Homer, Troy and the Turks

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Homer, Troy and the Turks: Heritage and Identity in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1870-1915.
Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
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Epilogue of an Empire

The years prior to the First World 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: the constitutional revolution of 1908 by the Young Turks (united in the Committee of Union and Progress, or 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 attack 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 increasingly volatile. Now Bulgarian artillery was within reach of Istanbul. Gallipoli on the European shore of the Dardanelles was seriously vulnerable.

Faced with this depressing situation, on 25 November 1912, a young Ottoman officer who had distinguished himself in 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. He was Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938), later known as Atatürk,\(^3\) 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 First World 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. In 1907, he joined the constitutional opposition group Committee of Union and Progress and became a member of the inner circle of Unionist officers.\(^4\) The Committee of Union and Progress (‘union’

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1. The members of this constitutional movement in France called themselves Jeunes Turcs.
2. For an overview of the political and economic developments in this period, see: Zürcher, *Turkey*, 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.’
4. Numerous books and articles have been written about Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. For a selection of significant biographies: Kinross, *Atatürk*; Mango, *Atatürk*; Becker, *Atatürk en Turkije’s weg*
referred to the unity of the Empire’s ethnic peoples), aimed to re-establish the constitution and parliament of the First Constitutional Era of 1876–1878, which was achieved in 1908. The CUP was the dominant political power in the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1918). Mustafa Kemal was to become the most important figure in the history of modern Turkey, yet his career started in the Dardanelles.

The Hero of Gallipoli

Having been appointed to defend the Dardanelles, the gateway to Istanbul, against a Bulgarian breakthrough, Mustafa Kemal took up his post at his new headquarters on the Gallipoli peninsula. While there, Mustafa Kemal visited the archaeological site of Troy in March 1913. To assess the threat of potential enemy attacks on Gallipoli he carried out a military survey. In the course of this military investigation, which is outlined by Mithat Atabay, historian and expert on Atatürk and his period in the Dardanelles, Mustafa Kemal followed the trail of the legendary figures who are traditionally held to have visited the Troad in earlier times, such as the Persian King Xerxes and Alexander the Great.

Tracing the footsteps of Alexander the Great, he crossed the Dardanelles Strait, visited to the Tomb of Achilles and the ruins of Troy. He investigated the locations and drew sketches in his notebook. Having evaluated the historical sites of the Troad, where the legendary Trojan War had taken place...
centuries ago, Mustafa Kemal concluded that an enemy would find it difficult to capture the Anatolian coast of the Dardanelles. He therefore decided that the main defensive lines should be deployed along the European coast.

This military survey of the Troad brought Mustafa Kemal to a historic decision and a military strategy which in a way laid the foundation for the success of the Ottoman army in the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915 and would earn him the title of hero of Gallipoli. Mustafa Kemal was to succeed where Hector had failed.

The First World War: A Glorious Ottoman Victory at the Dardanelles

The results of the Balkan Wars proved fatal for the Ottomans: almost all the Balkan territories were lost and the Empire was extremely weakened. While in no condition to fight a serious war, and preferring to stay out of it, the Ottoman government caved in to German pressure and anti-British sentiment, raised by the British requisition of two battleships which had been bought and paid for. Fearing isolation and already abandoned by France and Britain who were more interested in good relations with Russia which, in turn, collaborated with the Balkan states, the Ottoman Empire threw in its lot with the Triple Alliance in October 1914. With this the Empire entered its final war.

Soon after, the Ottomans mined the Dardanelles and fortified the surroundings of Troy on the Asian shore of the strait. 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 to gain control of the Straits (the Dardanelles and the Bosporus) was the bombardment of the outer forts on the Dardanelles by a British naval squadron in the Aegean on 3 November 1914. 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

8 The Battle of Gallipoli is also called the Dardanelles Campaign. The Turks named the battles on the Dardanelles the ‘Battle of Çanakkale.’ Çanakkale is the main town on the Asian side of the Dardanelles Strait. See: Broadbent, Gallipoli, 17.


10 On the reasons why the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War, see: Zürcher, Turkey, 110–114.
width of the strait were important advantages for the Ottoman defenders. The narrowest points, furthermore, could easily and effectively be fortified. In addition, for all the weakness of the Empire, the artillery and mines of the Ottomans had been greatly improved.

The first of a succession of British and French attempts to attack the Dardanelles came in February and March 1915. The main attack was on March 18. A fleet of British and French warships steamed through the Dardanelles to engage the Ottoman Turks. One of the British battleships participating in the main attack was the HMS Agamemnon. The naval assault by the Entente powers failed and ended in a costly defeat and heavy losses.11

Landings on Cape Helles and Arı Burnu (renamed ANZAC Cove shortly after the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps landed) on the tip of the Gallipoli peninsula on April 25 brought no breakthrough either. Actually, the tactics and strategy of the British and French forces during the landings, inspired by the Ancient Trojan War, are striking. For example, the collier SS River Clyde, carrying 2,000 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 Cape Helles beach. However, the Ottoman defence was too strong and the Trojan Horse boat, as the Allied soldiers called it, became a death trap. George Pake, serving as a private in the British army wrote that 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.’12

Eventually, the Allied troops were evacuated from the Dardanelles in January 1916; Churchill lost face.13 Mustafa Kemal, on the other hand, was promoted to full colonel during the battle.14 Although the Ottomans lost the First World War, from their perspective the outcome of the Dardanelles was a glorious victory; they had defeated their enemies and had written 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

11 Broadbent, Gallipoli, 3-16, 23-35; Zürcher, Turkey, 118.
12 Broadbent, Gallipoli, 149;
13 James, Churchill, 85-94; for the Battle of Gallipoli, see: Moorehead, Gallipoli; Haythornthwaite, Gallipoli; Erickson, Ordered to Die; James, Gallipoli; Kraaijestein and Schulten, Het Epos van Gallipoli.
14 Kinross, Atatürk, 96-98.
15 ‘The Dardanelles are Impassable’ is the common aphorism for the Turkish victory at the Battle of Gallipoli.
within living memory they had won a victory against a European power. There was life in the old Turk yet.  

News of Mustafa Kemal’s successful defence of the Gallipoli peninsula began to spread. Politicians who visited the battlefield extolled his virtues in reports and speeches and his achievements were praised 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. As he told journalist Ruşen Eşref Ünaydın (1892-1959), while the enemy were landing on 25 April he had commanded his soldiers: ‘I am not ordering you to fight, I am ordering you to die.’ He described the terrible circumstances in which the soldiers had to operate:

The distance of the opposing 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 breakdown. 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.

Mustafa Kemal explained, 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 created a new sense of confidence and pride. The Trojans lost, but the Ottomans won the war at that legendary place. According to Ottoman politician and leading intellectual Celal Nuri Ileri (1881-1938), if Homer had seen the victory of the Turks in the Dardanelles, even he would have turned his back on the legendary heroes of the Trojan War. In his essay ‘Turks in Gallipoli and Homer,’ published in 1918 in a special edition of the periodical Yeni Mecmua.

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16 Kinross, Atatürk, 96-98.
17 Atabay, ‘Osmanlı Meclis-i Mebusanı’nda Çanakkale Muharebeleri Konusundaki Görüşmeler.’
18 Eşref, ‘Mustafa Kemal Paşa,’ in Yeni Mecmua; and Eşref, ‘Mustafa Kemal Paşa,’ in Çanakkale’yi Yaşamak.
19 Confusion exists among scholars about the exact date of publication. Since 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, Yeni Mecmua, 9-12, and Avcı, Çanakkale’yi Yaşamak, 9-12.
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 epic genius will give this praiseful panorama to the future. When that happens, both you and me, your poetical servant, Homer, will be forgotten.20

This is a striking comparison of the Battle of Gallipoli with the Trojan War and a clear identification of the Turks with the Trojans, but now with a victory in the end.

In his novella *The List of Mustafa*, Ottoman writer F. Celaleddin (1895-1975) also urges Homer to change his epic and states “Troy was imagination, Gallipoli is reality.”21 By contrast, İhtifalci Mehmed Ziya 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.’22 Ibrahim Alaaddin Gövsə (1889-1949), poet, writer, psychologist, educator and politician, visited the Dardanelles during the battle on 19 July 1915. Inspired by the environment he wrote the poem ‘The Tracks of Çanakkale – Passing the Dardanelles,’23 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

20 Nuri, ‘Gelibolu’da Türkler ve Homeros.’
22 Ziya, ‘Kale-i Sultanıyê Sevahili.’
The world was cloaked in such an obscurity
As if I went through the cycle of mythology

It was not just Ottomans who compared the Battle of Gallipoli with the heroic Trojan War; as we have already seen, the British named their battleship after Agamemnon, the commander of the united Greek armed forces attacking the Trojans, and used military tactics inspired by the Trojan War. Diaries and memoirs of German war correspondents also demonstrate a great awareness of the heroic past of Troy and the Dardanelles. Paul Schweder, a German journalist, visited the region in 1916 and in his account of the Battle of Gallipoli he referred 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. 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 the East-West confrontation, led Ottoman Turks to experience the battle as a modern Trojan War. The Ottoman Turks were the new heroes of the Dardanelles; troops from all over the Empire fought for the defence of Anatolia. The new heroes managed to stop the enemy. In their view, this made them even more heroic than the Trojans. In spite of the many human and financial losses – of both Ottomans and Allies – the victory at Gallipoli encouraged and raised the confidence of the Ottomans. This was a prelude to the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923) led by Mustafa Kemal, who had made his name as commander during the Battle of Gallipoli. The Dardanelles campaign was a defining moment in Turkish history.

For all their success at the Dardanelles, the Ottomans lost the First World War. The Empire was forced to capitulate. By agreeing to the harsh Armistice of Moudros on 31 October 1918, the Ottoman Empire dug its own grave. The Armistice of Moudros marked the end of the Ottoman Empire. It was signed aboard the British ship HMS Agamemnon.

24 Schweder, Im Türkischen Hauptquartier.
25 Jäckh, Der aufsteigende Halbmond; Atabay and Aslan, ‘Atatürk in Troy.’
26 Meydan, Son Truvaldar, 207-231.
27 Züörcher, Turkey, 133-143; on the HMS Agamemnon, see: Burt, British Battleships.
Remarkably, in the midst of the struggle of a collapsing empire and the moral damage suffered by society, a new *Iliad* anthology was published in 1918.28

The meaning of Gallipoli for the Turks is comparable with the meaning of Verdun for the French or the Somme for the British. The Dardanelles campaign and its location is a historic site that carries a nation’s memories, it defines the country’s identity: a *lieu de mémoire*.29 Indeed, Gallipoli played a key part in the development of Turkish nationalism and collective memory in the final years of the Ottoman Empire and with the rise of the new Republic of Turkey.30

With the Dardanelles campaign Troy received a new dimension: it became a major component in the heroic story of a new nation, the Republic of Turkey, 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 Turkish War of Independence: ‘We avenged Troy’ (Fig. 42).31

28 Ömer Seyfeddin’s summary of the *Iliad* was published in instalments in the periodical *Yeni Mecmua* in 1918. Seyfeddin claimed that studying Homer’s works was a precondition for writing. The collection of articles was published in 1927: Seyfeddin, *Iliade – Homere*.


30 Albayrak and Özyurt, *Yeni Mecmua*, preface; Kraaijestein and Schulten, *Het Epos van Gallipoli*; see also the numerous reports, accounts and anecdotes published in the newspaper *Ikdam* between 3 November 1914 and 3 February 1916 collected in Çulcu, *Ikdam Gazetesi’nde Çanakkale Cephesi*.

31 The statement is incorporated in Sabahattin Eyüboğlu’s 1962 essay ‘Ilyada ve Anadolu.’
Lieutenant-Colonel Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on lookout during the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915. Atatürk is here standing on the Dardanelles in the vicinity of Troy in a photograph taken by Major Haydar Alganer. The photograph is part of the collection of the Çanakkale Deniz Museum and the camera used is in the Çimenlik Kalesi Museum.