

As geopolitical tensions grow with China

## Australian columnist lauds World War I as a “just war”

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Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of the *Australian*, wrote last week on the approaching centenary of World War I. His column was a strident defence of Australia’s participation in the war, using almost identical arguments to those he uses to endorse the very contemporary preparations by the US and Australian governments for military conflict with China.

Sheridan framed his article by asking “who is primarily guilty”? For the *Australian* columnist, there was only one possible answer. “Germany, especially under Kaiser Wilhelm II, bears the chief moral responsibility,” he wrote. “It engaged in a massive military build-up and increasingly militarist policies. It gave a blank cheque to Austria in its aggression toward Serbia and it invaded Belgium as a prelude to invading France... Everyone made mistakes, but the Germans started the war and rightly bore most responsibility.”

“Britain’s decision to resist German aggression was right,” Sheridan declared, and Australia was right to support Britain because it was in the country’s “national interests.” The Australians who died, he wrote, “mostly believed they were doing what was right” and had been “willing to sacrifice their own lives, their whole lives, for something beyond themselves....”

Sheridan authored what can only be described as a nationalist rant. “The purpose of such heroism and sacrifice,” he wrote, “was to defeat German militarism and preserve our security, not to attain glory. But it did attain glory. The Aussie Digger [soldier] rightly became legendary... The heroism of the war showed that we were capable of meeting any challenge. To recognise and take pride in this is not to glorify war. No-one glorifies war. But it remains true in most of history a strong defence is the best preventive of war. However, you can hate war as much as you like and still cherish the Diggers.... At the

end of the day, it was a just war and our soldiers were heroes.”

Sheridan’s assertion that soldiers attained glory and were heroes is aimed at concealing the unimaginable horror that was endured by young men, many still just teenagers, on both sides. In mud, filth and fear, millions lost their lives to bombs, bullets, gas and disease. Many millions more suffered terrible injuries and were permanently traumatised, both physically and mentally. Hurlled into an abyss of death and destruction, Australian soldiers did not display any more heroism or courage than their British, French, Turkish or German counterparts. To claim they did is nationalist stupidity and historical ignorance.

The soldiers who fought World War I were victims of a crime. As the great Marxists of the time explained, World War I was a predatory and imperialist war on all sides. A generation of youth was deluded by patriotism and nationalism and used as the cannon fodder in the struggle between rival capitalist elites over the control of colonies, markets and profits. The lives of 62,000 Australians were squandered to defend the British Empire’s grip over India and large areas of Asia and Africa, while expanding Australian capitalism’s own sphere of influence by taking possession of Germany’s colonies in the South Pacific.

In the final analysis, World War I was the outcome of the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist profit system between an integrated world economy and its continued division into outmoded nation-states. The only solution to the failure of capitalism, and only way to prevent war happening again, was for the working class to overthrow it.

The 1917 Russian Revolution was the first shot in the world socialist revolution, the perspective championed by the Bolshevik Party under the leadership of Lenin and

Trotsky and taken up by the millions of workers—including numerous veterans of the war—who flocked to join the Communist parties that were established in country after country after 1917. The defeat of revolutionary struggles between 1918 and 1927, and the betrayal of the international working class and world socialism by the Stalinist bureaucracy that usurped power in the Soviet Union, enabled the survival of capitalism and ultimately led to the horrors of World War II.

In 2014, the same contradictions of capitalism once again threaten humanity with the catastrophe of World War III. US imperialism, desperate to overcome its protracted economic decline, is ruthlessly using its military force to maintain its global dominance and impose its dictates in every part of the world. In Europe, Washington has provoked the crisis in Ukraine to pursue regime-change in Russia. The Obama's administration's "pivot" to Asia—of which Sheridan is one of the most vocal advocates—is a calculated attempt to extract sweeping economic and strategic concessions from China using the threat of war. Japanese imperialism is exploiting its current status as a US ally to cast off the restraints imposed upon it after 1945 and re-assert itself as an independent military power.

No contemporary political or strategic issue was referred to in Sheridan's column on World War I. The language he used, however, resonates with his portrayal of US and Australian foreign policy as a justified response to China's "military build-up" and "aggression."

In February 2011, for example, amid the preparations by the Obama White House to unveil its "pivot" to Asia, Sheridan endorsed an Australian strategist's assessment that the "massive build-up of China's People's Liberation Army has transformed the strategic environment in Asia so that US military superiority in the region, and Australia's own security, are profoundly threatened."

In June 2011, Sheridan wrote of "China's massive militarisation, and its aggressive actions in the South China Sea and East China Sea." He declared that Australia had to "support the US military presence in the region against the challenge of China's militarisation, and to put our own forces nearer the action should any nastiness take place."

Many more examples could be cited, but the most recent was Sheridan's praise last month for Obama's commitment to go to war to defend Japan's possession of the Chinese-claimed Senkaku Islands—small, rocky, uninhabited outcrops. He wrote: "Washington is

technically neutral on the many territorial disputes in Asia, but it is putting its alliance behind opposition to any forceful change to the status quo. That means China." In the same article he denounced Chinese "territorial aggression" toward the Philippines.

Every word written by Sheridan about the geopolitical tensions in Asia is aimed at obscuring that the responsibility lies with US intrigues and provocations, fully backed by the Australian political establishment. Unlike Germany in 1914, China is not an imperialist power. Rather it is a cheap labour platform, completely dependent on foreign investment and technology. What Sheridan labels as China's "massive military build-up" has been a desperate attempt by Beijing to counter the US military, which vastly outmatches that of China, both numerically but above all in terms of technology and sheer destructive capacity.

Sheridan's column on World War I is part of an ideological offensive underway in Australia. Over the next four years, the Australian political establishment intends to devote hundreds of millions of dollars to commemorating World War I. Young people in particular will be bombarded with historical lies that, in 1914, German militarism and aggression threatened the Australian "way of life" and had to be defeated, regardless of the cost. It will be accompanied by the mind-numbing promotion of nationalism, patriotism and militarist traditions, glorifying not only Australian involvement in World War I, but World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the most recent neo-colonial operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The campaign is in preparation for new conflicts. The demonisation of China is aimed at conditioning the population to the prospect of war and suppressing any criticism of the tens of billions of dollars being spent equipping the Australian military with the array of ships, submarines and jet fighters to fight alongside the US. It is also to divert the immense social tensions within Australia, produced by deep attacks on working-class living standards, outward against an external enemy.

Sheridan and his ilk want to brainwash a new generation to be sent off to kill and be killed, believing "they were doing what was right."



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