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THE GREAT WAR

# At Gallipoli, a Campaign That Laid Ground for National Identities

For the Turks and the Australians, the Gallipoli campaign has taken on an outsize importance as the bloody event that became the foundation of a modern national consciousness.

By **TIM ARANGO** JUNE 26, 2014

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CANAKKALE, Turkey — The trenches are still there, carved in the green hills of the slim Gallipoli Peninsula just across the Dardanelles, the waterway that connects the Aegean and Marmara Seas on the way to Istanbul from the port city of Canakkale. Gravestones adorn the

beachheads and lands farther inland, marking the lives of the young men — Britons, Frenchmen, Australians, New Zealanders and their enemies, the Ottoman Turks — who died there, almost a century ago.

Nowadays, it is a well-preserved national park, with rolling fields of olive trees and patches of tomatoes, watermelons and sunflowers lending a rural ambience to the solemn places of the dead. It is hallowed ground for battlefield tourists, mostly Turks and Australians, who are coming in ever greater numbers, taken by ferry across the straits, to pay homage to their nations' creation stories.

Almost a hundred years ago, it was the place where World War I was supposed to turn in the Allies' favor, but instead it became one of the great slaughters of the Great War.

In March 1915, the Western Allies, locked in stagnant trench warfare in Europe, seized on an ambitious strategy orchestrated by Winston Churchill, then Britain's first lord of the admiralty, to open a second front here. In securing control of the Dardanelles and conquering Constantinople, now Istanbul, the Allies hoped to knock the Turks, who had recently entered the conflict on the side of the Germans, from the war. It began with a naval bombardment of the Turkish forts lining the shores of the Dardanelles, and when that failed, British commanders ordered a land invasion. At the time, it was the largest amphibious landing in the history of warfare.

After nine months of grueling trench warfare, and after suffering tens of thousands of casualties while gaining little ground, the Allies evacuated. More than 40,000 British military personnel were killed, along with nearly 8,000 Australians and more than 60,000 Turks.

Nearly a century later, the legacy of Gallipoli transcends its military aspects. While the campaign is still remembered by the British and the French, they have greater battles to mark in their histories. For the Turks and the Australians, though, the Gallipoli campaign has taken on an outsize importance as the bloody event that became the foundation of a modern national identity.

The campaign also proved crucial in the careers of two of the 20th century's greatest statesmen: Churchill, who was demoted for his role in the military disaster, and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, then a young Turkish officer, whose battlefield success at Gallipoli propelled him to fame, which he built on to become the founder of the modern Turkish republic.

Also taking his place in history was a young Australian newspaperman named Keith Arthur Murdoch, whose role in the Gallipoli story presaged, many decades later, the global rise of another Murdoch newsman, his son, Rupert.

In September 1915, with the slaughter unfolding on Gallipoli but news limited in Australia because of military censorship, Keith Murdoch visited the peninsula on his way to London to establish a news bureau to cover the fighting in Europe. He arrived with a letter from the Australian prime minister authorizing him to look into the postal service for the soldiers.

The letter, Rupert Murdoch said in an interview, was "a bit of a cover, I guess." His real aim was to see for himself the conditions of the campaign. What he found appalled him. Believing that Australians were needlessly being sent to slaughter by incompetent British officers, he agreed to secretly take to London a letter written by a war correspondent stationed at Gallipoli that outlined the conditions on the ground.

When the commanding general at Gallipoli, Sir Ian Hamilton, learned of Keith Murdoch's plan to evade the censorship rules, he had him detained at a port in France and the letter was destroyed. When he reached London, he took a small office at The Times of London and began writing his own letter.

Rupert Murdoch, recalling the story as it was told to him by his father, said, "As he was writing his letter, the editor of The Times looked in and said, 'What are you doing, young man?'"

Keith Murdoch told him. The editor read it and, according to Rupert Murdoch, said, "I've got to show this to the chief." By that, he meant Lord Northcliffe, the owner of The Times, who read the letter and passed it on to Prime Minister H.H. Asquith. The 8,000-word letter, detailing what

Keith Murdoch called “one of the most terrible chapters in our history,” was published as a British state paper, and it figured into the decision to fire General Hamilton and evacuate the peninsula.

“My father did figure into that in a big way, and he was very proud of it,” Rupert Murdoch said.

Keith Murdoch later came under sharp criticism in Britain for breaking the censorship rules, and many in the British establishment, including Churchill, never forgave him, Rupert Murdoch said. “He had a perfectly clear conscience,” he said. In recent times, that story was cited by Julian Assange, an Australian and the founder of WikiLeaks, in justifying his own extraordinary efforts to bypass government secrecy rules.

In defeat, the Australians gained what many historians have described as the first embers of a national consciousness, apart from their British colonial legacy. “It’s certainly seen today as the beginning of a real Australian self-identity,” Rupert Murdoch said.

In recent times, successive Australian governments have promoted battlefield tours and television documentaries, leading to a growing interest in Gallipoli among younger generations, especially as the 100th anniversary approaches next year. The Australian government recently selected 8,000 people from a lottery to attend anniversary commemorations next year at the beaches in Turkey.

“Australians were looking for a blood sacrifice to sanctify their nationhood,” said Peter Stanley, an Australian historian, explaining that Australia had gained its independence from Britain through negotiation and referendums, not war.

“In those days, people believed that nations were born in blood,” he said.

On a recent afternoon, one visitor, Robert Lewien, walked among the gravestones along the shoreline near Anzac Cove, named for the acronym of the force that landed there, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, just as thousands of his fellow Australians do each year.

“My grandfather fought here,” he said. “But he never talked about it.”

His wife, Sheryl Lewien, walked alongside him, looking for the grave of a relative.

Another Australian walking nearby, Jacques O'Connor, 67, was also visiting for the first time. Back home, he said, "there's been a resurgence in emotions."

"Our kids, our grandkids, want to come here more than us or our parents did," he said.

In victory, the Turks ended decades of Ottoman defeats on the edges of the empire and emerged with a new sense of nationalism — and a leader, Mustafa Kemal, later known as Ataturk, who would lead the country to independence after the war ended. Mustafa Kemal, then a young officer, met the invading Australians with his men on the day of the landing and earned a reputation as a military genius for his success.

"Gallipoli is the place that for the first time, after a century of defeats, the Turks were successful," said A. Mete Tuncoku, a Turkish historian. "Turkish nationalism started re-emerging after the campaign."

Mr. Tuncoku, sitting at a waterside cafe, pointed across the straits toward the peninsula. "When we look at everything post-1923, we come back to this," he said, referring to the year that modern Turkey was founded.

In recent years, though, Turks have been engaged in an ideological contest over Gallipoli's legacy. With the rise of the country's Islamist government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan have come efforts to diminish the role of Ataturk, who established Turkey under secular principles. The military, which once had a predominant role over politics in Turkey, has also been pushed aside under Mr. Erdogan.

As a result, the Gallipoli campaign is being recast as a holy war and has become one more element in the polarization of Turkey, split between the secular and the religious.

"The Islamists say, 'We defeated the infidels,'" said Kenan Celik, a longtime tour guide of Gallipoli's battlefields. "The Kemalists say the imperialists. It's two different interpretations."

Many conservative Turkish municipal governments have been organizing free battlefield tours, with a message delivered by tour guides, Mr. Celik said, of “how great Islam is.”

“They come from central Anatolia,” Mr. Celik said of the flocks of religious tourists in recent years, with a measure of disgust. “They don’t have much education. They’ll believe in anything.”

The shared history has established an enduring connection between Turkey and Australia. In 1934, Ataturk famously wrote a letter to Australian mothers, saying, “having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well.” There is a statue of Ataturk in Canberra, the Australian capital.

Much of the sense of mutual respect between the two countries is founded on stories of camaraderie on the front lines between Australians and Turks, of tossing food, cigarettes and other gifts into opposing trenches.

While there was some of that, it is largely shrouded in myths, said Mr. Stanley, the historian. The truth is, they just wanted to kill one another and win the war, something evident in the letters from the front.

Early one morning almost a century ago, an Australian soldier hunched in his trench near Anzac Cove and considered his enemy.

He wrote, “Everything is so quiet and still one would never dream that two opposing forces, each eager for the other’s blood, were separated by only a few yards – and in places only a few feet.”

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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