

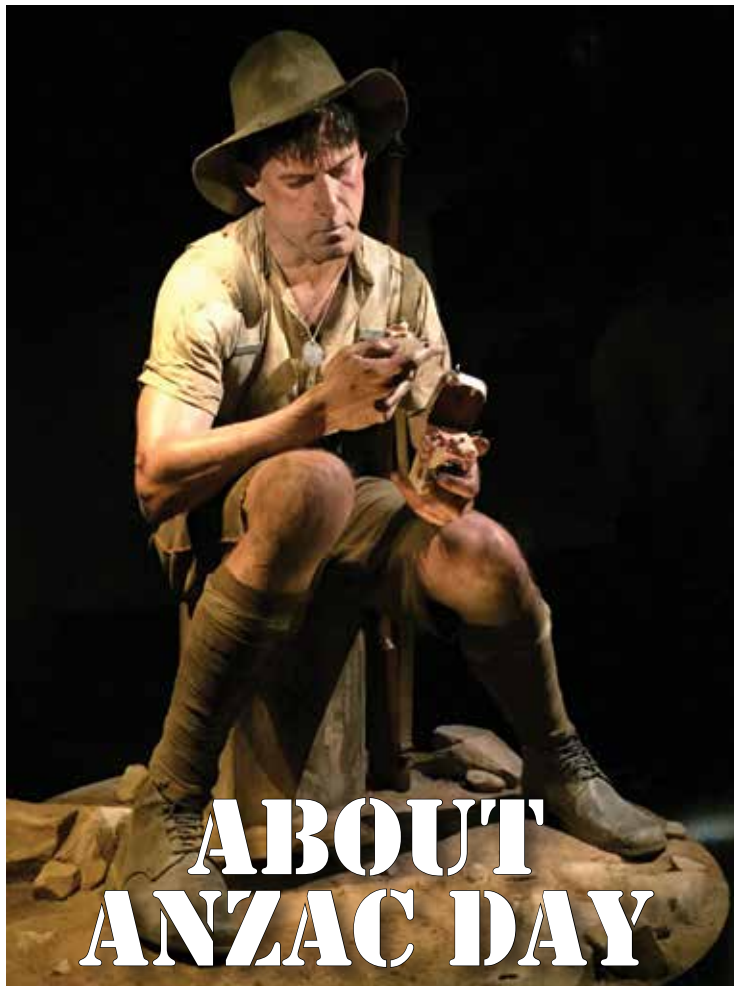
I think we need to rethink what we celebrate on Anzac Day. The signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 ending WWI, was when the victorious allies Britain and France, as French Premier Clemenceau put it: “squeezed Germany till the pips squeaked”. That policy was to come back and bite France in the bum as a humiliated Germany fell to the Nazis’ resurgent and aggressive nationalistic ambitions, a resurgence that was fuelled by Versailles.

Now, 100 years on, it’s worth reflecting on the meaning and significance of that “War to end all Wars”, a war remembered primarily around Anzac Day.

Over recent years that remembrance has motivated secondary school students to write about what Anzac means to them. Quite often the comments read like: “We remember our great uncles and grandfathers whose ultimate sacrifice meant the preservation of liberty and democracy in this land of ours.” Or: “We are free because of their fighting.”

This Anzac Day I appeal for a reconsideration of these sentiments and think on the following questions. In what way did the Allies’ victory in WWI make the colonised millions in Africa, India or elsewhere throughout the British, French and Belgian empires any freer than before the war’s outbreak? How did the torture carried out on notable conscientious objectors like Archibald Baxter, as shown in the film *Field Punishment No. 1*, display “our” democratic and freedom-loving values?

In reality, WWI represented



nothing less than a conflict between Imperial powers bent on global domination, whether they were British, German, Austro-Hungarian or Russian. Even “poor little Belgium”, whose defence was yet another justification for the slaughter, ran a brutal colonial regime in the Congo under which hundreds of thousands died. The British, Dutch and Germans along with other European powers were all either scrambling for more colonies or endeavouring to hold on to their existing ones.

Millions of men, mostly workers and peasants in uniform, were sacrificed in an obscene slaughter that had nothing to do with freedom or democracy but a lot to do with naked imperial ambition and patriotism.

On 25 April 1915, at the request of “Mother” England, New Zealanders and our Australian cousins embarked on Churchill’s foolhardy gamble to take the Turkish peninsular of Gallipoli. It was a failed enterprise that led to the mutual mauling and slaughter of Anzac, British and Turkish

troops, and also stained Churchill’s reputation for many years after.

Nevertheless, Anzac Day is remembered solemnly in New Zealand in both civic and religious rituals, honouring the brave sacrifice of those who lost their lives in such brutal fashion in the “cause of freedom”. The refrain is: “Lest we forget”. Yet there are myths around Anzac Day we *ought* to forget and put behind us in favour of a more honest evaluation of the invasion of Turkey. Renouncing the motivation for the obscene and futile conflict is not to dishonour those involved who undoubtedly committed acts of heroism and kindness. But we need to recognise that they were fighting under false pretences.

Recently, while attending the Gallipoli exhibition *The Scale Of Our War* at Te Papa Museum, I was gratified to hear a mother explaining to her children that “we” were invading “their” land. That is the kind of honesty I am referring to.

I’m not arguing for Anzac Day to become a symbol for opposition to war in general. Inevitably I think some armed conflicts are necessary, where one side is intractable and not amenable to negotiated peace settlements. For instance, Yugoslav partisans fighting the fascists of Croatia and Germany, or the Viet Cong fighting French then American imperialism from the 1950s onwards. In those conflicts there *were* sides to take in causes that were just and honourable. In WWI there were no sides with a just and honourable cause. If we cannot admit this, can we on Anzac Day at least resist perpetuating the propaganda that it was a war to defend our “freedom and democracy”? 🙌

Photo from *Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War* Exhibition Te Papa Museum Wellington

**Mike Gourley** lives in Wellington, where he was a broadcaster and educator. He worships with the Wellington parish of St Thomas’s in Newtown.

