

Anzac Day in New Zealand glorifies imperialism, past and present

Tom Peters
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Last Friday's Anzac Day commemorations in New Zealand marked an escalation of the government's campaign to glorify the country's involvement in imperialist wars over the past 100 years, from the First World War to the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

The annual celebration of militarism comes amid sharpening global tensions produced by the provocative US imperialist intervention in Ukraine, and Obama's backing of the Japanese government's aggressive stance against China. New Zealand's National Party government fully supported the right-wing coup in Ukraine and Washington's sanctions against Russia, and has expressed its support for the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, aimed at encircling and preparing for war with China.

April 25 officially marks the 1915 landing of Australian and New Zealand soldiers at Gallipoli in Turkey, as part of the disastrous Allied invasion. Some 2,000 New Zealanders and 8,000 Australians were killed, as well as more than 34,000 British and close to 10,000 French troops, and more than 80,000 Turks.

The war killed 18,500 New Zealanders and injured 40,000—out of a country with a population of just one million. The aim of the NZ ruling class, as a junior partner of British imperialism, was to expand its wealth and seize more Pacific island colonies, including German-held Samoa.

This year's dawn services held around the country, and at Gallipoli, are considered a "dress rehearsal" for the government's centenary commemorations of the landing next year. The events are part of a five-year program to glorify the country's involvement in WWI, aimed at conditioning the population to accept participation in future imperialist wars.

The government is spending \$120 million on a new

war memorial park in Wellington, and more than \$19 million on other projects associated with the centenary.

Prominent celebrities have been recruited to promote the commemorations. The Returned Services' Association is selling Anzac-themed iPhone cases, olive oil, umbrellas, T-shirts and bags, designed by award-winning fashion designer Dame Trelise Cooper. At the Wellington dawn service, soldiers wore replica 1914 uniforms created by *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson. Jackson is currently designing a WWI "trench experience" at the national museum Te Papa.

Thousands of ordinary people attend Anzac Day ceremonies to pay their respects to relatives killed in WWI, WWII and other wars. For the ruling class, however, the purpose of the events is to inculcate unquestioning respect for the military and its operations. As one TV3 presenter put it, the day "isn't just about the past, it is very much about the present."

This was most evident at the Auckland service, where Corporal Willie Apiata was chosen to address the crowd of almost 10,000 people. Apiata received the Victoria Cross medal for fighting in the elite Special Air Service in Afghanistan. The NZ SAS troops were part of the US-led invasion force in Afghanistan and were complicit in war crimes, including handing over prisoners for torture to US and Afghan forces. More than 100 New Zealand soldiers remained in Afghanistan until last year.

Apiata's speech did not mention many thousands of Afghans killed over the past 13 years in air strikes, night raids, and other brutal operations by US-led forces. Instead he declared that he went to Afghanistan to "make our place back here in New Zealand a little bit safer for our people to grow and to live." In reality the invasion—launched under the fraudulent banner of the "war on terror"—was a neo-colonial venture by the

US to gain control over the strategically located and resource-rich region.

Governor-General Jerry Mateparae similarly asserted in a speech at Gallipoli that New Zealand soldiers served in WWI, Afghanistan and elsewhere “to defend our freedoms and to bring about a better peace for their families, for our families.” Mateparae was Chief of the Army when the previous Labour Party government sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. He later became chief of the Defence Force and head of the spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau, before becoming the Queen’s representative in 2011.

As in Australia, New Zealand’s ruling elite has attempted to turn the military debacle and slaughter of tens of thousands of young men at Gallipoli into an occasion for national celebration. Mateparae declared that the campaign was “of enduring importance to all New Zealanders and Australians” and that despite the “suffering and loss of life... we also celebrate the values that rose above the hardship: comradeship, courage, compassion, loyalty, and self-sacrifice for the greater good.”

The *New Zealand Herald* similarly editorialised that despite the futility of the Gallipoli campaign, the soldiers deserved “recognition” for their purportedly “unquestioning commitment to a national purpose.” It is precisely this loyalty and willingness to “sacrifice” for the nation’s rulers that the government wants to instill in young people today.

For the centenary of WWI, this has included hiring several academics to re-write the history of the war. Thirteen books are being produced, the first of which was Damien Fenton’s *New Zealand and the First World War* —a crude attempt to falsify the character of the war, to sanitise its barbarism and present it as an altruistic endeavour that New Zealanders should be “proud” of. Fenton fully endorses conscription and all the police-state measures taken by the government during WWI (see: “Government-produced book describes WWI as ‘successful and profitable’”).

Another professor on the government’s payroll, ex-army colonel Glyn Harper, told TVNZ on April 20 that it was “time that we actually developed a much more sophisticated understanding of the First World War and New Zealand’s role.” He rejected the “notion that it was futile” and that the generals used soldiers as “cannon-fodder.” Like Fenton, Harper insisted that the

war was necessary to stop German expansionism—while saying nothing about the brutal rule of the British Empire over its vast colonial possessions.

Harper has just written a children’s picture book about Gallipoli, *Jim’s Letters*, in which a fictional 18-year-old soldier writes home to his brother. According to the publisher’s press release, Jim’s final letter—written just before he is killed—“concludes on a cheery note with; ‘Please tell Mum not to worry about me. I would not have missed this experience for the world.’” An afterword by Harper states that Gallipoli is remembered as “something more than a military defeat” but as “a victory for comradeship and a victory over military muddle and incompetence; even a victory over death itself.”

This sickening glorification of tens of thousands of deaths is presumably what Harper means by a more “sophisticated” understanding of WWI.

The broad propaganda campaign promoting militarism, which is backed by the entire political and media establishment, is the preparation for dragooning a new generation to fight in imperialist wars.



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