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Abstract

The expansion and growth of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1300s is one that has both intrigued and puzzled Western scholars for many years. Small bands of Islamic frontier raiders were able to join together and ultimately become a powerful empire that spanned three continents and had subjects of many different religions, cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. How did this happen? What was the spark that ignited the wildfire that would become the mighty and feared Ottoman Empire? Looking back on Ottoman history, one major acquisition, that is, the successful capture of a peninsula known as Gallipoli or Gelibolu in the Aegean Sea would give the Ottomans a permanent foothold in Europe from which to launch their forces into the Balkans and was responsible for the amazing Ottoman expansion after 1300. The strategic location of Gallipoli between Anatolia and the Middle East and Europe has made Gallipoli one of the most strategic locations within the Ottoman Empire, serving as a gateway between continents. History has proven that whichever nation has been able to hold Gallipoli has been able to keep power in the region.

Keywords

Ottoman Empire, Gallipoli, Gelibolu, expansion

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forces into the Balkans and was responsible for the amazing Ottoman expansion after 1300. The strategic location of Gallipoli between Anatolia and the Middle East and Europe has made Gallipoli one of the most strategic locations within the Ottoman Empire, serving as a gateway between continents. History has proven that whichever nation has been able to hold Gallipoli has been able to keep power in the region.

In order to understand the significance of the Gallipoli peninsula it is necessary to first look to the beginnings of the Ottoman Empire. This empire was able to emerge around the turn of the 14th century in Anatolia by joining many independent clans or “states” that shared a common goal; to expand the influence of Islam in the region. The

once defining historical thesis on this significant spark that would be the origins of the Ottoman Empire was written by Paul Wittek in 1937. This “Ghazi Thesis” proposed that it was the religious zeal of Islam that drove many of these Turkish raiders to spread across the Middle East and into Europe, taking control of land and people in an attempt to convert them to Islam.¹ While this thesis has been hotly debated for decades, one thing is certain, and that is that these groups of raiders, for whatever reason, did manage to expand from the frontiers of Anatolia into the Middle East and Asia as well as the Balkans of Europe, and Gallipoli would become the main reason for the latter.

¹ Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 2003), 2.

The early years for this band of frontier principalities were full of violence and bloodshed. This small confederation of Islamist states struggled to survive amongst several more powerful neighbors including the Persians and Byzantines. However, it was in these early years of the Ottoman Empire (in the 1350s) that a wise Orhan Bey, the son of Osman (creator of the Ottoman Empire), noticed internal struggle within their close neighbor, the Byzantine Empire, and decided to would take advantage of the situation. In 1346 Orhan made an alliance with John VI Cantacuzemus, a “claimant” or “pretender” to the Byzantine throne.² To solidify the alliance, Orhan married Cantacuzemus’s daughter, Theodora. This alliance put 6,000

² Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1973), 9.

Ottoman troops in Byzantine territory to support the rebel cause and gave Orhan an excuse to meddle in Byzantine affairs.³ When Cantacuzemus called for Ottoman support against the Serbs and Bulgarians in 1352, Orhan quickly dispatched his troops to Thrace, an outpost on the eastern side of Gallipoli, leaving his son, Suleyman Pasha, in charge of all Ottoman forces in the area. Suleyman's forces were able to take Thrace, but instead of putting the land back in Cantacuzemus's hands, Suleyman decided to bring in more troops from Anatolia and lay siege to the fortresses on the Gallipoli peninsula.⁴

Although Cantacuzemus strongly insisted that

³ Steven Turnbull, *The Ottoman Empire 1326-1699* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2003), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

Suleyman immediately retreat from Thrace and Gallipoli, his protests fell on deaf Ottoman ears.⁵

Although Suleyman had captured Thrace and was able to replenish his forces with more troops from Anatolia, his siege of the Gallipoli fortresses was moving at a very slow rate. In a last ditch attempt to regain lost Byzantine land in Thrace, John VI Cantacuzemus offered to pay Orhan to leave. Just as the Ottomans were about to accept this deal the area was rocked with a violent earthquake. It broke down the walls of several fortresses on the Gallipoli peninsula and caused major damage to the surrounding villages. While the Christian defenders rushed out from their devastated stronghold, Ottoman forces took control

⁵ Ibid., 13.

and quickly rebuilt what was destroyed.⁶ Again Suleyman brought in more troops and supplies to fortify his new outpost. This move sent shockwaves throughout Europe, as calls for a Crusade began to be heard throughout the continent.⁷

Many historians look back on the taking of Gallipoli as a major turning point in Ottoman history. Halil Inalcik writes in his book, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600*, that prior to the acquisition of Gallipoli the Ottoman State was “no more than one of many frontier principalities,” and that “the events after 1352 so firmly established its superiority over others that within 30 years they had become a tight knit and

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

powerful empire.”⁸ Inalcik would also claim that the conquest of Gallipoli was a “crucial event” for the Ottomans, as the Ottomans were able to “gain a foothold in the Balkans with the prospects of limitless expansion towards the west.”⁹ The later capture of Constantinople, as well as Ottoman excursions into Serbia, Wallachia, Hungary, Byzantium, and other Balkan lands would be the direct result of the seizure of Gallipoli. Carter Findley writes that the Ottomans were able to expand because of their conquest and winning of conquered societies as a direct result of their prime location and stronghold in Gallipoli.¹⁰ This peninsula provided a spring board for later Ottoman

⁸ Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire*, 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Carter Vaughn Findley, *The Turks in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110.

advances into Europe and, as long as the Ottomans were able to keep control of it, they had a vital lifeline from their homeland into Europe.

Also related to the success at Gallipoli was Sultan Murad I's decision to move the Ottoman capital from Bursa to Edirne. At the time Edirne was located on the outskirts of Ottoman territory and very close to "hostile neighbors". Steve Turnbull claims that this bold move clearly showed that Murad believed he could and was about to expand his empire, "making his advance from a firm base in the Gallibolu area."¹¹ Mark Mazower also notes that less than 20 years after Orhan was able to win a foothold on Gallipoli the Byzantine

¹¹ Turnbull, *The Ottoman Empire*, 16.

Emperor, Jean V Paleologue made his submission to his successor Murad I.¹²

As the Christian powers became increasingly worried about a growing Ottoman Empire, plans were made to snatch Gallipoli back from Ottoman hands. Although talks of a crusade began to fester in Europe, they did not come to fruition at this time and the only ruler to respond to the request was the Byzantine Emperor's cousin, Duke Amadeus VI of Savoy.¹³ In 1366 Amadeus was able to capture Gallipoli and immediately returned it to the Byzantines.¹⁴ This loss was a major setback for the Ottomans, as they were

¹² Mark Mazower, *Salonica City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 36.

¹³ Turnbull, *The Ottoman Empire*, 22.

¹⁴ Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age*, 12.

effectively cut off from their conquered European lands. Ottoman expansion westward came to a grinding halt without the troops and supplies that the Gallipoli lifeline provided.¹⁵ While this time was certainly a frantic and worried for Ottoman leaders, Gallipoli would fall back into Ottoman hands in 1376, thanks to an arrangement by Murad I where he secured the Byzantine throne for Adronicus IV in exchange for the vital peninsula.¹⁶

From this trade it becomes apparent that Gallipoli was important to the Ottomans and that they knew it. As stated before it was certainly a lifeline into the Balkans and would later be used as a buffer to stop advancing armies and navies into Ottoman lands. It is also important to note the

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

importance of Gallipoli in a social sense. After Suleyman took control of Gallipoli, and to a greater extent when Murad I retained Gallipoli in 1376, both Ottoman rulers began to strengthen this “European stronghold” with Muslims from Anatolia. The majority of Turkish civilians that moved to this land were nomads, as it was believed that they could easily transition and adapt to a new Ottoman acquisition.¹⁷ Turkish villages began to spring up and establish a frontier that kept expanding as more and more Turks settled in this land. Although the Turks would have skirmishes and battles in and around Gallipoli over the course of the next 538 years, the area would never fall out

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

of Ottoman hands, allowing a unique Turkish culture to flourish.¹⁸

Drawing a timeline backwards from the many accomplishments of the Ottoman Empire, one can see that Gallipoli is often where these accomplishments originated. While this may be a bold statement, many of the Ottoman advances, including naval advances, came from the springboard that was Gallipoli. Events that would not seem associated with Gallipoli, upon further inspection, turn out to be directly related to this vital conquest. For example, Ottoman offenses against the Byzantines in 1357 (which began in Gallipoli) led to the capture of Adrianople. From the prisoners of a captured Adrianople, Sultan Murad I created

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

the first Janissary Corps.¹⁹ In later years the Janissaries would be used as the tip of the Ottoman “spear,” becoming the first standing army and replacing “ghazi” tribal warriors. In later years the Janissaries would be key to winning many battles, especially against John Hunyadi and the Hungarians. If Murad was never able to capture Adrianople using forces from Gallipoli, the idea of the Janissaries might never have come to be realized, and history would have been changed forever.

Another pinnacle in Ottoman history was the sacking of Constantinople, the capital of an aging Byzantine Empire. While many nations, tribal groups, and empires before the Ottomans had tried

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

to capture the ancient city, all had failed. In 1453 a young Sultan, Mehmet II, decided that he would try his hand at doing what others before him had failed to accomplish: conquering Constantinople. While the defenses of Constantinople were impressive-- they had managed to keep the capital in Byzantine hands well after the fall of the Roman Empire-- Mehmet II decided to attack the capital from both land and sea, using a naval force that was assembled at Gallipoli. Although initially unsuccessful in their attack on a much smaller Venetian force, the Ottoman navy was able to strike a blow to the Byzantines after several vessels were carried over a small patch of land into waters close to the city walls.²⁰ As was the case in many Ottoman offenses

²⁰ Professor Karen Pinto. Class Notes from History

of this period and future periods, Gallipoli was vital in acquiring new lands and defeating Ottoman enemies.

It is also important to understand the role that the Ottoman navy played in Ottoman history. After conquering the Byzantine Empire and expanding Ottoman territory upwards to the Mediterranean the Ottomans had traded one enemy for a new one. This enemy was the Venetians of present-day Italy. While the Ottomans were feared for the skill of their armies, their navy at this point was still relatively weak. The Venetians, boasting a proud and very successful navy, had often fought skirmishes with the Ottoman navy and, in an attempt to destroy the Ottoman fleet, they attacked

330: The Ottoman Empire. September 28th, 2010.

the naval base at Gallipoli in 1416.²¹ Although the Venetians were able to decimate the Ottoman navy at Gallipoli, they could not overtake the Ottoman fortresses or destroy the inner harbor naval base and were forced to sign a treaty with Mehmet I to “keep the status quo.”²² As would be the case with the Ottoman navy for years to come, they were forced to rebuild, but maintained power in the region. Because the Turks were able to keep Gallipoli, they could still keep their power in the region.

Although firmly in Ottoman possession, Gallipoli seemed to be at the forefront of Byzantine and Ottoman minds. As the halfway point (at least until Ottoman control of Constantinople in 1453) between Byzantine Europe and the Ottoman Middle

²¹ Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 134.

East, whoever held this valuable land had a great chance of keeping the other power in check. A major scare for Ottoman forces immediately followed Sultan Mehmet I's death in 1421, as Mehmet's rebellious brother Mustafa agreed to cede Gallipoli back to the Byzantines. Again the Ottomans were in danger of losing their most valuable staging ground and naval base. Mehmet's young son, Murad, realized this and decided to fight against his uncle using a loyal Janissary Corps. Murad was able to defeat Mustafa, keep Gallipoli in Ottoman hands, and regain lost Byzantine lands that his father had fought so hard to obtain.²³

As the Ottoman Empire began to expand past Gallipoli in the late 1400s it became less of

²³ Ibid., 19.

buffer against the West but was still very important to the empire in many other ways. During the late 1400s the Ottomans began a profitable trade relationship with Florence, and used the port at Gallipoli as a major trading center. This helped the Ottoman economy to grow and prosper during this time.²⁴ Gallipoli also became a major mill for producing gunpowder for Ottoman guns during the 16th and 17th centuries, as its proximity to the Aegean, Mediterranean and Black Sea allowed for quick distribution to other Ottoman held territories. It must also be noted that Gallipoli was the main center for producing the cloth for the sails on ships during the 16th and 17th century and the largest

²⁴ Ibid., 135.

naval dockyard in the Ottoman Empire for well over a century.²⁵

In understanding the importance of Gallipoli as a naval base one must understand the significance that the Ottomans put on their navy starting with Mehmet II. Mehmet the Conqueror understood that a powerful army would only advance the Ottomans so far without the aid of a strong navy. He learned this lesson battling smaller numbers of Venetian ships and losing in the Siege of Constantinople. In fact, many Sultans after Mehmet attempted to strengthen their navy so that they would be on par with or more powerful than the navies of their adversaries. With this in mind the

²⁵ Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 295, 292.

Ottoman leaders carefully chose the Governor of Gallipoli, as he would become the commander of the entire Ottoman Mediterranean fleet.²⁶ This post became one of the most important in the entire Ottoman Empire.²⁷

While the history of Gallipoli before the 20th century shows how important this little peninsula was to the creation and endurance of the Ottoman Empire for over 500 years, this significance is often overshadowed by the events that unfolded there in the Great War, World War I. The Ottoman Empire joined the war on the side of the Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria. Because warfare had stalled and trench warfare resulted in a stalemate, British and French forces decided in

²⁶ Ibid., 297.

²⁷ Ibid., 297.

1914 and 1915 that they would attempt to end the war quickly by defeating Turkey and adding a new supply route to their ally, Russia.²⁸ The logical location for attack fell upon the peninsula of Gallipoli.

Despite the vital importance of Gallipoli, its defenses fell into disrepair after years of inaction. Only after Mahmut II's shock at a major Ottoman loss at Konya did he attempt to strengthen his defenses, including Gallipoli in 1837.²⁹ Viewing the aging and obsolete fortresses falling apart after the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 again focus was placed on improving Gallipoli but progress was slow. By the time World War I broke out in 1914,

²⁸ Robin Prior, *Gallipoli: The End to the Myth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 43.

²⁹ Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 41.

the Ottomans were “not ready” for war. In early August of 1914 Gallipoli was ill equipped and seriously lacking man power and weapons. Three infantry divisions on the peninsula only made up 14,000 troops and 2,300 animals. After a quick rush to resupply, troop numbers were up to 30,000 men and 7,000 animals within months.³⁰ Even with these preparations the land around the Dardanelles was still weak from aging and obsolete fortifications. To assist their allies, the Germans sent Admiral von Usedom, an expert in sea costal defenses, as well as 500 German costal artillery and mine experts to defend against a possible Allied attack.³¹ The Germans were also able to send limited supplies to

³⁰ Edward J. Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 76.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

the Ottomans through neutral Bulgaria and Romania.

Hostilities against the Ottomans started in November of 1914 with the British “briefly” bombarding Turkish forts along the Dardanelles. While damage was small, the British did succeed in accelerating Turkish fortifications.³² By early 1915 Gallipoli had added a further 6,000 soldiers, 263 more cannons as well as eight machine guns. In 1915 the 19th Infantry Division fell under the command of a “young” and “aggressive” Colonel Mustafa Kemal Bey, later to become the founder of an independent Turkey.³³ This escalation of troops and supplies shows that the Turks feared losing Gallipoli, just as the Byzantines had 500 years

³² Ibid., 77.

³³ Ibid., 78.

before. Thanks to German 150 millimeter howitzer cannons, the Turks at Gallipoli wreaked havoc on British ships passing through the narrow straits.³⁴

Although taking significant damage from Turkish defenses, the British Navy was able to deal several major blows to the Ottomans, including a battle in the winter of 1915 in which fortresses on Kum Kale and Seddelbahir were completely destroyed.³⁵ This victory gave the British a false sense of hope, as their hopes that the Ottoman defenders were weak and incompetent were correct. As the British prepared for a major naval assault against the Turkish defenses at Gallipoli and the surrounding coastal lands, the Ottomans went to work relaying mines and submarine nets and

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ Ibid., 79.

rebuilding destroyed defenses. Their strategy for defeating the British and keeping a firm hold of Gallipoli hindered on 3 main points:

- 1- Mobile howitzer cannons were to be used to strike at an incoming fleet and stop any minesweeping ships from taking the lead of the incoming fleet.
- 2- Underwater mines and anti-submarine nets would destroy ships too big to be destroyed with howitzer cannons.
- 3- Improved costal defenses would deal with any ships that made it through the first two points.³⁶

The British and French naval assault finally came in the spring of 1915, as the allied navies attempted to punch through the Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmara. At first the allied navy had success in silencing a few forts, but heavy howitzer fire caused damage and confusion amongst the European ships. The assault was called off after three ships had

³⁶ Ibid., 79.

quickly sunk as a result of hitting underwater mines and three larger battleships were greatly damaged from other mines. It was at this point that the British realized they could not control the Dardanelles with a naval force alone, and prepared the armies of France, England, Australia, and New Zealand for a ground offensive to destroy Ottoman fortifications and troops in an attempt to capture Gallipoli.³⁷ Thanks to minor British attacks and invasion scares, Turkish troop readiness had reached a high level prior to the Gallipoli Campaign.³⁸

In describing the Gallipoli Campaign historian Edward J. Erickson claims that it was a coming of age for not only the Turks, but for

³⁷ Ibid., 79.

³⁸ Ibid., 82.

Australians and New Zealanders as well: “The victory at Gallipoli was of huge physical and psychological importance and is vividly remembered in Turkey today.”³⁹ It is often remembered as a major and terrible disaster for the allies, with an estimated 280,000 allied casualties (44,000 deaths).⁴⁰ Adding insult to injury, British and French naval forces entered the Gallipoli straits knowing the Ottomans were low on artillery ammunition.⁴¹ A British Admiral even went as far as to send a cable to Winston Churchill before entering the Dardanelles, telling him to “expect Allied forces in Istanbul within 14 days”.⁴² This, of course, did not happen and, although

³⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁰ Prior, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth*, 43.

⁴¹ Joan Flemming. Class Notes from History 339: Australians in War. 21 October, 2009.

⁴² Ibid.

Ottoman losses were also very heavy, Allied ground forces were unable to make it past the Turkish lines on the rocky and steep slopes of Gallipoli.

Turkish forces fought gallantly to defend every inch of Gallipoli, as Colonel Mustafa Kemal ordered his famous lines to his 19th Infantry Regiment as they were running low on ammunition, “I do not expect you to attack, I order you to die. In the time which passes until we die, other troops and commanders can come forward and take our places.”⁴³ As allied forces could not make any headway in taking control of Gallipoli, the order was given to evacuate. British commanders expected heavy Allied losses, as many troops were dug in extremely close to the Ottoman enemy.

⁴³ Ibid.e n

However, the most successful Allied operation of the entire Gallipoli Campaign was its retreat from the peninsula. For all the bad planning and mistakes that went into the initial invasion, not one man was lost in the Allied retreat, as stealth, careful maneuvering, and decoys such as machine guns firing without operators (thanks to emptying sandbags attached to triggers) allowed Allied troops to escape unharmed.⁴⁴

The aftermath of the Gallipoli Campaign was one of excitement and pride for the Turks. They had defeated troops from Australia, New Zealand, France, and Britain and stopped them from taking over Ottoman territory, ultimately forcing the allies to abandon their Turkish campaign. This

⁴⁴ Ibid.

victory also proved to the Turks that they could stand up to Europe and support themselves, something that they would remember when they fought for their independence in the early 1920s.

Erickson sums up the feeling from a Turkish perspective:

For the Turks the Gallipoli campaign evokes the same kinds of memories as Gettysburg, the Somme, Verdun, or Leningrad do for the Americans, British, French, and Russians, respectively. The campaign is also similarly embedded in the psyche of the people of Australia and New Zealand who continue to celebrate Anzac Day.⁴⁵

While it is true that Turks today remember the Gallipoli campaign vividly, the same goes for Australians and New Zealanders. One might ask why such a terrible, costly, and embarrassing defeat is still cherished in Australian and New Zealand

⁴⁵ Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War*, 76.

minds, and it is because this conflict was the first time that an independent Australia and New Zealand were involved in any conflict as their own sovereign power. Although a disaster, these countrymen are very proud of their ancestor's sacrifice, something that is visible every April 25th, ANZAC Day.

In conclusion, the strategic location of Gallipoli between the Middle East and Europe had made Gallipoli one of the most important places within the Ottoman Empire. Whichever group claimed control over Gallipoli, whether it be the Greeks, the Byzantines, or the Ottomans, often had control over the region and could exert their influence into adjacent lands. Because the Ottomans were able to gain control of Gallipoli, through

cunning and help from Mother Nature, they were able to expand their empire into Europe, grow at a very fast rate, and ultimately rise to become a very powerful and dominant empire. Keeping control of Gallipoli was central to maintaining power, something the Ottomans knew very well, as they successfully defended the land from the Byzantines, Serbs, Hungarians, Venetians, and much later the combined forces of the British, French, New Zealanders, and Australians.

The successful defense of Gallipoli in World War I also helped propel Mustafa Kemal, the future founder of Turkey as an independent country, to an icon status. Although Allied forces in World War I were unsuccessful in capturing Gallipoli, the experience was none the less important to the

cultural psyche of Australia, New Zealand, and Turkey. Mustafa Kemal accurately described the feeling between all nations involved in the Gallipoli campaign with these words in 1934:

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 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.⁴⁶

In the end, Gallipoli proved to be one of the most important – if not the most important – Ottoman held territory in its storied existence. Since regaining the land in 1377, it has stayed firmly in Turkish hands under the Ottomans and later the

⁴⁶ Lynn Marsh, “Where ANZACs Lie” <http://www.anzacday.org.au/spirit/ad2004/index.html>. Online Source Accessed 3 December, 2010.

Republic of Turkey, where it remains today.

Although there have not been any major battles in Gallipoli in many years, the Turks still stand ready, knowing that this gateway between Europe and the Middle East is still a sought after commodity.