Australian government plans to celebrate World War I

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The Australian political establishment has outlined an unprecedented program of events, starting on August 4, 2014, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the imperialist slaughter of World War I.

The commemorations have become a national campaign, supported by all the major political parties—the governing Liberals and Nationals, the opposition Labor Party and the Greens—and promoted by the media. Dubbed "Rabaul to Return," every stage of Australian involvement in the war, from its outset with the seizure of the town of Rabaul in German New Guinea to its conclusion in 1918, will be marked by what Prime Minister Tony Abbott has declared will be a "peoples' celebration."

Everything is being done to prevent any discussion of the real causes and motivations of the war and to cultivate Australian nationalism. The deaths of nearly 62,000 Australian troops and wounding of 150,000 more, in carnage that directly claimed the lives of more than 10 million people, has been lauded by Abbott as the "crucible that forged our nation."

As in Britain, increasingly crude commentary is appearing in the media, declaring that the war was a "just war," fought to defend liberty against German tyranny and expansionism. In fact, the war arose from the contradictions of the capitalist system, and the struggle among the major imperialist powers for global dominance of markets, resources and profits.

While it was not the intention of the planners, the decision to include the little-known Rabaul campaign in the program's title draws attention to the imperialist character of the war on all sides. The Australian ruling elite sent hundreds of thousands of youth to fight in World War I to protect the interests of the major world power of the time, British imperialism, while utilising the war to prosecute its own predatory colonial agenda in the South Pacific region.

Within days of the outbreak of war on August 4, 1914, British authorities called on Australia to attack wireless stations in Rabaul—the capital of the German colony of New Guinea. A volunteer force of 2,000 troops was hurriedly dispatched from Sydney and by the end of September it had seized the German possessions, which the Australian ruling class had coveted for decades. As part of the sordid carve-up at the Versailles peace treaty at the end of the war, German New Guinea was handed over to Australia.

The celebration of WWI will be paralleled by "Century of Service," a program to mark military anniversaries from other conflicts. It is explicitly aimed at glorifying Australia's involvement in the wars that have been fought as payment for its post-World War II alliance with the United States, including Vietnam and the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Planning for the anniversary began in 2011, when the then Gillard Labor government established the "Anzac Centenary Advisory Board," a panel composed of senior military figures, academics, high-ranking public servants and media personalities. The board issued a report in March 2013 recommending a series of "commemorative" events, most of which were adopted by the government.

Federal government funding for the anniversary now totals some $140 million, including the allocation of $125,000 to each of the country's 150 electorates to finance local projects. Approved grants so far include the refurbishment of war memorials, the erection of new ones, and the placement of "commemorative plaques" in schools. State governments have also allocated millions of dollars for "community" events.

The federal government has also established the Anzac Centenary Public Fund to garner donations from the public and the corporate world. Speaking at the fund's launch last month, Prime Minister Abbott hailed the corporate elite. He described trucking magnate Lindsay Fox as "our fundraiser-in-chief, the legendary, the extraordinary, hopefully the immortal." He praised a number of corporations that had already contributed to the fund, including BHP Billiton, Woodside, National Australia Bank, Commonwealth Bank, ANZ Bank, Telstra, Australian Football League, Crown, Aurizon, NewsCorp, Leightons, James Packer and LinFox.

The publicly funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has been enlisted into the campaign. It will telecast

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various events and has commissioned a series of documentaries. School students will be coopted into celebrating the war through mandatory participation in various commemorative services.

The first major events, after services on August 4, 2014, will mark the departure of the initial convoy of Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (Anzac) troops from Albany, a southern port city in Western Australia, at the beginning of November 1914. The bulk of the troops were landed in Egypt, before ultimately being sent to fight in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign the following year.

The commemoration of the "Albany convoy" will include the docking of between three to six active naval ships at Albany and marches through the streets by current soldiers from Australia and New Zealand. Separate events are being hastily organised in Fremantle, after complaints by its Labor Party member of parliament Melissa Parke that Western Australian troops departed from there, not Albany.

The 100th anniversary of the landing of Anzac troops at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915—their first major engagement of the war—is the main focus of the celebrations organised thus far. Anzac Day 2015 will be the occasion for an unrestrained outpouring of nationalism.

The attempt by British and French forces to seize the Gallipoli peninsula from the Ottoman Empire was an unmitigated disaster. Almost 9,000 Australian and close to 3,000 New Zealand troops lost their lives during eight months of fighting, along with thousands of British and French soldiers and as many as 70,000 Turkish defenders. The slaughter was nevertheless seized upon by the ruling class to manufacture a jingoistic legend of the "Anzac spirit." The alleged bravery and self-sacrifice of those who fought at Gallipoli was used by the pro-war establishment to pressure thousands more young men to enlist to kill and be killed on the European Western Front. To this day, glorification of the Anzacs is the staple of patriotism in both Australia and New Zealand.

Anniversary services will be held across Australia, with school children in particular dragooned into taking part. At Gallipoli itself, the Turkish government has agreed to the Australian and New Zealand governments staging a massive commemoration. An online lottery is currently taking place, with thousands of "winners" being allocated tickets to participate in ceremonies on April 25, 2015, alongside political leaders, military commanders and the descendants of soldiers who lost their lives.

Later events will mark Australian involvement in various engagements on the Western Front in France and Belgium between July 1916 and November 1918. Among the catastrophes to be celebrated is Fromelles, where 5,500 Australian troops were killed or wounded in barely 24 hours in July 1916, and Pozières, a seven-week battle during the 1916 Somme offensive in which 6,000 Australian soldiers lost their lives and 17,000 were wounded.

Along with events to mark major battles, various museums and public buildings are being refurbished, while new ones are being created. World War I-themed plays have been commissioned. Virtually every aspect of the war, from the role of women and Aborigines, to the mental health implications of the conflict, will be canvassed.

To ensure even the most remote parts of the country are exposed to the campaign, a digital exhibition, featuring two interactive walls mounted on a truck and funded to the tune of $10 million, will travel across Australia throughout the four-year anniversary.

While the campaign is ostensibly preoccupied with past events, it has a definite contemporary political purpose. It takes place within the context of a major escalation of geo-political tensions precipitated by Washington's aggressive pivot to Asia, which is aimed at containing China through a full-scale military buildup in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Australian ruling elite has signed up for the US war preparations, establishing a new US marine base in Darwin, and pushing through a series of measures behind the backs of the population that integrate the activities of the Australian armed forces ever more closely into those of the American military.

The ruling elite's celebration of the barbarism of the World War I is aimed at preparing the conditions for new catastrophes. It is an attempt to cultivate, among young people in particular, nationalism and militarist conceptions.

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