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THE MOTHER OF ALL WARS

Long term consequences of the Allied Mediterranean strategy in the Great War

A MÃE DE TODAS AS GUERRAS

Consequências a longo prazo das opções estratégicas aliadas no Teatro de Operações do Mediterrâneo na Primeira Guerra Mundial

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the long term implications of allied choices regarding the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations in World War One, from the political and military actions that confirmed Turkey's entry into the war to decisions regarding the conduct of military operations and the relations between the Allied powers and local actors, in order to analyses the negative implications of failing to balance immediate military needs and long term political goals. In order to do so the article presents a brief analytical summary, organized geographically, of the main operations and their long term effects in each region, leading to a global overview of the allied strategy and its role in establishing the bases of the historic narratives and political realities of Mediterranean actors, such as the nature of the Turkish state, the evolution of Middle Eastern nationalisms and Islamic fundamentalism.

Keywords: Mediterranean, Middle East, Arab Nationalism, Islamic Fundamentalism, Allied Strategy in World War I.

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Resumo

Este artigo é uma análise às implicações a longo prazo das opções aliadas relativas ao Teatro de Operações do Mediterrâneo durante a Primeira Guerra Mundial, desde as ações políticas e militares que confirmaram a entrada da Turquia na Guerra às decisões relativas à conduta das operações militares e as relações entre as potências aliadas e os atores locais de forma a analisar as implicações negativas da ausência de ponderação entre as necessidades militares imediatas e os objetivos políticos a longo prazo. Para esse efeito o artigo apresenta uma breve descrição analítica, organizada numa base geográfica, das principais operações e dos seus efeitos a longo prazo nas respetivas regiões, conduzindo a uma apreciação global do contributo da estratégia aliada para estabelecer as bases das narrativas nacionais e natureza do estado Turco, da evolução dos nacionalismos do Médio Oriente e do fundamentalismo islâmico.

Palavras-chave: Mediterrâneo, Médio Oriente, Nacionalismo árabe, Fundamentalismo Islâmico, Estratégia Aliada na Primeira Guerra Mundial.

Introduction

The German naval build up is usually included among the causes of the Great War. Of all the hundreds of warships of the mighty High Seas Fleet, built with loving care in accordance with Tirpitz design, the Kaiser's ego, and the German taxpayer's money, two were to have a huge impact in leading two nations towards the option of entering the war, at least through the realm of public opinion. One, the U-20 submarine, did it with the discreet killing efficiency of a maritime predator. Sinking the Lusitania, it gave momentum to the, from then inexorable, movement of the United States towards war, and ultimately, superpower status. The other, the Battle Cruiser SMS Goeben, did it with rather more style and panache, as benefited its capital ship status. In one of the most remarkable cruises in modern naval history, the superbly commanded dreadnought[1] raced and bluffed its way into Constantinople and changed the world[2].

We can, and for obvious reasons this year we will, discuss endlessly whether the Great War was inevitable or not and never reach a conclusive consensus. A clearer case can be made, however, that the war's expansion to the Mediterranean and subsequent evolution in that theater was less a product of history's invisible guiding hands, and more the consequence of, mostly bad, allied decisions and, mostly opportune, German ones. And the consequences of those decisions are still haunting us today, and seem to be celebrating the centennial by particularly loud manifestations.

To understand how those decisions influenced the conduct of the war, and their long tern effects, we must first revisit the process that lead to the Ottoman Empire entry into the war,

[1] HMS Dreadnought was the first modern battleship with a single caliber main battery. Older ships with mixed caliber main armament become obsolete and were termed Pre dreadnoughts.

[2] The expression was popularized by naval historian Dan Van der Vat in his book: "The ship that changed the world".

then to the development of allied strategy and the operations on the main fronts, to be able to, finally, understand the long term consequences of options made under the pressure of immediate military necessity without regard for long term political goals in order to ascertain whether, within the conditions of the time, better options could have been considered that would present a more balanced perspective and if lessons can be inferred regarding the integration of political objectives into military strategic and operational planning.

The Strategic Battle Cruiser and the expansion of the war

The Great War could have started over Mediterranean issues. France and Germany nearly went to war over Morocco, twice, first in 1905 and then in 1911[3]. That they didn't is relevant. Germany exploited Mediterranean issues as pressure points but had no real vital interests there. Austria-Hungary was a more interested party, and its navy was expanding rapidly[4], but would rather avoid fighting a two front war if possible, Serbia being perceived as a greater threat. Italy, formally a member of the central powers, was on its way to choosing neutrality. The Ottoman Empire, despite the aggressive posturing of the new government, particularly the influential War Minister Enver Pasha, wasn't ready for war, and having endured rather unsuccessful conflicts recently, badly needed time to strengthen its forces and modernize its institutions.

But once hostilities started it was of great interest for Germany to bring the Ottoman Empire into the war. Having failed in its efforts to avoid fighting a war in two fronts, basic military logic dictated that its enemies ability to assist one another should be impaired as much as possible. Russia was a major supplier of grain for the allies, and a major recipient of both materials and weapons critical for its war effort.

There were other, longer term considerations at play, but for Germany, having entered war at a material disadvantage against a stronger coalition, winning the war was all that mattered. Anticipating this possibility, and conforming with the Kaiser's general sympathy towards Islam, the German Empire had, therefore, been working intensely and intelligently to make an ally out of the Ottomans, using the classical tools of generous financial loans, military cooperation, done in a modern practical fashion with German advisers getting deeply involved on the modernization of the Ottoman Army[5], and arms sales.

The Allies, on the other hand, had nothing to gain from a hostile Ottoman Empire. The straits were the shortest, easiest way to communicate with Russia (90% of Russian grain exports passed through the straits, as well as half her total exports) (Haythornthwaite, P., 1991), and keeping them open to allied ships would be of immediate military interest. And the political consequences of engaging would be vast. This was, after all, a war to reshape the world political realities, seen from the start as "the war to end all wars". The decline

[3] The 1911 crisis was arguably the last moment at which the Central Powers could have started war with a reasonable chance of winning. Relative strength in the next three years, both politically and military, was evolving towards a greater entente advantage.

[4] While the Anglo German naval race gets most of the attention, there were a number of naval races going on up to 1914, and some up to the Washington Naval Treaty. The Austro/Italian is one of the most interesting.

[5] Paving the way for a very active and "hands on" involvement on operational activities once war started.

of the Ottoman Empire was arguably the most complex and dangerous foreign affairs problem of the age. A war against the empire was bound to accelerate the process and force the winners to resolve the problem of transforming it into something else, while fighting a world war at the same time. It was a foreign policy nightmare come true, and one that should scare any statesman.

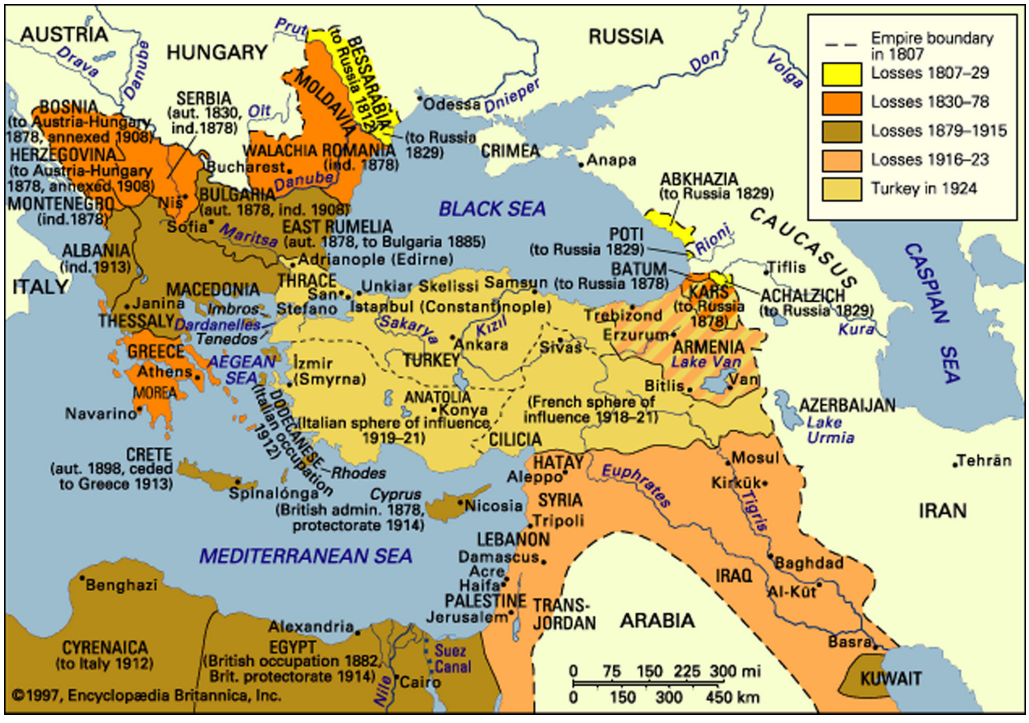

Figure 1: The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the XIX and early XX centuries

Source: (http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/oren/INR4204Middleeast.html).

The statesman in charge of the naval aspects of the situation, however, was not one to scare easily and his penchant for swift and bold action was to bring considerable problems in two World Wars. Winston Churchill had become First Lord of the Admiralty[6] in October 1911 and as war approached decided to reinforce the Royal Navy by taking over foreign battleships being completed or on trials in Britain. One, the Chilean Battleship Almirante Latorre, caused little political problems, being bought under favorable terms and without alienating the Chilean government[7]. The decision to seize two recently completed battleships about to be delivered to the Ottoman Navy[8] was another matter.

[6] Essentially Minister of the Navy.

[7] The ship was bought back by Chile after the war and went on to become the most powerful warship in South America for decades.

[8] The Ottomans cooperated with Germany in modernizing their Army but with Britain with modernizing their navy, a common option for other nations, such as Japan. When this cooperation was cut off by the British action, the best channel for influencing the Ottomans, through their ministry of the navy, was lost.

The ships were the Reshadieh, a Super Dreadnought (in Royal Navy terminology) designed privately for the Ottoman navy along similar lines to the Latorre, but with ten 13.5" guns as in contemporary British ships (Sturton, I., 1996). The other was the Sultan Osman I, a rather unusual design, with no less than seven twin 12" turrets, that had been ordered by the Brazilian navy, and then, when the Brazilians realized they couldn't afford it, been offered for sale and bought by the Ottomans, by the then considerable sum of 2.750.000 Pounds Sterling (Sturton, I., 1996). The purchase had been a response to the new battleships being built for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and had been paid partly with funds raised by a public subscription. To make matters worse, the ships trials had been delayed on Churchill orders, there were already Turkish crews on board that had to be evicted; the terms under which the ships were seized were less generous than the terms offered to Chile. In other words, Churchill had treated Turkey as a "de facto" belligerent nation, at a time when the Turks were still hesitating on whether or not to join the central powers. Interestingly the Sultan Osman I was renamed the HMS Agincourt[9], as if, after alienating the Turks, Churchill was bent on irritating the French.

With public opinion in Constantinople now inflamed, and the Ottoman Navy now clearly incapable of providing any deterrence against the Russians on the black sea in the foreseeable future, Germany was about to seize the opportunity with a sensational public relations coup. The Imperial German Navy had maintained a naval presence in the Mediterranean with the Battle Cruiser Goeben and the Light Cruiser Breslau. Initially tasked with intercepting French naval movements from North Africa to Europe, the ships were ordered to sail to Constantinople. Isolated as they were, they still posed a relevant threat, and to deal with it Churchill issued a needlessly complicated and elaborated order (in the days of primitive radio devices and manual codes) that while allowing for the need to intercept them, also gave priority to escorting the French troop transports and ordered Royal Navy ships not to "*be brought to actions against a superior force*" (Van der Vat, D., 2010).

The Goeben and Breslau managed to reach Constantinople at the end of an epic journey that saw them coal up from a German liner and in Sicily[10], avoid the French fleet (twice), win a race with two British Battle Cruisers and face off a force of four British Armored Cruisers under admiral Troubridge who, under advice from his gunnery expert Captain Ray, regarded the isolated Battle Cruiser as a "superior force" and avoided action, a decision that lead to a court martial. (Van der Vat, D., 2010) The charges were quietly dropped after British Battle Cruisers easily destroyed the similar Armored Cruisers of Admiral von Spee in the Falklands.

The Goeben was already a popular ship in Constantinople, three of its sailors having died while volunteering to assist fighting a major fire in the city earlier in May (Van der Vat, D., 2010) and when it entered the port and was transferred to the Ottoman navy as a gift from Germany, the public opinion impact was vast.

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[9] Why someone would, at the start of a war were France was the main ally, name a warship after one of the most humiliating defeats the English had inflicted on the French is hard to understand. The French, fortunately, were too busy with war to complain.

[10] German warships were designed for operations on the North Sea and had small bunkers and therefore limited range. The Goeben had a full load capacity of 3100t of coal while the smaller RN Indefatigable carried 3300t of coal and critically 870t of oil. The larger Lion carried 3500t of coal and 1135t of oil for a 40% greater range than her German equivalents. Oil was also more efficient and much easier to refuel. (Conway's all the world battleships).

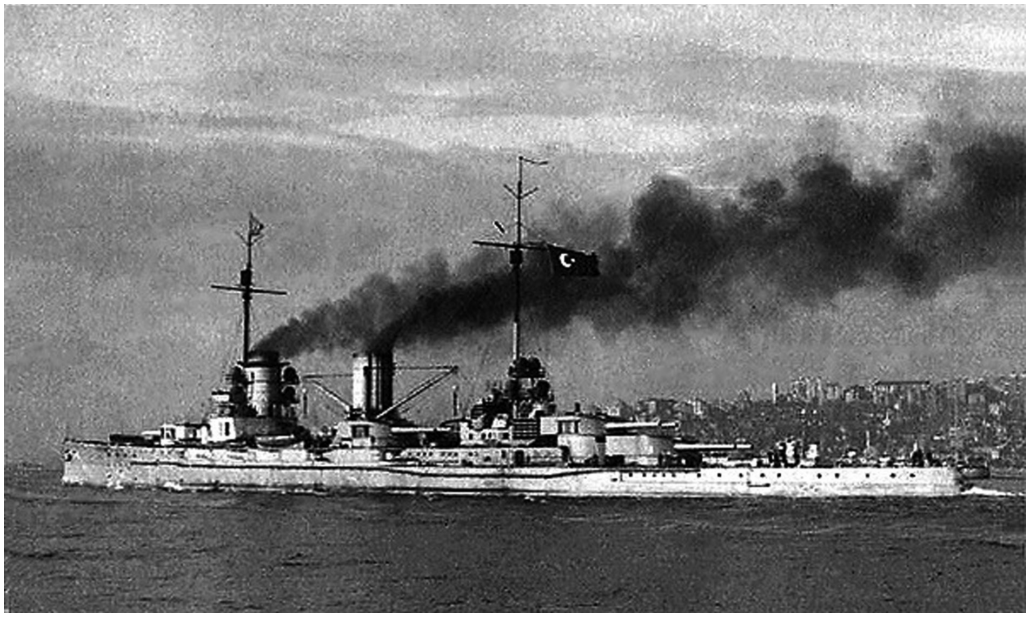

Figure 2: The Goeben flying Turkish colours as the Yavuz Sultan Selim. If the Kaiser had a Churchilian gift for words, he could have said that *"Never, in the history of naval warfare, have so few changed the fate of so many"*

Source: (image www.cityofart.net).

The Goeben, still German crewed but flying a Ottoman flag, promptly shelled Russian facilities in Novorossiysk, Odessa and Sevastopol, forcing a Russian declaration of war. Turkey was soon in the war and the straits closed. On the short term communications with Russia were seriously hampered[11] and the allies had to deal with an additional front. On the long run it is relevant that the Turks could legitimately claim to have been forced into war by allied actions that had left them no choice. Churchill's decision was not the only, and probably not the decisive factor in bringing the empire to war, but it was a relevant episode that would be deeply engraved on the country's collective narrative.

The Strategic Debate

An argument can be made, and it is the author's opinion, that the last moment in WW1 when the allies were in serious risk of losing the war was at the first battle of Ypres in October and November 1914. Having replaced the younger Moltke as the German Chief of the General Staff, General Erich von Falkenhayn tried to break through the allied lines in the Ypres region to envelop the allied left in a plan not very different than what was to be realized, in a larger

[11] In World War II this was not a factor thanks to northern convoys and the Iran route. In World War I northern convoys were employed, but of very limited capacity due to both shipping and port facilities limitations and German action through mines and submarines. Land transport through Russia's vastness was also extremely limited.

geographical scale, by the German army in 1940[12]. When that failed, and the western front became stable, there was no possible German war winning strategy. They were to try three great strategic concepts. Breaking the morale of the French Army (another von Falkenhayn concept); isolating Britain through unrestricted submarine warfare and beating Russia (and it's eastern allies) to allow a concentration of forces capable of beating the western allies. None of the three ever came realistically close to bringing about a total victory.

The case was different for the allies, who had superior resources, particularly with Germany being slowly strangled by blockade, and had consequently to consider their strategic options within the context of how, when, and at what cost victory was to be gained. In France and Britain, the debate between those who supported a fully concentrated effort in the western front and those who favored a greater effort on the Mediterranean, usually referred as the westerners vs easterners debate, is often reduced to a critique of Loyd George's proposal to "bring down Germany by bringing down the props" an expression he used on a memorandum on the conduct of the war (Philipott, W., 2014, p. 73) and the easterners are usually regarded as unrealistic while the westerners are presented as pragmatic realists.

While generally correct as far as Loyd George argument is concerned, this point of view conveniently forgets the fact that, if it is true that it was mostly Germany that was "propping" its allies and not the other way around, that happened because those allies were fully committed on the eastern front. The huge cost the Central powers paid for their victories in the East, and its relevance in the whole war, is often minimized. In 1915 Germany suffered 612.000 casualties on all fronts, while Austro-Hungary, that wasn't engaged on the western front suffered 2.100.000 casualties (Philpott, W., 2014, p. 214) The main difference between, for example, the circumstances of Brusilov's June 1916 offensive and those of the Red Army 1944 "Bragation" offensive is that the Soviet Union had both a powerful industrial base and massive lend lease, while the Russian Empire had neither. Bragation's operational success was a prelude to a series of devastating offensives and a major step to victory, while when the Russians attempted to follow Brusilov's initial operational success[13] with additional large scale offensives they failed through lack of sustainable logistical momentum.

The alternative way to a quicker victory, as opposed to attritional warfare in France was, to reverse Loyd George's expression, through propping up Russia. The British and the French were, however, seeing the war as primarily a war with Germany (more understandably so in the case of France, that was fighting in her own soil) and viewed other opponents essentially in terms of their role as German allies rather than as independent players. For them it was more a case of *Germany only* than *Germany first* and this incomplete perspective would distort strategic analysis during the war and still distorts historical analysis today. The German General Staff was to follow the opposite route, and once the perspective of a decisive victory in the west was gone, they concentrated on defeating their weaker opponents one by

[12] Erich von Falkenhain plan was to break through between Arras and Ypres, and swing northwest towards Dunkirk and Calais, cutting off the allied left flank and the communications of the BEF. Plan Yellow did just that, but with the starting line further back.

[13] In the first week of the offensive the Russians made 192000 POW and wiped out the Austrian 7th Army. From then on further offensives were doomed for lack of proper support.

one in large scale, well supported offensives. First they defeated Serbia, then Romania, and finally Russia.

An allied analogue for the German Grand Strategy would have been to concentrate enough force on each of the weaker adversaries in succession. Turkey in 1915, Bulgaria in 1916, Austro Hungary in 1917. Having chosen an attrition based strategy (Philipott, W., 2014, pp. 143 to 163) they created a situation where Germany eventually collapsed through exhaustion of resources, the lack of spectacular allied military victories leaving space for the "Stab in the back" myth to grow.

The Straits

Having a total naval superiority in the area, the allies now had to develop a strategy for the unplanned war in the Mediterranean that would eventually expand to four main fronts.

1. The Dardanelles
2. The Middle East (Egypt, the Sinai and Mesopotamia)
3. The Balkans and Greece
4. Italy

In the first two the opponent was the Ottoman Empire, and the obvious allied priority was to reopen the Straits to their shipping (There were 129 allied or neutral merchant vessels totaling 350.000 ton locked up in the Black Sea (Van der Vat, D., 2010, p. 84) That was far from an easy problem, as a simple look at a map will show us:

Figure 3: The Straits. The allied fleet expected to force Turkey to capitulate by shelling Constantinople (modern day Istanbul). An opposed forcing of the Bosphorus would have been an interesting preposition

Source:(http://hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/macquekl/History%20Web%20Page/History/major_battlesww1.htm).

In this article we will discuss three possible solutions to the problem:

With hindsight, and considering all possible options the most complete would be to defeat the Ottomans decisively. This could be accomplished by concerted offensives against them from Russia (within logistical limits), and on the Middle East from Egypt through Syria combined, possibly, with another offensive through Iraq and landings on the Dardanelles area. Such an effort would require a lot of troops, that nobody was willing to commit, and consequently this "Turkey first" approach was not considered as an option at the time. When troops become available for deployment in the Mediterranean most of those were committed to the Salonika front, a most unpromising venture that by 1917 absorbed no less than 24 divisions. At the time there were attempts to "outsource" an offensive against the Ottoman Empire to the various European small powers that bordered the it, but local politics were far too complicated for that. It was to be Turkey that went on the offensive, both against Russia and in Palestine, in two failed operations, in the case of the attack against Russia disastrously so, the Turkish defeat leading to an Armenian uprising that was to have tragic consequences.

The second possibility was to seize the straits by means of a combined operation using a substantial landing force with strong naval support. At the beginning of 1915, with the Gallipoli Peninsula defended by a single Turkish division and most of the best Ottoman forces tied in up the Caucasus, it could have been done with a reasonable chance of success. This was proposed as early as November 1914 at the first War Council meeting in Britain and was to be repeatedly suggested by Admiral Fisher, than First Sea Lord of Great Britain[14]. The council however, mostly due to Lord Kitchener, then secretary for war, influence, refused to assign any troops for the operation, an option that was also adopted by the French, with Joffre's view that the war could be won by massed offensives in France prevailing. (Fisher simultaneous proposals for landings in the Baltic didn't help much his credibility in the council regarding amphibian operations).

This left the final option of attempting to force the straits using only a naval force. This was authorized mostly by Churchill's insistence. He had already, on 3rd November, ordered a limited attack by two Battle Cruisers supported by two French Pre dreadnought Battleships, three days before Britain had actually declared war on the Ottoman Empire and primarily as a retaliation to Goeben shelling of Russian ports. When Fisher heard of the decision to launch a purely naval operation he threatened to resign, commenting that he "abominated the idea unless it became a combined operation, preferably with 200 000 troops". Regardless, at the 28th January 1915 war council, at which Fisher was not present, Churchill prevailed, and a purely naval operation was authorized (Van der Vat, D., 2010, p. 87) The general concept was that if the fleet managed to reach the Sea of Marmara and shell Constantinople the Turks would surrender, in what must be the largest manifestation of "Gun Boat Policy" ever. By then, alerted by the premature November attack, the Turks had reinforced the defenses with German assistance, and mined the straits extensively.

[14] Military commander of the Royal Navy.

Figures 4: Main Dardanelles defenses, with the location of the minefields

Source: (from Wikipedia images).

The naval operation that began on 19th February was a predictable failure. The strength of the defense lay not in the big fixed guns, but on the minefields being covered by mobile light guns that prevented proper minesweeping operations. This meant that success could only be archived by a combined operation, in which the land forces would have to push ahead of the minesweeping operation to clear the mobile defenses, and as experience was about to demonstrate, measures would have to be taken to prevent submarine attacks on the supporting fleet.

Despite the firepower of a large force of 12 mostly old Battleships (apart from the brand new Fast Battleship Queen Elizabeth and the Battle Cruiser Inflexible all the others were Pre dreadnoughts) and the novel advantage of using the seaplanes from the Seaplane Carrier

Ark Royal as spotter planes[15] the fleet never went very far into straits, let alone approach its objective of shelling Constantinople. The force had been planned by Fisher's staff primarily to provide fire support for a combined attack, and its minesweeping capabilities were not up to the task[16]. The decisive action was fought on March 18 inside the Dardanelles Straits, when, in a single day, mostly as a result of a recently laid minefield, three battleships, the Bouvet, Ocean and Irresistible were lost, two others heavily damaged, and the Inflexible was damaged, against the confirmed loss of only two coastal guns. The extreme vulnerability of these old battleships to underwater damage, mines in particular, was well known since the Russo-Japanese war of 1904/5 and was, again, amply demonstrated with large human losses .In a marked contrast, Bouvet sunk in two minutes after hitting a mine with the loss of 660 men, almost all of her crew, while the more modern Inflexible was able to reach Malta for repairs after hitting another mine. Later, during the combined phase of the operation, three more old battleships were sunk, the Majestic and Triumph by the German submarine U21 and the Goliath by a Turkish Torpedo Boat (Haythornthwaite, P., 1991). The Allied fleet lost as many Battleships, of similar type, in this campaign as those of the Imperial Russian Navy that were sunk at the Battle of Tsushima. The scale of WW1 is demonstrated when one realizes that the same losses that made Tsushima one of the great naval battles of all time were regarded as a side show in the Great War.

To make matters worse the defenders had been reinforced and there were now three Turkish divisions on the Peninsula. When the decision to land forces was finally taken in March 22, it was a classic case of too little, too late. Poorly lead at the start and always with insufficient troops despite being progressively reinforced (these reinforcements being matched by the defenders); the land campaign promptly reached an impasse. Despite all the efforts of the troops, the allied force was incapable of breaking through decisively and any Turkish counter attack was doomed from the fact that any force that exposed itself to the direct line of fire of the allied battleships was obliterated[17]. The campaign caused heavy losses on both sides and ended with an evacuation at the end of 1915[18]. The straits were to remain closed for the rest of the war.

Churchill and Ludendorff were later to agree that Turkey's closure of the Dardanelles had lengthened the war by two years, crippling the Russian war effort and preventing the full effects on Germany of a two front war (Van der Vat, D., 2010, p. 182) an observation that must be weighed against their shared tendency to exaggerate when it suited them. In 1915, both Churchill and Fisher[19] were to lose their jobs over this campaign, despite the fact that Fisher's original plan for a large scale surprise combined attack was sound at the time it was proposed.

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[15] The use of naval aviation was a major innovation of the campaign. Later the British Navy was to deploy torpedo bombers from their Seaplane carriers, sinking Turkish Ships.

[16] The Battleships were more or less immune to the lighter mobile guns that proved virtually impossible to silence. The Minesweepers on the other hand were vulnerable to everything and never had a fair chance of clearing the minefields.

[17] A lesson the Germans were to forget in 1943 in Anzio and again in 1944 in Normandy.

[18] 252.000 allied dead, missing, POW or sick. The Turks had at least 66000 KIA.

[19] Fisher's obsession with Baltic operations, and in particular the order of three Light Battle Cruisers optimized for the Baltic and promptly named Fisher's Follies was also a factor.

Operations in Iraq

The Dardanelles was not the only major operation that went seriously wrong for the Allies in the initial fight against the Ottomans. In Mesopotamia the first British concern was securing the Anglo-Persian oil companies facilities in Abadan (some things never change, oil being one of them). After that an attempt to secure Iraq was initiated, using too small forces along predictable lines of advance. As was to happen in the Second World War, most of the forces came from the Indian Army. The main force, with two Infantry Divisions and a Cavalry Brigade advanced along the Euphrates, being blocked by strong Turkish resistance. A second, smaller force of one reinforced Indian Army Division under Major-General Charles Townshend progressed along the Tigris only to be besieged at Kut after failing to seize Bagdad in November 1915. After failed relief attempts and the world's first attempted air supply of a besieged force, the surviving 13.000 British soldiers (out of 31.000 men force) surrendered to the Turks. They were to be given appalling treatment, 4.000 men dying on the forced march to Anatolia alone. (Hickey, M., 2008).

In late 1916 the British employed what we would now call the "Colin Powell Doctrine" and a much stronger force under General Maude overwhelmed the Turks with a four to one numerical advantage and superior firepower, seizing Bagdad in March 1917. This victory came too late. The blow to British prestige from the defeat at Kut had been serious. The fall of Singapore is often cited as having dealt a major blow to British prestige, and colonial aspirations, in Asia, but Kut was just as damaging in Iraq, and the country was to be, after the war, the most troublesome of the areas placed under British control. It was also to be the place where the Royal Force was to develop the use of tactical aircraft as counter insurgency weapons[20].[21] (It was also a lot cheaper. Resorting to the Royal Air Force as the primary force not only reduced the possibility of British casualties, it also reduced the annual cost of counter insurgency operations in Iraq from 30 to only 8 million pounds)[22]. So in a few years from 1914 to the early 20s we have the British invading Iraq due to a concern over oil, problems resulting from the use of a much too small force, and an insurrection being controlled with air attacks. Santayana's famous aphorism "*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*"[23] seems to be particularly strong in Iraq.

Palestine and the long road to victory

The primary front for conventional operations against Turkey was to be Palestine. Here the objectives were clearly defined. The Ottomans could threaten the Suez Canal and the Allies could invade through Palestine and Syria.

[20] The DH9A, built in WW1 as a light bomber, was to gain an excellent reputation as a colonial aircraft. The RAF knew the area the operations well from wartime missions in support of the same Arab fighters they were now bombing.

[21] The first RAF counter insurgency was in Somalia, but in a much smaller scale.

[22] http://portal-militaergeschichte.de/boehm_royalairforce.

[23] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Santayana.

Figure 5: RAF DH9As search for insurgents in Iraq in the early 20s, the more things change…

Source: (Image from http://www.britmodeller.com).

The Ottomans went into the offensive first. In a move that anticipated the British support for the Arab Revolt, they encouraged the Sennussi people of Libya to start an insurrection against the British in Egypt, with German assistance in the form of some shipments of weapons and the advice of a German officer who had converted to Islam under the name Jafar Pasha. This was to have little success and an attempted Senussi "invasion" of Egypt was decisively beaten by the British in February 1916 at Aqqaquia. Meanwhile the Turks had mounted an offensive across the Sinai, overcoming considerable logistic difficulties and making an attempt to cross the Suez Canal in February 1915. With the benefit of aerial reconnaissance the British were ready, and the overextended attackers were repulsed. The British took the threat seriously enough to deploy substantial forces that were to reach a peak of 13 divisions (Hickey, M., 2008), commanded by general Maxwell before being scaled down to support other areas.

In 1916 the British, now under General Murray, initiated a general advance into Palestine. Without sufficient forces, and facing difficult logistic problems, progress was slow despite the increasing support from the actions of the Arab Revolt. This was to change when Murray's successor, the rather more forceful General Allenby, demanded, and got, the substantial reinforcements that he needed to gain the initiative. From then on the British offensive gained

momentum, despite progressively greater German support for the defenders, and was to culminate in one of the great allied victories of the war at Megiddo, perfectly integrating Arab guerrilla operations into the global operational plan.

"The largest German prisoners of war camp" The Salonika Campaign

Lack of troops is clearly a recurrent theme in allied operations against the Ottomans, and if until early 1915 a valid argument could be made that nearly all British and French forces were needed in France, the allies were to greatly compound their manpower issues by their progressive commitment to the Salonika campaign.

When Bulgaria entered the war on the Central Powers side in September 1915, Serbia was doomed and Greece was now threatened. Taking advantage of a division in Greek politics between a pro allied government and a pro Central Powers Crown, the allies sent a force of five (four French and one British) divisions to Salonika to pressure the Greeks and support the Serbs by threatening an advance into Bulgaria. By October a joint German, Austrian and Bulgarian attack thoroughly beat the Serbs, and the last remains of the Serbian Army (some 125.000 Men) were evacuated from Albania. Now, with shortage of forces elsewhere, uncooperative Greeks, and the terrain favoring the Bulgarians, the sensible thing would have been to evacuate[24], form a Serbian Army in exile[25] and use that, and the freed five divisions, elsewhere. But the allies decided instead to reinforce and build a fortified camp around Salonika, promptly nicknamed the birdcage by the troops there. Often described as the largest German prisoners of war camp, this was to be progressively reinforced to the point that in September 1918 there were 550.000 allied soldiers there. This allowed launching of a major and ultimately successful multinational offensive[26] that, after three years of failed attempts of breaking out of the "birdcage" allowed some to justify the whole enterprise.

What must be remembered is that, like the Austrians facing the final and victorious Italian offensive of Vittorio Veneto, their Bulgarian opponents, who had given a major contribution to the Central powers efforts, knew by then the war was lost, having been won elsewhere.

Military impasse in the Alps

Despite having a prewar treaty with the Central Powers, and having declared neutrality, quite wisely, in 1914, Italy was tempted by intense allied pressure (and promises) to join the war on the allied side in May 1915. Despite their best efforts, Italy was not, however, in a position to make a significant contribution. The terrain favored the defensive enormously. There was a roughly 650 km front, of which only about 50km in the Isonzo sector were not too mountainous for conventional large scale offensives. Both sides had fortified positions

[24] In WW2, again in Greece, the British diverted troops that were on the verge of a major victory after operation Compass to Greece. At least then they had the sense to evacuate.

[25] The Polish Army of WW2 comes to mind.

[26] French, British, Serb, Albanian and Greek.

extensively and conducted large scale peace time exercises that prepared them well for defensive operations there. The Italians were to launch repeated offensives on the Isonzo sector, with heavy casualties, and without success.

While naval operations were mostly conducted with submarines, mines and small craft the Italians were to innovate with daring operations involving combat divers and manned torpedoes, sinking the battleship Viribus Unitis in an action that would inspire the exploits of X Flotilla MAS combat divers in World War Two.

All along the war the Austro-Hungarians were able to hold the front with significantly smaller forces, and in May 1916 in a surprise attack, that used innovative artillery tactics that predated the often mentioned German innovations of 1917/8, they struck across the mountainous terrain of Trentino and secured an offensive victory over the Italians.[27] By 1917 the Italian high command was asking for allied reinforcements, and in October after eleven failed Italian attacks on the Isonzo, a joint German and Austrian attack in the same region[28] inflicted a major defeat on the Italians making 265.000 prisoners, and forced the allies to send forces to the Italian front to help stabilize the situation. The Italians eventually recovered, replacing General Cadorna with the more capable Diaz and, after a defensive success against the final Austrian offensive on the Piave front, went on to claim a final victory in October 1918 against a collapsing Austro-Hungarian army, but the allies had reasons to feel they owed Italy little, and were to act accordingly when peace came[29]. The Italians, who had suffered 600.000 dead in the war (Hickey, M., 2008), felt cheated, with vast political consequences.

One aspect of the Italian Army recovery was the growing presence of Arditi units. Having a role similar to the famous German storm troopers, the Arditi represented an effort by the Italian Army of reinventing itself and these highly trained and motivated soldiers were to provide the core of the Fascist militias in the 20s, much like the Storm Troopers were, first through the Freykorps and later through the veterans associations, to play a large role in German post war politics. Unlike their German counterparts, however, the purely military legacy of the Arditi was to be lost by the Italian Army leadership in the thirties, who failed to capitalize on their lessons in terms of the need for a rigorous training program and initiative at small unit level.

The Arab Revolt

By 1916 the allies were ready to try a more unconventional approach in the Middle East. The British had been following signs of unrest within the Ottoman controlled Arab regions. This ranged from the Ahad society in Iraq (based on Iraqi officers within the Ottoman forces), the al-Fatad society in Syria (mostly urban middle and upper class) to more tribally based movements such as the Hashemite clan in Hejaz (Arabia) or religious based, such as the fanatical Wahabi sect lead by ibn Saud. Before the war the Hashemite leader, Sharif Hussein ibn Ali, who as the leader of the Holy city of Mecca and claiming direct descent from the

[27] The Brusilov offensive forced them to halt their offensive in Italy.

[28] Usually known as the battle of Caporetto it was the 12th battle of the Isonzo.

[29] The Allies found out in 1943/5 just how difficult offensives in Italy were.

prophet had great aspirations, had sent his son, the Emir ibn Hussein to Cairo to approach Kitchener on the possibility of British support for an Arab rebellion (Murphy, D., 2008). As the leading expert in non-conventional warfare of the age[30], Lord Kitchener of Khartoum registered the idea for future use, and through the difficult times of 1915 discreet channels of communication were kept open with the Arab leaders through Red Sea ports. When in June 1916 the Hashemite's, become aware that the Ottomans were planning to have them replaced by the rival, and more malleable, Zaid clan, they launched a rebellion, and the allies, seeing a military opportunity, seized it.

Both the British and the French were fortunate in having at their service a number of exceptionally talented officers who served as advisers to the Arab rebel forces. The one we all know of is the then Lieutenant Thomas Edward Lawrence, who wrote the definitive book on the rebellion, and went on to inspire a much admired film. But there were lots of others, like, on the British side, Colonels Cyril Wilson, Pierce C. Joyce and Francis Newcomb and the "explosives expert" Lieutenant H. Garland, and on the French side experts on colonial warfare like Colonel Brémond, muslin officers like Colonel Cadi and Captain Raho and Captain Pisani who lead the engineers during the anti-railway campaign (Murphy, D., 2008).

Despite the romantic image that endures, the Arab revolt was successful because the natural qualities of the Arab warriors, mobility, endurance and aggressiveness were complemented by the use of modern weapons, such as new and specially developed explosive devices[31], and communications, and supported by armored cars as well as dedicated, and well-coordinated, air support. The most recent parallel would be the actions of local forces, assisted by North American Special Forces teams, and benefiting from air support, in the overthrowing of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The revolt evolved in four main stages. The first was to gain control over a number of ports in the Red Sea Cost. Feisal's rebel Army, advised by Lawrence and supported by the Royal Navy, completed this phase with the capture of Wejh in January 1917. From this coastal sanctuary Lawrence launched a campaign to interdict the Hejaz Railway, first by blowing up tracks of the line, then by blowing up locomotives using contact mines. Lead by Raho north of Medina, this effort isolated the Turkish forces in Medina and from July was integrated with Royal Flying Corps attacks that delayed repairs.

The next stage was the expansion of the revolt to the Sinai after the daring desert march to seize Aqaba, the coastal town being turned into a base for in depth raids against Turkish communications lines and rear areas, using armored cars and supported by the RFC. The final phase was to take place in Palestine and Syria, and to consist of larger scale operations in support of Allenby's offensive.

The Arabs were to secure some spectacular successes, and did a lot of damage to the Ottoman war effort, in particular by their actions against rail communications. Towards the end of the campaign their actions were brilliantly integrated into Allenby planning in an early

[30] Those who claim that nobody wins guerrilla wars should remember Kitchener won one in Sudan and another in South Africa.

[31] Such as the Garland invented "tulip mine" to damage railway tracks and contact mines to destroy locomotives.

form of in depth operations. But they fought for an independence in terms that the British and French governments never intended to allow them, having decided in February 1916 on a partition of the Ottoman Empire among themselves in the Sykes-Picot agreement.

At the end of the campaign the allies could regard the revolt as a military success, but for the rebels it was to be a political defeat. All across the Middle East the Arabs had taken up arms on behalf of a diversity of political, ethnic and religious causes. A century later, they haven't put them down yet.

Conclusions: The Roadmap to Hell

The present brief analysis of allied strategic and operational planning seems to indicate that in the Great War the allies lacked a comprehensive "Grand Strategy" for the Mediterranean with clearly prioritized and well defined objectives, and that consequently they made a lot of bad choices. Some had limited, both in the war and the region's future, consequences. Others were more serious, both in regard to the conduct of the war as a whole, and to the shaping of post war realities. These allied errors can be attributed to two main causes:

The first was their misinformed and biased evaluation of Turkey. Having referred to the Ottoman Empire as the sick man of Europe for so long, the Allies came more prepared to conduct an autopsy than to fight a duel. A consequence of this was that at the Dardanelles (both in the first, purely naval, and then in the second, combined, attack), and more disastrously, even if less famously, in Iraq in 1915/6, undervaluation of Turkish resistance led to Ottoman victories. Unlike the massive efforts in the Western Front, allied operations in the Mediterranean usually were launched with a small force that failed and lost the benefit of surprise, and that was incrementally reinforced, usually giving the enemy ample time to react. This failed to exploit the fact that while In Europe Allied naval superiority was counterbalance by excellent interior (rail) lines of communication. In the Mediterranean the much more limited railway network meant the allies had a significant mobility advantage. When proper force was applied, by Allenby in 1918 in Palestine and earlier by Maude in Iraq in 1917, the Ottomans collapsed. This misjudgment prevented an earlier victory over Turkey, and weakened Russia significantly. It can also be found in the Salonika campaign, where a complete undervaluation of Bulgarian resilience and the intricacies of Greek politics lead to an incrementally vast dispersal of resources.

These failed allied operations, coming on top of a misguided international policy that had made Germany's courting of Constantinople quite easier, were to provide Turkey, once the war was over, with a founding national narrative. It can be said that the Ottoman Empire was one of the losers in the Great War, but Turkey was one of the winners. When the war was over the Turks were the only ones that managed to avoid being dictated peace terms, refusing the Treaty of Sevres that was meant to be their Treaty of Versailles. Lead by the hero of the Dardanelles, General Mustafa Kemal, they fought the Turkish War of Independence until they were able to impose their own terms in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. The new

Republic never saw itself as having been an aggressor, rather as having been unfairly attacked by hostile powers determinate to destroy it.

This error was magnified by an inability to identify the critical objectives and concentrate resources on achieving them. The forces that would have allowed to achieve victory in Iraq and in Palestine in 1915 or, more realistically, in 1916, were used in the unproductive Salonika campaign, under the general reasoning that they were tying down enemy forces. This would make sense, of course, only if the forces being tied down were more powerful than those doing the tying, a fact that escaped allied calculations, and would elude them again in the same Theater of Operations in the next war.

The second was placing immediate military needs in front of long term policy goals, bringing into the war new actors whose aims were incompatible with those of France and Britain. This was the case when the allies lured Italy into the war with vague promises of rich rewards. Italy failed to contribute much to the allied cause, the nature of the terrain allowing the Austro Hungarian forces to hold them back with smaller forces while still fully committed against Russia, in a manner that was entirely predictable. This lack of practical results, and the fact that in the end instead of drawing significant enemy forces away from the Western Front the Italians had to be reinforced with a large allied contingent, meant that the winners had little regard for Italian ambition. The Italians had however paid a large human price, and like in Turkey, the circumstances of the war would adversely affect national policy. But were Turkey became isolationist and defensive, Italy became aggressive above its capabilities and it would take another war to reset national political attitudes.

But if the Italian front can be somehow justified with the need to remove pressure from the Russians and Italy's political evolution would have been only discernible with hindsight, this disregard for long term policies was however taken to a greater depth by the decision to support a general Arab revolt. The military gain to be had was relevant, but not decisive. Allenby's victory was assisted by the Arabs, but would have come anyhow, and the war was won at that point anyway. The political price was however huge. As in Turkey, the war provided the Arabs with a founding narrative for their nationalist cause. And the choice of supporting not just the Arab movements that could be productive in post war politics, but virtually all that could contribute to the immediate objectives whatever their long term goals was disastrous. Men like Lawrence and Pisani became the living embodiment of what is now called the strategic lieutenant, making "on the spot" decisions that were to have long term consequences. The promises that they made where to be denied by the winners, and their presence, at Feisal's side, in the Paris peace conference was to lend credibility to the Arab conviction that they had been used by England and France, as in fact they had.

The long lasting legacy of the revolt is a divisive, tribally rooted and genetically suspicious of the west Arab nationalism, coupled with an inbuilt inability of Turkey to assume a leading, progressive role in a part of the world where revolt against the Ottomans is at the core of every historic legitimacy claim.

Figure 6: Emir Feisal's negotiating team in Paris in 1919. Captain Pisani (directly behind Feisal)) and COL T. E. Lawrence (second from right) stand behind the Emir

Source: (IWM Q55481, pulled from Wikipedia images).

The one peculiar case that stands to attention is how the British supported both the more moderate Hashemites and the radical Islamic fanatics of Ibn Saud, despite Lawrence repeated objections to the later and despite their obviously conflicting claims. With British support, Saud's movement grew during the war[32], and went on to seize what we now know as Saudi Arabia after the war, creating the first modern radical Islamic state. The growth of the Saud movement from a fringe rebel group to a full scale revolutionary army and finally to regional power is an interesting area of research in itself. If we compare Saud's limited wartime contribution to allied victory to the implications his form of government was to have for the whole region a century later, the gravity of the error made in 1916 becomes obvious. It was however a mistake that was to be amply repeated, with the same predictable consequences, in many occasions, notably in Afghanistan against the soviets, and more recently in Middle East conflicts, with the western powers supporting "the enemies of my enemies" even when their aims and ideological principles were in total contradictions with the desired regional end state.[33]

[32] Their contribution to the allied effort was small .They mostly used British weapons and money to strengthen their forces, arguably preparing themselves for the post war Arab infighting in which they were to get additional British support.

[33] The Spanish have a brutal, and realistic saying "*Cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos*": "Raise crows, and they will gauge your eyes out."

Figure 7: Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, The man who gave radical Islam a Kingdom, with British support

Source: (image from http://www.arabianheritagesource.com/altehomepage/page138.html).

Both main errors contributed to the current state of Middle East politics and the West current relations with Islam. Both were also to be repeated when the West had to deal with another collapsing empire, the Soviet one. Once again the fact that managing the fall of an empire is an extremely complex and dangerous process that should never be rushed was forgotten, and parallels can be traced between Turkey's struggle to define its post imperial status under Kemal and Russia's struggle to define its post-soviet status under Putin. And once again, (and, sadly, again and again), we have learned that the fanatics we turn loose on our enemies will eventually turn against us.

All could, of course, have gone terribly wrong anyway with different choices. Wars have a propensity for the unpredictable. However, when looking at the long term consequences of allied actions in the Mediterranean in the Great War, we must conclude that the roadmap to hell is drawn with bad strategy.

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