

Jump TO Article



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The Gallipoli campaign: a Turkish perspective

a presentation to the Institute on 30 April 2013 by

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Seeking to knock Turkey out of World War I in 1915, Allied forces, including Australians, invaded the Gallipoli peninsula. The Allied forces were repelled by the Ottoman defenders led by Mustafa Kemal. Amid heroism, chivalry and great loss of life on both sides, a mutual respect developed which led in time to genuine friendship between the Australian and Turkish nations.

Key words: Gallipoli; Çanakkale; Turkey; Mustafa Kemal; Atatürk; Australian-Turkish relations.

I wish to thank the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales for giving me an opportunity to address such a distinguished audience. Australia and Turkey enjoy a unique relationship born from the battle-grounds of Gallipoli, the birthplace of the Anzac spirit. I can feel the unique nature of this relationship in all my engagements with the local and national authorities.

Today, I will provide a Turkish perspective on the Gallipoli Campaign. I will begin by giving you some context about the Ottoman Empire. Then I will explain the reasons and consequences of World War I in general and the Battle of Gallipoli in particular, leading to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. I will conclude by sharing my thoughts about the unique friendship between our countries.

The Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire, the last Turkish Empire in history and the predecessor of modern Turkey, was established in Anatolia in 1299. The Empire gradually extended its territories in three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa, reaching its peak in the 16th century. At its height, the Empire included most of south-eastern Europe to the gates of Vienna [including modern Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Ukraine]; Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Egypt; North Africa as far west as Algeria; and most of the Arabian Peninsula.

However, the Empire began to lose its power in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 18th century, the rise of centralised nation-states in Europe, with increasingly organised administrative, economic, financial, and military systems, changed the balance of power in their favour and the Ottoman Empire entered a slow but continuous decline relative to Europe. The decentralised system which had brought stability and power to the Ottomans in the 15th and 16th centuries could not compete. In the 19th century, following the French Revolution which brought nationalism to the world stage, the Empire

began dissolving as it found itself fighting against European imperialism and defending its unity and integrity in the face of rising nationalistic movements.

Throughout 19th century and the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire exerted all its efforts to prevent the destructive effects of imperialism and nationalism and to maintain the Empire's unity and integrity. The 19th and early 20th centuries were centuries of long, exhausting and intensive wars. This was the historical background as the Ottoman Empire entered World War I.

A misconception about the Ottoman Empire is that, despite its diverse social structure and tolerant administration, it was an "oriental despotism", ruled tyrannically by an all-powerful sultan, who forced his non-Muslim subjects to convert to Islam. This conception has no credibility and does not reflect reality. In fact, the powers assumed by the ruler, and by the ruling class were narrow – limited to the assessment and collection of taxes, to the maintenance of military forces sufficient to keep order and defend and expand the realm, and to making certain that every subject could live his life and practice his religion as he wished, without interference from others.

It was an Empire of different cultures and religions living side by side in harmony. Each community was allowed to maintain ethnic, religious and cultural autonomy. Each of the major religious communities in the Empire, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, was given legal status under the leadership of its own religious hierarchy for the purpose of organising and carrying out all the functions of direction and regulation. Each religious group had its own legal and court systems based on its own traditional laws in both criminal and civil matters.

Had the Ottomans ruled the country tyrannically, forcing their subjects to convert to Islam and abandon their national traditions, there would have been no national revolts to break up the Empire in modern times. Instead, the different communities were allowed to, and did, maintain ethnic, religious and cultural autonomy, which made it inevitable that they should become hotbeds of nationalism and, ultimately, principal factors in the Empire's collapse in the 19th and 20th centuries.

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We Turks are proud of our history, not only because our ancestors established a world Empire and ruled a vast territory for more than 600 years, but also because of our heritage of cultural and social diversity.

World War I

World War I was a war between the Central Powers [mainly Germany, the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary] and the Allied Powers [mainly Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Japan and from 1917, the United States].

The last two representatives of the age of Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were seeking to restore their old orders. The dissatisfaction of the latest imperial power, Germany, with the distribution of the world's natural resources, aligned her with the two old Empires. On the other hand, the new-order imperial powers wanted to get rid of the two old empires and to share their territories, including oil-rich Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula which were under Ottoman rule.

In such an atmosphere, the Ottoman Empire, which had been drained by decades of continuous wars and uprisings, reluctantly joined the Central Powers in August 1914. It was a kind of *fait accompli* planned and implemented by the then Minister of Defence, Enver Paşa, whose main motivation was the recovery of the Empire's territories in Eastern Anatolia lost during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, in particular Artvin, Ardahan, Kars and the port of Batum.

The war was destructive for the Empire. While the Allies were invaders of its hundreds-year-old territories, the Ottoman commanders and soldiers were defending their countries with sacrifice and dignity on each front. During the war, the Ottomans fought on eight different fronts, Gallipoli being only one of them.

Ottoman soldiers defended their land at Gallipoli in an atmosphere which was not promising for the country. Compared to Allied forces, the Turkish side's military equipment and ammunition supply were very poor and their soldiers were exhausted from the endless wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their only advantage was to defend a soil that they knew and called "motherland".

The Gallipoli Campaign – Naval Phase

The Gallipoli campaign of 1915 was an attempt to knock Ottoman Turkey out of World War I. The initial plan, proposed by British Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, called for a mostly-British Allied fleet to force the Dardanelles Strait and then to steam to Istanbul to dictate peace terms. They began the campaign convinced that the Dardanelles would fall within a month.

But why attempt the Straits in the first place? The answer lay in the great strategic value the control would give the Entente Powers. The Straits linked the Mediterranean Sea with the Sea of Marmara. This not only gave ready access to the Turkish capital Istanbul and much of the Turkish Empire's industrial powerhouse, but also provided a lane to the Black Sea.

Just as importantly, if not more so, access to the Sea of Marmara was bound to give Britain and France supply route access to their eastern ally, Russia. Therefore it was quite feasible that should Britain and France gain the Straits they could succeed in not only eliminating Turkey from the war, but in also drawing Greece and Bulgaria into the war against the Central Powers.

Churchill was partly right. For centuries, the Dardanelles has been seen by foreigners as the door through which Anatolia could be invaded and conquered.



The Gallipoli Peninsula (Map: Wikipedia commons)

After the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers, the Anglo-French fleet blockaded the mouth of Dardanelles Strait in 1914. In early 1915, the Russians found themselves threatened by the Turks in the Caucasus and appealed for some relief. In response, on 2 January 1915 the British government agreed to stage a demonstration against Turkey and commenced a series of preliminary bombardments on 19 February 1915.

British intelligence reports of 17 March stated that no sea-mines were spotted that would create a risk for a naval attack. But contrary to the reports, a small Turkish mine-layer, *Nusrat*, had laid many sea-mines into the Dardanelles on the night of 7-8 March.

The main naval attack was launched on 18 March 1915. The Allied fleet, comprising 18 battleships with a supporting array of cruisers and destroyers, sought to target the narrowest point of the Dardanelles where the straits are just a mile wide. The fleet included *Queen Elizabeth*, *Lord Nelson*, *Agamemnon*, *Inflexible*, *Ocean*, *Irresistible*, *Prince George* and *Majestic* from Britain and the *Gaulois*, *Bouvet* and *Suffren* from France. At first they made good progress until the *Bouvet* struck a mine, heeled over, capsized and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Soon afterwards two more ships, *Irresistible* and *Ocean*, hit mines. Most of the men in these two ships were rescued but, by the time the Allied fleet retreated, over 700 men had been killed. Overall, three ships had

been sunk and three more had been severely damaged. Ottoman forces stationed on both sides of the waterway defeated the Allied fleet and "Çanakkale is impassable" became a common phrase expressing the nation's pride at stopping the massive assault. In Turkey, the annual commemoration of the Battle of Gallipoli centres around the decisive victory won over the British and French fleet on 18 March 1915.

In spite of all the efforts in the Dardanelles from 19 February to 18 March nothing had been gained by the Allied Forces. Now, alongside the naval bombardments, an amphibious operation was under consideration in order to capture the peninsula.

The Gallipoli Campaign – Land Phase

On 25 April 1915, one of the largest amphibious landing assaults ever attempted in military history began. Allied forces, in an effort to clear the Ottoman forces and to allow the passage of the fleet, landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

The Ottoman Fifth Army was assigned to repel a landing on either side of the Straits. The force, which initially consisted of five divisions with another en route, was a conscript force and was commanded by General Otto Liman von Sanders, a German officer who had been head of the Military Mission sent to Turkey as advisors. Many of the senior officers in the Fifth Army were also German. General von Sanders evaluated the defence of the Gallipoli peninsula as of secondary importance. Thus, out of six divisions, he allocated two divisions and one cavalry brigade to the defence of the Gulf of Saros [north of the Gallipoli Peninsula], two



Otto Liman von Sanders
[Photo: Wikipedia commons]

divisions to the defence of the area between Anafartalar and Seddulbahir [Suvla Bay to Cape Helles, Gallipoli Peninsula], and the remaining two divisions to the defence of the Asian coast, a third of his total force. Of the two divisions deployed on the Gallipoli Peninsula, one was the 19th Division which served as the Chief-of-Command Reserve Force in Bigali. The commander of this division was Mustafa Kemal.

All agreed that the most effective form of defence was to hold the high ground on the ridges of the peninsula, but there was disagreement where the enemy would land, and hence where to concentrate their forces. Von Sanders decided to hold the bulk of the force inland with minor coastal defences spread across the peninsula. Liman von Sanders' strategy drew complaints from Ottoman commanders, including Mustafa Kemal, who

believed the Ottoman forces were too widely dispersed and thus not in a position to drive the attackers into the sea as soon as their invasion began.

The Seddulbahir battles [Cape Helles]

At dawn on the 25 April, the Seddulbahir coast was surrounded by several ships and landing craft and at 5.30 a.m. fire was opened from the allied warships. Bombardment from the sea held the tip of the peninsula under fire from three sides. The 29th British Infantry Division attempted to move inland. The defending forces successfully broke the first wave of the invading forces. Then, with the reinforcements which were later brought in, the operation was extended on the land without much success.

The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battles of Kirte and Kerevizdere continued from 25 April until the end of May when the fighting turned into chronic local clashes. In June, the battle again intensified and the bloody Zigindere Battles began on 28 June and continued for eight days.

The Ariburnu battles [Anzac Cove]

The area chosen by the Anzac Corps as a landing area was the coast to the north of Kabatepe. However, the Anzacs had landed in the steep, inaccessible area of Ariburnu (in 1985 it was named Anzac Cove) due to their boats having been carried by the strong current. The first landing group consisted of 1500 men with the same number again in a following wave. The first target to be captured after the landing was the "Karacimen Bloc".

The Anzac attack began at 4.30 a.m. on 25 April. They landed at Ariburnu in the form of a surprise attack. The defending squad opened fire on the invading forces, but the Anzacs advanced. Using his initiative, Mustafa Kemal attacked the Anzacs. Reinforcing the 57th Regiment with a hill-top cannon battery, he advanced towards Ariburnu via Kocacimen. In a critical moment, Mustafa Kemal gave the order for a company to rapidly reach the area and for the forward battalion to immediately enter the fray. With their arrival, the Turkish forces attained the initiative. The 57th Regiment completed their battle preparations by noon and moved southwards from Conkbayiri to the Anzac forces. This strike could not advance any further than Duztepe because of the effective cannon fire from the ships. Kemal arrived at Korucakoy and reported the situation to the Army Headquarters. He met the commander of the 3rd Corps at Maltepe from whom he received permission to deploy the entire 19th Division after explaining to him the situation. He moved those forces forward.

On the night of 25-26 April, Mustafa Kemal decided to take the command of the 27th Regiment and to attack the Anzacs with two regiments from the south and two regiments from the north and to drive them that night into the sea at whatever cost. The same night, the attack was deployed. Since the majority of the 27th Regiment, which arrived from Aleppo (Halep), was composed of aged soldiers, the action on the southern flank did not develop as hoped. The 57th and 27th Regiments forced the Anzacs to retreat further south from the Cesarettepe hill-top. The

Anzacs had great difficulty defending their positions against this latest assault. The Australians thought that there were a great number of Turks there so they hesitated and stopped. Largely due to Mustafa Kemal and his command, the Anzac forces were contained and British land forces failed to attain their objectives.

As time passed, both sides were gradually reinforced. The 16th Division was rushed from Thrace and the 2nd Division from Istanbul. Fierce Anzac assaults on Ariburnu continued steadily and the fighting went on until the end of May. Finally, from the end of May onwards, it turned into trench warfare.

The clashes of Seddulbahir and Ariburnu in June and July of 1915 were typical of stationary warfare. The opposing forces were extremely close to each other, indeed as close as eight meters at certain locations.

The Anafartalar battles [Suvla Bay]

Unable to achieve any success on the Seddulbahir and Ariburnu fronts in the past five months, the British decided to open a third front in Anafartalar Bay in order to encircle and destroy the Turkish Army from the rear. This task was assigned to the 9th British Corps. The aim was to immediately seize the Conkbayiri and Kocacimen blocs, advance from there and take control of the Straits. During this landing, limited actions were to be taken to keep the Turkish forces in the Seddulbahir and Ariburnu regions pinned down.

The British Army Corps began landing on the night of 6-7 August, to start the final attack against the Turkish troops approximately on 9 August. They landed to the south of the Buyukkemikli and Kucukkemikli headlands. Due to the hot weather and the exhaustion of the British soldiers, 9th Corps spent a day on the beach front instead of moving to the target hills immediately. During this time, two Ottoman divisions were transferred to the front with Mustafa Kemal as commander. One of these divisions pushed the 9th Corps into the sea while the other one prevented the Anzacs from reaching the battle front.

The Ottoman 12th Division attacked the British 9th Corps front lines. The most critical point was over for the Turks. The 9th Corps, under the fire of the Turkish Forces, fell in great numbers on the beaches and was rendered totally ineffective. Even though 9th Corps, which was later reinforced, attempted more flank attacks from Ismailoglu Hill to Anafartalar and from Mt. Karakol to Ece Harbour and Tekke Hill, they could not succeed.

Pinning-down and encircling action halted the northern group, but some sections did come within 25 meters of the crest-line. The 9th Turkish Division, which had counter-attacked for two days in order to alleviate this dangerous situation, was not able to achieve a success. Then Liman von Sanders, Commander of the Fifth Ottoman Army, reinforced the 8th Division with two regiments and put it under Mustafa Kemal's orders.

Colonel Mustafa Kemal arrived at the headquarters of the 8th Division on the night of 9-10 August and ordered his soldiers to attack using only bayonets at dawn on 10 August. The attack succeeded and even the British

brigade commander was among the dead. Upon the seizure of the land that would guarantee the security of the defence line, the order to dig-in and defend was given. The British operation that had been carried out with strong attack groups in high hopes on Ariburnu and the landings at Anafartalar were paralysed and, as in the other regions, were brought to a standstill.

The aftermath

The Allied forces clearly saw that no possibility remained either of breaking the Turkish defence in the Dardanelles or of achieving any result in the Gallipoli Campaign, above all of achieving their ambition of taking Istanbul. This was the biggest failure of Churchill and of the Allies during the war. Of course, they underestimated the military skills of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his brave soldiers. On 20 December 1915, the Allies ordered the evacuation of Ariburnu–Anafartalar and, on 9 January 1916, Seddulbahir.



*Mustafa Kemal Atatürk
c. 1916*

[Photo: BBC History]

Although the Battle of Çanakkale lasted only 11 months, the casualties of both sides were enormous. In all, nearly a million men fought at Çanakkale.

The Ottoman Empire sent almost half a million men to the battle, of whom 250,000 became casualties. By the time the Gallipoli campaign ended, approximately 80,000 Turkish, 21,000 British, 10,000 French, 7594 Australian, and 2701 New Zealand soldiers had died. The number of the wounded soldiers, in total, was 261,554.

Mustafa Kemal was stationed at Edirne and Diyarbakir after the Çanakkale wars and was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general on 1 April 1916.

Atatürk's role

I wish to comment on Atatürk's role in the battle. At the beginning of World War I, Staff Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Kemal was Military Attaché in Sofia. Preferring to participate personally in the struggle of his country against the invading super powers of the time rather than watching from the sidelines, he requested active military duty from the Chief-of-Staff. He was appointed to command the 19th Division.

Mustafa Kemal was the most imaginative and most successful officer on the Turkish side at Gallipoli. At several moments in the campaign, his personal intervention was the difference between success and failure for the Ottomans. As commander of the 19th Division, he issued his most famous order to the 57th Infantry Regiment: "I do not order you to fight, I order you to die.

In the time which passes until we die, other troops and commanders can come forward and take our places and we will be able to win the battle.” And that is what happened. When the few soldiers were trying to fight against the Australians and the New Zealanders, other reinforcements were brought in immediately. That is why Mustafa Kemal in his diary said: “That was the decisive moment on the landing, that is the moment I won the battle”. The critical role he played in the Dardanelles Campaign resulted in a Turkish victory. Unfortunately, every man of the 57th Infantry Regiment was killed-in-action and, as a sign of respect, today there is no 57th Regiment in the Turkish army.

The Contemporary Significance of Gallipoli

The Turkish nation views the war at the Dardanelles as a turning point in her history. What happened at Gallipoli gave the Turkish nation the morale, strength and courage to fight its war of independence in the mid-1920s. It played a crucial role in consolidation of the Turkish national identity and laid the foundation of the Republic of Turkey.

At Gallipoli we also found Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who not only played a decisive role in the battle but went on to become the Turkish commander in the Turkish War of Independence and the founder of the Republic of Turkey. At Gallipoli, he tested the resolution of the exhausted Ottoman soldier and realized that, despite the endless wars of 19th and early 20th centuries that annihilated the majority of the population, the Turkish people and the Turkish soldier were still resolved to defend their homeland at any cost. This experience encouraged and convinced him to lead the Turkish War of Independence.

Many Australians similarly consider Gallipoli to be the starting point of Australia’s national identity. Gallipoli was the first military campaign of an Australian army organised at a national level. Enormous human loss and sacrifice created a national feeling of solidarity and strong comradeship which is an inherent quality of the Australian national character.

Gallipoli is important to us all, not only because of such national perspectives, but also because of a genuine friendship that it created between our nations. It is unique in world history that such a bloody war could nevertheless create such a deep bond of friendship between peoples who fought against each other. Certainly, bravery together with gallantry and chivalrous acts on both sides in a mortal combat led to a mutual friendship, respect and admiration. This is reflected in the words of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to the Anzac mothers in 1934 when the wounds of human losses were still fresh and relatives and friends of those who fell on the battlefield were still alive.

In the same spirit of mutual friendship and respect, in 1985 the Turkish Government officially named that part of Gallipoli peninsula after the Anzacs and changed the official maps accordingly. This is absolutely unique in our history. During the long centuries, different armies attempted to invade different parts of Turkey. But never

was a piece of Turkish national land named after an invading army. Only the Anzacs were honoured by Turkey in this way.

That our two nations were able to build genuine friendship and mutual respect on the basis of a past mortal combat is unique in world history. Our friendship could serve as a message to the international community for tolerance, mutual understanding and peace among nations. Anzac Day is not only important for us, but it is exemplary for the entire world.

Within 98 years, Çanakkale, which used to be a battlefield between our nations, has become a holy city for Australians and New Zealanders. Today, we are delighted to host thousands of Aussies and Kiwis in Çanakkale every year on Anzac Day to commemorate the sacrifices of their ancestors.

Conclusion

Today, relations between our two countries grow not only out of the historical context but also out of shared values. Our countries work together to face global challenges in multilateral fora, such as the United Nations, OECD and G-20, as well as our collective efforts in Afghanistan.

In 1967, we added another dimension to our relations when an “Assisted Passage Agreement” was signed. Since then the number of Australians of Turkish origin has grown to around 150,000, drawn from diverse backgrounds, including teachers, academics, doctors, engineers and architects. Australia now is their home and their adopted motherland. We are very proud of the significant contribution they have made to Australia and see them as a strong bridge between our two countries.

We now have an opportunity to take this special bond between Turkey and Australia further. The centenary of Gallipoli in 2015 will provide us an unprecedented opportunity to intensify and diversify our relationship. 2015 has been proclaimed as the “Year of Turkey in Australia” and the “Year of Australia in Turkey”. We have already started working on many projects for 2015 and people in both countries are enthusiastic to mark this very special centenary. As we approach 2015, I would like to reiterate the importance of our will and determination to further develop this unique friendship, which is based on the dignity of our ancestors.

The Author: Ms. Gülseren Çelik is the Consul General of the Republic of Turkey in Sydney. A graduate of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, Trinity College, University of Dublin, she joined the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1986. She subsequently held diplomatic posts in Oslo, in Cairo, at UNESCO in Paris, and in Dublin, before rising within the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to head, from 2007 sequentially, the Department of Multilateral Cultural Affairs, the Department of Overseas Promotion, and then the Department of Natural Disasters and Humanitarian Aid. She assumed her present appointment in 2010. [Photo of Ms Çelik: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson, MC]