

Australia: A barrage of pro-war propaganda to mark World War I centenary

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An extraordinary pro-war propaganda juggernaut has been set in motion in Australia this week, with commemorations held across the country to mark the centenary of World War I.

For the next four years, Australians are to be bombarded with official ceremonies, church services, exhibitions and media coverage, designed to glorify the 1914–18 war, cover up its underlying causes and prepare public opinion, especially young people, for another catastrophic conflict.

The Australian government is outspending many European governments in a campaign designed to extol the virtues of sacrifice in WWI—a war in which the casualty rate for Australian military personnel compared to population was one of the highest of the combatant countries.

By the time the four-year slaughter ended, from an Australian population of fewer than 5 million, 416,809 soldiers had enlisted, almost a tenth of the population. Of the 324,000 sent overseas, more than 60,000 were killed and 156,000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner—a casualty rate of 64 percent.

Altogether, the war claimed the lives of almost 10 million soldiers and six million civilians, and left 21 million wounded, often maimed or mentally damaged for life.

This terrible bloodbath is being “celebrated” by the authorities in Australia, with more than \$300 million being spent by federal and state governments, augmented by corporate donations, over the next four years.

Local councils, schools and other organisations have been applying for funding for displays, exhibitions and memorials. Every federal member of parliament has up to \$125,000 for projects in their electorate, with similar grants available from state and territory governments.

This propaganda campaign, which is expected to reach a crescendo in the lead up to next April’s centenary of the disastrous allied landing at Gallipoli, is completely bipartisan. In fact, it was originally devised by the previous Gillard Labor government.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott led Monday’s commemorations at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, where he launched two projects to mark the centenary. Until the end of 2018, recordings of children reciting the names of the 62,000 Australians listed on a Roll of Honour will be played at the Memorial. The names will also be projected onto the roof of the Memorial’s Hall of Memory every evening for four years.

Thus, school children in their formative years are being particularly targeted. They have been encouraged to identify with individual soldiers who perished and to embrace their willingness to sacrifice their lives. One of those involved, 11-year-old James Martin, told journalists he was surprised to learn he shared the same name as a 14-year-old who enlisted and was killed. “That’s a bit too young to go to war,” he said.

Schools are being saturated with war propaganda, accompanied by projects, competitions and excursions. In New South Wales, for example, 12 students from Years 10 and 11 were awarded Anzac Memorial Scholarships to tour Western Front war graveyards. At Villers-Bretonneux they inspected monuments to 11,000 missing Australian soldiers, many of whom were about their age.

The government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) are playing leading parts. The ABC’s News24 channel ran a three-hour commemoration special on Monday. Next Sunday, the ABC will debut “ANZAC Girls,” a six-part drama focusing on the experiences of

five military nurses. SBS is featuring “14 Diaries of The Great War,” a four-part series retelling the war via diaries, letters, postcards and telegrams.

Such has been the effort to promote Australia’s involvement in the war that two state capitals—Melbourne and Hobart—are proudly proclaiming that the first Allied actions of the war took place in their backyards.

“Less than four hours after the British Empire was plunged into war on August 5, 1914, the shot rang out—not in England, Belgium or France, but 17,000 kilometres away at Point Nepean, south-east of Melbourne, as the German cargo ship, SS Pfalz, desperately tried to leave Australian waters,” the ABC reported. The ship’s crew spent the rest of the war in an internment camp.

According to another ABC report, “one of the first military actions in Australia took place in Tasmania at Port Huon,” where a German ship was taking on a load of timber. “Eleven naval reservists armed with rifles were sent from Hobart to seize the ship and capture its 45 crew members.”

These assaults on German cargo vessels point to the mercenary calculations of the Australian ruling class in rushing to join the war. It was an imperialist war. Britain, then the strongest power, went to war not to protect France or Belgium from German invasion, but to maintain its global empire against the rise of German imperialism.

The Australian capitalist elite, while still dependent on Britain economically and strategically, relished the opportunity to seize its own colonial territories in the Pacific, starting with the German possessions in New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Nauru.

Speaking at the War Memorial on Monday, Prime Minister Abbott claimed to abhor the slaughter of World War I, describing it as “the most cataclysmic event in human history.” Yet he insisted it was justified. “It was a terrible war. In one sense a tragic waste, but it was for a good cause,” he said.

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten and Labor’s defence spokesman David Feeney issued a statement that Monday marked the beginning of four years of thanking those whose sacrifice “secured our freedom down the years.” Shorten and Feeney extolled the “values” they said were established in that war: “courage, duty, honour, mateship and sacrifice.”

These “values” reflect one of the central themes of the “celebration”—the supposed birth of a nation, baptised by the orgy of death and destruction. Once again, as it was 100 years ago, intensive efforts are being made to whip up the kind of nationalism necessary to send a new generation to kill or be killed.

The purpose of this disgusting celebration of war is in preparation for new wars. Denunciations of German aggression in 1914 are being connected to the current campaign by the US and its allies to vilify Russia, with Australia playing a prominent role in the aftermath of the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17.

Monday’s *Australian* editorial drew the connection, accusing Russia of conduct that could trigger another world war. “[T]he world, as it observes the 100th anniversary, cannot ignore the fact that Russia, after being embraced by the international order after 1990, is now undermining that order with its aggressive redrawing of international boundaries through the illegal annexation of Crimea.”

Reality is being stood on its head. By backing a fascist-led coup in Ukraine, on Russia’s doorstep, in February, and then bringing NATO forces up to Russia’s borders, Washington and its accomplices are provoking a showdown with Russia, just as the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia is stoking conflicts with China.

The nauseating celebrations of World War I in Australia are part of the propaganda war already underway to drown out popular anti-war sentiment and to condition public opinion, especially the minds of young people, for another call to “sacrifice for the nation.”



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