

A valuable and compelling antiwar film

By Richard Phillips
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Gallipoli: The Front Line Experience, written and directed by Tolga Örnek

The 1915 military assault by British, French, Australian and New Zealand forces on Gallipoli in Turkey was probably one of the most tragic and ill-conceived campaigns fought by the Allied Forces during World War I. Championed by Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, the attack, which was aimed at securing control of the Dardanelles and the Turkish capital Istanbul, was a devastating defeat for the Allied Forces.

The nine-month campaign resulted in the death of more than 130,000 troops. This included the loss of more than 85,000 Turkish soldiers, 21,000 British, 10,000 French, 8,700 Australians, 2,700 New Zealanders and 1,370 Indians, and a total of more than 250,000 wounded.

While these events have been the subject of several films, including Peter Weirs' well-known 1981 feature *Gallipoli*, starring Mel Gibson and Mark Lee, a recently released two-hour documentary by Turkish director Tolga Örnek and narrated by Sam Neill and Jeremy Irons is probably the most intelligent and deeply affecting of all these works.

Like most contemporary war documentaries, Örnek's movie—*Gallipoli: The Front Line Experience*—uses archival photos and film footage, as well as aerial photography and dramatisations to provide a detailed account of the military campaign. But Örnek's use of the letters and diaries of 10 soldiers—British, Australian, New Zealand and Turkish—selected from scores discovered by his research team gives it an extraordinary human dimension and immediacy.

Örnek told one interviewer that as soon as he started reading the correspondence of the Gallipoli soldiers, the event “stopped being about numbers and dates” and that “the horrors of war; how it destroyed lives, families and how it did this with indifference to race, religion, nationality or the motivation for being there, became clearer to me.”

“Slowly these sentiments,” he said, “began to transform the film. And what started out as a war documentary based on personal accounts became a strong antiwar project warning us about the perils of war”.

The British-led attack on the Dardanelles, the narrow and strategic sea-lane near Istanbul separating the Aegean and Black Seas, was aimed at assisting London's ally Czarist Russia, then in combat with Turkish forces and the German

military.

This grand plan, however, involved no serious estimation of Turkey's military strength or the determination of its soldiers and figures such as Gallipoli military commander Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, founder and president of the Turkish republic, to defend their homeland.

British leaders such as Churchill arrogantly believed that a display of superior naval firepower would induce panic amongst Turkish soldiers and the Ottoman Empire, then allied with Germany, would be quickly knocked out of the war, allowing Britain and France free rein in the Middle East.

As Robin Prior, one of several historians interviewed in the film, explained, according to this theory “the Turkish government will be so impressed, the Turkish people so overawed by our squadron of British battleships that they will immediately throw up their hands and surrender.”

The first major attack on the Dardanelles in March 1915 involved a combined British and French naval bombardment of the defending Turkish forts. But there was no grand victory. In fact, the operation was a total failure, with three of the sixteen ships involved sunk, three seriously damaged by mines and 700 sailors killed.

Churchill insisted, however, that Turkish firepower had been badly affected by the naval bombardment and ordered a British-led land assault on Gallipoli. British, French and Indian troops, together with Australian and New Zealand soldiers (known as Anzacs) temporarily stationed in Egypt on their way to Europe's Western Front, were mobilised for the attack.

Churchill's plan was a disaster. The Turkish military had more than three weeks to prepare and was ready when Allied forces landed at beaches along the peninsula in the early hours of April 25.

They faced a massive artillery barrage and thousands were killed, with many soldiers unable to leave their landing craft, or drowning before reaching land. British troops suffered the highest casualties, including 1,000 killed at one beach in the first 12 hours. Although the Allied troops were able to press inland in some places, at no stage were they able to dislodge the Turkish defenders from the peninsula's commanding heights.

Trench warfare soon began in earnest with frontline positions in some places only five metres apart. This was the first experience of serious industrial warfare for Turkish and Anzac

soldiers and the casualty rates were extreme, with more than 10,000 soldiers killed on each side in the first ten days. Such was the slaughter that in one area, the size of tennis court, there were more than 600 dead—a veritable carpet of bodies.

On May 24, a month after the assault had begun, an eight-hour armistice was called to allow the dead to be buried. Many bodies were dug into the trench walls, the smell of death a permanent feature of soldiers' horrifying existence. As soon as the corpses were recovered the fighting resumed.

It is difficult to adequately describe the harvest of death and suffering, but Gallipoli was without question a hell on earth.

As one letter cited in the film from Turkish soldier Ahmet Mucip comments: "I have no idea when the sun crossed over to the west today. Darkness fell over the sea and the whole area. Hundreds of British boys were lying on our land never to open their eyes again. These boys with clean-shaven faces and endearing faces were curled up in their bloodstained uniforms. The sight aroused in us feelings of both revenge and compassion."

British Lieutenant Colonel and doctor Percival Fenwick commented in one of his letters that life "under the constant shadow of death" had become "savagely simple". Letters from rank and file British soldier Guy Nightingale, initially an enthusiastic supporter of the attack, chart his increasing hostility to the bloody campaign. As he angrily declares in one of his letters: "Live and let live, and Turkey for the Turks".

A New Zealand soldier, one of many who had begun with some naive confidence in the assault, writes to his family that he had become so physically and psychologically exhausted from fighting that he "wished for a bullet".

Perhaps the most moving letter is from a Turkish soldier to his parents. Knowing that he is likely to die the next day, he begs them to make sure his wife and children are properly cared for in his absence. Another heartbreaking letter is from a British soldier who came across the torn backpack of a dead Australian soldier. Lying there amongst all the horror and destruction are two pale-blue baby shoes and a woman's silk gloves—obviously the dead young man's most treasured possessions.

As well as those killed by artillery and hand-to-hand combat, thousands died from infection, enteric fever, dysentery, diarrhea and various fly-borne diseases. Others were burnt to death in out-of-control scrub fires and some were drowned in sewage. An estimated 20,000 Turkish soldiers died from poor food and disease.

When heavy storms hit the area on November 27 and lasted for three days, scores of soldiers were drowned in their trenches. A few days later a freezing blizzard hit the area, killing hundreds more from exposure. According to the Örnek's documentary, 16,000 allied soldiers had to be evacuated with frostbite.

Having failed to make any real gains after months of fighting, including a desperate but failed offensive in August, the

British-led high command finally decided to withdraw from the peninsula in late 1915.

While British authorities tried to downplay the disaster, British military commander Ian Hamilton was removed from his position just before the final evacuation and Churchill, who became known as "the butcher of Gallipoli," was forced to quit his ministerial position in disgrace.

In Australia, under conditions of widespread hostility to the war and military conscription, the government and the local ruling elite attempted to proclaim the criminal waste of human life at Gallipoli a necessary and noble "baptism of fire" for the young Australian nation. Instead of dwelling on the military defeat, emphasis was placed on the fact that no one was killed in the evacuation. Stories of undoubted heroism and self-sacrifice were cynically shaped into legendary proportions and used to bolster nationalist sentiment.

April 25, the date of the Gallipoli landing, was declared a public holiday in 1920 and has been used since then by politicians of all stripes as an occasion to whip up nationalist fervour and, when required, support for new military adventures.

Gallipoli: The Front Line Experience does not explore these myths, nor does it attempt to explain the underlying causes of the war or its imperialist character. But its meticulous and objective presentation of the destruction of tens of thousands of young men and poignant commentary from those in Gallipoli's trenches make it a damning antiwar statement.

As 33-year-old Örnek explained to one interviewer: "It's not my goal to shock people but I want to display the conditions and how horrific it was. I want to take the glory and the polish out of war because when we glorify battles, when we mythicise, we really undermine the actual suffering that takes place, the actual horrors.... [W]ar is not glory, war is not polished; it's mud, disease, death, and fear."

Gallipoli: The Front Line Experience was released in Turkey early this year and for five weeks was the country's highest grossing movie. It is the most successful documentary in Turkish history. While most Australian critics praised the film following its Australian release in November, it is only being screened in a handful of cinemas. It is not expected to survive the surfeit of mindless comedies and blockbuster movies soon to hit the local cinemas for the Christmas season.

Örnek's film should be seen by all those who want to understand the real Gallipoli story. It certainly deserves a much wider audience.

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