

What happened if you were captured?

Men captured during wartime are called Prisoners of War (POWs) and there are rules about how they should be treated. By the First World War all the main combatants had signed up to the [Hague Convention](#), written in 1899. At the time this was the main list of rules of war, including the treatment of prisoners. The main idea was that POWs should be treated as well as men of the same rank in the army that captured them. All the same, there were plenty of stories of mistreatment, on both sides.

How were you treated if you were captured by the Ottomans?

Allied POWs were separated by rank and condition and taken to camps in the Turkish interior. If you were an officer you were lucky: you stayed in a permanent camp throughout the war, you would not be made to work, you would be paid, and you could expect quite a bit of freedom. Australian Lieutenant Leslie Luscombe wrote about his experiences. He was taken from Gallipoli in a horse-drawn *araba* and looked after very well by a young Turkish officer who even gave him his own greatcoat when Luscombe complained of the cold. He was taken to a luxurious hotel in Constantinople where he was given extravagant three-course meals, ice-cold beers, slippers and silk dressing gowns.

Other ranks were set to work, for instance building the Berlin-Baghdad railway, especially blasting cuttings and tunnels through the mountains in South Eastern Turkey, or working in the docks of Constantinople. Some soldiers reported how they were tied together, whipped and struck with rifles by their guards, given hardly any food and water. During their journey to the prison camp they received very little medical assistance and suffered from dysentery, malaria, ulcerated feet and exposure.



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However in the photo above they seem to be fit and healthy, with supplies of tobacco and fresh eggs. It was taken at the Belemedik Camp in the Taurus Mountains.

Transport

Allied prisoners were sometimes transported in cattle trucks. Private Reginald Lushington wrote later about his experiences: *'Our mode of transport was a close goods wagon with two small carved windows.... packed to suffocation with 40 men ... so that we sat on top of each other often for a couple of days and nights. It was impossible to lie down, so you who read this can imagine what we were like and the language we used.'*

However this was also the way the Turks transported their own troops, so perhaps the way the Turks treated the Allied soldiers showed a difference between the two cultures rather than evidence of the deliberate mistreatment of prisoners of war.

Food

Another cultural difference concerned food. There was a big difference between the diet of Europeans and Ottomans at this time. POWs were fed the same 'black bread' given to the Ottoman army, and thought they were deliberately being fed animal food just to humiliate them, and refused to eat it. The neutral American Ambassador agreed that although the prisoners were receiving regular rations, *'it is not of the right kind for Englishmen.'*

Even the way the prisoners were expected to eat caused distress. Submariner John Wheat and his comrades flatly refused to eat the first full meal they were offered by their captors: *'There were three dishes brought in to us and placed on the floor and we were given a wooden spoon each and told to divide ourselves equally around the dishes. Just imagine Englishmen, with a dirty wooden spoon, squatting down on the floor, all eating from the same dish food not fit for a pig. Needless to say we scarcely touched this meal, although we were so hungry.'*

[Quotes from '**Other Fronts, Other Wars?**' edited by Joachim Burgschwentner, 2014]

Why were there so few Allied POWs?

Only about 400 Allied Gallipoli POWs are recorded in the Ottoman records. This might just be because of poor record keeping but there is a possibility that more prisoners were killed unless the Ottoman soldiers thought they would be useful in some way, such as propaganda or for information. One British soldier had a view about why the numbers were so low. John Still was a Second Lieutenant in 6th Battalion, East Yorkshire Regiment, captured at Suvla on 9th August 1915. After the war he wrote a book about his experiences: **'A Prisoner in Turkey'**. After he had been captured, Still was taken to the Ottoman headquarters where he met the German General Liman von Sanders.

One of his staff, a German naval officer, told us that they found it almost impossible to get the Turks to take prisoners, or, having taken them, to keep them alive. ... The fact was that they only went in for taking prisoners when they wanted to study our newly-landed forces. At all other times they murdered them. It is easy to demonstrate, as I think the following facts will show. On Gallipoli, I believe something like 700 officers and 11,000 men were posted as missing. Many of these were dead, of course, but certainly nothing like all. Of the 700 officers only 17 were taken prisoner, one in every forty-one; of the 11,000 men about 400 were taken prisoner, one in every twenty-seven. The details regarding the men I do not know, but the officers were taken as follows:

At the first landing at Anzac – 2

At Anzac when the August landing at Suvla Bay took place – 2

At Suvla Bay from the 11th Division – 5

Between Anzac and Suvla, at the same time, from the Ghurkhas – 1

At or in the region of Cape Hellas at the same time, from the 29th Division – 3

At Suvla Bay, a few days later, when the Territorials landed – 2

At Suvla Bay, again a few days later, from the Yeomanry – 1

And one officer of the Australian forces was taken at the Anzac front when no new landing was on – 1

That clearly shows that the prisoners were taken only to gain information as to the types of our new forces.

As the two tables show, there were many more Ottoman prisoners than Allied ones taken during the First World War.

Reported Numbers of Allied Prisoners Captured by the Ottoman Empire

Nationality of prisoners	Numbers
British	5,404
Indian	11,179
French	120
Russian	15,728
Romanian	2,000
Australian	217 – 232
Total	34,663

http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/prisoners_of_war

Reported Numbers of Ottoman Prisoners Captured by the Allies

Captor	Number of prisoners
Russia	65,000-90,000
Britain	150,041
France	2000
Italy	100
Romania	605
Total	217,746-242,746

Submariners' stories

The crews of three submarines were captured by the Turks. The Australian submarine AE2 was sunk in the Dardanelles Straits on 30th April 1915. The 3 officers and 29 men were captured and sent on to POW camps in Turkey. Here are two quotes from the memoirs of one of the survivors, Stoker Charles Suckling.

The first describes his arrival in Constantinople (Istanbul):

'After getting off the ship, we were brought to a place that I believe was a military barracks. As we walked on the streets, it seemed like all the people in Istanbul were standing on both sides of the road just to see us. They did not show us any hostility. When we arrived at the military barracks, we were given Turkish navy soldiers' attire, jackets, slippers and a fez. Our own clothes were collected and our photos were taken after we gathered in a meeting place. With the help of a translator, the Ottoman commander told us that we should not consider ourselves as prisoners but guests of the Turkish state. We were to ask him if we wanted something and he would do everything he could to make it happen. The Ottoman officers listened to us calmly and patiently.'

However he also said in his journal: *'I don't think, if we had known what was ahead of us, that one of us would have left the boat.'*

On September 4th the British submarine E7 was captured and scuttled in the Sea of Marmara and its crew captured. In the photo below they are at the San Stefano camp in Constantinople, soon after

their capture. Fourth from the left on the very back row is Leading Torpedo Man Bob Sims, who was later drawn by Reginald Lushington, a fellow prisoner, in a camp in Turkey.



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Ottoman prisoners of war

Most of the Ottoman prisoners taken at Gallipoli were sent to camps in Egypt. The following photos show them after capture at Krithia (June 1915), then being allowed to bathe on the beaches, and finally on a ship.



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