

Australian audiences turn off *Gallipoli* TV war drama

Richard Phillips
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After weeks of extensive television, print media and street posters advertising its *Gallipoli* television mini-series, the Nine Network has been forced to bring it to an abrupt end by screening double episodes. It ended on Monday, weeks ahead of schedule.

The decision to “burn off” the seven-part series, which glorifies Australian military involvement in the Allied invasion of Turkey’s Gallipoli Peninsular in 1915, came after a plunge in viewer numbers. The show, one of numerous war-themed films, television programs and other “cultural events” produced as part of the World War I centenary “celebrations,” was timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli military campaign that began on April 25, 1915.

The incursion was the first major battle of Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (Anzac) troops in World War I and has long been promoted by the Australia establishment as the “birth of the nation.” Devised by the British high command, the Gallipoli campaign was a military disaster and abandoned after nine months with more than 50,000 Allied troops killed, including over 8,000 Australians and 2,700 New Zealanders.

The first episode of *Gallipoli* attracted over one million viewers on February 9. A week later the audience dropped by about half-a-million and the show rated 19 in the weekly television Top 20. By March 2 it had less than 400,000 viewers.

Nine Entertainment CEO David Gyngell told the media that although “research panels across the country” had predicted *Gallipoli* would be “the biggest show on television” this year, the show had become the network’s “biggest disappointment.”

Attempting to explain *Gallipoli*’s failure to attract a substantial audience, the Melbourne *Age*’s film and television critic Craig Mathieson, who had effusively

praised it as “must-see television” in the lead-up to its premiere, said the problem was viewers’ attitudes. The poor ratings, he declared, “tells us that Australia’s sense of cultural inferiority is as strong as ever.”

Mathieson’s article produced a stream of angry responses from online readers with over 420 comments posted in 48 hours. (The original article and comments can be read [here](#)).

Readers roundly criticised the film and Mathieson’s comments, citing a range of reasons including its poor script, lack of character development and blatant commercialism—all of which is certainly true.

Many, however, were repulsed by the show’s glorification of nationalism, militarism and war. Some described the show as “jingoistic,” others said it was “tacky, commercially and politically driven propaganda,” and even “glorified mythological garbage.”

The comments are significant as this anti-war sentiment finds virtually no expression within the corporate media. All of the establishment parties have lined up in support of the barrage of government-sponsored WWI centenary propaganda and an escalating nationalist and militarist atmosphere. A number of the responses drew comparisons between World War I and more recent illegal US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A concerned military veteran wrote that the country seemed “obsessed with the mythology of our Australian military.” Another ex-soldier commented, “I would like to know why young Australians were invading Turkey.... Look at the mess we have created for ourselves invading Iraq. Gallipoli is one of our inglorious past events not something to be glorified as one of our nation’s finest moments.”

One writer objected to the government’s promotion

of militarism in schools, while another commented: “You watch it [the mini-series] and if you are like me you just become angry and upset at the waste, and then you remember that this government is still sending our troops into harm’s way and for what reason. This time for the US in the Middle East, before that it was for the US in Vietnam, and then it was for the UK in Europe.”

Another letter warned: “If you can glamorise war, when another stupid war kicks off, they will have a steady supply of willing cannon fodder lining around the block to sign up.”

Some of the responses challenged the so-called “Anzac legend,” the long-standing nationalist myth that Australia was “forged as a nation” by Anzac troops during the Gallipoli invasion. Two letters denounced this mythology as “BS” and suggest that the Anzac legend is “relatively new.”

“When you realise that a fair bit of what you were told as a kid was a distortion in the name of ‘nation building’ it’s not a narrative you want to revisit much—unless there is going to be some clear sorting of fact from legend...”

Another reader asked, “Is Gallipoli all that Australia has to write about? If you watch the coverage of all things military and all things veteran on Australian TV you’d think as a nation we had a long history of military campaigns not the few instances that are reported and reworked time and time again. You’d think it was a military state and not a democracy...”

The comments reveal hostility to war and a healthy scepticism towards the media and the government in abundance. However, there is little understanding of why the Australian media and political establishment is spending an estimated \$600 million on a four-year “celebration” of Australia’s military involvement in World War I.

In fact, Australia is a medium-sized imperialist power that has relied strategically firstly on Britain then, from World War II, on the United States, and as a consequence has fought in virtually every one of their wars. These include the bloody Maori wars in New Zealand in mid-19th century, Britain’s colonial interventions in Africa—Sudan in 1885 and later the Boer War in South Africa—through to World War I and as a US ally in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

The “Anzac legend” of the prowess and mateship of

Australian and New Zealand soldiers at Gallipoli has entered into patriotic mythology as the means of encouraging young people to enlist in new wars and to suppress anti-war opposition. For the ruling class, the Gallipoli campaign, even though disastrous militarily, demonstrated that it was just as willing to squander young lives as the other powers and therefore had earned a seat at the imperialist table. That is why it is hailed as the “birth of the nation.”

While the influence of the Anzac mythology waned in the face of mass opposition to the Vietnam War during the 1960s and 70s, it was deliberately revived by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983–1996 and continued by subsequent Labor and Liberal administrations. Australia has been involved in virtually all the US-led wars of the past two decades in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as its own neo-colonial interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

Those who were justifiably repelled by the *Gallipoli* mini-series should consider why large sums of money are being lavished on the present unprecedented celebrations of World War I. The deepening breakdown of global capitalism that erupted in 2008 is fuelling sharpening geo-political tensions that are once again raising the danger of world war.

The entire political establishment has lined up behind the new US-led war in the Middle East, Washington’s provocative confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, and the transformation of Australia into a US base of operations as part of its preparations in the Indo-Pacific region for war against China.

All of this goes hand in hand with deep inroads into democratic and legal rights under the pretext of the “war on terror” and the fanning of nationalist and militarist sentiment to condition the population, young people in particular, for new and more devastating wars.



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