Canada’s Harper marks World War I with bellicose address

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper gave a bellicose address last week on the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War—an address aimed at politically and ideologically conditioning the population for Canada’s participation in future imperialist wars.

Speaking at the Canadian War Museum, Harper celebrated World War I as marking Canada’s emergence as a “great power.”

Given the war’s countless horrors and immense loss of life, Harper could not avoid mention of what he termed “the bitter harvest of suffering and death.” But in the very same breathe, he dismissed the unprecedented toll in human suffering exacted by the struggle between the two rival blocs of imperialist powers—the “Allies” and the German-led “Central Powers”—for markets and colonies, declaring that he would not “dwell on” the “numbers” of dead and maimed.

Instead, Harper urged Canadians to focus on what Canada had “achieved” as a result of its participation in the bloodletting in Europe. “By any measure,” asserted Harper, “Canada as a truly independent country was forged in the fires of the Western Front.”

Harper later bluntly underscored what he meant by this: with World War I Canada emerged on the world stage as a “great”—that is an imperialist—power in its own right.

“When the great nations of the world gathered,” said Harper, “we must never forget that our place at the table was not given to us. It was bought and paid for on the gas-choked field of Ypres … at Vimy Ridge, where Canadian men united under Canadian leaders achieved a victory that had eluded so many others; in the long muddy slaughter along the River Somme; in the drenched and cratered wasteland of Passchendaele …”

Much of the remainder of Harper’s speech was aimed at explicitly drawing the connection between the First World War and the wars Canada has fought and is preparing to fight in the 21st Century.

Harper lauded Canada’s leading role in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Then, in a reference to Canada’s military mobilization in support of Ukraine’s ultra-rightwing, putsch-installed government, he declared that “today (Canada) once again stands beside friends and allies” whose “sovereignty” and “territorial integrity” are “at risk.”

Canada has been playing a particularly provocative role in the US-German-led campaign to harness Ukraine to western imperialism, even at the risk of provoking a war with Russia, that is, a war between nuclear-armed states.

With the full support of the social-democratic NDP and the Liberals, Harper’s Conservative government has deployed six CF-18 fighter jets to Eastern Europe, dispatched a battleship to join NATO patrols of the Black Sea, and repeatedly joined Washington in pressing the European powers to impose much more punishing economic sanctions on Russia.

The aggressive tenor of Harper’s First World War centennial address was underscored by his celebration of the Canadian Expeditionary Force as “the shock troops of the British Empire.”

A more apt term would have been cannon fodder. More than 66,000 Canadian soldiers were killed in the carnage on the Western Front and a further 172,000 wounded.

When Harper referred in his speech to Canada having gone “all in” to World War I whatever the toll in “blood and treasure,” he was, for once, telling the truth—if by “Canada” one means the Canadian ruling class.

In pursuit of an Allied victory, the bourgeoisie imposed unprecedented privations on the Canadian people. In 1914, Canada had a population of barely eight million. Yet by war’s end, more than 600,000 Canadians—or about one in every fourth able-bodied man under the age of 50—had been enrolled in the military and more than half a million of them deployed to Europe.

Harper’s celebration of the First World War as

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Canada's war of "independence" and the failure of any prominent political figure to take issue with this claim speak volumes about the tawdry democratic traditions and militarist mindset of Canada's ruling elite.

On August 19, 1914, little more than two weeks after the war's outbreak, Canada's parliament adopted the War Measures Act. This legislation effectively gave the government dictatorial powers, including the power to censor the press and detain persons without charge. Tens of thousands of "enemy aliens," that is immigrant workers from Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were soon interned.

Later, conscription would be imposed through a rigged election, in which the Union or (Conservative-Liberal coalition) government whipped up animosity against what it denounced as a "disloyal" French-Canadian minority, and by deploying the army to suppress anti-conscription protests.

Meanwhile, the Canadian elite gorged on the profits from war production. World War I and its sequel, the Second World War, were the two greatest periods of Canada's industrial expansion in the last century.

Although Harper of course made no reference to this in his August 4 speech, World War I ended with the eruption of mass social discontent across Canada —most famously in Winnipeg, where a six week-long general strike was met with police violence and ultimately the city's occupation by the military.

Harper's speech exemplifies the shift of Canadian bourgeoisie to a more aggressive, militarist policy and was aimed at pushing politics still further right.

Over the course of the past two decades, the Canadian elite has put paid to the liberal-social-democratic myth of Canada as a "peacekeeper," joined one US-led war and military intervention after another (including the 1991 Gulf War, Somalia, the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the 2004 coup that overthrow Haiti's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide), and revived an aggressive explicitly right-wing Canadian nationalism that includes celebration of what Harper calls Canada's "warrior tradition."

By the beginning of this decade, Canada was waging wars in Libya and Afghanistan simultaneously and spending in real, inflation-adjusted, terms more on the military than at any time since the end of the Second World War.

Today, unbeknownst to the populace, Canadian imperialism is actively involved in war preparations in the three areas that currently constitute the focus of US military operations and planning: against Iran and Syria in the Middle East; against Russia in Europe; and against China in the Asian Pacific.

If Canada is clutching to the US—aiding and encouraging it in its reckless attempt to secure its global hegemony through aggression and war—it is because the Canadian bourgeoisie views this as the best means to assert their own global interests and ambitions. By tightening Canada's strategic partnership with the US, the Canadian elite, repeating the stratagem of its forbearers a century ago, seeks to defends its own predatory interests, to lay claim, as Harper enthused in his speech of last week, to a seat at the table of the great powers when the world is re-divided and markets, resources and spheres of influence are divvyed up.

This policy rightly finds no support among working people and youth. Earlier this year, as the Canadian military mission to Afghanistan came to an end, the corporate media lamented that there was little enthusiasm in the public for such military interventions. But the popular opposition to war, as that to mounting social inequality and the assault on democratic and social rights, can find no expression in the politics of the establishment, including the pro-big business trade unions and NDP.

For the opposition to war to find genuine and sustained expression it must be bound up with the development of an independent political movement of the working class—the systematic mobilization of working people against all the attempts of big business to make it pay for the capitalist crisis through job, wage and public service cuts; the fight for workers' government to break the power of big business through the implementation of a socialist program; and the struggle to unify the world working class against capitalism and imperialist war.

It is for this program that the Socialist Equality Party and the Fourth International fight.

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