

Fall 2015

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Recommended Citation

Jacob, Frank and Altieri, Riccardo, "Heroic Depiction vs. Modern Slaughtering -The Great War in the Middle East as a Semi-Modern War" (2015). *CUNY Academic Works*.

http://academicworks.cuny.edu/qb_pubs/19

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Heroic Depiction vs. Modern Slaughtering

The Great War in the Middle East as a Semi-Modern War

by

Frank JACOB and Riccardo ALTIERI

Introduction

The Middle-East was depicted as a sideshow of the First World War. With lesser casualties as they were caused in the battles of the Western front in Europe, more mobility and space for individual heroic actions it seemed to provide more space for traditional war tactics, which were no longer useful as a consequence of the highly modernized warfare in Europe. Edmund Allenby (1861-1936)¹ and Thomas E. Lawrence (1888-1935)² became the key figures of the Middle Eastern campaigns, while Gallipoli should become an emblem for British failure during the war years.³ However, it was not

¹ Lawrence James: *Imperial warrior: the life and times of Field-Marshal Viscount Allenby 1861–1936* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993).

² Scott Anderson: *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Doubleday, 2013); Bruce Leigh: *T. E. Lawrence: Warrior and Scholar* (Oxford: Tattered Flag, 2014); Lowell Thomas: *With Lawrence in Arabia* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 2011 [1924]).

³ Gregory A. Thiele, “Why Did Gallipoli Fail? Why Did Albion Succeed? A Comparative Analysis of Two World War I Amphibious Assaults,” *Baltic Security and Defence Review* 13:2 (2011), 128.

only the military genius of the two commanders which was responsible for the success of their campaigns; they were fighting different kinds of war.

The landing operation of Gallipoli⁴ was far more modern than one would assume by subsuming it to the Middle Eastern war scenario. The region itself was never a homogenous region, but in contrast left sufficient space for different tactics and the use of modern technology.⁵ Soldiers fighting in the Middle East could face trench warfare, gas war⁶, attacks by planes, heavy artillery, machine gun fire, barbed wire on the one hand, but also cavalry and camel attacks, guerilla warfare, surprise attacks and ambushes on the other. The Middle East thereby resembled the “art of war” of the European Western and Eastern front at the same time, and could be seen as a semi-modern war as a whole, a fact that the present paper wants to underline.

Therefore we will compare different campaigns and the use of modern technology to show, why specific battlefields highly resembled the problematic situation of Western European battlefields while others left sufficient space for the creation of heroes and legends at the same time. After a discussion of the Gallipoli operation we will switch the

⁴ Gallipoli “produced a very large English language historiography, but Ottoman/Turkish sources are notably absent in the bibliographies of these books. The result is a one-sided view of the campaign.” Tim Travers, “The Ottoman Crisis of May 1915 at Gallipoli,” *War in History* 8:1 (2001), 72. The Turkish General Staff Archives are hard to visit, anyway the Ottoman sources are written in Arabic script. *Ibid.*, p. 73. “There are no personal diaries of key individuals, because this was not an Ottoman tradition.” *Ibid.* For the Ottoman perspective see Edward Erickson, *Ordered to die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).

⁵ John J. Curry, “Review: Meyer, Karl E. and Shareen Blair Brysac: *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008),” *The Historian* (2010), 631-632.

⁶ L.F. Haber, *The Poisonous Cloud: Chemical Warfare in the First World War* (Oxford, 1986).

focus to the more mobile campaigns on the Arabian Peninsula have a close look at the tactics used by “Lawrence of Arabia”. We thereby aim to show the diversity of the Middle East as a theater of the First World War to strengthen the demand for more detailed studies of these war spaces, which should no longer simply focus on the failure of Gallipoli or the hero of the Arabian war scene.

Gallipoli

Gallipoli is mostly known as one of the darkest hour of British military history⁷ and is well described by Peter Doyle and Matthew R. Bennett as “a costly gamble intended to knock Turkey out of the war and to command the main supply line to Russia”⁸. Much has been said about the reasons for the failure:

“A combination of factors led to the failure of this plan, most particularly the ineffective-ness of naval artillery fire against land targets, the presence of mobile batteries on both the European and Asian shores and ineffective minesweeping by the Allies. This ultimately caused an escalation of the conflict, and a commitment to deploy troops in an invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula.”⁹

⁷ For example Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2014).

⁸ Peter Doyle and Matthew R. Bennett, “Military Geography: The Influence of Terrain in the Outcome of the Gallipoli Campaign, 1915,” *The Geographical Journal* 165:1 (1999), 12.

⁹ Ibid.

Furthermore the geographic setting was responsible for the problems the soldiers had to face after their landing began. “[T]he local inadequacy of water supplies, the steepness of slopes, the incision of ravines, the precipitous nature of the cliffs, and the density of vegetation”¹⁰ made the life of the troops as miserable as the higher positions of the Ottoman soldiers and their machine guns.

However, also the personal factor was responsible for the disastrous developments. While “Sir Ian Hamilton [1853-1947] was precisely the sort of commander that one might have chosen to lead the Dardanelles Expedition” the final campaign “proved [him] to be indecisive and lacking a firm hand with his subordinates.”¹¹ He was not able to give clear orders or to become a strong and energetic leader for the landing troops, why he finally lost the public and governmental believe in his capabilities as a military commander.¹² The withdrawal “in humiliation and defeat”¹³ was also due to the inexperience of the troops, which were sent from different parts of the empire to execute

¹⁰ Ibid, 14.

¹¹ Thiele, Gallipoli, 141.

¹² Dardanelles Commission, *The Final Report of the Dardanelles Commission: Part II – Conduct of Operations, &c.* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, n. d.), 87.

¹³ Edward J. Erickson, “Strength Against Weakness: Ottoman Military Effectiveness at Gallipoli, 1915,” *The Journal of Military History* 65 (2001), 981.

a poorly planned mission.¹⁴ The general staff had not possessed sufficient intelligence information about the situation on the peninsula and the quality of the maps was really bad.¹⁵

Despite this lack the mission was started, especially because the Dardanelles had been a strategic target in the war planning of the Royal Navy from the beginning of the war. In addition to the “the deadlock on the Western Front” and her majesty’s governments “appeals for assistance from Russia early in January 1915”¹⁶ the important figure of the British government and the British Navy, including Winston Churchill (First Lord of the Admiralty) and David Lloyd George (Chancellor of the Exchequer) were in favor of a fleet operation against Istanbul by sending a fleet through the straits, which would force one of the central powers out of war.¹⁷ But the Ottoman Empire was not unprepared and the military staff knew that the Dardanelles might be a target of the enemy.¹⁸ Liman von Sanders and Enver Paşa were well prepared to welcome the British and French landing and therefore “Sanders's ideas were formed before the Allied naval

¹⁴ C. F. Aspinail-Oglander, *History of the Great War, Based on Official Documents: Military Operations Gallipoli*, vols. 1-2 (London: HMSO, 1924-30); C. W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: The Story of ANZAC*, vols. 1-2 (1942; reprint, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Ian Hamilton, *Gallipoli Diary* (London: Edward Arnold, 1920), Vol 1, 14; Thiele, “Gallipoli Fails”, 131.

¹⁶ Tim Travers, “Liman von Sanders, the Capture of Lieutenant Palmer, and Ottoman Anticipation of the Allied Landings at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915,” *The Journal of Military History* 65 (2001), 965.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thiele, *Gallipoli*, 128.

attempts of February-March 1915 to break through into the Sea of Marmara, and therefore he stressed the need to defend the artillery of the Straits against Allied naval and land attacks.”¹⁹ Consequently “[a]t no time after 17 August 1914 (...) were the Dardanelles defences unready to receive an attack”²⁰ and the British underestimation of their Ottoman enemy should cost many lives. In contrast to the assumptions of the military planners in London

“[t]he Ottoman General Staff sent its best combat infantry divisions to defend the jugular of their empire. These divisions were well trained, well led, and very effective. The Gallipoli peninsula itself was the most heavily defended area in the Ottoman Empire, and the defensive planning for its retention encompassed years of effort and refinement. The principal tactical commander on the ground, Esat Paşa, was extremely energetic and experienced in the kind of fighting found on the peninsula, as were most of his subordinate leaders.”²¹

¹⁹ Travers, *Liman von Sanders*, 967; Carl Muhlmann, *Der Kampf um die Dardanellen 1915* (Berlin, 1927); Liman von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey* (Annapolis, MD, 1927); Kannengiesser Pasa, *The Campaign in Gallipoli* (London, 1927).

²⁰ Edward J. Erickson, *Gallipoli: The Ottoman Campaign* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2010), p. 28.

²¹ Erickson, *Strength Against Weakness*, p.1011.

²² *Ibid.*

Fighting against “the cream of the Ottoman Army”²² the campaign was doomed from its start to resemble the bloody war of the Western front, a fact that was also supported by the terrain, which left only room for a stalemate leading to trench warfare.

Anyway, War Minister Herbert Kitchener (1850-1916)²³ was optimistic, because he did not expect any resistance from the Ottoman side, a miscalculation that might have been a consequence of imperial arrogance as well.²⁴ Hamilton and his staff were consequently “assembled in a piecemeal fashion”²⁵ and briefed only vaguely about the environment. The commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force therefore had to admit that the peninsula “looks a much tougher nut to crack than it did over the map”²⁶. Additionally no surprise factor could help Hamilton to gain an advantage, because von Sanders had already heard rumors about an expedition and was able to get even more detailed information out of Egyptian newspapers.²⁷ Finally it seemed not to be surprising at all when British as well as ANZAC troops lands on the southern and western parts of the Gallipoli Peninsula on 25 April 1915.

²³ Peter King: *The Viceroy's fall: how Kitchener destroyed Curzon* (Sidgwick & Jackson, London 1986).

²⁴ Thiele, Gallipoli, 129-130.

²⁵ Ibid., 132.

²⁶ Hamilton, *Gallipoli Diary*, vol 1, 27.

²⁷ Ibid., 77; Thiele, Gallipoli, 134 .

Having no special equipment for an amphibious landing operation the soldiers had to land by getting towed to the shore in simple rowboats. There, the well prepared units of the Fifth Ottoman Army were already waiting to do its “bloody job.”²⁸ Finally, the “British assumptions regarding the Ottoman Army’s fighting prowess (which should have been questioned before the landing occurred) were about to have disastrous consequences.”²⁹

The Ottoman soldiers started immediately to open fire against the approaching British and Australian troops and from the beginning of the operation it was clear, that it would not become the easy job the military staff had believed in. Hamilton’s men had to face machine guns and barbed wire. Consequently, their situation resembled the one of the soldiers in France. Hamilton seemed to recognize the hopeless situation when he writes:

“we are struggling like drowning mariners in a sea of chaos; chaos in the offices; chaos on the ships; chaos in the camps; chaos along the wharves”³⁰.

The military staff was looking for alternatives to end the stalemate, which should last until the end of the operation, why the Gallipoli campaign – like the Western and Eastern

²⁸ Erickson, *Gallipoli*, 30.

²⁹ Thiele, *Gallipoli*, 136.

³⁰ Hamilton, *Gallipoli*, vol 1, 80.

front in Europe³¹ – reached a chemical level of warfare as well.³² The leading officers speculated about the use of gas, which was finally not used until a year later in Palestine, but the hopeless situation on the peninsula made people think loud about the use of gas as well.³³ While the entente had hoped to overcome the trench warfare of the Western front by the landing operation it opened a second stalemate scenario which resembled the technological warfare of the rest of Europe.

Consequently more than 30,000 respirators and 10,000 ‘gas helmets’³⁴ were shipped to the battlefields of the peninsula, because one feared an Ottoman gas attack as well. All in all the Gallipoli campaign was similar to those fought in Western Europe and

³¹ For a survey of works dealing with chemical and biological warfare see Eric Croddy, *Chemical and Biological Warfare: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997). Andy Thomas, *Effects of Chemical Warfare: A Selective Review and Bibliography of British State Papers* (London,: SIPRI, 1984); Charles E. Heller, *Chemical Warfare in World War I: The American Experience, 1917-1918* (Washington, DC: Combat Studies Institute, 1985); L. F. Haber, *The Poisonous Cloud: Chemical Warfare in the First World War* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³² Yigal Sheffy, “The Chemical Dimension of the Gallipoli Campaign: Introducing Chemical Warfare to the Middle East,” *War in History* 12:3 (2005), 278.

³³ Ibid, 280. “Winston Spencer Churchill, first lord of the Admiralty, took the matter a step further. An ardent supporter of technological innovations, Churchill had already been involved in discussions about chemical weapons and their exploitation before the German attack, although accepting the general view that Britain should not be the first to introduce them” Ibid, 282. After the Ypres attack he enthusiastically embraced the new invention, advocating the development and offensive use of chemical weapons by the British “Preparations for war with poisonous gases of the above nature are to be made forthwith on the largest scale possible. The composition most deadly to life and most widespread in their effects are [*sic*] to be employed. Not only heavy shells, but air bombs should be considered as well.” ‘Offensive Chemical Warfare prior to the Formation of the Scientific Advisory Committee on 23rd June 1915’, pp. 47-48, WO 142/240 cited in *ibid.*, 282.

³⁴ “‘Gas helmet’ was what the first-generation gas mask was called. It was developed by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France in spring 1915, and by July it replaced the ineffective primitive respirators. The mask, nicknamed ‘Hypo’, consisted of a flannel bag impregnated with substances such as glycerine, bicarbonate or hyposulphate of soda (hence the name) that were to neutralize chlorine and tear gases.” *Ibid.*, 283.

regardless of the fact that the “operation was a fiasco”³⁵, it was a modern one. Modern warfare with all its technological possibilities to kill the enemy had determined the battlefield at Gallipoli. This was no spot for heroic battles; it was a spot to die from machine gun fire, artillery shells, or as a consequence of the harsh weather in the winter. When the governmental leaders as well as the military staff recognized the failure, they decided to evacuate the troops between December 1915 and January 1916 and “in stark contrast with the landings in April and August 1915, was well-planned”³⁶.

Lawrence

Compared to Gallipoli, another setting of the First World War was able to create a hero, who had to wage a totally different kind of warfare. Thomas E. Lawrence, who became a galleon figure of British guerilla warfare in the Great War, was also promoted by the exotic setting he was fighting in as well as by the stylization through the modern mass media.

Lawrence had been no military tactician who was trained for guerilla warfare in the Arabian deserts, a fact that he recognized by himself:

“I was not practiced in that technique. I was unlike a soldier: hated soldiering. Of course, I had read the usual books (too many books), Clausewitz and Jomini, Mahan and Foch,

³⁵ Thiele, Gallipoli, 137.

³⁶ Ibid.

had played at Napoleon's campaigns, worked at Hannibal's tactics, and the wars of Belisarius, like any other man at Oxford; but I had never thought myself into the mind of a real commander compelled to fight a campaign of his own."³⁷

Despite this lack of experience, he was a man that could be made a myth³⁸, one that is still repeated in modern works about "Lawrence of Arabia" who set the desert on fire.³⁹

While the Arabian fight against the Ottoman rule was depicted in romantic ways, the support of the Royal Navy for resupply as well as air support was needed to win the battles.⁴⁰ The Arab irregulars might have been a powerful force, but they were "as unable to defend a point or line as they are to attack it"⁴¹. Lawrence must have realized "that in a stand-up fight against the better-disciplined Turks the Arabs would be doomed."⁴²

³⁷ Thomas E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, https://ia802508.us.archive.org/1/items/SevenPillarsOfWisdomByT.e.LawrencewithIllustrationsAndMaps/seven_pillars_of_wisdom.pdf, (accessed 8 January 2015). See also Thomas E. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly* (London: Williams and Norgate LTD., 1939), 109.

³⁸ Efraim and Inari Karsh, "Myth in the Desert, or Not the Great Arab Revolt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 33: 2 (1997), 267.

³⁹ Barr, James: *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918*. Critics at this work in William S. Goldmann, "Review: Barr, James: Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2008)," *The Historian* (2010), 677.

⁴⁰ Clive Blount, "Modern Air Power and the 1916 Arab Revolt. What Can the Modern Airman Do to Counter Lawrence of Arabia?" *Air & Space Power Journal* 3 (2009), 51.

⁴¹ Thomas E. Lawrence, "Guerilla Warfare", in: *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 14 (1929), <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1984900/TE-Lawrence-on-guerrilla-warfare>, (accessed 8 January 2015).

⁴² Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (London: Hutchinson & Co. 1924), 75.

Therefore he reacted by starting a guerilla war, for which the environment was predestined:

“How would the Turks defend all that (140,000 square miles) – no doubt by a trench line across the bottom, if the Arabs were an army attacking with banners displayed (...) but suppose they were an influence, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. The Arabs might be a vapour, blowing where they listed. It seemed that a regular soldier might be helpless without a target. He would own the ground he sat on, and what he could poke his rifle at.”⁴³

Lawrence also recognized the potential of such a campaign for the total scenario of the First World War:

“A man who could fight well by himself made generally a bad soldier, and these champions seemed to me no material for our drilling; but if we strengthened them by light automatic guns of the Lewis type, to be handled by themselves, they might be capable of holding their hills and serving as an efficient screen behind which we could build up”.⁴⁴

⁴³ Lawrence, *Guerilla Warfare*.

⁴⁴ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

While the press explained the heroic fight of the Arabs under the leadership of a noble Englishman to the world public by describing the war in Arabia as a conflict, where a single man was still able to make a difference, and thereby proving that the old way of warfare might still exist, Lawrence himself had already recognized, that also a guerilla war needed modern technology to become successful, because otherwise his forces were not able to hold conquered spots – e.g. Umtaiye.⁴⁵ Working with old tactics and modern technology, the war in Arabia was definitely semi-modern, like the conflict in the Middle East as a whole.

Conclusion

While the troops at Gallipoli faced the cruelties of a modern technological warfare, almost including gas attacks, Lawrence in the southern parts of the Middle East, like Allenby in Palestine, was able to act fast and use his higher level of mobility. His “operations were like naval warfare, in their mobility, their ubiquity, their independence of bases and communications, in their ignoring of ground features, of strategic areas, of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

fixed directions, of fixed points.”⁴⁶ This provided the stage for the creation of a myth, as the war in Arabia “was simple and individual”⁴⁷ and could make a hero out of Lawrence.

It was not only the bad planning that made Gallipoli a failure, the geographical setting of the campaign as well as the fact that the British and ANZAC soldiers had to face the best equipped and modernized troops of the Ottoman Empire, led by capable officers, made this the most modern battlefield of the Middle Eastern theater of war. Taking these different places, scenarios, and outcomes into consideration, it seems to be suitable to call the Great War in the Middle East as a whole a semi-modern war.

⁴⁶ Lawrence, *Guerilla Warfare*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*