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**THE DARDANELLES REVISITED: AN EXAMINATION
OF THE ALLIED STRATEGIC AIMS, THE CAUSES
OF FAILURE AND THE RESULTING PROLONGA-
TION OF A WORLD CONFLICT**

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9 November 1972

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I



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TITLE: The Dardanelles Revisited: An Examination of the Allied Strategic Aims, the Causes of Failure and the Resulting Prolongation of a World Conflict

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By the Spring of 1915 the conflict in Europe had settled down to a war of attrition with Russia on the verge of military collapse. A strategic operation in the Dardanelles had been devised by the Allies which, if successfully pursued, could have maintained Russia as a combattant and might have brought the war to an end within a year. The essay examines the political forces which impacted on the operation as well as the military decisions which combined to bring failure to the Allied hopes. Both primary and secondary source material reveals that the campaign, from its inception, suffered from a lack of clear cut national purpose in Paris and London. This indecisiveness was instrumental in the failure and the war spread throughout the world and lasted for another three years.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		Page
1.	The Peninsula, the Straights and Constantinople.	16
2.	The Dardanelles Area	17
3.	Southern Gallipoli Peninsula:	17
	Principal Geographic Features	

III

THE SCENE IS SET

Fifty-seven years have intervened since the illfated Dardanelles Campaign of 1915 which at its inception was hailed as either a strategic master stroke to end the war by 1916 or as a side show which detracted from the main drama in France. Proponents of both views were forceful in their arguments, so forceful that the decision to proceed with the operation was diluted by compromise between the two disagreeing factions.

Before examining the merits of the campaign and dissecting some of the causes for its failure it is necessary to look at the historic forces at work around the turn of the century's first decade. It was a period of political turbulence not only in the Middle East, the Balkans, but in Central Europe.

Francis Joseph, Emperor of Austria-Hungary, ruled a political goulash of eight nations, seventeen countries, twenty parliamentary groups and twenty-seven parties. The population was made up of Germans, Hungarian-Magyars, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Ruthenians, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.¹ On the balance, the House of Hapsburg was a tottering giant waiting for some cataclysmic chain of events to bring the edifice crashing into dust; its seven hundred year leading role in the destiny of Europe was nearing its end--an end to be precipitated at Sarajevo on the 28th of June,

¹Edmond Taylor, *The Fall of the Dynasties* (1963), p. 72.

1914 by two bullets fired from the gun of a nineteen year old Serb nationalist named Princip. Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the only man who might have kept Austria from a war with Serbia, was dead.²

To the south another dynasty had already gone down to the winds of change. By 1908 the absolutist monarchy of Sultan Abdul Hamid II of the Ottoman Empire had been overthrown by a junta of military revolutionaries known as the Young Turks. This ended centuries of Ottoman despotism which, like an inflamed tumor, had tortured the soft underbelly of Europe.³ The new regime, devoted to constitutionalism, did not take over the government themselves being content to remove the sycophants of Abdul Hamid in favor of functionaries sympathetic to social reforms, but the sinews which held the empire together had been fatally weakened. Restive forces of nationalism swept through the vast territorial holdings of the House of Osman and created a situation where two of the larger predators, Austria and Russia, attempted to plunder the corpse while it was still warm, precipitating the Balkan Wars of 1912. These conflicts left Turkey, if not helpless, debilitated to the degree that she was known as "The Sick Man of Europe".

The junta, however, in the immediate days before the outbreak of the First World War, held one important trump card. Turkey's geographical position put her astride the land and water bridge between Europe and Asia, and most importantly she controlled the sea

²Ibid., p. 17

³Ibid., p. 100

passage to warm water ports that Russia had historically coveted. Constantinople, between the Black and Marmora Seas, was the choke point to those Czarist ambitions.

In this setting the power brokers paid court to "The Sick Man". The British, the German and the Russian missions in Constantinople prior to the outbreak of hostilities vied in outbidding each other for Turkish favor, but it was Germany who prevailed. The reasons were partially historic and partially a function of the personalities within the Turkish junta.

For centuries the Turks and Russians had been at each others throats and the mistrusts were slow to die. Russia was unable in those twilight days before the great war to pass herself off to the Turks as anything other than a rapacious neighbor whose continuing self interest lay in absorbing her neighbor to the south. On the other hand, where the average Turk detested and feared the Russian he felt an affinity toward England primarily because Britain was Europe's oldest democracy and the heirs to the House of Osman had overthrown a despotic regime in favor of what was purportedly liberal reform. Unfortunately for history, however, England did not pay court to Constantinople as ardently as did the Germans who played upon the sensitivities of the rising star among the Young Turks, Enver Pasha, who was the Minister of War and rabidly pro-German.

As has been stated, Turkey came out of the Balkan Wars weakened and nearly bled to death. Her military forces had performed

poorly, not because of the individual fighting man's courage but primarily because of poor leadership--primarily Enver's.

It was at this stage that one of the major actors of the drama to be unfolded stepped upon the stage, Major General Liman Von Sanders. Von Sanders initially headed the German military mission to Constantinople, but as Turkish dependence grew upon German supply and know-how he progressively became Inspector General of the Turkish Forces, and later Commander-in-Chief of the 5th Turkish Army which was charged with the defense of Gallipoli.⁴ Historians are almost universally agreed that without Liman Von Sanders the Dardanelles Campaign might have reached a different conclusion, for prior to the outbreak of the war he was able to reorganize the Turkish forces into formations capable of future, sustained operations. In consort with the German Ambassador, Von Wangenheim, he cultivated the fire brand patriotism of Enver who was still attempting to achieve supremacy over the other members of the junta.⁵

The stroke which pushed Turkey into alliance with Germany was partly the British' doing and partly due to the political opportunism of Von Wangenheim and Von Sanders.

Britain had agreed to build in British shipyards two battleships for the Turkish navy. Throughout Turkey people had contributed from their pockets to pay for these ships and by the 3rd of August 1914 one ship was ready for delivery; the second would be prepared

⁴Toward a more modern parallel, the German advisory personnel were not universally liked and admired by the Turks. In 1914 a pun in vogue in Constantinople referred to "Deutschland uber Allah".

⁵Liman Von Sanders, *My Five Years in Turkey* (1920), pp. 5-9.

for turn over within the month; the financial arrangements had been satisfactorily completed; the ships had been given Turkish names and a Turkish crew was in England for the pick up. At the instigation of Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, Constantinople was told that Britain, because of national security, could not deliver the ships but would requisition them for her own navy.⁶

In the wake of this political bombshell the Germans seized their golden opportunity and offered to give two war ships, the Goeben and Breslau, to Turkey. The offer was accepted, the junta faction which preferred alliance with England was permanently undercut and Turkey joined the struggle on the side of Germany on 31 October 1914.

Little else remains to review before examining the Dardanelles issue except to bring in context the state of the war and the status of the main combatants by early 1915.

Briefly, the stalemate on the western front was already apparent after the nearly decisive month of August 1914 when the German forces almost captured Paris. Trench warfare from the North Sea to the Swiss border was tying down millions of opposing forces and casualties from the frontal assaults of fortified positions were already painting a grim picture of the months to come if some means of bringing this war of attrition to a close could not be found.⁷

On the eastern front Russia was almost to her knees. She had started the war with approximately 5,000 guns and 5,000,000 shells, but during the first ninety days she expended a daily average of

⁶Alan Moorehead, Gallipoli(1956), pp. 25-26.

⁷Winston Churchill, The World Crisis 1915(1923), pp. 14-18.

45,000 shells, although her factories could only replace 1,000. She was short rifles and by January 1915 estimates show that she had suffered 1,350,000 casualties.⁸

It was vitally important to France and Britain that Russia remain in the war and on the side of the Allies. When the Russians attacked Prussia in August 1914, the Germans were immediately forced to take divisions from the Western Front and reinforce in the East. If Russia were to capitulate, those forces plus any others which had been in the east would be free to move to France and Belgium. But how to keep Russia in the war?

THE CAMPAIGN

The Dardanelles Campaign was designed to knock Turkey out of the war by forcing the Dardanelles, entering the Sea of Marmora, destroying the Turkish battle fleet, and shelling Constantinople into surrender. The Dardanelles passage is approximately fifty miles long, two to four miles wide, bounded on the east by Turkey in Asia and on the west by the Gallipoli Peninsula which juts into the Aegean Sea some fifty miles from the vicinity of Bulair at the entrance of the Sea of Marmora, past the town of Gallipoli to the southern tip of Cape Helles.

There were several considerations which lead to the adoption of the Dardanelles Campaign, but the strategic aim of maintaining Russia in the war was the most immediate and crucial one for the

⁸Ibid., pp. 11-12.

Allies.

Russia had been promised Constantinople if she entered the conflict on the Allied side. This at last, would give her entrance to the warm water ports of the world, but as long as Turkey held not only the Bosphorus, but controlled the Sea of Marmora and sat astride of the Dardanelles there was no way Britain could reinforce Russia with needed war supplies short of the northern route to Murmansk. On the other hand, if such passage could be forced Russia could provide the Allies critical food supplies which were needed because the submarine blockade of the Isles was beginning to be painfully felt. Also, any Allied move in the Dardanelles would have an added advantage of drawing south some of the Turkish divisions holding down large numbers of Russian forces in the Caucasus.

In addition to maintaining and supporting Russia, there were other glittering gains to be achieved by a successful campaign. Germany's line of communications to the Near East would be severed thereby protecting Egypt and India. Success would hold Bulgaria neutral or bring her into alliance with the Allies. In retrospect, it also might have saved Serbia without the later and major effort at Salonika and it probably would have averted the subsequent entanglements with Greece.⁹ On the highest strategic plans, it might have brought the war to a negotiated settlement in 1916. None of these prospects materialized.

The decision having been made to attempt to force the Dardan-

⁹Henry W. Nevins, The Dardanelles Campaign (1918), pp. vii-viii.

elles, the question became "how?". The consensus was a joint operation involving the fleet penetrating the Strait and reducing the Turkish forts on either side by heavy gun fire until the ships could gain the Sea of Marmora. Simultaneously a land force would enter the Gallipoli Peninsula and attack the forts from the rear, facilitating passage of the fleet which was to be the decisive arm.

However, it was at this juncture that a divergence of views as to the "how?" began to wreak havoc on the eventual campaign.

Planners estimated that a ground force of at least 75,000 men would be required. In addition a fleet comprised of battleships with 15 inch guns would be necessary to reduce the earthen forts on both sides of the Straights. Lord Mitchener, Secretary of State for War, a man revered in England for his military brilliance, initially refused to consider taking the necessary troops from France and there were few other formations in the Middle East available for the purpose.¹⁰ At one time Churchill had concocted a scheme where Greek divisions would be used, but the Czar would not hear of Greek troops even approaching Constantinople which was to be his. This intransigence doomed the initial phase of the operation which commenced as an attempt by the British fleet augmented by French and some Russian ships to ram through the Dardanelles without support of a land force either in the Gallipoli Peninsular or the Asian landmass side.¹¹

¹⁰Ibid., p. 23.

¹¹Robert Rhodes James, Gallipoli (1965), p. 50.

The attempt was not successful. Loss by the naval forces were not so severe as to be crippling to the fleet since the majority of ships which were lost were antiquated vessels which were best utilized as floating gun platforms rather than maneuver units to be employed against the rest of the German high seas fleet.¹² Some accomplishments were noted. It was determined that naval gunfire alone could not reduce the forts guarding the Straights primarily because of the flat trajectory characteristic of naval ordnance, and the British and French governments now authorized the use of sizeable land forces to be used in a combined, joint operation. This, of course, was an accomplishment on the Allied side, but the abortive naval attempt also brought a solid bonus to the side of the Turks and Germans for it gave them ample time to reinforce the peninsula whose terrain vastly favored the defender.¹³

If the subsequent Allied landings could have been achieved rapidly success still might have been theirs, but there were incredible muddles with attendant delays. For example, ships loaded with troops, equipment and animals had to be diverted to Egypt, unloaded, reloaded in a combat configuration and dispatched to Mudros harbor on the Island of Lemnos, sixty miles from the beaches of Gallipoli Peninsula. It was from Lemnos that the invasion was staged in April almost two months after General Liman Von Sanders had started fortifying Gallipoli.

Initially, landings were made at the southwestern tip of the

¹²William Seaver Woods, Colossal Blunders of the War (1930), p. 144.

¹³Von Sanders, pp. 55-56.

land spur at Cape Helles and shortly thereafter successive landings were made at beaches further north on the Aegean side of the Peninsula. Once ashore, the land battle through the spring, summer and fall of 1915, was characterized by incredible hardship on both sides due to rugged terrain, poor communications, a plaguing shortage of water, intermittent failures of the supply system (most prevalent on the Allied Side), inadequate medical facilities for a casualty load way out of proportion to the figures arrived at by the planners and rampant epidemics of dysentery.

Because of the narrowness of the peninsula, twelve miles on average, and the fact that much of the terrain was impassable, frontal attacks on fortified positions became the normal tactic. When further landings were made by the Allies at Suvla Bay further north on the Aegean Sea the trench networks of the opposing forces on the highground overlooking the bay were sometime only ten yards apart. Moslem and Christian lived like moles, underground, venturing upward only to blindly attack across a few feet of no-man's-land before sinking back into the sheltering earth.

I will not pursue at great length the tactics used by both sides in attempting to achieve their aims. Basically, the Turkish forces strove to prevent the Allies either from moving up the peninsula or from gaining the high ground so that the fortifications covering the Dardanelles on both sides of the Strait could be taken under attack by plunging fire from the front or rear. By the same token, the forces under Sir Ian Hamilton attempted to pinch off at the waist of the peninsula some ten enemy divisions defend-

ing in the south. Had this been accomplished the Dardanelles would have been secure for at least the first thirty miles which were the most treacherous.

Fascinatingly, documents from both sides indicate that on several instances one or the other engaging force was so weak or reduced by lack of supply that a resolute effort by only a small portion of the opposing force could have won the day completely.¹⁴ By winter of 1915 the Allies were completely divided over whether or not to pursue the original goals of the Dardanelles Campaign. A new operation in Salonika had commenced and was competing for troop assets. Sir Ian Hamilton requested more men of Lord Kitchener who began to become more and more irresolute over not only that theater of the war, but others where British and Allied Forces were engaged.

Among the commanders on Gallipoli and off shore on the allied side there was divergence. Some pressed for one more supreme effort to carry the day and achieve those glittering aims everyone's eyes had been fixed upon such a few short months ago. Others foresaw only a further wasteful loss of treasure and men in continuing and wished to evacuate.

The failure of the campaign had come high. In London the government had fallen. Winston Churchill was turned out from the Admiralty; the Commander-in-Chief at Gallipoli, Sir Ian Hamilton, was replaced by General Sir Charles Monroe--an officer imbued with the philosophy that any operation which detracted from killing Germans in France

¹⁴For comparison of opposing commanders views see Sir Ian Hamilton, Gallipoli Diary, 1920, Vol. 2, pp 52-119 and Liman Von Sanders, Five Years in Turkey(1920), pp. 83-105.

was insane. The campaign was rapidly liquidated. In two separate and brilliant operations the northern and southern forces were evacuated by sea in the dead of night over several days. The Turks and Germans never suspicioned that thousands of men were disengaging from entrenched positions sometimes only ten yards from their own fortifications. Losses in the evacuation were negligible and the British press hailed the departure as some great victory although it signaled the terminus of an attempt to shorten the war before the conflagration spread from Europe to the Near East, the Far East and across the Atlantic.

THE CAUSES OF FAILURE

The operation failed because of shortcomings in both tactical and strategic planning. Some of the decisions which impacted on the failure were military and some were political.

On the tactical side, it must be recognized that until the Normandy invasion of 1944, the Gallipoli landings were the greatest amphibious operation ever attempted. The planners had no historic lessons to draw upon. The "state of the art" of hitting a fortified beach

¹⁵British and American historians and participants in the operation to include Sir Ian Hamilton, Winston Churchill and Alan Moorehead generally claim the Allies had complete tactical surprise during the withdrawal. General Von Sanders maintains Turkish intelligence was aware of the disengagement prior to the evacuation. In either case, the allied force was able to withdraw from the Peninsula with a total loss of only approximately 200 casualties. Turkish forces on the other hand suffered several times that number from delaying minefields, booby-trapped front line positions and covering naval gunfire. It is agreed by both sides that a tremendous amount of stores of all types fell into Turkish hands from stocks which were left on the beaches which could not be destroyed.

and securing a beach head was not in existence and no effective landing craft had been developed for the specific purpose of transporting troops to the beach.¹⁶ Faulty advance planning resulted in insufficient and inaccurate tactical maps, a shortage of drinking water for men and animals, an insufficient hospital bed capacity either on shore or afloat and insufficient stocks of artillery ammunition.

However, even if the tactical shortcomings had been alleviated the fundamental problem was the inability of the British and French governments to arrive at national commitments to pursue the successful completion of the campaign. It would have meant an early decision to divert ground troops to the Gallipoli venture and a further decision to divert any additional forces required. The fact that ground troops were eventually allotted is a case of "too little, too late", because the opportunity for a short and successful campaign was finished by late March when a purely naval operation had failed.

THE CONSEQUENCES

With the evacuation of the Peninsula twenty Turkish divisions with German supporting elements were freed to join Bulgarian forces in Thrace in further attacks against Russia's southern flank. The immobilized war of attrition which had extended from the North Sea

¹⁶For an example of the casualties this type oversight caused is seen in the description of the Collier River Clyde used as a landing barge. See Nevinson, pp. 94-99.

to Switzerland now extended through the Balkans, Palestine and Mesopotamia.

Russia, unable to be supplied, fell through a combination of outside German force and inward political turmoil. She had extended herself in order to survive to claim the prize of Constantinople; her casualties had been horrendous; and when she fell there was a permeating feeling within the country that Britain could have taken the Dardanelles with one more attempt, but did not because she had lost interest in ceding Constantinople to Russia. German propagandists used every stratagem at their command to drive this point home throughout Russia.

On the European continent the tragic blood letting continued unabated. The attempt to turn the enemy's southern flank having failed, the combatants settled down to three years of attrition which took the lives of hundreds of thousands, set the stage for the eventual settlement that sowed the seeds of rancor and disillusionment which sparked another war in 1939.

Could all this have turned out differently if the Allies had prevailed at the Dardanelles? History has no definitive answer. What can be fairly stated is that Gallipoli and the Dardanelles offered the only perceptible opportunity available to be grasped by the Allies in 1915 which had the remotest chance of bringing the war to a close within one year. The concept was seen and understood by powerful forces in London and Paris, and the root failure was that these forces could not persuade or convince their parliamentary opposition that the national purposes of England and France had to

be mobilized and united behind the operation.

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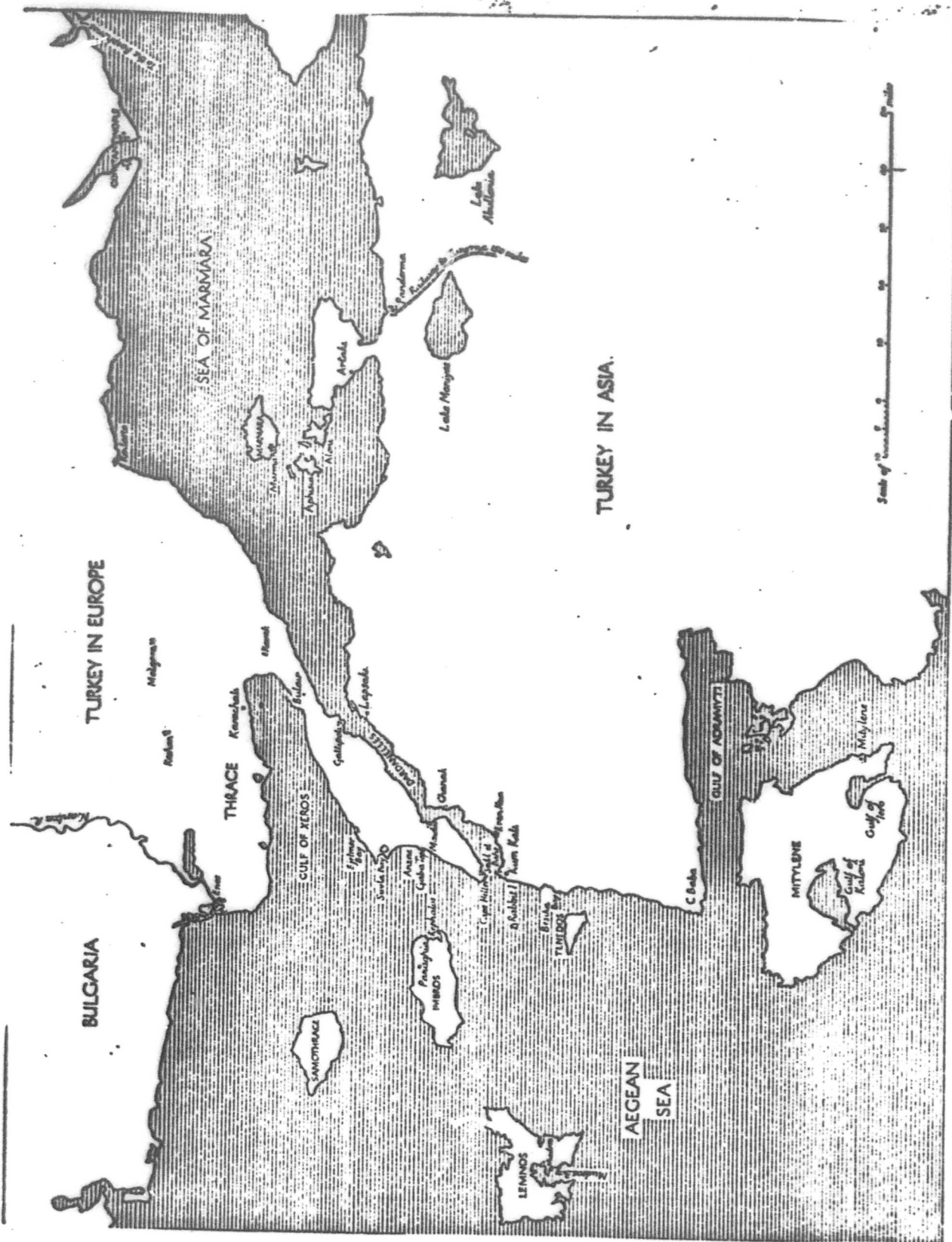


FIGURE 1

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THE PENINSULA, THE STRAITS, AND CONSTANTINOPLE

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