

Government-produced book describes WWI as “successful and profitable”

New Zealand and the First World War 1914–1919

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New Zealand and the First World War 1914–1919 by Damien Fenton, an employee of the Ministry of Culture, was published last November. The book was produced in collaboration with the Defence Force and Massey University. It was launched by the Governor-General Jerry Mateparae and Prime Minister John Key, who described it as “a superb achievement” that “deserves to become a family heirloom.”

The book is a tendentious piece of pro-war propaganda and historical falsification. It is the opening shot in a five-year campaign to glorify WWI, in order to numb the consciousness of workers and youth and condition public opinion to support the current preparations for war by Washington and its allies. The previous Labour government sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and over the past year the entire political establishment has indicated that it supports US intervention in Syria, Ukraine and North Korea, as well as the military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China.

The National Party government and Lottery Grants Board intend to spend at least \$36 million on various events and projects connected with the WWI centenary. This includes publishing 10 more books on aspects of the war.

World War I was an imperialist war. Its fundamental cause was the breakdown of the capitalist system, expressed in the struggle between the major powers in Europe, Asia and America for domination of colonies, markets and profits. As Leon Trotsky wrote after the outbreak of war, it signified that the development of world economy had come into conflict with the division of the world into competing nation states. But “the way the governments propose to solve this problem of imperialism is not through the intelligent, organized cooperation of all of humanity’s producers, but through the exploitation of the world’s economic system by the capitalist class of the victorious country,” he explained.

The world war produced the greatest barbarism up to that point in history. More than 10 million people were killed and 21 million wounded, physically and psychologically.

New Zealand’s ruling class, as a junior partner in British imperialism, viewed the war as an opportunity to seize new colonies and expand its wealth. Since the 19th century, governments in Wellington had had designs on Pacific island territories, including German-held Samoa and Nauru.

To this end, 100,000 New Zealand soldiers were sent to fight—10 percent of the country’s population and over 60 percent of men aged between 19 and 45. Of these, 18,500 were either killed or died of disease, while 42,000 were wounded.

New Zealand and the First World War aims to justify this appalling toll by crudely falsifying the character of the war, presenting it as an altruistic endeavour that New Zealanders should be “proud” of taking part in.

Fenton is an ardent militarist who writes entirely from the point of view

of the ruling class. His first book, *A False Sense of Security: The Force Structure of the New Zealand Army 1946-1978*, attacked successive governments for not providing more funding and equipment to the military. It endorsed NZ’s role in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and lamented the abolition of compulsory military training in 1972. In January, Fenton told the *Dominion Post* one of his favourite authors was Christopher Hitchens, a former leading member of the Socialist Workers Party who charted the path for all the pseudo-left organisations into supporters of imperialist war with his notorious backing for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Fenton’s account of the origins of WWI places the blame on Germany and Austria-Hungary. Repeating the Allied propaganda, he justifies Britain’s declaration of war as a response to the invasion of Belgium and the need “to contain the German Empire and prevent it from further upsetting the European balance of power.” He hails “the military defeat of Imperial Germany in November 1918” as a “triumph,” which must be “balanced” against the “tragedies” of the war.

Britain’s real aim in the war was to defend its vast empire, including the brutally oppressed peoples of India, much of Africa and the Middle East, as well as to secure more colonies.

Indeed, while condemning German expansionism, Fenton openly celebrates the seizure of colonies by the Allies. He declares that New Zealand’s involvement was “largely successful and profitable” because it grabbed German Samoa and, along with Britain and Australia, secured a share in the plunder of phosphates from Nauru. He writes that “New Zealand’s superphosphate industry boomed in the decades following the war and was to make an important contribution to the country’s grasslands revolution of the mid-20th century.”

Fenton is silent about the impact of NZ colonial rule on the Pacific populations. In Nauru, villages were cleared to make way for phosphate mines, worked by indentured labourers from Asia. In Samoa, thousands of indentured Chinese labourers continued to work under brutal conditions in the copra plantations.

The negligence of New Zealand authorities in Samoa led to the introduction of the deadly 1918 influenza virus, which killed 22 percent of the population. The administration of Colonel Robert Logan provided completely inadequate medical services. Logan infamously replied to one appeal for help from a school by saying, “I do not care if they are going to die. Let them die and go to hell.” [1] Fenton says nothing about this.

Fenton presents a sanitized picture of the carnage of the war. The book contains more than 500 photos, maps, posters, etc., but fewer than a dozen pictures of injured and slain soldiers, and virtually none of ruined towns or villages.

He heaps praise on the Allied generals, including Sir Douglas Haig, who became notorious among the troops as the “butcher of the Somme” for

sending wave after wave of young men “over the top” and to their deaths. The Allies suffered nearly 500,000 casualties in the Battle of the Somme, including 8,000 New Zealanders, and Germany more than 600,000.

Writing with the callousness of a general, Fenton “balances” the waste of lives by Haig and others against their military victories—that is, the slaughter of “enemy” troops. He insists that “Most of the criticism [of Haig after the war] was ill-founded or grossly exaggerated.” He told Radio NZ that the generals “who get blamed for being butchers and bunglers in 1916 are actually the same generals who lead us to victory in 1918.”

In reality, it was the Russian Revolution and the ensuing upsurge of the working class across Europe, that forced the European powers to agree to an armistice. Fenton describes the revolution and Russia’s withdrawal from the war as merely a military “setback” for the Allies, but in fact it inspired fear in the bourgeois rulers of every country. British prime minister Lloyd George wrote during the 1919 Versailles conference, “The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other.”

A particularly chilling aspect of Fenton’s book is his endorsement of the police state measures put in place during the war. He writes that “New Zealand’s political leaders came to accept that extreme times demanded extreme measures.”

At the start of the war, the opposition Liberal Party went into coalition with the ruling Reform Party and parliament voted to suspend elections scheduled for 1917 until the war was over. Newspapers were censored, antiwar books were banned and so was “criticising the government, generating hostility between employers and workers, interfering with recruiting, and encouraging resistance to conscription.” About 500 “enemy aliens” were imprisoned and 208 people were convicted of sedition or disloyalty, many of them for doing nothing more than speaking against the war.

Fenton declares with satisfaction: “Dissent was successfully contained and domestic security achieved by the government’s wartime measures.”

His undisguised sympathy for authoritarian forms of rule reflects moods that are prevalent among today’s ruling elites, as they prepare for new wars. Last year, in the face of overwhelming public opposition, the government significantly increased the powers of the state spying agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau, to carry out mass surveillance of the population.

According to Fenton, the wartime government’s actions were “in step with public thinking.” He claims that “only a small minority actively opposed the march to war, and few voiced such opinions publicly once the war began.” He asserts that New Zealanders, “rich or poor, Maori or Pakeha [European]” overwhelmingly believed that “if the empire was at war, so were we—it was that simple.”

This is a complete fabrication. The police state measures that Fenton applauds were taken precisely to suppress widespread opposition to war and conscription.

The system of compulsory military training introduced in 1909, which according to Fenton “worked remarkably well,” was resisted by thousands. Historian Stevan Eldred-Grigg noted: “The state, during the first three years of enforcement of the war law, convicted nearly seven thousand men and youths for not registering, or refusing to take the oath, or not turning up for parades, or for obstructing parades.” Just before the outbreak of war, “seventeen per cent of young men liable to go into military camp had stayed away.” [2]

The Liberal-Reform government overcame opposition to war largely thanks to the collaboration of the reformist Social Democratic Party (SDP)—which became part of the Labour Party in 1916—and the trade unions. Steeped in reactionary nationalism, the labour aristocracy, like its counterparts in Europe, actively supported its “own” ruling class in the

war.

Hiram Hunter, president of the SDP and secretary-treasurer of the United Federation of Labour (UFL), told a meeting in Christchurch that it was “the bounden duty of everybody in the community to pull together and see that our interests are protected, not only in New Zealand but also throughout the Empire.” [3]

Daniel Sullivan, also a SDP member and president of the UFL in 1914, sat on the executive of the Christchurch Patriotic Committee and Citizens’ Defence Corps, taking “a prominent part in recruiting drives.” James McCombs, who was the first Labour Party president and a member of the parliamentary opposition during the war, “spoke at almost every possible recruiting meeting week after week.” [4]

As in other countries, thousands of men volunteered for the first overseas expeditions. But as reports of the carnage at Gallipoli and elsewhere began to come in, the numbers of recruits dwindled and the government introduced conscription in 1916. Defence Minister James Allen wrote to Prime Minister William Massey at the time that he feared conscription would provoke a “colossal industrial disturbance.” [5]

The government outlawed strikes in essential industries as “seditious.” Nevertheless, in 1916 and 1917 coalminers “stopped work over and over again, some strikes lasting for two months” to protest conscription and the fact that wages were not keeping pace with wartime inflation. In order to end the strikes the government was forced to agree that miners would not be conscripted. [6]

The Labour Party and the unions were instrumental in preventing broader strikes. When Labour MP Paddy Webb and mining union leader Bob Semple were imprisoned for opposing conscription, they both urged workers not to strike. [7] Labour instead channelled the growing antiwar sentiment by holding anti-conscription meetings across the country, some of which attracted thousands of people.

According to Eldred-Grigg, in the winter of 1917 the state was aware of almost 5,000 men who had deserted after being called up for conscription. Some had become fugitives within NZ while others fled overseas. Fenton never mentions this figure, asserting that only “a tiny fraction of those eligible” opposed being drafted.

As part of his attempt to portray the war as central to the “creation of a modern New Zealand identity,” Fenton describes it as a “significant milestone in the history of New Zealand race relations, with Maori and Pakeha soldiers fighting together overseas for the first time.”

This is another obscene fabrication. About 2,200 Maori and Pacific island soldiers were sent to fight, of whom 325 died and 700 were injured or became ill. Their recruitment was organised by five Maori members of parliament and some tribal leaders keen to prove their loyalty to the British Empire.

Echoing the propaganda of the time, Fenton asserts that “[m]any Maori were eager to serve,” even while admitting that the Maori MPs “struggled to fill their recruitment quotas.” In fact, the recruiters dragooned about 500 men from the NZ colonies in the Cook Islands and Niue to make up the numbers. Several Maori tribes, hostile to Britain’s confiscation of their land in the 19th century, refused to send volunteers. Out of 552 men who were balloted for conscription, only 74 went to train. About 100 were imprisoned.

That such a shamelessly pro-war book, based on falsifications and distortions, has been produced by the government—with no objection from anyone in the political establishment, and universally praised by the corporate media—should be taken as a sharp warning by the working class.

Amid the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression, which began with the crash of 2008, the world situation bears a striking resemblance to the period before WWI. The US has sought to counter its economic decline through a series of imperialist operations—including supporting a fascist-led coup in Ukraine and fomenting a civil war for regime change in Syria. These and other “flash points” throughout the

world threaten to escalate into a major military confrontation between the US and Russia or China.

Like other governments in the Asia-Pacific region, New Zealand has strengthened military and intelligence ties with the Obama administration as part of Washington's "pivot" to Asia—that is, the military encirclement and preparations for war against China. Fenton's book demonstrates that NZ's ruling class is now re-writing history as part of a conscious effort to lay the ground for joining the next world war.

References:

[1] *Mau: Samoa's Struggle Against New Zealand Oppression* by Michael Field, 1984, pp. 42-43.

[2] *The Great Wrong War* by Stevan Eldred-Grigg, 2010, p. 17.

[3] *Evening Post*, 8 August 1914.

[4] "The Necessary But Not Sufficient Condition: Christchurch Labour and Working-Class Culture," Libby Plumridge, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 1985.

[5] *King and Country Call: New Zealanders, Conscription and the Great War* by Paul Baker, 1988, p. 157.

[6] Eldred-Grigg, pp. 321-2.

[7] Baker, pp. 157, 163.



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