

Australia: Anzac Day and the promotion of militarism

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27 April 2012

Official Anzac Day ceremonies held on Wednesday marked a further stage in the Gillard Labor government's promotion of militarism and war.

Anzac Day, April 25, is an annual public holiday in Australia, formally commemorating the beginning of the 1915 Gallipoli campaign in Turkey during World War I, when more than 8,000 Australian troops were killed, together with an estimated 21,000 British, 10,000 French, and 80,000 Turkish soldiers. More and more openly, the occasion is being used by the entire media and political establishment to justify the current military interventions being conducted by Australian imperialism and to prepare the ground for new ones.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard addressed the annual dawn commemoration service at Gallipoli's Anzac Cove. Her speech amplified all the nationalist myths that have been generated during the past century about Australia's participation in World War I. Describing Anzac Cove as "sacred soil", Gillard declared that the Australian soldiers who fought there had created a "new story for a new nation." Ascribing militarist values to the very establishment of the Australian nation state, she continued, "The laws and institutions of our nation were laid down in 1901. But here, in 1915, its spirit and ethos were sealed. This was our first act of nationhood in the eyes of a watching world, an act authored not by statesmen or diplomats, but by simple soldiers... All of us inhabit the freedom the Anzacs won for us."

Far from having anything to do with "freedom" or "democracy", the First World War erupted as a ferocious struggle between the major European capitalist states. Vladimir Illyich Lenin, leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, aptly characterised it thus: "The war of 1914-18 was imperialist (that is, an annexationist, predatory, war of plunder) on the part of both sides; it was a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance capital."

Imperialist and predatory from its very foundation, Australia became involved as a dominion of the British Empire—which stretched from Ireland to India to vast swathes of Africa—following its earlier participation in British-led colonial operations in Sudan in 1885 and South Africa at the turn of the century. The nine-month Gallipoli campaign was one of many

bloody slaughters orchestrated between 1914 and 1918, featuring protracted trench warfare in appalling conditions, with tens of thousands of deaths caused by malnutrition and disease. Organised by Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, who was subsequently dubbed "the butcher of Gallipoli", the unsuccessful operation was aimed at securing Allied control of the Dardanelles, the strategic sea-lane separating the Aegean and Black Seas, in order to bolster the position on the eastern front of the tottering Russian Tsarist autocracy.

None of these historical facts was permitted to intrude upon the official Anzac Day ceremonies. Nor was there any mention of how deeply unpopular World War I was at the time. In reality, Australian government attempts to impose conscription were twice defeated in referenda held in 1916 and 1917.

Gillard hailed Gallipoli's "tradition of arms", which had been "passed down unbroken over a century to more recent conflicts", and referred specifically to Afghanistan.

Support for the criminal US-led occupation of the central Asian state was a common theme of Wednesday's events. Governor General Quentin Bryce travelled to Afghanistan, to "reflect on our proud military history" and to pay tribute to the "modern Anzacs." Turning reality on its head, Treasurer Wayne Swan declared that Anzac Day was about the "principle of justice—the principle that nations that trample on the rights of others must be resisted." He added that the Australian soldiers in Afghanistan "know that equality is a cause worth fighting for—that, even when we fight a long way from home, their struggle ennobles all of us."

The government's shamefaced paeans to this filthy neo-colonial war, which is opposed by the vast majority of the Australian population, underscores the transformed status of Anzac Day in official politics.

In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, Anzac Day was a relatively low profile event, with dwindling attendances. A more critical attitude to the Gallipoli campaign and to Australia's relationship with British imperialism dominated—reflected for example, in Alan Seymour's 1958 play *The One Day of the Year*. The central character in the play is a university student who regards Anzac Day as nothing but a pretext for his father and his mates to engage in drunken brawling. While Gallipoli

veterans began to die in this period, many had steadfastly refused to participate in the marches and ceremonies that glorified and falsified the brutal reality of their war experiences.

Historian Marilyn Lake has noted that the prominence assigned to Gallipoli's place in Australian history is a recent invention. One widely read historical work, first published in 1955 and repeatedly reprinted in the 1960s and '70s, Gordon Greenwood's *Australia: A Social and Political History*, contains no index entries for "Gallipoli" or "Anzac."

The promotion of Anzac Day by the media and political establishment in the 1980s and especially the 1990s was intimately connected to the deepening crisis of global capitalism and the new period of imperialist war that had opened up.

In 1990, Labor leader Bob Hawke was the first prime minister to attend an Anzac Day dawn service at Gallipoli, just three months before the US launched Operation Desert Storm against Iraq, in collaboration with Canberra as one of its key allies. The brutal bombardment of Iraq marked a turning point in world politics. No longer checked by the existence of the Soviet Union, American imperialism sought to counter its economic decline by using military force to gain advantage over its European and Asian rivals. The 1990-91 war against Iraq was followed by the US-led military intervention into Somalia in 1993-95, the Balkans War of 1998-99, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 2011 NATO war and regime change operation in Libya.

In every one of these campaigns, the Australian government either deployed troops or provided other forms of support. At the same time, Australian imperialism used its alliance with Washington to advance its own financial and geo-strategic interests in the South Pacific, organising neo-colonial military interventions into the oppressed nations of East Timor in 1999 and Solomon Islands in 2003.

The revival of Anzac Day has formed a vital part of the ideological preparations for such predatory operations. Shortly after becoming prime minister in 1996, John Howard declared that it was "particularly gratifying that some vestige of cynicism over Anzac Day a generation ago appears to have evaporated." Under the Howard government, attendances at official ceremonies markedly increased while Gallipoli became, for the first time, a place visited by many young Australian backpackers. At the same time, the government consciously shifted the tenor of Anzac Day events, from a *commemoration* of the dead to a *celebration* of the militaristic values supposedly embodied in the lives and deaths of the victims of imperialist war.

Since returning to power in 2007, the Labor Party has taken things even further. In addition to the two days traditionally marking Australia's military history—Anzac Day and Remembrance Day—the Rudd-Gillard governments have added three new ones—the Bombing of Darwin Day (1942), Battle for

Australia Day (1942-43 Pacific War) and Merchant Navy Day (for merchant seamen who served in wartime).

The Gillard government has aligned itself with the Obama administration's highly reckless drive to maintain its domination of East Asia and the Pacific Ocean by militarily confronting China. Last November, during Obama's visit to Australia, Gillard announced that 2,500 US marines would be based in Darwin and has since confirmed that US nuclear submarines will dock in Western Australian ports and US military drone aircraft will be stationed on the Cocos Islands, in the Indian Ocean, near key naval straits leading to the South China Sea. The Gillard-Obama deal means that Australia will be on the front lines of a US war against China that could be triggered by any number of regional flashpoints.

In the Anzac Day ceremony in Darwin, particular prominence was given to the US-Australia military agreement. The first marines, who arrived in the northern city a few weeks ago, marched with Australian soldiers and veterans, as well as with US navy personnel from the visiting USS Halsey guided missile cruiser.

On April 24, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr in Washington to discuss, as she explained, "the steps we are taking together to strengthen our military alliance, which helps underwrite security and stability in the Asia-Pacific." The same day, she issued her own statement marking Anzac Day. Strikingly, it made no mention of Gallipoli or World War I, instead referring exclusively to Australia's involvement in World War II's Pacific theatre. Like the First, the Second World War was a conflict between major imperialist powers over competing geo-strategic and economic interests.

Hailing the "brave soldiers who were working for peace seventy years ago", Clinton declared: "At that time, the Pacific faced an uncertain future, but American, Australian, and New Zealand troops joined together and stood up for the tenets of democracy." She concluded that it was now necessary to "recommit ourselves to their mission."

This can have only one meaning. It amounts to a chilling call to arms, underscoring the central purpose of this year's Anzac Day commemorations. For all the talk of remembering the past, their real goal is to glorify a fabricated history in anticipation of major military conflicts in the immediate future when, once again, imperialist governments intend to dragoon another generation of young people throughout the world to fight and die on the altar of private profit.



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