

THE GALLIPOLI BATTLE - A RUSSIAN CONNECTION

The Gallipoli battle, which had played such a significant role in the Australian history, became the culmination of a long series of political games and collisions. The Australian soldiers, landing on the Dardanelles coast under the fire of Turkish machine guns, paid for many tragic errors of several generations of the British politicians with their blood. Long before the Crimean war the Great Britain had actively begun to counteract the Russian anti-Turkish policy aimed at the liberation of the Christian nations from the Osman yoke, spread of the Russian influence over the Balkans and, finally, the control over the straights between the Black Sea and Mediterranean. The Great Britain provided the Ottoman Empire with a military (years of the Crimean war) and a political (1878) support. Had not Great Britain helped Turkey politically after the end of the Russo-Turkish war in 1877-78, the Australians might not have had to land on the Gallipoli coast in 1915.

By the beginning of the First World war Turkey had found itself under the strong German influence. The pro-German position was also taken up by Bulgaria, which Russia had liberated from the Turkish domination only 36 years before at a high cost of life of her soldiers. Although the countries of Entente and Russia did not want to have Turkey and Bulgaria as opponents at all and preferred to see these countries neutral, the political-military situation in the Black Sea region became explosive in the first months of war. In August 1914 German cruisers *Geben* and *Breslau* broke into the Black Sea. They raised the Turkish flag and formally became a part of the Turkish navy. On the 27th of September Turkey closed the straights, and a sea way vital for Russia and through which the main part of her sea trade took place, was blocked. On the 28-29th of September the German warships under the Turkish flag shelled Odessa, Sebastopol and Novorossiisk. The Russian ports and navigation incurred a serious damage. On the 30th of October the ambassadors of Russia, Great Britain and France in Constantinople handed a 12-hour ultimatum over to the Turkish government demanding to open the straights and stop naval raids. The ultimatum stayed unanswered - the next day Turkey entered the war on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. For Russia it meant opening of a new - Caucasian front. In spite of the fact that the Russian army achieved a considerable success on this front in the first months of war, her situation on the main - German front was very harsh. The losses were huge, and permanent shortage of ammunition and materiel was common. On the last days of 1914 the commander-in-chief the Russian army Grand Duke Nikolay Nikolaevich referred to the British ambassador in Petrograd George Buchanan with a request to undertake a divertive operation against the Turks and to compel them to withdraw a part of their troops from the Caucasian front. On the 2nd of January, 1915, the British Minister of War Lord Kitchener sent a memorandum to the first lord of Admiralty (the commander-in-chief of the Navy) Winston Churchill with the following message:

The only place where demonstration might have effect are the Dardanelles, in particular in the event that rumors about a threat to Constantinople are distributed.

A cable of the following contents was sent to Petrograd:

Accept assurances that we shall take measures for realization of divertive operation against the Turks. Nevertheless, there are fears, that such action can hardly affect the number of the enemy in the Caucasus or cause their withdrawal.

At the same time the British commanders understood, that the success of operation would mean capture of the straights. It might open a way for the Russian foodstuffs to the countries of Entente, and for the ammunition and arms to the Russian Black Sea ports. The situation on other fronts of war against Turkey caused optimism. On the 4th of January 1915, the Turkish troops were routed by the Russian army in the battle of Sarykamysh. Only about 12000 out of 90000 Turks, who had fought this battle, returned. This disaster had been preceded by a series of their defeats in the Middle East. The population of Turkey showed an extreme apathy towards the war. The Germans already expected, that the Turks were just about to start confidential peace negotiations.

The first phase of the Dardanelles operation began on the 19th of February 1915, at 09.51 a.m. when the flotilla of twelve British naval ships commenced shelling of the Turkish forts on the Gallipoli peninsula. On the 25th of February small British landing groups found out, that the Turkish and German artillerymen had abandoned their positions, having not endured the dreadful naval barrage. The British ships entered the straights and moved over six miles eastwards meeting no resistance. On the 2nd of March admiral Carden

sent a message to London with a statement, that, provided a good weather, the Allies will be in Constantinopol in two weeks. In Chicago the grain prices fell in the light of the oncoming resumption of the Russian export.

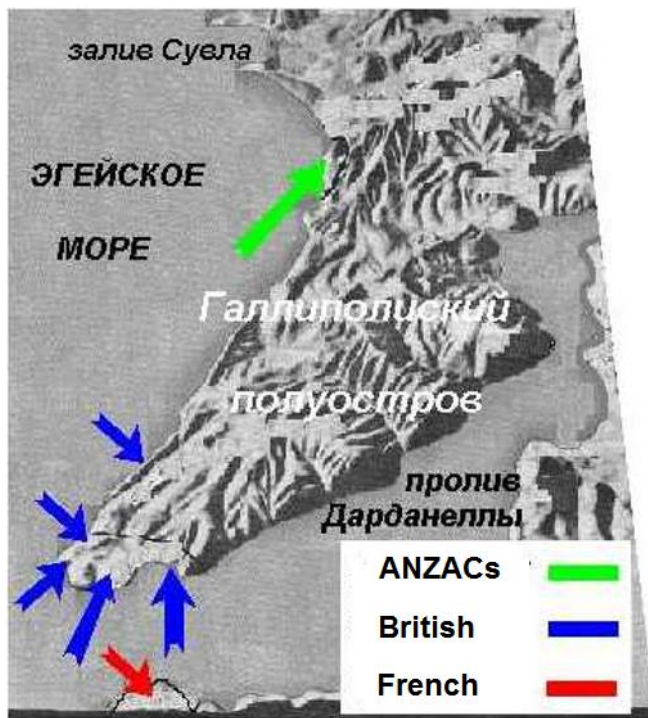
In the beginning of February the Prime Minister of Greece Venitselos rejected an offer to strengthen the border with Bulgaria with one British and one French division, but in the light of the successful shelling of the Gallipoli fortifications he himself offered to send three Greek divisions for a strike on the Turkish positions from the rear with the subsequent capture of Constantinopol. Britain and France supported this proposal, but the Tzar's government turned it down - Russia wanted the complete control over the straights, not wishing to share it with anybody. On the 3rd of March Nikolay II declared it to the British ambassador. In the middle of March the agreement on transfer of the straights to Russia right after the fall of Constantinopol was signed. The shelling of the Turkish forts lasted for nearly a month. It seemed they were doomed - the moral of the defenders of forts was extraordinarily low, there was no ammunition and food. The Turks were even short of mines for blocking of the straights and they began to collect and utilize Russian mines, which were brought from the Black Sea by streams. On the 18th of March the Turkish mines changed dramatically the situation in the heating battle - the French battleship "Bouvet" hit one of them and sunk. The British battleships "Ocean" and "Irresistible" incurred heavy damage from the mines and were scuttled in order to prevent their capture by the enemy. The Allies could not afford such losses. In the morning of the 19th of March from the forts of Gallipoli the Turkish and German artillerymen saw an empty horizon in front of themselves - the ships of the Allied squadron had gone. There was no limit to the triumph in the Turkish camp... It became clear to Allied command, that a naval effort would not be sufficient to capture the straights.

Lord Kitchener gave an order to prepare for landing. It was supposed, that as soon as the landing troops consolidated a bridgehead on the Gallipoli coast, the Russian troops would land on the coast of Bosphorus. In the meantime, the British marines and units of the Australian-New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) began to arrive on the Lemnos island. By the 21st of April there were more than 70 000 troops on the island - 30000 Australians and New Zealanders, 27000 Britishers, 16000 Frenchmen. A grandiose squadron of allied ships including a Russian cruiser *Askold* anchored by the island coast... Now it is well known, that the landing was poorly prepared, that the Allied commanders knew very little about topography and passability of the Gallipoli coast and the availability of fresh water on it. The place for landing had been chosen wrongly - the soldiers would have to assault fortified heights, climbing up abrupt, strongly dissected slopes.

On the 25th of April the Allies landed on three bridgeheads on the Gallipoli coast. The bloody battle began. The bridgehead Kum Kale on the Asian coast of the straights was soon abandoned. In May reinforcements began to arrive to the Turkish trenches from the Caucasian front. The course of the battle began to remind strongly the operations on the notorious Western front: sitting in trenches, bayonet attacks with variable but minor success for both sides, heavy losses. The only thing was different - highly chivalrous attitude of the hostile sides to each other, unusual even against the background of "soldier's brotherhood" which frequently took a place on the fronts of the first World War. For example, soldiers of the Allied troops never shot on the Turks, walking behind the line of entrenchments. Both sides let each other take out wounded from the battlefield and bury killed comrades. The soldiers frequently threw in the enemy trenches, which were only twenty - thirty meters apart, gifts: the Allies - cans (the Turks requested mostly for tinned milk), the Turks - fruit. It is remarkable, that the Australians and New Zealanders got rid of their gas masks. "The Turks will not poison us. They fight decent way," - the ANZACs were saying...

By the autumn of 1915 it had become clear, that the Turks, which outnumbered the Allies and fought for their land with an exclusive ferocity, would not retreat. There was no chance to break through the Turkish defense line as the battle had depleted the Allies - there were no reinforcements for the decimated troops on the bridgeheads. In addition to these problems of the Allies a new - Saloniki front - had appeared on the map of the Balkans. By the beginning of December it had become necessary to choose between the Saloniki and Gallipoli, and the French and Russian command informed the British that the Saloniki front could be abandoned under no circumstances.

The cold weather came in November, and the first frosts and snowfalls did not leave the Allies any choice - it was decided to evacuate the troops. In the beginning of January they left the Gallipoli coast.



Left - the main bridgeheads of Gallipoli; right - climbing up steep slopes the Australians went into their first attack. In the middle - a British colonel Whiley who died in this battle and was awarded a VC posthumously

Herewith is a short chronology of the Gallipoli battle:

1915

APRIL

25 - The first landings

26 - The ANZACs beat off the first Turkish counter-attack

27 - Six French battalions land on the Helles bridgehead

28 - The First battle at Kritia (bridgehead Helles)

29 - Fierce Turkish attacks on the ANZAC bridgehead

MAY

1-2 - In a night attack the 21st Turkish batalion broke through the Anglo-French defense on the Helles bridgehead. A balance was restored with a lot of effort and heavy losses

4 - An attack of the Australians was beaten off by the Turks on the ANZAC bridgehead

5-6 - The 2nd Australian and New Zealand Infantry brigades arrived on the Helles bridgehead

6-8 - The Second battle at Kritia (bridgehead Helles) with participation of the British, French and ANZACs

10 - Another unsuccessful attack of the Australians on the ANZAC bridgehead

15 - Australian general Bridges was fatally wounded

19 - A Turkish counter-attack on the ANZAC bridgehead was beaten off with huge losses for the Turks (10000 killed and wounded)

20 - The Turks requested an armistice to bury the dead

24 - An Armistice for a funeral of dead soldiers

18 - The British submarine A14 sank a Turkish liner with 6000 soldier and officers onboard. There were no survivors

25 - The German submarine *U-21* sank a British battleship *Triumph*

26 - The same boat sank a British battleship *Majestic*

29 - Turkish attack on the Queens Post (bridgehead ANZAC)

JUNE

4 - The 3rd battle at Kritia (bridgehead Helles): A small success was achieved by the Allies with heavy losses (6500 killed and wounded)

21 - The French troops captured the Harikot Redoubt on the Helles bridgehead, having lost 2500 killed and wounded

28 - The British troops advanced on the left flank at Helles, having lost 3500 killed and wounded

JULY

2 - An unsuccessful Turkish counter-attack on the Helles bridgehead

4-5 - Another one with the heaviest Turkish losses so far

10 - The Turks requested an armistice to bury their dead, but the Allied command refused to co-operate

12 - The Commander of the 1st French division general Masnu was fatally wounded

12-13 - An attack of the Allies on the Helles bridgehead, their losses - 4000 killed and wounded

31 - The Australians captured the Turkish trenches at the Tasmania Post

AUGUST

6-7 - Attacks of the British, Australians and New Zealanders on the Helles bridgehead. A considerable advance was made

7 - A divertive landing of the 9th British Corps on the Suvla gulf coast. The ridge "Rhododendron Spur " is captured by the New Zealanders

8 - The Wellington batalion of the New Zealanders captured the Chunuk Bair Hill. The troops landed on the Suvla bridgehead remained inactive

9 - The Gurkhs reached the pass between the Cue Hill and Chunuk Bair. The exhausted New Zealanders were withdrawn and replaced with fresh British troops

10 - The British troops were knocked out of Chunuk Bair by the Turks. The British troops at Suvla remained inactive because of incompetence of their commander Stampford

12 - The 5th the Norfolk battalion perished entirely in a fruitless attack on the Suvla bridgehead

15 - One more fruitless British attack on the Suvla bridgehead

20 - Italy declares war on Turkey

21 - The largest engagement of the Gallipoli battle began at the foothills of the Scimitar Mountain with the first attack on the Hill 60 on the Suvla bridgehead

27 - Resumption of fierce fighting for the Hill 60

28 - The New Zealanders consolidated their position on the Hill 60

SEPTEMBER

2 - The transport "Southland", transporting the 2nd British division, was torpedoed

25 - An agreement between Turkey and Bulgaria was concluded

30 - The 10th (Irish) division left the Suvla bridgehead for Saloniki

OCTOBER

3 - The 2nd French division left Gallipoli for Saloniki

5 - The Allies disembarked in Saloniki

- 8 - The first autumn storm renders serious damage to the ships and moorings of the Allies at the ANZAC and Suvla bridgeheads
- 9 - The Austro-German troops capture Belgrade
- 10 - Lord Kitchener queried from Hamilton - the commander of the Allied troops at Gallipoli - about probable losses during an evacuation. The answer figured it about 50%
- 12 - Hamilton advised that the evacuation might not be accepted.
- 14 - In the House of the Lords Lord Milner and Lord Ribblesdale demanded for the evacuation of the troops from Gallipoli
- 15 - Hamilton was withdrawn from the battlefield
- 20 - General Monroe was appointed as the commanding officer of the Allies in the Mediterranean
- 30 - General Monroe visited the battlefield for the first time

NOVEMBER

- 13 - Lord Kitchener arrived at the ANZAC bridgehead. Churchill submitted his note of resignation from the post of the First Lord of Admiralty
- 24 - A three-day armistice was declared
- 27-30 - "The Big Blizzard". As a result the Allies lost about 10 % of the troops as frostbitten

DECEMBER

- 7 - The British government ordered the evacuation of the Allied troops from Gallipoli
- 10-11 - All sick and wounded and all valuable equipment were evacuated
- 19-20 - Complete evacuation of all troops from the ANZAC and Suvla bridgeheads

JANUARY, 1916

- 9 - Complete evacuation of all troops from the Helles bridgehead. The Dardanelles operation ended with the defeat of the Allies.

Later the Turks recognized, that by the 19th of March, 1915 there had been no ammunition on their forts and if the landing had occurred then, their defeat would have been inevitable. But the history does not know alternatives. From 489,000 of the Allied soldiers and officers which took part in the battle, 252,000 were killed and wounded. Out of 500,000 their troops the Turks lost approximately one half killed, wounded and dead of illnesses. One of the initiators of landing, the First Lord of Admiralty Winston Churchill was compelled to resign from his post. This failure had left forever a dark spot on his reputation of a military leader.

Some young people who had participated in the battle later became famous: Clement Attlee, a 32-year old captain of the British army, later on a leader of the Labor party of Great Britain. In 1945 he defeated Churchill, who once had sent him into a battle, in the Parliament elections and became the Prime Minister of Great Britain; a New Zealander Bernard Freyberg, lieutenant-commander, later a noticeable figure in the history of WWII and a General-Governor of New Zealand; an Australian John Monash, the commander of the 4th Australian brigade, later became famous as a division, and then as a corps commander on the Western front (1915-1918). The future marshals of the WWII Britishers Slim, Harding and an Australian Blamey gained battle experience at Gallipoli. More than 150 Russian-born soldiers and officers participated in this battle in the ranks of the Australian army. Besides, many Russian Jews, amongst them - a hero of the Russo-Japanese war Joseph Trumpeldor, were there as well.

The defeat of the Allies seriously undermined the Russian war effort. In the summer of 1915 the Russian Army suffered several defeats and incurred huge losses. In many respects these failures were determined by insufficient material supply of the army, shortage of arms and ammunition. The success of the Gallipoli operation might have prevented it. The failure of the landing made the Allies look for an alternative sea route to Russia. There was a way around Scandinavia to the Northern Russian ports - Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. The problem was to some extent solved - largely through these ports Russia received about 25% of arms and military equipment, used by her during the WWI. However, the transportation of the cargoes delivered by sea went rather slowly, and by the moment of departure of the revolutionary Russia

from the war huge amount of ammunition and military equipment had accumulated in her northern ports. To no lesser extent, the re-orientation at the use of the Northern way resulted in the Allied landing in the Russian North in 1918-1919, what led many Australians to Russia in the ranks of the British forces (and again under an initiative of Mr. Churchill).

For the Russians the word "Gallipoli" has a special meaning. Much more often, than the landing of the Allies aimed to aid them, the Russians recollect another sad landing: in 1920 the remnants of the White army, which had suffered a defeat in the Civil war, landed on this coast.

The Gallipoli landing remained the largest battle landing on an enemy coast in the history of warfare till June 1944. As historians believe, the experience acquired by the British command in 1915 determined the success of the Allied landing in Normandy during the WWII.

The Gallipoli landing played an unforgettable role in the history of Australia. The legend telling that the Australians played the key role in this operation and showed extraordinary heroism was born here. Up to this day the Australians like to accuse the British command of the arrogant attitude towards the colonial soldiers, which had been ruthlessly thrown on the Turkish machine guns and been used as cannon fodder. The legend does not correspond the reality. The Australian losses (26111, incl. 8141 killed) made about 10% of the Allied losses, what is proportional to their share in the battle order. They fought really well, but not better or worse than the British, French, New Zealand or Indian troops, and on the first day of landing the British suffered losses considerably heavier, than the ANZACs. Moreover, the loss rate at Gallipoli was notably lower, than, say, on the Western front. Already soon after the end of the WWI an opinion was expressed in Australia, that the Gallipoli operation had delayed the dispatch of the Australian troops to France, where losses were incomparably higher, for one year. However, every nation needs legends. For rather a small Australian nation the Gallipoli battle had become the baptism of fire. Now the 25th of April is a national holiday - the ANZAC Day - some kind of birthday of the nation and day of memory of the compatriots who lost their lives in all wars.

From Gallipoli by Alan Moorehead. 1956