

Anzacs witnessed the Armenian genocide – that shouldn't be forgotten in our mythologising

We have a chance to build a more honest and genuine tradition

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23 Apr 2019



A photo dated 1915 purportedly shows soldiers standing over skulls of victims from the Armenian village of Shekxalan in the Mush valley, on the Caucasus front during the First World War.

“It is universally admitted,” the great psychologist Sigmund Freud wrote as the 19th century turned to the 20th, “that in the origins of the traditions and folklore of a people, care must be taken to eliminate from the memory such a motive as would be painful to the national feeling.”

In Australia and New Zealand, the most popular tradition of all is Anzac Day, perhaps the last truly unifying moment of national pride. Anzac Day has its own folklore, and that folklore has penetrated so deep that any citizen could automatically rehearse its liturgy: dawn storming of the beachhead, Chunuk Bair’s pinnacle, the waste of the Nek, Simpson and his donkey, trench life and periscope rifle, hardy lads seeing it through to the end.

We are told there is a Special Relationship: a close partnership forged between Australia, New Zealand, and Turkey since the 1980s around that sanguinary conflict at Gallipoli we commemorate every April 25th.

Looked at one way, the Special Relationship is a rare example to the world: former enemies *can* be reconciled. Veterans and families can mourn together. Memorials can be built and services held on each

other's soil. However the Special Relationship, and Anzac Day itself, has a seedy underside of ignorance and corrupted history.

Australians, New Zealanders, and Turks all date the birth of their nations to the First World War, ultimately to the cliffs of Gallipoli. The popular legend is one of miraculous emergence into the world by the efforts of great men. But this too is fraudulent, a distortion that obscures the real, much earlier origins of those countries: the extermination of their Indigenous peoples.

In Australia, the total usurpation of Aboriginal life. For New Zealand, the dispossession of Māori. Turkey's formation was an abattoir of mud and blood that included the eradication of almost all ethnic and religious minorities, including the Armenians, Assyrians, and Ottoman Greeks between 1914 and 1923. It was, as the British sociologist Michael Mann says, "the most successful murderous cleansing achieved in the 20th century".

Gallipoli, in fact, was the final trigger in the perpetrators' decision to carry out unimaginable horrors. And further, Anzac Prisoners of War witnessed this genocide: the death marches and killing fields, the cattle trucks rammed with bodies, the concentration camps of Aleppo and Der Zor.

Gallipoli veterans Stanley Savige and Robert Nicol aided in the rescue of at least 45,000 Armenian and Assyrian refugees fleeing annihilation in 1918. Nicol sacrificed his life in the process. Civilians back home read gory details in the press, because the mass murder was (apart from the war itself) *the story* of the day.

When peace came, those same ordinary people participated in the world's first international humanitarian relief movement on behalf of Armenian survivors. Australians and New Zealanders rallied to lend their care. Some even volunteered to give succour in ravaged places, like Isobel Hutton, John and Lydia Knudsen, and James Cresswell. The children born to the Genocide's survivors found their way to Australasia, looking for a house of safety, and found it.

That successive Turkish governments, stretching back to the killers themselves, have denied the Genocide outright is well-documented: diplomatic extortion, millions spent on lobbying, the staining of academic study. Just last week, the Turkish Foreign Minister had the audacity to claim that "We are proud of our history because our history has never had any genocides. And no colonialism exists in our history..."

Imagine if Germany said something similar of the Holocaust, and we can begin to consider the injustice at work here.

Indeed, the Turkish government showed how little it cares for the Special Relationship or the "Anzac spirit" when, six years ago, it threatened members of the New South Wales state parliament that had reaffirmed a motion recognising the Genocide. To be quite clear, it is difficult not to believe that the Special Relationship is little more than a cover for Turkish leaders to assert their own mythology of nation-building, and to enforce their policy of genocide denial.

What is less known is that Australia and New Zealand's governments have been complicit in this denial. Rather than acknowledge a historic crime or even recognise their own ancestors' experience of that event, they stay quiet or warp the truth for fear of endangering the Special Relationship, for fear of disturbing their own national mythology.

Acknowledging another's bleak past would mean acknowledging our own.

As Paul Daley recently wrote in these pages, it's high time we reclaim our "national memory and narrative from the purveyors of a largely mono-dimensional Anzac story that comes at the expense of

so much else”. And yes, revisiting and reconsidering the mythology of Anzac would be, as Freud said, “painful to the national feeling.” But in doing so, there is a chance to build a more honest and genuine tradition in its place.

- **James Robins is an award-winning journalist and historian. His forthcoming book is *When We Dead Awaken: Australia, New Zealand, and the Armenian Genocide*.**