

# Why Australia

**"Politicians need the Anzac myth or they would never be able to convince soldiers to go to war."**

Tom O'Lincoln

**I**n the Great War commemoration we recall one of history's greatest crimes. Sixteen million dead and 20 million wounded. Such a grubby mix of murder and profit-hunger confronts us. In Rosa Luxemburg's words: dividends rise and proletarians fall.

Even conservative NSW Governor Sir Philip Game declared at the opening of a war memorial in 1930 that: "None of us can say that the world is better for the Great War."

So why did Tony Abbott travel as far as France to celebrate it? Just because his Liberal Party represents the rich? The most obvious reason came a few years back from the cynical lips of former Defence Minister Kim Beazley: "politicians need the Anzac myth or they would never be able to convince soldiers to go to war." The rulers of wartime Australia had another fear, well analysed by Archbishop Mannix:

"Within the past twelve months the well-paid had their salaries increased, while poor working men had been turned out idle in hundreds. What wonder if idle starving men find themselves driven to socialism."

They need the Kokoda myth, too. Kokoda seems to carry conviction for those who don't buy Anzac; and they can even find a purpose for a relic like Coral Sea Week – which can still be used to promote the

US alliance. But Anzac Day gets massive official support. Last time I had a look at the Melbourne procession, it seemed as if every marching band in the state was marching. But what did a war in Europe have to do with Australia?

When one western government after another declared its participation in World War I, Australia was part of an obscene rush. Unlike Britain, Australia experienced relatively little opposition to conscription at first. This passivity seems to show Canberra's total subservience to Britain. If so it would be a damning accusation, and Australian foreign affairs thinkers are under some pressure to disprove it. *The Australian's* Greg Sheridan made the effort back in 2002. ["Reasons beyond solidarity", 18 July 2002.]

Sheridan actually thinks the war was important for building a better world. "It was vital that German militarism not be allowed to triumph over British and French democracies and the global order they represented," wrote Sheridan. References to "German militarism" appeal to his readership's prejudices from World War II, but this is nonsense. In 1914 the Prussian elites had a militarist streak, but they could claim a certain enlightenment derived from Frederick the Great. Most importantly, the German working class was potentially a vast force against war.

British historian Max Hastings is often cited as an authority, claiming the allies were morally superior. But his argument in *Catastrophe 1914* is far from convincing. Berlin's territorial demands were over the top, he says. Well sure they were, but whose empire was it on which the sun never set? The Allies were "clumsy" at Versailles, he concedes. But had Germany won, he continues, "European freedom, justice and democracy would have paid a dreadful forfeit". He's smart enough to confine himself to "European" justice, freedom and democracy, being aware like you and I that the Europeans gave none of these to their hundreds of millions of colonial subjects. Even then it's a rash statement to say the least: was Britain's ally tsarist Russia a model of democracy?

German militarism's 1914 version was repulsive, but if you'd gone with me to the site of the British-conducted 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, India, you'd doubt whether British global rule was any better. When a crowd gathered to protest against the arrest of two local community leaders, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer gave the order and the army fired on the crowd for ten minutes, firing largely towards the few open gates through which people were trying to run. Dyer became a



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hero to a few old blimps of the Raj; but the massacre horrified all of India.

So much for the progressive British global order. But we still haven't decided why Australia joined the war. Fortunately, Greg Sheridan carries cats in his bag, and in the run-up to the last Gulf war, he let one or two of them out. For Australia's rulers, the Great War wasn't primarily about bailing out the British at Gallipoli or Pozières. Rather, as he points out, "we dealt with Germany's Pacific colonies...before we dispatched troops to Britain." Canberra's first goal was grabbing territory and projecting power in its own sphere of influence.

That wasn't just about thwarting the Germans, whose positions in the Pacific were indefensible anyway. It was most of all about securing a strategic position against the Japanese. In World War I Japan was an ally, but that didn't stop Prime Minister Billy Hughes from plotting against them.

And when it came to local conquest, democracy and human rights counted for little.

True, the platitudes were there, even if confused. Australian Senator Mathew Reid declared grandly that Australia must treat

Pacific peoples "like grown-up children".

There was more to imperial rule than condescension, however. In the pre-war years, reforming German administrators had made some advances in the condition of local peoples in the pre-war years. But human rights seem to have gone backwards once the Australians took over. Pacific historian Derryck Scarr records that the "often callow Australian servicemen who ruled the former German New Guinea from 1914-1921 were able to flog freely, just as their own concept of military justice allowed them to shoot pretty much at random when whites were killed by New Guineans". After 1921 the administration kept taking a "permissive view" towards punishment and was freer with hangings than the administrators in Papua.

In addition to grabbing territory, Australia needed to put in a juggernaut performance on the battlefield to make sure it had sufficient clout to confront Japan at the 1919 Paris conference. This was the macabre logic behind the intensive Australian war effort. Reminded at Paris that he spoke

for only five million Australians, Hughes shot back: "I represent sixty thousand war dead". (US war dead were far fewer per head.) Once having hurled enough meat at the meat grinder, Australia had the prestige among the delegates to belligerently oppose anti-racist arguments from the Japanese. These were more than ideology. Australia wanted to be allowed to run its new Pacific territories (technically, League of Nations mandates) on a legal basis consistent with White Australia. Japan was exposing this racist logic.

The Japanese were furious at Hughes; in revenge they threatened to undermine US President Wilson's League of Nations project. But there was a way to mollify them. Wilson agreed to Japanese control of German-held territories on China's Shantung Peninsula. Here was a step deeper into conflicts that would scar much of the 20th century.

For most people the carnage of the war was a tragic waste. Hughes made the toll of

PHOTO: Australian troops on the attack during the Gallipoli campaign in 1915 (Source: British Official/Corbis).





PHOTO: Labor's most notorious "rat", Prime Minister William (Billy) Hughes addresses Australian troops in France (Source: Museum of Australian Democracy).

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fallen "diggers" into bargaining chips, to be cashed at Paris for colonies when the time came.

**Rationale for war**

Imperialists like to portray themselves defensively. Australian is no exception. They act like bullies; and Australia is likewise no exception. The underlying logic of Australia's military posture was spelt out by three quite different participants, two of them in 1913 – a year before war started.

1. In August 1913, just one year from the outbreak of war, General Joseph Gordon circulated a General Scheme of Defence for Australia.

Like most such schemas in this country, it had little to do with defending ordinary people. According to historian Douglas Newton, it incorporated plans to support the British empire, balanced by "a shopping list of potential colonial conquests" in the Asia-Pacific. The targets would be seized not only from the Germans but also from the French and the Dutch, at the risk of possible "occupation of hostile bases" – in other words by force. It was near enough to a plan for war.

2. Fast-forward a century later as commemorations began for the Great War: an Australian military think tank announced the Australian military army

had "begun planning for high-tech combat in Asia's megacities". Operating in high-density terrains will "no longer be a discretionary activity". Get ready for urban warfare.

3. Returning to 1913, one type of nationalism was bound to intensify with the coming of war. Having built a nation by dispossessing indigenous peoples, many white Australians feared someone might dispossess them in turn. Once again the "defensive" posture. Speaking at the 1913 laying of the foundation stone for Canberra as national capital, Billy Hughes offered a blunt commentary on this settler imperialism.

British and American colonists had always prospered in new lands, said Hughes, because they had "killed everybody" to do so. This was shown by the fact that they were holding such a foundation ceremony without any Aborigines attending. However white people shouldn't be too complacent about this ability to banish other races from the earth; rather they should watch out lest whites also disappear in time. "We must take steps to safeguard that foothold we now have," said Hughes. This was his rationale for war.

When asked on TV to explain the wonders of war, children commonly say the diggers fought for "freedom". But this

is plainly idiotic when applied to, say Australia's invasion of Turkey, so the clichés move quickly on to the Diggers' heroics. Didn't Aussie troops fight superhumanly at Gallipoli and only lose because the British officers were venal fools? Not really. It was an unwinnable battle, against a fiercely determined enemy on difficult terrain.

In Europe didn't our heroic diggers break through the Hindenburg Line – a fearsome series of German fortified positions? Yes, but actually the allies made similar break-throughs at other points. A major factor was explosive gas shells that hadn't been available a year or two earlier.

Then there is the incipient racist idea that Aussies are just naturally better soldiers – we all learnt to shoot in the bush, you see. I heard someone on TV during the Football World Cup declare that "the Dutch are scared of us because we're Anzacs".

In itself this foolishness might seem not to matter much. What matters is how the myths become so tenacious, so hard to get rid of, that a recent book about them is called *Zombie Myths*. The contributors despair of ever killing them off. From glamourising the Australian Imperial Force specifically, the ideology factory has moved on to cultivation of an eternal mythology about the "Anzac Spirit", suitable for promoting each imperialist war that comes along.

During the Iraq invasion there was talk of "endless war". For this, it seems our rulers need never-ending myth.