

GALLIPOLI

PETER HART

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PREFACE

GALLIPOLI! IT WAS A LUNACY that never could have succeeded, an idiocy generated by muddled thinking. The Great War stalled when the huge continental armies of Germany and France fought themselves to a standstill on the Western Front in 1914. For the Allies, the grim business of killing Germans, wearing them down to the point that their armies collapsed, would take four more painful years. The British were very much the junior partner to the French, yet in 1915, long before they had the military capability, they engaged in a series of military adventures that sought an easier route to victory. Of these the most doomed, the most pointless, was the attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula, the aim of which was to gain control of the Dardanelles Straits that separated Asia from Europe and take Turkey out of the war. Apologists for the campaign have pointed to its imagined benefits, thereby not only removing one member of the alliance that was propping up Germany but also influencing the wavering Balkan states into joining the Allies. This would result in the pressure being taken off Russia, while the opening of the sea route to the south Russian ports in the Black Sea would allow the export of desperately needed munitions to feed the Russian guns on the Eastern Front. Much of this view is sheer nonsense.

Moreover, from the British perspective few military operations can have begun with such a cavalier disregard for the elementary principles of war: Gallipoli was a campaign driven by wish-fulfilment rather than a professional assessment of the strategy and tactics required. Right from the beginning it was a distraction from what should have been the main business of the war: concentrating scarce military resources on defeating the Germans on the Western Front. Although surprise is usually crucial to any successful campaign, in this case at a strategic level it was meekly

surrendered by allowing small-scale naval attacks months before the main assault. Any brief tactical possibilities the British may have contemplated were dissipated by plans that failed to focus sufficient force to secure any significant objectives, while carrying out the first ever contested landings against a modern weapons system. Logistical incoherence was guaranteed by the decision to try and wage a major campaign thousands of miles away from Britain with neither the necessary resources nor infrastructure to ensure success. The British units sent out to fight were for the most part only half-trained, inexperienced in modern combat and poorly led, in sharp contrast to the better trained, battle-hardened, well-led Turks. This truly was a disaster in the making.

Gallipoli proved to be a key moment for two of the most significant individuals of the twentieth century: Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and Mustafa Kemal, then an officer in the Turkish Army. Churchill pushed his luck once too often and ended up justly vilified for the dreadful consequences of his strategic incompetence. The setback would have ended the career of a lesser man; even he had to spend ten years in the political wilderness. For Kemal, Gallipoli was an opportunity. Before the Great War he had been a frustrated politician-soldier, but at Anzac he demonstrated the keen military skills and a messianic style of leadership that were to give him the post-war platform to seize the reins of power in Turkey and become the head of his people as Kemal Atatürk.

Gallipoli was a truly international campaign involving troops from a multinational Allied task force made up of British, French, Australian, New Zealand and Indian troops. As ever, the British and Anzac forces are right at the centre of our tale. But this book seeks to tell the story from all sides and Turkish sources have been incorporated into the narrative of battle wherever possible to give a more rounded picture of events than has hitherto been presented. They were, after all, the victors in 1915; the story they tell is one of equal heroism and superior military competence. The role, too, of the French has long been unfairly downplayed; it could be argued that they were the most effective fighting unit at Gallipoli. Well trained and supported by a sufficiency of artillery batteries armed with the highly regarded 75mm guns, they proved a formidable fighting force. But they were cruelly hamstrung in their efforts on the right flank at Helles by the threat of flanking fire from the Asiatic coast just across the Dardanelles, combined to lethal effect with the terrible ground configuration

that thwarted their efforts in the Kereves Dere sector. This book attempts to put the French contribution more appropriately at the heart of events.

The true picture of war is a jigsaw puzzle made up of thousands of individual stories from men unfortunate enough to have experienced it. In battle few knew what was going on just fifty yards away, so the overall picture created depends very much on the individual stories chosen. I have tried to use sources that reflect elements of both the commonality and the uniqueness of the Gallipoli experience, using the now-stilled voices of the soldiers who were there to bring their terrible experiences back to life. The original quotations have, where necessary, been lightly edited for overall readability. Thus punctuation and spellings have been largely standardised, material has occasionally been re-ordered and irrelevant material has been omitted, usually without any indication in the text. Nevertheless, changes in the actual words used in the original sources have been avoided wherever possible.

Overall the book aims to expose the futility of the campaign while showing what it was like to fight at Gallipoli almost a hundred years ago. It does not cover every battle, but pursues a course through the most tactically illuminating and some of the previously less well-documented episodes, which I hope are covered in more detail here than in most other books.

Gallipoli is an epic tragedy with an incredible heroic resilience displayed by the soldiers at the centre of our narrative. But historians must beware of being caught up in the romance of the campaign and sucked into thinking that it was either a justifiable operation of war or that it had a realistic chance of success. The Western Front was where the war would be decided and the German Army defeated. Although there were important lessons to be learnt from the Gallipoli campaign it was a futile and costly sideshow for all the combatants. This is their story.

DODGING THE ISSUE

The only place that a demonstration might have some effect in stopping reinforcements going East would be the Dardanelles – particularly if, as the Grand Duke says, reports could be spread at the same time that Constantinople is threatened. We shall not be ready for anything big for some months.¹

Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener

THE GREAT WAR was a continental war that would be decided on the Western Front. Right at the start of the war the Germans unveiled their latest version of the Schlieffen Plan, which entailed holding the Russians back on the Eastern Front while seeking to knock out France. This set the tone for the whole war. It was a battle between heavyweight continental armies relying on conscription to mobilise millions of trained men. In this battle of the giants Britain was a mere pygmy with her small regular volunteer army of just 250,000. She had agreed to deploy the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) alongside the French on the Western Front, as to leave France to fight by herself was to guarantee German victory. Although the fighting would spread across the globe, the result of the war would be decided – no less than with the Seven Years War, the Napoleonic Wars and the Franco-Prussian War – by the course of the fighting in Europe.

What was it that toppled Turkey into this Great War of the European Powers? What was it that caused a country evenly balanced between

her ambitions and her well-justified fears of looming disaster to plunge into the war in November 1914 – a war for which she was by no means ready? Was there ever any real advantage to be gained by poor benighted Turkey, whichever side won? Both the Allies and the Central Powers had their greedy eyes fixed on various portions of the Turkish domain. Where they did not actually plan to seize territory, they sought either increased political influence or long-term economic gains and looked forward to future depredations. Whatever protestations they might make, the Great Powers all had an unspoken agenda that boded ill for the Turks once the war was over. Why then did the Turks expose themselves to a lottery where the winner would take all, but that winner could never be Turkey? A refusal to be dragged into such a dangerous morass alongside a diligent armed neutrality would have served Turkey far better. Most of all the Turks required time to modernise their country; time to husband their strength for the battles to come against the predators that surrounded them.

Turkey was not a nation state in the contemporary sense but the still-twitching corpse of the once-great Ottoman Empire.² Of its approximately 40 million population at the end of the nineteenth century about half were ethnic Turks. The rest were a collation of Greeks, Arabs, Slavs and many other races scattered more or less wherever the tides of history had washed them. Religious differences added a further spice to this complex ethnic mix. As the various layers of European Turkey were peeled off with the onset of independence for Greece, Rumania, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria, one effect of the removal of these largely Christian countries from the Ottoman Empire was a consequent rebalancing towards a generally Muslim character. This growing source of national identity was counterbalanced by the effective economic penetration of Turkey by the Great Powers which, coupled with a crippling national debt, made economic regeneration exceedingly difficult. The country was therefore still largely agricultural, with little heavy industry or exploitation of natural resources. Infrastructure improvements were financed from abroad and often reflected a foreign agenda that was not in Turkey's long-term interest. Even her army and navy were dominated by foreign military missions.

The floundering government of Sultan Abdul Hamid was first challenged in 1908 by a partial coup led by the 'Young Turks' of the pro-saically named Committee of Union and Progress. This was a fractured

group of dissidents but the key groupings lay among young army officers and civil servants. Their common desire was to modernise the Ottoman Empire and thereby reverse its long term decline. The parliament was restored, but the Young Turks at this stage did not actually seize power and the Sultan continued to rule in a somewhat amorphous situation. The real revolution came in 1909 when a half-hearted counter-revolution gave the Young Turks the opportunity to mobilise and take full control. A brief period of martial law followed and the Sultan was deposed before parliament was re-established. Yet it was still difficult to see how modernisation could be achieved without ceding even more control to foreign powers. And those powers seemed to be circling ever closer: indeed, Italy launched a direct attack on Turkey in 1911, seizing both Tripolitania and the Dodecanese Islands; France's lust for Syria was evident; and greedy European eyes lingered on almost every portion of the former empire. The economy remained moribund and nothing seemed to have changed. A serious political crisis emerged in 1912 as more liberal elements tried to manipulate the political system to remove the increasingly dictatorial Young Turks.

The Turkish weakness demonstrated in the war with Italy encouraged the Balkan states and the First Balkan War broke out as the Balkan League of Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Montenegro attacked Turkey in October 1912. The Turks failed to concentrate their forces and in just a couple of months were soundly defeated, with severe losses. An armistice was called in December 1912 and negotiations at a peace conference convened in London seemed liable to strip Turkey of all her European Balkan possessions. Yet these defeats gave the Young Turks a chance to restore their position. A volatile 31-year-old army officer named Enver Bey, enraged by the suggestions of surrendering Adrianople and Thrace to Bulgaria to gain peace, led an armed raid on the Sublime Porte which forced the Grand Vizier to resign. Further complex manoeuvrings enabled the Young Turks to regain political control and brought together the three men who would dominate the political scene in Turkey in 1914: Djemal Pasha, Mehmed Talaat and Enver Bey. They then withdrew from the peace negotiations and the war accordingly resumed in February 1913. Further military disasters followed, forcing them to accept defeat and the loss of both Adrianople to the Bulgarians and Yannina to the Greeks at the Treaty of London in June 1913. Yet just when it seemed all hope was

lost, the Balkan League spontaneously imploded. A bitter dispute over the spoils of war caused Bulgaria to launch a pre-emptive strike on Greece and Serbia over their unresolved conflicting territorial claims, thereby triggering the Second Balkan War in June 1913. When Rumania and Montenegro joined in, Bulgaria found itself badly isolated and was forced to withdraw from Thrace. Turkey took immediate advantage and succeeded in regaining Adrianople without becoming entangled in serious fighting before the war ended in August 1913, with Bulgaria having lost most of its earlier spoils of war.

The recapture of Adrianople seemed to cement the authority of the Young Turks across the country and in particular with the army – their real power base. They had been through the fire and their aims were now far more clearly defined by what they had abandoned: Islamism had been strongly associated with the Sultan's regime; liberal support was not compatible with the methods they used to attain and retain power. What was left was the drive to modernisation and an increased nationalistic concentration on their Anatolian heartlands – the area that would become the beating heart of modern Turkey.

The British claimed a theoretical long-standing friendship with Turkey, but this was an amity that could easily be confused with enmity. Britain had taken control of Egypt and Cyprus in the late nineteenth century. In 1914 the British had a new interest in the oilfields of the Persian Gulf and it did not take great insight to guess their ambitions in the Mesopotamian area. The regular outbursts of popular indignation in Britain at various real or imagined Turkish atrocities were not only hypocritical, given the not infrequent incidents of similar deplorable behaviour by the British Empire throughout her history, but also largely synthetic, whipped up by politicians looking for a convenient external enemy. There was no genuine friendship for Turkey emanating from Britain. Her Naval Mission in Constantinople under Rear Admiral Arthur Limpus was there to strengthen the Turkish Navy, but only so it could act as a barrier to Britain's potential rivals in the Middle East. There was no altruism in the gesture: Britain and her businessmen were doing very well out of Turkey and the status quo was quite satisfactory. The whole situation was further complicated by Britain's 1904 entente with France and Russia in response to the new threat from Germany across the North Sea. This change in strategic priorities rendered Britain not only far more ambivalent about

the long-term future of Turkey, but also no longer quite so concerned over the control of the eastern Mediterranean.

Germany was another false friend to Turkey. Her apparent camaraderie was largely a thing of smoke and mirrors deployed in the service of long-term ambitions to secure new commercial spheres of influence stretching from the Rhineland to the Persian Gulf. Symbolic of this was the Germans' heavy commercial involvement in the construction of the so-called 'Baghdad to Berlin' railway. They also supplied a Military Mission to strengthen the Turkish Army in counterpoint to the British Naval Mission. In November 1912 Germany despatched the modern battlecruiser *Goeben*, accompanied by the light cruiser *Breslau*, to Constantinople. The effect was to demonstrate to the Turks that, not only was the German Empire the dominant military force in Europe, but it had serious pretensions to challenge the Royal Navy for control of the seas. For the next two years the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* remained in the Mediterranean area acting as symbols of nascent German naval power. Regular visits of the *Goeben* to anchor off the German Embassy at Constantinople soon became a focal point of admiring comment among Turkish society. When volunteers from the *Goeben* crew helped quench a serious barrack fire during a visit to the city in May 1914, this only added popular acclaim to the growing prestige of the German Navy.

The struggle had lasted for hours – hours of toil, fire-fighting and rescue. There was no danger that was not faced. All had attacked the raging flames like heroes. Suddenly, with a terrific roar, a wall had collapsed and buried four good fellows. We dragged them out from the smoking ruins of the masonry. Four German seamen had given their lives at the burning of a Turkish barracks. All Constantinople sincerely mourned these four brave *Goeben* men. The funeral was a thing never to be forgotten.³

Seaman Georg Kopp, SMS *Goeben*

On 28 June 1914 the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, by a Serbian nationalist triggered an unfortunate sequence of events. Posturing diplomacy, precautionary mobilisations, alliance commitments and long-standing military plans added lethally to the mix. At first the Turks watched from the sidelines with a degree of hope that the situation would

turn out to their advantage, as had been the case in the Second Balkan War. One young Foreign Office official at the British Embassy watched the fluctuating Turkish moods with a professional eye:

We gazed on distant war-clouds through the light glow of Japanese lanterns. The change came with the publication of the Austrian note. The feeling that predominated at Constantinople at the outset was more or less a reflection of that which, as far as we could see, obtained in London; sympathy with Austria was considerable amongst diplomats. Austrians are generally liked as personalities, and from Constantinople the Serb can be observed rather too closely to pass for a '*chevalier sans reproche*'. The Turks, I fancy, in so far as they understood it all, were in the first phase not sorry that Serbia was to get a trouncing. Later, they rejoiced in the thought that thieves would fall out and honest men come by their own, and they calculated on a Turkish re-conquest of Salonika, for Greece was at that time their *bête noire*.⁴

Charles Lister, British Embassy, Constantinople

When it became apparent that the situation was escalating out of control, it became equally evident that isolation could be very dangerous in a world at war. Turkey needed strong friends; the question was how to choose them? There were attractions to an alliance with Germany, whose military and naval resources would be a sure source of strength. Germany also posed a less immediate threat to Turkey than the Entente Powers of Britain, France and Russia, as she had far less obvious territorial ambitions.

It is difficult for us to make out the Turks' attitude towards Germany. I don't think the Turk has any liking for the German; he looks on him as useful, and has boundless confidence in his efficiency. It was this conviction, that Germany was sure to win, which had to be met. There is, after all, something to be said for those who were throughout convinced that it was in Turkey's interest to go to war on Germany's side, such as Enver and others of the soldiers. Turkey could alone hope from the Central European Powers for any reversal of the Balkan settlement arrived at in 1913; France was herself at war and therefore unable to lend Turkey money. This fact precluded any possibility of peaceful regeneration and raised the spectre of internal disruption and the fall of the Enver regime. Add to this the dazzling nature of the German promises.⁵

Charles Lister, British Embassy, Constantinople

On the other hand, the other Central Powers – Austria-Hungary and Italy – were recent enemies and enduring grievances remained. It was a complex situation, with no clear-cut course of action evident to most Turkish politicians. Some favoured an alliance with the Entente; others an armed neutrality. Although there was a fair degree of confidence that Germany was capable of defeating the French and Russians, there was an equal hesitation to trust their entire future on such a gamble. Many Turks also feared that their army was not yet ready for war so soon after its traumatic experiences in the Balkan Wars. Crucially the key Young Turks, Enver, Djemal and Talaat, were in favour of an alliance with Germany. Ignoring doubts even in their own cabinet, they negotiated a secret Turko-German alliance. Under the treaty conditions Germany promised to help recover the Turkish territories lost in recent wars and to guarantee her current borders – if Turkey joined the war in the event of a Russian attack on Germany. The whole treaty was immediately overtaken by events when, the day before it was to be formally signed on 2 August, the Germans declared war on Russia. This did not prevent the Germans exerting pressure on Turkey to join the war, but a lack of consensus among Turkish politicians severely restricted the actions of the pro-Germany faction, especially when Italy and Rumania both failed to honour their treaty obligations to join the war. Although the Turks began their long mobilisation process they could hardly leave their Balkan and Russian borders unguarded as Europe plunged into war.

Amid this state of febrile diplomatic tension the Turks were rashly provoked. It was almost as if the British government had set about creating a situation designed to deliver a pre-packaged Turkey into the ranks of the Central Powers. First, there was a staggering degree of *laissez faire* at the Foreign Office. When the crisis reached its heights, where was Sir Louis Mallet, British ambassador to Turkey? It might have been expected that he was straining every sinew to counter the machinations of his German opposite number Baron Hans Freiherr von Wangenheim. Incredibly, he was on holiday from 14 July to 16 August. He should of course have returned to his post in Constantinople in order to monitor the local situation, analyse the possibilities and judge what diplomatic responses could be made. In circumstances where a simple gesture of friendship to Turkey might well have resolved the situation and maintained her neutrality – which was, after all, her default position – the British exuded nothing but casual indifference.