

# TURKISH–AUSTRALIAN RAPPROCHEMENT IN LIGHT OF THE GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN

*People from Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain come to Gallipoli to commemorate their fallen soldiers who were lost nearly one hundred years ago, in 1915, during the Great War. This article elaborates on the rediscovery of the Gallipoli campaign by Australians, New Zealanders, and Turks in the 1980s. The collective remembrance enacted by these peoples, divided by nationalities but united by history, provides an exemplary precedent of reconciliation that can extend to all parts of the world.*

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**T**oday, people from Australia, New Zealand, and Turkey gather on the once blood-stained battlefields of the Gallipoli peninsula. This was not always the case. In the early 1990s, there was little interest in Turkey towards visiting this site.

From the lips of the people who gather here every year on 25 April (Anzac Day – commemorating those soldiers who fought and died as part of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps), you hear such poignant questions as: “why and for what did they die?” People cry for the fallen soldiers who were killed in the fierce battles of the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915. At the same time, politicians take part in these gatherings and make moving speeches. Watching this scene, you ask yourself whether humans learn lessons from history. Unfortunately the answer is often “no.”

Every year, thousands of people come from the cities, towns, and villages of Turkey, Australia, and New Zealand to commemorate the anniversary of the Gallipoli Campaign. While Turkey and Australia share what has become known as the Anzac, or Gallipoli, commemoration, there are differences in their focuses. Turks generally commemorate 18 March 1915, marking the defeat of the Allied fleet in its attempt to conquer the Dardanelles, but Australians had nothing to do with this battle. Instead, Australians commemorate 25 April 1915 – the day Allied forces landed on the shores of the Gallipoli peninsula. The Turks, in turn, consider this an invasion of their land by foreign powers who had nothing to do with home defense.

With all of this shared but at the same time distinct history, it is worth asking what does Gallipoli mean to Australian and Turkish identity today? Turkey rose out of the Ottoman Empire while Australia emerged from the British Empire. For both countries, the Gallipoli experience has been critical to the understanding of each country’s respective nation-building process. As a multiethnic country, Australia needed a common history around which its people could rally. Interestingly though, the Gallipoli campaign was a defeat for Australians, and tourists visiting historical sites in the area quite often say “we remember the defeat.” Why, then, do so many people come every year either to visit or commemorate Gallipoli? It is most likely because of people’s need for a legacy. As a relatively young nation, Australians needed historical references to construct their own national narrative.

The difficult question many Australians ask themselves is whether they are British or Australian. It seems like the growing feeling among them is that they are different, and not British any more. Their Gallipoli commemorations usually include narratives that criticize British incompetence in Gallipoli in 1915. This is a very

common saying among Australian diggers –an Australian slang term for soldiers– “the Turks did not defeat us but our British generals did.” They attribute their defeat to the British generals in command at Gallipoli.

Australians do not have many heroes of the Gallipoli campaign. They tend to commemorate simple foot soldiers rather than their British generals. One man almost every Australian knows of, for example, is John Simpson Kirkpatrick – also known as the man with a donkey. On the first day of the land battle, Simpson found a donkey and used it as an ambulance to transport wounded soldiers from the frontline to the hospital on the beach, before being killed himself on 19 May 1915. Tellingly, Australians have erected statues of Simpson in various locations in Australia, but no memorials to the generals of the battle have been made.

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Following the release of the movie *Gallipoli*, by Australian director Peter Weir in 1981, Australian interest in Gallipoli increased. Initially, it was the older generations who came to see where their relatives lay buried in the cemeteries of Gallipoli, but later young people started coming to the Gallipoli site for reasons of heritage. These visits were not necessarily to visit the graves of relatives, as many did not have family members lost at Gallipoli, but rather to participate in an act of collective remembrance of a larger kind.

Prior to the 1990s, the commemoration of Gallipoli was limited in Turkey. The events were only celebrated locally, mostly on 18 March 1915 as the day of the naval victory, and on 10 August 1915, the turning point in the land battles of Conkbayırı and Anafartalar in which Colonel Mustafa Kemal –later known as Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey– emerged as a hero.

During the Remembrance Day ceremony at Ariburnu Cemetery in 1985, there were roughly 100 people on the beach taking part in the commemoration. On that day, the Australian Minister of Veterans’ Affairs unveiled a stone monolith carrying Atatürk’s message of 1934 to the mothers who had sent their sons from far away countries to Gallipoli:

Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives... You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side now here in this country of ours... you, the mothers, who sent their sons from far-away countries wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.

Today, when politicians deliver a speech on the occasion of the Gallipoli remembrance, they often finish their address with this eloquent quote from Atatürk. Since 1985, the number of people visiting Gallipoli has increased every year.

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Observing Australians’ attention to the commemoration of the Gallipoli battlefields encouraged the Turkish memorial response to accelerate in turn. At first, municipalities in Istanbul began bringing people to Gallipoli. Later, the government joined in, motivating young school children to come and visit the sacred site. Today, over a million Turkish visitors come to Gallipoli every year. In addition, almost 60,000 Australians,

New Zealanders, and British visit Gallipoli annually. Considering the great distances they cover to arrive there, it is a highly significant dedication to the fallen soldiers. Had Australians not started visiting Gallipoli, it is reasonable to question whether Turkish people would visit Gallipoli today.

Unlike many historically significant sites of the world that are considered contested ground, Gallipoli has become a site of pilgrimage and a place of pacific conciliation. At a time of increased division between the Muslim and Christian worlds, the shared identification with the Gallipoli heritage between Turks and Australians can make a positive contribution to world peace.

It is known from history that when the veterans of both sides met and shook hands with each other, they regretted having fought. One Turkish veteran from the village of Biga –only two and half hours’ walking distance from the battlefield of Anzac (Arıburnu)– stated that when his grandson suggested taking him to the battlefield, he said: “No I do not want to go and see and remember it again.” Many veterans did not want to speak about their experiences. As one Australian digger said when asked whether he would fight at Gallipoli again, “Yes, but I would fight on Turkish side.”

This clearly shows an Australian way of belief that they would help the underdog, rather than be on the side of the powerful. As Atatürk once said, “war is only legitimate when your country is attacked; otherwise it would be murder.”

Long after the war, and a few years before his death, Winston Churchill was hosted by the Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis on his yacht. During the cruise, they passed through the Dardanelles. Notably, Churchill –the man often credited with launching the campaign– never stopped to visit the battlefields of Gallipoli.

The commander of the Anzacs, Field Marshal William Birdwood, visited Gallipoli in 1934. General Fahrettin

Altay, who had been a staff officer in the Turkish headquarters of the Anzac sector in 1915, and who had campaigned against Birdwood’s forces, accompanied him on his visit to the battlefields, and they remained in contact for many years. The King of the United Kingdom Edward VIII also visited Gallipoli with his wife; Fahrettin Altay was their guide.

Perhaps the most interesting story was of Stanley Bruce. Later Viscount Bruce of Melbourne, Bruce fought at Gallipoli against the forces commanded by Mustafa Kemal at Suvla (Anafartalar) in 1915, where he was awarded the Military Cross. In 1923, having entered politics, Bruce became the eighth Prime Minister of Australia, in the same year that Mustafa Kemal was elected as the first president of Turkish Republic. In 1936, when the Turkish and Allied delegations met to discuss the future status of the Dardanelles and the proposal to return their control to Turkey, the chairman of the commission was Australian Prime Minister Stanley Bruce himself, who supported Turkey. Mustafa Kemal, and finally Turkey, regained the right to fortify the Dardanelles. To express his gratitude to Bruce, Atatürk sent him a golden cigarette case *via* the Turkish foreign minister. A Turkish star was embossed on top of this cigarette box, which also carried the signature K. Atatürk on top. It is now in Canberra in the Australian national archives. Till his death in 1967, Bruce had two pictures in his study; one of them was his wife and the other was a picture of Atatürk.

When Turkish people started coming to Gallipoli they found there were very few sites to visit, something that frustrated many visitors. In the 1950s and 1960s, an

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organization called “the Association for the Construction of Turkish Memorials and Cemeteries” had built a few memorials, but this was not enough. Thanks to the Şevki Paşa maps, drawn up after the War on the orders of a senior Ottoman officer who had served in the campaign, some 28 Turkish mass graves on the battlefields were located. Currently, the Turkish government and some volunteer institutions are building several symbolic memorial cemeteries to mark the sites of these graves. Today, while the number of Turkish memorials is increasing, managing them is correspondingly becoming increasingly more difficult.

Following the armistice in 1918, the Allies returned to Gallipoli to construct their cemeteries. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission established memorials and cemeteries for the Allies, but Turkey did not have time and control over the battlefields during the Greek invasion of Turkey, from 1918 to 1923. After the War of Independence, the Lausanne Treaty was signed, but Turkey retained only limited control over the Dardanelles, and thus was not able to fortify the region. The Montreux Treaty of 1936 gave full control of the Dardanelles to Turkey but the waterway was also designated as international waters, so Turkey could not impose taxes on the ships going through the Dardanelles.

The unique relations and mutual understanding between Australia and Turkey will likely continue in the future. In 2015, the centennial of the Gallipoli campaign, the number of people visiting Gallipoli will likely peak. However, there is a limit to the number of visitors who will be able to attend the commemoration events. Only 10,000 people from Australia and New Zealand will be allowed to take part in the ceremony on 25 April 2015 near Anzac Cove. There will most likely be other commemorative ceremonies throughout the year. It is possible that in years following 2015 the number of visitors to Gallipoli from Australia and New Zealand will decrease but a steady flow –also due to the growing populations of Australia, New Zealand, and Turkey– can be expected. Accordingly, it will be important that infrastructure and personnel training as well as environmental protection deficiencies are addressed by authorities in the bureaucracy.