

Australia's Anzac Day and the glorification of militarism

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Last week's commemoration of Anzac Day, an annual Australian public holiday nominally held to commemorate the 1915 World War I Gallipoli campaign in Turkey, was again dominated by the glorification of war and promotion of militarism.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted that last year's Anzac Day was the first held in the aftermath of US President Obama's visit in November 2011 when he and Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced plans for a US Marine base in Darwin as part of his confrontational "pivot to Asia" directed against China.

The 2012 Anzac Day events, we warned, amounted to "a chilling call to arms ... 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." (See "Anzac Day and the promotion of militarism")

Twelve months on, US preparations for war against China have continued apace, heightening geo-political tensions throughout the region. One after another, dangerous flashpoints have been created, from the Korean peninsula to the island dispute between Japan and China, and various territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as the US encourages its allies to take a tougher stance against China.

It was therefore by no means accidental that at this year's Anzac Day events, the Pacific campaign during World War II and the contemporary criminal operations of US and Australian imperialism in the Middle East and the South Pacific were placed at centre stage.

Hundreds of US Marines were prominently featured in the military and veterans' march through the streets of Darwin. Across the country, far more emphasis was

placed on the Pacific battles of World War II than on the Gallipoli campaign or World War I. Governor General Quentin Bryce travelled to Papua New Guinea for official commemorations at sites marking battles against the Japanese in World War II. Gillard officiated in Townsville, northern Queensland, home to an army and air force base that played a key role in the US-Australian campaigns during the Pacific War.

In her speech, Gillard specifically promoted the involvement of Australian troops in the criminal US-led occupation of Afghanistan, declaring in Townsville that "we do want to honour their sacrifice by talking too about what they've achieved. We went to Afghanistan to deny Al Qaeda a safe haven for terrorism. That's the work that we're doing. And that's the mission we are accomplishing."

Central to the "mission" have been Australian elite special forces (SAS), which have functioned as US-directed death squads in Afghanistan's southern provinces. The SAS has specialised in assassination missions, targeting any Afghans identified as participants in anti-occupation activities. Numerous civilians have been killed in the course of house-to-house raids and other operations by Australian troops in isolated farming villages, though no-one within the military hierarchy has faced a single war crimes charge.

At the Anzac Day events outside the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith led the proceedings. A veteran of the Afghanistan war, Roberts-Smith was awarded the Victoria Cross, the Australian military's highest award, in 2011 and has been seized upon by the government as the telegenic "face" of the war. During last week's ceremony, he read lengthy excerpts from letters written by Australian soldiers who have since been killed in Afghanistan.

The *Daily Telegraph* noted that Roberts-Smith was

also prominent because “the new director of the Australian War Memorial, former defence minister Brendan Nelson, deliberately placed the new generation front and centre for the first time.” This “new generation” of veterans of Australian imperialism’s latest operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, East Timor and Solomon Islands, marched toward the head of the official rallies in each capital city.

Nelson, a defence minister under the previous Liberal government of John Howard, told the ABC of his satisfaction that Anzac Day had been successfully revived after previously dwindling into near-extinction. “We went through a period in Australia through the '70s and the early '80s where there were existential questions about Anzac Day, about its survival, its relevance to Australia,” he said. “And thankfully now we have emerged from that.”

From its inception during the 1920s, wide layers of military veterans had boycotted Anzac Day in protest against what they saw as the falsification of their experiences and glorification of war. During and after the Vietnam War, when mass protests erupted against Australia’s involvement in the neo-colonial US intervention in that impoverished country, Anzac Day attendances fell to record lows. A concerted campaign was then mounted to revive the event, initiated by the Labor governments of Hawke and Keating, and stepped up under Howard. This was bound up with the ideological needs of Australian capitalism as it entered a new period of war and militarism.

Under Gillard, the promotion of the Anzac myth has been taken to a higher level, with the anticipated centenary of the Gallipoli campaign in two years’ time already being promoted in schools and in the media as a major national event. Vietnam veterans were prominently featured in this year’s event, consistent with the Labor government’s efforts to end the stench that continues to surround that war.

This protracted campaign to rehabilitate Anzac Day has had an impact. Record crowds attended this year’s events, with tens of thousands of people, including significant layers of young people, joining dawn services in each capital city. While the attendance does not reflect overt support for war, it is an expression of the confusion deliberately fostered by the political establishment to facilitate the growth of militarism. Not only the horrors of military conflict, but the underlying

predatory motives have been completely buried. Moreover, the official recollection of Australian imperialism’s military history has been consciously cast in religious terms—with “sacred” sites marked by the blood “sacrifices” of “martyrs” for the nation—aimed at elevating the military to an unchallengeable status within official political life.

Every aspect of Anzac Day is shrouded in the grossest myth-making. Excluded from Australia’s real military history, first as the colonial adjunct of the British Empire and then as the junior partner of US imperialism, is the fact that many young men who joined up, out of a confused sense of patriotism, and fought in World War I were so afflicted by the experience that they returned determined, above all, to fight against war. Many became socialists as a result.

Within the Australian working class as a whole, there are deeply rooted anti-militarist and anti-imperialist traditions. But their revival requires the conscious fight for a new anti-war movement, directed against the Gillard Labor government and its filthy alliance with US imperialism, as it prepares a catastrophic conflagration in East Asia. The Socialist Equality Party is alone in fighting for the development of such a movement, in opposition to the entire political establishment, and in advancing the necessary socialist and internationalist perspective for the mobilisation and unification of the working class in Australia, throughout the Asia-Pacific region and internationally against the escalating threat of war. This is the central focus of the SEP’s federal election campaign, and we urge all workers and young people to attend our campaign launch meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on May 5.



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