To what extent was Winston Churchill responsible for the Dardanelles failure?



Winston Churchill, born 1874, was one of the major world figures of the 20th Century due to his leadership in the Second World War, seen as "the right man at the right time" to lead Britain to victory. An indication of how highly he was regarded and the esteem in which he was held, was that in 2002 he was voted by the British public in a BBC series, "The Greatest Briton".



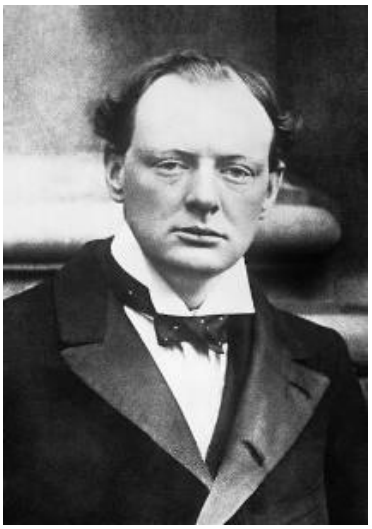
Churchill came from the great British military Marlborough family with an upbringing of great tradition and privilege. He began his career as a journalist adventurer[1] before going into politics and was fascinated by soldiering and Grand Strategy from an early age. He was controversial, with a reputation for being impulsive and impatient, a risk taker, recognised for being ambitious and desperately wanting to be at the centre of British government and significantly - one for the grand event. Politically, from 1899, he was known as a Conservative, but for his own political expediency he was a minster in Asquith's Liberal government between 1904 and 1924.

As a politician he held important positions; President of the Board of Trade (1908 – 1910), Home Secretary (1901 – 1911) and First Lord of the Admiralty (1911 – 1915). At one time the Admiralty thought him "To behave like a bully", "Absolutely unreliable" and "Quite unscrupulous"[2]. He was sacked from the Cabinet in 1916 after the Dardanelles disaster. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in the early 1920's, his defence cuts were responsible for the ultimate loss of Singapore in early 1942. His "Wilderness years" between 1929 and 1939 were when he was out of office and opposed appeasement. As elections were suspended in Britain during WW2 he was not elected Prime

[1] https://www.nationalSWCmuseum.org/winston-SWC-early-life.html
[2] Pound to Keyes 10th August 1927, as referenced in John Maurer, "Winston has gone mad": SWC, the British Admiralty and the rise of Japanese Naval Power, Journal of Strategic Studies, December 2012, page 783

Minister by a General Election[3] taking over from Chamberlain he formed a government of National Unity. Like many successful leaders he was not always popular and in Parliament he faced a vote of no confidence in 1942. Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff during World War 2, said Churchill believed he was a military genius[4] but had a "fertile imagination"[5]. However, for all these perceived faults, his success in developing a relationship with Roosevelt and the subsequent creation of the Allies leading to the ultimate victory, cannot be overstated.

Churchill's record in the First World War was less successful. At the outbreak of war as First Lord of the Admiralty he was a Hawk in the Cabinet along with Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. The British government's attitude was "Business as Usual" but Churchill was frustrated that the Royal Navy was not taking immediate offensive action against the German fleet. Captain Herbert Richmond, Assistant Director of Naval operations, wrote "We have the game in our hands if we sit tight, but this Churchill cannot see. He must see something tangible, and he can't understand that naval warfare acts in a wholly different way from war on shore"[6]. Typically forthright, Churchill said to Richmond, "Now we have our war, the next thing is to decide how we are going to carry it on". Richmond was appalled "by this damning confession of inadequate preparation for war"[7]. There were rumours of Churchill's poor behaviour at the Admiralty, as a civilian interfering too closely with naval operational issues.[8] Richmond would become one of Churchill's fiercest critics; at one point he describes Churchill's plans as "an amateur piece of work of a medieval type"[9].



As early August 1914, one of Churchill's naval objectives[10] was how the Royal Navy could destroy two German battleships, Goeben and Breslau, which had been given to Turkey and were in the Sea of Marmara. However, towards the end of 1914, it was Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the War Council, who proposed action maximising the assumed superiority of the Royal Navy against the Ottoman Empire. Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported Hankey and proposed that Britain should start to attack Germany's allies which would ensure Germany being "brought down by knocking the props under her"[11]. This can be seen as the politicians starting to dictate military strategy. This approach is similar to Churchill's WW2 strategy of attacking the "soft underbelly" of German territories, rather than a full-frontal attack.

[3] SWC, Winston, The Second World War, Chartwell Edition volume 1, The Educational Book Company, 1954 Pages 516 to 523
[4] Roberts, Andrew, Masters and Commanders, Penguin Books, 2008, Page 40;
[5] See Appendix 2.3
[6] Richmond Diary, 12th August 1914, Portrait of an Admiral, Arthur J Marder, 1952, as cited in Christopher Bell, 2014, Churchill and Sea Power, p56
[7] Richmond Diary, 5th August 1914, Portrait of an Admiral, Arthur J Marder, 1952, as cited in Christopher Bell, 2014, Churchill and Sea Power, p49
[8] Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P14
[9] Christopher Bell, 2014, Churchill and Sea Power, p56
[10] Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P49
[11] IBIS, P45-46

By January 1915, the war on the Western Front was at a stalemate and there was a consensus in the government that something had be done to break the deadlock. A very hawkish Churchill supported this and wrote to Asquith "Are there not alternatives than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders?"[12] and options were considered to gain a quick victory. The War Council were keen for on an attack on Turkey, particularly after a request from Russia for an intervention against Turkey[13]. on 1st January.

Hankey's suggestions of using the Navy to force the Dardanelles and then on to Constantinople and the Bosporus provided an initiative that Churchill could get behind, but he was sceptical. Typically, and not for the last time in his career, Churchill as a politician, is at odds with those around him and not heeding the advice of experts. Churchill favoured two alternatives; firstly, to secure the Baltic which would allow Russia to invade North Germany and on to Berlin. Secondly, to capture an island in the North Sea which could be used as a forward base by the Royal Navy to maintain the German blockade and also to tempt the German High Seas Fleet out of port for a Trafalgar like confrontation. Churchill claimed that such a victory in the North Sea would allow an unrestricted British occupation of the Baltic giving access to the strategic Kiel Canal[14]. In early January Admiral Jacky Fisher, First Sea Lord, was told by Churchill, that Germany was the natural enemy rather than her allies, "It is too far from the main theatre of war" and "Germany is the foe, and it is bad war to seek cheaper victories and easier antagonists"[15]. Already this can be seen as in conflict to the original reason, agreed by the War Council, for taking the war to Turkey; that Turkey is not the Western Front and a quick morale boosting victory would divert public attention away from that carnage.

The combined influence of Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War and Fisher pushed Churchill into developing a Dardanelles mission[16]. However, the new army that Lord Kitchener was raising



was not ready for action and it was Kitchener who suggested to Churchill that the Navy might undertake a "Demonstration" in the Dardanelles. The British Army had to look to other parts of the Empire for this mission.

Between the 3rd and the 5th of January 1915 Churchill tried to generate further support from the Admiralty. The contentious issues were fundamental to the mission; whether the offensive should be a combined army and navy expedition, or navy only. Certainly, the plan was for the Royal Navy to destroy the Turkish shore batteries and fortifications in the heavily defended narrow straits, which would then allow the fleet through the Dardanelles to the Sea of Marmara and the two warships. There was no agreement that ground forces would be required to hold the peninsular. The peninsula also needed to be secured for the safe return of the fleet, but this did not appear to be a priority in

[12] Churchill to Asquith 29th December 1914, as cited in Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P44

[13] Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P52

[14] Graham Clews, Churchill's Dilemma, 2010, P297

[15] Churchill to Fisher, 4th January 1915, Fear God and Dread nought, Arthur Marder, 1953, as cited in Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P52

[16] Graham Clews, Churchill's Dilemma, 2010, P293

the initial planning[17]. Lack of agreement on strategy by the politicians made it difficult for the military, who had to deliver.

To start the process, Churchill sent a telegram to Admiral Sir Sackville Carden, Commander of the Eastern Mediterranean Squadron, asking him to produce a navy only plan. This telegram has been criticised for being phrased in a leading manner that could only produce a positive response for a naval only operation. There is a question over whether Churchill sent this to influence the Admiralty position, or that the Admiralty encouraged him to send it expecting a rejection from Carden. The reply from Carden was not positive, claiming a successful mission was possible, but such a risky operation should be taken slowly. A later pessimistic memorandum from Admiral Henry Jackson to Churchill agreed with Carden[18] but he included reservations about potential substantial British losses.

Initially, Admiral Jacky Fisher, First Sea Lord, was enthusiastic; on 1st January 1915 he wrote to Churchill, "I consider the attack on Turkey hold the field, but only if it is immediate"[19]. The main concern for the Royal Navy was the distribution of resources and getting the balance right between raising an Eastern fleet whilst, at the same time, not weakening the Home North Sea Fleet. To achieve this the Admiralty proposed using obsolete and expendable pre-dreadnought battleships for the offensive. This can be seen as both a lack of enthusiasm in the mission and also the anticipation of losses; Fisher wanted to keep his best warships available for the North Sea; but later Fisher further endorsed his support by including one of the latest super Dreadnoughts, the Queen Elizabeth[20]. In the time between these the communications between Churchill, Carden and Jackson; Admiral Bayly, a well-known Churchill "Yes Man" submitted his more optimistic report that the Dardanelles could be rushed quickly, which Churchill used as a green light to proceed[21].

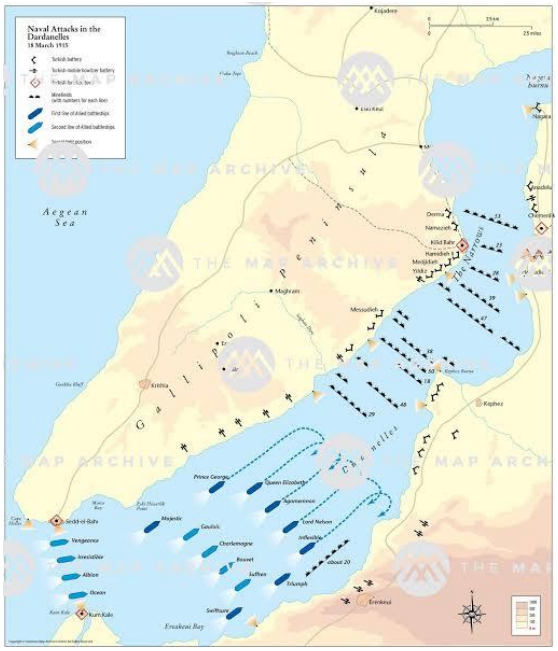
Churchill presented his plans to the War Council on 13th January, as a quick win, a major victory at little risk that would only take 2 to 3 weeks and if it went wrong, it could be stopped very quickly,[22] but he did not include Jacksons predictions of heavy losses. As a politician, he took personal responsibility for this risky proposal but this would also guarantee he would take any credit and the glory for a victory[23]. It was agreed as a Naval only action, which he believed Fisher supported and was the only way Kitchener agreed to it. Significantly, Fisher attended the meeting but did not contribute to this meeting[24]. Fisher is now an old man compared to Churchill and it is claimed that Churchill often pressured Fisher into supporting his ideas. To combat these, Fisher preferred subterfuge to confrontation[25]. Churchill gets political backing to go ahead. He still had his North Sea and Baltic campaign aspirations, but he appreciated that if the Dardanelles failed these would then be both politically and therefore militarily impossible.[26] His Dardanelles proposal was his big chance with the War Council but it immediately started to unravel due to the reservations of the Admiralty, even though Jackson reports positively to support Carden's plan on 15th January. Fisher starts to disassociate himself from the plan, supporting Churchill to his face but going behind his back to Hankey and the War Council, recommending that it should be Navy and Army mission.

The initial Naval barrage was successful but there were significant losses and Churchill pressured Carden to continue taking heavier losses. Carden was criticised for being half-hearted[27]. Vice Admiral John de Roebuck replaced Carden and mounted a full assault where nothing went right, there were

[17] Christopher Bell, 2014, Churchill and Sea Power, p63
[18] Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P58-60
[19] Fisher to Churchill, 3rd January 1915, Fear God and Dread Nought, Arthur Marder, 1953, as cited in Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P52
[20] IBIS
[21] Christopher Bell, 2014, Churchill and Sea Power, P62
[22] The Hobhouse Diary, 16th February 1915, as cited in Christopher Bell, 2014, Churchill and Sea Power, p65
[23] Robin Pryor, 2009, Gallipoli – the end of the myth, p238
[24] Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P76
[25] IBIS P78 - 79
[26] Graham Clews, Churchill's Dilemma, 2010, P299
[27] Robin Pryor, 2009, Gallipoli – the end of the myth, p241

further heavy losses as predicted by Jackson. Not surprisingly, it becomes apparent in the War Council that some land-based support will be required[28]. Churchill never backed away from his naval only operation but on 16th February the 29th Army Division was belatedly allocated to the operation; as far as Churchill was concerned to complement the naval-only operation; not replace it[29]. Once again Churchill is overconfident, he claimed that Constantinople could be taken by the end of March[30] and says that only 50,000 men will be required to occupy the Dardanelles after the Navy done its job, but this number was quickly revised that to 100,000. Churchill's Navy only option was abandoned[31].

Ultimately, the Gallipoli landings take place on 15th April, but the forces were soon bogged down like the forces on the Western front – the Dardanelles campaign becomes a disaster with 300,00 Allied casualties, many from Australia and New Zealand; it lasted through 1915 and eventually the forces are evacuated. The army was criticised for its poor leadership, the quality of its officers and flawed plans[32].



The campaign was not only a military failure, but it also contributed to a political crisis; Asquith lost control of the government and invited the Conservatives to join them. Churchill was sacked from the Liberal government as a condition of the Conservative support.

There are two conflicting views over the reasons for the Dardanelles disaster, but the truth is probably somewhere in between. The First is that it was Churchills fault; the second that it was a sound strategy performed badly.

Firstly, that Churchill was entirely to blame, that he was an amateur strategist, where his plan had no chance of success; that he ignored the experts in the Admiralty, duped the cabinet and suppressed opposition until the disaster was clear. Even though he favoured operations in Europe, Churchill supported Hankeys proposal but as it quickly gained its own momentum Churchill took a gamble on its success and by taking full responsibility he saw opportunities to advance the war and his reputation. Churchill was certainly guilty of over optimism by promising a risk-free escalation of the war but the War Council were also over enthusiastic and wanted to use its success to recruit other countries into the war such as Russia, Greece and the Balkan states as allies. The Politicians were

[28] Graham Clews, Churchill's Dilemma, 2010, P300
[29] IBIS, 2010, P301
[30] Christopher Bell, 2014, Churchill and Sea Power, p68
[31] Graham Clews, Churchill's Dilemma, 2010, P303
[32] Robin Pryor, 2009, Gallipoli – the end of the myth, p244-247

dictating military strategy and increasing the pressure on the military to provide their solution, so there was always going to be friction in the plan.

To push his plans through, Churchill ignored the early advice of Admirals Carden and Jackson and is accused of pressuring Carden, but Jackson eventually supported Carden's revised plan, so there is some inconsistency here. Furthermore, Fisher supported Churchill's plans but then distanced himself and stabbed Churchill in the back with the government probably to save his own reputation. As he changed his position, it is questionable if he did ever support it, or if he was using it as a way of bringing Churchill down. Churchill can be forgiven for thinking that his plans had the full support of the navy.

The Navy can also be accused of arrogance. It was taken for granted that just the presence of the Royal Navy would be enough to frighten the Turks into surrender. Carden underestimated the number of Turkish mines and the number of British minesweepers required to clear a channel for the warships. Carden also underestimated the navy's gunnery ability to put the Turkish shore-based forts and guns out of action without land-based support; additionally planes from the Ark Royal were unable to support the fleet's guns in the way planes supported the army on the Western Front. de Roebuck continued Carden's plan even though it was failing, until it was obvious that a land-based assault was essential. Lastly and perhaps most critically, the quality and fighting spirit of the Turkish defenders was underestimated, they did not submit or flee at the sight of the British.

It is also questionable how supportive Kitchener was to Churchill and whether he ever believed in the mission. Kitchener only approved the initial mission as a Navy only expedition; he wouldn't commit any land forces for the first campaign. Churchill was critical of this perceived lack of support and he wrote "Upon me more than any other person the responsibility for the Dardanelles and all that it involved has been cast. Upon me fell almost exclusively the fierce wartime censures of press and public"[33].

Churchill rightly carried the can as he sold the plan and he paid a very high price for this failure but he should not be seen to be totally responsible. It is questionable what support he had from Fisher, Kitchener and Asquith, individually or as members of War Council and they should also share the responsibility for decision making. This inconsistent support could indicate how much Churchill was actually liked by the Cabinet, maybe he was he seen as domineering, arrogant, too pushy.

The alternative view to Churchill being totally to blame, was that the Dardanelles was one of the few creative strategies available at that time, a missed opportunity by Britain for a quick, morale boosting win, its failure was in the execution not the concept, the fleet would have reached Constantinople, knocking out the Ottoman empire, saving Russia from defeat in the war and possibly revolution[34].

How much responsibility should be attributed to Churchill is questionable as there are many other characters involved and bad decisions made. Churchill being personally responsible should take the majority share but he maybe he should have followed through with the original plan as he promised and taken the responsibility to call off the mission; but that could have been politically dangerous to his career.

Postscript:
After his dismissal from the government Churchill remained an MP. True to his Hawkish commitment to the war, in November 1915, hel returned to active service with 2nd Grenadier Guards, then promoted to lieutenant-colonel and given temporary command of 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers on the Belgian Front.

[33] Winston Churchill, 1923, The World Crisis, P8
[34] Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P3



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