

ESSAYS & REPORTAGE

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AUSTRALIA'S ARMENIAN STORY

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Extract | The wartime events of 24 April 1915 initiated more than a century of interaction

Right:

Captain Thomas White of the Australian Flying Corps – second from the left in this photo taken in Basra, Mesopotamia (now Iraq), in July 1915 – had his first encounter with the Armenian massacres at Tel Armen, in the north of Iraq. [Australian War Memorial](#)



On the afternoon of 24 April 1915, one of the most significant events in the military history of Australia and New Zealand began in Mudros Harbour on the Greek island of Lemnos. This was the base for the great Anglo-French assault on the Gallipoli peninsula. On the same day, just hours before the Anzac landing, the Ottoman authorities arrested about 230 Armenian political, religious, educational and intellectual leaders in Constantinople.

Even as the Anzacs were coming ashore, the Ottoman authorities deported the Armenian prisoners by train, inland from Haidar Pasha station, on the Asiatic shore, to Angora (now Ankara) in the east. Only a handful of the 230 survived; the rest disappeared without trace. The arrests became a blueprint for the Ottoman government's systematic destruction of its civilian Armenian population. Its commitment to eradicating Armenians extended well beyond ethnic cleansing to become a dedicated attempt to wipe out all traces of Armenian culture and history. Across the Near East, Armenian churches and cemeteries were reduced to rubble. A campaign of cultural genocide had begun, and has continued across the region ever since.

For the Anzacs and their comrades, 25 April 1915 began an eight-month ordeal that would see the deaths of 40,000 invaders and more than twice as many defenders. The failed campaign would later be celebrated as the making of the Anzac nations, and the Ottoman victory over the Allied troops would contribute a figurehead (Mustafa Kemal, later Atatürk) and associated mythology to the idea of a Turkish nation. On that first Anzac Day, too, the train rattling eastwards from Constantinople marked the beginning of the extermination of at least one million of the Ottoman Empire's Armenian subjects. The fate of an already oppressed people, for centuries without a nation, who would wait decades to belong to a nation again, was bound up with the new Antipodean countries, whose soldiers were at that moment fighting on the hillsides of Gallipoli.

How were these events connected? The answer can be summarised quite simply, though the details are complex. Australians saw the attempted genocide of the Ottoman Empire's Armenians and fought to liberate them; Australians were active in a massive humanitarian effort – the first in Australia's history – and later welcomed descendants of genocide survivors and victims. Today in Australia we know far more about what began on 25 April 1915 than what began the day before.

The Armenian genocide of 1915 was implemented through what Turkish historian Taner Akçam called a “dual track mechanism.” Deportation and resettlement orders came via official channels from the interior ministry to the provincial governors, who then circulated them to the security service units connected to the ministry. Concurrently, coded killing orders went to the provinces from the government in Constantinople; families then had a few days to gather their belongings. Their property was sold off or given to the local population. Men were rounded up and killed. Convoys of the elderly, women and children were sent on the road and subjected to robbery, looting, rape, abduction and murder.

From the Ottoman eastern provinces, the twin measures – deportations and mass killings – spread westward, spanning much of Anatolia, the major part of modern Turkey. Akçam estimates that between 600,000 and 1.5 million Armenians were killed. (Armenian volunteer battalions fighting alongside the Russian army killed perhaps a few thousand Ottomans, although again exact numbers are unknown.) The number of women and children given to Turkish, Kurdish or Arab families or simply kidnapped is impossible to calculate, but some authorities suggest the number could have been as high as 200,000.

Australian forces encountered Armenians wherever the Anzacs went in the Middle East. A community of several thousand Armenians lived in Egypt, mostly in Cairo, and the Anzacs stationed at Mena Camp, about ten miles from Cairo, patronised Armenian businesses. In December 1914, Henry Miller Lanser of the 1st Battalion, a motor mechanic from Sydney, visited a recording studio owned by an Armenian, Setrak Mechian, and recorded a Christmas message to his family onto a shellac disc. Lanser's disc is the only known recorded letter made by an Australian soldier during the first world war, perhaps the only one of its kind in the world.

In late 1915, details of the escape and rescue by French cruisers of some 5000 Armenians from the Mediterranean coast began to be widely disseminated. The heroism of these Armenians, and the suffering they endured, became a popular news item in Australia. In July, Armenians had defied an order to leave six villages at the base of Musa Dagh (Mount Moses) near Antioch in Syria. With only a few hundred rifles and provisions from their village stores, they fiercely resisted attempts by regular Ottoman troops to flush them out. Untrained, inexperienced, outnumbered and outgunned, the Armenians had little expectation of surviving the siege when their food stocks were depleted after a month. Gradually, they retreated to the sea, the situation seemingly hopeless.

Their only hope lay in the possibility of rescue by an Allied warship patrolling the Mediterranean coast. By astonishing chance, two large banners hoisted by the Armenians – one a Red Cross flag and the other stating “Christians in Distress: Rescue” – were seen by a passing French warship. A squadron of Allied warships rescued the Armenians and took them to Port Said. A British staff officer used three Australian transport ships to deal with the emergency. The Anglo-Egyptian government

established a camp for the refugees, where they were housed, fed and given medical treatment. Anzacs stationed close to the refugee camp would purchase the refugee women's handiwork to send to Australia as gifts.

Australian encounters with Armenians multiplied after the Gallipoli landing in April 1915. Like the British and French forces, the Ottoman army reflected the multiethnic composition of an empire. Despite being commonly referred to as Turks, they also included Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Greeks and more. On 25 April, Anzacs captured at least one Ottoman Armenian; interrogated by intelligence officers, he reported that an Ottoman division of 18,000 men was advancing on the invaders. As the campaign continued, the number of Armenian prisoners increased.

Since many of the prisoners had studied in American mission schools, they often had a good command of both English and Turkish. British intelligence officers examining prisoners found many of the Armenians sympathetic to the Allied cause and saw them as trustworthy guides or interpreters. Still, the concept of an Ottoman prisoner being in sympathy with the Allies took time for some Anzacs to comprehend. Aubrey Herbert, a British intelligence officer and interpreter with the Anzacs, recalled his difficulty persuading Anzacs that the "Greeks and Armenians... were conscripts who hated their masters" and that just because a prisoner knew Turkish, this "did not make him a Turk."

Anzac officers learned more about their enemy. In September 1915, Charles Bean reported from Gaba Tepe that the Turkish labour battalion – which largely comprised Greeks and Armenians – had been "very active in digging and improving the trenches" for the upcoming winter campaign. Lieutenant Edward Gaynor wrote in November 1915 that the "Turkish soldier does no work" but the Armenians and other Christians were herded together into battalions to do nothing else but dig trenches. Gaynor thought it would have been "a boon and a blessing" if he had such working battalions: his fighting men spent "half their time digging trenches."

Among the many foreign eyewitnesses to the Armenian genocide were the Anzac prisoners captured by the Turks. They included prisoners taken at Gallipoli, on the Sinai Peninsula and in Mesopotamia (Iraq), as well as the submariners who penetrated the Dardanelles in 1915. Perhaps the best-known Australian prisoner in Turkey was Captain (later Sir) Thomas White, a pilot for the Australian Flying Corps and in later years a minister in the Menzies government. White was captured by the Ottoman army while on a mission to cut telegraph wires near Baghdad in November 1915. He had his first encounter with the Armenian massacres when he reached a "mainly Armenian town," Tel Armen, in northern Mesopotamia. White noticed that only a very few Armenian women and children had remained, "the males being conspicuously absent." He found "thirty-six newly-made graves which spoke eloquently of what had become of the Armenian men." He noticed a little girl looking pleadingly towards him. Powerless to help her, White was "horrified at the Turk's handiwork, learning later that these massacres had been simultaneous and to order throughout the entire country."

As well as the demographic change caused by the forced deportation of Armenians and other Ottoman Christians, the Ottoman policy had served another useful purpose. The homes, churches and monasteries the Armenians had been forced to abandon became the prison camps where many Australian and other Allied prisoners were held. Lieutenant Leslie Luscombe of the 14th Battalion was taken prisoner at Gallipoli in August 1915. While he was being transported to the centuries-old Sourp

Asdvadzadzin (Holy Mother of God) Armenian monastery in Ankara, he witnessed “a sad and depressing sight” at the station in Eskişehir, a railway junction town in western Turkey. “As our train pulled into the platform, Turkish soldiers armed with whips were driving the [Armenian] women and children into the sheep trucks. It was evidently intended to transport them to some distant concentration camp.”

Another prisoner was Able Seaman John Wheat, a crew member of the Australian submarine *AE2*, which had been captured shortly after penetrating the Dardanelles in April 1915. Wheat was taken to another Sourp Asdvadzadzin, an Armenian church at Afyonkarahissar, a town in western Turkey. Before the war, the Armenians comprised about one-third of the town's 30,000 inhabitants. Wheat observed that “all the Armenians” had been “driven from the town” before his arrival. Another Australian prisoner, Private Daniel Creedon of the 9th Battalion, wrote in his diary just two months later: “The people say that the Turks killed 1¼ million Armenians.” Creedon's figure was close to the accepted death toll for the massacres and suggests that the magnitude of the outrage was known and discussed by Anzac prisoners of war.

As the British forces advanced northwards into the Ottoman province of Palestine, the Australian Light Horse encountered thousands of Armenian refugees. In Jerusalem, British Empire troops discovered around 500 deportees in the Armenian monastery of St James. During operations in February 1918, 900 deportees were recovered in Tafele on the Dead Sea, all of them in terrible health. They were the remains of a convoy of nearly 10,000 people deported mainly from Cilicia on the southeastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey. A month later, the British discovered a group of Armenian refugees, including about one hundred orphans, near Es Salt, west of Amman. Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Mills of the 4th (Anzac) Battalion of the Imperial Camel Corps was among the Desert Column troops who helped rescue these Armenians. In a touching display of humanity amid the horrors of war, Mills carried a four-year-old Armenian girl asleep in his arms as he rode his camel to the safe haven of Jerusalem. In this way, individual Australian soldiers saw firsthand the victims of the war the Ottomans waged against Armenian civilians.

Victorian Colonel Stanley Savige had a similar story. As a member of the elite Dunsterforce, Savige helped rescue tens of thousands of Armenians and Assyrians in the summer of 1918. Named after its commander, Major General Lionel Dunsterville, the Dunsterforce was an Allied military mission established in 1917 and comprising about 500 elite Australian, New Zealand, British and Canadian troops. In mid 1918 the force was deployed to northern Persia and the Caucasus to protect the Baku oilfields from the Ottomans.

Savige was in charge of twenty-two men helping the Armenian and Assyrian forces defend strategic areas of northern Iran. A successful Ottoman offensive against the Armenians and Assyrians resulted in a huge exodus of some 80,000 refugees. Savige and his small party protected the refugee column against their pursuers, fighting off the Turkish cavalry and Kurdish horsemen, who outnumbered Savige's men ten to one. The demoralised crowds of men, women and children, with their carts, animals, flocks and herds, were ultimately shepherded to safety in Hamadan, through country almost entirely devoid of supplies. Savige received the Distinguished Service Order for his role in the rescue effort. “His cool determination and fine example inspired his men,” the DSO citation said, “and put heart into the frightened refugees.” Many people today regard the first world war as a futile clash of

empires, but those Australians who helped rescue and protect the war's Armenian victims may rightly have considered themselves to be fighting for humanity.

The 1915 deportations triggered massacres of Armenian clergy, the destruction of churches and monasteries, and the burning of thousands of handwritten medieval manuscripts. As well as the seizure of personal property, by the end of the war Armenian communal properties (including some 2538 churches, 451 monasteries and 1996 schools) had been almost entirely transferred to the Ottoman state. The Armenian atrocities were one of the foremost examples of “asset transfer” – a euphemism for forcible economic dispossession – in modern history. Yet amid the cultural destruction there were stories of cultural rescue by Allied forces. On 16 November 1917, the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade entered the port of Jaffa after its Ottoman defenders had been defeated by the Australian Imperial Force's 1st Light Horse Brigade. The Armenian cemetery of Jaffa was being destroyed by Ottoman soldiers; hardly a single tombstone had been untouched. The Anzacs arrived just in time to prevent the removal of the few remaining stones.

The destruction of Armenian cultural heritage continued during the postwar Turkish republican era. Armenian monuments were used as targets for Turkish military training exercises or converted to mosques, shops and jails. Across historical Armenia (today's eastern Turkey), 90 per cent of Armenian placenames and the names of geographical sites were replaced with Turkish names. This desecration of the most sacred symbols of Armenian culture, as well as their churches and monasteries, combined with a continuing attempt to erase Armenia from the history of the Near East, is a clear continuation of the Turkish policy of Armenian genocide. Still today, official travel guides published by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism often fail to mention Armenian cultural heritage in Turkey.

Back home, the fate of the Armenians aroused the sympathy and interest of many Australians. In December 1915 Miss Edith Searle, the secretary of the Armenian Relief Fund, wrote to the Melbourne *Argus* that the Young Turks – the government in Constantinople – were bent on “exterminating the Armenians” and had made “appalling progress” towards this goal. Searle urged her fellow Australians to “spare something for these most pitiful of all.” In late 1916 the Armenian relief movement gained momentum with the establishment of the Friends of Armenia organisation by prominent Victorians Alexander Leeper, Master of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, and parliamentarian William Edgar. The organisation took over the administration of Searle's relief fund and began to expand its support base. There were fundraising concerts as well as special church collections for the “suffering Armenians.” By 1918, Armenian relief funds were also operating in Sydney and Adelaide, and more than £11,000 had been collected and sent to the London Armenian fund. The plight of the Armenians also featured in stirring speeches during recruitment drives: the outrages were a way of encouraging men to enlist.

The Australian Armenian relief movement culminated in the establishment in Lebanon in November 1922 of an Australian-run orphanage for some 1700 Armenian orphans. A national executive committee, the Australasian Armenian Relief Fund, was formed a month later. Its secretary, the Reverend James Cresswell, a Congregational minister from Adelaide, made a fact-finding tour of the Armenian refugee camps and orphanages in 1923. At one camp near Aleppo, Syria, he saw “women pale and emaciated, children with swollen abdomens, the result of starvation. Again, one saw little babies pinched and pallid – further on a little one just recently born, one tiny atom among thousands

of the suffering children to be seen here.” At this time, too, the prime minister, Billy Hughes, allowed free transport of relief supplies for Armenian refugees aboard the new Commonwealth Government Line of Steamers. Shipments of supplies went to the Armenian refugees from various Australian ports until 1929.

Before the second world war, Australia was home to no more than a few scattered Armenian families, perhaps one hundred individuals. After the war, though, the number of Armenian migrants to Australia began to increase, and by 1960 about 500 Armenians had migrated. At first, most came from British colonies in South and Southeast Asia, where thriving Armenian trading communities had existed before the war, but Armenian migration significantly increased during the 1960s because of the political turmoil in the Middle East. The largest single group came from Egypt in 1962–63, when President Nasser began purging Egypt of Westerners and people like Armenians and Greeks, who were seen as pro-Western. The Australian government set up an office in Cairo to facilitate the entry of “well-qualified Armenians, Italians and Greeks from Egypt.” A one-year pilot scheme allowed entry without sponsorship.

After 1965, the presence of family and friends already settled in Australia became the major pull factor for Armenian migrants. Most of the new arrivals came via sponsorship or by qualifying for one of the immigration schemes operating during the period. Following the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 and the opening of Australia's doors to migrants from the war-torn country, a further small wave of Lebanese Armenians migrated to Australia. By 1976, an estimated 10,000 Armenians had settled in Australia, the majority of them in Sydney and Melbourne. They came from forty-three countries, held twenty-five nationalities upon arrival and spoke thirty-five different languages, a reminder of the magnitude of the Armenian diaspora before 1915 and the exodus thereafter. The Iranian revolution of 1979 led to yet another wave of Armenian migrants. Then, in the early 1990s, a small number of Armenians migrated to Australia to escape the hardships caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union (there had been a Soviet Armenian republic), the devastating Armenian earthquake of 1988 and the Armenian–Azerbaijani war over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Today, small numbers of Armenians come to Australia from many parts of the world, but mostly from the war-ravaged regions of Iraq and Syria.

Australia has had a long relationship with Armenia and its people. But since Australia also has a Turkish past – because Gallipoli in Turkey is such an important part of Australia's understanding of the place of the first world war in our history – it also needs to come to terms with what happened to the people of Armenia during and after that conflict.

Since 1985, when the Turkish government agreed to rename a small stretch of Turkish land and water Anzac Cove (or Anzak Koyu), Australians have been exposed to, and have largely swallowed uncritically, a version of the Gallipoli story that portrays the “Johnnies” (that is, the invading Allies) and the “Mehmets” (the Ottoman defenders) as common victims of a war engineered by Britain and Germany. A quotation attributed to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and supposedly addressed “to the Anzac mothers” in 1934 has been used repeatedly over the past thirty years, in Anzac Day ceremonies, in films and books, and on memorials erected all over Australia. The words reassure Australians that the Australian dead of 1915 are cared for by Turkey, whose people are said to regard the Anzacs as “our sons as well.” As David Stephens and Burçin Çakır have shown, the celebrated words were almost

certainly made up in 1953 by Atatürk's associate Şükrü Kaya, a man as guilty as any of crimes against the Ottoman Empire's Armenian and Kurdish minorities during and after the first world war. This is at best a terrible irony; at worst it is an insult to the memories of Australians who fought and died to defeat a power capable of perpetrating or permitting such a crime as the genocide of the Armenians.

The New South Wales and South Australian state parliaments have officially recognised the Armenian genocide. In New South Wales, a monument to the victims of the Armenian genocide and all other genocides was erected in the grounds of Parliament House in 1998. In May 2013, a decision by the NSW parliament to reaffirm the genocide prompted the Turkish foreign ministry to ban the proponents of the motion from attending Anzac commemorations at Gallipoli. The Turkish consul in Sydney, Gülseren Çelik, made it clear that official Turkey saw suppression of the genocide story as the other side of the coin of Anzac commemoration.

"These people," she said, "want to hijack this very special bond, the Turkish Anzac spirit, this is their target... We expect Australians to show the same kind of respect that we have shown to their history and their ancestry." Official Australia concurs. While the Australian government has historically maintained a policy of avoiding "this sensitive debate," the foreign affairs minister, Julie Bishop, made her position clear in 2014. She wrote that the government does not recognise these events as genocide, adding that "Australia attaches great importance to its relationship with Turkey, which is underpinned by our shared history at Gallipoli, and by the recent cooperation in the G20 and a range of other international fora."

Over the past century, in both official and popular works on Gallipoli, Turks have been variously portrayed as ruthless foes, noble enemies and, in recent years, national friends. What began as respect for the enemy at Gallipoli has "morphed into a nationally celebrated, government-constructed and media-supported friendship between Turkey and Australia." This unthinking acceptance of a Turkish (actually Kemalist) approach to the history of the first world war suppresses Australian popular interest in narratives presenting a darker side of the Ottoman Empire's war. The Australian media has now fully committed to a view of the war, and especially of Gallipoli, that sees Turks as noble defenders – and, like Australians, the victims of an imperial power. The story of the Ottoman Empire turning on its Armenian minority and murdering a million innocent people sits awkwardly with this benign view. This approach extends beyond the media, too. In Australian military history, the genocide and Australia's relationship to it are mostly ignored, so eager are Australian agencies to demonstrate a positive relationship with Turkey, built around the shared Gallipoli story.

Many Australians recognise the Gallipoli campaign as a seminal event in the shaping of Australia's national identity. For Armenians, on the other hand, the genocidal eviction from their country was a defining moment in their quest for national survival. These two seemingly unrelated events had more in common than a mere coincidence of dates and a shared setting in Ottoman Turkey. They were also brought together by a humanitarian bond that helped save the Armenian people from complete annihilation. In the Ottoman war theatre, Anzacs witnessed the Armenian genocide and helped rescue survivors of the death marches. At home, a combination of patriotism, Christian solidarity and public outrage at Ottoman atrocities sparked a relief movement in Victoria that eventually spread throughout the nation.

There is always more to war than heroism and fortitude under fire. Similar qualities can be displayed in a variety of settings, with or without proximate violence. Australians showed such qualities to the benefit of Armenians a century ago and since. Yet, despite the strong connection between Australia's Gallipoli experience and the Armenian genocide, the latter does not form part of modern Australia's collective memory of the first world war. The events that began on 25 April 1915 are burnished and sacralised; the events that began the day before are glossed over. The historical anthropologist Paul Shackel argues that "public memory is more a reflection of present political and social relations [in this case, the relations between Australia and Turkey] than a true reconstruction of the past." After 101 years, it is time that Australia's connection to the Armenian tragedy formed part of our reconstruction of the past. •

This is an extract from The Honest History Book, edited by David Stephens and Alison Broinowski, published this month by NewSouth.

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