

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to Maj. Eric T. Venditti, “The Rock of Gallipoli: The Leadership of Mustafa Kemal”

Military Review, January-February 2021

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Maj. Eric T. Venditti from the U.S. Army defined the talent of Atatürk’s leadership in his 2021 article “The Rock of Gallipoli: The Leadership of Mustafa Kemal.” Atatürk, the indisputable founding father of the Republic of Turkey, owes his successful field experience to his talent. In this context, Venditti’s article focuses on Atatürk’s experience in the Gallipoli campaign.

After a short introduction about the Ottoman Empire’s entrance to World War I, the reasons for the opening of the Dardanelles front, and the preparations for the Gallipoli Campaign, in the first section, Venditti describes the Ari Burnu landings. The description focuses on the first hours of the first day’s engagements. As the author emphasized, within the chains of mistakes that existed on both sides, success would be for those who made fewer mistakes or who could make up for their mistakes. So, it happened. Mustafa Kemal, a young staff lieutenant colonel (SLTC), took the right position at the right time in the right place, first changing the course of the battle and then the war.

Although the author stated that Mustafa Kemal was at the right time and in the right place with the right tools,

The Rock of Gallipoli The Leadership of Mustafa Kemal

Maj. Eric T. Venditti, U.S. Army

Mustafa Kemal, 24 April 1915

When the Ottoman Empire joined Germany and the Central Powers against the Allies, a small nation became known for its courage in the Caucasus and the Balkans and finally in the Gallipoli campaign. These three were considered the only young republic available to the world. Mustafa Kemal was the only one who would lead the Ottoman Empire through the darkest days of its history. He was the only one who would lead the Ottoman Empire through the darkest days of its history. He was the only one who would lead the Ottoman Empire through the darkest days of its history.

Mustafa Kemal, 24 April 1915



U.S. Army soldiers and British soldiers at the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915, photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

southern sectors of Gallipoli. The main problem, as Venditti emphasized, was understanding the situation. SLTC Mustafa Kemal achieved this with a high level of empathy. His empathy was twofold. He first understood the purpose and intention of his echelon commander by putting himself in the position of Esat Pasha as a reserve unit commander should do. He then put himself in the enemy's shoes and evaluated the enemy's purpose with high accuracy. Moreover, as Venditti found, Mustafa Kemal had almost no information. The genius SLTC would overcome this shortcoming with two clever practices. He analyzed the terrain very well and applied tactical principles without hesitation. Venditti caught both points with great accuracy.

In this context, the author's assessment of the commander's six activities is important, which brings us to the second part of the article. The exaggerated praises for Atatürk's ability to take initiative threaten to diminish his genius of command. Holders of this view argue that Atatürk acted independently in Gallipoli and made up for the lack of competent commanders. Actually, the real situation was different. Atatürk's ability to use initiative depended on the correct understanding of the purpose and intent of his echelon commanders, and contrary to common belief, acting within the chain of command. As a matter of fact, we can understand his initiative from his work called *Discourses with the Officer and Commander*, which was published three months before World War I:

Every officer, non-commissioned officer, or even privateer in every unit, big or small, may face a situation where he cannot get any orders or ideas about his course of action. For this reason, it is imprudent and disastrous to recognize a military unit as the trusted and respected force of an army, without being convinced that both commanders and soldiers are capable of accomplishing their mission by thinking independently.

On the other hand, according to Atatürk, there is a limit to this kind of independence. He expresses this limit as follows:

An army's independently fulfillment of every mission creates serious concern if it goes to the extreme. This is because the more admirable when independent duties are positive, the more open to criticism when they are

contrary to purpose. However, the suitability of every action for the purpose depends on being able to understand the purpose clearly in all situations and conditions.

Therefore, as Venditti has determined, the talented SLTC Mustafa Kemal correctly understood the complex situation or the "wicked problem," correctly identified the necessary measures for success, correctly explained these precautions to his subordinates, led the battle on the first line and engaged the battle wherever or whenever he wanted, and finally updated his plans in accordance with continuous situation evaluations.

Venditti pauses his detailed account in the evening of 25 April 1915 and makes a long jump to January 1916, when Allied troops withdrew from Gallipoli. He then focuses on the lessons learned. In this context, it is possible to see this part of the article as the third and last section. In agreeing with the author, it can be said that SLTC Mustafa Kemal's ability to understand the commander's role in battle sets an example for today's commanders. Moreover, Mustafa Kemal did this with an almost insufficient intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). More precisely, the weight of his IPB was compulsorily limited to the land rather than the enemy. However, he studied the land very well. Atatürk emphasized this in his book titled *Advice Regarding the Solution of the Tactical Problem and Writing the Orders*, in which he wrote about his experiences from the Gallipoli battles:

As for the land; it is always necessary to give the land its true value. Rather than acknowledging that the land limits the enemy's goals, it must be admitted that it will help the enemy take advantage of the land's possibilities and achieve his goal by overcoming his difficulties. Remembering the blood shed on the steep rocky slopes of the Kodja Chemen range overlooking the sea is enough to accept this fact.

According to Venditti, three lessons can be learned from the 25 April battles. According to the first lesson, if there is no information about the enemy, it is necessary to attack terrain. This is actually a familiar maneuver that exists in Turkish strategic culture and was implemented by SLTC Mustafa Kemal with a pragmatic fine-tuning. The Ottoman Gen. Hacı İlbey implemented a similar maneuver against the Crusader Army

in 1364, in Sirpsindiği Battle in the context of a reconnaissance in force. “The spirit of attack,” which Atatürk devotes to the fourth part of his work, *Discourses with the Officer and the Commander*, has once again come true in the cliffs of Koja Chemen Tepe.

The second lesson is to motivate soldiers. It is possible to support Venditti’s accurate determination with quotations from Atatürk. In *Discourses with the Officer and the Commander*, Atatürk expresses this point of view: “I guess it is our duty to win the souls of our soldiers, and to create a soul, an ambition and a character in them first turns to us after Allah and the Prophet who is in the city of Medina.” On the other hand, SLTC Mustafa Kemal’s order to die cannot be reduced to sacrifice alone. There is no doubt that the attack ordered on 25 April was a suicide mission. But this mission is also a pragmatic act that serves a higher purpose of battle. It is possible to see this in the second part of the mentioned order of SLTC Mustafa Kemal. He expresses the purpose and intention of his operation concisely: “In the time that it takes us to die, other forces and commanders can come and take our place.” As a matter of fact, Atatürk also said the following words in a later period of his life: “Death must be directed only towards the intention and purpose of killing. But what good is dying if no purpose can be achieved after death?”

Venditti did not mention the May 1915 attacks or the second landing operation in the Ari Burnu and Anafartalar regions in August 1915. Although it is possible to see the omissions as limitations of research, they can be noted as a little gap in terms of the analysis of Atatürk’s leadership characteristics too. It was the “Anafartalar Battles” that brought Atatürk his known reputation. The ingenious command and management of SLTC Mustafa Kemal during these battles pushed the Allied attacks to the culmination point in mid-August 1915. After his success in these battles, he started to be known as the “Hero of Anafartalar.” In terms of six commander activities, if Atatürk’s prominent effort in the 25 April battles can be called an “understanding,” his role in the 10 August battles can be defined as “leading.”

There are many studies and monographs on Atatürk’s talent of leadership, especially in Turkish literature. Yet Venditti’s article has privilege in several points. First, thanks to the article, Atatürk’s decision-making and command practice becomes more perceptible for contemporary strategists. Second, Venditti makes clear that Atatürk is the most prominent operational figure in Gallipoli whose daring measures frustrated the offensive efforts of Allied forces. Finally, the article emphasizes Atatürk’s talent of understanding that correctly uncovers both the enemy’s and his echelon commanders’ intents without any information. ■



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