



5-25-2015

Memory on Parade: The Gallipoli Centenary and Anzac Day Commemoration

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Lavery, Kevin P., "Memory on Parade: The Gallipoli Centenary and Anzac Day Commemoration" (2015). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 98.

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Abstract

On April 25, 2015, record crowds were drawn from across Australia and New Zealand to the annual Anzac Day celebrations. This year's commemoration was extra special, for it marked the one hundredth anniversary of the First World War's Gallipoli campaign. Several of my primary news sources reported heavily on the festivities and it all got me thinking again about how people rally around these patriotic, semi-historical holidays even if the holidays are often distorted reflections of the historic events that they are meant to commemorate [*excerpt*].

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, The Gallipoli Centenary, The Anzac Day Commemoration

Disciplines

European History | History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Memory on Parade: The Gallipoli Centenary and Anzac Day Commemoration

May 25, 2015

By Kevin Lavery '16

On April 25, 2015, record crowds were drawn from across Australia and New Zealand to the annual Anzac Day celebrations. This year's commemoration was extra special, for it marked the one hundredth anniversary of the First World War's Gallipoli campaign. Several of my primary news sources reported heavily on the festivities and it all got me thinking again about how people rally around these patriotic, semi-historical holidays even if the holidays are often distorted reflections of the historic events that they are meant to commemorate.

The United States does not have a perfect parallel to Anzac Day, but the way in which our own national identity is constructed around certain annual holidays like Memorial Day and the Fourth of July—and around certain locations such as Gettysburg and Washington, DC—does present us with some loose parallels that we can work with to discuss some of the issues at play. I realize that comparisons can be problematic tools when dealing with history, but I also think that understanding such commemorations as a global phenomenon is essential to recognizing the scale and spread of the issues involved.

In the century since the landings on an Ottoman peninsula in the Mediterranean, Gallipoli has come to exert an almost mythical hold over the public consciousness of Australia and New Zealand. At a ceremony last month in Turkey to honor the men of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC), New Zealand Prime Minister John Key declared that “to us Gallipoli is a byword for the best character of Australians and New Zealanders, especially when they work side by side in the face of adversity.”

Some historians, however, have commented on the thin veneer of history that swaddles this national myth. Coincidentally, the centenary of Gallipoli coincided with my reading of David Reynolds's *The Long Shadow: The Legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century* for Dr. Isherwood's new class on the First World War (If you're interested, [click here to check out his class blog](#)). Reynolds addresses the historic significance of Anzac Day in Australia, explaining that Gallipoli had not always been seen as a critical moment of nation building by the majority of the population; rather, it was only after Britain's pivot toward Europe and away from its empire that Australia began to trace a distinct national identity back to Gallipoli. In spite of this, today it seems that Anzac Day is taken for granted as a day to celebrate Australian heritage, instead of as the chosen result of a search for what that heritage should look like.



Anzac Day originated just after the First World War's end, but at the time it was an event that linked Australia and New Zealand to the greater British Empire, writes Reynolds. This photo was taken at an Anzac Day March in Glen Innes, New South Wales, ca. 1919. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, via Wikimedia Commons.

It's also notable that Prime Minister Key paid tribute to both the Allies and the Turks for fighting for what they believed to be the right thing, explaining that "both sides conducted themselves with courage and bravery." That sounds strange, doesn't it? That nations that fought each other so savagely could come together in mutual remembrance of the dead? We don't exactly honor Nazi soldiers for putting up a good fight. But we do, however, come to places like Gettysburg to honor the soldiers of both the Union and the Confederacy, even though they fought and killed each other over irreconcilable ideas. It might be a strange mode of remembrance, then, but it's hardly unheard of.

But there are those seeking a still more inclusive interpretation of Anzac Day. Right now, argues historian Marilyn Lake, the Anzac legend is centered on the experience of the Australian soldier, downplaying the war's "multiple stories," such as those of women, Australian Turks, and Indigenous Australians. That's not an unfamiliar issue to those of us interested in American history, a field which has to constantly strive to broaden itself to be more inclusive. Of course, the issue of inclusivity goes far beyond just acknowledging the stories of different Oceanic sub-groups—the dominant Gallipoli narrative also tends to downplay the involvement of other parties, such as English and Irish soldiers, who fought alongside their Pacific counterparts. As nice as it feels to

celebrate one's nationality on such holidays, patriotic chest-thumping can too easily be the bane of a historically valid understanding of an occasion.

Moreover, a lot of money has become tied up in the commemoration of Gallipoli. Australian army veteran James Brown has called Anzac Day a "military Halloween," observing that Australia will spend more in the next four years to commemorate the Great War than it will spend on medical care for modern day veterans suffering from mental illness. Both America and Australia believe in the importance of honoring the dead, but are both countries perhaps guilty of buying so much into that idea that they sometimes ignore the needs of the living?

Recently, corporations in Australia have come under fire for what was deemed to be an excessive attempt to profiteer from a hallowed day. Target stores apparently had plans to sell Anzac Day merchandise such as hats and clothing until "the government deemed them inappropriate." Even though I've been known to rage against kitschy Gettysburg memorabilia, I'm not convinced that this is an appropriate place for the government to intervene. On the other hand, I don't think that a holiday of remembrance is an appropriate time for corporations to cash in on the memory of fallen soldiers. Then again, I hardly blame them for doing so when there is such a big market for those trinkets. Consumers and producers are both responsible when commemoration is transformed into a massive commercial monster at the expense of a serious day of remembrance that could be leveraged to expand the public's historical consciousness.



Today, Anzac Day parades are huge patriotic gatherings honoring national heritage and military service, even though the event that they commemorate is a lot more complicated than the festivities imply. The above image is from the 2015 Anzac Day march in Wagga Wagga, Australia. Courtesy of Bidgee, via Wikimedia Commons.

There are a lot of myths out there masquerading as history and some of them, such as the Anzac Day myth, have more significant legacies than the events that they have obscured. It only gets worse when they get wrapped up in the financial interests of corporations and tied up in the chest-thumping patriotism of a national holiday. Just because that's the way things are, though, doesn't mean that we should simply accept such myths at their shallow face value and imagine that they are all that we can ever hope to collectively understand about a historic moment. To blindly accept the myths of history is a bigger insult to the memory of the men who fell at Gallipoli and at Gettysburg than to acknowledge the complexities of the story.

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