Homer, Troy and the Turks: Heritage & identity in the Late Ottoman Empire 1870-1915

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Epilogue of an Empire
The years prior to the Great War are considered the most turbulent, dynamic, yet also the most ruinous period in the history of the Ottoman Empire. Various revolutions, coups and wars took place, resulting in internal unrest and territorial losses. To name a few major events: the constitutional revolution of 1908 by the Young Turks (united in the Committee of Union and Progress, CUP)\(^1\) and the end of the Hamidian regime, the counterrevolution of 1909, revolts in Albania, Kosovo, Yemen, the Ottoman-Italian War in 1911-1912, the coup of 1913 (consolidating the power of the CUP) and the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913.\(^2\)

Defending the Dardanelles and Gallipoli against enemy attacks had become a major concern. The Italians had bombarded the Dardanelles in April 1912 during the Ottoman-Italian War. With the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) between the Balkan League (Greece, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia) and the Ottoman Empire the region became more and more threatened, and now, the Bulgarian artillery reached the vicinity of Istanbul. Gallipoli on the European shore of the Dardanelles was seriously vulnerable.

Faced with this depressing situation, on 25\(^{th}\) November 1912 a young Ottoman officer, who had distinguished himself during the Ottoman-Italian War, was appointed head of operations of the army corps on the Gallipoli peninsula, the so-called ‘Reorganized Forces for the Mediterranean Strait’. This officer was Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938), later known as Atatürk,\(^3\) the first president of the Republic of Turkey (1923) and the leader of the Turkish War of Independence, which would begin soon after the end of the Great War with the capitulation of the Ottoman Empire.

Mustafa Kemal was the son of a customs clerk in Salonica (present-day Thessaloniki). He enrolled in the military primary and secondary schools in Salonica and Monastir and graduated from the Ottoman Military Academy in Istanbul in 1905. He joined the constitutional opposition group Committee of Union and Progress in 1907 and became a member of the inner circle of the

\(^1\) The members of this constitutional movement in France called themselves Jeunes Turcs.
\(^2\) See for an overview of the political and economical developments in this period: Zürcher, Turkey. A modern History, in particular chapters 7 and 8.
\(^3\) Mustafa Kemal received his surname Atatürk from the Turkish parliament in 1934. In modern Turkish Atatürk means: Father of the Turks.
Unionist officers. The members of the Committee of Union and Progress – union referring to the unity of the (ethnic) elements – aimed at re-establishing the constitution and parliament (of the First Constitutional Era of 1876-1878), which was materialized in 1908. The CUP was the dominant political power in the Second Constitutional Period (1908-1918). Its member Mustafa Kemal would become the most important figure in the history of modern Turkey, yet the starting point of his success were the Dardanelles.

The Hero of Gallipoli

After his appointment to defend the Dardanelles strait – and, consequently, Istanbul – against a Bulgarian break-through, Mustafa Kemal came to his new headquarters on the Gallipoli peninsula. During his stay there, Mustafa Kemal visited the archaeological site of Troy in March 1913. Reviewing the threat of potential enemy attacks on Gallipoli he carried out military investigations in situ. During this military exploration trip, which is outlined by Mithat Atabay, historian and expert on the topic of Atatürk and his stay in the province of the Dardanelles, Mustafa Kemal followed the trails of the legendary figures who


according to tradition had visited the Troad in earlier times, such as the Persian King Xerxes and Alexander the Great.

So, following the footsteps of Alexander the Great, he crossed the Dardanelles Strait, went to the Tomb of Achilles and the ruins of Troy. He investigated the locations and drew sketches in his notebook. After his profound evaluation of these historical places in the Troad, Mustafa Kemal concluded that the Anatolian coast of the Dardanelles strait, where centuries ago the legendary Trojan War had taken place, was hard to capture by enemy forces. Consequently, he decided that in the case of enemy attacks the main defensive lines should be deployed along the European coast.

This military investigation of the Troad made Mustafa Kemal come to a historical decision and a military strategy that in a certain way laid the foundation for the success of the Ottomans in the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915 and would earn him the title of ‘the hero of Gallipoli’. Mustafa Kemal would succeed were Hector had failed (fig. 1).

The Great War: A Glorious Ottoman Victory at the Dardanelles

The results of the Balkan Wars were fatal for the Ottomans: almost all the Balkan territories were lost and the Empire was extremely weakened. Although the Empire was in no condition to fight a serious war and tried to keep out of it, it caved in under German pressure and anti-British sentiments caused by the British requisition of two battleships which the Ottomans had ordered and had already paid for. Afraid of isolation and already brushed off by France and

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8 The Battle of Gallipoli is also called the Dardanelles Campaign. The Turks named the battles on the Dardanelles the ‘Çanakkale Battles’. Çanakkale is the main town on the Asian side of the Dardanelles Strait. See: Harvey Broadbent, Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore (Sydney 2009) 17.

Britain, that aimed to have good relations with Russia which, in its turn, collaborated with the Balkan states, the Ottoman Empire decided to join the central powers in October 1914. With this it entered its final war (fig. 2).¹⁰

Soon after, the Ottomans mined the Dardanelles and fortified the surroundings of Troy on the Asian shore of the strait (fig. 3). The Troad and the Gallipoli peninsula had become a war zone and in a little while the region would turn into a battlefield. The first indication of the British strategy of meaning to control the Straits (the Dardanelles and the Bosporus) was the bombardment of the outer forts of the Dardanelles strait by the British naval squadron in the Aegean on November 3rd. The order to bombard the outer forts of the Dardanelles came from the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill. He insisted that the best way to defeat the Ottoman-Turks, and consequently the Germans, was to attack the Dardanelles and take Istanbul. However, the topography and the tides of the Dardanelles made it difficult to attack from the sea and from the land. As Mustafa Kemal had already observed, the hills of the Asian shore form a natural barrier. Moreover, the steep slopes of the Gallipoli peninsula and the narrowing width of the strait were important advantages for the Ottomans. The narrowest points, furthermore, could easily and effectively be fortified. On top of that, for all the weakness of the Empire, the artillery and mines of the Ottomans had been greatly improved.

The first attempt to attack the Dardanelles (of a chain of British and French landings between February 1915 and January 1916) was made in February and March 1915. The main attack was on March 18th. A fleet of British and French warships steamed through the Dardanelles to fight the Ottoman-Turks. One of the British battleships participating in this main attack was called *HMS Agamemnon* (fig. 4). The naval operation of the entente failed and ended in a costly defeat and heavy losses.¹¹

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Landings on Cape Helles and Ari Burnu (renamed ANZAC Cove shortly after the landing of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) on the tip of the Gallipoli peninsula on April 25th brought no break-through either (fig. 5). Actually, the tactics and strategy – inspired by the ancient Trojan War – of the British and French forces during the landings are striking. For example, the collier SS River Clyde, carrying 2000 soldiers, was used as a Trojan Horse: holes had been cut out to provide sally ports from which the soldiers would emerge onto gangways and then to a bridge of smaller boats connecting the collier to the beach of Cape Helles. However, the Ottoman defence was too strong and the Trojan Horse boat, as the soldiers of the Allies called it, became a death trap. As private George Pake from the British army notes, the outcome was disastrous: ‘Our boat then ran alongside the Trojan Horse boat, River Clyde (...) I looked to my right and saw a sight I shall never forget – a very large number of French Legionnaires lying on their stomachs, all dead’ (fig. 6).12

Finally, the Entente troops were evacuated from the Dardanelles in January 1916; Churchill lost face.13 Mustafa Kemal, on the other hand, due to his qualities and success as an officer and the fact that he knew the Dardanelles well, was promoted to full colonel during the battle.14 Although the Ottomans lost the Great War, from their perspective the outcome of the episode in the Dardanelles was a glorious victory; they defeated their enemies and wrote a new ‘legend’ that would go down in history as ‘The Impassable Dardanelles’.15 As Patrick Kinross aptly notes, ‘The British failure at the Dardanelles gave a momentary psychological lift to the Turkish people. For the first time within living memory they had won a victory against a European power. There was life in the old Turk

12 Broadbent, Gallipoli, The Fatal Shore, 149;
14 Kinross, Atatürk, The rebirth of a Nation, 96-98.
15 ‘The Dardanelles are Impassable’ is the common aphorism for the Turkish victory at the Battle of Gallipoli.
yet’. Mustafa Kemal’s successful defence of the Gallipoli peninsula started to get around. Politicians who visited the battlefield extolled his virtues in reports and speeches and his merits even became subject matter in the Ottoman parliament. In an interview in April 1918, Mustafa Kemal reported his war experiences and praised the spirit of the Ottoman soldiers during the Battle of Gallipoli. During the enemy landings on April 25th, he told his interviewer, the journalist Ruşen Eşref Ünaydın (1892-1959), that he had commanded his soldiers in the following way: ‘I am not ordering you to fight, I am ordering you to die’. Subsequently, he described the terrible circumstances in which the soldiers had to operate: ‘The distance of mutual trenches was only eight metres, thus death was inevitable, inevitable… Those at the first trench all fell without any one saved. And those at the second trench took their place (…). They saw the dead, and knew that they would die too within three minutes, but showed not a glimpse of hesitation. No break-down. This is a celebrated and astonishing example of the spiritual power of the Turkish soldier. Be sure that it was this great soul that secured the victory of Gallipoli’. According to Mustafa Kemal, although everyone was exhausted, the battle was a matter of honour: ‘everyone believed that there was no rest before they had wholly driven the enemies into the sea’.

**Turks: New Heroes of Troy**

After the many military losses of the previous years, this victory indeed created a renewed confidence and great pride. The Trojans did lose, but the Ottomans won the war at the same legendary spot. According to the Ottoman politician and prominent intellectual Celal Nuri Ileri (1881-1938), upon seeing the victory of the Turks in the Dardanelles, even Homer would have turned his back on the legendary hero of the Trojan War.

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16 Kinross, Atatürk. The Rebirth of a Nation, 96-98.
published in 1918 in a special edition of the periodical *Yeni Mecmua*, dedicated to the Battle of Gallipoli, ‘Homer spoke’ to the warriors of the Trojan War: ‘I have decided that from now on both the Iliad and the Odyssey are not valid anymore. My main works should not be read anymore. Here, in the old country of Dardanos (…), I witnessed such a glorious and honourable event, such a great war, such a marvellous defence; Oh famous warriors of Troy! Although your attacks are so brilliant, so lovely, they are dull compared to the struggles and efforts of the Turks, who shouted Allahu Ekber Allahu Ekber! and scattered the largest armies of the world (…) and forced the troops to flee, bewildered and ashamed. Oh, come all gods, oh, all the most prominent people from the epics, oh, men of Troy! Let us view the success of Gallipoli (…). Due to my efforts, centuries later, your heroic story reached future generations. After a while, certainly another epical genius will give this praiseful panorama to the future. When that happens, both you and me, your poetical servant, Homer, will be forgotten’. This is a striking comparison of the Battle of Gallipoli with the Trojan War and a noticeable identification of the Turks with the Trojans, but now with a victory in the end.

The Ottoman writer F. Celaleddin (1895-1975), too, in his novella *The List of Mustafa*, urges Homer to change his epic and utters ‘Troy was imagination, Gallipoli is reality’. Ihtifalci Mehmed Ziya, on the other hand, connects various mythological figures from the Iliad with ‘the noble and powerful Ottoman-Turks’, who in his opinion ‘proved themselves during the Dardanelles Campaign and deserve a respectful and glorious place in the dictionary of the eternal civilization of mankind’. Ibrahim Alaaddin Gövsa (1889-1949), poet, writer, psychologist, educator and politician, visited the Dardanelles during the battle on 19th July 1915. Inspired by the environment he wrote the poem ‘The Tracks of

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19 There is confusion among scholars about the exact date of publication. Regarding the fact that the last article was delivered on 21 April 1918, it is probable that the special edition was published around May 1918, in: Albayrak and Özyurt (eds.), *Yeni Mecmua*, 9-12 and Avci (ed.) *Çanakkale’yi Yaşamak*, 9-12.
Çanakkale – Passing the Dardanelles’, in which he referred to Troy. Here is a short passage:

_Above a heaven with stars and the moon_

_A wind through the strait, so sweet and balmy_

_On the coast a mysterious new Troy_

_The world was cloaked in such an obscurity_

_As if I went through the cycle of mythology_

Not only Ottomans compared the Battle of Gallipoli with the heroic Trojan War; as we have already seen, the British named their warship Agamemnon and used military tactics inspired by the Trojan War. Also diaries and memoirs of German war correspondents demonstrate a great awareness of the heroic past of Troy and the Dardanelles. Paul Schweder, for instance, a German war correspondent, visited the region in 1916 and in his account of the Battle of Gallipoli he made references to the legendary Trojan War and its heroes. The report of the German journalist Ernst Jäckh (1875-1959) of his visit to Gallipoli in 1915 includes a lively comparison of the battle with the Trojan War. According to Jäckh, he spent time with Mustafa Kemal and together they watched ‘British warships over the hill where Achilles and Patroclus were buried’.

Homer introduced the first heroes of history. The Trojan warriors, supported by other Anatolian nations, defended their country on the Asian shore of the Dardanelles against enemies from the west. The fact that the battle took place in the heroic landscape of the Dardanelles as well as its nature of a ‘West-against-East’ conflict, made the Ottoman-Turks experience the Battle as a modern Trojan war. The Ottoman-Turks were the new heroes of the Dardanelles; troops from all over the Empire were fighting for the defence of Anatolia. These new

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24 Paul Schweder. _Im Türkischen Hauptquartier_ (Leipzig 1916).
heroes managed to stop the enemies. From their perspective, this made them even more heroic than the Trojans. In spite of the many human and financial losses – on the side of both the Ottomans and the Allies – the victory at Gallipoli encouraged and raised the self-confidence of the Ottomans. From this point of view, it was a prelude to the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923) led by Mustafa Kemal, who had made fame for himself as commander during the Battle of Gallipoli. The Dardanelles campaign was a defining moment in Turkish history.

For all the success at the Dardanelles, the Ottomans lost the First World War. The Empire was forced to capitulate. By signing the extremely harsh clauses of the Armistice of Moudros on 31st October 1918, the Ottoman Empire dug its own grave. In fact, the Armistice of Moudros marked the end of the Ottoman Empire. The armistice was signed aboard the British warship *HMS Agamemnon*.\(^{27}\) It is remarkable that in the midst of the struggles of a collapsing Empire and the moral damages suffered by its society, an *Iliad*-anthology was published in 1918 (fig. 7).\(^{28}\)

The meaning of Gallipoli for the Turks is comparable with the meaning of Verdun for the French or the Battle of the Somme for the British. The Dardanelles campaign and the location is a historical zone to which national and identity-defining memories are attached: a ‘lieu de mémoire’.\(^ {29}\) Indeed, Gallipoli was highly instrumental in the development of Turkish nationalism and collective memory in the final years of the Ottoman Empire and in particular in the new Republic of Turkey.\(^ {30}\)


\(^{28}\) Ömer Seyfeddin’s summary of the *Iliad* was published in instalments in the periodical *Yeni Mécmua* in 1918. Seyfeddin claimed that studying Homer’s works was a precondition for writing. The collection of articles was published in 1927: Ömer Seyfeddin, *Iliade – Homere. Tercüme ve Hülasa* (Istanbul 1927).


\(^ {30}\) Muzaffer Albayrak and Ayhan Özyurt (eds.) *Yeni Mécmua, özel sayı 18/03/1918*, (Istanbul
With the Dardanelles campaign Troy received a new dimension: it became a strong component of the heroic story of a new nation, the Republic of Turkey (1923), and its founder and first president, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, who is reputed to have said to a retired colonel at the last battle of the Greco-Turkish War in 1922 – the Independency War of the Turks –: ‘We avenged Troy’.  

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2006) preface; Kraijestein and Schulten, Het Epos van Gallipoli: feiten, verhalen en mythen over de geallieerde aanval op Turkije tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog (Soesterberg 2009); See also the numerous reports, accounts and anecdotes published in the newspaper İkdam between 3rd November 1914 and 3rd February 1916 collected in: Murat Çulcu, İkdam Gazetesi’nde Çanakkale Cephesi (İstanbul 2004).