

AN ESSAY ON ADMIRAL SOUCHON - THE MAN WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

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Berndt Langensiepen (Langensiep@aol.com), the author of The Ottoman Steam Navy 1828-1923 (Conway Maritime Press, 1992) has a slightly different perspective, which has been added at the end of Lieutenant-Commander Chessum's article.

For the peoples of the East and Middle East (the Goeben carried) more slaughter, more misery and more ruin than has ever before been borne within the compass of a ship.

Winston Churchill⁽¹⁾

INTRODUCTION

While many individuals contribute to the development of history, few men truly shape the future of international relations. Admiral Wilhelm Souchon was one of those men. Both Winston Churchill⁽²⁾ and Van der Vat⁽³⁾ credited the battlecruiser Goeben with profound impacts on the international environment, however, this impact should more logically be credited to the commander on that ship. Direct results of Souchon's actions include the entry of Turkey into the war on the side of the Triple Entente, the declaration of war on Turkey by Russia, the Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaigns, and the Russian Revolution⁽⁴⁾.

The aim of this essay is to analyse Souchon's leadership, and to determine lessons which might still be applicable at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Little has been written of Souchon in English, and descriptions of his style and characteristics are rare. The approach adopted for this analysis has therefore been to analyse some of the key decisions taken during the critical period of Souchon's career when he was commander of the German Mediterranean Squadron, and subsequently the Turkish Fleet.

BACKGROUND

Souchon was noted for his 'even temper, self-control, cheerfulness, versatility and capacity for hard work.'⁽⁵⁾ Due to his gift of tact, together with good manners and modest demeanour, he was given the nick-name of 'the Diplomat'. He seldom drank alcohol, never smoked, and exuded energy.⁽⁶⁾

SOUCHON'S PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

By May 1914 the Goeben, had developed numerous boiler defects which substantially limited her speed and seagoing ability, and her replacement in the Mediterranean squadron by her sister-ship, Moltke, was therefore scheduled for October 1914.⁽⁷⁾ Upon hearing the news of the assassination of the Archduke and his Consort, Souchon immediately comprehended the possibility that this might involve Germany in war. He therefore made urgent arrangements for replacement boiler tubes and skilled German tradesmen to be sent to the Mediterranean to enable temporary repairs to be carried out.⁽⁸⁾ Sufficient progress had been made on these repairs by early August that the Goeben was able to outpace her contemporaries in the Royal Navy (RN) during the crisis to follow.⁽⁹⁾

The actions outlined above demonstrate a commitment by Souchon to achieve a high level of situational awareness, an understanding of the potential implications of political events in his theatre of operations, and the ability to take decisive action to ensure the readiness of his flagship.

THE BOMBARDMENT OF THE ALGERIAN PORTS

Souchon had received general instructions that in the event of war with France, he was to attack French military centres in the colony of Algeria, and then flee the Mediterranean to join the main body of the German Fleet in the North Atlantic Ocean.⁽¹⁰⁾ When Souchon received news of the German mobilisation, however, he had no specific orders and took matters into his own hands, drawing up plans to bombard ports on the Algerian coast.⁽¹¹⁾ After coaling at Messina, Souchon sailed for the Algerian coast with both his ships. Two hours before the ships were due to open fire, Souchon received orders to proceed to Constantinople forthwith. In Souchon's own words 'To turn round immediately, on the verge of the eagerly anticipated action, was more than I could bring myself to do.'⁽¹²⁾ Souchon proceeded with the bombardment of Bona and Phillippeville.

Souchon's decision to disobey his orders is one that has received very little analysis, probably due to the fact that few consequences arose from his actions. The wisdom of his decision, however is open to greater criticism when what might have happened is considered:

- At the time of the bombardment (dawn on 4 August 1914) Germany was not at war with England. Furthermore the English cabinet was split over the issue of whether or not to declare war on Germany.⁽¹³⁾ During the bombardment, an English steamer was seriously damaged by German gunfire.⁽¹⁴⁾ As it turned out, information of this was not received in England until after the decision was taken to declare war on Germany. However had events within the English cabinet evolved differently, knowledge of the shelling of an English steamer at this critical juncture might well have made the difference between war and peace. The risk of such an action was well understood in Berlin, where the Admiralty Staff had specifically been ordered 'to avoid all movements or actions that might be construed by England as directed against herself.'⁽¹⁵⁾ Souchon had therefore violated and undermined a carefully preserved position adopted by Berlin.
- Undertaking the bombardment of the Algerian ports exposed the German ships to gunfire from coastal defence artillery.⁽¹⁶⁾ Although the chances of this artillery inflicting serious damage on the German ships may have been small, the German ships were isolated in a sea teaming with hostile and potentially hostile warships⁽¹⁷⁾. Had either German ship been seriously damaged, there was little chance that they could obtain repairs in a friendly port, and their ability to achieve the directed objective, i.e. Constantinople, would have been seriously compromised.
- Continuing with the bombardment of the Algerian ports delayed the German squadron's departure to Constantinople for many hours.⁽¹⁸⁾ As a direct result of this delay, they encountered an RN detachment of two battlecruisers that were hunting for the German squadron. As the two nations were not yet at war, the two squadrons passed each other tentatively before the RN turned and gave chase.⁽¹⁹⁾ Due to the repairs that the Goeben had just completed, the German squadron had superior speed to the RN ships, and was able to shake off the pursuers.⁽²⁰⁾ Noting that Souchon was unaware that the RN battlecruisers were speed restricted due to overdue maintenance and manning shortages⁽²¹⁾, this was a fortuitous escape. Although subsequent war experience was to show that the Goeben may well have been a match for the two RN battlecruisers⁽²²⁾, the comments above regarding the consequences of damage to the German cruisers are equally valid in this context. The delay in Souchon's departure for Constantinople caused by the bombardment of the Algerian ports therefore exposed his force to an encounter that was potentially fatal to his mission.

By proceeding with the bombardment of the Algerian ports Souchon may have provided a morale boost for his sailors, however very little damage was done.⁽²³⁾ To achieve this, however, Souchon had not only given England additional motivation to enter the war against Germany, but he also seriously risked compromising his directed mission. The impact of Souchon successfully completing his mission (delivery of the German cruisers to the Turkish government) was assessed by General Ludendorf as extending the length of the First World War by two years.⁽²⁴⁾ Whilst Souchon may not have been fully aware of the strategic importance of his mission, this serves to underline the risks that occur when operational commanders choose to disobey orders from their

strategic command. Notwithstanding the successful completion of his mission, the risks taken to complete the bombardment of the Algerian ports appear difficult to justify.

TACTICAL MANOEUVRE OF THE SQUADRON DURING THE FLIGHT TO THE DARDANELLES

Although Souchon's successful escape can largely be attributed to varying degrees of negligence amongst the allied admirals hunting him⁽²⁵⁾, the tactical handling of his squadron certainly contributed to their uncertainty, and Souchon should therefore be given credit for this.

STRATEGIC EMPLOYMENT OF THE SQUADRON AFTER ARRIVAL IN TURKEY

The successful delivery of the squadron to Constantinople, and their gift to the Turkish Government by Germany was a significant political coup, however Germany encountered significant difficulty in persuading Turkey to enter the war. After nearly twelve weeks of political manoeuvring Souchon, now acting as General Commander of the Turkish fleet bombarded a number of Russian Black Sea ports. This act of outright aggression had the desired effect of provoking a Russian declaration of war on Turkey, which was subsequently followed up by further declarations from the other major allied powers, and ultimately led to the ill-fated allied expeditions to the Dardanelles and Gallipoli.⁽²⁶⁾

Souchon's role in this act of manipulation can be assessed from the facts that:

- Souchon acted largely on his own initiative, using as justification an 11-week old order from the German High Command without seeking any further clarification⁽²⁷⁾, and
- Only one member (Enver) of the Turkish Government was aware that Souchon was conducting this operation, however it is doubtful that even he was fully aware of Souchon's intentions.⁽²⁸⁾

It is reasonable, therefore, to surmise that Souchon deserves the credit for achieving a major foreign policy objective (the entry of Turkey into the war) on behalf of his German masters.

LESSONS FOR COMMAND IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A key aspect that led to Souchon's success during the escape to the Dardanelles, was the impact that his preparations for war had on his success. Getting to know his environment, both physically and politically, and ensuring that his forces were in the best possible material state at the outbreak of war, were crucial enablers that allowed the success of his operation.

A dominating feature of the conduct of operations during the escape of the squadron, was the irregular and unreliable nature of communications. In spite of the rapidly developing political situation immediately prior to the outbreak of war, Souchon received only occasional messages from the German naval command. Furthermore the practical realities of radio communications and cipher technology at that time imposed significant delays on those messages that were received. As well as delaying the timely receipt of situation reports and orders, these technical limitations effectively prevented Souchon from seeking guidance or instructions on how to deal with any developing situation. In these circumstances it was essential that Souchon acted on his own initiative according to the situation as he saw it.

In spite of huge advances in communications technology, modern commanders still have to face challenges similar to those encountered by Souchon. The requirement for Emission Control to prevent disclosure of force location can impose severe restrictions on deployed forces, whilst technical complexity can result in failures such as those experienced during Desert Storm.⁽²⁹⁾ The manner in which Souchon employed his own initiative to interpret the instructions he had been given, and make his own plans in order to achieve his assigned mission could therefore be a model for modern commanders, and could be considered to be a forerunner of 'Mission Command.'

A further aspect of the flight of the Goeben that has lessons for today is the impact that decisions taken at the operational level of war can have on the strategic level of war. In the case of the decision to bombard the Algerian ports, Souchon allowed tactical imperatives (the morale of his troops, and the disruption of enemy troop transportation) to dominate a decision which had far-reaching strategic implications, including potential mission failure. The lesson here is that higher commands generally have a broader perspective, and are better positioned to evaluate the strategic implications of major decisions. Operational level commanders should therefore be aware of the risks entailed in failing to comply with explicit instructions.

CONCLUSIONS

Souchon's preparations for war were meticulous, deliberate, and effective. By shaping his environment and preparing his forces for the forthcoming war, Souchon was able to achieve key advantages that enabled him to prevail over his opponents during the escape to the Dardanelles.

The decision by Souchon to proceed with the bombardment of the Algerian ports in violation of an order from his higher command was one of debatable merit. The military objectives achieved during this bombardment would not appear to justify the risk that this entailed to Souchon's far more important strategic mission.

Souchon's tactical handling of his squadron during the escape to the Dardanelles was competent, although he was not really tested due largely to the inadequacies of his opponents.

Souchon's actions as commander of the Turkish fleet demonstrated cunning, ruthlessness, and political astuteness, whereby he successfully manoeuvred Turkey and Russia into a state of war, thereby achieving a major strategic objective for his German masters.

Key lessons that can be learnt from an analysis of Souchon's actions during the early months of the First World War are:

- the importance of environmental awareness and material readiness to operational effectiveness,
- the need for operational commanders to be able to operate in an environment where communications with higher headquarters are unreliable, and
- the need for operational commanders to be aware of the risks entailed in disregarding orders from superior commanders.

Admiral Souchon was an able commander, whose reputation has been assured by the spectacular success of his operations during the first months of the First World War. By escaping to the Dardanelles, and drawing Turkey into the war on the side of the Central Powers, Souchon achieved strategic results out of all proportion to the forces available to him. In an environment of uncertainty and overwhelming odds, Souchon demonstrated the command ability that allowed him to shape the course of the war in his theatre.

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Footnotes

1. Miller, G. 1996, *Superior Force - The conspiracy behind the escape of Goeben and Breslau*, The University of Hull Press, Hull, p284
2. See opening quote
3. Van der Vat, D. 1986, *The Ship the Changed the World - The Escape of the Goeben to the Dardanelles in 1914*, Adler & Adler, Bethesda
4. Explaining the full consequences of Souchon's actions is outside the scope of this essay, however Van der Vat, op cit, p237, contains a succinct summary of these consequences.
5. Van der Vat, op cit, p38
6. Jarrett, H. 2000, *German Ships Goeben and Breslau in the Mediterranean July/August 1914*, The Naval Historical Society of Australia Inc, Sydney, p4
7. McLaughlin, R. 1974, *The Escape of 'The Goeben' - Prelude to Gallipoli*, Seeley Service & Co, London, p50
8. Souchon, op cit, p481
9. Jarrett, op cit, p14
10. Chrastina, P. German Warships Flee British Fleet, *Old News*, Vol 7 No 4
11. Miller, op cit, p49
12. Souchon, op cit, p484
13. Miller, op cit, p49
14. ibid
15. Miller, op cit, p51
16. Souchon, op cit, p485
17. The French fleet, with whom Germany was already at war, were at sea in the vicinity of the French North African ports. There were also several squadrons of RN warships at sea in the Western Mediterranean that Souchon had to consider potentially hostile in the prevailing political climate.
18. Transit time to the Algerian ports, time on task during the bombardment, time taken during the feint to the west on completion of the bombardment, and then time taken to regain the position held at the time the order to proceed to Constantinople was received.
19. McLaughlin, op cit, P60
20. Souchon, op cit, p485
21. Miller, op cit, p72
22. At the battle of Jutland three RN battlecruisers were sunk with relative ease by an outnumbered force of German battlecruisers.

23. Jarrett, op cit, p12

24. Van der Vat, op cit, p15

25. Admiral Troubridge was subsequently court-martialled for his failure to engage the German Squadron, while his superior commander (Admiral Milne) was never given another opportunity to command.

26. Van der Vat, op cit, p15

27. Frame, T. 2000, *The Shores of Gallipoli*, Hale & Iremonger, Alexandria, p83

28. James, R.R. 1965, *Gallipoli*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, p13

29. McNab, A. 1993, *Bravo Two Zero*, Transworld Publishers Ltd, London, p358

A Different Perspective

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The article written by Lt.Com. CHESSUM (RNZN) is another good example of British/American interpretation of WW1 history, again only using English material, book and documents. The Ottoman or German point of view or better the facts given in documents were unnoticed.

In my last book (based on German and Turkish archives material) *Halbmond Und Kaiseradler* Hamburg, 2000, you can follow the way the Ottoman Government went into war. Souchon was in no way able to teach or force the Ottoman Government. The German position at Istanbul was in no way as strong as it has been told. The *Goeben* was a nice gift for the Turks, but the Ottomans certainly did not enter into a world-war only because of the presence of an battlecruiser.

The Ottoman Govt. was looking for a war in **spring 1914**. The Armenian question was important as was the recapture of the islands. In August 1914 the Ottomans awaited Greek operations against the Dardanelles. Also a strong movement in the *Ittihat ve Terakki* (the so called committee) for an Islamic/Turkish Empire . A large part of their interest were Russian -Asia .

In September 1914 the *Ittihat ve Terakki* saw only two possibilities:

Neutral in a war means, that..

- if a British/Russian Victory: The Russian at the Bosphorus, The British in the Arabic part of the Empire and so on.
- if a German/Austrian Victory: Not much better, because the Germans would made arrangements with the Armenians, Georgians and the Ukraine and so on.

Mustafa Kemal saw another way. He and his friends wanted the Empire out of this war and used the time for to reorganisation of the Ottoman armed forces. But was their Empire in a position to hold against a World War winner?

Next was to joint the Entente side. Talks in early 1914 with her neighbours gave the Government the correct feeling, that Turks were unwelcome. At last the German side. Germany had no or very small interest in Ottoman territory, whereas. the Committee saw a possibility for German interest in Russian territory. The question was simply *who would win the war?*

Back to Souchon. He was very unsuccessful in his political manoeuvrings. His problems with Cemal Pascha started with the first day of his arrival at the Dardanelles, and also v. Wangenheim must have stopped him for this idea to send *Goeben* under the German flag into the Black Sea in September 1914. It was Cemal who from **September** 1914 onwards did anything to send Sochon back to Germany. There are a large number of modern **turkish** books that show how the Empire went to war, but neither *Goeben* nor Souchon was in no way a major factor. He was **never** called *The Diplomat* , that was a name given to him by the German propaganda after 1933.

When the German/Ottoman fleet went into action the most member of the Committee were **informed**. He was given his order by the Committee. Everything the members of the Committee told **after** the war, was pure falsehood.

The history of how Turkey entered the war is still not written , because nobody outside Turkey went into the archives of Ankara.

Non-German authors (G.Miller, Van der Vat,..) who have written about Souchon have no idea of his role in the Post-War- discussions in Germany. He was until 1933 one of the men who given the way free for the Kiel-revolution Okt./Nov.1918 . After 1933 with the Nazi Government the story of "the Diplomat": was born: "The Hero of Turkey."

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