A NOTE ON ATATURK’S WORDS ABOUT GALLIPOLI

Adrian Jones

Dr Adrian Jones is a senior lecturer in European history at La Trobe University and chairs the History Council of Victoria. He was one of two foundation Directors of the National Centre for History Education (NCHE) (http://hyperhistory.org), 2000–03. Adrian graduated from the University of Melbourne, and then studied history at La Trobe University and Harvard University. Apart from a scholarly monograph, Late-Imperial Russia: An Interpretation (Berne: Peter Lang; 1997) and a local history, Follow the Gleam (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing; 2000), which won the Information Victoria prize for the best print publication on history in 2001, Adrian has published on historiography, revolutions, and French, Russian and now Turkish social and intellectual history. Adrian is a commentator on ABC local radio 774 on history. His current research relates to a study in historiography, ‘Things Historians Do’, on phenomenology, narrative and hermeneutics, and a cultural history of a Russian-Ottoman encounter in the era of Peter the Great and Ahmed III. To complete his VCE in Turkish, Adrian is nervously planning an oral presentation of Atatürk’s views of the Anzacs.

Correspondance to Adrian Jones: adrian.jones@latrobe.edu.au

This article looks again at the words which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk addressed in 1934 to the Europeans against whom he had fought at Gallipoli, words now set in stone beside Anzac Cove. It offers a historical explanation of the extraordinarily generous terms in which he spoke.

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Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent their sons from far away 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.

The words are Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s. They were written by him in 1934 to be spoken about foreigners who invaded the European shores of the Dardanelles in 1915. Atatürk played a key role – some say, the key role – in halting their invasion (Mango 2000 p. 156). These words of Atatürk’s of 1934 were translated and set in stone in Turkish and English on Arı Burnu (Australians call it Anzac Cove), near Gelibolu (Gallipoli), in 1985. The words always surprise.

This essay ventures to explain. Offering a new translation, I recall Atatürk’s past words and deeds. His noble words of 1934 were about deeds of 1915 that had not seemed noble to him in
1918. Why did Atatürk insist on writing generous things in 1934? I here interpret Atatürk’s few
comments about Gallipoli. A slight – even insignificant – discrepancy in the words set in stone
set me thinking. In the sculpted words (above) in English that surprise and endear, the sons whose
mothers weep were named ‘Johnnies’. In the Turkish they remained as honoured, but went
unnamed.

What’s in a name? I am Australian and an historian of Russia and of the Ottoman Empire.
I unexpectedly encountered Atatürk’s words, like so many others, on arrival at Anzac Cove.
Intriguing words in two languages I knew were thrust upon me about deeds I thought I knew from
lore of family and school. A great Turk’s subtle magnanimity needed explaining. My surprise
seemed to show superficialities in Australian ways of remembering. I thought of my grandparents,
who said nothing to me about their times on Gallipoli shores or awaiting them in Egypt. Veterans
don’t glory in war. One fired shells from Shrapnel Gully. The other drove wagons in Egypt. Both
went to France. On Gallipoli, I also saw my cousin, Ross Bastiaan’s plaques on every field of
battle, explaining – in Turkish, German and English – who was there, what they did and what
they saw.⁵ The website of the Federal Department of Veterans’ Affairs now embellishes them.⁶

Atatürk was like my grandparents. He wrote and said little about the Gallipoli landings. And
the few things he did say and write differed. My thesis is that Atatürk’s views changed in accord
with Turkey’s prospects for independent nationhood and according to comparisons he came to
want to make with the irredentist policies of old colleagues, the Young Turks, whom he supplanted
after 1918. My evidence is that Atatürk’s words about Anzac deeds differed in revealing ways
according to whether they were uttered in 1915 – mid-battle, in 1918 – after battle, but before
independence, and in 1934 – once independence was assured and secularism had been achieved.

Foreign policy agendas of the 1930s don’t seem to explain Atatürk’s view of Gallipoli. Al-
though his peace-seeking foreign policy of the 1930s pinned hopes on the League of Nations,
exhibited a vague Anglophilia, and exerted every effort to stay neutral in the face of blandishments
of the fascist powers, the generous words we’ve quoted from 1934 had no particular foreign
policy implications (Mango 2000 chapter 27). They were written to be spoken before a delegation
from the Allied War Graves Commission. The words represent instead another of Atatürk’s ways
of sorting through and sorting past old-Ottoman and Young-Turk ways: cultural, military and
imperial. Mustafa Kemal of the 1920s was consciously a nation-builder, cashiering the sultanate
and then the caliphate, fashioning republican secularism, Latinising Turkish letters, drinking for
pleasure, reforming dress, even trying to vernacularise Islam (Mango 2000 part IV). Then the
Father of the Turks – the title ‘Atatürk’ was bestowed in 1933 – of the 1930s eschewed day-to-
day government and became preoccupied with the place and contribution of Turkic peoples in
the history of the world (Mango 2000 pp. 492–499). The generous words about the Anzacs reflect
these agendas of identity-making and re-making.

History and memory are odd bedfellows. Australians know about Anzacs landing on 25 April
1915, but tend to think that only Australians and New Zealanders were involved – to the annoy-
ance of Britons, Indians, Senegalese and French. Some Australians assume that the Gallipoli
campaign must have been victorious; why else would it be remembered? The only thing that
Australians seem to know about Turks on Gallipoli is that they were brave.

For their part, Turks focus on the campaign at nearby Çanakkale. These were battles on and
from Asia’s shore of the Dardanelles, opposite Gallipoli, when British and French naval assaults
were repulsed in February–March 1915. Turks prefer to remember the bravery of an everyman artilleryman, a Mehmet from a nation of Mehmets, who threw a rock at an invading English marine. Turkey’s Mehmetçilik monument (1942, 1960) at Çanakkale emphasises the defeat of the British and French naval force trying to force the Dardanelles. Modern Turkey was late to recognise the defenders of the Gallipoli side of the Dardanelles campaign, only building monuments in the 1960s and 1970s that balanced those erected by the Allied War Graves Commission after 1934. Atatürk’s words were therefore exceptional in 1934: the founder of a Turkish republic, a victor in one of the first successful post-colonial struggles, the Turkish war of independence of 1919–22, had oddly troubled himself to equate Turkey’s Mehmets, dead heroes of the Dardanelles campaigns of 1915, with the dead of the imperialist invaders.

How did this come about? In 1953, Şükrü Kaya, Interior Minister in Atatürk’s government in 1934, recalled meeting with Mustafa Kemal. He was charged by Atatürk to deliver the speech now set in stone on the Gallipoli shore. Atatürk had been ailing since 1933. He died in 1938. Atatürk insisted that Kaya lay a wreath at Arı Burnu, Anzac Cove. Atatürk told Kaya:

- You will say to those dear martyrs lying there that we commemorate you with reverence and respect. You will speak with all the eloquence of your tongue…
- You will address them, ‘Rest in Peace’. If you had not been there, if your chests had not held off the ramparts of steel, this strait [Dardanelles] would have been breached, Istanbul would have been occupied and the Native Soil would have been invaded (İğdemir 1978 pp. 5, 38).

When Şükrü Kaya agreed, Atatürk went on to tell him that his speech must also honour the dead of the invaders. Kaya was the Minister then responsible for the internal stability of Atatürk’s fledgling Turkish secular republic. He had just superintended the suppression of Şeyd Said’s Kurdish revolt seeking to undo Atatürk’s secularism. Kaya must have been perplexed, if not vexed. Why honour external invaders and aggressors (İğdemir 1978 pp. 4–7, 36–41)?

History gave Şükrü Kaya every reason to doubt Atatürk’s instruction. The invasions had been an imperialist gambit. The sailors who tried to force the Dardanelles in February and March 1915 (only to lose three warships), and the soldiers who landed on Gallipoli shores in April 1915 (only to be evacuated in November), were invaders bent on dismembering what was left of the old Ottoman Empire. Southeastern Anatolia and Syria were earmarked for France. Britain wanted to put Palestine beside Suez and Egypt, the better to safeguard the ways to India. The Italians (later the Greeks!) were promised southern Anatolia. Italy already held the Dodecanese islands – Rhodes and Cos – since 1912. Prime Minister Venizelos in Greece had hastened in 1917 to bring down his pro-German King, Constantine I, the better to secure a province of Greece in western Anatolia. Venizelos had already fomented the last Balkan war (1912–13), securing most of Ottoman Macedonia for Greece. Britain and France had even promised Russia free passage and perhaps control of the straits, though most governments doubted whether British and French ships would ever make good on that promise unless a Russian army actually arrived. The terms of the armistice of Mudros in November 1918 that ended the First World War in the Ottoman Empire fulfilled those suspicions. Given that Russia had indeed dropped out of the war, lost in its revolutions and subsequent civil war, British warships occupied the straits in 1918 and British
advisers routinely bullied the new Sultan Mehmed VI Vahideddin. The dismemberment of an unlaumented Ottoman Empire was about to begin.\textsuperscript{8}

This is not a happy story. Atatürk knew that the invaders of 1915–22 knew or cared nothing about Turkey. They were agents of foreign powers out to turn Turkey into a patchwork of colonies. Yet Atatürk still went out of his way in 1934 to honour these imperialist invaders of the Ottoman Empire. Not trusting Minister Kaya, the ailing Atatürk wrote a short speech for him to give. He handed it to the bemused Minister to deliver at the Gallipoli site (İğdemir 1978 pp. 6, 39). Atatürk showed he was in earnest by his respectful use of the polite form of the indicative, addressed to invaders whom he honoured un-named, in the abstract. Using the informal form of ‘you’ must have seemed too endearing, the violated ratifying their violation. The ‘them’ form we might expect must have seemed too aloof to Atatürk. The fine translator who crafted the English in the monument on the shore – the version quoted first – opted to evoke the link by turning the ‘you’ into named British everymen: ‘Johnnies’. He blessed them beside everyman ‘Mehmets’ whom every Turk already named in pride. This is my translation:

Over [our Turkish] home soils flows the blood of these heroes: you lie here a friend in [our] native land. Repose within, at ease and tranquil. Side by side with our Mehmets, you each embrace. Mothers of sons sent to battle from foreign lands far away: wipe away your tears. Your sons are in our hearts. They will sleep within so very calm and in peace. From the moment they gave up their lives in this soil of ours, they became our sons as well (Artuç 1992 p. 388).

Atatürk was honouring an enemy. Imagine any Australian Prime Minister in 1960s – roughly the same elapse of time – saying this about Japanese soldiers in the Second World War? German and Japanese veterans still may not march on Anzac Day. Yet Atatürk blessed un-named invaders of his homeland. He troubled in 1934 to address them directly with the formal form of ‘you’.

This is my explanation. Atatürk seems to have honoured the invaders in 1934 because they unknowingly prompted Atatürk and the Turks to shape the kind of nation that the Turks came to know that they wanted, but which his fellow Young Turks had been unable to glimpse, let alone achieve.

There is a strange symmetry here. Australians felt the same way about the army they sent to Gallipoli, the first Australian Imperial Force, the first to serve overseas under an Australian flag. Australians such as the military historian C.E.W. Bean, another veteran, felt that the ordeal in the face of the Turks helped secure Australia’s nationhood. Invasion, nations-in-waiting, the ending of old imperial attachments: these are my themes.

Atatürk’s initial response had been far less generous. Speaking to a journalist in 1918 he had noted dismissively:

When Ottoman soldiers attacked ferociously, supported by accurate shrapnel fire from mountain batteries, the English\textsuperscript{9} soldiers could only think of escaping to the sea. I was surprised to hear that even General Ian Hamilton came on location and could not have his commands obeyed and there was much discussion and procrastination amongst the senior officers. This allowed us to win… We captured many machine guns and prisoners.\textsuperscript{10}
He then concluded:

The English brag about the soldiers and officers who fought gallantly and bravely at Ari Burnu landings and at this front. But think about [how] the enemy... equipped with the most advanced war machinery and determination by and large were forced to remain on these shores. Our officers and soldiers [whose] love for their motherland and religion and heroism protected the doors of their capital Istanbul against such a proud enemy won the right to a status [of which] we can be proud. I congratulate all the members of the fighting units under my command. I remember with deep and eternal respect all the ones who sacrificed their lives and became martyrs for this great objective.  

These words of Atatürk’s in 1918 about 1915 seem standard patriot puffs. Or rather: not quite. Consider Atatürk’s backhander of 1918, typical of Young Turks like he, about winning ‘the right to a status of which we can be proud’.

The first clue to the source of Atatürk’s generosity of spirit in 1934 comes from 25 April 1915, day one of the Anzac landing. As Lt Colonel of the 19th Division, Atatürk had hastened in the morning from his post in a hamlet in the hills behind the shore village of Eceabat. The few Turkish troops on Ari Burnu shore had retreated. No one expected an attack on such a place, ringed by steep hills, so open to strafing. The commander, a German general, Liman von Sanders had based himself on the Thracian plain, at Bolayır to the north. Atatürk was alone with a small force. The Ottoman troops between him and the Anzacs had retreated that morning. Moving up, Atatürk halted those men on their way out. He re-grouped them next to his men coming in. When the troops who had retreated complained that they had no ammunition, he told them to fix bayonets.  

He gave this sharp order found later in the pocket of a dead Turkish messenger who didn’t get through:

I do not expect that any of us would not rather die than repeat the shameful story of the Balkan war. But if there are such men among us, we should at once lay hands on them and set them up in line to be shot!

Harsh words. Desperate times. Another backhander: ‘the shameful story’.

Atatürk was already worried. Just a month before, after the failed British and French naval attacks on the Dardanelles, when the 35-year-old arrived to take his command at Eceabat, Atatürk had worried that there were too many Arabs in his army with no enthusiasm for the Ottoman cause. They wanted to go home to places like Baghdad, Damascus or Beirut. Even so, Atatürk succeeded in checking the advance of the British and the Anzacs near the summit of Conk Bayırı. When the Turks fixed bayonets, to Atatürk’s relief, his enemies did the same. Everyone dug in (Fewster et al. 1985 pp. 67–77). But Atatürk’s counter-attacks for a week or so after failed; the invaders stayed put. For two months, Atatürk could hear Anzac blarney and smell their bully beef. When they all came out to bury their dead under a truce on 24 May, he noted their ‘British’ courtesy and correctness.  

As a staff officer he had learned to dance European-style in Bulgarian soirées. He liked to dress Saville Row fancy (Mango 2000 pp. 129–132).

We know that a dreadful battle ensued. Between April and November 1915, a staggering 200,000 invaders were casualties; 40,000 men died, a ratio of one death to every five sick or
wounded. The Anzacs’ death rate was higher than the overall invading army average: one died for every three wounded. On the Ottoman side, in spite of the advantage of the terrain, the casualties were even worse: over a quarter of million casualties: 75,000 died in battle, some 10,000 were missing (assumed dead), 164,000 were carried out and another 20,000 died from diseases of filth like dysentery (Fewster et al. 1985 p. 6; Mango 2000 p. 156). The Anzacs had the same ratio, on a much lesser scale, of deaths to wounded. An exhausted Atatürk, now promoted to Colonel, was eventually ordered to furlough in September 1915. He had probably caught malaria (Mango 2000 pp. 152–154).

Still we ask the question, why did Atatürk go out of his way to honour these invaders who had brought so much death and anguish? Recall that in the heat of battle on 25 April 1915, Atatürk had written in his order to panicked troops about ‘the shameful story of the Balkan war’. In 1918, he had also in mind a ‘status of which we can be proud’. Moreover, he had worried in March 1915 about having too many Arabs in his force. We also know that Atatürk admired European values. Heedless of Islam, he enjoyed drinking wine and rakı with fellow officers in İstanbul cafés (Mango 2000 p. 164, chapters 2–4). He had no time for the harem, in which noble Ottoman women lived in seclusion. He loved soirées, relishing the role of the knight in a company of elegant ladies. Nor could Atatürk follow his troops in believing that if they died in battle, they would be martyrs for the faith, dancing with lovely girls (huris) in heaven. He had no time for Muslim clerics (imams). He had always associated with the European-minded Young Turks, privileged army officers and cadets who wanted to Europeanise Ottoman society and to restore its empire with vigour and valour. The Young Turks had overthrown the crafty autocrat, Sultan Abdülhamid in 1908, but Atatürk had still been sidelined.

Atatürk accomplished a lot between 1915 and 1934. Magnanimous in 1934, Atatürk must have felt that he had re-made Turkey into a nation. He had created a Turkish nationalist movement in 1919, steered it to victory against Greek armies (1920–22) and diplomats bent on dismembering Anatolia (at the Treaties of Versailles 1919 and Sèvres 1920), and drafted a new constitutional and cultural order for a Turkish secular Republic (from 1923). His Turkish national Republic superseded a decrepit Ottoman Empire in 1923. Atatürk had steered that transformation, defying his Sultan in 1919, conjuring a parliament, raising winning armies and forcing a favourable peace at the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

Not everything was new, however. There were also important Ottoman pasts within the novelty of this nation-building Republican cause. Atatürk had been born outside today’s Turkey in Thessalonica. His place of birth was lost to the Ottoman Empire in 1912. His Salonika, and much of Ottoman Europe, had been a model of inter-communal toleration (Mango 2000 chapter 1). Like most Ottoman Balkan towns, Salonika had distinct quarters – Turkish, Greek, Jewish – small and segmented by class; wealthy Turks had neighbourhoods close by wealthy Jews or Greeks; poor and middling folks had their quarters too. Parts of Istanbul remain like this today. Settler societies like Australia are not the first multicultural societies. Symphonies of tongues in places like Egypt’s Alexandria or in Ottoman Europe were much the same and far older: in Salonika you could hear Greek, Turkish, Thracian dialect and Ladino, the language of Jews of Spain. People got on with each other, provided they did not flaunt religion and provided they ignored their foreign nationals with irredentist agendas.
But Atatürk and his officer brethren in the Young Turks had watched this polyglot Ottoman Balkan world unravel. As the Great Powers, merchants and Orthodox clergy fanned Egyptian, Romanian, Greek, Serb and Bulgarian aspirations for independence, Moslems were either driven to rebel, like Albanians, or had to choose between flight or submission, like Tatars, Gagauz, Circassians, Chechens and Bosnians. Young Ottoman officer kadets like Mustafa Kemal and Enver Paşa had witnessed waves of refugees seeking safety (and finding poverty) in Turkish homelands alien to them. In the half-century before 1914, millions of Moslem people who never thought of themselves as ‘Turks’ now bore that label, grieving and displaced. This was ‘the shameful story of the Balkan wars’ of 1912–13 Atatürk had referred to when mired in battle in 1915.

Atatürk already doubted that an army of Ottoman Arabs would care enough about an Ottoman Empire or Ottoman Europe to set things right. Bitter lessons had to be learnt, and were learnt, from the follies of the last leaders of the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turks, a group of impetuous officers of great ambition. Enver Paşa had led the Young Turks. They responded to Ottoman defeats in a succession of Balkan and East-European wars by seeking to stiffen Ottoman resistance against threats of internal subversion. They exerted every effort to regain lost territory. The Young Turks disdained defensive strategies; for them, it was all or nothing, death or glory. Like France facing Germany, foolish dreams of revanche were nurtured instead. An army was even despatched to Libya in a futile attempt to resist Italian annexation in 1911.

Enver Paşa took even more fateful steps. A secret alliance was struck with Germany in the maelstrom of August 1914. With Germany on side, the Young Turks hoped to reverse Russian, Greek, Bulgarian and Serb gains since 1877. Enver Paşa hastened to use German ships to bombard Russian Black Sea ports in October 1914, and then committed 90,000 of his best troops to a winter campaign thousands of feet above sea level at Sarıkamış on Russia and Turkey’s Caucasian frontier in November and December 1914. A losing battle and minus 26°C later, only 10,000 Ottoman troops limped home. Many then succumbed to typhus in their camp. Still Enver Paşa persisted, despatching 18,000 troops from Damascus to Suez across Sinaï in January 1915, hoping to foment revolt in Egypt. It was another defeat: Egypt’s Arabs were content with phoney independence proclaimed by Britain. Half that Ottoman army was lost too. Worse still, hundreds of thousands of Armenians in the Anatolian east were now viewed as a potential fifth column. While a few Armenians had answered Russia’s call to revolt in 1914–15, many more were indifferent, or at worst waiting and seeing. Deported, at least 300,000 civilian Armenians were murdered. Units of Enver Paşa’s political police were prominent among their killers.

I suggest that these things were on an ailing Atatürk’s mind in 1934. The defensive war Enver Paşa chose not to wage in 1914-16 was actually waged by Atatürk at Gallipoli in 1915. He was just a Colonel – we would say in the wrong spot at the wrong time – but Atatürk would not have agreed with us, in 1915 or in 1934. The words he penned for Şükri Kaya in 1934 show how much Atatürk now appreciated the invigorating honesty of a society with its back to the wall, mobilising all in its own defence. Wars of defence had re-kindled pride and re-fashioned community. Wars of aggression had once annihilated it.

Old-Ottoman fabrics of community re-emerged around an idea of a nation shaping itself from within. Three threads were woven into an anti-Ottoman fabric of Kemalist Turkish nationalism. The first was tacit, based on old-Balkan, multi-communal urban values. The second was
explicit, applying European norms of nationhood, republicanism and secularism. The third scorned the Pan-Turk aggrandisement and inter-communal betrayal that Enver Paşa set in train against Armenians in Anatolia in 1915–16 and again in Soviet Turkestan in the 1920s. The new Kemalist nationalism which was trumpeted in 1919 emerged implicitly at Gallipoli between April and November 1915. The new idea of a nation of and for Turks was then forged in Kemalist disdain for the Sultans’ imperial pusillanimity and the Young Turks’ imperial folly.

So, I suspect this is how and why 1915 looked different by 1934. It couldn’t have done so in 1918. The new understanding could only begin to form once the war for independence drew to a close in 1922. By helping to stiffen the resistance against imperialist aggression and re-instil pride, Atatürk’s glorious deeds at Arı Burnu and Conk Bayırı laid a course for a new nation to follow. Turkey was born there and then at Gallipoli, as Johnnies who knew nothing about Mehmets re-made those Mehmets as masters of their fate. Ottomans turned Turkish nationalist, discarding imperial obsessions of victim-hood and victimisation. Refugee-mindedness ended. Allied imperialisms dispelled the Young Turks’ yen for Ottoman re-empiring. Revenge no longer seemed sweet. Modern Turkey was born – more tolerant, more content, a new model for a modern Middle East. Was Australia much the same?

ENDNOTES

This anonymous English translation of a Turkish text is accessible in İğdemir (1978 pp. 39–40), and at the Commonwealth Department of Veterans’ Affairs’ Anzac site – http://www.anzacsites.gov.au/2visiting/grave.html – once you click on Arı Burnu on the map. The Anzac site offers views of the locale of the monument immortalising the words.

I took the Turkish text from İğdemir (1978 p. 6) and cross-referenced it with Selahattin Çetiner’s Çanakkale Şavaşı: izerine bir inceleme (p. 20 [place, publisher and date unknown]), and with İbrahim Artuç (1992 p. 388): topraları is a mis-print in Artuç; it should be toprakları or ‘soils’. In some books the words are written in verse, in others, and on the monument itself, they are prose.

This essay was conceived as a talk for a Festival organised by the Union of the Australian Friends of Turkey in April 2002 at the National Trust property ‘Como’ in South Yarra. Turks had finally taken – for a day – a great citadel of Melbourne Anglo-Saxonia.


Selahattin Çetiner: Çanakkale Şavaşı: izerine bir inceleme (place, publisher and date unknown). This study by a staff general and former Minister for Internal Affairs discusses the key campaigns and monuments.

The history of the Balkan Wars and of the First World War, particularly as it pertained to the policies of the Young Turks, is well told in these major studies: Lewis (1967); Mantran (1989); McCarthy (1997); Quataert (2000).

Like many Europeans of his imperial age, Atatürk (1881–1938) did not distinguish between ‘England’ and her dominions.


André Aciman (1994) and Braude et al. (1982) evoke this world.

17 The policy history of the Young Turks, summarised below, is drawn from: Lewis (1967); Mantran (1989); McCarthy (1997); Quataert (2000).


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