

Anzac Day 2014: A glorification of Australian imperialism

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Anzac Day 2014 saw the Australian population saturated with nationalist propaganda. With every organ of the mass media devoting itself to promoting the dawn services, the veterans' marches, tales of soldiers' sacrifices and heroism and the presence in Canberra of the British royal couple, Prince William and his wife Kate, it was almost impossible to avoid.

Anzac Day, a public holiday in Australia and New Zealand, commemorates the landing on April 25, 1915, of Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corp) troops on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey, as part of a British and French force. The aim of the invasion was to seize the narrow Dardanelles strait between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and compel Turkey, which was allied with Germany, to surrender. Control of the sea lanes would have been used to send material assistance to the Tsarist regime in Russia, which was facing defeat after sending hundreds of thousands of men to their deaths in failed attempts to seize territory from Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Yesterday's events provided a foretaste of what can be expected when the ruling class launches its four-year campaign to celebrate the centenary of World War I on August 4. A long list of battles that involved Australian forces will be marked by official state ceremonies. Over \$500 million is going to be spent promoting patriotism, an uncritical attitude toward war and servile deference to the military.

The assault on Gallipoli in 1915 was a debacle. After encountering Turkish resistance, the Anzac troops were ordered by their inexperienced Australian commanders to dig in on the narrow ridges overlooking the beaches. In a blunt assessment authored in 1936, George Patton, the future World War II American general, wrote that the first day of the Gallipoli campaign demonstrated "the folly of sending partially trained troops, no matter

how brave, on an operation of this character or any other operation."

Over the next eight months, the lives of over 8,000 Australians and 2,000 New Zealanders, as well as more than 34,000 British and close to 10,000 French troops, were squandered in attempts to advance further into the peninsula. Eventually, British command accepted defeat and the invasion forces were evacuated in January 1916 and sent to the trenches on the western front in Europe. More than 80,000 Turks died defending Gallipoli.

Ninety-nine years after the landing, Gallipoli, the first battle that involved Australian troops in World War I, is still lauded by the political establishment as the "birth of the nation." In the peace talks that followed the end of the war, the Australian ruling elite exploited the death of 62,000 Australian troops and wounding of over 150,000 to begin asserting itself on the world arena as an independent force from Britain, including extracting colonial control over German New Guinea.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott focussed his speech to the Anzac Day service at the War Memorial in Canberra on the significance of World War I for Australian imperialism. In line with the official lies that have surrounded the war since 1914, Abbott blamed the four-year catastrophe on "Prussian militarism." The attempt to place sole responsibility on German imperialism is used to obscure the no less predatory war aims of all the imperialist powers involved in the conflict.

Abbott made reference to the immediate interests of Australian imperialism in World War I, noting that, in September, a celebration will be held to mark the centenary of the capture of German New Guinea. A rag tag force of Australian militia was dispatched from Sydney within days of the declaration of war to seize

the territory. Papua New Guinea remained an Australian colony until 1975 and is still economically subjected to its domination.

Abbott, while hailing Gallipoli as “Australia’s baptism of fire,” lauded the battles in Europe above all. “We should remember the Western Front,” he declared, “not just for its carnage, but also for Australia’s moment on the stage of history.” In a display of the nationalist arrogance and ignorance that permeates the Australian political establishment, Abbott asserted that Australian troops had effectively won the war in the battles of 1918. “Gallipoli was a defeat,” he said, “but the Western Front was a victory.”

Abbott gloated that five Australian divisions in 1918 had “bested no fewer than 39 enemy divisions.” He omitted the fact that the German Army was ripe with rebellion and soldiers, inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution, were refusing to throw away their lives for the German capitalist class. Thousands simply surrendered rather than continue to fight. The same mutinous conditions and anti-capitalist ferment permeated the British and French armies. The truth of the matter is that the ruling classes of all the imperialist powers sought an end to the war due to their mutual terror of the rising tide of socialist ferment and political opposition within the working class.

Abbott summed up the purpose of the glorification of World War I and its millions of casualties with his expression of hope that “we might find it in ourselves to rise to the supreme challenge, as they did, should we ever be put to the test.”

The Australian capitalist class has set itself—and the Australian population with it—on a course that leads inexorably toward war. The context in which the celebrations are taking place, and youth in particular subjected to patriotic indoctrination, is the unconditional alignment of Australia with the US preparations for a confrontation with China, and the build-up of the Australian military to complement American forces in the Asia-Pacific. Everything is being done to cultivate an atmosphere in which youth can be enlisted to kill and be killed for the economic and strategic interests of the capitalist elite.

Whereas those interests in 1914 were bound up with the British Empire, today they are dependent on the waning power of the United States. Every war, intervention and intrigue of American imperialism to

maintain its world dominance is being given unqualified support by the Australian political establishment.

Perhaps the most significant feature of Anzac Day 2014 was the degree to which the veterans of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were paraded before the population as heroes. The wars, which the majority of the population opposed, are being hailed as the battlefields that have produced a new generation of “Anzacs,” whose actions must be venerated and whose views must be given unquestioned respect. Former Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, a man who was given the Victoria Cross for killing resistance fighters in Afghanistan, was provided a platform at the Canberra dawn service to laud the neo-colonial occupation as a defence of “freedom.”

These historical falsifications and justifications of imperialism are the preparation for new wars.



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