

Centenary of the Gallipoli Campaign: Turkish elite commemorates imperialist bloodbath

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Turkey marked the 100th anniversary of the naval battle at Çanakkale last week.

During the 1915 battle, also known as the Gallipoli Campaign or the Dardanelles Campaign, Ottoman artillery held off British and French warships from taking the capital Constantinople (later renamed Istanbul). This would have given the Allied powers control of the Bosphorus and entry into the Black Sea, securing access to Russia against Germany.

The main ceremony was held in Çanakkale, attended by Turkish politicians, including Prime Minister Ahmet Davuto?lu, and military and civil officials from Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Official ceremonies were held in other cities, including Istanbul, Ankara and Diyarbakir, attended by Turkish military officers, representatives of the political parties and civil society organisations. The Religious Affairs Directorate organised prayers across Turkey for those who died, who were described as martyrs.

As well as those killed in battle, thousands died from infection, enteric fever, dysentery, diarrhea and various fly-borne diseases. Others were burnt to death in out-of-control scrub fires. Some drowned in sewage, and others died from poor food and disease. While the exact number of casualties in the Gallipoli Campaign, which lasted about 10 months, is not known, one estimate puts the number of casualties on the Ottoman side at 250,000, with a similar number from the Allied forces. It was one of the most horrific slaughters of World War I.

In a Twitter post on March 18, Richard Moore, the British ambassador to Turkey, “congratulated the people of Turkey for the victory.”

In an attempt to cover up and sanctify the imperialist slaughter, he wrote, “Both the parties bravely fought during the war and Turks deserved the victory, Çanakkale is impassable!”

This was no different from the official propaganda,

launched by the Turkish media weeks ago, that branded the imperialist slaughter of the Gallipoli Campaign as the beginning of the Turkish people’s struggle for independence.

Speaking during the ceremony at Çanakkale, Prime Minister Davuto?lu blessed the martyrs and said, “Turkish soldiers from different origins, including Kurdish, Bosnian and Circassian, started and won Turkey’s war of independence in unity and brotherhood.”

He used the centenary of the Gallipoli Campaign to make broader and more topical political points, saying threateningly, “Turkey is not a country that would succumb to either internal or external threats. It has the ability to immediately respond to any kind of treachery.”

Davuto?lu’s words followed the Prime Ministry’s Directorate General of Press and Information accreditation ban on media outlets critical of the government, including the *Cihan* news agency, one of the largest news agencies in Turkey, and the *Zaman* daily.

The centenary of the Gallipoli Campaign gave the Turkish government and the media a welcome opportunity to deflect the mounting anger of working people away from the burning social and economic problems at home, as well as to legitimise Turkey’s embroilment in the imperialist interventions and civil wars in the Middle East, in North Africa and potentially—as a NATO ally—in Ukraine.

As part of this broader campaign to distract working people’s attention away from deteriorating living conditions and prepare Turkish public opinion for impending military interventions in Iraq and Syria, all the bourgeois parties and media have joined in the official campaign of rewriting the history. There have been a series of activities, including conferences, lectures, films, and sporting and cultural events, with millions of dollars of government funding.

Ankara has used its best endeavours to rewrite the history of the Gallipoli Campaign to glorify the Turkish nationalist officers who years later waged the War of Independence

against Britain and Greece, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, founder and president of the Turkish republic. Atatürk first rose to prominence as a commander during the battle at Gallipoli.

Thus, the Turkish ruling elite has promoted the glorification of the imperialist bloodbath of Gallipoli as “the defence of the motherland.”

The pretence that the position of the Ottoman Empire in the Gallipoli Campaign was “the defence of the motherland” is bogus. The Gallipoli Campaign of March 1915-January 1916 was not a part of the Turkish national liberation war of 1919-1922. It was a tragic episode in the imperialist slaughter of World War I for raw materials, markets and geostrategic interests that resulted in the deaths of millions, in which the Ottoman Empire, albeit not itself an imperialist power, actively participated on the side of the Central Powers.

By the eve of World War I, the Ottoman Empire, described by Tsar Nicholas I as the “sick man of Europe,” had been weakened by economic crisis and military defeats by the imperialist powers, rival dynasties and national liberation movements. It had become a semi-colony of German imperialism, which enthusiastically supported the Young Turks’ regime led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), since 1908.

Germany provided significant financial aid and investment, training and re-equipping its army. In December 1913, Germany sent a military mission to Istanbul, headed by General Otto Liman von Sanders, who would serve as adviser and military commander for the Ottoman Empire during the war, and organise and lead the defence of the Dardanelles.

On July 30, 1914, only two days after the start of war in Europe, the CUP decided to accept Germany’s offer of a “secret alliance” against Russia. On October 27, the alliance was put into practice when two German warships set sail for the Black Sea and bombarded the Russian navy in Odessa. Three days later, the Ottoman Empire, with a view to recovering territories it had lost in previous wars in the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East, officially entered the war on the side of the Central Powers led by Germany.

In early 1915, Tsarist Russia, then in combat with Ottoman forces and the German military in the Caucasus, appealed to Britain for relief. With the Western Front deadlocked, the British government decided to mount a naval expedition to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsula on the western shore of the Dardanelles, the narrow and strategic sea-lane near Istanbul separating the Aegean and Black Seas. The aim was to capture Constantinople, knocking Turkey out of the war, and link up with its tsarist ally.

The first attack on the Dardanelles began February 19, 1915, when a strong Anglo-French task force began the bombardment of Ottoman artillery along the coast, launching their main attack on March 18, 1915. The slaughter reached its peak as imperialist troops landed on April 25, after the failure of the naval attacks, commemorated by Australians and New Zealanders every year as “Anzac Day.”

In the following months, little progress was made and the Ottoman army took advantage of a British hiatus in the campaign to bring as many troops as possible onto the Peninsula. In a speech in April 1915, Atatürk told his soldiers in the 57th regiment, “I do not order you to fight, I order you to die. In the time which passes until we die, other troops and commanders can come forward and take our places.”

Few of the regiment survived the war.

The standstill was to lead to a political crisis in London in which the Liberal government was replaced by a coalition.

The deadlock in Dardanelles dragged on into the summer amid disease-ridden conditions. Nevertheless, the British government continued its attacks. It decided to end the campaign only after the unsuccessful landing of early August, finally evacuating the troops in January 1916.

In November 13, 1918, almost three years later and after the deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers from both sides, the Allied Forces would occupy Constantinople in accordance with the Armistice of Mudros that ended Ottoman participation in the First World War, as they hoped, a prelude to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey itself.

The Gallipoli Campaign was one of the most tragic battles of the imperialist slaughter, a war worthy not of glorification but of condemnation. It should act as a spur to opposition in Turkey and internationally to the ongoing eruption of imperialist militarism and war-mongering.



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