

The Disaster at the Dardanelles:
How British Ethnic Prejudice Led to the Blunder of the Gallipoli Campaign

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War truly brings out the worst in mankind. In war, one faction, people, belief, or ideology competes with another. Not even the most sophisticated, cultured, and intelligent of people can avoid conflict and taking sides. As evidence, the British people and government fell into this trap of taking sides in 1915 when they launched the Dardanelles campaign. They felt their opponent, the Ottoman Turks, were a most unworthy adversary, who could not competently muster an army and defense of their nation without the intervention of another European power, in particular the Germans. Nor could, it was felt, their determination or their genetic makeup equal that of a white British soldier. To the British, this inferior and backward foe should crumble under the British war machine; with its superior navy and strong army Britain would break the Turks and be the toast of the Allied powers as they liberated Russia from the constraints of a Turkish naval blockade around the Dardanelles. Truly these prejudices of the British would lead directly to the disaster at Gallipoli. The white British prewar ideology of superiority over the Turks formed a military and mental perspective that led directly to the disaster of Gallipoli in 1915 during the Dardanelles Campaign.

It has been firmly established by historians and military intelligentsia that the catastrophe of the Gallipoli campaign was due to a certain set of factors and consequences, one of the most notable was the terrain of Gallipoli. Gallipoli is a peninsula which sticks out of European Thrace. On a map, the Gulf of Saros appears on its western flank as the peninsula runs parallel to the Turkish coast on its east. The Gallipoli peninsula is then separated by a tight running seaway known as the Dardanelles.¹ It was felt that this natural canal, which at some points becomes 1,600 yards wide, must be taken by the British.² For if it was not, the Russian grain supplies would stop flowing and it was feared the worldwide price of grain would sky rocket and

result in a grain shortage. Ninety percent of Russia's grain and fifty percent of all its exports came through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.³ Thus, it was that the British Commonwealth determined the necessity of establishing control of the Dardanelles, Istanbul, and the sea trade to the Black Sea. However, this was to be no easy battle; nor would it result in a smashing British triumph. Instead, it was a disaster conflict filled with British blunders.

Britain was in no shape for World War I with its poor government leadership, a lack of realistic and well defined goals, no coherent plan, and inexperienced troops. To make matters worse an absence of proper maps or intelligence, negligible artillery support, totally inadequate logistical and medical arrangements, incompetent commanders caused only a further deficit, and in particular an underestimate of the enemy.⁴ This led to catastrophic events on the battlefield; the soldiers were ill equipped to go into combat due to lack of proper clothing, food, water, and ammunition. It led to the shell shortage crises of 1915, and struck more centrally at the soldiers stranded on the Gallipoli peninsula when the government could not even adequately supply them with enough water. The situation was so dire that water was being imported from over 500 miles away.⁵

It is true that all these facts contributed to the Dardanelles disaster. However, the reason for the failure does not lie in geography, supplies, or war policy. Instead what led to calamity and to the true reason why Gallipoli was a failure was the idea of British cultural superiority. This silly notion cannot be traced to one central unifying cause. Instead it was a buildup of numerous and particular prejudices that had been established by centuries of British relations (or lack thereof) with Islam and Muslim peoples. These cultural beliefs manifested themselves amongst the soldiers, and led to their belief that they were superior over the Turks.

Many Englishmen were under the impression that European literature and classics were superior to Islamic and Middle Eastern texts. These impressions provided these men with an ignorant and false veil of invincibility vis-a-vis the Turkish people. They led many to believe they could simply waltz in upon the Turks and destroy them without any difficulty at all, even if the British government was not in the best position to lead them into battle. In his book, Compton Mackenzie, who had failed his physical and was still allowed into the British army, was under the impression that: "If the Turks had landed and attacked some property of mine at Capri [I] would be sailing forth in my pajamas to deal with them."⁶

Many of the social elite in England were taught "the classical" studies of an English gentleman. During the early 20th century the Greek Classics were the foundation of the curriculum in most English schools, universities, and households. One of the most notable of the classics was Homer's *Iliad*, which depicted the Greek heroes struggling against the foreign Trojans. To many British it was a calamity that these Turks were in control of this sacred area of the world where the Trojans and Greeks had fought so valiantly. Compton Mackenzie illustrates this when he described how he and many of his comrades felt about the Turks occupying this area of the world: "This fellow [a Turk] embodied nothing more sublime than a crafty Oriental wizard. His very name was an insult to Troy hidden over there in the blue haze along the Asiatic shore."⁷

There was a great feeling of duty among the British people to take up arms and fight the enemies of the British Commonwealth and Empire. In 1914 there was a great push toward volunteerism; the men sent to Gallipoli were made up of volunteers who were patriotically venturing off to defend their Commonwealth.⁸ This patriotism led many white Britons to develop false impressions about this enemy.

British soldiers were under the impression that they were in a Crusaders' army that was going to be sent by their government to liberate Istanbul from the Islamic Turk and return it to European Christian Constantinople. There was a clear presence of religious hatred among many Englishmen. John Masfield was a British officer who wrote about the reaction of his men when they first saw the beaches of Gallipoli upon arrival from Alexandria, Egypt: "The reward they came for [Constantinople]: the unseen cross upon the breast. All that they [British soldiers] felt gladness of exultation their young courage was to be used."⁹ Many British officers and servicemen were under the impression that the Dardanelle expedition represented a clash of civilizations; it was where men went to demonstrate their courage and bravery and to triumph over their religious enemies.

In addition to believing that they were going to liberate the "Holy Land" and restore proper European rulership to these sacred Greek Mythological sites, many British also believed the idea of the "Savage Turk." This myth claimed that the Turks were blood thirsty monsters, who had committed genocide upon the Bulgarians. In May 1876, there was a Bulgarian revolt in Panagyurishte; the revolt was quickly put down by the Ottoman army and the event was rumored to have claimed the lives of 10,000 to 25,000 Bulgarians. However, the number of Bulgarians massacred was highly exaggerated; many nations and peoples used it as propaganda against the Turks.¹⁰ In Britain, the Ottoman atrocities set off a great debate, and further contributed to the idea that the Turk was racially inferior and a savage. It split the government in the 1870s. Benjamin Disraeli, who was the Conservative Prime Minister, highly doubted the accuracy of the reports, and refused to read much into the subject. Others in the government, in particular some Liberal leaders, thought this was a great crime.¹¹ William Ewart Gladstone led the Liberals in a charge against the Turks. Gladstone's philosophy in common life and politics orbited around an

extreme illusion of Christian providence. For Gladstone it was of great importance that groups (especially Christian groups) be allowed self-determination wherever they lived. These strong beliefs in faith, therefore, led to his racist pamphlet which was released on 6 September 1876 and titled *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, Gladstone claimed the Turks had: “abominable and bestial lusts... at which Hell itself might almost blush” and continued by saying “the Turks were a lazy, ugly, sensual dark fanatic.”¹² His work made the Turks appear as if they were savages who murdered innocent women and children. At the same time, it was also meant to pat himself and the Liberal leaders on the back for being the champions of humanity and discrediting the Conservative leaders.

Due to his work *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, Gladstone achieved another goal, whether it was desired or not. He led many British to believe that the Turks were indeed an inferior people, who had no right in Europe, and should be pushed out. Race superiority was not a new idea in Britain, but it soon began to establish itself within the conscious of many British people. Race and genetics had been used in the past in Britain as a foundation for racist theories. The first mention of it can be traced back to the Enlightenment. James Cowles Prichard was a leading advocate of monogenesis, and has been identified as the founder of ethnology in Great Britain.¹³ After Prichard there was a great flood of anthropologists and biologists who sought to establish racism by using science. They later became classified as Victorian Anthropologists.¹⁴ In his 1850 book, titled *Races of Man*, Robert Knox placed great emphasis on the difference between racial groups, and argued that the races were species with separate origins and distinct, biologically fixed and unequal characteristics.¹⁵ In 1870 T.H. Huxley, an anthropologist, set up a classification scheme of racial types based on skin colour, hair colour and texture, eye colour, skull shape, and body stature. He thus identified

five main races: Astraloid, Negroid, Xanthochroi (fair whites of Europe), Melanochroi (dark whites of Europe, North Africa, Asia Minor, and Hindustan), and Mongoloid.¹⁶ Another example was Sir Francis Galton, who was the father of Eugenics. Galton claimed there were various differences between white European and other races. He attempted to advance eugenic principles of inheritance, and claimed that due to the heat of the equator the peoples who inhabited the area around it were naturally lazy.¹⁷ By 1880 there was even a racist journal published in England known as *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute*. The journal reinforced negative associations of blacks with savagery and inferiority by publishing racist accounts of African and Middle Eastern peoples. The works promoted the penetration of the “Dark Continent” and Asia Minor.¹⁸ All of these works have a central theme: discrimination based on a belief in the natural inequality of human beings, and a readiness to generalize freely about the character of racial and ethnic groups. Neither of these patterns of thought were derived from systematic science, but were habits of mind shaped by the larger social and cultural environment.¹⁹

This culture of the “inferior Turk,” and regret that the British government in the past had not acted against their atrocities, led many white Britons to believe that there had to be intervention in the Middle East. Compton Mackenzie and his fellow servicemen believed in this. He claimed: “What was this anachronism doing in Europe? Let Disraeli answer why. What is he [the Turk] doing in Europe now?”²⁰ There was moral fervor in these words. He wrote to explain why the British had not acted in earlier times in this area of the world. He asserted that many in Britain felt that Disraeli was wrong, that Gladstone and his assessment of the Middle East was right; there should be British intervention, and he was clearly demonstrating racial beliefs that these people were inferior.

Racial politics and prejudices played a central role in the disaster at Gallipoli. Many in the British government believed the stereotypes they had learned from this culture and political experience. The Ottoman Empire was believed to be on its last leg, the so called “Sick man of Europe.” The possibility of the Ottoman Empire mustering an adequate defense to the onslaught of the British Navy was considered impossible. It was commonly believed that the “Young Turks,” who used physical violence and created a political revolution in 1909 by abolishing the Sultanate and creating the Committee of Union and Progress which had been designed as a progressive and liberal-minded attempt at government, but later became corrupt and failed, could not manage their own nation. Many Ottoman soldiers had been unpaid for months, and the army was about ready for mutiny.²¹

This myth that the Turks could not adequately defend themselves was believed by people within the British Government, and the government became trapped in an aura of false superiority, which validated their right to interfere in this part of the world. In early 1914, the British disposed of the Ottoman leadership in Egypt, declared Egypt a Protectorate, imposed martial law, and establish control over the Suez Canal. Despite being part of the Ottoman Empire, the British took it upon themselves to take this part of the world to ensure their route to India.²² Clearly, the British would never attempt this on another European white nation. For example, had the Baltic Trade been important, the British would never have taken it upon themselves to establish a protectorate in Sweden, Norway, or Denmark to regulate trade in the Baltic Sea because these people believed in a Christian God and because they were white. The situation of the Suez Canal was different because the Ottomans were Muslim, thought of by the British as inferior, and in Britain’s way. In the battle for the canal, the British experienced 32 killed in battle and 130 wounded, while the Ottomans had 192 dead, 371 wounded, and 727

missing.²³ These statistics revealed (to the British) that the Turks once again had failed to prevent a white invader from land grabs. The results of the Suez conflict reinforced the government's belief that they would simply bowl over the Turks when engaged in major combat.

Winston Churchill fueled the flames of ignorance. At the time he was First Lord of the Admiralty. He believed that the British could pull off an amazing naval escapade, similar to the one performed in 1807 by Admiral Duckworth who took seven ships up through the Dardanelles. The seven ships were under constant Turkish fire through the straits but managed to escape and were within 8 miles of Istanbul when the winds abruptly failed and they had to turn around.²⁴ Thus clearly, there was this idea of British naval superiority, that due to its reputation and historical accomplishments in the past Britain would clearly succeed in almost any endeavor it attempted. With this thought of invincibility, it was decided by Churchill and John Fisher that the British could indeed use the battleships of the *Majestic* and *Canopus* class, dreadnoughts which had been due for scrap in 15 months back in 1914. These ships would have never been used on a more respected foe like the Germans, but to use them on the old Ottoman forts was believed by many to be a great idea.²⁵ Sir John Fisher exclaimed about the usefulness of a naval attack: "I CONSIDER THE ATTACK ON TURKEY HOLDS THE FIELD!"²⁶ Churchill and Fisher believed that if they were to take their naval guns and blast the old Turkish forts a couple times, the Turkish Army would be so horrified by this bombardment that it would surely surrender. They believed in the inferior nature of the Turks, and their likelihood to flee was the central reason why it was thought this would actually work.

As a means to ensure complete victory, the Admiralty also decided that the *Queen Elizabeth*, the first of five new battleships and one of the most powerful vessels afloat, was to proceed to the Dardanelles, and calibrate her 15-inch guns on the Turks- a task (believed by the

Admiralty) very easily done, without ever coming into range of the hostile batteries ashore.²⁷

Churchill further justified his strategy claiming:

If the arrival of one battle-cruiser, the *Geoben* [German battleship], had been enough to bring Turkey into the war then surely it was not...too much to hope that the arrival of half a dozen [those being British dreadnoughts] would get her out of it.²⁸

Almost singlehandedly, Churchill and Fisher convinced the British government to go to war in Turkey with an argument that in effect had very little proof that it could work, but clearly demonstrated the contemporary racial prejudices. Herbert Asquith made a comment about Churchill, claiming: "Winston [is] violently anti-Turk."²⁹ Although Asquith was not as violently anti-Turk as Churchill, he was still a product of this racist era. Churchill had not misled these other men within the government about the racial inferiority of the Turks because they already believed the Turk was inferior. Churchill had succeeded at instilling the belief that the old ships could effectively knock the Ottomans out of the war because everyone thought the Turks inferior. It was believed once the guns opened fire, the Turkish "mobs" (armies) would scatter like rats. Additionally, once their two munitions factories (which were located on the coast) were taken out, it was thought that the Turks would beg for a ceasefire.³⁰

Over confident with the concept of superiority due to the prejudices reinforced by racism, the British opened fire on the Turks and began a Naval Assault at 9:51 a.m. on 19 February 1915. It was felt by many Englishmen that they were going to get their chance to become heroes. Despite no proof of success, very little headway gained, and heavy casualties on the 2nd of March, Admiral Carden sent a message to London boasting: "He hoped to get through to Constantinople in about 14 days."³¹ At this point, everyone wanted to be associated with the campaign; Lord Fisher claimed he would be going down to take control of the Dardanelles operations himself.³² The initial naval bombardment was a success; the old forts were truly no

match for the British and their heavy guns. This only fueled the ignorant notion of the inferior Turk. What was not expected was that the Turks had outsmarted the British. The fact was that these old forts were not the only defenses guarding the Dardanelles. The forts were just the beginning of a complex set of fortifications. Ironically and unbeknownst to the British, the Turks were using a strategy developed by a British naval advisor who had been working for the Turkish Government! Admiral Limpus had advised the Turkish government from 1912-1914 on the best way to defend the Dardanelles. Limpus engineered the design to install defensive mobile batteries that could fire across the Dardanelle straits. By March 1915 there were 24 of these mobile batteries established on both sides of the straits. Their task was to provide cover fire to the 11 lines of mines (which totaled 344) from mine sweeping ships, and to also protect the 18-inch torpedo tubes guarding entrance into the Dardanelles from the south.³³ Clearly the British were set for a trap, and on the 18th of March catastrophe struck. When approaching the battle, an unnamed British officer wrote: "It looked as if no human power could withstand such an array of might and power."³⁴ The belief in white superiority did not last long, as the *Bouvet* sunk casting almost its entire 600 men crew to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Three of the 18 British and French warships commissioned to take the Dardanelles by force were sunk.³⁵ Thus it became clear from this point on that the pre-game hype was entirely false. The Turks were indeed a formidable foe and a force to be reckoned with. March 18, 1915 established the fact that the Turks had the superior ground and were not going to give up the Dardanelles without a tremendous commitment from the Allied powers. The idea of sending a few ships down to the Dardanelles, taking a few pot shots at the forts and having the Turks begging for surrender had been a miscalculation. The British had committed themselves to a disastrous campaign that

would later incorporate 489,000 British Empire and French soldiers. In the end, the total number of men lost by the British Empire and French amounted to 252,000 men.³⁶

British ethnic prejudices reinforced by centuries of so-called scholarly work had its validity tested on the shores of Gallipoli. The battle proved British racial, cultural, and political superiorities to be nothing more than complete tomfoolery. Gallipoli was a great defensive position that should never have been attempted. The only reason it was attempted was British because of racist belief about the Turks. The strategy involved in the naval assault was ineffective against the Turkish positions and would never have been used against a European foe. Ultimately the Gallipoli campaign failed due to ignorant beliefs about racial superiority, cultural superiority, and political prejudices against the Turkish people on the part of the British.

¹ Peter Doyle and Matthew R. Bennett, "Military Geography: the influence of terrain in the outcome of the Gallipoli Campaign, 1915," *The Geographical Journal* 165 (1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3060508> (26 October 2009).

² Robert R. James, *Gallipoli* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 4.

³ Alan Moorhead, *Gallipoli* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1956), 24.

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- ⁴ Michael Howard, *A Part of History: Aspects of the British Experience of the First World War* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 38.
- ⁵ John Masefield, *Gallipoli* (New York: Gossert & Dunlap Publishers, 1916), 151.
- ⁶ Compton Mackenzie, *Gallipoli Memories* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1930), 9.
- ⁷ Mackenzie, 33.
- ⁸ Howard, 29.
- ⁹ Masefield, 45.
- ¹⁰ Mark Rathbone, "Gladstone, Disraeli and the Bulgarian Horrors," *History Review* (December 2004) 3, <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.library.lemoyne.edu/ehost/detail?vid=4&hid=107&sid=25aff613-a6ea-4ea1-a252-1bbe1d910b71%40sessionmgr104&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=afh&AN=15218052> (24 October 2009).
- ¹¹ Rathbone, 6.
- ¹² Rathbone, 3. James, 4.
- ¹³ Douglas Lorimer, "Theoretical Racism in Late Victorian Anthropology," *Victorian Studies* V. 31 issue 3, p. 413 (1988) <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.lemoyne.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=6879552&site=ehost-live> (5 November 2009).
- ¹⁴ Lorimer, 405.
- ¹⁵ Lorimer, 405.
- ¹⁶ Lorimer, 413.
- ¹⁷ Lorimer, 422.
- ¹⁸ Lorimer, 417.
- ¹⁹ Lorimer, 428.
- ²⁰ Mackenzie, 33.
- ²¹ Moorehead, 11.
- ²² Moorehead, 16.
- ²³ Moorehead, 17.
- ²⁴ Moorehead, 38.
- ²⁵ James, 27.
- ²⁶ Moorehead, 36.
- ²⁷ Moorehead, 39.
- ²⁸ Moorehead, 41.
- ²⁹ James, 12.
- ³⁰ Moorehead, 41.
- ³¹ Moorehead, 56.
- ³² Moorehead, 56.
- ³³ James, 15.
- ³⁴ James, 60.
- ³⁵ James, 63.
- ³⁶ Moorehead, 256.

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