

Researching the *Carnets* of a Forgotten Front: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Dardanelles & Gallipoli Campaign during World War One

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Débarquement de troupes françaises à Moudros (île de Lemnos), April 1915
Gallica Digital Library

Table of Contents

Introduction
The Gallipoli Campaign
My Research
Conclusion
Appendix
Primary Sources
Bibliography

Introduction

I spent one and half weeks in Paris, France at the end of July conducting research on the topic of my senior History thesis, the experience of French soldiers during the Battle of Gallipoli of World War One. I photographed, read, and documented dozens of sources at two sites of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, François-Mitterrand, and Arsenal. The books I am interested in studying for my thesis do not exist online or are not accessible at libraries in the US. Some of these books can only be found at the BnF. One book I checked out still had its pages uncut—it had never been read! I discovered my thesis topic and learned about the wide variety of the BnF's sources while studying in Paris last semester with Hamilton in France. In the spring I visited the BnF a handful of times to look at and document sources. However, I was only able to read a few books, which necessitated a return visit to Paris to continue my research. My research experience, thanks to the Friedberg Fellowship, gave me the incredible opportunity to read and document these sources, while also having the experience of being a real historian. Overall, I photographed over 30 volumes and uncovered many primary sources for my thesis.

The books I uncovered will help me answer my questions about how French soldiers felt, thought, and endured their time at Gallipoli. Today the Battle of Gallipoli is remembered mostly from Australia and New Zealand's Anzac Day, which marked the anniversary of the battle and commemorated the participation of Anzac soldiers in WW1. Today the holiday has come to celebrate the sacrifice of all Anzac soldiers. While Gallipoli and the Dardanelles Campaign is extremely important in Anzac culture and memory, the event has slowly faded from the legacy of WW1 among French memory. There have been several studies by military historians and several works on the testimony from the battles. However, there is only one published book on the French soldiers' testimony. My thesis will build upon previous historian's work and continue to share some of the lesser-known stories of this chapter of WW1.

Background on the Gallipoli Campaign

While the Western Front was the central fighting ground for WW1 among the European powers, military campaigns took place across the world. In the Middle East, European powers continued their efforts to exploit the lands and peoples' resources. The British and French sent soldiers to the Dardanelles, a 40-mile-long strait in northwestern Turkey that connected the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, in an effort to end the war with Turkey and destabilize

Germany's key ally.¹ The conditions of the Gallipoli campaign were horrific, and caused major casualties on both sides, but ultimately resulted in an Ottoman victory.

On the eve of war, the British were unsure what an attack on the Ottoman Empire would look like, or if one would be needed. They hoped to stop the Ottoman Empire from supporting Germany.² Despite British and French investments in the Ottoman Empire's economy, Germany had helped the Ottomans prepare for war. During August 1914 the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty with Germany, officially ending the era of Ottoman neutrality. Soon after, the Dardanelles Strait was closed to the allies for all shipping and the Ottoman Empire declared a Holy War against the allies.³ The British soon initiated a discussion with its allies about an expedition to fight in Turkey, with the goal of reaching Constantinople.

By the start of the war the Dardanelles Strait had been fortified with aid from the Germans, including howitzers and new fort constructions. The Entente attack on the Dardanelles was originally envisioned only as a naval mission. Great Britain had long been a "master of the seas" and relied on its Navy as its primary defense.⁴ By 1915 Russia needed relief after reaching a stalemate with the Turks during the battle of Sarıkamış; the need for allied support was urgent.⁵ Meanwhile, the Western Front had become a stalemate of trench warfare with high losses and deplorable conditions for soldiers. Something needed to change. A victory in the Dardanelles would open a shipping lane to Russia and effectively end the war with the Ottoman Empire. Germany would be cut off from its ally and its resources, putting an end to the stalemate emerging on the Western Front.⁶

After the failed naval attack, British, Anzac, and French launched invasions on the beaches of the strait. The French sent nearly 79,000 soldiers as a part of the *Armée française d'Orient*. Losses were high, with 47,000 casualties and 14,000 deaths.⁷ The allies' plan to swiftly end the war by aging a campaign in the Dardanelles had failed. The war would continue until

¹ Jenny Macleod, *Gallipoli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18.

² Rob Johnson, *The Great War in the Middle East: a Strategic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26, 28.

³ Johnson, *The Great War in the Middle East*, 32, 33.

⁴ Johnson, *The Great War in the Middle East*, 23.

⁵ Roger Ford, *Eden to Armageddon: World War I in the Middle East* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010), 203.

⁶ Johnson, *The Great War in the Middle East*, 6, 87.

⁷ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 2015) 214.

November of 1918. The soldiers who survived the Gallipoli campaign left their memories of the war in letters and diaries or wrote their own account of the war years later. Their stories offer perspectives not only into the experiences of battle, but how they thought about the war, their role in it, and how they chose to remember it through their writing.

Research

Each morning I arrived at the principal site of the BnF, François-Mitterrand. The library is in the 13th arrondissement, near Paris Cité University where I had taken courses last semester. I am familiar with the area, but the BnF impressed me when I arrived each day. The building is composed of four large towers arranged in a square, like how a book might look when it's left open. The main rooms of the library are located beneath ground level, arranged in a rectangle around a central garden. In order to access the research library, you need to scan your research pass twice, and descend down two escalators into the research rooms. There are hundreds of seats available for work and research. I had never been in a library of this size before!

I also spent several days at another site of the BnF, the Arsenal library. Located in the 3rd arrondissement, the Arsenal is equally as impressive, but is a smaller, more intimate historic building. This library is housed in a historic building, and the collection of books dates to 1757. The Arsenal contains one million volumes and 12,000 manuscripts. The library concentrates on literature from the 16th to 19th centuries. Unlike François-Mitterrand, when entering this library, I felt like I was stepping back in time. The paneled wood walls were lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, filled with wood desks and chairs where I imagined many scholars before me sat and studied. In both locations I felt like a true historian, nestled among my colleagues eager to uncover secrets of the past.

During my time at the BnF I became closely acquainted with soldiers' testimony of Gallipoli. I looked at dozens of books and decided to photograph and read over 30 volumes. I looked at many different types of sources, including academic books, testimonies, newspapers, and published diaries. The published books I looked at can be put into two categories, those published in the interwar period (the focus of my thesis), and those transcribed from diaries, letters, or other sources and published later. Unfortunately, a few titles I wished to look at were not available. Oftentimes these books were too damaged to be checked out or had been requested

by other customers. Other than a few titles, I was able to look at nearly all the books I wished to read and document.

My research also led me to look at archival sources which I had not expected to find. One source I stumbled upon were several veteran association's newspapers. I had previously scoured the online catalog of the BnF and believed I had found every source they had on the Battle of Gallipoli and the Eastern Front that might be useful to me. A search on one of my last days in the archive led me to records for three different veteran newspapers: *Amicale des Anciens Combattants des Dardanelles*, *Le Poilu d'Orient*, and *L'Essor*. These were published in the post war period as quarterly magazines or newspapers. They included updates from veterans, informational articles on the campaign, and discussions of current political affairs.

The sources I discovered at the BnF will be essential to writing my thesis. My initial reading of these sources has already revealed fascinating insights to their experiences.

Book Testimony

The main primary source for my thesis and the ones I consulted most at the BnF were the published written testimonies of French soldiers. Historian Francine Saint-Ramond's book, *Les Désorientés: Expériences des soldats français aux Dardanelles et en Macédoine, 1915-1918* is the most recent and definitive work on the experiences of French soldiers on the Eastern Front of WW1. In her work Saint-Ramond summarizes the experience of French soldiers as the following: "raconter l'épisode militaire des Dardanelles revient à évoquer un drame. À l'échec stratégique se superpose une expérience humaine désastreuse par la durée et les conditions de l'événement."⁸ The French soldiers of Gallipoli recalled their experience in the Dardanelles with little valor, and instead provide reflections on the horrific conditions.

Through my own readings, I have begun to discover for myself the experience of French soldiers. During a conference at Nîmes Jean Lucien Marie de Chazelles recalls the experiences of the French: "Et les Français? Ils eurent une mission de confiance: s'emparer de la côte asiatique de l'autre côté du détroit. Comme sur la côte d'Europe les canons de l'escadre ont fait pleuvoir sur la côte d'Asie un déluge d'acier: de Koum-Kalé à Yeni-Cheir inclus, la terre flambe,

⁸ Francine Saint-Ramond. *Les Désorientés Expériences Des Soldats Français Aux Dardanelles et En Macédoine, 1915-1918* (Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2019).
<https://books.openedition.org/pressesinalco/20470>

les moulins à vent qui tout à l'heure couronnaient le village ont disparus; pas un être, homme ou animal, n'a pus survivre."⁹ Like writings of the Western Front, descriptions of Gallipoli heavily referenced its desolate and apocalyptic like conditions, and writers tried their best to explain these conditions through their writing.

Beyond the battleground, soldiers also endured malnutrition, injury, and illness. Ernest-Albert Stocanne described the conditions he endured in *Souvenirs de Guerre et de vie Militaire*. He recalls the inedible food, ruined because of the heat: "La viande, à cause de la chaleur, n'est quelquefois plus mangeable." He also described the general displeasure of the trenches: "Une mauvaise odeur flotte dans l'air. Je dois dire ici qu'avant notre embarquement nous avons été vaccinés contre la fièvre typhoïde et le choléra..."¹⁰ Charles-Roux in *L'expédition des Dardanelles: au jour le jour*, elaborated on the horrors that resulted from so much disease: "Je ne sais si l'on peut bien se rendre compte, en dehors d'ici, de l'espèce de prodige que c'est d'avoir réussi à préserver des épidémies tant de milliers d'hommes entassés, pêle-mêle avec des milliers d'animaux, au gros de l'été sur quelques kilomètres carrés, dont le sous-sol est un cimetière."¹¹ Another common theme among the soldiers' writing was the prevalence of malaria (paludisme). Edmond and Étienne Sergent titled their book *L'armée d'Orient délivrée du paludisme*, directly referencing how illness became the center of their war memories.

These small snapshots provide just a sampling of what I will uncover from these testimonies. I had an incredible experience being able to read and document all these books!

Veteran Association Newsletters

The postwar publications from various veterans' associations were the most unexpected yet interesting source I discovered while at the BnF. Reading these provided a valuable perspective on how veterans perceived themselves in the postwar period. Throughout the different newsletters and newspapers I read, many veterans wrote about their fear of being forgotten as veterans as they fought to receive the medals and pay they deserved. Other topics included book reviews, news reports of commemoration events, reminiscences of battles, literature, and even cartoons.

⁹ Association Nationale Pour le Souvenir des Dardanelles et Fronts d'Orient, *Dardanelles Orient Levant 1915-1921: Ce que les combattants ont écrit* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2005), 20.

¹⁰ Association Nationale, *Dardanelles Orient Levant*, 56.

¹¹ Saint-Ramond, *Les Désorientés*. <https://books.openedition.org/pressesinalco/20470>

One of these bulletins I looked at was the *Amicale des Anciens Combattants des Dardanelles*, published three times a year in Paris. I was able to look at editions published from 1929 until 1941. One example of literature included in these newsletters was a poem written by Robert V dedicated to a friend who died at Lemnos. He opened his poem with the lines:

*Honneur à eux, venus des quatre coins de France,
Chefs et soldats, frappés aux abords des Détroits,
Qui, négligent du Nord les brumes et le froid,
De vaincre à ciel ouvert ont nourri l'espérance!*¹²

Robert V's poem, like the many writings and pieces of literature in the newsletter, continue to honor and memorialize those lost in the Dardanelles. In addition to publishing literature, the newsletter also advertised readings of a book "Les Dardanelles," a history of the campaign published by the organization.¹³ Another ad in the bulletin called for former soldiers to send in their photographs so that they could: "donneront à nos enfants quelque idée du terrain sur lequel nous avons lutté en 1915, dans des conditions si pénibles."¹⁴ This newsletter served as a way for veterans to connect with their past and keep their memories alive. Like with published book testimony, the veterans appeared to be overwhelmed with descriptions of the conditions they endured, and still trying to process them.

Another publication I read was *Le Poilu d'Orient*, a newspaper that focused on the recollections of veterans that fought across the entire Eastern Front in places such as Palestine, Balkans, Egypt, Greece, and the Dardanelles as well. *Le Poilu d'Orient* was published by the "Organe officiel de l'amicale départementale des P.O." This newspaper also featured educational articles, cartoons, advertisements, and published information about memorial events. There are only a few mentions of the Dardanelles Campaign in this newspaper. An article by L Cayol article details the expédition of the Dardanelles. He described the scene of battle: "Arrivés de France depuis une heure seulement, les benjamins de la classe 15 partent à l'assaut et l'on voit bientôt les capotes bleues, toutes neuves, couchés immobiles entre les tranchées..."¹⁵ The battle's conditions continue to haunt these soldiers, and their writing provides clear testimony of the battle, even years later.

¹² Robert V, "Aux Morts de Lemnos," *Amicale des Anciens Combattants des Dardanelles*, January 1936.

¹³ "Une Page d'Histoire," *Amicale des Anciens Combattants des Dardanelles*, January 1934.

¹⁴ "Album Souvenir," *Amicale des Anciens Combattants des Dardanelles*, January 1936.

¹⁵ L Cayol, L'expédition des Dardanelles," *Le Poilu d'Orient*, January 1938.

These newsletters offer a fascinating insight into the postwar lives of these soldiers and the ways they sought to commemorate and share their experiences. I look forward to reading and studying them in further detail!

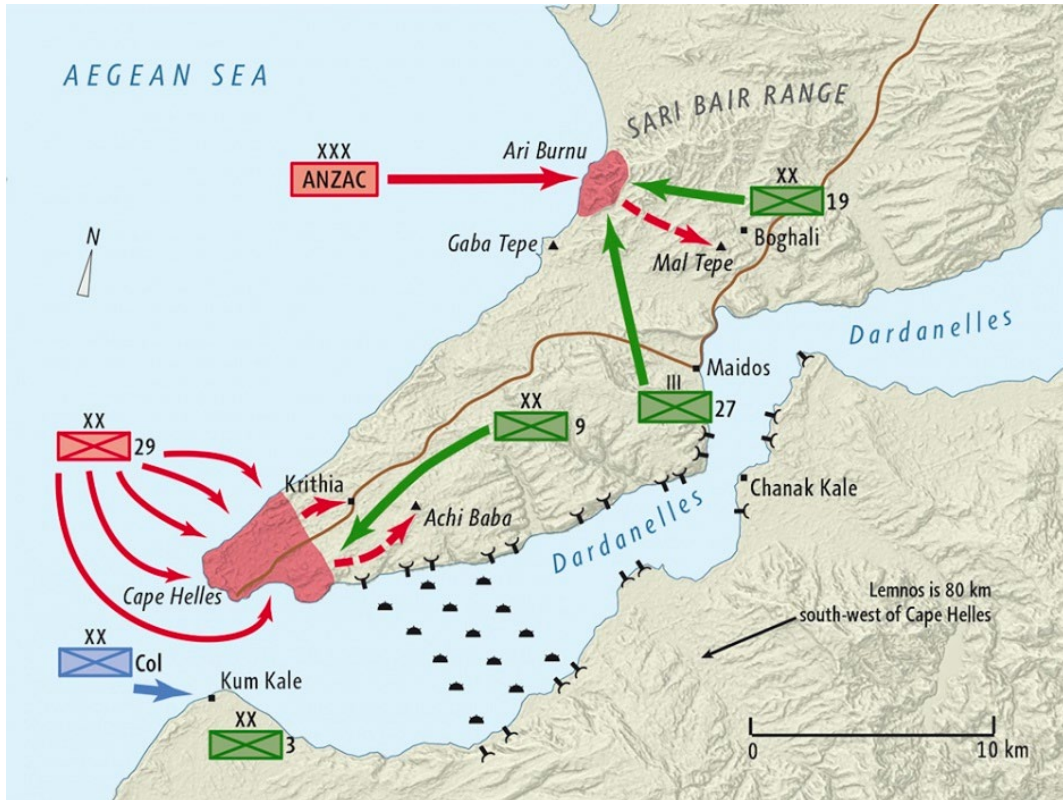
Paris & the Memory of War

I spent most of my days in the library, but I also made a note of any monuments or historic sites I encountered while visiting Paris. The city is filled with monuments and memorials, some of which I stumbled upon by accident. On my first day I visited Père Lachaise Cemetery, where I discovered monuments dedicated to foreign soldiers who had fought for France. I spent one day at *Les Invalides: Le musée de l'armée* to visit their World War One exhibit. The Eastern Front only received a few panels of information, and the Battle of Gallipoli had only a paragraph of summary. This wasn't surprising, since the exhibit covered nearly every aspect of WW1, and Gallipoli was only one small part of the French experience. The exhibit did feature some items from the Armée d'Orient. I loved being able to see artifacts from what I had just been studying!

Conclusions

I had an incredible experience researching at the BnF libraries in Paris. My thesis topic would not be possible without the ability to see the testimonies of French soldiers at Gallipoli for myself. There are many stories of the past yet to be told, and this research will help to tell the sometimes-forgotten soldiers of France's memory. I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity, and I look forward to continuing my research and writing this upcoming semester.

Appendix



Gallipoli Invasion Map, detailing ANZAC landings and Turkish defenses

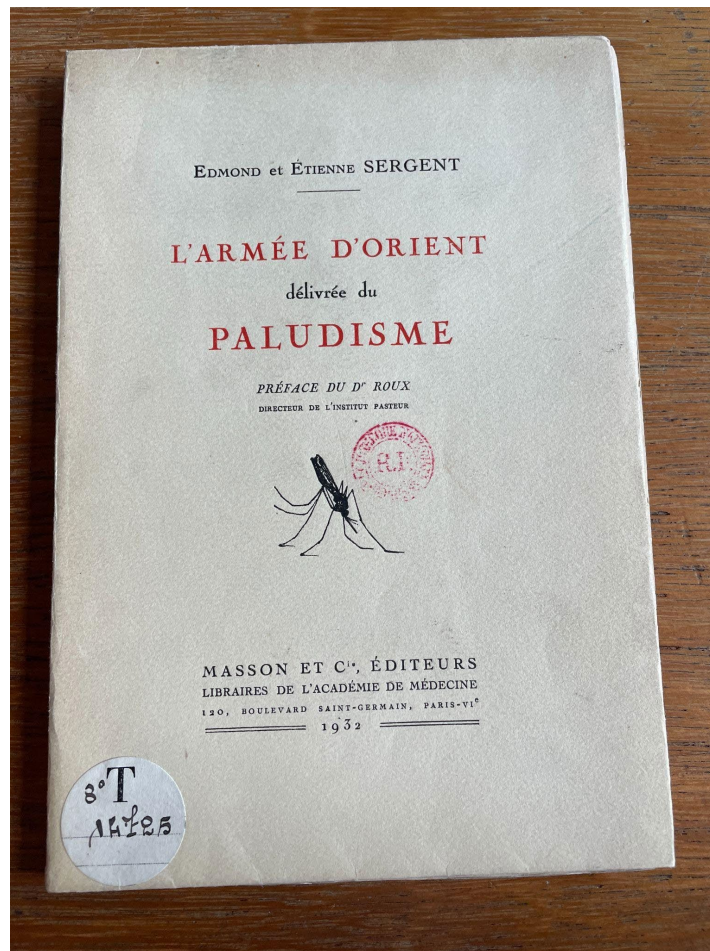
<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/gallipoli-invasion-map>



What my morning at the BnF looked like every day!



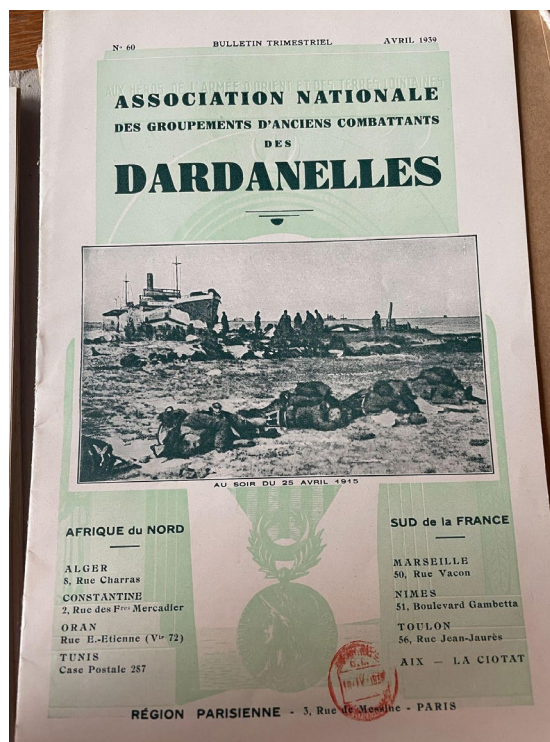
Arsenal research room
<https://www.bnf.fr/en/arsenal>



Edmond and Étienne Sargent's Book, *L'armée d'orient délivrée du paludisme*



Picture from *Les Invalides*
The trunk of General d'Esperey, Commander in Chief of "Les Armées Alliées en Orient"



Bulletin Trimestriel d'Association Nationale des Groupements d'Anciens Combattants Des Dardanelles

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Le Poilu d’Orient (1934-1939)

L’Essor (1934, 1936-1939)

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