

New Zealand media, politicians ramp up war propaganda after soldier killed in Ukraine

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On August 24, the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) revealed that one of its soldiers had been killed in Ukraine, while on unpaid leave from the army.

Corporal Dominic Abelen, aged 28, was killed on the front lines in eastern Ukraine, while serving in the foreign legion, with personnel from around the world who have been recruited into the Ukrainian military to fight against Russia.

Abelen's death is a tragedy for his family and those who knew him. It adds to the tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians who have been killed on both sides. Abelen had been a professional soldier for 10 years and reportedly was previously deployed in Iraq, during New Zealand's contribution to the criminal US war and decades-long occupation of that country.

Over the past seven days, Abelen has been relentlessly glorified, with the undisguised aim of encouraging more young people to follow his example and risk their lives in support of imperialism. The population is being bombarded—by the media and various politicians and academics—with propaganda about the need to sacrifice to defend “freedom” and “democracy.” This is aimed at preparing public opinion to support far greater involvement in the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, which is evolving into a global conflagration.

The militaristic, patriotic tone was set by the Labour Party-led government. Asked in a press conference on August 25 whether he considered Abelen “a hero,” Defence Minister Peeni Henare replied: “I consider all of our NZDF personnel heroes.”

Wayne Mapp, defence minister in the previous National Party government from 2008-2011, joined in, telling Radio NZ that Abelen was a “hero” who “was defending freedom.” Ukraine's ambassador to New Zealand Vasyl Myroshnychenko told Radio NZ: “He died in action courageously defending human rights, defending freedom, defending democracy in Europe.”

The media's go-to “international relations expert,” Otago University professor Robert Patman, told the *Otago Daily Times* that Abelen's death was “a symbol of the determination to thwart the ambitions of an authoritarian regime.”

The corporate media is full of such statements, falsely portraying the NATO-backed war as the defense of “democratic Ukraine” and covering up the real history of the conflict. The war was deliberately planned and provoked by the US and European imperialist powers, which supported a coup in 2014, ousting an elected pro-Russian government, and then flooded the country with weapons. The coup prompted Russia to annex Crimea, and sparked a civil war in eastern, mainly Russian speaking provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk.

There is nothing remotely democratic about Ukraine's government, which has banned opposition parties, victimised Russian speakers and violently suppressed political opponents. Fascists from the Svoboda Party and Right Sector spearheaded the 2014 coup and remain prominent in the state apparatus. Neo-Nazi militias such as the Azov Battalion have been heavily armed, integrated into the armed forces, and are playing a major role in the war.

The invasion launched by Putin in February 2022 was a reactionary and disastrous response to NATO's military build-up in Ukraine and throughout Eastern Europe. Moscow's actions played directly into the hands of Washington and its allies, which are now doing everything possible to prolong and escalate the war in order to inflict a decisive defeat on Russia.

The US and NATO have zero concern for the Ukrainian people, who they are using as cannon fodder in the initial stages of this war. The aim of US imperialism is to resolve its severe economic breakdown by redividing the world and establishing its global hegemony, over the vast Eurasian landmass in particular, even if this means

starting a nuclear war with both Russia and China.

New Zealand's ruling class, as a minor imperialist power and ally of the US, has previously deployed hundreds of troops to join the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, and is determined to secure a seat at the table in the carve-up of Russia. While there are no NZ troops *officially* deployed in Ukraine, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government has sent more than 200 to train Ukrainian forces in Britain and to assist with coordinating supplies for Ukraine.

The NZDF's claim that it had no prior knowledge that Abelen was fighting in Ukraine is not credible, given the extent of its involvement in the war, including in intelligence operations. In April the NZDF deployed several intelligence personnel to Europe to assist in the war effort.

New Zealand is a member of the Five Eyes intelligence network, which includes the spy agencies of the US, Canada, Australia and the UK—all of which undoubtedly closely monitor travel to and from Ukraine. Thousands of mercenaries from these countries and elsewhere have joined Ukraine's armed forces, with governments making no attempt to stop them and, in some cases, encouraging them.

Sections of the New Zealand media were aware of Abelen's presence in Ukraine. Prominent broadcaster Tova O'Brien briefly interviewed him (under a pseudonym) about a week before his death. She described him in an August 18 *Stuff* article as "a fighter keen for the combat experience New Zealand's military wasn't able to give him, the adrenaline rush of being in contact with the enemy." Abelen used the interview to call for more NZ money for the Ukrainian military to buy weapons.

Radio NZ and *Newshub* have reported that about 100 New Zealanders have been in Ukraine fighting or otherwise assisting the war effort. On August 25, *Newshub* reporter Lisette Reymer said Abelen's death "has only strengthened their desire to get back to Ukraine, because it reiterated just what is at stake and how much there is yet to do."

Despite the Labour Party-led government's official discouragement of travel to Ukraine, one of the most prominent people who visited the war zone is Ron Mark, who was the defence minister from 2017 to 2020.

Mark, an ex-soldier and a leading member of the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First Party, has made four visits to Ukraine since May, saying that he delivered aid. Echoing Henare and Mapp, Mark told *Newshub* that Abelen would be remembered as "a fallen warrior." He

said: "Soldiers want to test themselves in an operational theatre, and I think he's done that."

On May 1, Mark suggested to TVNZ that New Zealand should send elite SAS troops to carry out "covert operations" inside Ukraine, similar to the secret training and support given by the US and UK to what became the Taliban in Afghanistan during the 1980s war against the Soviet Union.

"This is not something that countries should or would talk about [publicly], but I'd like to think that, behind the scenes, these conversations are being had," Mark said. Such statements suggest that New Zealand special forces may already be secretly involved in the war.

During Tova O'Brien's interview with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky in early August, the latter stated: "I have information from our soldiers that you have these high-level people and they already gave help and training missions on the territory of Baltic countries to our people." He said about 20 NZ SAS personnel were involved.

On August 18, Minister Henare denied that the SAS had been deployed, but told Today FM: "If they're requested, we've always made clear that the government will consider [it]."

The increasingly feverish warmongering from the government and media must be taken as a serious warning by the working class. The ruling elite is seeking to overcome deeply-held anti-war sentiments in order to integrate New Zealand into a developing Third World War. The stoking of nationalism and militarism is also intended to divert growing tensions at home over inequality and the soaring cost of living.

An anti-war movement must urgently be built, in opposition to all the parliamentary parties and their pseudo-left supporters, and based on the mobilisation of the international working class to put an end to capitalism. We urge workers and young people who agree with this perspective to contact us.



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