CHAPTER FOUR

THE WAR IN 1915: BADLY PLANNED DISASTERS

RUSSIAN POLAND, SECOND YPRES

The muddled state of war aims in 1915 corresponded to the muddled state of the war itself. Germany had failed to carry its plan to the intended conclusion but still held the strategic initiative in the east and west. In particular, Falkenhayn had the advantage of a reserve of manpower which, thanks to the central position of Germany and to the railway system, he could deploy where he wanted. Brusilov's success in September led Falkenhayn to fear that Austria–Hungary was too weak to resist Russia by herself, so he moved his reserve from west to east, using a chlorine gas attack at Ypres on 22 April to cover the withdrawal of eleven divisions and to test the effectiveness of poison gas as a weapon. Gas had not been used on the Western Front before, and the Algerians and French reservists who were its first victims broke and ran. The BEF, including the 1st Canadian Division, stood its ground on the second day and, at the cost of 2,000 lives, plugged the gap [*Doc. 7*]. Because the gas attack was experimental and the Germans intended to stay on the defensive in the west, they were not ready to exploit their initial success. The Allies quickly improvised gas masks, and poison gas became a feature of the new warfare, limited because of its dependence on the wind and terrain but increasingly part of the dehumanized environment of the Front and always deadly to the unwary [*Docs. 13* and *17*].

To attack in the east, Falkenhayn set up a two-pronged offensive in Russian Poland, with General August von Mackensen commanding the Austro-German thrust north-east in Galicia and Hindenburg attacking in the north towards Kovno [Map 2]. Hans von Seeckt was Mackensen's chief of staff; Ludendorff continued to serve with Hindenburg. Both Seeckt and Ludendorff were innovative. Seeckt put his assault divisions in the line without tipping off the Russians to the impending attack; the brief but intense preliminary bombardment also confused them, and when the German first wave attacked on 2 May, it was ordered to flow around resistance, leaving these positions to be taken by later waves. The attack went as planned and the Russians

collapsed. The Austrians regained their fortress city of Przemyśl on 3 June and Lemberg on 22 June. Falkenhayn then directed Mackensen to move north. Warsaw fell on 4 August, and then the fortress city of Brest-Litovsk. To the north, Hindenburg took Kovno. By the time Falkenhayn closed down the eastern campaign, his forces had advanced 300 miles, occupied most of Russian Poland, taken a million Russian prisoners and inflicted a further million casualties. It was the most successful German campaign in the war. The loss of prestige was devastating for the Tsar, especially after he sacked the Grand Duke Nicholas as commander in chief and took his place. Tsar Nicholas could not have organized a rummage sale let alone an army. From now on, defeat would be a personal matter, bringing the very survival of the autocracy into question.

Falkenhayn was not thinking of driving into Russia proper but rather of inflicting such a defeat that the Tsar would abandon France and ask for a separate peace. Humiliation, however, made the Tsar stubborn. Nor was he alone. The loss of Russian Poland finally gave the patriotic classes of Russia something tangible for which they could fight. Seeing the helplessness of the autocracy, the middle classes started to take over the organization of the war economy. As production rose, so did inflation, making the cause of 'bread', or affordable food, into a revolutionary issue.

THE TRENCH SYSTEM AND THE CODE OF THE FRONT

Fewer men spread over greater distances kept the war in the east mobile. The war in the west was different. To understand why trench warfare prevailed there, one must first realize that it was nothing new. Since the first appearance of rifled arms with a greater zone of accurate fire, infantry had dug in for protection. In the First World War, trenches* appeared as early as the Battle of the Aisne. When the opposing armies connected the strongest defensive positions they held with trenches and barbed wire over the winter of 1914–15, the trench system emerged as a temporary improvisation. The trenches in turn were reinforced, in the German and British positions with sandbags piled to form parapets in front and paradoses to the rear (both terms derived from medieval siege warfare), in the French lines with bunches of branches to 'revet' or strengthen the constantly collapsing walls. In front of the trenches, in No Man's Land, each side staked rolls of heavy barbed wire. The teeth were razor-sharp; men could tear themselves to pieces if they were caught [*Doc. 5*]. Wiring parties worked through the nights while raiders tried to cut gaps. These gaps then showed the enemy where an attack would likely come.

Trench systems evolved gradually. They were different for each army. The British had to build on the ground in Flanders rather than dig in because of the high water table. In theory their system used three lines. The front line contained the fire and command trenches. The fire trench was zig-zagged with

traverses,* with thick buttresses blocking off each section, and an infantry section of 14 men in each separate bay. The command trench, about twenty yards back, contained the dug-outs and, where possible, the latrines. The second line was the support trench, from seventy to a hundred yards behind the front line. The third line was the reserve trench, four to six hundred yards behind the support line. The French, who were still committed to attacking, used only front and support trenches and, like the British, manned the front line heavily. The Germans, who had shrewdly taken the high ground when the front stabilized, built a trench system up to 5,000 yards deep, with the forward lines lightly held and the reserves safe in massive bunkers, some dug up to a hundred feet underground.

By and large, the Germans learned about trench warfare faster than the Allies not because they had expected it, which they had not, or because they were wiser in the arts of war, which they were, but because they had an incentive to learn. They chose to stand on the defensive on the Western Front, which concentrated their mind on using their firepower and higher ground to maximum advantage. In this learning period, the Allied commanders were still thinking of attacking, leaving the unexciting details of figuring out appropriate tactics to field officers, who improvised stop-gap solutions. Few realized that in war, and perhaps in modern life, nothing is as permanent as the temporary (Daylight Savings Time, income tax, trenches). Then again, nothing is as temporary as the permanent, for the layout of the trench system was constantly modified by bombing, the weather and reconstruction. In effect, the infantry rebuilt the trenches each night. Because the trenches were always changing and the men in them usually on the move, unless they were in a front-line trench in daylight, it was almost impossible for soldiers to comprehend the labyrinth they were inside.

As trench fighting developed, a myth about the war took hold, especially among British junior officers. Myth in this case does not mean a falsification of the war experience but rather a heightened explanation of it that confirmed certain beliefs and made sense of the situation. According to the myth, young men went to war full of innocence and idealism, hoping to make the world a better place and to purge themselves of such peacetime vices as selfishness and materialism. They were murdered *en masse* by the old men, the generals, politicians, and profiteers, the noncombatants. This bitter disenchantment was muted at first, appearing occasionally in outbursts such as the declaration of the poet Siegfried Sassoon in 1916 [*Doc. 12*]. But eventually it became the dominant way of imagining and understanding the war. This myth of the Massacre of the Innocents made sense of the disjointed experience by refusing to look for any overall meaning, or indeed denying the possibility of such meaning in the world the war created. Paul Fussell (1975) has argued that instead of offering a meaningful narrative, the myth of the war imposed a binary structure:

then (naïve and innocent) and now (grizzled and world-weary), here (the trenches) and there (home), them (the noncombatants) and us, before and after [*Doc. 16*]. After the war, this myth became virtually the only way of remembering the war especially in Britain and France, expressing as it did a disillusionment not just with the war but with the peace that followed it [*Doc. 18*].

What should be noted is that the dominant myth of the war grew out of the experience of a small minority of the front soldiers, junior officers from relatively privileged backgrounds. Indeed, it could be argued that these young men were not actually front soldiers in the strict sense, because as officers, even junior officers, they visited the front lines and led raids and attacks but did not live continuously in the front-line trenches. That honour was reserved for the other ranks. For the educated officers, it was a 'literary war', to quote Paul Fussell. The overwhelming majority of front soldiers, however, came from the urban and rural working and lower-middle classes. These less educated and literate men did not preserve their experience in letters or works of the imagination, although many of the survivors later provided invaluable interviews and memoirs. Their attitude to the war can be gauged from the language they used [*Doc. 15*], the songs they sang [*Docs. 4* and *5*], the trench newspapers they wrote and read and the way they behaved. On the whole, whereas the officers saw the war through the prism of duty and service, the other ranks saw the war as unavoidable work to be carried out as part of a team, and treated it much as they had treated their civilian work.

According to the myth that arose after the war and coloured the way the war was remembered, the ordinary soldiers were doomed to their fate, which they had to endure passively. In fact, the soldiers had choices – not many to be sure, but enough to affect the conduct of the war. Seeking to show 'not . . . how the decisions of a few generals affected thousands of soldiers, but, rather how the decisions of thousands of soldiers affected a few generals', Tony Ashworth shows that front soldiers on both sides worked out a system of 'live and let live'* that prevailed in about one-third of the trench tours made by all the divisions of the BEF [7: *Chapter 7*]. Both the astronomical casualty rates for certain days and the attitude of utter disenchantment were exceptional rather than typical [*Doc. 16*].

According to Ashworth, as the trench system emerged, the front soldiers exercised the first of four choices open to them. They exchanged peace openly, with the most famous but by no means the first or last truce coming on Christmas Day 1914 on the British front. High Command was not amused and, as its grip over the war tightened, it forced the front soldiers to try a second option, inertia. They refused to take aggressive action because it made no sense against someone who could hit back. Equal vulnerability and a latent sense of fair play thus reduced the violence. Once again, High Command imposed rules to ensure that the men had the proper 'offensive spirit' [*Doc. 15, Offensive*]. Specialist units, recruited from men who wanted to be aggressive,

Plate 2 The most famous of the cartoons by Bruce Bairnsfather. The caption became a watchword for the British soldiers: 'Well, if you knows of a better 'ole, go to it' (originally printed in *The Bystander*, 1918, then *Fragments From France*, Part Five).

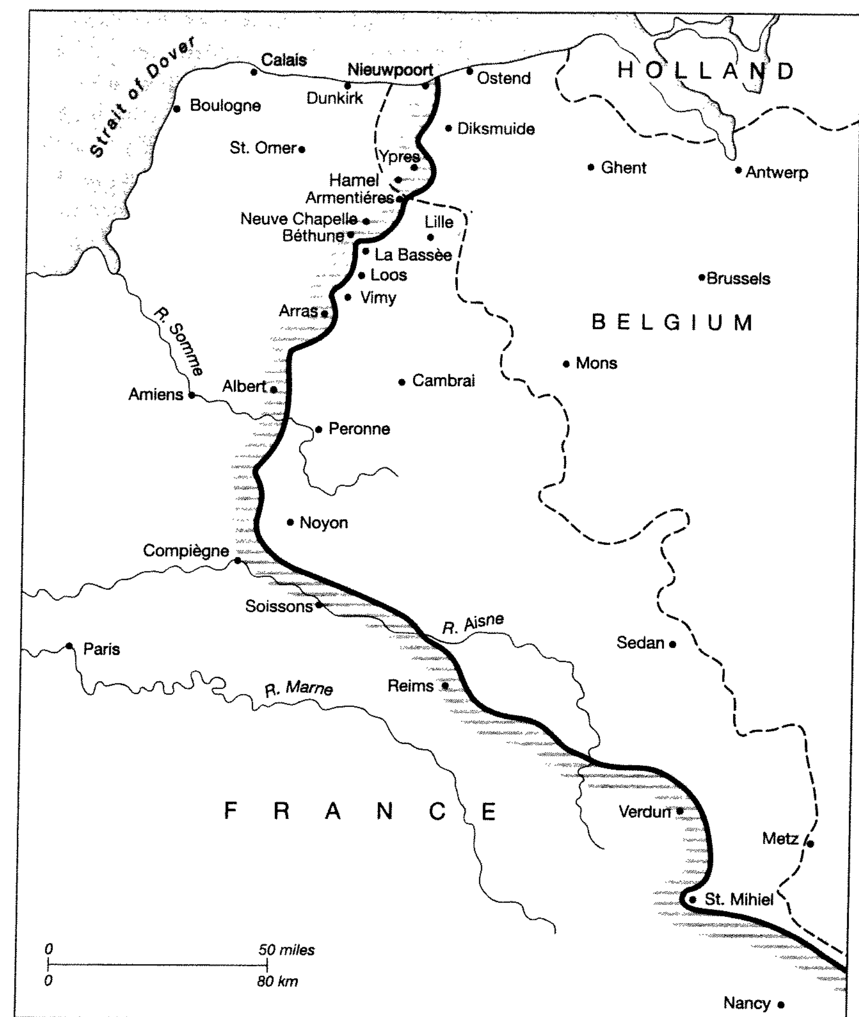
were sent to the Front to use mortars, grenades, sniping rifles and gas to irritate the enemy. Once again, the men refused to submit passively. They worked out a third response, ritualization. Because they were under orders, they could not openly engage in truces or refuse to be aggressive. They had to act, but they could try to ensure that what they did was not lethal, hoping that the other side would return the favour. Patrols avoided each other, gunners fired predictably at the same time and place, and each side was careful not to harass the other's ration parties. As the violence became ritualized, 'the other side' came to refer more to the other team, as in a sport, than to the enemy. The real enemy were all those outside the Front, the staff officers and civilians who were keeping the war going while imagining it to be different than it was [*Docs. 4* and *16*].

According to Ashworth, truces, inertia and ritualization made up the live and let live system, a way of improving the chances of survival that was carefully handed on to the new units that came into and took over the line. Soldiers were really civilians in uniform, and usually could not and would not abandon their civilian view of life, including the commandment of the Gospel not to kill. They fought not for King, Emperor or Country but for each other. When and if they abandoned live and let live, it was often to avenge the loss of comrades. They soon became disenchanted with the home front and its perception of the war as glorious. This created a rift between combatants and noncombatants [*Doc. 16*]. How then did nine and a half million men die if hatred was either episodic or absent at the front? By and large it happened because most of the killing was distant, mechanized and impersonal rather than face to face. Front soldiers were no killers. They were the killed.

NEUVE CHAPELLE, CHAMPAGNE, ARTOIS AND LOOS

The British discovered the strength of the German defences when they attacked at Neuve Chapelle on 10 March. The staff planners tried to approach the problem of attacking with fresh ideas. They saw that it was a gunner's war, and brought in 340 guns to fire off more rounds than in the entire Boer War. The artillery was asked to co-ordinate a fire plan instead of freelancing at targets of opportunity. The Royal Flying Corps (RFC) provided aerial reconnaissance and photography. Finally, the infantry was made familiar with the ground over which it was to attack. Haig insisted on the need for surprise and the British concealed their intentions completely.

If wise precautions and thorough preparation were enough, Neuve Chapelle would have been a success. Indeed, the first British rush advanced 1,200 yards and took the village of Neuve Chapelle. Haig got ready to pass the entire First Army through the village, including the cavalry, but nothing came of it. The second wave of infantry got entangled with the first, and then General Henry Rawlinson, commanding 4th Corps, was slow bringing up the reserves. The



Map 3 Western Front, 1915
Adapted from Lyn Macdonald, 1915, *The Death of Innocence*, Henry Holt (New York, 1993), p. 343

German defences stiffened as the British lost their initial advantage. The whole point of a competently set defence is that it does stiffen. It lets the defenders ride out the disadvantage of being surprised or outnumbered. As long as they can hold their ground, time will be on their side, because their reinforcements will be able to arrive quicker than those for the attacking side. Moreover, the firepower of the gunners was not a magic wand. The fire had to

be observed to be accurate; the shells and guns had to be free of defects and of the proper sort for the job at hand. Rawlinson soon concluded that 'bite and hold' attacks were the only way to attack successfully. The guns did the biting; their range dictated what the infantry could take and hold. He was right. Bite and hold was one of the secrets to success hidden in plain sight. Why then did he and the other responsible commanders forget or ignore the lesson they learned so early? The answer seems to be that their initial successes encouraged them to go too far, to bite off more than they could hold. In the case of Neuve Chapelle this very human flaw showed up in the hope that a whole army could funnel through the village and break out. It was not stupidity that bedevilled high command but impatience, not too little imagination, as critics often complained after the war, but too much.

Joffre remained supremely confident that he could pinch off the huge German salient formed where the front turned to the south-east. The two avenues of ground suitable for attack were at Arras and in the Champagne district. The first French offensive came in May, when 18 divisions attacked near Arras, aiming to take the high ground of Vimy Ridge that dominated the Douai plain. The main attack foundered on the elaborate German trench system, as did the British attack on Aubers Ridge. Nothing daunted, Joffre claimed that his real objective was to wear down the Germans, not to break through their lines. Wearing down, *usure* in French, was then elevated into higher diction as 'attrition'.* For the set piece in the autumn, he devised the greatest offensive of the war to date, the main blow coming in the Champagne region where the front turned and ran due east, with a supporting attack in the Artois again, including Vimy Ridge.

The French three-day bombardment in the Champagne offensive, heavy though it was, failed to breach the defences or cut the wire. The French repeated the pattern they and the British had set at Neuve Chapelle and Arras: success on the first day (25 September), soon giving way to uncoordinated local actions, and finally, after ten days of thrashing around, a futile attack against the German second lines. For a two-mile dent in the German lines, the French lost 145,000 men. To the north in Artois, the Allies fared even worse. Joffre had pressured Sir John French to attack the industrial sector north of Lens. Haig, who was to command the attack, argued that the target area was heavily fortified and of little military value. After a bombardment that was light because of the shortage of shells and thus brief enough to surprise the Germans, the British took the village of Loos and pushed on to break through the second German line near the suburbs of Lens. They released 150 tons of chlorine gas, killing 600 Germans but also, when it blew back, killing or disabling many of their own men. Sir John French unwisely kept his main reserves 16 miles to the rear, and by the time they reached the battle, the Germans had sealed the breach. With confusion reigning, the British second wave advanced in column into German machine-gun fire. When Sir John finally shut down the

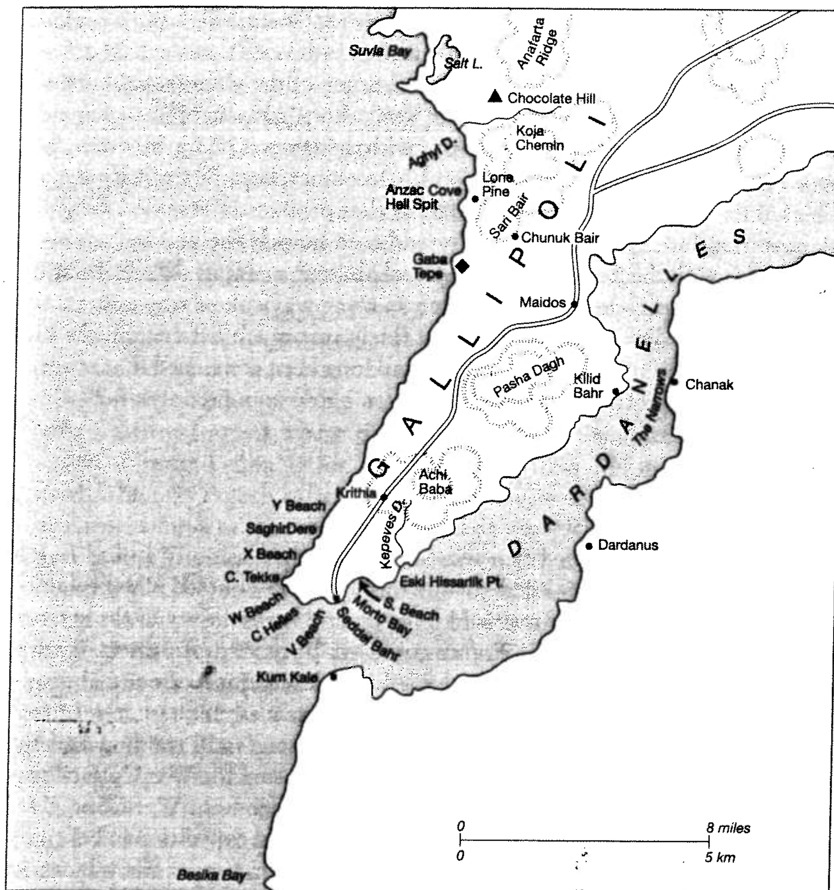
attack, the British had lost around 8,000 officers and men, killed and wounded. All they gained was another useless salient. It was at Loos that medical officers first observed 'hysterical manifestations' in some of the younger soldiers, the first trickle of what was to be called 'shell shock'. In an official dispatch, Sir John tried to blame Haig for the delay with the reserves. Haig, however, was better connected than Sir John and, on 17 December, became Commander-in-Chief of the BEF. From the Scottish family that produced the famous whisky, Haig started his career in the cavalry and rose quickly, helped by his wife's friendships with the Court and his own real abilities as a staff officer. Taciturn of speech, he was a clear-headed writer, in some ways like a top commander in the next war, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Haig was much better than the pig-headed Presbyterian of later legend. He had long been convinced that modern wars would be protracted, with the decisive battle coming only after a long wearing-down struggle.

GALLIPOLI

Lord Kitchener complained that what was going on was not war and he did not know what to do. In fairness to him, this should be coupled with his hunch at the start of the war that it would be long, and his certainty at the start of 1915 that the German lines in France could not be carried by assault. By that time the War Council agreed with his view, but it could not offer an alternative to the Western Front. It could not because there was no alternative except a negotiated peace, and with Kitchener's New Army* still training and the prospects of the Allies likely to improve in the long run, the War Council saw no reason to quit. However, responding to a request from the War Council for options, the Admiralty in early 1915 proposed 'a naval expedition in February to bombard and take the Gallipoli peninsula, with Constantinople as its objective' (Wilson, 1986: 107).

At the eastern end of the Mediterranean, the Dardanelles Straits ran into the Sea of Marmora, on the coast of which lay the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople. The Straits were 41 miles long, four miles wide at most and as narrow as three-quarters of a mile. The Gallipoli peninsula formed the north coast of the Straits, Asiatic Turkey the south coast. To pass through the Straits, the Royal Navy would have to destroy the forts along the shore and neutralize the minefields, which meant destroying the shore batteries protecting them.

The Royal Navy began to bombard Gallipoli on 19 February. The fortresses were scarcely touched, but the assault committed Britain to carry on. So Kitchener quickly authorized the dispatch of a regular division, the 29th, to Gallipoli. Even with the Australians and New Zealanders (the Anzacs) and some French added to the 29th, the military force would amount to only 75,000 men, half the total he had earlier promised.



Map 4 Gallipoli
Adapted from Lyn Macdonald, 1915, *The Death of Innocence*, Henry Holt (New York, 1993), p. 343

Meanwhile, the naval attack had bogged down. The navy could not suppress Turkish fire from the land and so could not sweep the minefields. When the naval commander fell ill, Admiral de Robeck took over command and carried out the original plan, a daylight attack on 18 March using 16 obsolete battleships to hit the forts. Unexpected mines sunk three of the battleships, although in shallow water, and put three more out of action, and the minesweepers never reached the minefields. De Robeck withdrew, promising to return to support an amphibious landing.

General Sir Ian Hamilton, in command of the landings, was given no staff for planning and logistics and had only six weeks to figure out where and how

to land his men. He chose Cape Helles at the tip and Suvla Bay and Gaba Tepe halfway down the north coast. The invasion kicked off on 25 April, which later became Anzac Day, commemorating the coming of age of the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand. The Anzacs missed Gaba Tepe and landed on a smaller beach, but they managed to advance inland despite the rough ground and fierce resistance from the Turks. The main force of the Anzacs landed at Anzac Cove and dug in. The landing at Cape Helles had a mixed result. The British and Anzacs scratched out perimeter defences on the beaches and hung on.

By now, the navy had stopped promising any result even if it did force the Straits, while Kitchener had decided not to divert any more men from the Western Front. By July, several attacks from the Cape Helles beach heads had failed dismally, and the only point from which an attack seemed promising was Anzac Cove, originally a secondary position. To achieve surprise, Hamilton tried night attacks. Once again, despite the courage of the Anzacs, the inherent difficulties of the situation prevailed and the attack stalled. On 6 August, Hamilton landed his New Army divisions at Suvla Bay, north of Anzac Cove and behind the Turkish front. The Turks were surprised and by the end of the first day, the British were close to a victory. But the local commander, Sir Frederick Stopford, dithered and let the beach head degenerate into a shambles, giving the Turks time to organize their defences.

By September, the summer heat, the flies, dysentery and disappointment had worn out everyone on the British side. Hamilton was sacked in October. To cover up the fiasco as much as investigate it, a Dardanelles Committee of Inquiry was set up in London, and then promptly changed to a smaller War Committee from which advocates of Gallipoli were excluded. That meant Churchill, who had earlier been demoted to a junior Cabinet portfolio. When Kitchener went to Gallipoli, he agreed to evacuate. The Cabinet fell in line on 7 December. Because the Turks were glad to see the British leave, the evacuation was the one aspect of this badly planned disaster that went right. From its muddled origins through its tragic course to its pointless end, Gallipoli was a textbook example of the dangers of making things up as one went along. ‘Plan’ might seem like a four-letter word when its military results are contemplated, but Gallipoli serves as a reminder of the grimmer fate in store for those who proceed without planning. Of the 410,000 British and Commonwealth and 79,000 French soldiers who served at Gallipoli, 205,000 of the former and 47,000 of the latter were killed, wounded, sick or missing.