

Extended Essay

History

An investigation into what went wrong during the Gallipoli Campaign:

To what extent were faults in leadership to blame for the failure of the Gallipoli campaign?

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Introduction

The Gallipoli Campaign started on the 25th of April, 1915 when French, British, Australian and New Zealand forces landed in the straits of the Dardanelles¹. This conflict was a significant part of the war as the campaign aimed at seizing Istanbul and knocking the Ottoman Empire out of the war. In the end, this campaign ultimately cost the lives of 489,000 allied troops and 315,000 Ottoman soldiers. as well as failing to achieve its objectives and prolonging the duration of the First World War.

The Gallipoli Campaign sparked debate around the world on why and who was to blame for the failure. Additionally, the importance of this campaign in knocking a key player out of the war could have changed the course of the great war and indeed may have changed history as we know it today. This essay will explore four of the most prominent perspectives on the failure of the Campaign. The first factor, widely thought of as the main reason for failure, is the failure of leadership. This factor places the majority of the blame on the British as their officers orchestrated this campaign with Sir Winston Churchill, Lord of the Admiralty heading the Campaign's planning. Secondly, mistakes in planning and strategy will be explored as it also played a role in the downfall of allied troops in the Dardanelles. Finally, we will examine the issue to see if it was a underestimation of the strong Ottomans which led to defeat. This would be more sympathetic towards the British and will assess if they were ultimately facing an uphill battle. This investigation will conclude that whilst the operation did face an unexpectedly determined and well-organised enemy, the failure could have been averted at a number of key points if it wasn't for poor British strategic and tactical leadership.

¹ Gilbert, Martin. The First World War. A Complete History, Holt Paperbacks, 2004.

Chapter 1 - The Background

In late 1914 the war on the Western Front became a stalemate and the allies needed a new way to regain the advantage. Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, planned the attack on the Dardanelles. This entire allied operation was part of a plan to seize Istanbul which would subsequently throw the Ottoman Empire out of World War 1. Before one can analyse the reasons for the failure, it is necessary to understand the chronology of the campaign to assess where exactly things went wrong.

The campaign began on the 25th of April 1915 with the allied landings in the Dardanelles in the Ottoman theatre of war.² The campaign started as a purely naval operation to sail directly up the Dardanelles straits onto Istanbul. When the Armada came up against mines and shore defences, the naval group withdrew, thus alerting the Ottoman's to an impending attack³. Hurriedly, the Admiralty in an attempt to salvage the campaign quickly came up with a land invasion of Gallipoli peninsula as a way to save the campaign aims and capture shore batteries, enabling the navy to sail up to Istanbul as originally planned⁴. He proceeded with the land campaign which began with two separate landings in the straits of the Dardanelles. The first landing was at Cape Helles or "W Beach" on the southern tip of the Dardanelles⁵. The second further up the coast across from the town of Midos, this is where 12,000 Australian and New Zealander (ANZAC) soldiers landed just before dawn at 4 am⁶.

The landing itself was mostly unopposed however soon after a Turkish battery near the town

² Edward J Erickson, *"Gallipoli Command Under Fire"*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

of Gaba Tepe began bombarding the soldiers on the beach⁷. This forced the men on the beach to push further inland, taking further casualties and attempting to climb the steep terrain in order to gain higher ground⁸. The Turks quickly realised that if the crest was not held then the whole peninsula may be lost to the ANZAC's. One Turkish and two Arab regiments arrived soon after, further reinforcing the crest for the Turk's as the fighting lasted the rest of the day⁹. The Allies had landed 30,000 troops, however suffering heavy casualties around 20,000 dead in the crucial landing stages during the start of the campaign¹⁰. The true scale of devastation that the Allies had suffered while landing their troops was truly immense.

The next two months of allied occupation would soon descend into trench warfare and subsequently, stalemate¹¹. This began to change in August 1915 with the Allies landing 10,000 more troops at Suvla Bay in an attempt to once more to gain the higher ground. The fresh British troops relieved the New Zealand troops who held Chunuk Bair, which was then attacked by the Ottomans and the British were forced further downhill, and further inland whilst the Ottomans once again held Chunuk Bair. The best way to describe the months that followed until evacuation on the 9th January 1916 were simply "lunatic persistence in the face of obvious defeat"¹². By the end of the campaign 35,268 allied soldiers were evacuated leaving nothing behind to fall into Ottoman hands¹³.

Now that we have established what happened and some of the key battles fought at Gallipoli, the question still remains. What went wrong? And who is really to blame? To

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ C.F. Aspinall-Oglander, *"Gallipoli Vol 1. Official History of the Great War Other Theatres"*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hart, Peter. *The Great War. A Combat History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹³ Edward J Erickson, *"Gallipoli Command Under Fire"*

answer these question we will first look at the faults in Leadership and poor strategy at Gallipoli. More specifically the pre-campaign planning that was planned by the Admiralty and Churchill's War Council which outlined the overall aims, purpose, and rationale of the campaign. Then we must analyse the mistakes in leadership and poor decisions made during the battles themselves at Gallipoli. Finally the underestimation of the opposition and their superiority.

Chapter 2 - Campaign Planning and Tactical Mistakes

The communication and deliberation between Churchill and his Generals in the planning stages would prove crucial to the viability and strength of the entire campaign. In terms of the planning of the campaign at Gallipoli, it was unrealistic and could not be described as sensible. The majority of the modern historiography would agree with this and most notable Historians being Philip Haythornthwaite and Ian Gilbert. However, some historians such as Leslie A Carlyon argue that all the blame shouldn't be placed on the British Generals¹⁴. As the British faced the unexpected reality of industrial warfare with the Generals being trained in an era where they had never encountered industrial warfare of this scale so they weren't fully prepared for this kind of campaign. The planning that began prior to January 1915 and which had continued until the commencement of the campaign was a gross inadequacy in terms of understanding the enemy. Furthermore, the tactical decisions that were made would prove decisive in the direction of the campaign, which would swing in both directions until settling with the Ottomans. A lackluster amount of effort was injected into this operation in which the men on the ground paid the ultimate price for.

One of the major problems of the strategic planning of the campaign seems to lie in false assumptions, underestimation and a lack of intelligence about the enemy and the battlefield environment. The correspondence between Vice-Admiral Carden to Churchill neatly illustrates this. The planning stages in the build up to Gallipoli started on November the 25th 1914¹⁵, when Winston Churchill proposed a new plan for a front in the Dardanelles to the government's War Council due to a desperate need to break open the Ottoman empire.

¹⁴ L A Carlyon, "*Gallipoli*"

¹⁵ Edward J Erickson, "*Gallipoli Command Under Fire*"

Subsequently on the 19th of February 1915, the War Council cautiously agreed with Churchill and British troops in Egypt were informed¹⁶. On the 11th of January 1915 a telegram was sent from Vice-Admiral Carden to Churchill setting out plans for Dardanelles¹⁷. The telegram was replying to a query from Churchill about how they would get past the Turkish defences¹⁸. The main points of the telegram are as follows, “total reduction of defences at the entrance”, “Clear defences inside of Straits up to and including Oshes Point Battery No. 8.”, “Reduction of defences at the Narrows Chank”, “Clear passage through mine field advancing through Narrows reducing forts above Narrows and final advance to Marmara”¹⁹. Furthermore, Vice-Admiral Carden included that the time needed simply depended on the morale of the enemy and the weather conditions. Lastly and perhaps the most important and crucial inference made by Vice-Admiral Carden, “Might do it all in a month about”²⁰. Frequent reconnaissance by seaplane did not suffice in the allies initial perception of the Turkish defences at the Dardanelles. From this source it is clear that the Allies were ill informed about the Turkish defences and had no form of respect for their Turkish opponents. Indeed, one of the limitations of the source is that Carden gives no evidence to back up his assertion that the campaign could be completed in a month. This limitation could be because Carden is possibly trying to increase the Royal Navy's role in the war. By packing the operation as a virtual success and skipping over uncomfortable details and contrary evidence, Carden is clearly trying to persuade Churchill of the viability of the operation. This hints towards the idea that campaign planning was compromised from the very beginning due to political maneuverings at the highest levels of military command. This point is backed up by some historians who argue that Churchill was known for his political ambition and wanted an operation that would raise his profile within the government. The

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Telegram from Vice-Admiral Carden to Churchill setting out plans for Dardanelles, dated 11 January 1915

²⁰ *ibid.*

resources that Britain had contributed to the campaign were finite with the naval assault being carried out by obsolescent ships that were spared from the North Sea Fleet²¹. Likewise much like the naval component on the land the men consisted of inexperienced ANZAC troops training nearby in Egypt²². The way in which this campaign was planned was, therefore, not rationalized in any way, shape or form and wasn't based upon actual professional appreciations. In a tactical sense, Vice-Admiral Carden's plans were based upon numerous assumptions about the Ottoman defences and how the Ottoman General's would react to the assault. Lack of planning in the details of the campaign, Churchill needed to look more closely at this instead of the bigger picture.

Churchill was looking far too much at the bigger picture due to his blind optimism and faith in operations because of his desire to raise his profile in an attempt to win the war for Britain. 'All of these troops can be transported to the region by March 21st if we give the order now. If the navy hasn't broken through, the troops can be used to attack Gallipoli. As soon as the Dardanelles are open to us they can operate from Constantinople to finish off Turkish forces. Bulgaria and Serbia may also join forces with us'²³. Churchill had 115,000 men ready to take Turkey and to win world war one in a matter of months²⁴, at least that's what his line of thought sounds like to me. Churchill looked too much at the bigger picture, the taking of Constantinople seemed more of a goal rather than to actually landing his men and going from there. 'The only place where we can take any kind of initiative is in attacking Constantinople and driving Turkey out of the war'²⁵. This further reinforces the idea that Churchill was looking at the bigger picture in his blind optimism and faith. This new plan for Gallipoli was presented by Churchill at the Imperial War Council meeting to gain support for

²¹ Philip Haythornthwaite, "*Gallipoli 1915*"

²² *ibid.*

²³ A document ('appreciation') in which Churchill set out the arguments he would use in a War Council meeting, dated 25 February 1915

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

his risky plan for Gallipoli. Far from being a sensible plan, Churchill had to argue for support from the War Council on the 26th February²⁶. Clearly, he did not have the full support of the council and this new plan is a major deviation from his original plan entailing a naval assault using battleships and not men on the ground. Churchill's optimism did not help in the planning stages of the campaign especially when his line of argument was illogical and needed to take the plan step by step, starting with securing the Dardanelles with a successful landing. Furthermore, presenting evidence at an imperial war council meeting affects the reliability of the evidence that Churchill is providing and the purpose of his speech seems purely persuasive and highly ambitious. This reveals that his motives for the operations may have been for his own political ambition and to raise his profile within government.

Another failure in campaign planning lies in the failure of the War Council to come to a unified decision on a land campaign. The decision came to shift the British force from a naval component to a land campaign was made not by Churchill or Carden but by de Robeck who unilaterally terminated the continuing naval assault in March²⁷. The imperial war council disagreed with this decision but did not order him to continue the naval attempt at the Dardanelles. And "as the Allies drifted into an unwanted and unplanned land campaign, the War Council made no efforts to reassess the ends, ways, and means that might be required to execute successfully such an endeavour"²⁸. However, Lord Kitchener did make suggestions in respects to the campaign plan he sent no new men to battle. In the end, it was General Sir Ian Hamilton, who was a senior officer in the British Army, who commanded the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force during the campaign and was leading a multitude of divisions with a range capacities and capabilities²⁹. Perhaps a more inclusive decision could

²⁶ Edward J Erickson, *"Gallipoli Command Under Fire"*

²⁷ Edward J Erickson, *"Gallipoli Command Under Fire"*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

have made the difference in a successful naval campaign if there was a more unified discussion in the ranks rather than a rushed land assault. Which would end in the straits running red with the blood of young, fresh and inexperienced troops who were inadequately supported.

The planning of the campaign was therefore, unrealistic and couldn't be described as sensible. Campaign planning and tactical mistakes were not rationalized and based upon numerous assumptions. These assumptions made the operation seem as a virtual success which only furthered the notion that this was going to be a fruitful and simple campaign. The leadership was of poor quality and if there was better strategic and tactical leadership it would have most likely affected the outcome of Gallipoli far more positively. This furthers the idea that these crucial mistakes in planning would prove to be the largest factors in the destruction of the campaign. However, it wasn't final nail in the coffin, but it was a large underlying factor which caused the failure of the campaign.

Chapter 3 - Costly Mistakes in Planning and Strategy at Gallipoli

Small but costly mistakes were made strategically and tactically by Generals and leaders amongst the men at Gallipoli, these mistakes would prove costly and would further peril the Allied attempt at Gallipoli. Despite the poor planning of generals the Gallipoli campaign still had a slim chance at success, however, these mistakes placed the final nail in the coffin for the Allies. This school of thought aims at narrowing down the blame to mistakes at Gallipoli, such as battles and decisions made during the course of the campaign.

The quality of troops that the British had sent to Gallipoli were poorly trained and were inadequate compared to their Turkish battle-hardened soldiers. "14 days of good weather to break into the Sea of Marmara"³⁰. An optimistic Churchill replied to Carden with instructions about sinking the enemy fleet, cutting enemy communications and taking the Bosphorus from behind³¹. Ottoman General's themselves thought that the British were defeated because of 'the use of too small forces at different attacking points' and 'the poor quality of English commissioned officers'³². The Ottomans 'all agreed that these officers were brave but inexperienced, and did not seem to know how to command or lead their soldiers into battle'³³. This source is a good indication of the thoughts of high ranking Ottoman Generals at the time and shows what they really thought of the British, which supports the idea that the British were weak compared to the Ottomans. Additionally, Williams had numerous detailed discussions with Turkish officers on the peninsula throughout the campaign which adds credence because they were on the peninsula. These decisions are ones that only increased the challenge the men faced in battle and to and unknowing Churchill blind at the challenge

³⁰ Edward J Erickson, *"Gallipoli Command Under Fire"*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

he faces, thought these decisions to be appropriate. Inexperienced troops who had no time to train in Egypt and generals, obsolete resources showed the lack of respect the British had not only for the enemy but for the Australian and New Zealander troops on the ground, as if they were pawns in a campaign he didn't want to fight or thought he would win. Either way, these decisions were poor and could only contribute the plight of the allies at Gallipoli.

Leadership would be the downfall of the Allies at Gallipoli, and undisputed fact a factor that could have been fixed from the start with more able leaders. The troops that the British had sent to Gallipoli were poorly trained and were inadequate compared to their opponents. Perhaps more time and thorough training would have done them a world of good. As well as decisions such as the rushed land campaign with the failure to come to a unified conclusion showing off the lack of skill the Generals possessed. The poor decisions carried out by these men shall forever rest in their laurels, and would ultimately decrease the chances for success in the campaign and catalyse defeat.

Chapter 4 - Underestimation of the Ottomans and their Superiority

Clearly, failure at Gallipoli was almost inevitable from the drawing board and was exacerbated by tactical failures on the ground during the initial landings. Yet despite this multitude of sins, the campaign could have been saved if the Ottoman's had of melted away when they encountered their superior enemy. But it was this failure to estimate the strengths of the Ottoman defenders that led to the final nail in the defeat at Gallipoli. The dogged defense of the higher ground by the Ottomans meant that the Allies were prevented from achieving all of their objectives.

The Dardanelles were the most heavily secured and fortified area in the entire Ottoman Empire and the British would sail into an almost impenetrable defensive operation³⁴. Their defences were hundreds of years old, in the 1880's the Ottoman's modernised their defences against naval attacks³⁵. Furthermore, the Allied plan as we have discovered was flawed in more ways than one, whereas the Ottoman's were well rehearsed operationally and tactically. "By 19 February, Ottoman plans for the defence of the Dardanelles could be characterized as mature and well tested"³⁶. The Ottoman army mobilised six army regiments of the empire's best trained and led divisions to the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus anticipating a war against Greece as well as Bulgaria³⁷. This bit of luck further enabled the Ottoman's to have a large combat-ready garrison at or near the landings matching the allies.

³⁴ Edward J Erickson, *"Gallipoli Command Under Fire"*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Edward J Erickson, *"Gallipoli Command Under Fire"*

³⁷ *ibid.*

The Allies never understood that in April 1915 their men faced an opponent that had extreme degrees of combat readiness and effectiveness³⁸. They expected an army that was “ill-commanded and ill-officered”³⁹. Rather they were met with aggressive and highly skilled officers and men in the handling of the war. In this sense Determinist Historians would say that the British never stood a chance against a strong opposition so the fault does not entirely lie with the British as it was inevitable or determined that they would be defeated.

The Ottoman fighting superiority lied within the Fifth Army and its commanders who were a well run and tactically superior group with Ottoman corporals, divisional and regimental commanders⁴⁰. Who exercised individual decision making and initiative, even with less men they held the Allies to small portions of Gallipoli. This loss of momentum left the Australians trapped in rough terrain for months hardly moving from the initial landing beaches. The system of reporting that the Ottomans had created was severely effective and gave the commanders awareness of the battle. This subsequently let them distribute reserves and forces easily and far quicker than Hamilton had planned. Finally, the Ottoman forces demonstrated the ability to control the battle by distributing fully trained, motivated and most importantly something the British never had, well-led soldiers.

Examples of where the Ottomans triumphed against the Allies are ever present, this continues to suit the school of thought that the Ottomans were simply too strong for the

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

British. The Ottomans compared to the Allies could effectively report to one another and have a clear idea of the events that were happening, this is due to the positioning, leadership, and planning. Furthermore, the Ottoman's were extremely effective in securing objectives this was due to their ability in multi-dimensional combined-arms which was achieved through rigorous training. The Ottoman Army wasn't comprised of fresh inexperienced soldiers like the ANZAC's they were battle hardened in their involvement in the Balkan Wars of 1912⁴¹, their leaders knew how to command and soldiers knew how to fight. Ottoman General's scouted the terrain and even had plans in case of fires, this was detail, this was the complete opposite to the Allied planned operations⁴². This was detailed, and it was based upon the experiences in the Balkan wars, experience that the ANZAC's didn't have. The Ottomans proved themselves formidable adversaries with their well-trained army which understood the doctrines laid down by experienced and well-trained leaders. Additionally, "in the 37 days between 18 March and 25 April, Enver Pasha activated the Fifth Army headquarters, a corps headquarters and deployed two first-class infantry divisions, a cavalry brigade, four Jandarma battalions, an artillery battalion and several machine-gun companies to the new army"⁴³. Therefore, when the landings came the Ottoman's had the upper hand and the high ground. Their defensive plan was created back in 1912 and was rehearsed multiple times and the Generals had clarity and confidence in their ability to enable and defend via their plan⁴⁴. Finally, these organizational and leadership capabilities gave the Ottoman's the advantage with levels of military effectiveness and superiority the

⁴¹ Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913: Prelude to the First World War*

⁴² Aspinall-Oglander, *Military Operations, Gallipoli, Vol II*, 369.

⁴³ Aspinall-Oglander, *Military Operations, Gallipoli, Vol II*, 369.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

Allies never had.

Years of planning, thorough defensive work and highly trained soldiers and corps led to a highly fortified area which became near impossible for the Allies to overcome.

This school of thought has shown that the British never had a chance, facing the quality and strength of the Ottomans also highlighting the stupidity of the British for not knowing this.

However, if the hills from Achi Baba to Gaba Tepe were defended by less military aware, tactically vulnerable and fresh troops from the Ottoman side, would the British still have lost?

To an extent, as the flaws of the planning and decision making need to be considered as they would have had the bigger impact on the outcome rather than if the battlefield were simply evened out. Ottoman strength can be considered a factor in the eventual defeat but the failure could have been averted at a number of key points if it wasn't for poor British strategic and tactical leadership. Ottoman Strength was important but could have been overcome with better leadership and tactical decisions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are numerous factors that I have found to have contributed to the plight of every man who set foot on the peninsula. The failure at Gallipoli must come down to an underlying cause, being the poor planning initiated by the Allied forces which made success at Gallipoli almost impossible to achieve from the outset. Therefore, failure at Gallipoli was almost inevitable from the drawing board and was sped up by tactical failures on the ground

during the initial landings. Yet despite this multitude of sins, the campaign could have been saved if the Ottoman's had of melted away when they encountered their superior enemy. But it was this failure to estimate the strengthens of the Ottoman defenders that led to the final nail in the defeat at Gallipoli. The dogged defense of the higher ground by the Ottomans meant that the Allies were prevented from achieving all of their objectives. Yet in the final analysis, blame cannot be put on the Ottoman's they didn't initiate the conflict but those who orchestrated the whole campaign from its inception to fruition. Therefore, blame for the failure of the Gallipoli campaign must rest on Winston Churchill and the plethora of Generals who motivated the push for the bloody campaign.

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