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Gallipoli: Attack from the Sea

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Author:
Victor Rudenno
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Trevor Wilson

This is a book whose coverage is not confined to its title. That is, it tells us about more than just the naval aspect of 1915?s attack on Gallipoli. There are chapters here about how the campaign was initiated in London, about the ill-starred military landings at Cape Helles and Anzac Cove, about the failed attempts to develop the operation in the south of the peninsula and then to initiate a whole new endeavour at Anzac and Suvla, and about the melancholy decision to abandon the campaign. (The last of these includes the traditional, if witless, lament that the British had not executed the invasion with the degree of expertise they devoted to calling the whole thing off.)

But it must be said that it is in the chapters on strictly naval matters which intersperse these, and especially those which deal with the German and British submarine campaigns at Gallipoli, that the book achieves some sort of a scholarly standard. It may be noted that the longest chapter in the book, of 38 pages, is called ?Submarines take control of the Sea of Marmara?. Here is related how, between May 1915 and the end of the year, a succession of British underwater vessels penetrated through the Dardanelles waters and engaged in attacks on Turkish vessels in the Sea of Marmara. So, from 19 May to 7 June, the submarine Ell spent its time in the Sea of Marmara under the command of Eric Nasmith, sinking supply ships, taking photographs in Constantinople harbour, threatening the rail line which conveyed Turkish troops and supplies to the front, and avoiding the devoted attempts of enemy destroyers and submarines to halt its rampage. For this Nasmith

received the Victoria Cross. This saga of submarines in the Dardanelles constitutes a good adventure story. But as history its importance is trivial. The British, in so far as they had developed any clear ideas about what they were hoping to achieve at Gallipoli, had gone there to open the route to Constantinople, which by painful experience they discovered could only be accomplished ? if then ? by conquering territory. This is the tale which, in just under half his chapters, Rudenno endeavours to tell. But his mastery here is altogether less adequate than in the naval sections.

There are a few political and military stories worth telling about the Gallipoli operation, far removed though they may be from the real war (which, it needs to be stressed, was being fought of necessity against Germany, not Turkey, and in Western Europe, not the Dardanelles). Most of those stories concern the matter of the campaign?s inauguration. The British decision to launch any activity there was made tentatively, by Asquith?s War Council on 13 January 1915. It was a decision to undertake a (purely naval) attack to ?bombard and take? the Gallipoli peninsular, ?with Constantinople as its objective?. The War Council was a sub-committee of the British cabinet designed to deal just with matters relating to the great conflict in which Europe had become involved. Its overwhelming concern was the war in France and Belgium, where matters had not been going as well as hoped. Long military agonies had been occupying the War Council?s deliberations on that occasion. Then, late in the exhausting day, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, raised a naval matter.

Plans were emerging, Churchill told his colleagues, for a purely naval assault at Gallipoli. It would sail through the defences in the narrow Dardanelles channel and appear before Constantinople, an event which it was assumed would promptly cause Turkey to throw in the towel. (The presence in the Sea of Marmara of two German battle-cruisers, one of greater size and fire-power than anything the British were planning to send there, was not considered deserving of attention.) The War Council, not surprisingly, sat up and took notice. No one was talking about sending troops, which was what the war in France and Belgium was all about. And, as the War Minister Lord Kitchener sagely observed, if the naval assault at the Dardanelles did not succeed, the fleet could always sail away with nothing lost.

Yet from this slender basis, large decisions would flow. None of the fundamental questions had been asked. What objectives actually were the British planning to assault? And could they be taken only by a naval force? If not, how many troops would be required, and would such a number ? and the appropriate ammunition ? be available? (It may be noted that, speaking generally in January, Kitchener ? while claiming to have no troops available for Gallipoli ? had said that 150,000 would be needed to secure a victory there. But when a few months later he actually launched the attack, having realised that the navy would never get through and forgetting his wisdom that the attempt should therefore be abandoned, he provided only half that number.) So an operation was being undertaken with no serious consideration of what were manifestly important matters. Thereby the scene was set for an expedition which possessed beggarly opportunity of achieving any objectives.

But one will look in vain for any analysis of the inception of Gallipoli in Rudenno?s book. The author?s precarious knowledge of the basic political facts of the period is revealed early on, when Lloyd George, in one of only three references to him, is described as ?prime minister?. If one asks what post is attributed to H. H. Asquith, the actual prime minister, it is not possible to answer. Asquith?s name is wholly absent from the book.

Out of this unhappy state of disorder, no clear narrative emerges about who originated the Gallipoli campaign or how its method of commission was first planned and then subjected to startling changes. Likewise, the issue of what the operation might reasonably be expected to achieve remains unanswered. Initially, Rudenno?s ?Conclusion? seems to be telling us that Gallipoli was a glorious opportunity which went to waste: ?perhaps one of the few strategic ideas of the First World War which, if successful, could have led to a shortening of the conflict?. But the more he ponders it, the more the improbability of a glorious victory against Turkey, and one sparing the Allies the need to succeed on the Western Front, establishes itself. He asks: ?But
was a land-based victory ever plausible?? and answers:

> The combination of a lack of space, a lack of men and materials, weakened navy support, difficult terrain and a determined enemy meant that, with the loss of surprise after the first naval bombardment, no victory was possible unless an overwhelming force was sent to the peninsula, and that was never going to happen.

This collection of reasons for failure is rather a jumble, but it gets a good deal nearer the truth than many a discourse by the ?if only? school of historians.

?Meantime?, Rudenno?s ?Conclusion? goes, ?thirteen Allied submarines had managed to complete twenty-seven successful passages through the Dardanelles?. With that he is back where he wants to be, summarising British naval achievements of no significance but ? at least to him, and to readers of like inclination ? of great satisfaction.

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