Nationalism and the First World War Centenary: Post 28

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Steve Marti of the University of Delaware brings H-Nationalism another monthly update on nationalism and the commemoration of the First World War. Please feel free to respond to this post. Interested in contributing to this series? Drop Steve a line at steve.marti.25@gmail.com.

Australian commemorations of the First World War feature prominently in this series, and the annual observance of Anzac Day on 25 April brought a deluge of material for those who study the relationship between nationalism and the commemoration of the First World War. A tweet published by Australian Broadcasting Corporation host Yassmin Abdel-Magied sparked furor among Australian commentators. On the morning of Anzac Day, Abdel-Magied posted a short message stating: "LEST. WE. FORGET. (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine ...)". The most outraged responses to Abdel-Magied remain behind the Australian’s paywall, but the Guardian’s Rick Ackland summarises these reactions in an essay that places them in a longer tradition of suppressing anyone who contests nationalist narratives of Anzac Day. The Guardian’s satirical comic strip “First Dog on the Moon” delivered a more humorous assessment of the outrage. The ABC’s Stan Grant reflected more broadly on the contradiction of curating a selective national memory in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. The Sydney Morning Herald’s Amanda Vanstone argues that Abdel-Magied brought the attacks on herself by posting the tweet. Jane Gilmour, writing for the same paper, points out that Abdel-Magied’s post attracted a far greater negative response than more provocative social media posts written by other prominent leftist commentators, arguing that racism drove much of the vitriol. Gilmour’s argument seems equally applicable to the experience of Anne Aly, the first Muslim woman elected to Australia’s Federal Parliament. Aly received a litany of attacks on social media after Kim Vuga, the openly Islamophobic founder of the Love Australia or Leave Party, accused Aly of refusing to lay a wreath at the Anzac Day ceremony in Perth. Vuga apologized when Aly explained that she had laid a wreath and made a speech at the Anzac Day ceremony in Ballajura.

Two well-timed essays appeared in anticipation of Anzac Day controversy. Deakin University’s Carolyn Holbrook wrote an essay explaining how Anzac Day became a sacred occasion in Australia, while The Sydney Morning Herald’s Damien Murphy recounts the enactment of legal protections on uses of the word Anzac in Australia. Despite these protections, events promoters continue to use Anzac Day to drum up business. The Guardian’s Russell Jackson wrote about the Australian Football League’s continuing tradition of organizing high-grossing Anzac Day matches, while pointing out how the rhetoric of organizers, coaches, and players often liken the sport to war. A Darwin nightclub cancelled its...
Anzac Day Beach Party and Wet T-Shirt Contest after receiving complaints from the public. The *New Daily*’s Alana Mitchelson tallies up Anzac Day-themed events organized by bars and nightclubs in Sydney, Perth, and Bendigo.

Anger and outrage aside, commentators also reflected on the international impact of Anzac Day. The *University of Sydney*’s Mark McKenna examines Anzac Day’s role in subverting the Australian republican movement by celebrating Australia’s wartime allegiance to Britain. The *University of South Australia*’s Brad West and *Istanbul Bilgi University*’s Ayhan Aktar co-authored an essay examining the impact of Turkey’s recent referendum on presidential powers and how that might affect Australian commemorations of Gallipoli. The *University of New South Wales*’ Tom Sear published an essay arguing that the role of social media in Australian observances of Anzac Day may serve as an example for state commemorations in China.

New Zealanders likewise observed Anzac Day and experienced their own disputes over the day’s meaning. Members of Peace Action Wellington attended the national Anzac Day ceremonies in Wellington, carrying a banner that read “Lest We Remember: No NZ support for war,” and laying a wreath at the national cenotaph honouring civilians killed in Afghanistan. Their actions gained national attention when a twelve year old boy interrupted a news reporter’s interview with one of the group’s members. The boy’s comments drew praise from the *president of New Zealand’s Returned and Services’ Association*, who argued that Anzac Day should be reserved for remembering soldiers, not civilians. *Radio Live*’s Alison Mau wrote an editorial for the *Sunday Times* supporting the renewed public participation in Anzac Day services, but warning against the repercussions of silencing those who use the occasion to protest. *Newsroom*’s Sam Sachdeva commented that the tightening of immigration restrictions against New Zealanders living in Australia “soured” the spirit of Anzac Day.

While divisive rhetoric abound in Oceania, Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade issued a joint statement with the United Kingdom’s Northern Ireland Offices to announce a joint UK-Ireland commemorative service for the centenary of the Battle of Messines in June 2017. The 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) Divisions fought alongside one another during the Battle of Messines, providing the rationale for the joint commemorative service.