

RECOGNISING THE OTHER: IDENTITIES IN CONFLICT AT GALLIPOLI

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Abstract: Besides its political, diplomatic and military consequences, the Gallipoli war also brought different national and cultural identities into confrontation. In other words, as can be clearly seen from memoirs, diaries and letters of the Turkish and allied soldiers, each side othered the other side and with rooted prejudice, antagonism, and cultural solipsism, ignored to recognize each other's real identity. Especially the British and Anzac soldiers depicted the Turkish identity in their writings in the traditional antagonistic manner. Also, some oriental colouring was added to the representation of the Turkish identity. However, in time, as a result of the cultural experiences shared on the battlefield, this prejudice was turned into not only mutual respect to each other but also respect to their own nation by the Anzacs. So, the purpose of this article is to discuss and demonstrate, on the basis of memoirs, diaries and letters as primary material, how the war at Gallipoli was also metaphorically a war of identities, especially between the Turkish and Anzac soldiers.

Key words: Antogonism, East, Turks, Anzacs, The Gallipoli war, identities in conflict.

Ötekini Tanımak: Çanakkale Savaşı'nda Kimlik Çatışmaları

Özet: Politik, diplomatik ve askeri sonuçlarına rağmen Çanakkale Savaşı farklı ulusal ve kültürel kimlikleri de karşı karşıya getirdi. Diğer bir deyişle, Türk ve müttefik askerlerin hatıratlarından, günlüklerinden ve mektuplarından da anlaşılabilceği gibi, her bir taraf diğer bir tarafı ötekileştirmiş ve kemikleşmiş bir ön yargı, düşmanlık ve kültürel tekbencilikle birbirlerinin kimliklerini tanımayı reddetmişlerdir. Özellikle İngiliz ve Anzak askerler, Türk kimliğini, Çanakkale Savaşı öncesinde kendi geleneksel düşmanlık tutumlarıyla tasvir etmişlerdir. Üstelik Türk kimliğinin temsiline biraz da doğuya özgü renkler yüklemişlerdir. Ancak, savaş sonrasında özellikle Anzak askerlerinin Türk askerlerine besledikleri bu önyargılı düşünce ve tutumları değişmiştir. Bu yüzden bu çalışmanın amacı, hatıratları, günlükleri ve mektupları ana kaynaklar olarak baz alarak Çanakkale Savaşı'nın mecazi anlamda nasıl bir kimlik savaşı olduğunu ele almak ve açıklamaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Düşmanlık, Doğu, Türkler, Anzaklar, Çanakkale Savaşı, çatışan kimlikler.

Recognising the Other: Identities in Conflict at Gallipoli¹

Besides its political, diplomatic and military consequences, the Gallipoli war also brought different national and cultural identities into confrontation. In other words, as can be clearly seen from memoirs, diaries and letters of the Turkish and allied soldiers, each side othered the other side and, with rooted prejudice, antagonism, and cultural solipsism, ignored to recognize each other's identity. The British and Anzac soldiers depicted the Turkish identity in their writings in the traditional antagonistic manner. Also, the Turkish identity was misrepresented by the Anzacs who were highly affected by the concept of orient of the Western perspective. However, in time, as a result of the cultural experiences shared on the battlefield, this prejudice was turned by the Anzacs into not only mutual respect to each other but also the respect to their own nation. So, the purpose of this article is to discuss and demonstrate, on the basis of memoirs, diaries and letters as primary material, how the war at Gallipoli was also metaphorically a war of identities, especially between Turkish and Anzac soldiers.

Contrary to the general belief, as Kevin Forster has clearly pointed out, "the 1915 Gallipoli battles have ... been the major factor in fostering closer ties of friendship between Anzacs, New Zealanders and Turks both national and local levels over the past decade" (Forster, 2003, p. 12). It is paradoxically true that, out of very severe bloody battles, the Turks and the Anzacs managed to bury their enmities and construct an unforgettable bond between themselves. The major factor that should not be forgotten here is the condition of the Anzacs who were brought to Gallipoli with the hope of becoming a part of the British Empire.

In fact, for the British, French, Canadians, Indians and Germans, the Gallipoli war "[was ...] one of a long tragic list of World War I battles, but for the Turks, Australians and New Zealanders, Gallipoli has been something apart- a significant event in the self-development of their individual nations"(Lawrence, 1983, p. 7). Australians and New Zealanders really recognised the meaning of defending a country. Their great amount of losses and their own experiences at

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Gallipoli made them aware of not only of their own national identities but also of the Turkish national identity. It was these experiences which led them to give up their traditional antagonistic and solipsist manners. What was their loss in these wars?

Throughout 1915, Ottoman and German troops turned back repeated sea and land assaults from British, French, Indian, Newfoundland, Australian and New Zealand forces. In all, nearly a million men fought there. The battlefields were tiny, the casualties enormous. The Ottomans threw almost half a million men into the battle, of whom 250 000 became casualties. Although no accurate records available, 86 000 Ottoman troops died there. The German contingent was very small and lost few men. British and Indian casualties totalled almost 120 000; ... Australia's wounded numbered 27 700, of whom 8700 were killed, while the New Zealanders lost 7521 men (2701 killed). It seems almost incomprehensible that such casualties could be sustained in this small area. Almost 50 000 Australians subsequently died on the Western Front... The Ottomans, by comparison, suffered more casualties than in any other campaign of the war (Macleod, 2004, p. 6).

The Anzacs were sent to Gallipoli without being aware of the realities of their campaign and against whom they were going to fight. Just before the war, their troops were trained in Egypt by the British Imperial forces for a short time and there they were "warned" against the Turks who were described as "a cruel and ignorant race ... [They were] one of the most fanatical of the Mohammedan races, the ferocity of the unspeakable Turk in gaining converts being unsurpassed by any other race" (Koebner, 1965, p. 125). It was not long before the local papers were reprinting stories of "[Turkish] and German alleged barbarity, bayoneting babies, raping and killing women, severing prisoner's hands and host of similar fabrication" (Kerr, 1998, p. 53). Largely in response to these stories, many Australians instantly turned against anyone around them German and Turk in origin.

The British Imperial Force in Egypt trained 20 000 Australians and 8 000 New Zealanders troops and corps whose names were, soon abbreviated as the Anzac, and who had expected to be shipped directly to Europe and there join other British armies on the Western Front in the World War I (Macleod, 2004, p. 88). But, by the British authorities, the diversion of the convoy to Egypt and then to Gallipoli made the Anzacs disappointed as, for many critics, "they might not get their chance to win fame and glory on the battlefields" (Murray, 1965, p. 40). On the other hand, Australia and New Zealand were members of the British Empire and maintained economic, social and cultural close links with the mother country. The other reason why the Anzacs were on the side of the British Empire was that Australia had gained the status of nation in 1901 when the six colonies combined to form the Commonwealth of Australia. In many

respects, this political independence was a “misnomer” (Magdoff, 1978, p. 67) since many Australians, especially the wealthy ones, heavily relied on Britain as their mentor and chief source of inspiration as they were looking for their financial benefits. Since at this core British imperialism was a vigorous practise of capitalism, it evolved from its beginnings during the rise of free trade in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries into a hegemonic and economic system that flourished in proportion to its expansion on a worldwide scale (Owen, 1972, p. 52). This might have been another reason why Britain’s trials and triumphs were seen as theirs by the Anzacs. Thus, it was not surprising to observe that the Australian colonies had quickly despatched military contingents to fight for Britain’s wars. Ten thousand men were enlisted in Sydney in a week to attend the army for the World War I on the side of Britain. “Great wars were rare, and short, and many eagerly seized a fleeting opportunity” commented Australian historian (E.M. Andrews, 1993, p. 217). Those who were accepted considered themselves lucky. War was glamorous, soldiering was romantic and death was glorious. Their prejudiced and antagonistic attitude towards the so called barbaric Turks changed its phase during the Gallipoli war. The more the Anzacs fought against the Turks and had experience with them and shared the same atmosphere, the more they realized how they had been unfairly prejudiced against the Turks. Later on, after the war, they began to regard Gallipoli as the war that made the Anzacs and Turks friends. In the Australian veterans’ letters, this issue was indicated as follows:

Contrary to all negative propogandas and promptings that had been made, we understood by our experiences in the events how Turkish soldiers were gallant warriors (Karatay, 1987, p. 104) (author’s translation).

Similarly, the same issue was written even with similar words in another veteran’s letter:

We understood by our experiences in the events how Turkish soldiers were gallant warriors, contrary to all negative propogandas and promptings that had been made while we were going to Gallipoli, about how badly Turkish soldiers might treat us (Sezen, 2008, p. 115) (author’s translation).

What were these experiences which made the Anzacs change their antagonism and cultural solipsism, and recognize the Turkish identity that they earlier considered as the other. As it can be understood from the Australian veterans’ letters, the answer is simple in fact. It was the humane values of the Turkish soldiers. As indicated in another veteran’s letter:

One of the situations that affected us most is that the gentlemanliness of the Turkish soldiers ... Turkish artillerist, when there was a possibility that the artillery shooting will harm our hospital ship, always ceased fire ... Our hospital ship that was anchored offshore of the Anzac Bay was

protected carefully by the Turkish artillerists. From time to time when our battle ship got near to our hospital ship, the artillerists would cease the fire in order not to harm the ship with a Red Cross symbol on it... These and suchlike events immediately awakened respect and sympathy among every other member of our unit (qtd in Kerr, 1998, pp. 99-100).

The Anzacs realized the fact that what was written in history books and what was enforced on them about the Turks was far short of representing the truth. Admiration and respect gradually replaced hatred and enmity. In spite of heavy fightings and many devastating battles, there was born a mutual respect and love between the Anzacs and the Turks. It is also reflected in a diary of an Anzac soldier.

I set to work in the light of a torch I have found in the bag of a wounded officer. In the meantime, a Turkish soldier, who was wounded at his knee just like me approached me. He tried to convey that he wanted to cooperate. We immediately took action. We started to cover the wounds with the bandages we can find together and to drop the water that is left in the flasks into the dried mouths of the ones who were in the death agony... That lasted pretty long. In the end both my friend and I became weary. Before I collapsed there I had to drag myself to the bandage place. Two enemy friends left after having shaken each other's hands... (qtd in Kerr, 1998, p. 90).

When the Anzacs recognized the humanity of the “so-called barbaric” Turks, they understood the fallacies fabricated (for them) through the British imperial ideology which generally ignored, devalued and humiliated the colonized. The humanity of the Turkish soldiers was also emphasized in a memoir of an Australian soldier:

During our period of being comrade in arms for years, I didn't see any cruelty towards the ones who came to kill themselves and to take their lands. They carried the wounded enemy soldiers on their backs to the battlements and they tended them, if they couldn't find gauze bandage they would tear their shirts which has no other substitute to tend them (Thomson, 1995, p. 89).

The Anzacs were surprised, shocked and ashamed to some extent, because they really became aware of the fact that Turks were defending their own land and nation bravely and resolutely despite all the difficulties. For the Anzacs what made the Turks powerful was neither their financial nor military power but their faith in their mission to defend themselves and their country. The Australian soldier wrote that “what I understood in time was that we fought against a gallant and a brave nation who defended its country against the invasion of the enemy in Gallipoli resolutely ... It is impossible to find an equal to Turkish

soldiers especially in battles in the world” (Sezen, 2008, p. 93) (author’s translation). Another veteran described the courage of the Turks in these terms:

They would sleep on the stones, in spite of the sun, storms, cold and rain, they spend their days in the dust and mud in the unsheltered battlements but they would fight with their enemies, who had every facilities in the world, with a lion’s heart. What a humble and calm patriotism was that ... There is no other soldier in Europe comparable to Turkish soldiers in defence in Gallipoli. If the troops there, which had great losses with our fires from ships, weren’t the Turks they couldn’t stay where they are and would have been changed immediately. However Turks never left the battlements all along the war (Thomson, 1995, p. 22).

The Anzacs appreciated the self- sacrifice, the firmness, and the bravery of the Turkish troops and the determination of the Turkish soldiers and the chief commander, Mustafa Kemal. The change of heart was induced partly by the need to explain why the allies had not been able to defeat the Turks as quickly or as easily as had been expected. From the letters and diaries of the Anzac soldiers it was understood that the Turks were “a determined, resourceful fighting force” (Kerr, 1998, p. 79). An Ottoman general proudly reported in a letter to his father that: “The allies are astonished at the bravery and self-sacrifice of our soldiers” (qtd in Eşref, 2010, p. 39) (author’s translation). An Anzac soldier also commented on the same point stating that “the Turkish soldiers were determined not to accept the authority of the superiors. They followed the leader unconditionally and ahead into the enemy” (qtd in Eşref, 2010, p. 40). In the memoirs of the Anzacs, a very interesting remark was made as follows:

We observed the courage they showed and their beliefs of “either victory or death” during the war with admiration... Being sure of expressing the ideas and thoughts of most of us, I want to state that we desired by heart that the Turks weren’t fighting against us but beside us (Murray, 1965, pp. 89-100).

The Allies were really most impressed by the high sense of honour and virtue, boundless bravery, humanity and loyalty, outstanding patriotism of the Turkish soldiers, and they recognized the value and meaning of all those qualities for the Turks. It was specified in a letter of an Anzac veteran:

With the cries of “Allah – Allah” and with the power of faith in their brave hearts they attacked on the bayonets in such a way that no one in the British history might have showed more bravery than them ... They attacked on the assailer crying out loud the name of “Allah”... I couldn’t encounter any equal to the courage and humanity of the Turkish soldiers (qtd in Kerr, 1998, pp. 23-22).

The Turkish soldiers were ready to obey the command of their leader, Mustafa Kemal. That is “to defend their country to death”. Their loyalty and dedication to their country and commander can be traced in their memoirs as well.

We are firing from our local in Arburnu. I pulled the trigger of the rifle but it didn't fire. I thought 'Probably, the rifle is faulty'. I turned to my friend next to me 'Look! I think my rifle is broken, it doesn't fire'. He looked at it and when he said turning to me 'It is not broken, your finger is gone, and that's why it doesn't fire'. I suddenly looked at my finger and it was bleeding. Only then I began to feel the pain (Sezen, 2008, p. 126) (author's translation).

This incident shows that, for the Turkish soldiers, not only their fingers, but even their lives were of no importance in the defense of their country. That's why all the soldiers are called as “Mehmetçik” which shows that they are one and same and ready to die to save their country.

In the memoir of another Mehmetçik, this sacrifice was illustrated in a very emotional, touchy but at the same time in a realistic manner. He wrote:

One night, I was walking about the stream bed of Karayürek River. I was very thirsty. The river was flashing. I filled my flask; however, when I drank a sip of water, I thought that its taste was different. When the moon got rid of the shade of the cloud, I took some water in my hand and then I realized it was the blood with which I filled my flask with (Tezcan, 2007, p. 41) (author's translation).

The common point shared between the Anzacs and the Mehmetçik was that it was impossible to describe the bloody battles in Gallipoli. It was also undeniable that both sides suffered very heavy losses. From this agony, they managed to construct a mutual friendship between themselves. On the battle field, during the ceasefire, paradoxically enough, they helped each other and even exchanged cigarettes, water, and sanitary goods. An Anzac soldier wrote:

Five days after this bloody battle, a period of ceasefire took place between the sides. In the hours we tried to bury the corpses, we have found an opportunity to be in touch with wounded enemy soldiers... While I was going to the bandage place, to the back, I saw that the battlement we had just passed over was full of dead bodies and wounded soldiers. The situation of the majority of the wounded was serious. I forgot about my wound and pain. I wanted to help those people. It was of no importance if they are from our side or not anymore ... There happened to be times when we exchanged food and cigarette with them (qtd in Kerr, 1998, pp. 90-88).

This extract shows both sides were respectful to each other. They were not the enemies who tried to destroy each others but mutual comrades. The Anzacs attributed a name to the Mehmetçiks suitable to their own culture and called

them as “Johnny Turk” (Murray, 1965, p. 85) to show their sympathy towards them. This may also indicate that the Anzacs, leaving aside their antagonistic and solipsistic manner, began to appreciate the patriotic soul of the Turkish soldiers. A veteran explained in his diary why they called the Turks as Johnny Turk. “We were addressing them as “Johnny Turk” sincerely ... “Johnny Turk” was loved for being a perfect soldier as well as being honest and noble. We agreed that no other army could defend its country better than the Turkish soldiers” (qtd. in Murray, 1965, pp. 90-84). They developed great respect to the enemy they faced at in Gallipoli. Moreover, this emotion which deepened in time turned into a mutual friendship. As it can be observed in the letters and memoirs, while the Anzacs were leaving Gallipoli having lost the war, they were not really sorry for having failed in their campaign and not to having the honour of victory, -but they were happy to have an endless friendship with the Turks as they indicated in their letters:

We left that peninsula with the admiration we felt towards gallant Turkish soldiers. I want to indicate that you are the offspring of a nation who is as brave as is humane and civilized... if our troops were allies, there would happen to be the most powerful war power of the world. And surely, today's map of Europe would have a different composition ... I can say depending on what I have seen in Gallipoli that Turkish soldiers and Anzac soldiers are the most superior soldiers in the world ... We didn't ever nurse a grudge and hatred towards Turkish soldiers whom we met in Gallipoli in blood and smoke (Forster, 2003, pp. 84-88-102).

As it can be understood from all those letters, it would not be wrong to state as a conclusion that, after Gallipoli, generations of Australians “perceived the Turks as determined people” (Forster, 2003, p. 67) and learned many things from these experiences, changed their antagonistic attitude toward the Turks and gained their independence and be a nation. As an Australian veteran indicated “we, old generation, evaluated the Gallipoli War as a great event which shows Australia is not a colony anymore but a country, a nation that is bound to be strengthening in the future” (Koebner, 1965, p. 105). So, to justify and substantiate this perception, the impact of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's immortal speech, which was delivered on the Anzac Day in 1934, on the Australians and New Zealanders is undeniable:

Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives! You are now living in the soil of a friendly country, therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehments to us where they lie side by side, here in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent their sons from faraway 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 (Forster, 2003, p. 79).

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