

GALLIPOLI

Few people anticipated the First World War's devastating consequences. The world that emerged after 1918 was so radically different from what came before that it could almost be characterized as a communal **psychotic** break. It took fully a decade before people could even talk openly about what had happened on the battlefields of 1914 to 1918, so great was the trauma of losing an entire generation in the trenches. In France, a quarter of all men between the ages of 20 and 32 had perished, and the British had lost nearly a million men (3% of Britain's 1914 population) in the war. Commenting on the emotional effect of so much loss upon his countrymen, T.S. Eliot remarked, "I had not thought death had undone so many."

Outrage at this loss zeroed in on the leaders who started the war and especially the generals who fought it. It can be argued that the latter were ultimately to blame for the wasted lives that came from failed offensives, outdated tactics, and a complete lack of strategic imagination.

There hadn't been a general European war since the days of Napoleon, and military technology had advanced by leaps and bounds in the **interim**. The invention of heavy artillery, the machine gun, the submarine, barbed wire, the airplane, and poison gas made the battlefield a much more dangerous place than ever before. Tactics had not yet caught up with technology, so these new 20th century weapons were in the hands of generals with 19th century mentalities.

The result was a slaughter. A snapshot of just one engagement, the Battle of the Somme in 1916, was typical. In the first day of this battle, 60,000 Englishmen were killed or wounded without gaining a single yard of ground. *Sixty thousand*. The incompetence of the officers in charge of this **debacle** bordered on the criminal.

There was one exception to this failure – the Arab rebellion against Turkey in the Middle East led by T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). In truth, there should have been another exception, also in action against the Turks – the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915.

Gallipoli was a heartbreaking event, both for the loss of life suffered and the lost opportunity it represented. It was an operation conceived by Winston Churchill, who as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1915 was chief of Britain's Navy. Frustrated by the stalemate of trench warfare on the Western Front, Churchill sought another opportunity to press Britain's military advantage.

He thought he had found it in the Dardanelles – the **straits** that separate Europe from Asia and lead to the Black Sea (see map below). Churchill's idea was to send a naval squadron up the waterway and take the Turkish capital of Constantinople (now Istanbul), thus knocking Turkey (a German and Austrian ally) out of the war. Once that was accomplished, British, French, Russian, and Serbian forces could then advance through the Danube Valley to Vienna, into southern Germany, take Berlin, and bring a quick end to the war.

On paper it was a brilliant strategy. The British War Cabinet approved it unanimously. They believed the Dardanelles was the keystone, which, once shaken loose, could end the war and the agony in France. In addition to the military advantage of knocking Turkey out of the war there was



an economic one. Three hundred thousand tons of Russian grain sat on ships in the Black Sea waiting to pass through the Bosphorus, which the Turks had closed to the Tsar and his fleet. Once the British took Constantinople, the grain could flow to England and France to feed the hungry armies of the Western Front, in return for arms and ammunition the Russians badly needed in their own fight against Germany and Austria. The Tsar was also desperate for a victory, and the psychological effect of defeating Turkey and putting the Germans on the defensive was priceless.

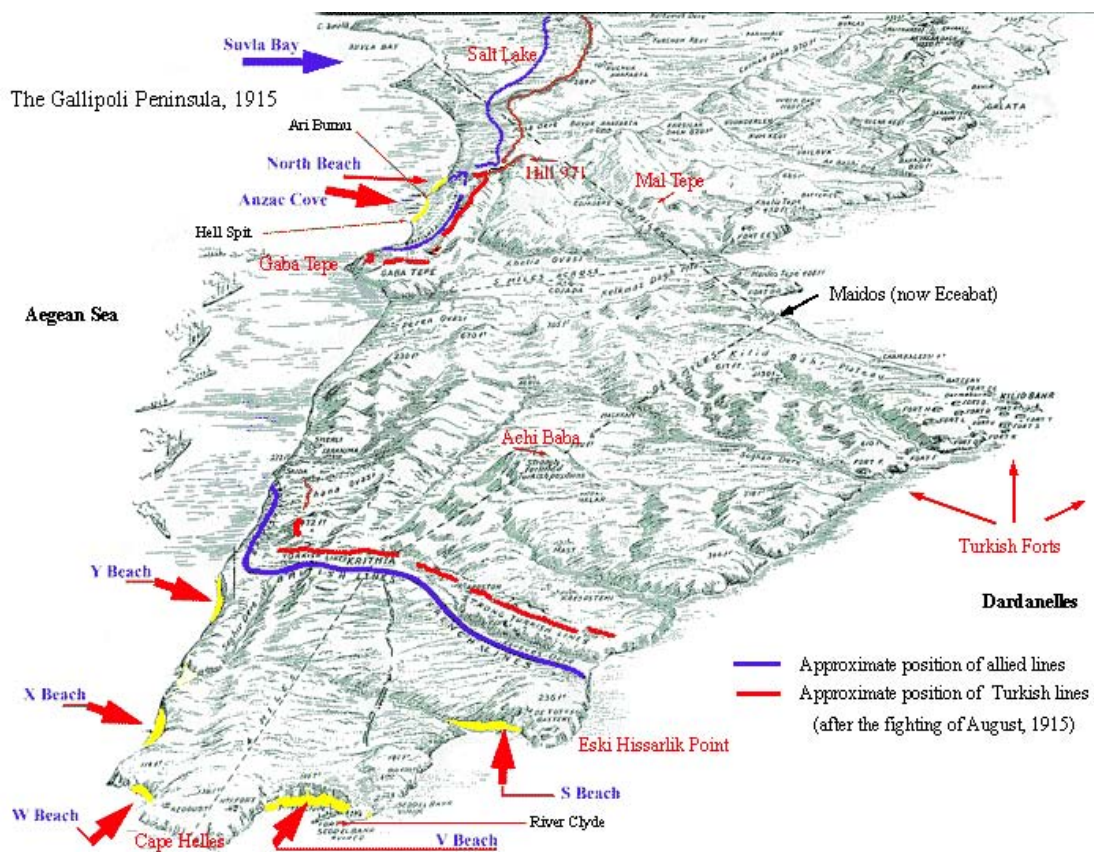
In short, the stakes were huge and the British were willing to gamble on the Dardanelles. A naval task force was assembled in the Eastern Mediterranean and put into the hands of Vice Admiral John de Robeck, who launched his attack on February 19, 1915.

At first it went well. The combined British and French fleets met little resistance as they advanced up the strait. Once they did, however, they soon lost their nerve. De Robeck lost three ships to mines and was unwilling to risk any more. These losses were not heavy, but to naval officers who still **abided** by the peacetime notion that losing any ships was a catastrophe, it was enough to make them turn tail. De Robeck's second-in-command, Roger Keyes, begged him to press the attack, pointing out that they still had twelve battleships, two dozen **minesweepers**, and several destroyers and submarines ready, willing, and able to continue the fight. Although they had lost three ships, the task force had succeeded in knocking out most of the Turks' coastal artillery. The remaining batteries were either low on ammunition or completely out. Far from being angry at him, Churchill told de Robeck his losses were acceptable and immediately offered four more battleships to replace them. All that stood between the British and Constantinople were a few minefields that could be easily **dismantled**.

But de Robeck didn't see it that way. The yeast of worry began to work in his mind and convinced him it couldn't be that easy. He broke off the attack and insisted that infantry would have to take the Gallipoli Peninsula before he could resume his attack.

Hesitant to overrule a field commander, the War Cabinet agreed. British, Australian, and New Zealand troops were landed at Gallipoli in April 1915. The Turks, who had been preparing to abandon Constantinople, couldn't believe de Robeck had broken off his attack. Taking advantage of this **interlude**, they immediately reinforced Gallipoli with 60,000 troops, complete with German artillery and advisors. This force kept the Allies confined to the tip of the peninsula (see map below), where they remained for the next eight months, bogged down in yet another hopeless trench stalemate. By the time the British withdrew in January 1916 they had suffered 250,000 casualties; every one of them in vain. Gallipoli remained in Turkish hands for the rest of the war.

The tragedy of Gallipoli is how a little boldness could have gone a long way in ending the world's most destructive conflict. After the war, the Turkish leader himself admitted,



“If the English had only had the courage to rush more ships through the Dardanelles they could have got to Constantinople.” The senior German commander in Turkey, General Otto Liman von Sanders, agreed. He confessed that if de Robeck had pressed his attack he would have found the Turkish capital defenseless. “The course of the World War would have been given such a turn in the spring of 1915” he concluded, “that Germany and Austria would have had to continue the struggle without Turkey.” Perhaps the saddest testament came from Roger Keyes, who sailed up the Dardanelles ten years later on vacation. When he saw what lay beyond the furthest point his ships had reached ten years earlier, he began to cry. “My God,” he said, “it would have been even easier than I

thought. We simply *couldn't* have failed...and because we didn't try, another million lives were thrown away and the war went on for another three years.”

Winston Churchill would be afflicted with a horrible case of the “what ifs?” for the rest of his life. *If* de Robeck had been more aggressive, then Constantinople would have fallen. *If* Constantinople had fallen, then Turkey would have been knocked out of the war. *If* Turkey had been knocked out of the war, then Germany could have been defeated in 1915. *If* Germany had surrendered in 1915, then millions of lives would have been saved, the Russian Revolution (and everything *that* led to) might never have happened, Hitler (and everything *he* led to) may never have entered politics, etc., etc.

So many things can hinge on one decision. Gallipoli just goes to show that one person in the right place at the right time can make a *huge* difference.