

# Empire vs Nation, Despair vs Hope at Gallipoli <sup>1</sup>

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HALİL BERKTAY \*



Why does Gallipoli loom so large in Turkey's both social (*i.e. from below*) and national (*i.e. more official, or from the top down*) memory? First, because it is by far the single biggest war, front, campaign, expedition or indeed fused mega-battle in modern Turkish or for that matter Ottoman history. Over eight and a half months (25 April 1915 to 8/9 January 1916) of fighting on land, its total casualty figure of 251,000 outnumbers the corresponding total of 40,000 for the three-plus years (1919–22)

of the National Struggle by 6:1, while its death toll is even greater in comparison -- 85–86,000 vs around 9200, which is higher than a disparity of 9:1.

In short, an entire generation was lost at Gallipoli, as reflected in some of the most painful folk songs to come out of the Great War. At the same time, among all the various Ottoman fronts of 1914–18, it most embodied the idea and spirit of national self-defence; after all, it was not so remote as Caucasia, Mesopotamia, Iran or the Suez Canal, but right here on the doorstep of Istanbul. Hence, too, it was one of the last wars fought to maintain an obsolete and defunct empire, and simultaneously one of the first wars marking the rise of a new Turkey. An old content was dying; a new content was being born. But even more crucially, it was the first victory in a long series of defeats stretching all the way back to the rout outside Vienna in 1683. Much closer to home, they had lost catastrophically against Russia in 1877–78, against Italy in 1911, against four small Balkan states in 1912–13, and then again in both the east (*Sankamış*) and the south (*Egypt*) in 1914. It was as a bright and unexpected ray of hope in the mi-

dst of all this gloom, this unending retreat that Gallipoli suddenly appeared in 1915. It was, moreover, a victory against not just anybody, but two Great Powers whose combined fleets launched against the Dardanelles stood as the very embodiment of that civilization of steam and steel brought forth by the Industrial Revolution which seemed to have left Turkey sadly behind. Hence when they were repulsed on 18th March 1915, this was virtually like a Turkish Tsushima (*the Japanese naval victory over the Russian fleet back in 1905*). Or it was once more like David slaying Goliath -- and without the morale and self-confidence it provided, without the sense that yes, we can do it, who knows whether that last magnificent "Independence or Death" gamble of 1919 might have been undertaken with such panache?

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1- This is a brief summary of the opening and closing sections of a 103rd anniversary talk I gave at Ibn Haldun University on 19th March 2018.

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\* Head of the Department of History at Ibn Haldun University