

ZED ZED-The life and times of Sir Basil Zaharoff (1849-1936)
Robin Davies

It had been a long pleasant evening reminiscing with some of his old pals of the armaments world when John Meade Falkner finally staggered into his house on Palace Green. He slumped into his favourite armchair and poured himself a brandy....

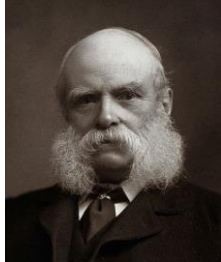
Ah yes, the good old days. The good old days before the World War when everyone was arming themselves to the teeth. Reminiscing about some of the great names of the time: Albert Vickers, Sir Vincent Caillard, his own patron Andrew Noble, Sir Charles Craven and then there was that exotic creature dubbed by unpatriotic scribblers as 'the merchant of death', what was his name? Demetrios? Karolides? Oh no, Zaharoff - at least when he was in the arms business, there had been at least two before that. He was called the 'Mystery Man of Europe'.



Albert Vickers
1838-1919



Vincent Caillard
1856-1930



Andrew Noble
1831-1915



Charles Craven
1884-1944

The only mystery I shall leave is what happened to the Fourth Manuscript - assuming I ever wrote it and I am starting to wonder that myself. We knew a lot about him at Armstrongs, being the overseas sales agent for our rivals Vickers. Indeed, we had a file on him. What a man! At one time, he had two wives, for Zed Zed (as he used to call himself) had been a great charmer; not for him spending his free days in the Vatican Library - no he liked his fun. He was hot-blooded and wild - once on the Orient Express, and hearing a female scream, he rescued a Spanish duchess from a beating from her lunatic husband. A forty-year affair ensued until the husband died and they could marry. Alas she died less than two years later. A bit

different from the little woman upstairs - still each to their own. I can but dream anyway. What am I doing in this poky little house when Zed Zed has his house in fashionable Avenue Hoche in Paris, the Chateau Balincourt and his place in Monte Carlo? I always thought his life was like something from a John Buchan novel. Now it is all coming back to me...

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Basil Zaharoff even made his birthday a mystery. *'My father was Russian and my mother Greek' or again 'I have almost forgotten. I was born in Anatolia. My father was of Polish origin. My mother was French with a Levantine strain.'* And that was just what he said. Others said he was a Jewish revolutionary from Odessa. All very fanciful. His family were Greeks called Zachariadis from Constantinople who Russified their name after fleeing to Odessa. When things were calmer they returned to the great cosmopolitan port.



His education was said to be in an ordinary Greek school but this was only part of the truth. His family were well-off business people and sent him to England. Legend has it that his earliest business ventures were as a pimp and fire-fighter with the Constantinople fire brigade, the latter meaning he started fires and then offered to put them out for a consideration. He began working for an uncle and after a while vanished at the same time as some of his uncle's money disappeared. A court case ensued. By then he was married to an English girl under the extraordinary name of 'Prince Zacharias Basilius Gortacoff'. Shortly afterwards, the court case was settled and Zaharoff thought it best to 'relocate' to Cyprus which he did in 1873 using the name Z.Z. Williamson, which he pinched from a family with old Anglo-Levantine associations.

It was while there that he met an English merchant who collected agencies. One of these was for a Swedish armaments manufacturer called Nordenfelt but before then he concocted an ambitious scheme for Cyprus, which at that time was leased by the British from Turkey, to pay the Turks

for the treaty to be amended. It did not work out but, in trying, Zaharoff met the Rothchilds. He certainly knew how to meet important people. He left Cyprus and floated around the Mediterranean looking for deals. Brief stays in Ireland and Utah (where he was a count) and New York (a prince) culminated in a bigamous marriage to an heiress. That did not turn out well when the two women met.



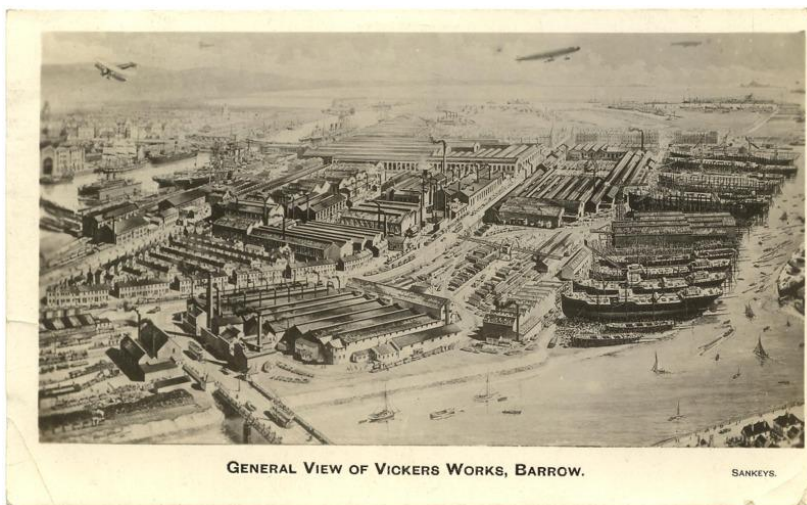
Thorsten Nordenfelt
1842 - 1920

Zaharoff now carried on floating around the Mediterranean looking for deals and in 1886 he reactivated his association with Nordenfelt who were into machine guns and submarines. Legend has it that he sold one sub to the Greeks, two to the Turks, whom he worried by his first order, and four to the Russians to cancel the threats posed by the Greek and Turkish subs he had himself created. There were practical problems involving the submariners inhaling poisonous air but, hey, that is the problem with being at the cutting edge of progress.

Meanwhile Zaharoff had moved on to machine guns. The Gatling was the weapon of choice for dealing with uppity natives - the body count (at Omdurman for example) was reassuringly massive. His company Nordenfelt was up against the Maxim who started to find problems selling their product - demonstrations got cancelled and there were other acts of sabotage until the two companies merged in 1888.

Zaharoff now began the association which was to last the rest of his working life with the steel manufacturer Vickers, producer of field-guns and new armoured plate for naval shipbuilding. They challenged the heavy guns and shipbuilding combine of Armstrongs who, in 1897, merged with Whitworths. In this period, he regularly visited Spain where doors were opened by the Duchess of Marchena whom he had rescued from her brutal husband; Spain was to be his most long-lasting and profitable source of commission. In 1897 Maxim-Nordenfelt was taken over by Vickers. It was at this time that the rumours about his methods of business multiplied; e.g. the two South American countries whom he persuaded to cease fire so

he could restock them. Then the bribery wheezes: offering a potential client something from his cigarette case which included some rolled-up banknotes. Or the naval officer who took offence when Zaharoff offered to send him a lovely little steam yacht. The admiral threatened to report him for trying to bribe him, at which Zaharoff said it was certainly not a present. He would have to pay and the price is ten pounds sterling. The Admiral replied that this made it an entirely different matter. *'In that case send me two. My son likes yachting too.'* Then there was the minister of state who told him there was no point in coming again to canvass orders to which Zaharoff replied: *'I shall come tomorrow, Thursday.'* When the Minister pointed out that tomorrow was Tuesday, Zaharoff exclaimed: *'I will bet you one hundred thousand francs that tomorrow is Thursday.'* His Excellency won the bet and Zaharoff had another customer. Or so the legend says.



The drive for overseas orders was necessary due to the failure of HMG to provide regular orders. Zaharoff now had a range of products to sell into an expanding market. The defeat of Spain by the United States and the defeat of Russia by Japan required those countries to re-equip but, contrary to received opinion, bribes were merely an entrance fee and Zaharoff and Vickers were just one of several players of which Germany's Krupp, France's Schneider, and Austria's Skoda were other big names.

During this period Zaharoff was able to assist not only British but also French interests and this earned him a Legion d'Honneur. Not only Russia and Japan were rearming but Germany and Britain were deadly rivals in the arms race. It was later claimed that Zaharoff owned a French newspaper and created war scares; in truth, all the newspapers were venal and his may have been least of all, which of course upset the others. Turkey was another great opportunity and both Vickers and Armstrongs were engaged in shipbuilding competition there.

Zaharoff was keen on aviation - indeed he claimed to have flown (probably briefly) in 1894 in a proto-aircraft on Sir Hiram Maxim's Bexley estate 8 years before the Wright Bros. – and, in 1901, endowed chairs of aviation in the Universities of Paris and St. Petersburg. Indeed, around 1910/1 Vickers produced some early aircraft, but the Admiralty declined to buy! Later on, in 1916, he gave Asquith £25,000 for research into flight but the money bounced around between departments for over a year and when he rang the Rector of The Imperial College of Science for news he was told to ring back. Zaharoff asked for the money to be sent to London hospitals with interest and it was only after Winston Churchill intervened that the money was retrieved and the Zaharoff chair of Aviation finally established.



**Vickers F.B.12 single-seat
pusher fighting scout**

The Zaharoff legend really grew wings during the First World War. In one way, it clipped them because there was no need to sell the products, the problem was producing them. But the legend was that he prevented the French from bombing the iron ore works of Briey, as otherwise France would be deprived of the iron and steel it needed and was being supplied with via Switzerland.

Indeed, the barbed wire which protected Verdun came from Germany. Balfour added to the legend by claiming that 'Zaharoff had engineered the war' But then Zaharoff hardly helped by boasting that 'I made wars to sell arms to both sides' not to mention his letter to the Greek prime minister: 'I could have shown the allies three points at which had they struck, the enemy's potential would have been utterly destroyed. But that would have ruined (my) business.' Less fanciful were his dealings with his old stamping grounds Greece and Turkey. In the former the king, conscious of the

inadequacies of their army, was neutral whereas the dominant politician, Venizelos, was pro-Allies. After a lot of conspiring and money, the king was forced out and Greece declared war on the Central Powers.

In the case of Turkey, the Big Idea was to buy the government for a Big Sum although Zaharoff was realistic: 'Will men who offer to betray their country be loyal to us?' Negotiations took place in neutral Switzerland and Zaharoff had to get there by train from Monte Carlo. Alas the Italian customs men were not co-operative and Zaharoff was stripped semi-naked and his property looted. Perhaps being made a Knight Grand Cross of the British Empire in March 1918 shortly afterwards made up for it. That was only on account for, in December, he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath; as he claimed to his Turkish visitors: 'I have spent and continue spending my own millions freely for the Allies'. If he thought this munificence would impress the Turks he was wrong, although at one late point he was offered reports of all Central Power war councils at which Turkish delegates were present. Not content with that, the Turks claimed the Hungarians could be bought as 'from time immemorial they had been the closest of friends with the Turks', a not totally convincing proposition to anyone with even a modicum of historical knowledge. Anyway, by then it was all a bit academic.

A later story was that he went to Germany in the uniform of a Bulgarian doctor (who conveniently died shortly afterwards) to obtain vital information: 'They say that the information I brought ended the war'. Others might say the arrival of the American army had more to do with it. In June 1918, he was pipped up to being Grand Officer of the Legion d'Honneur. He claimed to have



**Grand Officer of the
Legion d'Honneur**

'given two-thirds of his entire fortune to France' and never regretted it. He also gave to Lloyd George's Political Fund. One wonders which was most cost-effective.

Zaharoff made a large number of benefactions and at one point is said to have offered a man £100,000 a year to marry one of the Duchess of Marchena's daughters; as she was described as 'very clever and

outspoken', it seems she was stuck on the proverbial shelf and despite this extraordinary offer she remained there. One cannot help feeling she must have been incredibly ugly. He was rather unctuous about these benefactions: 'Whenever I spend money I think how best I can spend it to the advantage of my fellow men'. In 1919, he founded the Marshal Foch Chair of French Literature at Oxford and the next year was rewarded with an Honorary Doctorate in Civil Law.

The end of the war brought a slump in the armaments industry. Although logically there should have been a restocking, in fact there was such a feeling of revulsion in reaction to the terrible casualty roll that everyone wanted to believe this would lead to peace for all time. This feeling of revulsion was not helped by the revelation that Vickers was paying back royalties to Krupp for the fuses used in its shells and Krupp in their turn owed Vickers royalties. Neither was it helped by the leading Vickers director Sir Charles Craven, whose flippant response to a writer who queried whether he thought his 'wares were no more dangerous or noxious than, we will say, boxes of chocolates, or sugar candy', was 'Or novels? No.'



Eleftherios Venizelos
1864-1936

The Russian market was lost after 1917, things did not work out well in Turkey for either Vickers or Armstrongs, neither did a venture in Roumania, leaving Spain the only major client left. However, Zaharoff was not without ambitions and decided to venture into the world of geo-politics with a wish to see Greece as a great power at the expense of a stricken Turkey. It is not clear how much he influenced the Greek government of Venizelos to attack her in the hopes of territorial gains in Asia Minor - there was a great deal of paranoia about Zaharoff's role as an *eminence grise*, pulling politicians' strings as if they were puppets; although it was said that Lloyd George had told him: '*It is your birthday today. Tell your friend Venizelos I will make him a present of Asia Minor.*' Indeed, the Treaty of Sevres of 1920 did give Greece all of European Turkey and Smyrna and its hinterland. However, Greece's attempt to claim ended in disaster and humiliation, with the expulsion of all Greeks from Asia Minor. It was said that Zaharoff had paid the Greek

army himself, but by January 1924 he had had enough saying: 'I do not wish to hear Greece or Greeks mentioned ever again.'

He now moved back to his earlier love of deals with the establishment of a French bank with offices in Constantinople, a shipbuilding business and plans for an oil company. None of these were particularly successful. He was advised by Clemenceau's finance minister Klotz, the man who presided over the calamitous decline of the franc, and of whom the former said: 'Just my luck to get hold of the only Jew who cannot count.' More worthwhile, he was for a while (1923-26) the chief shareholder in the Société des Bains Mer which owned the casino and other properties in Monte Carlo. Legend has it that he bought it for his new bride the Duchess of Marchena who was now free to marry him, her husband having died. It was a quiet wedding but, alas, she died in 1926. *'40 years' patience was rewarded by a year and a half's marriage. It is a meagre dividend for a man who has invested so much in one passion'* he mused. Two days after the funeral, he boarded the Simplon-Orient Express and at exactly 2.32 am, the time when he rescued her, he sat in the darkness of his carriage alone with his thoughts and memories.

Vickers and Armstrongs merged in 1927 but, with business so bad, it was really a case of two drunks propping each other up. Zaharoff was given a cup to commemorate his 50-year association with Vickers. The Treaty of Washington after the First World War, which had frozen expenditure on warships, was renewed in 1930 and the Admiralty cut its orders by a third. The League of Nations' sub-committee on arms accused the industry of fomenting war scares and employing bribery.

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War scares! Bribery! What! He woke with a start. Somehow, he must have crawled into the downstairs spare room. Those blasted cathedral bells - why must they be so loud? He looked out of the window. Pouring with rain as usual. *Quelle surprise!* Then he wondered if it would be raining in Monte Carlo. Not likely and, even if it did, there were more diversions there than in Durham. A Spanish duchess with her lovely slim olive-tanned body ... The Orient Express. The Blue Train ... If only ... His head dropped as he pulled the sheets over his head and buried himself beneath the pillow.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Basil Zaharoff died in November 1936 in Monaco and was buried at the Chateau Balincourt north of Paris, which he had bought in 1915. He left no great enterprise and had no male heirs to use his money to create one. Some of his obituaries recorded his benefactions but others were not so pleasant - 'millions died that he might live' was the flavour.

But he did leave a legend, some of which is recounted above. He is believed to have been the inspiration for the title character in the 1939 Eric Ambler novel *'The mask of Dimitrios'* (also known as *A Coffin for Dimitrios*); Orson Welles wrote and directed a similar film in 1955 called *'Mr Arkadin'* (also known as *'Confidential Report'*). Aficionados of John Buchan will spot that Karolides is a name in *'The Thirty-Nine Steps'*.

The first book I read on Zaharoff was *'Peddler of Death'* by Donald McCormick 1965; the most recent (and the one relied for facts in this essay) was *'Man of Arms'* by Anthony Allfrey 1989. Others I have are *'Sir Basil Zaharoff'* by Richard Lewinsohn 1929; *'Zaharoff, High Priest of War'* by Guiles Davenport 1934; and *'Zaharoff, the armaments king'* by Robert Neumann 1938. He gets a whole chapter to himself in several books denouncing the arms trade, such as *'The Bloody Traffic'* by Fenner Brockway of 1933; *'Merchants of death'* by Engelbrecht and Hanighen 1934; and *'Arms and the men'* by Basil Collier of 1980. He also appears in Rosita Forbes's 1940 *'These men I knew'*. I have all these. Does it say something about me that I have all these books? What does it say about the hero of our society that he could have spent his career in this milieu? According to Ken Warren's biography: 'There was the shady Zaharoff, with whom, nonetheless, he seems to have had an easy enough relationship' And elsewhere: 'They seem to have been on friendly terms.'

Basil Zaharoff died while Germany had been rearming for 3 years and we had only just started. Two years later a triumphant Germany had taken over Austria and Czechoslovakia. Less than four years later we were battling for our lives and very grateful to have the weapons we needed. As Kipling wrote: *'It's Tommy this and Tommy that and chuck him out the brute but it's saviour of his country when the guns begin to shoot.'*