

Australia's WWI Albany commemoration: All about the future, not the past

Richard Phillips
7 November 2014

The former whaling port of Albany in Western Australia was the setting last weekend for the “Albany Convoy Commemoration.” It was part of the Australian government’s World War I centenary program—a multi-million dollar four-year campaign aimed at preparing the population for new wars.

In October 1914, King George’s Sound, just off Albany, was the assembly point for merchant ships carrying Australian and New Zealand troops, later known as Anzacs, before they set sail for the slaughter houses of WWI.

The first armada of 32 ships, carrying 30,000 troops and 8,000 horses, departed from Albany on November 1 under escort from three Australian navy vessels and HIJMS Ibuki, a navy cruiser from Japan, a British wartime ally. It was the first of two convoys that conveyed 41,000 troops from Albany that year. A third of these soldiers were killed in the attempted allied invasion of Turkey in 1915 or on the European battlefields.

Last weekend’s commemoration was attended by an estimated 40,000 people and senior government representatives from Japan, France and New Zealand. It was an occasion for government and military heads to wave the flag and issue proclamations about the birth of the “Anzac spirit,” while engaging in high-level discussions with military allies for new wars.

The three-day extravaganza, initiated by the former Rudd Labor government in 2008, featured a re-enactment of the convoy’s departure, involving four Australian warships and a submarine, a New Zealand navy vessel and a Japanese destroyer. A military march through the town was accompanied by low-flying Australian air force planes roaring overhead. Then came a commemorative service and the opening of the National Anzac Centre, a so-called interpretative

museum.

More than 800 Australian Defence Force personnel were involved in the proceedings, along with soldiers from New Zealand and the French Pacific colony of New Caledonia. On Saturday night, WWI memorabilia were projected onto local buildings, alongside an outdoor “community concert.” Nearby Middleton Beach was covered with 30,000 hand-sewn red poppies.

No doubt many of those in attendance came to honour relatives who served in the war and were genuinely interested in trying to understand what produced the 1914–18 slaughter. That, however, was the last thing on the minds of the official speakers. Those in charge were preoccupied with obscuring the real reasons for WWI as they discussed, in private, preparations for new wars.

Australian Veteran Affairs Minister Michael Ronaldson chaired the commemoration ceremony. Japanese officials in attendance included Kazuyuki Nakane, the vice-minister for foreign affairs and Hideshi Tokuchi, the vice-minister of defence. Tokuchi oversees all Japanese negotiations with US and international defence officials.

Disingenuous speeches were delivered by Australian and New Zealand prime ministers Tony Abbott and John Keys, pledging to “never forget” the “selfless sacrifices” of the war dead and the “spirit of Anzac.”

The so-called Anzac spirit—of mateship and unwavering devotion to the nation—is an entirely invented reality and one that denies the imperialist character of the war. The Australian and New Zealand troops on board the ships were mobilised in 1914 as part of the British Empire’s war efforts to retain its global dominance. The soldiers had never even heard the term Anzac.

Abbott called on those present to remember “the soldiers and sailors of the countries of the British Empire, of gallant France and of Japan—first an ally, then a foe, now the very best of friends.”

In 1914, the ruling elites in Australia, New Zealand and Japan were driven by long-held imperial ambitions in the region. The sacrifice of thousands of Australian and New Zealand troops was the human down-payment for the emergence of Australia and New Zealand as imperialist powers. As soon as the war began, all three countries seized German territories in the Asia-Pacific.

Japan had told the British government that it would only enter the war if it could take Germany’s Pacific territories. On 7 August 1914, Britain officially requested Japanese assistance to destroy German navy ships in and around Chinese waters. Japan declared war against Germany on 23 August and attacked the German settlement at China’s Tsingtao a week later.

Australian and New Zealand forces took over Germany’s South Pacific colonies, including German New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Nauru and Samoa, while the Japanese military seized the Mariana, Caroline and Marshall islands, north of the equator.

Japan, which expanded its influence in China at the expense of Germany and other European powers during the war, not only escorted Anzac troop convoys to Egypt and Europe in 1914. It was also involved in the bloody suppression of the Singapore Mutiny, an anti-colonial uprising against the British in Singapore six months after the outbreak of WWI. In February 1915, Japanese marines were mobilised to assist British forces crush the week-long rebellion by 850 Indian members of the British army stationed there.

While speakers last weekend shed crocodile tears over the death of Allied soldiers in WWI at the official ceremonies, Australian Defence Minister David Johnston met with his New Zealand, Japanese and French counterparts to discuss the current war in the Middle East and preparations for future conflicts.

Johnston and New Zealand Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee held the annual Australia-New Zealand defence ministers’ meeting, which covered “recent developments in Iraq, and shared perspectives on security issues in the South Pacific.” Johnston then met with the French minister for defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, to further Australia’s “close cooperation with France in the South Pacific” and “shared interests” in

Iraq and Afghanistan.

Johnston also held extensive talks with Japanese officials Nakane and Tokuchi on Australian-Japanese involvement in the US-led “pivot to Asia,”—Washington’s diplomatic offensive and military build-up against China.

Over the past 18 months, the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has rapidly increased military spending, “reinterpreted” the Japanese constitution to end legal restraints on participation in US-led wars and increased Tokyo’s diplomatic and military pressure on Beijing.

As well as collaborating closely in Washington’s war preparations against China, the two countries are strengthening their own military ties. In July this year Abe, while visiting Australia, announced new defence agreements between Canberra and Tokyo which could pave the way for the Australian purchase of Japanese submarines.

This is another clear indication of increasing geo-political tensions, particularly between China and the US and its allies, and the danger of wider conflict in the region.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact