

THE GREAT WAR

THE SOUTHERN FRONT

DOCUMENT A

Battle for Gallipoli: February 1915 - January 1916 (BBC History)



By 1915 the Western Front was clearly deadlocked. Allied strategy was under scrutiny, with strong arguments mounted for an offensive through the Balkans or even a landing on Germany's Baltic coast, instead of more costly attacks in France and Belgium.

These ideas were initially sidelined, but in early 1915 the Russians found themselves threatened by the Turks in the Caucasus and appealed for some relief. The British decided to mount a naval expedition to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsula on the western shore of the Dardanelles, with Constantinople as its objective. By capturing Constantinople, the British hoped to link up with the Russians, knock Turkey out of the war and possibly persuade the Balkan states to join the Allies.

The naval attack began on 19 February. Bad weather caused delays and the attack was abandoned after three battleships had been sunk and three others damaged. Military assistance was required, but by the time troops began to land on 25 April, the Turks had had ample time to prepare adequate fortifications and the defending armies were now six times larger than when the campaign began.

Against determined opposition, Australian and New Zealand troops won a bridgehead at 'Anzac* Cove' on the Aegean side of the peninsula. The British, meanwhile, tried to

land at five points around Cape Helles, but established footholds in only three before asking for reinforcements. Thereafter little progress was made, and the Turks took advantage of the British halt to bring as many troops as possible onto the peninsula.

This standstill led to a political crisis in London between Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty and the operation's chief advocate, and Lord Fisher, the First Sea Lord, who had always expressed doubts about it. Fisher demanded that the operation be discontinued and resigned when overruled. The Liberal government was replaced by a coalition and Churchill, though relieved of his former post, remained in the War Council.

Amid sweltering and disease-ridden conditions, the deadlock dragged on into the summer. In July the British reinforced the bridgehead at Anzac Cove and in early August landed more troops at Suvla Bay further to the north, to seize the Sari Bair heights and cut Turkish communications. The offensive and the landings both proved ineffectual within days, faced with waves of costly counter-attacks.

The War Council remained divided until late 1915 when it was decided to end the campaign. Troops were evacuated in December 1915 and January 1916. Had Gallipoli succeeded, it could have ended Turkey's participation in the war. As it was, the Turks lost some 300,000 men and the Allies around 214,000, achieving only the diversion of Turkish forces from the Russians. Bad leadership, planning and luck, combined with a shortage of shells and inadequate equipment, condemned the Allies to seek a conclusion in the bloody battles of the Western Front. Furthermore, Gallipoli's very public failure contributed to Asquith's replacement as Prime Minister by David Lloyd George in December 1916.

** ANZAC is the acronym formed from the initial letters of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, the formation into which Australian and New Zealand soldiers were grouped in Egypt prior to the landing at Gallipoli in April 1915.*

First written as A. & N. Z. Army Corps, it soon became A. N. Z. A. C. and the new word was so obvious that the full stops were omitted. The word was initially used to refer to the cove where the Australians and New Zealanders landed and soon after, to the men themselves. An ANZAC was a man who was at the Landing and who fought at Gallipoli, but later it came to mean any Australian or New Zealand soldier of the First World War. An ANZAC who served at Gallipoli was given an A badge which was attached to his colour patch.

Following the allied withdrawal from Gallipoli and the expansion of Australian and New Zealand forces in Egypt early in 1916, the ANZAC was split into two new formations... These formations... were transferred to France and fought on the Western Front until 1917, when the five Australian formations were grouped into a single Australian Corps.

DOCUMENT B: Gallipoli – A Turkish Perspective

by A. Mete Tuncoku – Middle East Technical University

"The war at Gallipoli, for Turks, is a holy war. "We are fighting for the sake of Allah, for the sake of God, and for the protection for the heartland, Turkey. The Australians and the New Zealanders landed on 25th of April, early morning. I think at about 3:00 am Mustafa Kemal, who was the Commander of the 19th Division on the peninsula was inspecting the troops.

"Suddenly he met certain Turkish soldiers. They were retreating, and Kemal said, 'Why are you retreating?' And they said, 'Because they are coming: the Australians are coming; the British are coming; the enemy is coming.'

"Mustafa Kemal orders them to stop and start fighting back. Then he says, 'During the time that you will fight and stop the enemy, the others will come and reinforce you and we will be able to win the battle.' And that's what happened. When the few soldiers were trying to fight against the Australians and the New Zealanders, the other reinforcements were brought immediately. That's why Mustafa Kemal in his diary said, 'That was the decisive moment on the landing, that is the moment I won the battle.'

"Because the Australians, when they saw that Turks were fighting from up in the hills, they thought that there were a great number of Turks there so they hesitated and they stopped. That was a mistake on their part. Just before the attack, his famous order is: 'I'm not ordering you to attack, I'm ordering you to die.' Meaning that you will either win or die no third alternative.

"Think about the psychology of the Turkish soldiers. We have to remember again, he's fighting for the Motherland, for the heartland, and he's fighting a holy war. So dying for the country is something very important, and also the order expresses that there's no other choice. We'll either die or let the enemy pass through and occupy Istanbul.

"At some places the trenches were very close... there were about eight meters or ten meters between the two trenches. It's very close: I mean they could hear the voices of each other. They could hear the Turks singing songs in the evening; or the Turks could hear the talks of the Anzacs in the trenches. And it was a stagnant war. I mean, they were just waiting for each other to attack so that they would defend their trenches. So during these critical stages, there were exchanges of gifts. For example, the Anzacs offered canned food, beef; and the Turks in exchange, gave tobacco because they had plenty of tobacco. There were exchanges of letters.

"There were some official exchanges between the officers of the two parties. And these exchanges are interesting to show what each party was thinking about each other.

"They asked questions of each other, 'Why are you fighting?' 'Why are you here?' During this conversation there were no hostile feelings on the part of both parties. It's very interesting. I mean, can you imagine that war? During the eight-and-a-half months they were fighting, thousands of soldiers were killed on both sides, and still they are not fighting each other. The messages left by the Anzacs after the evacuation are quite interesting. There are letters written to Turkish soldiers saying: 'Johnny The Turk, good-bye. We left lots of food for you, enjoy them.'"

DOCUMENT C: Gallipoli – An Australian Perspective

by Trevor Wilson – University of Adelaide

"The Gallipoli Campaign can be viewed from very different perspectives... on a broad view, it had almost no chance of success. It required an amphibious invasion, which to succeed needs long preparation and great resources – neither of which the British had at their disposal. And the defender possessed on this occasion, even greater advantages than were usual. The Gallipoli peninsula, with its narrow beaches and sheer cliffs and commanding ridges and high peaks, happens to be a defender's dream.

"The only chance of the British attack succeeding was if the Turks could be taken by surprise or were already highly demoralized. Neither was the case. An invading force could not be assembled in the Eastern Mediterranean without its object being painfully clear. And although Turkish forces sometimes fought badly in the far-flung parts of their empire, they would ferociously defend their homeland and their capital, Constantinople.

"If we narrow the focus to what was happening on the ground – that is, among the fighting men – it seems a different story of courage and endurance and even purpose. Let it be said, the Gallipoli operation was not a comfortable experience.

"The climate of what the British Prime Minister thought was the 'gorgeous East' ... was often very inhospitable. It proved insufferable hot in summer – a soldier opening a tin of jam would find it smothered in blowflies before he could get a spoon of it to his mouth, and large numbers of men fell victim to dysentery – and freezing in winter. And the distances between the opposing trenches were so limited that it was perilous to risk even a swift look over the parapet.

"Yet soldiers proved adaptable to this situation, and resourceful. Australian and New Zealand troops (ANZACS) converted empty jam tins into home-made bombs, and created periscope rifles so as to get a sight on the enemy without exposing themselves. The determined fighting in a succession of gripping but ill-rewarded offensives won great attention, not only at home in Australia and New Zealand, but in the newspapers of Britain and elsewhere.

"So although the Gallipoli Campaign may be judged a doomed undertaking from the start, nevertheless, the positive qualities revealed by the forces engaged in it have caused it to be remembered as heroic. For example, in Australia and New Zealand, Anzac Day – 25 April, the day of the first landings – is a national holiday and the principal occasion for remembrance of war and its sacrifices."

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Essential Question:

Why did the Allies lose the Battle of Gallipoli?

DOCUMENT A – BBC History Summary

- According to DOCUMENT A, what were the key factors that led to the Allied defeat at Gallipoli?

DOCUMENT B – A Turkish Perspective

- According to DOCUMENT B, what were the key factors that led to the Allied defeat at Gallipoli?

DOCUMENT C – An Australian Perspective

- According to DOCUMENT C, what were the key factors that led to the Allied defeat at Gallipoli?

SYNTHESIS

- What could explain the differences in the various accounts?

- Based on your analysis, why did the Allies lose the battle of Gallipoli?