

# Australia's Anzac Day: Revising history in preparation for new wars

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Amid the deluge of militarist propaganda in Australia surrounding the centenary “celebrations” of World War I, its ideological function in rewriting history and justifying Australian involvement in the imperialist war has become more explicit. Its political purpose is to condition public opinion for the new wars, already underway or being prepared, particularly in the Asia Pacific region against China.

This reactionary campaign is reaching a crescendo this week with the approach of Anzac Day on April 25—the anniversary of the landing of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps as part of the disastrous Anglo-French invasion of the Gallipoli peninsula in modern-day Turkey in 1915. The failed operation, which cost the lives of thousands of young men, has always been exploited as a touchstone of nationalism and military tradition, directed in particular against anti-war opposition—never more so than today.

During the mass opposition and protests against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, Anzac Day was widely reviled, particularly among young people. Its resurrection in the 1980s, especially by the Labor governments of prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating demanded the reinvention of World War I, not as a war for “King and Empire,” but one in which, despite all its horrors, the Australian nation and national identity were forged. Assiduously avoided was any reference to the real causes of the conflict in the breakdown of capitalism and imperialist rivalries for empire and colonies.

In a Remembrance Day speech on November 11 2013, Keating epitomised this outlook when he declared that World War I was “a war devoid of any virtue” that “arose from the quagmire of European tribalism—a complex interplay of nation-state destinies overlaid with notions of cultural superiority peppered with racism.” Australia, on the other hand, he declared, was a country “free of racial hatreds.” The “Anzac legend” reinforced “our own cultural notions of independence, mateship and ingenuity, of resilience and courage in adversity.”

The argument was full of historical absurdities and lies. The newly-established Australian nation state was founded on “White Australia” racism, and the Labor governments of Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes sent thousands to their deaths to maintain the global position of British imperialism and secure Australian colonial interests in the Pacific. Nevertheless, Keating came under fire, not for his historical distortions, but for his dismissal of World War I as “devoid of any virtue.”

A new ideological wind was blowing. As Australian imperialism

is integrated ever more closely into the US “pivot to Asia” and its war planning against China, the Australian political establishment is reviving and seeking to inculcate militarism and patriotism. It can no longer tolerate anything that would open avenues for widespread anti-war sentiment, including any questioning of martial traditions that have their roots in World War I.

The Murdoch media has been in the forefront of the new historical revisionism. An essay in the *Australian's* supplement “The Great War” last weekend by editor-at-large Paul Kelly is typical in insisting that Australia’s involvement in World War I was not only necessary, but morally justified. In reviving the patriotic nostrums and realpolitik of the first imperialist bloodbath, he is preparing the ideological ground for another global conflagration.

Kelly takes aim at “the contemporary myth about World War I, pervasive in the post-1960s cultural depictions of the war as a meaningless slaughter... that it was not Australia’s business and the wiser leaders would have stayed away.” The war, he declares, “was a struggle over who would rule Europe and that meant who would rule much of the world. Australia as an integral part of the British Empire, had critical national interests at stake.”

The title of Kelly’s essay “Born in blood” says a great deal. For the Australian ruling class, the slaughter of 62,000 soldiers was the necessary price to be paid for international recognition. In “a lost age” of empires and colonies, Kelly declares, “Australia was a young nation yet to prove itself in a world where baptism by blood was a nation ritual.” Australia won a seat at the Treaty of Versailles negotiations that divided up the spoils among the victors, and gained the former German colony of New Guinea.

In an oblique reference to the mass anti-war opposition during and after the war, Kelly acknowledges that World War I presents “a historical problem” as “the result—the unsustainable peace it wrought—was never seen to justify the sacrifice.” He declares, nevertheless, that it was a just war. “In truth, the war had a moral legitimacy—resistance to German aggression with the war fought mainly on the soil of France and Belgium,” he writes.

“German aggression” and the trampling of “little Belgium,” along with the defence of “democracy,” were the catch cries of British and Australian wartime propaganda. However, the real question is not who fired the first shot, but the character of the war. It arose from the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, between global economy and the outmoded nation state system. Britain and France were defending their colonial empires and the

exploitation of the colonial masses against a rising and dynamic German imperialism.

As for the defence of “democracy,” Britain and France were in alliance with the Russian autocracy, long regarded throughout Europe as the bastion of deepest reaction and oppression. In fact, the strategic aim of the Gallipoli campaign, for which so many young lives were sacrificed, was to come to the military assistance of the Tsarist regime—a fact, significantly, all but absent in the current lauding of the “sacrifice” of Anzac soldiers.

In the early months of the war, the Russian army suffered major reversals and defeats, with over a million troops killed, wounded, deserted or taken prisoner. Moreover, many Russian soldiers lacked basic arms and ammunition. According to one estimate, about a third of the 6.5 million soldiers in December 1914 had no rifle. On January 2, Grand Duke Nicholas, commander in chief of the Russian armies, appealed to Britain for assistance against the Ottoman army, which had launched an offensive in the Caucasus.

After a failed naval attempt in February 1915 to force a passage through the Dardanelles to the Black Sea, the seizure of the Gallipoli Peninsula was conceived, with the aim of capturing Constantinople to take the pressure off the Russian army and forge a route to Russian Black Sea ports in order to provide much-needed supplies. The nine-month land campaign that began on April 25 quickly reached a stalemate, in the face of fierce and determined Turkish resistance to the invading force, that cost the lives of 86,692 Turkish, 21,255 British and 9,829 French soldiers, as well as 8,709 Australian, 2,721 New Zealand and 1,358 Indian troops.

The predatory character of the broader war aims was graphically revealed in the secret treaties between Russia, Britain and France, made public by the Bolshevik government following the October 1917 Russian Revolution. Far from being a war for “freedom,” Russia’s claims, agreed to by Britain and France, included Constantinople, the Dardanelles and other Turkish territory so that the Tsarist dictatorship could realise its long-held ambition of a warm water port with access to the Mediterranean. In return, Russia recognised Britain’s and France’s demands for control over much of the rest of Europe.

As part of this Great Power rivalry, Australian imperialism had its own calculations and ambitions, which went further than the seizure of German colonial possessions in the South West Pacific. In his essay, Kelly is very open about the considerations that drove the Australian ruling classes, who feared a future challenge to their own economic and strategic interests in the Asia Pacific from Germany and Japan, and had a large stake in maintaining continued British predominance in the region.

Kelly writes: “For [Australian Prime Minister Billy] Hughes, the war was the epoch-making event that he had long feared. Obsessed with Australia’s geography ‘at the back door of the East,’ alarmed at the racial and military threat that Britain’s ally, Japan, posed to Australia, sure that the Pacific was an ocean of potential conflict, Hughes drew an unremitting conclusion: ‘If Britain were defeated Australia would be left merely to choose to whom it should surrender’.”

If Kelly raises these calculations, along with the lies and justifications for World War I, it is because similar considerations

animate the Australian ruling elites today. The outer trappings of what Kelly calls the “lost age” of empire might not be present, yet the same fundamental contradictions of capitalism that drove World War I are fuelling geo-political rivalry today amid the global economic breakdown since 2008.

Australian imperialism no longer relies on Britain to defend its interests, but has depended on the United States since the end of World War II. Replace “Germany” and “Japan” with “China” and “Russia,” and Kelly could be making an argument for Australian involvement in the current US military build-up and preparations for war against China and Russia—as indeed, the *Australian* newspaper does.

In his essay in the *Australian* supplement, historian Geoffrey Blainey, who like Kelly justifies World War I as a necessary war, draws the comparison that “Germany’s ascent was dramatic, rather like China’s today.” This false historical analogy is increasingly exploited to portray China as a new “aggressive” power and to justify US imperialism’s provocative actions in inflaming flashpoints throughout the region that threaten to trigger conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

Dredging up the old rationalisations for Australian involvement in World War I serves the same political purposes as the ideological campaigns underway in Germany and Japan to falsify and relativise the crimes of the Nazi regime and Japanese militarists during World War II. It is to inculcate militarism and glorify martial traditions in preparation for the “sacrifice” of millions of people in new and even bloodier conflagrations.

Absent from all these accounts is the widespread opposition in the working class that emerged in Australia and internationally against World War I and which reached its highest expression in the Russian Revolution in 1917. Fear of socialist revolution, not battlefield victories, finally forced a halt to the bloodbath in November 1918. In opposition to the tidal wave of militarist propaganda surrounding Anzac Day and the centenary of World War I, that is the critical lesson from 100 years ago that workers and young people must learn and act upon.



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