"My film is not a national propaganda tool"

An interview with Tolga Ornëk, director of Gallipoli: The Front Line Experience

Richard Phillips
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Turkish director Tolga Ornëk has made six major documentaries since he began filmmaking in 1998. These include, Atatürk *(1998),* Mount Nemrud: The Throne of the Gods *(1999),* Eregli: The Heart of Steel *(2002) and* The Hittites *(2003).*

His latest feature-length documentary, Gallipoli: The Front Line Experience, *is a deeply moving account of the catastrophic British-led attack on Turkey in 1915, during World War I (see* "A valuable and compelling antiwar film"*). The most successful documentary in Turkish history, the movie has been shown in several European countries, as well as in the UK and the US, and is currently screening in Australia and New Zealand. Thirty-three year-old Ornëk spoke recently with the* World Socialist Web Site *about the film.*

Richard Phillips: Most contemporary historians tend to de-personalise war with dry statistics and lots of military detail. Your film, however, does the opposite and exposes the human tragedy of it all. How long did you spend on the film?

Tolga Ornëk: It was quite a long project, about six years but when you work out the style of film you want you also establish the workload required. In this case, once we decided that the documentary would cover all sides and be personalised and balanced then it became a big project and an international, not just a Turkish one.

Although I was completing other movies during this time whenever I went abroad I looked around to see if the country we were visiting had anything on Gallipoli. Once we'd finished the documentary on the Hittites in 2003 then we dropped everything else and just concentrated on Gallipoli.

We had researchers and a team of 16 historians in various countries and there was 18 months of research done before the script was begun. This research went on until we finalised the film. It continued as we were shooting and editing so that if we unearthed any particularly interesting documents or photographs then the film was changed to include it.

RP: And the location shooting?

TO: This lasted about 40 days. We shot on the peninsula in April to capture the spring colours and then travelled to the Aegean coast—the Dardenelles—to a military shooting-practice location where we built dugouts and trenches and did all the re-enactments. In August we travelled to Australia and New Zealand to film archival material and interview the families of the soldiers. Then we returned to Turkey for another peninsula location shoot in September.

RP: How did you locate and select the soldiers' letters?

TO: Finding the material was the easiest part of the process I would say. Because we knew that the film would be as good as the letters and the diaries we found, selection of this material was difficult and so we made sure that we uncovered as much of this material as we could.

We looked in the archives of every country that held collections on Gallipoli and then through our historians and researchers contacted the families of soldiers who had letters and diaries in their possession. Through personal archives and institutions we compiled about 500 diaries and a few thousand postcards and letters. Then through a gradual process of elimination we settled on quotes from about 27 different soldiers and officers, with 10 of these men being the main characters in the film.

Overall the most important element in the selection process was whether the letters drew us in emotionally. There had to be an instinctive pull, an emotional connection. For example, as soon as I read the postcards and letters from Australian soldiers Joe and Oliver Cumberland to their sister Una. Their letters were so evocative and emotional. These two brothers had to be in the film because their letters showed in detail the transformation in their characters at Gallipoli.

Our aim with the letters and diaries was to feature a group of central characters who would represent the whole spectrum of men fighting at Gallipoli. These soldiers had to represent in some way all of the troops, their different backgrounds and different reasons for being there and give the audience real insights into their characters and personalities.

RP: What were the letters like from the Indian and French troops involved?

TO: As you know there weren't many soldiers from India and but unfortunately the letters I read were rather dry. I really wanted to include something from a French officer and a soldier but their letters also suffered from the same problem and were mainly preoccupied with military details.

I was pleased that your article mentioned the letter from the Turkish soldier at the end of the film. This letter had a tremendous emotional impact on me. I hoped that the audience, no matter which country they happened to be in, would see these soldiers as ordinary people and not to look at them through the prism of the country they were fighting for or their ethnic backgrounds. I wanted the national boundaries to disappear from the movie so I was very happy that you recognised and responded to this in your review.

RP: It's impossible to watch Gallipoli and not draw parallels with events today and see how contemporary governments glorify the slaughter of previous wars to prepare for new disasters.

TO: That's true. In fact, at every screening that I attended in

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Australia, New Zealand, UK, America, Turkey and France, at least one person from the audience came up to me after the film and made a connection with the situation in Iraq. I didn't plan to make these parallels in the film but it is so obvious. One thing history seems to teach us is that we don't ever seem to learn from history.

Everybody talks about the mistakes and the horrors that come out from this. People study all this and yet the same mistakes, albeit in different countries and at different times, are made all over again. Of course there is a difference between those who make the political decisions and the rest of the population who have no say in it.

RP: The film clearly shows the indifference of the British high command to its rank and file soldiers and their arrogant belief that somehow the Turkish soldiers would simply run away when attacked. This is also reminiscent of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

TO: The British generals had no real idea about what they would face from the Turkish military. As one of the historians in the film explains, they didn't know what would happen after their troops came onshore or where they would go. It is the same situation today in Iraq. The US government simply declared to the rest of the world that they would capture Baghdad, depose Saddam and then somehow the Iraqis would agree and accept this. The parallels with Gallipoli are uncanny.

Another similarity is the way in which the Allied politicians used fear to whip up support, just like they do today. The Australian people were told by their leaders when World War I broke out that the Germans were going to invade Australia and then, after the failure of Gallipoli, that the Turks would take over Australian land.

The same fear techniques are used today. I was in Australia when the Howard government was preparing to pass the new anti-terror laws and it was terrible the way they manipulated people's concerns about terrorism.

The government claimed that the new laws would stop terrorism. But how can you prevent people who are prepared to die for their cause? They're not going to be deterred by a few laws. All the Australian government and media have done is tell terrorists all around the world that if you act in Australia they will get lots of publicity.

RP: What were the most memorable audience reactions at screenings?

TO: The most common comment was that the people didn't realise how bad the conditions were in Gallipoli. This, of course, is the reality we wanted the film to convey because all the countries involved, particularly Australia, New Zealand and Turkey, tend to glorify and romanticise Gallipoli, which undermines any understanding of the human degradation that occurred.

A number of female members of the audience were almost ill over the terrible suffering they saw in the film. They were really shocked. Others were pleased that the film provided the opportunity for ordinary soldiers to speak, instead of all the political and military big shots like Churchill, Kitchener, Hamilton, Walker and so forth.

RP: I read that your film was criticised by the extreme right in Turkey and sections of the so-called left. What were their arguments?

TO: The criticism had three things in common: that the film was too lenient towards the Allies; that it didn't make enough distinction between the invaders and the defenders; and didn't have enough of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In other words, the film didn't have enough of a Turkish element in it.

Obviously I don't agree with these comments. The film has a strong Turkish element. It has enough on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and explains that he was the most successful military leader. It also makes a clear distinction between the invaders and defenders and is very critical of the Allied high command.

I gave one interview where I answered each criticism in detail. I explained that it was not necessary, however, to answer all these confused criticisms over and over again because they were generally based on wrong historical knowledge or no real understanding of the event. It's not my job to correct people who base themselves on misinformation.

Anyone who watches this film through a nationalistic prism is not going to enjoy it. It doesn't have a nationalistic agenda, it is not a propaganda tool, nor is it concerned with promoting Turkey. It is simply telling the real story fairly and in an even-handed way.

My film is about ordinary soldiers and makes clear that the real enemy is not people but war itself. Of course you don't have to shout or underline everything but this comes out clearly within the film.

RP: What impact did the making this film have on you?

TO: It had an impact in two ways. It made me appreciate the little things that I have in life. When you read the soldiers' letters about trying to have a simple meal, a cup of tea or to have fresh water or a bath, then you really begin to understand what are the most important things in your life.

Secondly, it put people and faces to the statistics of war. Now every time I hear that tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed or that over two thousand American soldiers have died, I know what each number means. Each number has a name, a life, an experience and a family and so my attitude to war and towards news about war has changed. I now have a more sensitive appreciation of how devastating war really is.

RP: Did you read British playwright Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize acceptance speech? It's called "Art, Politics and Truth" and he concludes by issuing a call for artists to recognise that the struggle for truth is the only path to human dignity. Could you comment on this?

TO: I haven't read the speech but this is completely correct. This search for the truth has to be conducted without any prejudice. If the truth is going to surprise you or shatter any preconceived notions then that's the risk you must take. It cannot be a journey that somehow satisfies your already existing beliefs or ideology. It must be unconditional and conducted in the knowledge that it might change you completely.

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