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How the Battle of Gallipoli was hijacked by religion

Angels, Muslim saints, and soldiers disappearing into fluffy white clouds. The tour guides are rewriting history and the secularists are none too happy, **Robert Fisk** reports



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attlefield tours may not be back for a few more weeks, but just imagine what the Turks will be able to enjoy at Gallipoli. They can wander through the 105-year-old killing fields along the Dardanelles and listen to a recitation of a traditional 15th-century poem praising the birth and life of the Prophet Mohamed. They can hear a work from 1924 which glorifies the Turkish struggle against Winston Churchill's allied invasion force as a war against the Infidel. Indeed, there was a time when a primary school teacher-cum-tour guide at Gallipoli recounted how Islamic saints intercepted the 15-inch projectiles fired at Gallipoli by the British battleship HMS Queen Elizabeth.

The same school-teacher's spiritually oriented tour of the cliffs, which the British, Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) and French armies failed to capture in 1915, included a description of Muslim saints with long white beards – and yes, with white turbans as well – appearing over the Allied soldiers to frighten them away. We shall forget for a moment his reference to the white cloud which descended from a blue sky to envelop the Royal Norfolk Regiment and make them disappear. It is necessary to put this particular story on the long finger – because it turns out that the British also once believed it to be true. More, as they say, later.





Secular and Islamist guides will soon be returning to the beach at Gallipoli with their version of events (Rex)

I owe all of the above to the assiduous work of Professor Ayhan Aktar of Istanbul Bilgi University, whose academic work on genocide in Ottoman Turkey – and on the memoirs of an Armenian officer in the Turkish army, the now famous Captain Sarkis Torossian – has long made him a beacon of free thought in what was once called Constantinople. Aktar holds a mischievous record for holding modern Turkish governments to account when they misrepresent the facts of history. But his latest study of “the struggle between Nationalist and Jihadist narratives” of Gallipoli, just quietly published by St Andrews University, is a classic of its kind.

Tour guides beware. Especially when the retreat of Covid-19 allows Islamist and secular "guides" to lead their thousands of young visitors through the battlefields and memorials once again. From the start, the story-line was always a bit wobbly. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, founded of course by one of Gallipoli's major heroes, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, it went like this: in 1915, the Turkish army defended the fatherland against the invading great powers: the Brits, the Anzacs and the French. They were "the enemy" but not "the infidel". Turkey's German allies did not get much of a look in; they were either airbrushed out of the story or regarded as incompetent.



Ataturk defended the fatherland against the invading powers of Britain, the Anzacs and the French (Getty)

Then in 1924 came Islamist poet Mehmet Akif whose poem *To the Martyrs of Canakkale* – the Turkish name for Gallipoli – turned the whole affair into a battle between Islam and the Infidel. The Europeans are portrayed as “rapists” forcing their way into Turkey’s mountain passes, the multinational force described as “jack-booted”, the invasion itself – in reality an attempt by the Allies to break out of the trench warfare of France by opening a new front against the German empire – as “baser than the Black Death”. Akif even makes a parallel between Turkish Ottoman soldiers and the Muslim warrior Saladin, who captured Jerusalem in 1187. Saladin was also Kurdish, though for obvious reasons, we’ll pass on that...

In the mid-1990s, however, after Recep Tayyip Erdogan – now the Turkish president – became mayor of Istanbul, Islamist parties became a part of the country’s politics. The Islamist mayor of Zeytinburnu, an Istanbul suburb, visited the Australian war memorial at Canberra and decided it was time Turkey

commemorated the Gallipoli battle itself. In 2000, the mayor, Murat Aydin, began sending busloads of residents from his borough to the old battlefield – 200,000 visitors from this one location would travel over the next two decades – and the emphasis would be more on faith than nationalism. The crowds were pious as well as patriotic.



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Australian artillery gunners during the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 (Rex)

But as Professor Aktar notes, secularists were none too happy with the hijacking of their greatest national battle in modern history. The Turkish press discovered that a primary school teacher named Sefer Goztepe was prosecuted for acting as a Gallipoli tour guide without a ministry permit – and was walking the sacred battlefield without mentioning Ataturk’s role in the victory. His story, did, however, mention the mythical angels which seized the British battleships shells and the white cloud descending from a blue sky to engulf the Royal Norfolk Regiment.

In fact, the 5th Battalion of the Norfolks advanced on the Turkish lines on 12 August 1915 and, in the words of the British commander Sir Ian Hamilton, “they charged into the forest and were lost to sight

or sound. Not one of them ever came back.” But in 1965, three surviving New Zealand veterans claimed they had seen the British regiment marching up a sunken road “to be swallowed up in a cloud”. Thus are legends made.

Steve Smith, a professional UK battle tour guide, has found that even more esoteric stories had built up around the Norfolk’s disappearance: they had been kidnapped by aliens landing from space ships. Or, more prosaically, executed by the Turks after their capture. In fact, Smith’s research strongly suggests that the soldiers fought to the death under Turkish fire.

In 1919, the 5th battalion’s chaplain found the remains of 180 Allied soldiers and met a local Turk who told him he had found the decomposing bodies of British soldiers around a farm and had thrown the corpses into a ravine. Only two were identified – Private Barnaby and Private Custer. But Smith hunted down a copy of a local Norfolk newspaper, which in February 1916 reported that a Mrs Coxon of King Street in Lynn (Norfolk) had received a postcard from her son, Captain Cedric Coxon. He had taken part in the battalion attack, was wounded and then captured by the Turks – and was writing from a Turkish hospital in Istanbul. So here was one member

of the regiment who had not vanished into a cloud. Another survivor later recalled for the same local paper that he saw no wood or "forest", had himself become lost in the battle and never saw his comrades again.

Either way, shortly after Turkey's very unofficial tour guide was prosecuted in 2004, Ataturk metaphorically returned to the centre of the ancient battlefield and nationalist mayors sent less Islamist visitors to Gallipoli. This did not last. More religious guides turned up on tour buses. Since 2012, the ruling Islamist party in Turkey has organised a Menu of the Martyrs at the Gallipoli memorial, where thousands of visitors can consume during the holy month of Ramadan exactly the same food as the soldiers of almost a century earlier: rye bread, cracked wheat and soup. It was a good story. But it wasn't true.

Lieutenant Colonel Cemil Conk, commander of the 4th Ottoman Division at Gallipoli, for example, wrote in his memoirs that each of his soldiers was daily issued with chicken soup, meat and bean stew, meat and chickpea stew, cracked wheat pilaf, dry broad beans, and dried fruit compote.

"For snacks," wrote Colonel Conk, "they were issued dried sultanas and roasted hazelnuts. There was a regular distribution of tobacco as well." So there we have it. Not exactly the Hilton hotel. But the Turkish army looked after its soldiers, who were clearly brave defenders but not starving would-be Islamist martyrs. Many were those who did fight to the death – as patriots rather than followers of

It is a fallacy to liken this war to an Islamist Jihad, when it was fought with German money, German military aid and the active participation of German military personnel

But there was another historical slippage. In 2012, guests were invited from Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq and Bosnia — grandsons, it was said, of those other soldiers of the empire who died at Gallipoli. In 2013, Erdogan insisted that Gallipoli was “a Crusade” and that Turkey had Bosnians, Kosovans and men from the Balkans fighting alongside it. So here, we must bring Turkish Professor Ayhan Aktar back into the picture for a few facts.

“The Christian allies of the Ottomans were the imperialist Germans, Austro-Hungarians and Bulgarians,” he writes in his study of Gallipoli historiography.

“The ruling Committee of Union and Progress in 1914 had gambled the future of the Ottoman Empire by signing a secret deal with Germany... On 29 October 1914, the Ottoman navy began the war by opening fire on the Russian fleet...The Ottoman state was not a distressed victim; it was clearly an aggressor, the party which actually started the war. Moreover, the present independent Arab states of Syria and Iraq were merely Ottoman provinces in 1914. Those men conscripted to the Ottoman army...were merely complying with their compulsory military service. It is a fallacy to liken this war to an Islamist Jihad, when it was fought with German money, German military aid and the active participation of German military personnel.”

The Australians organised a cruise to Gallipoli in 1965 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the landing at Anzac Cove, and many of the 316 pilgrims were veterans of the conflict – a battle which ennobled Atatürk just as it almost doomed the political career of Winston Churchill. The prominent Australian historian Kenneth Inglis travelled with his countrymen and wrote dispatches on the trip for *The Canberra Times*.

While behaving most amicably towards his hosts, he knew his history rather well. He was well aware, for example, that the day before the Allies landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, 250 Ottoman Armenian politicians and intellectuals were arrested and deported – the start of the Armenian genocide in which around one and a half million Christian Armenians would be killed by the Ottoman Turks. Had Gallipoli become a cover for this other, even more terrible bloodletting?

As Inglis wrote, “there may be other reasons that elude the casual visitor. Is it possible, for example, that the Turks find it more pleasant to dwell on the defence of their homeland against invasion than to recall the simultaneous act by which, as a deliberate policy, the Turkish government killed nearly a million [sic] of its Armenian citizens?” And Inglis added: “Last Sunday, Armenians outside Turkey were commemorating this pioneer essay in modern genocide at the very time when the Turks were playing hosts to the Anzacs...”

I was in Istanbul on the 100th anniversary of Gallipoli and the

Armenian genocide, and noted how Erdogan even moved forward the Anzac-Turkish commemorations to the 24 April 2015 – when the Armenian deportations began a century before – and thus compelled international leaders to attend the ceremonies at Gallipoli intended to mark the 25 April landings rather than the Armenian commemoration in Istanbul.

As Aktar says in his study – not of the Armenians but of Turkey itself – “the transformation of the Gallipoli narrative in present-day Turkey not only contributes to an arguably distorted image of the past, it also renders sentiments of martyrdom and self-sacrifice politically consumable for the conservative masses today.”

They’ll be back at Gallipoli again soon, I’m sure. But it all adds a new and piquant updating to the old First World War poster where a little girl looks at her troubled and disconsolate father – who wears an expression of failure – and asks him: “Daddy, what did YOU do in

the Great War?

Professor Ayhan Aktar's study appears in the Forum for Modern Language Studies (Vol 56, No 2, April 2020).



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