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# Who Sank the Battleship *Bouvet* on 18 March 1915? The Problems of Imported Historiography in Turkey

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This article traces how differing perspectives on the sinking of the French battleship *Bouvet* ultimately denied the Ottoman artillery credit for the success. The official British account would attribute the defeat to ‘floating mines’ and to the ‘luck’ of the Turks in March 1915 first, and later to the *Nusret*’s minefield when they published their official history in 1921. Following the Great War and the occupation of Istanbul, the Ottoman officers who participated in the naval operations revised their own accounts and imported the British official narrative of the event. In understanding this overlooked case using newly disclosed Ottoman and German accounts, we can analyse how the losers’ historiography is vulnerable to overt influence from the victors’ hegemonic official historiography.

**KEYWORDS** French battleship *Bouvet*, Gallipoli, Dardanelles, official historiography, Great War, Ottoman artillery

Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.<sup>1</sup> (Chinua Achebe, 1930–2013)

On 18 March 1915, the Allied Navy attempted to push through the Dardanelles and occupy Istanbul in order to knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war. As it turned out later, their combined attack — using battleships alone and without land forces — was doomed to failure. On 18 March, the Ottoman artillery together with the minefields inflicted considerable damage. Dan van der Vat concluded: ‘The tally for the day was 6 battleships knocked out of a fleet of 18 — a startling loss rate of 33 per cent ... The

The last version of this work was presented in a conference titled as the ‘First World War at Sea, 1914–1919’ at National Maritime Museum, Greenwich at 3–4 June 2016. I would like to express my thanks to colleagues Oleg Ayrapetov, Yigal Sheffy, Gültekin Yıldız who expressed their opinions in the earlier version of this article. I am also grateful to Prof. H. Nüzhet Dalfes and Dr. Bülent Arıkan of Istanbul Technical University for preparing Figure 1. I wish to thank Kyle Hansen who was extremely helpful in final copy-editing. Of course I am responsible for all possible mistakes.

<sup>1</sup> Chinua Achebe, ‘The Art of Fiction — Interview with Chinua Achebe,’ *The Paris Review* (Winter, 1994), 133.

*Bouvet, Irresistible* and *Ocean* were sunk ... This was surely a remarkable harvest for a last minute afterthought of a minefield laid ten days before the great naval attack'.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1921, it has been believed that the minefields, not the Ottoman artillery, defeated the Allied fleet. This belief became part of the dominant historical narrative when Sir Julian Corbett published the first official British account of the Gallipoli naval operations in 1921. He made the following statement:

Not till long after was the real cause of the disasters ascertained. The truth was, that on the night of March 8, the Turks, unknown to us, had laid a line of twenty moored mines in Eren Keui Bay parallel to the shore, and our sweeping craft had missed them. They had been deliberately placed in our usual manoeuvring ground, and, in spite of all our precautions, they had achieved a staggering success.<sup>3</sup>

According to the British official history, it was not the Ottoman heavy artillery but the mines laid by the *Nusret* minelayer that had produced the disaster. Sir Julian Corbett's official history was later translated into Turkish in 1926. Significantly, this narrative established its hegemony over the years in Turkey. In 1929, the official historian of the Gallipoli operations Lt. General Cecile F. Aspinall-Oglander argued along a similar line and cited the testimonies of the French sailors who were rescued from the *Bouvet* by maintaining the fact that 'it was at first believed that a shell had exploded her magazine, but from the statements of survivors (48 officers and men were picked up) it is now certain that she stuck one of that fatal row of mines'.<sup>4</sup> Later, Aspinall-Oglander's official history was presented to President Kemal Atatürk on 21 May 1932 by the British Ambassador Sir George Clerk in Ankara and President Atatürk himself ordered the book to be translated into Turkish. In 1939, the Turkish military press published the book in two volumes.<sup>5</sup>

Building his account on the narrative established by the official historians, Sir Roger Keyes who was the Chief of Staff to Vice-Admiral John M. de Robeck gave his personal recollections of this terrible day in his memoirs as follows: 'The *Nousret* minefield had been responsible for all our troubles, and other writers have recorded their belief that this line of mines altered the whole course of history'.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to this, the Ottoman and German narratives and war accounts of the day advocated the following: the French battleship *Bouvet* sank at the hands of Ottoman heavy artillery. Later on, however, Turkish military historians and also the veterans

<sup>2</sup> Dan van der Vat, *The Dardanelles Disaster: Winston Churchill's Greatest Failure* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2010), 127–8.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Julian S. Corbett, *History of the Great War — Naval Operations, December 1914 to Spring 1915*, Vol. 2, Part 2 (London: Longmans — Green, 1921), 228.

<sup>4</sup> See, French Official Account, Tome viii. Annexes i. No. 55, quoted by C. F. Aspinall-Oglander, *Military Operations: Gallipoli*, Vol. 1, *Inception of the Campaign to May 1915*, reprint of the 1929 edition (London: Imperial War Museum, 1992), 97–8. However, another French account claims that the *Bouvet* had 29 officers and 680 men. Out of these, only 71 could be rescued. See, G. Clerc-Rampal, *La Marine Française pendant le Grande Guerre (Août 1914–Novembre 1918)* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1919), 45.

<sup>5</sup> On the political background of this diplomatic gesture, see: Ayhan Aktar, 'Mustafa Kemal at Gallipoli: The Making of a Saga,' in *Australia and the Great War: Identity, Memory and Mythology*, ed. by Michael J. K. Walsh and Andrekos Varnava (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2016), 149–71. For the Turkish edition of the British official history: C. F. Aspinall-Oglander, *Büyük Harbin Tarihi. Çanakakale: Gelibolu Askeri Harekâtı*, Vols 1 & 2 (Istanbul: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1939 & 1940).

<sup>6</sup> Sir Roger Keyes, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral of the Fleet: The Narrow Seas to Dardanelles, 1910–1915* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1934), 252.

themselves would endorse the British official accounts published in London in 1921 and 1929. In other words, the hegemonic historical narrative about the loss of the *Bouvet* was created in London and Paris and was later imported to Turkey and still shapes the historiography. Since the late 1920s, the epic defence of the Ottoman artillery has long been forgotten.<sup>7</sup> As one can imagine, the ‘Saga of *Nusret*’ and its minefield remain at the centre of the spectacle not only in the academic writing, but also in the official commemoration ceremonies on every 18 March in Turkey.

In this paper, I shall discuss how the sinking of the French battleship *Bouvet* is represented in the British, Turkish and German historiography of the Gallipoli campaign and illustrate how the Turkish narrative was transformed after the publication of British official war accounts in the early 1920s. In evaluating the assessment of the day by the Ottoman High Command, I shall concentrate on the recently disclosed excerpts from the Ottoman War Journals, combat reports and officers’ memoirs. In doing so, I shall also utilise related German combat reports and other German accounts published before 1921. Additionally, I shall summarise the findings of a Turkish underwater expedition completed in 2012 and the testimonies of salvage operators who dived to the wreck in 1965–1970. Now, let us follow the course of events that shaped the hegemonic narrative in relation to the sinking of the *Bouvet* on 18 March 1915.

## 1. Operation orders and conduct of war by the Allied Navy

First, it is necessary to review the plan of bombardment and operation orders of the Allied navy. It is interesting to note that in the operation orders, Vice-Admiral de Robeck set a limit in terms of the advancement of Allied battleships.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that the Ottoman artillery’s firing range and firing capacity were well known by the Allies’ high command at that time. Commodore Francis Mitchell set out the operation plan in 1919:

The attack was to be maintained by one division consisting of four most modern ships, who were to bombard the four main forts of the Narrows from positions about 14,000 yds. [12,797 metres] from Fort No. 13 [Rumeli Mecidiye], i.e., just outside what was expected was the maximum range of the forts. The four ships of line ‘A’ — ‘Inflexible’ (1), ‘Lord Nelson’ (2), ‘Agamemnon’ (3), ‘Queen Elizabeth’ (4) — were to take station in line from [the] Asiatic shore in that order and were detailed to bombard respectively Forts Nos. 16 [Rumeli Hamidiye], 17 [Namazgah], 13 [Yıldız] and 19 [Anadolu Hamidiye]. Ships 5 [*Suffren*], 6 [*Bouvet*], 7 [*Charlemagne*] and 8 [*Gaulois*] were to form line ‘B’ and were to take station

<sup>7</sup> A few memoirs underline the efficiency of Ottoman artillery in the sinking of the *Bouvet* in the last eighty years; for instance, a veteran Sergeant Mehmet from Balıkesir who was at Fort Rumeli Mecidiye’s observation post at 18 March states that *Bouvet* was hit seven times and had sunk as a result of artillery fire. See, *Yaratanların ağzından 18 Mart 1915 Çanakkale Zaferi* [Victory at the Dardanelles on 18 March: Testimonies of its Creators] (Ankara: Türkiye Eski Muharipler Cemiyeti Yayını, 1965), 130. Also, S. Bilbaşar underlined the crucial role of Fort Rumeli Mecidiye in striking the fatal blow to *Bouvet* in his book titled as *Çanakkale 1915* [Gallipoli 1915] (Ankara, 1971), 91. Finally, a Polish scholar Dr. Piotr Nykiel put forward the same argument in his book review titled as ‘Echoes from the Deep — A Huge Academic Mystification’ <[https://www.academia.edu/7647861/\\_Echoes\\_from\\_the\\_Deep\\_A\\_Huge\\_Academic\\_Mystification](https://www.academia.edu/7647861/_Echoes_from_the_Deep_A_Huge_Academic_Mystification)> [accessed 20 December 2015].

<sup>8</sup> ‘Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Attacks Delivered on and the Enemy Defences of the Dardanelles Straits,’ 1919, The National Archives (TNA), London, AIR 1/2323/223/41/1550, 62.

one mile astern of line 'A,' ready to pass through the intervals of line 'A' when ordered, and to engage Forts Nos. 16 [Rumeli Hamidiye], 17 [Namazgah], 13 [Yıldız] and 19 [Anadolu Hamidiye] respectively at closer range. Their advance was to be gradual and up to a line 8,000 yds. [7,312 metres] from Fort No. 13 [Rumeli Mecidiye]. Line 'B' was to be supported by Line 'A,' who were expected to close to 12,000 yds. [10,968 metres].<sup>9</sup>

According to this plan, four Ottoman artillery units in the Narrows were crucial in terms of the Allied navy's firing range. Fort Nos. 13 [Rumeli Mecidiye], 16 [Rumeli Hamidiye], 17 [Namazgah] on the European side and No. 19 [Anadolu Hamidiye] on the Asian side were the ones who had the technical capacity to strike and sink Allied battleships. In these forts, they had *Krupp* coastal cannons which were either 355 mm/L35 in Rumeli Hamidiye (2) and Anadolu Hamidiye (2) or 240 mm/L35 (Rumeli Mecidiye (4), Namazgah (2) and Anadolu Hamidiye (7) had the capacity to strike as long as they were loaded with appropriate shells.

This plan worked quite well until the line B, consisting of four French battleships (*Suffren*, *Bouvet*, *Charlemagne* and *Gaulois*) advancing and entering into the firing range of the Ottoman heavy artillery. Let's read German artillery Captain Heinrich Herschel's letter who was stationed at Anadolu Hamidiye (Fort no. 19) on the Asian side on 18 March. Fort Anadolu Hamidiye was run by the German officers and its CO was Lt.-Colonel Fritz Wossidlo. Herschel's letter dated 21 March 1915 was first published in *Cologne Gazette* in German and later translated into English and reprinted in *The Times*:

During the course of the morning [of 18 March] there appeared quite unexpectedly ten British and four French ships of the line accompanied by a large number of destroyers. The ships streamed slowly through the entrance to the Straits, and then turned broadside-on right across the fairway. One ship of the *Queen Elizabeth* class, with eight 15in. guns and sixteen 6in. quick firing guns, lay at a distance of over eleven miles and opened fire. Against this fire, we could, of course, do nothing. The very first shots told us what we were in for. Soon the shell began to fall on Chanak (Dardanelles Town), where they started a fierce conflagration. I had sent my men under cover, and, with Lt-Colonel [Fritz] W[ossidlo] watched the fire of the *Queen (sic)* and of other enemy ships from my battery-commander's station. I was longing for the moment when we too should be able to open fire, for this taking cover and doing nothing is a dreadful business ... Meanwhile the [howitzer] batteries nearer to the ships had opened an effective fire. Two ships were compelled to get more way on, with the result that their own fire became less accurate. At last our turn came too. Three minutes before one o'clock [12.57], after we had been for two or three hours under a veritable hail of shells, the order to 'stand by the guns' was passed along the battery. How the men jumped to it! The first shots were aimed at the ship on the extreme left of the line, a Frenchman. Shot followed shot, and soon we worked up to volleys, although our battery was in the very thick of the enemy's fire. But we had no more time to notice it ... Now and then we had to take cover, such as it was. But still we were getting on, and soon we nailed the *Bouvet*. We could see quite clearly how our shots got home. The men were streaming with perspiration, but they went on working ... The Frenchman was for it, and soon his last hour had come. A fire broke out in his gigantic hull, one more shot in his side, and then we cried: — 'Hurrah,

<sup>9</sup> 'Report of the Committee', 60.

boys! The *Bouvet* is heeling over!’ and the cheers rang through battery. Three minutes later the Frenchman sank like a stone. That was the end of him.<sup>10</sup>

From this account, we understand that when the British battleships had started to fire from 14,000 yards, in the Ottoman coastal artillery units had nothing to do except wait. Again, it is obvious that Fort Anadolu Hamidiye started engaging after 12.57 and had certainly secured a few hits to the battleship *Bouvet*. As seen on Map 1, the *Bouvet*’s wreck at the moment is 14,200 m away from Anadolu Hamidiye. As we shall see later from the testimonies and reports of the German officers, however, Fort Anadolu Hamidiye had started to strike the *Bouvet* earlier when it advanced to 11,600 meters range. There is no doubt that this fort, equipped with seven 240 mm L/35 and two 355 mm L/35 *Krupp* coastal guns,<sup>11</sup> was the strongest of all batteries in the Narrows. This battery during the day used seventy-five armour-piercing shells and seven high explosive shells.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. The first impressions of the High Command and the Official Communiqué

From the standpoint of the Allied navy, misfortunes started with the sinking of the French battleship *Bouvet* within two minutes at 13.55. Six days later, on 24 March, Vice-Admiral de Robeck who was commanding the fleet aboard the flagship, *Queen Elizabeth*, outlined this incident in his report to the Admiralty:

‘*Suffren*’ leading the line ‘B’ out of the straits, with ‘*Bouvet*’ immediately astern. A large explosion occurred on the starboard side of the latter, abaft the after bridge, accompanied by the dense masses of reddish-black smoke. ‘*Bouvet*’ capsized to starboard and sank within two minutes of the first explosion.

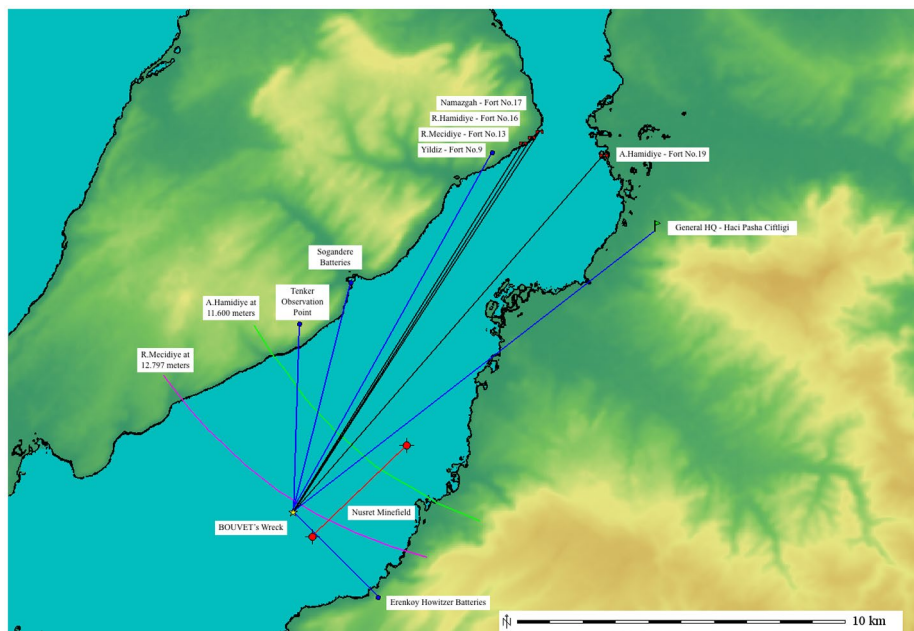
From the ‘*Queen Elizabeth*’, it appeared that the explosion was not due to a mine, but possibly to a large projectile; it was also considered that a magazine explosion had occurred, as she was previously observed to be on fire aft and she sank so rapidly; there appears little doubt that her magazine blew up, but whether it was exploded with mine, gun fire or by an internal fire is not clear.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The letter ends with the following paragraph: ‘Yesterday [20 March] General Djavad Pasha himself pinned the Turkish medal for bravery on my breast, and I have been also recommended for the Iron Cross. There are 24 German soldiers who are to get it as well, and 22 have, like me, received the medal.’ *The Times*, 6 April 1915. Indeed, CO of Dardanelles Fortified Zone, Cevad Pasha wrote a circular to all units on 19 March and declared that two German officers of Anadolu Hamidiye, i.e. CO of Fort Anadolu Hamidiye Lt-Colonel Fritz Wossidlo and Commander of the 2nd Battery Captain Heinrich Herschel, were to be decorated with silver war medals. On 26 March, they both also received German Iron Cross medals (2nd Class). See, Klaus Wolf, *Gelibolu 1915: I. Dünya Harbinde Alman-Türk Askeri İttifakı*. İstanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2014. Appendix II. The original is in German: *Gallipoli 1915, Das Deutsch-Türkische militärbündnis im ersten weltkrieg* (Report Verlag, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Forrest, *The Defence of the Dardanelles: From Bombarads to Battleships* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Maritime Books, 2012), 229.

<sup>12</sup> For the shells utilised by the forts on 18 March, see the Turkish official history: ATASE [Military History and Archives Administration], *Birinci Dünya Savaşı’nda Çanakkale Cephesi (Haziran 1914–25 Nisan 1915)* [Gallipoli Front during the WW I: June 1914–25 April 1915], Vol. 5, book 1 (Ankara, 2012), 186.

<sup>13</sup> Vice-Admiral J. M. de Robeck, ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the Allied British and French Fleets of the Dardanelles on 17th–18th March 1915’ dated 24 March 1915. Cambridge University, Churchill College Archives, DRBK 4/4.



MAP 1. The forts and Ottoman artillery defending the Dardanelles, *Nusret's* minefield and the wreck of *Bouvet*.

As one can ascertain from de Robeck's personal narrative, the British high command was sure that the *Bouvet's* magazine had exploded, but they were not certain about the reasons for her rapid sinking, in which more than 600 sailors and officers drowned. It is very probable that in the beginning, the weight of these factors contributing to the disaster (mines, artillery fire or by an internal fire) had not been determined at that time. However, the Admiralty in London made its official explanations to the press in relation to the loss of the *Bouvet* next day. Not being aware of the fact that the *Nusret* laid mines ten days ago in Erenköy Bay, they pointedly blamed the 'floating mines' for the disaster, not the coastal artillery. The Secretary of Admiralty in London had issued the following statement on 19 March and this was published in *The Times* the following day:

*Bouvet* was blown up by a drifting mine and sank in 36 fathoms [66 metres] north of Erenkioi [sic] village in less than three minutes ... The losses of ships were caused by mines drifting with the current which were encountered in areas hitherto swept clear, and this danger will require special treatment. The British casualties in personnel are not heavy, considering the scale of the operations; but practically the whole of the crew of *Bouvet* were lost with the ship, an internal explosion having apparently supervened on the explosion of the mine.<sup>14</sup>

We do not know whether this explanation, i.e. striking 'floating mines', was part of the propaganda initiative or a genuine conclusion reached by the Admiralty in London. Even if it was propaganda, however, it was quite effective. Accepting the fact that the Ottoman

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 20 March 1915. Another popular magazine, *Illustrated London News*, stressed again on 1 May 1915, no. 3967, 'These disasters, which took place in the afternoon, were ascribed to floating mines, and not to the fire of the Turkish forts'.

artillery scored hits on the *Bouvet* would necessarily mean admitting the superiority of the defending party at the Dardanelles. Conversely, blaming ‘floating mines’ for the disaster would allow the British public to chalk up the failure of their naval operation to ‘bad luck’. Indeed, two days later, the Naval Correspondent of *The Times* argued the following: ‘It cannot be disputed, however, that luck has been with the Turks. The weather has been in their favour ... Moreover, it was only by a slice of good fortune that they got any of the vessels with their floating mines’.<sup>15</sup> No doubt, an official explanation based upon ‘bad luck’ was more palatable for the British public compared to energetic and belligerent enemy artillery.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The Ottoman Combat Reports and Officers’ Memoirs of 18 March

Contrary to the Turkish official historical narrative dominant today, there is ample evidence in the recently disclosed war journals and reports that the *Bouvet* sunk as the result of heavy artillery fire coming from the Ottoman coastal guns.<sup>17</sup> The first war report dated 18 March and written in the evening hours was from the CO of the 4th Heavy Artillery Regiment Major Ahmet Kemal who was the commander of all forts and field batteries (Fort nos. 13, 16 and 17) on the European side of the Narrows. He informed his HQ that the French battleship *Bouvet* sunk at 13.55 as the result of hits coming from his batteries.<sup>18</sup> The same day, another report was written by artillery Captain Hasbi who was in the howitzer batteries stationed on hills of Erenköy Bay, on the Asian side. He reported that a French battleship that was supposed to be the *Bouvet* had sunk as the result of projectiles coming from the fortifications at 14.00.<sup>19</sup> A third war report came from Lt-Colonel Fritz Wossidlo who was CO of Anadolu Hamidiye (Fort no. 19) on the Asian side. He stated that his battery commenced fire on the *Bouvet* at 12.58. His range was 11.600 m and the fire went on until 13.58. After that, the battleship went out of vision because it moved behind Kepez Point on the Asian side.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the official compilations, an important war diary of the Medical Officer, Dr. Behçet Sabit (later Erduran) of Yıldız Battery at the Narrows (Fort no. 9) was published in 2015. As indicated in Map 1, Dr. Behçet Sabit was 12,400 m away from the wreck of the *Bouvet*. He not only gave a vivid description of the 18 March naval operations but also quoted extensively from the official communiqués coming to Yıldız Battery from the HQ at that time.<sup>21</sup>

On 18 March, the famous 19th Infantry Division under the Command of Staff Lt.-Colonel Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) was situated in Maydos (renamed later as

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 22 March 1915.

<sup>16</sup> The possibility of the renewal of naval attack after 18 March was discussed in the following article by Edward J. Erickson, ‘One more push: Forcing the Dardanelles in March 1915,’ *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 24.3 (2001), 158–76.

<sup>17</sup> I would like to underline the fact that the Turkish Military Archive (ATASE) located in Ankara is practically closed to readers. Researchers are not in position to see all relevant war journals and battle reports and our analysis has to be limited to the material published recently in *Askeri Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi* [Turkish Journal of Military History Documents]. No. 132, Year: 63 (January 2014).

<sup>18</sup> War report from the CO of the 4th Heavy Artillery Regiment Major [Ahmet] Kemal. Cited in *Askeri Tarih*, 284.

<sup>19</sup> *Askeri Tarih*, 290.

<sup>20</sup> *Askeri Tarih*, 292.

<sup>21</sup> Behçet Sabit Erduran, *Cephedeki bir doktorun gözünden 1915 baharında Çanakkale* [An Eyewitness Account of a Medical Doctor: Gallipoli in the Spring of 1915]. Ed. by Tamay Açıkel (Istanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2015), 46.



Eceabad). A year later, the ‘History of War Commission’ in Istanbul authorised him to write a report on the Ariburnu Battles of the Northern zone of Gallipoli after 25 April 1915. Mustafa Kemal narrated the naval operation of 18 March as an introduction to his report where in later pages he summarised the initial stages and the battles after the ANZAC landing on 25 April as follows:

On that day, Cevat Pasha, the commander of the Fortified Zone [at the Dardanelles], requested my presence and asked to see me at Kilitbahir [Fortress on the European side]. Following my arrival and meeting him, again he asked me to accompany him – along with the Inspector-General of the Shores and Straits Admiral [Guido von] Usedom – to visit coastal artilleries and fortifications on the European shore [of the Dardanelles] and to choose convenient locations to position additional mobile batteries. We obliged. We accompanied Cevat Pasha, the commander of the Fortified Zone, and proceeded to Kirte, [Krithia, an evacuated Greek village on the southern side of the Gallipoli peninsula]. Upon reaching our destination ... we observed that the enemy navy approached to the entrance of the straits, targeting their bombardment to Kirte and Alcitepe [Achi Baba], where we were caught under fire. To enable Cevat Pasha to return back to his GHQ [on the Asian side of the Dardanelles], we reverted to Maydos. The battle of that day took place solely on the sea, ending up with the defeat of the enemy forces. Other than some enemy battleships bombarding the shores, no notable engagement on land happened.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, Lt.-Colonel Mustafa Kemal had observed the battle with his binoculars in hand. Interestingly, the official circular written by Mustafa Kemal next day is missing in the official compilations of selected combat reports/war journals of the day published in the *Turkish Journal of Military History Documents (Askeri Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi)* recently. According to Dr. Behçet Sabit who quoted the circular signed by the CO of the 19th Division in his entry to his diary on 19 March, Mustafa Kemal reported the events of the previous day as follows:

Yesterday at 11.25 before noon, the enemy entered the Dardanelles with eleven battleships, two battle cruisers and six torpedo boats and opened fire on our batteries. We responded. As the result of the fire opened from our batteries, one of the enemy’s torpedo boats and the *Bouvet* battleship has sunk and two other battleships so heavily wounded that they are unable to open fire anymore.<sup>23</sup>

From the combat reports of the day, we realise that Ottoman officers like M. Kemal were certain that the *Bouvet* had sunk from the fire opened by the batteries. Interestingly, they were not aware of the fact that two other battleships, namely *Irresistible* and *Ocean*, had also sunk later in the evening of 18 March.

A similar circular coming from high command at the Dardanelles dated 18 March was also recorded in Dr. Behçet Sabit’s diary. This one was issued by the CSO of Çanakkale Fortifications, Lt.-Colonel Selahaddin Adil who commanded the operation. He stated similar facts about the day and thanked God that casualties were negligible.<sup>24</sup> The next day, Cevat Pasha sent a daily order to all batteries congratulating the officers and

<sup>22</sup> Mustafa Kemal, *Ariburnu Muharebeleri Raporu* [Report on Ariburnu Battles] (Ankara: ATASE, 2011), 6–7.

<sup>23</sup> Erduran, 48.

<sup>24</sup> The casualties of the day for the Ottomans were four officers dead, one wounded and twenty-two soldiers dead and fifty-two wounded. In addition to that, one German officer and fourteen German soldiers wounded. Total casualties of the day were ninety-seven persons.

soldiers. He recommended that prayers be recited for the fallen soldiers and gave a list of the officers to be granted Ottoman silver merit war medals.<sup>25</sup>

Dr. Behçet Sabit's diary is also rich in extracts from General HQ circulars issued from Istanbul and distributed among the units at Gallipoli. The resumé of the British and French press was recorded in a circular coming from the General HQ in Istanbul. According to British and French press, all three battleships sunk due to floating mines. Dr. Behçet Sabit's diary quotes the official circulars extensively. Actually, the Turkish *Journal of Military History Documents (Askeri Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi)* has also printed the British and French official communiqués stating that the *Bouvet* hit the floating mines and sunk.<sup>26</sup>

One intervention missing in the official publication — and found in Dr. Behçet Sabit's diary — is worth mentioning: The CO of all coastal artillery units (2nd Heavy Artillery Brigade) Colonel Mustafa Talat Bey had added a paragraph to the end of the official circular refuting the press resumé's content:

As it was written above and understood from more than ten circulars [distributed previously] that the enemy argues that their battleships were lost due to [striking] mines only. This shows the fact the enemy's will-power has been broken at such a level that I recommend all officers and soldiers in the batteries work harder in order to instigate more casualties to the enemy. I pray God helps them.<sup>27</sup>

Coming from the commander of all artillery units at the Dardanelles, this shows that the Ottoman officers took the British Admiralty's official communiqué merely as war propaganda and reacted accordingly.

It is likely that Dr. Behçet Sabit was also trying to establish the truth by his own means. He conducted interviews with officers who had a better view of the battle compared to where he had been stationed at Yıldız battery 12,400 m away. In his diary entry, Dr. Behçet Sabit gave the testimony of artillery officer Hüseyin İbrahim who was on active duty at Tenker howitzer batteries on the European side, only 5690 m away from the point where the *Bouvet* sunk (see Map 1). Here is Hüseyin İbrahim's testimony:

Contrary to the allegations, three of the enemy battleships were not sunk because of the mines but from artillery fire coming from our batteries. The French battleship [*Bouvet*] was coming close to Dardanos battery [Fort No. 8 on the Asian side] and was struck by a projectile coming from the [Rumeli] Mecidiye [Fort No. 13 on the European side] in the afternoon. She was hit at a point just close to her waterline and an explosion came after, creating big flames. She changed her course. Another explosion took place probably close to her coal storage or somewhere else and further conflagrations observed. She capsized and sank from the rear.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cevad Pasha's order dated 19 March 1915. See, *Askeri Tarih*, 267.

<sup>26</sup> *Askeri Tarih*, 299–300.

<sup>27</sup> Erduran, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Erduran, 45–6.

The doctor's diary captures the triumphant mood prevailing among Ottoman officers in the post-18 March period. For instance, he rushed to the Rumeli Mecidiye battery on evening of 18 March to pay his respects to its commander Captain Mehmet Hilmi (later Şanlıtop). Dr. Behçet Sabit had congratulated him and provided medical service to some of his wounded soldiers until the early hours of 19 March.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Ottoman press in Istanbul had been censored extensively during the war, the coverage on the sinking of the *Bouvet* was jubilatory. On 21 March 1915, the Ottoman daily *Tasvir-i Efkâr* highlighted the fact that two projectiles hit the *Bouvet* before it sunk. The same day, the official communiqué issued from the Ministry of War declared 'the military observers on the sides [of the Dardanelles] clearly verify and affirm that the French battleship *Bouvet* received two hits from the Ottoman artillery before it had sunk'.<sup>30</sup> Again, in the Ottoman daily *İkdam*, the official communiqué of the French authorities was criticised. In a column published with the headline 'the French Confess', the news from the Italian press was as follows: 'Although the French official communiqué confesses the fact that the Allied navy suffered big losses at the Dardanelles, they try to explain it by attributing the incident to explosion of mines as a way to trivialise the Turk's radiant success'.<sup>31</sup>

Starting from November 1915, the Ottoman General HQs published a magazine titled *Harb Mecmuası* (The War Magazine). The celebratory mood was also repeated in its third issue published in January 1916; we see the photographs of Captain Mehmet Hilmi and Lieutenant Fahri from the Rumeli Mecidiye battery in front of a cannon (see Figure 1). A caption under the photograph states: 'The cannon that sunk the *Bouvet* and the Commander of Battery Mehmet Hilmi and Lieutenant Fahri'.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Recollections of Captain Mehmet Hilmi, CO of Fort Rumeli Mecidiye

The CO of Rumeli Mecidiye (Fort no. 13), Artillery Captain Mehmet Hilmi (1884–1946) wrote his memoirs just before his retirement in July 1942. This manuscript was prepared for a conference at the Military Academy and covered the events between 25 February and 18 March 1915 at Gallipoli.

Captain Mehmet Hilmi stated that prior to 18 March, the Forts of No. 13 [Rumeli Mecidiye], No. 16 [Rumeli Hamidiye] and No. 17 [Namazgah] were united as a group under his command. In other words, Captain Mehmet Hilmi must have been in charge of the fire coordination of these three forts on the European side of the Narrows that were 13,080 m away from the wreck of *Bouvet*. His description of the incident was as follows:

On 18 March, the French navy had suffered great damage. Because of this, Admiral de Robeck ordered the French to retreat. The battleship *Suffren* was going out of the strait in full speed

<sup>29</sup> According to the Turkish official history, Rumeli Mecidiye sustained total casualties of twelve dead soldiers and one officer, thirty soldiers wounded. See, ATASE, *Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Çanakkale Cephesi* (Haziran 1914–25 Nisan 1915), Vol. 5, book 1 (Ankara, 2012), 187.

<sup>30</sup> *Tasvir-i Efkâr Gazetesinde Çanakkale Savaşları* [Gallipoli Battles on *Tasvir-i Efkâr* Daily]. Comp. by Mithat Atabay (Istanbul: E Yayınları, 2014), 114–15.

<sup>31</sup> *İkdam Gazetesi'nde Çanakkale Cephesi* [Gallipoli Battles on *İkdam* Daily], Vol. 1, Comp. by Murat Çulcu (Istanbul: Denizler Kitapevi, 2004), 174.

<sup>32</sup> *Harb Mecmuası* (Kasım 1915–Haziran 1918), No. 3, 36. Reprinted by Türk Tarih Kurumu [Turkish History Association], Ankara, 2013.

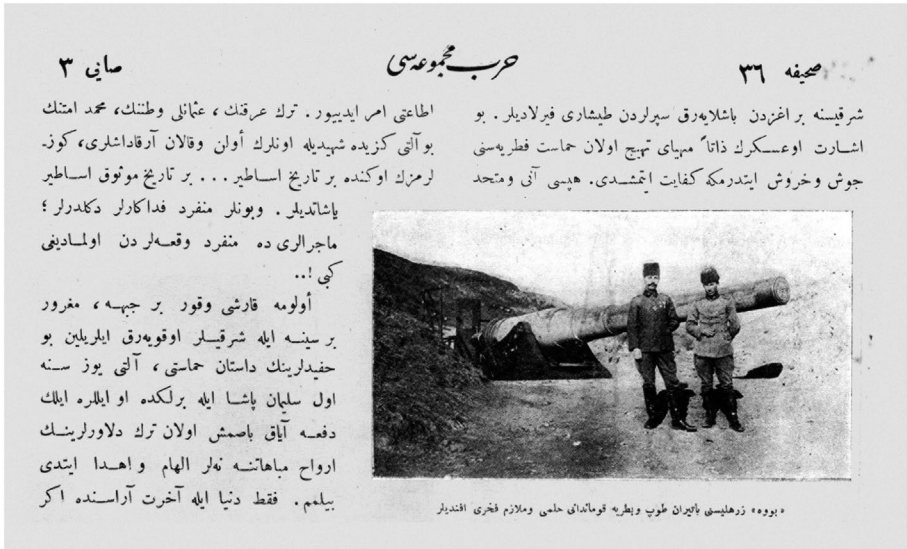


FIGURE 1. The cannon that sank the battleship *Bouvet* and its commanding officers [Captain] Hilmi and First Lieutenant Fahri in *Harb Mecmuası* (*The War Magazine*) No. 3, January 1916.

and the *Bouvet* was following it. The *Bouvet* was lightly damaged. Just as it was streaming in front of us, a projectile charged from my [Rumeli] Mecidiye [Fort no. 13] hit its funnel and its magazine exploded. A reddish smoke came out of the battleship. When the smoke dispersed, it was visible that the ship had tilted. Two minutes later the *Bouvet* had sunk ... [Later in the evening the CO] of 2nd Heavy Artillery Brigade Colonel [Mustafa] Talat came to visit us. He stated that from morning till evening he was in the observation post at Tenker [Battery] and watched all phases of the battle. He said that the battleship *Bouvet* had been hit by a projectile that charged from our battery. It was hit just one metre below its waterline and this strike had its magazine exploded and sunk because of it.<sup>33</sup>

Captain Mehmet Hilmi's bravery was noticed by the high command as he was decorated with the silver merit war medal by Cevad Pasha. Later, he was also awarded the German Iron Cross (2nd Class) for his distinguished services.<sup>34</sup> Another officer, Lieutenant Sarkis Torossian, an Armenian artillery officer under the command of Captain Hilmi, witnessed the incident and recorded his impressions as follows:

The enemy, realising that our main fortifications had been destroyed, began to manoeuvre more boldly and a French ship started to approach along the Asiatic side of the coast. I watched her every metre she moved. I became breathless with the tension I felt. She streamed nearer, nearer, then she began to slacken speed and swerve toward the centre of the strait. I

<sup>33</sup> Captain Mehmet Hilmi's testimony was published partly in a biographical novel written by his nephew, Gazanfer Sanlitop. Captain Mehmet Hilmi's authentic testimony was given in italics. Mr. Sanlitop was kind enough to permit me to use the original manuscript in Ottoman script. I would like to thank my colleague Prof. Fikret Yılmaz of Bahçeşehir University for its transcription. Here, I quote from the published version: Gazanfer Sanlitop, *Çanakkale Geçilemedi: Yüzbaşı Mehmet Hilmi* [The Dardanelles Held Strong: Captain Mehmet Hilmi] (Istanbul: Esen Publications, 2010), 221–2.

<sup>34</sup> Sanlitop, 233.

gave the command to fire on her forward deck. One shot had taken away her steering gear. She began to list heavily ... The French ship tried to surrender but our guns were merciless and no attention paid to her frantic signals. Finally she too disappeared in the waters of the Dardanelles.<sup>35</sup>

Lieutenant Torossian's recollection suggests that he must have been somewhere around Fort Rumeli Hamidiye (Fort no. 13), probably in one of the observation posts. Though we will not be able to know exactly where Torossian was exactly stationed, we know from the recollections of Captain Mehmet Hilmi that he established one observation post on the right side of the battery towards the entrance. Hilmi also underlined that due to the dust and smoke of the allied bombardment, it was sometimes difficult to see even the battleships and he had to rely on the calculations of his observation officers.

## 5. German officers' narrative on the sinking of the *Bouvet*

German Military Archives (Freiburg) has some of the war journals (*Kriegstagebücher*) from 18 March 1915. For instance, Colonel Heinrich Wehrle who was the CO of the 8th Heavy Artillery Regiment situated at Erenköy Bay observed what went on and wrote his report to Marshall Liman von Sanders in Istanbul the next day. He recorded the incident as follows:

By then two French ships of the line [*Linienschiff*] of the *Bouvet* type had come in front and received cross fire from [Fort no. 19, Anadolu] Hamidie and my sector. The *Bouvet* received an underwater hit by 35 cm cannon from [Anadolu] Hamidie. She listed, retreated, and capsized. She sank like a stone in hardly 1.5 minutes with the entire crew (1.45 pm). The other French [battleship] went out [of Dardanelles] heavily damaged.<sup>36</sup>

As we can see in Map 1, his battery was only 3700 m away from the wreck of the *Bouvet*. Colonel Wehrle's position was likely the closest of all observers that day, whose testimonies and recollections reached us. His report must have been read extensively in General HQ in Istanbul. In April 1915, Wehrle's war journal was also drawn on in a longer report written by German Vice-Admiral Guido von Usedom who was the 'Inspector General of Ottoman Coast Defences'. Admiral von Usedom stated that the *Bouvet* was not sunk by the mines laid by. He argued that the *Bouvet* was hit by the artillery fire directed from Anadolu Hamidiye (Fort No. 19) while it was still east of those particular minefields.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Captain Sarkis Torossian, *From Dardanelles to Palestine*. (Boston: Meador Press, 1947), 54–5. The publication of the Turkish edition of Captain Torossian's account initiated a fierce debate by Turkish nationalist historians in 2012–2013. Torossian's memoir was subjected to close scrutiny by drawing on the miniscule details of military history in an attempt to discredit him. It was claimed that Torossian had never been to any of the fronts he had described and that the details he had given were wrong. Interestingly, they used the paragraph quoted above as an example of Torossian's lies. Following the official line, it was argued that all ships sunk on 18 March struck the mines from the *Nusret* minelayer. For the Torossian debate, see Robert Fisk, 'The Armenian Hero Turkey Would Prefer to Forget,' *Independent*, 12 May 2013; Taner Akçam, 'A Short History of the Torossian Debate,' *Journal of Genocide Research*, 18.4 (2016), 345–62. In the *Journal of Genocide Research* 18.4, (2016), an extended English version of the Captain Torossian debate can be found.

<sup>36</sup> German Military Archives (Freiburg) BA/MA, RM 40/810. War Journal, Dardanelles, Howitzer Section, Colonel [Heinrich] Wehrle to Marshall Liman Von Sanders, Camp near Erenköy, Mar. 19, 1915 (copy). I am grateful to Dr. Hilmar Kaiser for the translations.

<sup>37</sup> Admiral Guido von Usedom, 'Zammenfassender Bericht über die Kämpfe an der Dardanellen vom 19. Februar bis 20 April 1915'. *Sonderkommission der Deutschen Marine in der Türkei*, 7. Quoted by Wolf, *Gelibolu 1915*, 200.

He added that first it was thought that the *Bouvet* hit the mines laid by *Nusret* by the high command, but when they had read Colonel Wehrle's combat reports, they later realised that the Ottoman artillery had scored the deadly blow. Indeed there was one combat report dated 18 March of Fort *Namazgah* — 13,680 m away from where the *Bouvet*'s wreck is currently — verifying Admiral von Usedom's observations. That document reported that the *Bouvet* hit a mine and sunk at 13.55.<sup>38</sup>

Commodore Francis H. Mitchell and a group of British officers visited Istanbul in 1919. The committee was in charge of examining the 'Attacks Delivered on and the Enemy Defences of the Dardanelles Straits' and attached to the Dardanelles Commission formed in 1916. During their undertaking, they toured Gallipoli battlefields between 6 and 14 May 1919.<sup>39</sup> They took photographs of the forts and later interviewed the Ottoman officers who had participated to the campaign. In his final report, Commodore F. H. Mitchell unknowingly repeated Admiral von Usedom's interpretation and underlined the following:

It was thought at the forts that '*Bouvet*' had struck a mine, but the following day, when observers below Dardanos [Fort no. 8 on Asian side] were heard from (they had been cut off [in terms of communications] all this time, as stated before) they reported the '*Bouvet*' was struck twice by shells and sunk immediately after the second hit.<sup>40</sup>

Admiral von Usedom's description of the sinking matches our findings illustrated in Map 1. Indeed, the battleship the *Bouvet* was up in the east of the minefield when it sustained the first hits from the Ottoman artillery. Today, its wreck is on the west of *Nusret* minefield.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, we can calculate the shortest distance of the *Bouvet*'s wreck to the minefield is 920 m based on the given coordinates.<sup>42</sup> Having received at least two hits from the Ottoman artillery that created an explosion and tilted to its starboard, could this battleship still drift 920 m towards the west of the minefield after striking a mine? This seems to be very unlikely. However, we shall consider the effect of mines in the sinking of the *Bouvet* later.

Another important testimony belongs to Lt.-Colonel Fritz Wossidlo who narrated the story of the day in his combat report as follows:

On 18th of March 1915 at 1.20 pm, the Battery [Anadolu] Hamidie opened fire on the French ship of the line [*Linienschiff*] *Bouvet* which was laying in Erenköy Bay. This [bombardment] was conducted until 1.50 pm at median battle range of 11,600 meters with short intermissions caused by [impeding] of the observation possibilities through strong smoke from short shots which also caused the silting of the guns. The fire had to cease because the target disappeared behind the Kepez point ... The side observer at [Fort no. 8] Dardanos had observed aside

<sup>38</sup> See *Askeri Tarih*, 276.

<sup>39</sup> ADM 116/1713, Diary of the Dardanelles Committee, 14–15.

<sup>40</sup> 'Report of the Committee', 62, TNA AIR 1/2323/223/41/1550, 440.

<sup>41</sup> ATASE, *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi: Deniz Harbi* [Naval Operations in WW I], Vol. 8 (Ankara, 1976), 174, footnote 1.

<sup>42</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Selçuk Kolay for sharing with me the coordinates of the *Bouvet*'s wreck. Also, I thank my friend Prof. Nüzhet Dalfes of Istanbul Technical University who came with me all the way to Gallipoli to visit the forts and determine their exact locations via GPS. Dr. Bülent Arıkan of Istanbul Technical University used these data and produced an excellent map to follow the events of the day and measured the distances using Google Earth between the wreck of *Bouvet* and several forts and observers.

of several covering salvos, several short-shots in front of the target [*Bouvet*] which are to be considered as underwater strikes. In all, seventy-nine blue armour-piercing projectiles were fired. At five pm all guns were again battle-ready aside of the destroyed second 24 cm gun.<sup>43</sup>

Although German war journals and combat records underline that Anadolu Hamidiye, run by the German officers, had scored hits on the *Bouvet*, Ottoman officers were quite sure that Rumeli Mecidiye (Fort no. 13) was instrumental in striking the final deadly blow to the *Bouvet*. According to our calculations, Anadolu Hamidiye and Rumeli Mecidiye are 14,200 and 13,080 m away from the wreck of the *Bouvet*. They both had the technical capacity and expertise to sink this battleship. If one compares testimonies of the Ottoman and German officers, there is a clear-cut contest among the artillery officers in claiming the glory, hence the victory.

Interestingly, other war accounts of the Ottomans and Germans in the post-1915 period continued to stress the fact that the *Bouvet* sunk due to artillery fire. For instance, German war correspondent Paul Schweder published a book on the German–Turkish alliance and gave detailed information about the theatres of the war in 1916. Visiting the Dardanelles and possibly reading either Vice-Admiral von Usedom’s report or Colonel Wehrle’s war journal, Schweder also argued the following:

... but a destroyer and a minesweeper hit by the indirect fire of the howitzer batteries. The *Bouvet* had been sunk by artillery fire. Shortly before she sank, she had been hit twice, once on the deck, once at the level of the waterline, by the 35.5 cm projectile from one of the large batteries. The speedy sinking of the ship of the line, is probably explained by the fact, that it took too much water on one side, as its weight could not be balanced in time.<sup>44</sup>

Major C. R. Prigge, another eyewitness, was later appointed as the adjutant to Marshall Liman von Sanders Commander of the 5th Army. He narrated the event as follows:

The counter fire of the Turkish batteries began. At 2 o’clock the French battleship ‘Bouvet’ was struck by two 35.5 cm shells from Fort [Anadolu] Hamidieh. A tall white column of smoke rose from the ship, and a few seconds later a terrific crack drowned the din of the battle. Torpedo boats, minesweepers and destroyers hurried up, but none reached the sinking monster which took her whole crew with her to the bottom.<sup>45</sup>

In the testimonies of German and Turkish officials, the sinking of the *Bouvet* was explained by artillery fire until 1921. For instance, in 1917, the ideologue of Turkish nationalism Ziya Gökalp began publishing *Yeni Mecmua* (*The New Review*) as part of a new, literary project to strengthen the spirit of resistance among the nationalist elites. A year later, the editorial board of *Yeni Mecmua* decided to publish a ‘Special Issue on Gallipoli’ which included literary works, memoirs and interviews.<sup>46</sup> Promoted to the rank of Brigadier-General in April 1916, Mustafa Kemal Pasha gave his first full-fledged

<sup>43</sup> German Military Archives (Freiburg) BA/MA, RM 40/59, folios 14 and 15. War Journal by Lt.-Colonel Wossidlo, the CO of the Fort Anadolu Hamidiye. Chanak, 18 March 1915 (copy).

<sup>44</sup> Paul Schweder, *Im Türkischen Hauptquartier* [In Turkish HQ] (Leipzig: Hesse & Becker, 1916), 102. I am grateful to Prof. Nazan Aksoy for the translation.

<sup>45</sup> C. R. Prigge, *Der Kampf um die Dardanellen* (Weimar: 1916), 16. Unpublished English translation prepared for the Dardanelles Committee, June 1919. See TNA ADM 116/1713.

<sup>46</sup> It featured articles describing the Gallipoli battle, with references to the ancient history and geography of the place. Journalist Ruşen Eşref (later Ünaydın) interviewed the soldiers and officers who had fought at Gallipoli, including Mustafa Kemal. See, Erol Köroğlu, *Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity: Literature in Turkey during World War I* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 96.

interview on his Gallipoli times. Apart from him, another five Gallipoli veterans of various ranks were interviewed as well.

In this compilation, Captain Emin Âli wrote a long essay on the naval assault of 18 March and reviewed the highlights of the war. Using patriotic language, he said the following: the '*Bouvet* received twelve hits [from our artillery] and this courageously advancing battleship started to live its final moments. Just one and half minutes later, under the severe bombardments coming from our batteries, the proud French flag had sunk to the foam-covered waves of the blue seas'.<sup>47</sup>

## 6. Losing the Great War and changing the narrative

As mentioned before, the British Admiralty formed a special committee presided over by Commodore Francis H. Mitchell on 21 March 1919.<sup>48</sup> It had its first meetings at the Admiralty in London during March 1919 and later travelled to Turkey. They arrived in Istanbul in April. In those days, Istanbul was under Allied occupation and the British High Commissioner was Vice-Admiral de Robeck, Commander of the fleet on 18 March. During their stay in Turkey until 14 June 1919, members of the Mitchell Committee not only visited the battlefields of Gallipoli, but also interviewed many senior Ottoman officers who had fought at Gallipoli.<sup>49</sup> One of the distinctive characteristics of the Mitchell Report was its scope. It was the first official British account of the war integrating the Ottoman officers' narrative.<sup>50</sup>

In relation to the sinking of the *Bouvet*, the Mitchell Report repeated Vice-Admiral de Robeck's personal recollections of 26 March 1915, which was not decisive about the reasons of sinking of the *Bouvet*:

From the *Queen Elizabeth* it appeared that the explosion was not due to a mine, but possibly to a large projectile; it was also considered that a magazine explosion had occurred, as she was previously observed to be on fire aft and she sank so rapidly; there appears little doubt that her magazine blew up, but whether it was exploded with mine, gun fire, or by an internal fire, is not clear.<sup>51</sup>

The Mitchell Committee also interviewed Cevad Pasha, the CO of Fortifications at Gallipoli on 18 March. Interestingly, his recollections were similar to Admiral de Robeck's:

I had a special line of 8 [?] mines laid in a line parallel to the Erenkeui [Erenköy] Bay on the south side of the Channel.<sup>52</sup> I considered these would be less likely to be detected owing to

<sup>47</sup> Yüzbaşı Emin Âli, 'Çanakkale'ye Düşman Donanmasının Hücûmları ve 5 Mart 1331 [18 Mart 1915], 'Çanakkale, 18 Mart 1915: Yeni Mecmûa'nın Nüsha-i Fevkalâdesi [The Special Edition of *Yeni Mecmua* on Gallipoli]. Ed. by Murat Çulcu (Istanbul: E yayınları, 2006), 52.

<sup>48</sup> For Admiral Francis Herbert Mitchell's (1876–1946) service records, see TNA ADM 196/89/169.

<sup>49</sup> 'Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Attacks Delivered on and the Enemy Defences of the Dardanelles Straits,' 1919. C.B. 1550, Mitchell Report, TNA AIR 1/2323/223/41/1550.

<sup>50</sup> For the diary of the activities of Commodore Mitchell's Committee, see TNA ADM 116/1713.

<sup>51</sup> 'Report of the Committee', 62.

<sup>52</sup> Probably Cevad Pasha when interviewed by Brigadier-General C. J. Percival on 14 April 1919 in Istanbul could not remember the exact number of mines laid by *Nusret* in the early hours of 8 March 1915 (Full interview is in TNA ADM 116/1713). However, the War Journal of Dardanelles Fortified Zones, High Command, published by ATASE, clearly states that the number of moored mines laid by *Nusret* is 26. See, ATASE, *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi: Deniz Harbi*, 174.



their being parallel to and not across the channel, and that they might catch a ship keeping to the south. The 'BOUVET' sank near this line: I do not know whether she struck the minefield or was hit by gun-fire.<sup>53</sup>

This was plausibly the first time the British officers had learned of the existence of the minefield laid by the *Nusret* parallel to Erenköy Bay. As Cevad Pasha reached his HQ late, his staff officer Lt-Colonel Selahaddin Adil supervised the operation until his arrival. Five years later, Selahaddin Adil gave a lecture on the 'Gallipoli Naval Operations during the Great War' at Ottoman Military Academy in Istanbul on 15 February 1920, which was later published as a pamphlet. He presented the event as follows:

Finally the *Bouvet* and *Gaulois* battleships came close to five to six kilometres (Kepez-Soğanlı) line. They advanced as far as the Karantina line. Entering into possible firing range, the *Bouvet* was put under fire from the Rumelian and Anatolian Hamidiye batteries. Anatolian Hamidiye [battery] had a side observer close to Erenköy [Bay]. Just after two o'clock the commander of the [Anatolian Hamidiye] battery informed me that [the *Bouvet*] had two strikes. At that time, we could see the *Bouvet*'s sinking from our General Headquarters. It is just this moment that His Excellency Cevad Pasha set his foot from European side to Anatolian side. In short, two hours later, the sinking of the *Bouvet* was seen from everywhere and made great impression on general morale.<sup>54</sup>

First, it is significant that Selahaddin Adil does not mention any mines striking the *Bouvet* at all. Furthermore, his narrative of the incident clearly glorifies the Ottoman artillery of the Narrows. Selahaddin Adil's account in his memoirs (written in the 1950s and published posthumously in 1982) demonstrates that by then the imported British narrative had established hegemony in Turkish historiography:

At 13.45, while the *Bouvet* was leaving its place to the British [battleships], she had disappeared with a terrible explosion in a huge column of water within seconds. **Although it is certain that the *Bouvet* had got its fatal blow from the mine and sinking with all of its sailors,** but we know that she had to be called back from the battlefield. Because her turrets were destroyed, several fires activated, severe casualties inflicted and got many strikes on its waterline as the result of our artillery fire.<sup>55</sup>

It is quite obvious that in the post-1921 period, Selahaddin Adil had revised his narrative. In the second narrative, the *Nusret* minefield was introduced into the analysis. Although he gave credit to the Ottoman artillery for securing several hits on the *Bouvet*, he endorsed the mines laid by *Nusret* as the deadly hit.

Another example could be taken from the recollections of Major Sedat (later Doğruer), a staff officer at 3rd Corps at Gallipoli. He was in the HQ at Hacı Paşa Çiftliği with Lt-Colonel Selahaddin Adil on that day — 13,830 m away from the wreck of the *Bouvet*. In his book published in 1927, first, he included the French and British accounts of the day that had already been translated into Turkish. Finally, he added the following:

<sup>53</sup> Notes of an Interview by Brigadier-General Claude J. Perceval with General Djevad Pasha on 14 April 1919, TNA ADM 116/1713.

<sup>54</sup> Selâhaddin [Âdil] Paşa, *Harb-i Umûmî'de Çanakkale Muhârebât-ı Babriyesi* (Istanbul: Erkân-ı Harbiye Mektebi Matbaası, 1920), 20–1.

<sup>55</sup> Selahattin Adil, *Hayat Mücadeleleri: Selahattin Adil Paşa'nın Hatıraları* [Life Struggles: The Memoirs of Selahattin Adil Pasha] (Istanbul, 1982), 227 (emphasis is mine).

It was doubtful as to whether this battleship [the *Bouvet*] had sunk as the result of our artillery fire or striking a mine. Among us, the majority believed that it had sunk due to the artillery fire. **According to the information [later] given by the French which was based upon the rescued sailors' testimonies**, the ship received altogether twelve hits before an explosion [occurred] in one of its 30.5 mm turrets that was the prelude to its calamity. Then the battleship was able to fire few shots afterwards. But after receiving another strike, the ship tilted to its starboard. **From this, we understand that the *Bouvet* was damaged by our artillery fire, lost its capacity to manoeuvre and [finally] struck a mine that completed its calamity.**<sup>56</sup>

This shift in the narrative is worth considering. The translations of Sir Julian S. Corbett's official history into Turkish in 1926 and of Lt. General Aspinall-Oglander's *Military Operations: Gallipoli* in 1939 shaped the nature of modifications to both of the Ottoman officers' analysis. Both underlined the efficiency of coastal artillery fire that they had observed with their own eyes but later introduced the minefield to their narrative. Apparently, the convincingly written British account influenced and altered the Ottoman officers' narrative.

This shift could be observed in the memoir of a German navy officer, Major Hermann Lorey who had published his own recollections in 1938.<sup>57</sup> As a flotilla commander at the Dardanelles, he observed the naval operations on 18 March. In his book, he summarised the day from the British sources first and quoted from the war journal of Lt.-Colonel Fritz Wossidlo of Anadolu Hamidiye. He finished his account by quoting Winston Churchill's resumé of the day by glorifying the performance of *Nusret* minelayer in changing the course of the war. His remarks about the cause of *Bouvet*'s loss were similar to Major Sedat's account:

Despite overwhelming superiority and the strongest will to fight, the enemy fleet had not succeeded in striking down the forts and achieving its main goal: the elimination of the minefields. **That mines had primarily caused the sinking of three ships on the line was not immediately recognised [by the officers] in the forts.** One officer assumed that the loss of the *Bouvet*, at least, was due to hits from a 35 cm volley by Fort [Anadolu] Hamidiye. **Only after enemy news had become known did the crucial importance of the mines set in the Erenköy Bay on 8 March become clear.** All the same, artillery fire had not missed its effect: the *Gaulois*, *Suffren*, and *Inflexible* had received heavy artillery hits, which forced them to retreat. Also, that the *Ocean* failed to keep afloat could be attributed to the impact of a projectile that followed [hitting] the mine. The significant share of the success of the day that fell on to the steep fire of batteries has already been highlighted. Thus, artillery and underwater defense were allowed to share success ...<sup>58</sup>

Another early example of the change in the narrative could be found in the so-called first official Turkish account published in 1921. The Turkish official account was likely published just after Sir Julian S. Corbett's work. Mysteriously, the Ministry of War published the book in Istanbul but did not distribute it. It cannot be found in any of the Turkish libraries today. Interestingly, it had been translated into English and both the original Turkish edition and its English translation were discovered recently in the

<sup>56</sup> Mirliva Sedat, *Boğazlar Meselesi ve Çanakkale Deniz Zaferi* [The Question of the Straits and the Dardanelles Naval Victory] (Istanbul, 2008), 255 (emphasis is mine).

<sup>57</sup> Hermann Lorey, *Der Krieg in den Türkischen Gewässern: Der Kampf um die Meerengen*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Mittler, 1938).

<sup>58</sup> Lorey, 93. I am grateful to Dr. Hilmar Kaiser for the translation (emphasis is mine).

British National Archives. Both versions were published in a single volume in Ankara in 2012. Apart from explaining the loss of the *Bouvet* as a result of the Erenköy minefield, the general tone of the narrative is rather gloomy:

By 14.00 hours the military situation had become extremely critical. Towns of Çanak and Kilitbahir were in flames, all telephone lines were cut, all communication with the forts was interrupted, some of the guns were knocked out, others were half buried, others again were out of action with their breech mechanism jammed; in consequence the artillery fire of the defence had slackened considerably. Just at this moment, an enemy destroyer off Erenköy was sunk by a direct hit from one of our shells. Immediately afterwards the battleship *Bouvet* struck a mine and sank.<sup>59</sup>

This narrative certainly differs from the triumphant spirit of 19 March 1915 where the Ottoman and German officers were sure that the battleship *Bouvet* was sunk as the result of Ottoman artillery fire coming from their batteries. Probably written in the post-1919 period, the pessimistic and self-debasing disposition of the Ottoman and German officers likely contributed to this kind of analyses. Winning the battle at Gallipoli in 1915, but finally losing the war in 1918 and further experiencing the humiliation of Allied occupation must have contributed to the formation of a solemn and depressive mood.

## 7. Turkish diving expedition to the wrecks of Dardanelles in 2012

A group of Turkish divers organised a diving expedition to the wrecks of the battleships laying deep in the Dardanelles. However, they could not obtain official permission to dive to the *Bouvet* because the wreck is located in the middle of the straits on the international waterways as seen on Map 1. However, they used ‘3D Multibeam Sonar Imaging’ techniques to scan the wrecks where experts could assess the reasons for its sinking. The Turkish research team shared the 3D Sonar Data of the *Bouvet* with two international experts: Dr. Larrie D. Ferreiro and Sean Kery. They are both members of the ‘Marine Forensics Committee’ functioning under SNAME (The Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers).<sup>60</sup> The experts’ report is as follows:

- (1) We do NOT believe that the mine was the sole cause of BOUVET’s capsizing and sinking. The reasons are:
    - (a) The mine damage near the bow, which does not correlate with eyewitness accounts of a blast amidships.
    - (b) The location and extent of the damage are too small to account for the rapidity of the capsizing. The mine hole would not have caused many compartments to flood, and the ones that would have flooded are small, so too little water would have come in during the first 50 seconds to cause a capsizing
- ...

<sup>59</sup> *Çanakkale Muhârebati: Cihan Harbinde Osmanlı Harekât-ı Tarihçesi* [The Dardanelles Campaign: A Short History of the Turkish Operations in the Great War]. Ed. and intro. by Bülent Özdemir and Abdülmecit Mutaf (Ankara: TTK, 2012), 102.

<sup>60</sup> For further information on SNAME, see: <<https://www.sname.org/home>> [last accessed 20 December 2015].

- (2) The most likely cause of the rapid capsize would have been a large hole on the starboard side in one of the boiler rooms, each of which was subdivided by a longitudinal bulkhead. This would have quickly created substantial off-centre flooding, which, when coupled with the mine damage and the tumblehome shape of the hull, likely would have resulted in a rapid roll-over.
- (3) Such a hole would have almost certainly been caused by Ottoman artillery.
- (4) Therefore, a more thorough examination of the wreck, particularly starboard amidships at the waterline, should be accomplished to determine if that hole would provide the ‘smoking gun’ to show what caused *BOUVET* to sink, killing 604 men and changing the course of World War I.
- (5) To be Cartesian about this (actually Bayesian), I assign an 85 % probability that mine alone did not sink *BOUVET*.<sup>61</sup>

Another expert, Dr. Jean-Marie Kowalski, member of the French Naval Academy, who had also studied the 3D sonar data, reported the following on the sinking of the *Bouvet*:

The hull on the starboard side just forward of the engine room seems to have a serious damage. This indicates that mine damage was not the only cause of the sinking. Most probably a shell from the Ottoman artillery inflicted the damage amidships.<sup>62</sup>

These reports confirm that the Ottoman coastal cannons of the Narrows were the major cause for the *Bouvet*’s downing. Striking a mine was a secondary, if not negligible, cause of the disaster. Both experts’ reports point out the large hole existing in the middle of the *Bouvet*’s hull that caused the rapid capsize and sinking of the ship within two minutes. The experts underlined the fact that they were 85% sure that the Ottoman artillery had caused the sinking of the *Bouvet*. Here, the ‘crude positivism’ of the experts at ‘Marine Forensics Committee’ ends the differences of officers’ opinions and their changing narratives between March 1915 and post-1921 period. At this instance, the unbearable burden of losing the war for both the Turks and Germans, experiencing the humiliation of foreign occupation — and hence allowing the victors’ official histories to be accepted as the absolute truth — cannot influence the experts’ judgement.

## 8. Turkish divers visiting the ‘Crime Scene’ in 1967: salvaging the Gallipoli Wrecks

As Dr. L. D. Ferreiro and S. Kery mentioned above, the experts need to have ‘a more thorough examination of the wreck ... to determine if that hole would provide the “smoking gun” to show what caused *BOUVET* to sink’. The most interesting finding of our research that opens up another layer of truth has come as the result of interviews I conducted in December 2015.

As mentioned above, the members of 2012 diving expedition did not personally dive to wreck of the *Bouvet* resting at seventy metres. In the 1960s, however, the Straits were not as busy as today in terms of international maritime traffic and the Turkish Ministry of Finance granted permissions to professional divers for salvaging scrap metal as it was

<sup>61</sup> Selçuk Kolay et al., *Echoes from the Deep: Wrecks of the Dardanelles Campaign*. (Istanbul: Vehbi Koç and Ayhan Şahenk Foundations, 2013), 84.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

a lucrative business. Battleships had massive propellers moulded of phosphor bronze, torpedo tubes and other parts mostly made of brass and copper. They were scraped out and sold in the local market for recycling. As the authorities treated the wrecks as part of ‘war booty’, salvage operations were defined as a legitimate business.

The *Bouvet* was a pre-dreadnought battleship launched in 1896. When fully loaded, she weighed 13,235 tons. Her length was 117.8 m, the beam was 21.4 m and it had two 457 mm (14 in) torpedo tubes.<sup>63</sup> Two young professional divers — Robert College graduates — Tosun Sezen and the late Baskın Sokullu — formed their company in 1961 for sponge diving around Bodrum. Later, they found a challenge in searching for the wrecks of the Gallipoli campaign. By coincidence, the grandfather of Baskın Sokullu was Lt.-Colonel Fahrettin (later Altay) who was CSO of 3rd Corps defending the Northern sector of Gallipoli peninsula in 1915. He described to them the probable location of the wreck of the *Triumph* that was sunk by the German submarine U21 on 25 May 1915. At the site, at the invitation of his grandson, Fahrettin Altay Pasha stated that the Ottomans had one artillery unit that had a firing range of 1700 m only and that the *Triumph* bombarded their trenches within that limit. If the young divers were to look for the wreck of *Triumph*, they had to start surveying 1700 m from the shore. Taking the advice of the veteran general seriously, the divers discovered the wreck soon.<sup>64</sup>

From 1965 to 1970, Sokullu & Sezen Underwater Works Co. discovered and dived to the wrecks of the *Triumph*, *Irresistible*, *Ocean* and finally the *Bouvet*. Having worked previously around Bodrum, they had good connections with legendary figures like Professor George Bass, the director of the first archaeological expedition of an ancient shipwreck in 1960 still displayed in the Bodrum Museum. Also, Professor E. T. Hall (1924–2001) of Oxford University, the founder of the discipline called ‘archaeometry’, was among their best friends.<sup>65</sup> ‘Teddy’ Hall had developed a ‘marine magnetometer’ and helped his Turkish friends spot the wreck of the *Ocean* and the *Bouvet* in 1967.

Tosun Sezen was arguably the first diver who went down to the ‘crime — scene’ nearly fifty years after the incident. About the wreck of the *Bouvet*, he recounts:

We discovered the wreck of the *Bouvet* using Teddy’s magnetometer and our Norwegian made echo — sounder. There were two [historical] photographs showing the sinking and capsizing of the *Bouvet*. By taking these photos as a starting point we did our systematic underwater surveys just off Erenköy Bay. We spotted the wreck of the *Bouvet* and registered it to the Ministry of Finance. We signed the contract with authorities [granting us privileges for salvage operations] for three years. I was the first one to dive into the *Bouvet* at seventy metres. It was resting upside down and the rear was covered with sand ... She had three propellers dug into the sand. We could not take them out ... One day, just out of curiosity, I entered the terrible big hole on the starboard of her hull. Actually it is not correct to say that it was a ‘hole’, more than that it was like a ‘split’ or ‘tear’ in the amidships. As if an explosion occurred over there ... When I entered, [I noticed] everything was in a mess ...

<sup>63</sup> Kolay, 78.

<sup>64</sup> Oral history interview conducted with retired professional diver, Mr. Tosun Sezen in Antalya, Turkey on 17 December 2015.

<sup>65</sup> For Professor E. T. Hall’s obituary, see, *New York Times*, 21 August 2001 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/21/world/e-t-hall-77-archaeologist-who-debunked-pilt-down-man.html>> [last accessed 20 December 2015].

With a big explosion everything had scattered all over. Either her magazine or her steam boiler must have had exploded.<sup>66</sup>

During the interview, I asked Tosun Sezen about the findings of the 2012 diving expedition. He said that he knew the members of the team but he underlined the fact that they did not practically dive to the wreck of the *Bouwet* and argued that this was the major weakness of their expedition. I also asked about the hole that was supposedly the result of the mine damage near the bow visible in the '3D Multibeam Sonar Images' printed in their book. His answer was quite revealing:

There were no holes on the bow of the *Bouwet*, because it did not strike a mine! I know the mine damages very well from the other ships that I had dived to [i.e., *Irresistible* and *Ocean*]. [In the *Bouwet*] there is a huge damage in the amidships which was not caused by a mine. A battleship like the *Bouwet* cannot sink within two minutes with mine damage. I also checked the book of Selçuk Kolay. [To tell the truth], we actually opened up the holes on the bow with explosives that they are attributing to a mine! We did this during our salvage work in order to salvage the two torpedo tubes under the bow that are made of bronze ... It is not a big deal to open up a small hole on the bow. Then from that small hole we pushed the dynamite stick attached to a moor that would hold the dynamite above the basement. Otherwise dynamite [stick] would go down because of the gravity [and the blast effect of the explosion would be limited] ... After this explosion you could enter into the ship and conclude your salvage work quite easily. Before I sold the torpedo tubes to the scrap, I kept some of the brass-metallic tags as memorabilia of the French shipyards that produced them.<sup>67</sup>

Interestingly, Tosun Sezen's testimony eliminates even the minor contribution of *Nusret* minefield to the sinking of the *Bouwet* as mentioned by both the members of 'Marine Forensics Committee' of SNAME. On the brass tag that was taken as a memorabilia by Tosun Sezen, we read 'Société Anonyme Ateliers et Chantiers de la Loire' that was functioning at St. Denis at the outskirts of Paris (see Figure 2). This company must have been instrumental in the production of torpedo tubes. Apart from Ottoman, German and British officers' war journals, archive documents, unpublished recollections of the officers and official communiqués of the Ottoman HQ, this seems to be the final layer of truth in relation to the sinking of the *Bouwet* to date.<sup>68</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

By comparing the various (and varying) narratives, which recount the reasons for the *Bouwet*'s sinking, the progression of a shift in the official narrative becomes clear. The

<sup>66</sup> Oral history interview conducted with Mr. Tosun Sezen.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> In 1979, Henry M. Denham (1897–1993) visited and interviewed Tosun Sezen about the Dardanelles wrecks in Istanbul. H. Denham was a midshipman at *Agamemnon* on 18 March and his account of the incident is as follows: 'at about 2 p.m. when *Bouwet* suddenly heeled over and quickly started to sink; she disappeared by the stern in about 1½–2 minutes ... *Bouwet* had evidently had a shot in her magazine'. See, H. M. Denham, *Dardanelles: A Midshipman's Diary* (London: John Murray, 1981), 64–5. Thanks to the information gathered from Professor E. T. Hall and diver Tosun Sezen, H. M. Denham seems to be the only person hesitantly stating the fact that *Bouwet* sunk as the result of artillery fire. In his memoir, he acknowledged the interview and also summarised salvage operations in 1960s in 69. I would like to thank Tosun Sezen for sharing his private correspondence with the late H. M. Denham.



FIGURE 2. Memorabilia taken from the *Bouvet* by the professional diver Tosun Sezen in 1967.

course of the Great War changed on 18 March 1915 in the temporary favour of the Ottomans; but in the post-1918 period, the British official historiography had overlooked the success of the Ottoman artillery. The official British account had been imported into the Ottoman and German accounts. The British Admiralty's official communiqué first ascribed the disaster to the random 'floating' mines. This official explanation was modified in 1921. As Commodore Mitchell had shared his extensive report with the official historian, Sir J. Corbett, the analysis based upon 'floating mines' had been replaced by another powerful factor, i.e. 'Nusret's minefield'.<sup>69</sup> Until 1921, the Ottoman and German officers who observed and reported the incident at the Dardanelles were quite certain that the explosion followed by artillery fire had caused the sinking of the *Bouvet*. Likewise, they had treated British official communiqués simply as 'war propaganda'. After the publication of the British official history in 1921, however, both Ottomans and Germans modified their narratives in the coming years. In other words, the British official historiography had gained ascendancy and established its hegemony over the others. Needless to say, they acknowledged this hegemony without much resistance. At this point, let me speculate the reasons behind this recognition from the Turkish perspective.

In his powerful essay, Dipesh Chakrabarty underlined the existence of 'the everyday subalternity of non-Western histories',<sup>70</sup> that they '[remain] a mimicry of a certain 'modern' subject of 'European' history and is bound to represent a sad figure of lack

<sup>69</sup> In a letter written on 7 October 1919, Sir J. Corbett officially asked for a copy of his report from Commodore F. Mitchell stating the following: 'I am now ready to revise my Dardanelles volume, but feel it would be useless to do so without the assistance of your report'. See TNA ADM 116/1713. Also, in the preface of his book, Sir J. Corbett mentioned the 'Mitchell Report' as one of the main sources shaping his official history, see Sir Julian S. Corbett, *ibid.*, viii.

<sup>70</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?' *Representations*, no. 37 (winter 1992), 19.

and failure'.<sup>71</sup> Identifying the sentiments of the Ottoman and German officers and their unquestioning acceptance of the British canon is more intelligible through Chakrabarty's 'subaltern' perspective. History may be written by the victorious, but it is lived alike by the losers. In the case of Ottomans and their German ally, they were the actual winners of Gallipoli battles in 1915, but losers of the First World War. For the Ottoman officers, there was something more than a military defeat. They had experienced widespread depression and humiliation as the result of British occupation of Istanbul between 1919 and 1922. As Jenny Macleod rightly underlines, 'In these moments, the grievous physical loss of men and destruction of armaments on the battlefield commingle with economic debilitation, geographical mutilation, and political division and disempowerment in a profound psychic wound'.<sup>72</sup> Apart from the publication of the British official history in 1921, this 'profound psychic wound' must have contributed to a rupture in the communicative memory among the veteran Ottoman officers. This void likely enabled the imposition of a foreign canon on cultural memory and later historiography. Needless to say, shutting the Turkish military archives to readers also contributed to the relative ignorance of the subject. In conclusion, the Turkish military history of Gallipoli naval battles has turned out to be a cheap 'mimicry' of the British one.

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>72</sup> Jenny Macleod, *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.