

BOOK REVIEWS

GALLIPOLI: THE END OF THE MYTH¹

REVIEWED BY LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BRIAN W. ROBINSON²

“Are there not alternatives than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders?”³

I. Introduction

In his latest book, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth*, Robin Prior⁴ adds an insightful, well-researched, and concise narrative to a robust library about one of the most storied campaigns of the Great War. Prior’s myth-busting target is the Gallipoli campaign and the notion that Gallipoli offered a potential turning point to the carnage on the Western Front. British leadership conceived of the Gallipoli adventure as a way to use comparatively limited naval and ground forces to accomplish four strategic objectives at low cost: knock Turkey out of the war by taking Constantinople, force Germany to divert resources away from the stalemate on the Western Front, relieve pressure on Russia, and bring fence-sitting Balkan states (most notably Greece and Bulgaria) into the war on the side of the Entente. Many historians have opined that these objectives and the overall plan to achieve them were sound but that a lack of attention to details, bad timing and poor execution tragically undermined the campaign.⁵

Prior challenges the premise that Gallipoli was “the great lost opportunity of the First World War.”⁶ In Prior’s view, Gallipoli offered no chance of achieving strategic success. Prior often revisits ground other historians have already traveled and devotes more of the book to collateral Gallipoli myths than to the question of Gallipoli’s strategic importance. Nevertheless, Prior largely succeeds in attacking this central myth of the Gallipoli campaign. In Prior’s analysis, even flawless execution of the plan would not have produced the great strategic results its architects had hoped to achieve. In debunking the idea that the Gallipoli campaign was a fundamentally sound plan that was wrecked by mismanagement, lack of initiative in the field, bad luck, and other misfortunes, Prior reminds us that the momentum of a bad idea often masks its lack of merit. That wisdom is as true today as it was in 1915.

II. Of Myths and Men: How British Leaders Conceived a Schizophrenic Plan

Prior presents Gallipoli as a case study in military planning gone awry and provides a cautionary tale for leaders. Gallipoli began as a concept with low risk and low cost, but the actual operation morphed into a massive sacrifice of men and machines that its planners never intended. Many historians attribute the concept of the Gallipoli campaign almost exclusively to the fertile mind of Winston Churchill,⁷ but while Prior acknowledges Churchill’s involvement, he lays responsibility for the failure of Gallipoli on the entire British War Council.⁸ Early in the war, Churchill presented three different schemes for

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³ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 10 (quoting an informal note from Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, to Herbert Henry Asquith, Prime Minister of Great Britain, advocating the use of the British Navy to engage the Central Powers in a new theater of war to relieve the stalemate on the Western Front).

⁴ Prior, a professor and fellow at the University of Adelaide and the Australian Defense Force Academy, is highly qualified to provide a new look at the Gallipoli campaign. As a professor of military history in Australia, Prior understands the Gallipoli campaign and the experience of the troops that fought there as few others can. Prior is particularly well-versed in the history of the Great War having co-authored two previous books about WWI: *PASSCHENDALE: THE UNTOLD STORY* (1996) and *THE SOMME* (2005).

⁵ See, e.g., JOHN KEEGAN, *THE FIRST WORLD WAR* 237 (1998) (noting that “the Fisher [First Sea Lord] plan might have worked, for the Turks were only slowly repairing and strengthening the Dardanelles defenses, had the War Council acted immediately . . .”); PHILIP J. HAYTHORNTHWAITE, *GALLIPOLI 1915*, at 9 (1991) (noting that the Gallipoli campaign is traditionally viewed as “the only truly innovative concept of the entire war”); ALAN MOOREHEAD, *GALLIPOLI* 363–65 (1956) (noting that Gallipoli was “the most imaginative conception of the war, and its potentialities were almost beyond reckoning.”); DAVID FROMKIN, *A PEACE TO END ALL PEACE: CREATING THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST 1914–1922*, at 166 (1989) (noting that “[o]n April 25, 1915, the Allies could have won an easy, bloodless victory . . . and, with it, the Middle Eastern war . . .”); G.S. PATTON, JR., LT. COL., *THE DEFENSE OF GALLIPOLI, A GENERAL STAFF STUDY* 62 (1936) (Patton noted, “Had this sound plan been executed with resolution and energy, it would had (*sic*) effected very far reaching results.”).

⁶ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

⁷ See, e.g., KEEGAN, *supra* note 5, at 236; MOORHEAD, *supra* note 5, at 45; HAYTHORNTHWAITE, *supra* note 5, at 8–9; FROMKIN, *supra* note 5, at 159.

⁸ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 237–38.

major naval operations, which eventually lead to the Gallipoli plan, but the War Council rejected most of Churchill's proposals as impractical, believing they carried unsavory ratios of risk to reward. Churchill's proposal for a naval action in the Dardanelles, however, lingered and eventually gathered momentum. The operation was designed to support a hoped-for attack by Greek forces on the Gallipoli Peninsula, and the idea became a seed the entire War Council nurtured. That seed grew rapidly and eventually produced disastrous fruit.

Prior suggests that late in 1914 and early 1915, military action against Turkey gradually gained support as an appealing alternative to the growing stalemate on the Western Front.⁹ Most notably, Russia appealed to the British to open a front against Turkey that would draw Turkish resources away from Russia's hard-pressed defense of the Caucasus.¹⁰ Two days later Churchill called a special meeting of the Admiralty War Group, and "the subject of operations against Turkey 'was brought forward by the First Lord [Churchill]' and thoroughly discussed."¹¹ Admiral Fisher had previously suggested that a fleet of older, pre-Dreadnaught battleships could "force the Dardanelles" if the Navy planned and executed the operation quickly.¹² Notably, the Fisher proposal did not contemplate the use of infantry to neutralize Turkish shore batteries.¹³

Fisher and other leaders began to view the battleship plan as a low-cost option.¹⁴ The Admiralty believed (foolishly, in Prior's view) that it could deliver Constantinople with a force of outdated warships that Britain could easily sacrifice to the effort. The Admiralty plan initially presumed that almost no ground troops would be needed for the campaign other than a small occupying force to keep the lights on and trains running in the Ottoman capital. The Admiralty believed Turkey, the "sick man of Europe"¹⁵ (and getting sicker by the day) would collapse at the sight of the British fleet, new allies (Greece, Bulgaria, Rumania and perhaps others) would come running to the Entente, and Russia could then re-direct her forces against Germany with arms and other support from Britain and France. What could go wrong?

These rosy assumptions are absurd, of course, but that is precisely Prior's point. These assumptions were equally absurd in 1915. Prior summarizes the folly of each of these predictions and criticizes the underlying assumptions to underscore his core argument—that no amount of tactical success at Gallipoli would have yielded a strategic victory.¹⁶ Apologists might forgive the War Council's reliance on these assumptions as an unfortunate example of out-of-the-box thinking,¹⁷ but Prior's assessment is not as charitable:

This was the War Council at its worst—unable to stick to a thorough discussion of any subject, discursive, rambling, incoherent . . . [N]ot surprisingly the War Council's conclusions reflected the discussion . . . [:] the 'Admiralty should . . . prepare for a naval expedition in February to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsula, with Constantinople as its objective.'¹⁸

⁹ *Id.* at 9–14.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 13; *see also* FROMKIN, *supra* note 5, at 128 (discussing the influence of the Russian plea on Kitchener, Churchill, and others); MOOREHEAD, *supra* note 5, at 35 (noting that the Russian plea "could not be ignored" and that Kitchener and Churchill considered the Dardanelles the only feasible theater for the attack that the Russians requested).

¹¹ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 14.

¹² *Id.* at 13. Vice Admiral Carden, the on-scene British Navy commander, verified that such a fleet might sustain heavy losses but could force its way into the Sea of Marmara. *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 16, 18; *see also* FROMKIN, *supra* note 5, at 130–34 (discussing the Admiralty War Council meeting on 3 January and Admiral Cardin's confirmation that the concept of a Navy-only action could succeed).

¹⁴ Indeed, Fisher had advocated scrapping the entire class of pre-Dreadnaughts only a month before. PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 13.

¹⁵ HAYTHORNTHWAITE, *supra* note 5, at 6.

¹⁶ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 7–11, 65–67, 249–52. For example, Prior points out the following: long held cultural and political animosity between many of the Balkan states made the contemplated "Balkan alliance" against Turkey and Germany a fantasy. The Balkan states showed, at best, a luke warm reaction to the campaign after it started. Greece had no trained troops for any serious move against Turkey or for a major contribution to any other Allied effort, making her possible entry into the Triple Entente inconsequential to the stalemate in France. The Allies had enough trouble keeping their own troops in France stocked with ammunition and supplies so there was no surplus of war materials to give to Russia even if Britain re-opened a route through the Black Sea. There was no available shipping to move Russian wheat to the West so the "arms for wheat" concept was never viable. The Turks manned and supplied batteries and constructed trenches and other defenses around Constantinople making it clear that Turkey planned to defend rather than abandon its capital. The evacuation of civilians and the movement of gold reserves and government documents from Constantinople were merely the same sort of precautions that the French took at Paris in 1914 and not evidence of an imminent collapse. *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.* at 30.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 19.

By early January 1915, the War Council had cast the die that would send men to their deaths by the tens of thousands over the next year.

As British leadership began to lose their collective nerve over the likely success of a purely naval operation, the plan was steadily revised and became more convoluted. The members of the War Council eventually persuaded themselves troops would be needed to take Turkish defenses along the Gallipoli Peninsula if the naval attack faltered.¹⁹ Even Lord Kitchener, who initially opposed committing any troops to the campaign, came around to the idea of the use of land forces. By mid-February, Kitchener determined he could use Australia and New Zealand (ANZAC) forces at Gallipoli after Turkish forces retreated from the Suez Canal. Kitchener later added the entire British 29th Division to the campaign. In the end, British leaders had shifted their support from a small occupying force to an attack force of between 80,000 and 130,000 troops in the span of a few weeks.²⁰

Prior offers a new and articulate summary of the curious steps that transformed the War Council's plan from a low-cost naval operation to a complex naval and amphibious assault the likes of which no military power had ever attempted. British leaders had misgivings about the plan, and Prior highlights the concerns they shared with each other in private correspondence.²¹ Prior's most powerful criticism derives from his description of the inability of admirals, generals, and politicians to stop what they had begun to suspect was a bad idea because the highest levels of leadership had already set the wheels of the campaign in motion. As Prior persuasively concludes:

[W]hat we can say with . . . certainty is that had the naval advice been of a higher caliber and identified all of the difficulties . . . and drawn them to the attention of the Admiralty War Group, it is a reasonable proposition that the operation would have met the same fate as Borkum, the Baltic and other Churchillian schemes. After all, trenchant criticism from admirals such as Jellicoe had stopped those adventures in their tracks. It is therefore probable that had good naval advice been tendered there might have been no naval attack at the Dardanelles and no land campaign at Gallipoli.²²

In Prior's analysis of Gallipoli, the lack of thoughtful naval advice was another great tragedy of the campaign. Those that knew or should have known that the plan was doomed kept mum—or at least did not voice sufficiently strong objections to obvious flaws in the plan—and the Gallipoli juggernaut proceeded to its inevitable end.

III. The Naval Campaign

Prior also analyzes Britain's aborted attempt to force the Dardanelles. Most historians contend that the British Navy stopped just short of victory in mid-March 1915.²³ The conventional view suggests that the British fleet could have fought its way into the Sea of Marmara with one last push through the Dardanelles because the Turks were nearly out of ammunition.²⁴ Prior completely debunks this myth with two lines of attack. First, Prior provides an exhaustive analysis of the minimal damage that British warships inflicted on Turkish artillery.²⁵ Second, Prior estimates that the heavy Turkish guns defending the straight were equipped with fifty-five shells per battery and that the lighter guns had between seventy and

¹⁹ Prior persuasively points out that even a complete success on the European side of the Dardanelles, in which British troops rendered every Turkish gun on the Gallipoli Peninsula impotent, would have done nothing to silence the 111 high caliber guns located along the Asiatic side of the straight. *Id.* at 31–32. The official British inquiry into the Gallipoli campaign addressed this, but Prior uses the obvious oversight as another example of the planners' willing ignorance of the perils of the operation.

²⁰ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 23–25, 27–29, 33–34, 60–62, 66–71.

²¹ In particular, Prior sheds light on Admiral Fisher's subtle attempts to undermine the scheme through other senior leaders of the Navy and Admiralty and Fisher's apparent unwillingness to confront Churchill head-on. *Id.* at 23–27.

²² *Id.* at 43.

²³ See KEEGAN, *supra* note 5, at 239–40; FROMKIN, *supra* note 5, at 154.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 39–59. Prior confirms that the poor results were the result of a number of factors: the older pre-Dreadnaughts that made up the bulk of the fleet had aged and inaccurate guns; even the best naval gunfire from modern Dreadnaughts was typically ineffective against fixed fortifications and earthworks; the flatter trajectories of naval gunfire made it extremely difficult to destroy or damage the Turkish guns; and the extremely strong currents in the Dardanelles further decreased the accuracy of the British naval guns. Using the same methodology that an official British inquiry into Gallipoli used, Prior calculates that the British fleet would have hit the Turkish guns it targeted with only 3% of the shells it fired.

two-hundred and fifty shells per gun;²⁶ therefore, the Turkish batteries had sufficient ammunition to defend against at least two more British attacks. Moreover, Prior argues that the real threat to the British fleet was the extensive series of mines in the Dardanelles.²⁷ From the beginning of the naval operation through 18 March 1915, the mines had sunk one-third of the British fleet and severely damaged another third. Like other historians, Prior concludes the Admiralty's decision to use fishing trawlers, with civilian crews, for minesweeping in the Dardanelles was a farce. The trawlers could barely make headway against the strong currents in the straight and were completely ineffective. Most significantly, Prior argues that Britain's heavy losses in the first attack left the fleet with no ship capable of confronting the battleship *Goeben* that Germany had given to Turkey at the beginning of the war. Based on this evidence, Prior makes a strong case that another British naval attack would likely have been as disastrous as the attack on 18 March.

IV. "Never Get Involved In A Land War In Asia [Minor]"²⁸

Prior's analysis of the campaign includes an examination of the infantry action on the Gallipoli Peninsula, from the initial landings at Helles and ANZAC cove on 25 April 1915 to the comparatively well-orchestrated evacuation of the troops in early January 1916. The book vividly describes the land operation, including the numerous attacks and repulses, the difficult terrain (which offered extraordinary defensive positions to the Turks), and the appalling loss of life on both sides, particularly during the repeated British attacks on the Turkish lines south of Krithia that mirrored the suicidal assaults on the Western Front.²⁹ Prior tells the story of the land campaign well, but he does not break much new ground in reviewing the chronology of the operation. On the other hand, Prior does convincingly challenge two additional myths about the infantry assault: that the ANZACs could have opened a road to Constantinople if they had seized and held the Sari Bair ridge and that successful landings and advances at Sulva Bay in August 1915 could have won the entire campaign.

Prior makes quick work of the myth that the ANZACs were "within an ace of success" at Sari Bair.³⁰ Prior points out that the combination of Sari Bair's topography and the strong Turkish positions on the ridge would have made holding the ridge for long completely untenable for any assault force. The Turks could have ripped any attacking unit that managed to seize Sari Bair to pieces from other defensive positions.³¹ Attacking, seizing, and holding the entire ridge line would have been equally impractical because it would have taken the whole force at ANZAC Cove to attempt it.³² Finally, even if the ANZACs had accomplished the impossible, there were no reserves available to follow up on the success, and the British remained completely bogged down at Helles. Thus, even a tactical success at Sari Bair would not have opened a road to a larger strategic victory.

The badly coordinated attacks that followed the British landing at Sulva Bay have also been criticized as a low-point in the Gallipoli fiasco. Prior agrees, but offers a fresh perspective. Prior explains that the Sulva Bay operation was supposed to establish a supply base for all forces north of Helles and ANZAC Cove.³³ Criticism of the Sulva Bay operation, Prior persuasively argues, amounts to an objection that the landings did not produce a victory they were never intended to produce. Moreover, Prior correctly points out that while the British attempts to take the Anafarta ridge above the bay were suicidal and badly planned, none of the strategic objectives of the campaign lay beyond that ridge.³⁴ Accordingly, a victory at Sulva Bay, like Sari Bair, would not have opened the expected road to Constantinople.

²⁶ *Id.* at 57–58. This estimate contradicts evidence from reports of the Turkish General Staff that came to light after the war, suggesting that the Turks were critically short of artillery shells after the first naval attack. See KEEGAN, *supra* note 5, at 239–40; FROMKIN, *supra* note 5, at 154. Prior cites his own analysis of Winston Churchill's *The World Crisis* in support of his calculation. This is disappointing. The question of how much ammunition the Turks had available after 18 March 1915 has been a key Gallipoli discussion point almost since the troops evacuated the peninsula. Prior should have reiterated or more fully summarized the basis for his calculation of Turkish artillery reserves to support his point.

²⁷ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 36, 41–42, 58; see also WEST POINT ATLAS FOR THE GREAT WAR 44 (Thomas E. Greiss ed., 2003) (depicting location of eleven separate mine belts in the Dardanelles).

²⁸ THE PRINCESS BRIDE (20th Century Fox 1987).

²⁹ PRIOR, *supra* note 1, at 72–81 (difficulties of terrain and Turkish dispositions), 133–42; 149–59 (losses and failures of attacks at Krithia and the southern end of the peninsula).

³⁰ *Id.* at 185.

³¹ *Id.* at 181–88.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 190–93.

³⁴ *Id.* at 204–09.

V. Conclusion

Prior provides a remarkably thorough discussion of the Gallipoli campaign in a concise narrative. The book puts a bright spotlight on the British War Council's collective mismanagement and its haphazard and negligent planning of the ill-fated attack. Prior also brings many facts to light that debunk much of the conventional wisdom about the naval action in the straights and the hard fighting on the peninsula. In doing so, Prior delivers on his promise to dispel many of the Gallipoli myths that have perpetuated the notion that the campaign might have succeeded with only a bit more effort or a bit more luck. His discussions of the naval and land operations are fascinating, but they are collateral to Prior's main target, the really *big* myth about Gallipoli: that success on the peninsula would have guaranteed the capture of Constantinople and a separate peace with Turkey, which, in turn, would have shortened the war on the Western Front. Although the book spends fewer rounds on this main target than on the many collateral myths it attacks, Prior still persuasively debunks the belief that Gallipoli could have produced any significant strategic result.

Prior's detailed chronicle of the defalcations of the British War Council should also resonate with judge advocates struggling to provide legal counsel that may be perceived as the laying of legal minefields in the paths of operational commanders. As lawyers and officers, judge advocates are rightly encouraged to help commanders "get to yes," but Prior reminds us that there are times when getting to "yes" is an invitation to disaster. At such times, offering sound counsel to halt the momentum of a bad idea may be the best service a lawyer can provide. Prior's fresh view of a well-studied campaign highlights one such bad idea and is certain to inspire additional scholarship.