

“Governments want a history that reflects their agenda”

History web site secretary discusses World War I centenary

Susan Allan
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The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke with Honest History secretary Dr David Stephens. Established in 2013, the Honest History web site is maintained by a coalition of historians and other writers. Over the past year, the site has published articles exposing how the Australian government and the mainstream media are using the World War I centenary to embellish nationalist myths and promote militarism.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government is conducting a four-year official extravaganza to “celebrate” WWI, which includes the April 25, 2015 “Anzac Day” centenary of the British-led military invasion of Gallipoli, on Turkey’s Dardanelle Peninsula, which involved 11,000 Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) troops.

The following is an edited version of the discussion with Stephens, whose remarks were made in a personal capacity.

Susan Allan: You’ve noted that the World War I centenary is highly politicised. Can you elaborate?

David Stephens: If you start with the assumption that all history is open to interpretation—and that’s what E. H. Carr says in *What is History?*—then everyone writes the history that reflects their own interests. The same thing, of course, applies to governments.

Governments want a history that reflects their own interests and current agenda. They look back at history and make the war commemoration activities and speeches, school curriculum and so on, into a version they want.

It’s the same in every country. The British are doing it in their commemorations for World War I. The Russians, the Turks are doing the same. The Americans have done it for centuries.

In Germany they’re selectively interpreting the history of World War I. There’s a whole range of German historians saying it was all the Kaiser’s fault and others who say it was everyone’s fault. The German government, not surprisingly, is seizing on the histories that give relatively less blame to Germany.

SA: Can you comment on the Australian government’s agenda?

DS: Labor and Liberal have basically been bipartisan about

Gallipoli and Anzac for the past 25 years. People blamed previous Liberal Prime Minister Howard for starting the promotion of Anzac but it was really [Labor Prime Minister] Hawke much more than Howard. Both sides of politics think they gain an advantage by being seen to praise soldiers and construct and dedicate memorials to war.

Abbott and [former Labor Prime Minister] Julia Gillard both talk about an Anzac “tradition of arms” going from Gallipoli to Afghanistan. They all use our history of going to war to whip up enthusiasm for the current war, wherever that happens to be. Howard was probably the most blatant with the Iraq War but others have done similar things.

The World War I centenary committee was established under the Rudd Labor government. In 2010, [Prime Minister Kevin] Rudd gave one of the most over-the-top examples of what we call “Anzackery”—the overblown, sentimental, tear-jerking, jingoistic treatment of it.

The WWI centenary committee made various recommendations about how to commemorate Anzac Day and the centenary. If you look at the list of potential commemorative things, about 250 separate occasions could be commemorated between 2014 and 2018.

The list goes from when the first Australian won a Victoria Cross in 1898, through to the most recent event in 2008. The committee is essentially saying that this is not only an opportunity to commemorate things that happened a century ago in Turkey or the Somme but to commemorate every other military-type event in the past 100 years. Theoretically, they could be commemorating something virtually every day for the next four years. That’s where politics takes over.

When politicians talk about the freedom and honour inscribed on the King’s Penny, which was handed out to the relatives of soldiers who died in WWI, they’re justifying something to the families after the fact.

SA: You have written about how the WWI commemorations are targeting children and the impact on their mental well-being. Could you explain?

DS: The commemorations get children into a particular frame of mind about war. Children are told that Australian soldiers

went off on an adventure, that they thought they were going to Europe for a bit of fun and then they “fell”—the word “fallen” is always used—and made the supreme sacrifice.

Some kids grasp a bit more about what that means but they certainly don’t get the full story. They’re not told that “falling” often meant getting your head blown off, or your innards ripped out and being picked up in a bucket by your friends. That kind of reality is suppressed. So they’re presented with a rose-coloured view of what war is about.

I recently listened to the roll of honour soundscape as part of the WWI commemorations at the War Memorial [in Canberra] and which involves Year 6 school kids reciting the names of fallen soldiers. The kids don’t really know what they’re doing. Twelve-year-olds don’t understand what’s been presented to them and I don’t believe they should be involved.

David Turnoy, an American elementary teacher and author of history textbooks, has said that the first information presented to children about a particular subject becomes the children’s baseline. All subsequent information is taken in by making connections to this original information and judged in the light of it. In other words, what is presented to children first is how they understand it later on.

We asked the Australian Minister for Veteran Affairs Michael Ronaldson what he meant by younger generation having “obligations.” Did he mean moral obligations or physical ones? He replied: “Young people should realise that their freedom was bought in blood.”

The only point in saying that is to ensure that children are in a frame of mind that they recognise they may have to pay the same price as their ancestors did. All this talk about “carrying forward the torch of remembrance,” sounds a bit banal but when government ministers say you have to pay for it in blood, this implication is obvious.

Ronaldson would say: “We’re not glorifying war.” While the government may not be explicitly glorifying it, it is sentimentalising war. They’re doing it in such a way that little kids are given a particular attitude to war that will translate later into: “This must be what we’re expected to do as Australians ... We have to carry this torch.”

There’s a poem by Osbert Sitwell, “The Next War,” written in 1918. It’s a great poem because it talks about plutocrats discussing a memorial for the fallen. They end up saying that the best memorial would be that our children should fall for the same cause. This poem resonates today because children are again being told to fall for that same cause.

SA: You recently commented on the education programs offered at the national war memorial in Canberra. Could you explain?

DS: The war memorial’s program for primary school children has many parts. Children can attend the Discovery Zone, where you can pretend to be in a trench on the Western Front, or get down low fighting the enemy in Vietnam. You may choose to try on the nurses’ uniforms. So, if you’re not

grabbed by something, you’re grabbed by something else.

[Australian Victoria Cross winner] Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith writes in the foreword to his recent book that he was inspired to become a soldier after attending war memorials and seeing all the poppies as a child. I feel like saying to him, the war memorial is 100,000 names of people who were killed and often in terrible circumstances. Very little is told about the post-traumatic stress disorders suffered, the terrible facial injuries or the amputated limbs.

The war memorial has locked cabinets of photographs of facial injuries from those in WWI. We’ve recommended they do an exhibition with these photographs to show the other side of war. These were people who didn’t die gloriously, but came back to live the rest of their lives looking like that.

There’s a real issue of when you can teach children the full spread and reality about war. Maybe it shouldn’t be looked at until Year 9 and until you can do it in an honest way.

Teachers don’t have to be patriotic when presenting the curriculum on this. They have to try to present both sides of the story. We get reports from teachers who say they receive the curriculum material from Veterans Affairs and throw it out but I imagine teachers are under a lot of pressure not to resist the visits by Returned Soldiers Leagues [RSL] people or from Vietnam veterans.

There are alternative curriculums that can be taught, such as the medical effects of war, put together by the History Teachers Association of Victoria with the Medical Association for the Prevention of War. Teachers say to us, that they have an obligation not to take sides, but I say to them, it’s not taking sides, it’s just ensuring that students have a broader range to consider.

The federal department of education also has the PACER [Parliament and Civics Education Rebate] scheme. Schools and students are subsidised for organising a trip to Canberra, provided they go to the war memorial, parliament house and the electoral education centre. The inevitable logic of all of this is that they’re preparing the younger generation to be recruited for war.



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