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# Role of German Officers in the Gallipoli Campaign

By [Thomas P. Iredale](#)

**Serving alongside their Ottoman brothers-in-arms, an estimated 500 German officers and men took part in the fighting at Gallipoli. Why were they there? This article provides a brief overview.**

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## Background

Running from November 1914 through to the first days of 1916, the [Gallipoli or Dardanelles Campaign](#), known in Turkey as *Çanakkale Savaşı*, was fought between the Entente Powers (the [British Empire](#), [France](#), and [Russia](#)) in attack, against Ottoman forces in defence. Access to the Dardanelles Straits and the Bosphorus was of strategic importance for Russian [shipping](#). In late 1914, when the [Ottoman Empire](#) allied itself with the Central Powers ([Germany](#), [Austria-Hungary](#)), it was thus able to block all access to the straits. Britain badly needed [foodstuffs](#) from Russia and in turn was prepared to supply her Russian ally with armaments. Warships from the British and French navies tried to force passage in the Dardanelles with a major [naval](#) attack on 18 March 1915. The

goal was to thrust on to Istanbul, forcing Turkey to surrender, thus giving maritime access to Russia. After this attack failed, the Allies launched amphibious landings on 25 April 1915 to knock out the coastal defences, giving passage to the fleet. Fighting continued throughout the year without the Allies achieving any of their planned objectives and ended with the final Allied withdrawal on 8 January 1916.

## The German Military Mission

Military cooperation between the Ottoman Empire and Germany originated in 1756, but the most notable army training legacies were left by the then Captain [Helmuth Karl Bernhard von Moltke \(1800-1891\)](#) between 1836 and 1839 and, in various senior ranks, [Wilhelm Leopold Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz \(1843-1916\)](#), first from 1883 to 1887 and later on, many extended visits from 1909 to 1913.

After the Turkish army's defeat in the [Balkan War](#) of 1912, the grand vizier, [Mahmud Şefket Paşa \(1856-1913\)](#), concluded that he needed German military assistance to reorganise his forces. He said to minister of marine, [Cemal Paşa \(1872-1922\)](#):

As regards our army, I don't think we must hesitate any longer to adopt the methods of the Germans. For more than thirty years we have had German instructors in our army, our Corps of Officers is trained entirely on German lines, and our army is absolutely familiar with the spirit of German training and military education. It is quite impossible to change all that now. I therefore intend to send for a German military mission on the grand scale and, if necessary, I shall even appoint a German general to command a Turkish army corps, place German staff and regimental officers in command of every unit comprising it, and in this way form a model army corps.<sup>[1]</sup>

In November 1913, a German military mission was despatched under General [Otto Liman von Sanders \(1855-1929\)](#). By 2 August 1914, it numbered seventy-one officers of all arms. Lieutenant Erich Serno was assigned to set up a flying training school at San Stefano. The military mission also delegated navy Captain Waldemar Pieper to help reorganise the Turkish armaments industry. Aged seventy-two, General von der Goltz was again re-assigned to Turkey in November 1914, but was very disappointed not to be given the command of the military mission.

## The Ottoman Alliance with Germany

After the outbreak of World War I, Admiral [Wilhelm Souchon \(1864-1946\)](#) broke through to Istanbul with the warships [SMS Goeben](#) and [SMS Breslau](#). These two ships, now flying Turkish flags, added heavy muscle to the Turkish navy, of which Souchon became the commander in chief. After the Turkish navy attacked Russian seaports on 29 October 1914, Russia declared war on the Turks, who then formally allied themselves with Germany. All officers and men of the military mission, as well as the German naval contingent, now entered active service in the Turkish armed forces, which had been contractually agreed when the military mission was set up.

## The Naval Battles

Initially, the Allied plan was to force the Dardanelles with its fleet of warships alone. To reinforce coastal defences of both waterways, the Special Command was formed under Admiral [Guido von Usedom \(1854-1925\)](#). Defence against naval attack consisted of heavy [artillery](#) in the forts on both sides of the straits, as well as mobile howitzer units, [minefields](#), and anti-submarine barriers. In command of the Hamidié Fort with its 35.5 centimetre guns was Lieutenant Commander Fritz Wossidlo. Commanding the mobile 8<sup>th</sup> Heavy Field Artillery Regiment, along both shores of the Dardanelles, was Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich Wehrle, who instigated firing procedures from constantly changing positions against the Allied ships. In Fort Orhanié, battery commander Lieutenant Hans Woermann was the first German officer to be killed in action on 19 February 1915. Naval engineer Lieutenant Arnholdt Reeder ensured that the minelayer *Nusret* steamed smoke-free to avoid detection by patrolling Allied vessels, when she went to lay the fateful line of mines on 8 March 1915. Flying with Lieutenant Commander Karl Schneider as observer, Captain Erich Serno of No. 1 Squadron detected the Allied fleet assembling for its major attack on 18 March 1915.

## From the Allied Landings in April 1915 to Withdrawal

A month before the Allies launched amphibious attacks on 25 April 1915, General (now Marshal) Liman von Sanders Paşa was appointed to command the Turkish Fifth Army, which was responsible for defending Gallipoli. At this time, one-third of the senior commanders were German officers, for example General [Erich Paul Weber \(1860-1933\)](#), who commanded the XV Corps. Lieutenant Colonel Perrinet von Thauveney was his chief of staff. At divisional level there was Colonel [Georg von Sodenstern \(1889-1955\)](#) commanding the 5<sup>th</sup> Division as well as Colonel [August Nicolai \(1873-1947\)](#) commanding the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Lieutenant Colonel Hans Kannengiesser later took command of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division. Major Wilhelm Willmer commanded the "Anafarta Group", defending Suvla Bay from mid-June 1915 and Major Alexander Efnert commanded all the Fifth Army engineer units. Major Lierau, an experienced German heavy artillery officer, was in charge of all the Anafarta Group's artillery from August 1915.

Successfully attacking Allied warships off Gallipoli was Lieutenant Commander Rudolph Firlé, jointly commanding the Turkish destroyer *Muavenet*, which sank the English battleship HMS *Goliath* in the Dardanelles on 13 May 1915. The morale-boosting torpedoing of the battleships HMS *Triumph* on 25 May 1915 and HMS *Majestic* on 27 May was accomplished by Lieutenant Commander [Otto Hersing \(1885-1960\)](#), the famous captain of the German [submarine U 21](#). In the [air war](#), the first Allied [aircraft](#) was shot down by Lieutenant Karl Kettembeil on 27 September 1915, whilst flying in an Albatros C.III, piloted by Lieutenant Ludwig Preussner.

Those German officers named in this short narrative serve to highlight some of the wide-ranging and key roles they played on land, at sea, and in the air – some of which are hardly known, long-forgotten, or simply ignored. There is more interest in research on this subject from the Allied and

Turkish sides, but it remains sparse in Germany itself and this situation seems unlikely to change.

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Section Editor: [Pınar Üre](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ [Paşa, Cemal: Memories of a Turkish Statesman-1913 1919, New York 1922, p. 67ff.](#)

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