25 April: Animated documentary on New Zealand's role in the Gallipoli invasion

Sam Price, Tom Peters
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Directed by Leanne Pooley from a script by Pooley, Tim Woodhouse and Andrew Metcalfe

25 April is an 85-minute animated documentary, directed by Leanne Pooley, about New Zealand's involvement in the Allied powers' catastrophic attempt to seize the Gallipoli Peninsula in present-day Turkey during World War I.

The invasion began with the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps' (Anzacs) beach landing on 25 April 1915. Soldiers from Britain, France, India and Newfoundland were also involved. Their immediate objective was to seize the Dardanelles shipping lanes linking Russia to Western Europe and defeat the Ottoman Empire, a German ally.

Recorded deaths on all sides numbered 130,842, with a further 262,014 wounded. After eight months of mutual slaughter, the Allies evacuated. Following the defeat, many soldiers who participated in the invasion were sent to the Western Front, while a sizeable Allied force continued to fight in the Middle East. After the war the Ottoman Empire's territories were divided between Britain and France.

Pooley's *25 April* has been released amid a deluge of war propaganda linked to the World War I centenary including exhibitions, a new memorial park, television shows and books glorifying New Zealand's war effort. The purpose is to instil unquestioning respect for the military, especially in young people, to prepare them for the next war.

The world today closely resembles the build-up to war in 1914. A series of bloody interventions in the Middle East, NATO's threats against Russia, and increasingly reckless US provocations against China threaten to unleash a Third World War, even more barbaric than the last.

A documentary exposing the real character of New Zealand's role in WWI would be extremely timely. Pooley's animated feature, however, fails to deliver on this score. While avoiding the overt jingoism of other centenary productions, the film is guided by national-isolationist conceptions; it does not oppose the war itself or touch on its imperialist character. Its depiction of fighting at Gallipoli implies that New Zealand should have simply stood aside, or chosen a strategy more independent of Great Britain.

New Zealand soldiers are presented as victims of British commanders and Ottoman bullets, rather than of their *own* government and military that sent them to fight. This is why the NZ Film Commission, which funded the production, regards it as no threat to the official glorification of the Anzacs and promotion of militarism. It is currently preparing a lesson plan for schools based on the film.

The documentary has no narrator, but describes the Gallipoli campaign through the words of five New Zealand soldiers who participated in it—Thomas (H?mi) Grace, Edmund Bowler, George Tuck, John Persson and Ormond Burton—and Muriel Wakeford, an Australian nurse. Passages selected from their diaries and memoirs are related in animated "interviews," interspersed with scenes of battle and daily life at the front.

The interviews are life-like and relatively engaging, but in the battle scenes the soldiers' faces are like those of chiselled superheroes, with unchanging, grim expressions. The comic book style, designed to appeal to children, has a distancing effect which, whatever the film-makers' intentions, results in a sanitised picture of the fighting.

The film's underlying nationalist approach is spelled out most clearly by Lieutenant-Colonel Edmund Bowler. Bowler went to war, he says, believing he was "serving great men" and "prepared to die for King and country." After the months of carnage, he concludes: "Everything was so mismanaged; it was time to demand a colonial voice and a leader of our own."

Bowler's statements do not amount to an argument against the war. World War I would have been no less barbaric if New Zealand leaders had more authority, or if this or that campaign had been better "managed."

The worst aspect of *25 April* is its one-sided, almost exclusive focus on what the New Zealand and Australian forces endured, glorifying their bravery and sacrifice. It fails to convey the enormity of the Ottoman Empire's casualties: 86,692 deaths, compared with New Zealand's toll of 2,779. British deaths are also ignored.

Some sympathy is shown for the Ottoman troops, notably in the depiction of the 24-hour armistice, when both sides paused fighting to bury the dead. A New Zealand soldier shares a cigarette with a Turk and later refuses to shoot him when he has the chance. But this scene is an exception.

Some of the individual stories give a sense of the horrors of war and the despair felt by ordinary soldiers. They describe vividly the constant fear of being shot, the appalling army rations, the filth, disease and lice, and the waste of lives in battles such as the Nek and Chunuk Bair.

Muriel Wakeford explains that she defied Australian censors by writing letters home detailing the atrocious conditions and the lack of medical supplies. Some were published in a regional newspaper.

She remarks that "sometimes the suffering [of wounded soldiers] was so intense, death seemed like the best way out." At one point a soldier is shown deliberately walking into no-man's-land to commit suicide by being shot.

The inclusion of Ormond Burton is marred by what is left out. Burton says he joined the army because "the church backed the war and I wanted to do the Christian thing." A note at the end of the film states that after the war Burton became a pacifist, but does not go into detail.

What Burton actually wrote of the war was: "Victory had not brought a new world, and we saw in a flash of illumination that it never could. War is just waste and destruction, solving no problems but creating new and terrible ones." Such denunciations are excluded from *25 April*.

In 1936 Burton co-founded the Christian Pacifist Society of New Zealand. He was arrested for speaking and writing against World War II under anti-democratic laws passed by the Labour Party government, and spent more than two years in prison.

Perhaps the most poignant story in the film is that of John Persson who, after experiencing the fighting, strongly objects to his 17-year-old brother Martin's decision to enlist. John speaks of his powerlessness to protect Martin, who becomes the youngest New Zealander killed at Gallipoli. The film ends with John, wounded, returning home to his farm after refusing to go to the Western Front.

Despite such moving portrayals, the depiction of the Anzacs simply as victims of Britain serves to reinforce the Gallipoli myth: that the troops were national martyrs who died so that Australia and New Zealand could gain "national identity" and independence.

Speaking at an Anzac Day screening in Auckland, writer-director Leanne Pooley implied that New Zealand had naively followed Britain into the war: "[W]e went off to war without asking too many questions because we were part of a club ... Last year, around the anniversary of Gallipoli, we committed troops to go and join the fight with ISIS, and it struck me ... that once again, we were going off to war because we were in a club."

These comments cover up the fundamental nature of the First World War and New Zealand's involvement in it. The four-year slaughter—a conflict waged between the imperialist powers for the re-division of colonies and markets—was a manifestation of the break-down of the capitalist nation state system. The New Zealand ruling elite eagerly joined in, sacrificing 18,500 young lives, in order to share in the spoils of war.

New Zealand participated as a minor imperialist power, quickly seizing German Samoa in the South Pacific and after the war, along with Britain and Australia, took a share in the plunder of phosphates from Nauru. Today, New Zealand's capitalist class is an ally of US imperialism for the same reason it previously supported the British Empire: it relies on Washington to protect and advance its own neo-colonial interests.

Unfortunately, while it has definite positive features, Pooley's *25 April* fails to mention any of these most critical issues.

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