

Review Essay—“Neither Knaves nor Fools”: "The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster: How Globalized Trade Led Britain to Its Worst Defeat of the First World War"

Thomas C. Hone

Nicholas A. Lambert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Hone, Thomas C. and Lambert, Nicholas A. () "Review Essay—“Neither Knaves nor Fools”: "The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster: How Globalized Trade Led Britain to Its Worst Defeat of the First World War", *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

REVIEW ESSAY

"NEITHER KNAVES NOR FOOLS"

Thomas C. Hone

The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster: How Globalized Trade Led Britain to Its Worst Defeat of the First World War, by Nicholas A. Lambert. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021. 368 pages. \$49.95.

This thoroughly researched and very well written book is based on the research that Nicholas Lambert did for his *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War*, published in 2012. In his earlier book, Lambert showed how the global trade network that Great Britain constructed before World War I was a decidedly two-edged weapon when Britain went to war with Germany in the summer of 1914. On the one hand, the ability of the British government to cut German trade and finance out of the network suddenly might hamper the German economy so severely that the German government would find it impossible to continue the war; on the other hand, strangling German trade and finance would affect other nations' economies, including those of the United States and even of Britain.

The War Lords and the Gallipoli Disaster picks up where *Planning Armageddon* left off. Lambert shows how economic and social factors rooted in Britain's global trade network shaped the decision by the British War Council (the "War Lords" of the title) to order British (joining with French) naval and land forces to capture the Dardanelles in 1915. Lambert has read the military histories of the Gallipoli campaign, but his research shows that comprehending why that campaign occurred—and occurred the way it did—requires an understanding of the role of wheat in Britain's war strategy.

Thomas C. Hone is a former professor at the Naval War College and a former principal deputy director of program analysis in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

occurred—and occurred the way it did—requires an understanding of the role of wheat in Britain's war strategy.

Wheat? Why did wheat—specifically, Russian wheat—play an important role in the decision to

attack the Turkish defenses of the Dardanelles? Lambert answers that question by first noting that the major belligerents assumed that the war would not last long. “Home by Christmas” may have been a wish that the troops on both sides voiced in 1914, but the leaders of the warring states hoped for it as well. Great Britain, for example, did not have a process in place to guarantee that British bakers would continue to have flour on hand to make affordable bread for Britain’s population if the fighting continued into 1915. British political leaders assumed that the commerce of wheat production and distribution, coupled with the commerce of open-market bread production and sales, would feed Britain’s millions adequately. They also assumed that the tsar’s regime could supply the Russian armies with sufficient ammunition. Both assumptions turned out to be wrong, and Lambert deftly explains why.

The heart of Britain’s problem was the insistence of Sir John D. P. French, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force in Flanders, that a stalemate did not exist on the western front. French argued that, with more troops and artillery, his force could crack the German trench line in 1915, and Herbert H. Asquith, the prime minister, “could not and did not take the political risk of ignoring the professional opinion of the senior field commander” (p. 264). However, if French had it wrong—as indeed he did—then the war could drag on; and if it did, the Asquith cabinet—and not just the War Lords—had to do its best both to gain a victory and to not destroy the British economy in the process.

French’s was not the only military proposal on the table as the War Lords met at the beginning of 1915 to consider Britain’s next move in the war. Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, pressed his colleagues to adopt a plan to seize the Dardanelles. His argument was that doing so would not prevent the British forces in Flanders from making a major attack on the German lines in 1915. Moreover, opening the Dardanelles would knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war—thereby allowing Russian wheat to flow into world markets, preventing a price surge that Britain ill could afford.

Lambert makes a strong case that the War Lords went along with Churchill “primarily for political, not military, reasons.” Britain needed a victory to justify war losses already sustained; Russia needed to export its wheat so it could buy needed ammunition; British workers needed the wheat to live; and Britain needed to keep Russia in the war. Lambert observes that “[f]or the most important decision-maker—the prime minister—the weight of the evidence indicates clearly that the wheat issue was paramount in his mind” (p. 267). But it did not retain that position for Asquith. By late March 1915, after initial attempts by British and French warships to force their way through the straits had failed, Asquith and his colleagues faced a choice: Back down and call off the attacks on

the Turkish defenses or press on with a major amphibious assault? They chose the latter—and lived to regret it.

For Lambert, the failure at Gallipoli—especially the thinking and discussions that preceded the actual military assault—illustrates the dilemma facing the builders of any global economic system in wartime. If they create a worldwide system of free trade in peacetime and then engage in what they think is decisive economic warfare, they run the risk of robbing their system of the confidence on which it is based. Free trade is built on the expectations and perceptions of multiple participants in its system of communications, finance, and shipping. A government that decides to manipulate those systems drastically runs the risk of wiping out those expectations and wrecking the very system that is the source of its great influence. That was the dilemma facing the British cabinet as it explored the chances of gaining a quick and decisive victory in the Dardanelles.

As Lambert shows, Asquith and his colleagues were aware that they faced a situation of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t.” Lieutenant Colonel Maurice P. A. Hankey, who was secretary to the War Council (and therefore to the War Lords) after November 1914, and whom Lambert quotes, put it well: “We were neither knaves nor fools. We were dealing, under circumstance of great pressure and difficulty, with a problem of appalling complexity” (p. 261). It is not as though no one had warned them previously; in 1903, then–Prime Minister Arthur J. Balfour had noted that the “difficulties which we have to face are difficulties which are inherent in our position, and which nothing can wholly remove” (p. 272).

Even as Lambert illustrates the “difficulties,” he also warns historians to take heed of the economic, social, and even psychological factors that influence decision-making in wartime. As he states, “This book is an attempt at intent-based, rather than outcome-based, history” (p. 261). Why did the War Lords approve military operations in the Dardanelles? Was there one basic reason, and was that reason the only one that really mattered as the leaders in London considered the alternatives before them? Lambert’s answer, based on his careful and thorough research, is no. “The blinding rapidity with which events occurred and opinions altered makes it difficult to generalize or point to any single set of reasons” why the Asquith cabinet chose to attack the Dardanelles (p. 262). This should sound familiar to today’s Americans trying to understand where U.S. policy in Afghanistan came from.

Related to this rejection of a single cause for the Gallipoli campaign is Lambert’s understanding that trying to apportion blame is a misguided effort. What matters is trying to understand the intentions of the principal actors, how those intentions were formed and sometimes changed, and how the principal actors

saw themselves and their tasks. As Lambert asserts, “The contextual breadth, explanatory precision, and archival research necessary for intent-based history exceeds the norms of conventional naval and military history” (p. 261). He thus throws out a challenge to military historians to wrap their minds around all the major factors that shape decision-making.

As Lambert writes, “Temporarily separating out the various component parts [military, economic, etc.] may be necessary for analytical purposes but the artificiality of this separation must be constantly borne in mind” (p. 276). And as far as the issue of personal responsibility is concerned, his last words in the book never should be forgotten: “All the threads [in making decisions] were knotted together on [decision makers’] desks every day. The collective weight of all this complexity was crushing and inhibited decision-making. Historians are obliged to re-create that narrative tapestry as best as possible. Before we can say whether their decisions were right or wrong, we must truly understand why they were so difficult” (p. 280). Wise words from one of our finest naval historians.