Disrupting the Narrative

challenging ideas about New Zealand in World War 1
Produced by
the Art Not War Collective & Auckland Peace Action

Anti-copyright 2017
May not be reproduced for the purposes of profit.
Enquires: aucklandpeaceaction@gmail.com
This zine evolved out of the desire to challenge the State’s representation of New Zealand’s involvement in World War 1, and the uses to which that representation is directed. Over the past decade in particular, there has been a concerted effort by the State to cement some enduring myths and ideas about the war that advance a patriotic, racist, capitalistic, patriarchal, neo-colonial agenda of perpetual war. The most salient and enduring myth concerns the birth of New Zealand identity in the First World War, as typified by this from New Zealand History Net:

‘Being so far from home made these New Zealanders very aware of who they were and where they were from. In battle they were able to compare themselves with men from other nations. Out of this, many have argued, came a sense of a separate identity, and many New Zealand soldiers began to refer to themselves as “Kiwis.”

A popular and enduring view of the significance of the war on New Zealand society was summed up by a man who participated in it from Gallipoli to France. Ormond Burton went from being a stretcher-bearer at Anzac Cove to a highly decorated infantryman on the Western Front. He believed that 'somewhere between the landing at Anzac and the end of the battle of the Somme, New Zealand very definitely became a nation.'

The idea that a distinctive ‘New Zealand identity’ was born through involvement in World War 1 conveniently ignores the reality of the
Civilisation: 1914, Unmasked.

The face seemed fair beneath thy veiled veil,
Oh, Civilization! Though half-veiled men
Were startled at by echoes, which, now and then,
Shattered the night like a voice from far away.
Of voices, in their hour of all-seeing, three, which echoed again
Through war's tired maw (what else, but life?)
To send their notes to earth—not audible when.
The bread and length of life for them should fail.
Ah, happy they whose life's dear days were told
In waters only, trust and lores unsure—
Now ruthless men, with environment's side.
Their bid, the steep, did to the industrial tide,
Sleep-like in death—with craft and cunning love,
And base their breed and truth, in Pluto's desire.

But now the mask is fallen from thy face,
Men know thee for the evil thing thou art,
Hated and fled even wringing from thy heart.
And the dead sea roars, and the dead sea bares
Those eyes and ears of the earth, to man;
When once and evermore from thy mortal sea—
Great, Guild, and God, thy Purse God-come earth—
Which Make-shall would moist the populace.

Now on thy hand Humanity, in wrath,
Will hurl thy wrongs of thine on thousand years,
And, at the dolomite, none shall show thee pain.
The flood now sweeps—seek Art Providence's path,
The deep new hate—sad but have all their fame,
The Lamb now speaks—and all men honor Truth!
‘founding’ of New Zealand. The struggles over land and resources that occurred in the 70+ years prior to the war are erased. The assertion that New Zealand only became a ‘nation’ somewhere between the beaches of Gallipoli and the Western Front ignores the brutal and cataclysmic experiences of all of the people whose lives were shaped by the arrival and subsequent domination of the British Crown, relegating them to a status of lesser importance, one that has no ‘formative’ impact on our identity as ‘New Zealanders’. During the time between the arrival of the Crown and World War 1, a million and a half people had immigrated to New Zealand from all around the world, and Māori went from being the overwhelming numerical majority to being a dispossessed and disenfranchised minority.

Just as many of us can trace a familial link back to World War 1, we could equally well trace a link back to the horrors of colonisation: as coloniser, as colonised or as both. Yet the creation of a national identity that remembers colonisation is not useful for the State and those in power; it reflects a much more complex and ambiguous history that contains a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the current social, political and economic order of life in New Zealand.

We are taught to believe that being a New Zealander means something in particular. It means that we are supposed to have something in common—we all wear gumboots, or believe in the equality of women, or love the All Blacks, or eat pavlova or have a grandfather who was in the war. Yet, when we deconstruct the idea of national identity, we discover that there isn’t much common ground. National identity is something that is constructed by constantly deploying stereotypes and generalisations to erase differences in race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, experience or beliefs that divide us. It is constructed to strengthen the belief in the legitimacy of the State and to serve the interests of other powerful actors in society. The development, and more importantly, the embrace, of a cohesive and proud national identity based on an imagined, glorified collective experience of war is important for those in power because it can secure our consent to wage future wars that are fundamentally contrary to our interests: to send our children to fight and die, to sacrifice our rights and fundamental freedoms, and to divert public resources to
war rather than to education, health, welfare or eliminating inequality.

The corollary to the ‘national identity’ mythology is the enduring view of the New Zealand state as a relatively benign actor swept up in a war over which it had no control, but one that was, nevertheless, still worth fighting. In his 2009 Anzac day speech, Prime Minister John Key said that, ‘we remember those men and women who put their lives on the line for our country, and who fought for a better world ... to preserve our freedom and humanitarian ideals.’

It is absurd to describe New Zealand’s actions during World War 1 in brutally occupying Samoa, stealing the resources of Nauru, instituting conscription, imprisoning people based on their ethnicity, committing war crimes and depriving people of their rights as ‘preserving freedoms and humanitarian ideals.’ However, such rhetoric is essential to maintaining the State’s position as not just benign, but as positive. Such historical myth-making serves as a weapon of the powerful as a modern tool of oppression: in 2014, the prime minister claimed that the country was ‘peacefully settled,’
thereby erasing the State’s brutal colonialism of the past in order that the State’s brutal colonialism in the present can continue.

Moreover, statements that attempt to universalise some benefit from the war, such as the Prime Minister’s statement that they ‘fought for each and every one of us’ or Helen Clark’s suggestion that we are all really like soldiers, and that:

‘Characteristics which became central to how we identify ourselves as New Zealanders were forged during this conflict: mateship, unity, courage, self-sacrifice, loyalty and egalitarianism.’

conveniently gloss over other attributes of that ‘New Zealand identity’: racist, imperialist, with a patriarchal attitude towards women, and a code of silence operating among fellow soldiers. Atrocities committed by New Zealand soldiers in the war—brutalising Chinese indentured servants in Samoa, repeated rioting in Egypt, the murder of Palestinian men in the village of Surafend—are rarely, if ever acknowledged,
and if they are, it is as if they were aberrations in an otherwise good, proper, gentlemanly war. This white-washed military history accords with a well-cultivated modern image of the New Zealand military as a ‘peacekeeper,’ despite multiple SAS war crimes in Afghanistan (in 2002 & 2010), and service as part of the US-occupation in Iraq in 2003.

One of the most potent current myths about World War 1 is that Anzac Day is strictly a commemoration of the dead, without a political agenda. Activists who have sought to use Anzac Day to discuss contemporary involvement in war have been attacked by both the political right and left. Yet the State routinely deploys Anzac Day to cloak modern war-making with the honour, courage and duty assigned
to long-ago wars. In order to provide political cover for the current deployment of New Zealand troops to a deeply unpopular war in Iraq and Syria, the Prime Minister invoked the Anzac centenary. When asked ‘Why badge them as Anzacs?’ he responded that it was a symbolic gesture to mark the centenary of the Gallipoli landings. Lest We Forget.

Yet as Alan Bennett wrote, ‘It’s not “lest we forget”, it’s “lest we remember”. That’s what all this is about – the memorials, the Cenotaph, the two minutes’ silence. Because there is no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.¹⁵ The ‘Lest We Forget’ slogan is not intended to encourage us question to why people died in World War 1, nor to ask who benefited from their deaths, nor even to resolve to never wage war again. Instead, it is apparently intended only to be understood as the simplistic idea that we shouldn’t forget that the war dead existed.

Repeatedly, we are told the names of the heroic battles of World War 1—Gallipoli, the Somme, Passchendaele — but we are not encouraged to contemplate some of the outcomes of the war — the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Balfour Declaration or the Treaty of Versailles — on our contemporary political and economic landscape.

The cynical deployment of patriotic mythology by the New Zealand state has reached a fevered pitch. But in an ironic twist, such enthusiastic flag-waving also has the effect of heightening the critique of militarism and the uses of history. This zine is dedicated to that purpose. Needless to say, in the time and space we have for this, we cannot possibly be comprehensive nor can we do justice to all of the stories, issues and ideas that need addressing.

Nevertheless, we want to connect the issues and events together: that war and this war; 20th century imperialism and 21st century imperialism; the settler colonialism and racism that is still alive and well today, along with the class war and the patriarchy. Resistance is also still alive and well; that’s a big part of the story, not just as history, but as contemporary, living reality. We not only want to respond to this State mythology with rationality and facts, but also with creativity, because art can free us to understand things in new and different ways. It can produce unexpected conversations and responses. Art can challenge rigidly held beliefs and in those challenges is the possibility of change.

It is because of the enduring power of these myths - the power
to make people kill and be killed - that we are seeking to disrupt and ultimately to completely delegitimise them. As historian Howard Zinn wrote, “We must not accept the memory of states as our own. Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as a history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest between conquerors and conquered, between masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people not to be on the side of the executioners.”

Ngā mihi nui,

The Art Not War Collective
Auckland Peace Action

[3] ibid
“our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.”

Lieutenant General Frederick Stanley Maude to the people of Baghdad, 19 March 1917

“from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact be greeted as liberators”

US Vice President Dick Cheney 16 March 2003