Anarchist Affinity
The Politics of War Graves
November 10, 2014

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The way in which the dead are remembered is a political act – the commemoration of war is never neutral. Australia has commenced an orgy of official remembrance; the ANZAC commemoration industry is expected to consume the larger part of a billion dollars of public and private money over the next two years[1]. The reformist left is already bemoaning the crass commercialism of it all, and the more critical amongst them point out that ANZAC and Gallipoli were mere side shows to the "countless white crosses" that in "mute witness stand" in the muddy fields of Belgium and France[2]. But there is no such thing as an apolitical commemoration. The endless white crosses served their imperial masters in the aftermath of four

[1] See James Brown in The Monthly, February 2014. Tens of millions of dollars are planned for new museums, centres and exhibits; $10 million of federal money is being spent on a single day's commemoration in Turkey; $125,000 has been assigned to each federal electorate for "community activities" focused on the war; an events company in Melbourne has pocketed $27 million to coordinate events "on the day" in 2015; and private tour operators are offering everything from re-enactments of landings in small boats to a jet ski race through the Dardanelle straits.

[2] Plagiarising Eric Bogle, No Man's Land, 1976

years of slaughter, just as the ANZAC industry serves the Australian state today.

Mass slaughter shakes a society to its core. This can (and should) undermine the legitimacy and control of the ruling class that unleashes it. In May 1917 the British government established the Imperial War Graves Commission. This was a response to the unprecedented scale of slaughter, a slaughter wrought across the British working class; and across the colonies and dominions of the British Empire. 1917 had already seen revolution in Russia and mutiny in France[3]; it was clear to the British ruling class that slaughter could shake the legitimacy of the class at home the image of unassailable power that the Empire depended on abroad. In wars past, a powerful leader or heroic figure might be remembered with an official statue, patriotic poem or day of mourning. But the scale of death in the First World War required a more comprehensive response, steps had to be taken to control and subvert the process of mourning that might all fall too easily morph into recrimination against and indictment of the rulers who had caused it. The Imperial War Graves commission responded to this situation by conscripting the dead.[4]

In wars past the arrangements made for human remains were adhoc. Many might be buried on the site of battles, but families with the means and inclination would often recover the bodies of loved ones to be reinterred "at home". The bodies of the wealthy and powerful were routinely repatriated. The arrangements made reflected inequalities of wealth and power, but the key point is that previously the state never claimed to

[3] More than anything else, revolution in Russia and then Germany was ultimately responsible for ending the war.

[4] For a longer discussion of just how outrageous the Imperial War Graves of the First World War are and the traumatic impact this had on the families of the dead, see "Were many people upset when they announced they weren't bringing back the bodies England's war dead back at the end of WW1?"

own the bodies of its dead soldiers. Whether they could access them or not, in principle the body of a dead soldier belonged to the family.

The War Graves Commission had other ideas. It became British government policy that bodies were not to be repatriated. Even after the war ended, families were to be prevented from recovering the remains of their loved ones. The British state still had use for them. After November 1918, across battlefields like those of Ieper (Ypres), the Imperial War Graves Commission exhumed tens of thousands of adhoc graves and cemeteries. Grand monuments to sacrifice were planned, to be consecrated with the human remains of the working class of the British Empire.

Winston Churchill famously sought to dedicate the entire town of Ieper in Belgium to the British Empire. Entirely destroyed by the war, its ruins were to stand as an eternal monument to British sacrifice, even if the Belgians had to be prevented from ever returning to their homes. Ieper was eventually rebuilt, but not without significant concession. Monumental graveyards litter its landscape. The Menin gate stands over the entrance to the town, the worlds "PRO PATRIA" and "PRO REGE" stare down from above, whilst its walls record the names of fifty thousand soldiers of empire "to whom the fortunes of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death"[5].

[5] Of this disgusting (and much revered) monument, the First World War veteran and poet Siegfried Sassoons wrote "www.ppu.org.ukl][Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime, Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime]]".

<And because a grave a site of dense richness, oh does modern war bugger grieving patterns. Those Great War cemeteries with their ranks of war dead interred near or in the battlefield where they died? Profoundly unnatural. All politics. The bodies were co-opted in death as they had been conscripted in life. Stolen for their "charge" and richness of meaning. I use the word 'stolen' in a very real sense, because in the normal course of death, bodies are returned to their families.>

At a place called Tyne Cot, eleven thousand nine hundred and fifty four marble headstones stand in careful rows. As you enter, the cemetery rises in front of you on a gentle slope. The horizon is capped with a neoclassical monument in marble. The cemetery centres on a "cross of sacrifice", mounted on marble stairs and bearing an iron sword.

These cemeteries were designed for a purpose and to convey a message. That purpose is stark and apparent when you contrast the glorious dead of Tyne Cot with those entombed at the nearby German cemetery at Langemark. At the centre of the cemetery at Langemark is a small garden, perhaps ten metres by ten metres. It marks the spot where the exhumed remains of twenty four thousand German soldiers were dumped.

Unadorned, the piles of the dead are an indictment. You cannot look upon the mass grave at Langemark and not despise those responsible for the commission of so monstrous a crime. The famous British war graves of Menin Gate and Tyne Cot are no mere memorials; they serve a clear and reactionary political purpose in the context of the immediate post-war period. These monuments serve to recast the nature of the crime they record. On the walls of the Menin Gate, the dead are not working class conscripts, callously butchered in the name of a lie. Instead they have become heroic figures, united under the cross of sacrifice, who nobly struggled for the cause. The dead are sanctified in the name of king and country, the class butchery is obscured under a false equality, and the crime of militarism is rescued for future use by the ruling class and the state. The remains of twenty four thousand German soldiers can be dumped in a pit and forgotten, but to this day the British and Australian ruling classes still need the remains and memories of those butchered in the monumental lie that was the First World War.

It is now one hundred years since tens of thousands of Australians died for the British Empire in Europe and the Middle East. Those people died and killed countless others because the

Australian ruling class had a vital interest in the maintenance of the British Empire, that empire allowed the Australian ruling class to project power and obtain resources in this region well beyond its own means.[6]

One hundred years later the Australian ruling class eagerly supports and encourages the military adventures of the United States, the threat of US protection facilitates the Australian ruling class's disproportionate power in relation to its immediate neighbours, and the Australian state is spending more than anyone else on "commemorating" a minor battle of the First World War.

[6] It is no coincidence that Australia's first act in the First World War was the seizure of the militarily insignificant German colony in New Guinea.