A nation transformed: the impact of war on the home front
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LEARNING AREAS: History
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Almost a century has passed but Australia still identifies strongly with the Anzac ‘legend’ that emerged during the First World War. Entering the war as a small outpost of the British Empire, no one would have anticipated the courage and tenacity displayed by the Australian troops or the extent to which their war efforts would become the foundation of our national identity.

Defending the Mother Country
When war broke out in 1914 Australia was a very young nation. This would be the very first time that Australia would send its own Imperial Forces off to war, rather than sending troops as part of the British army. This fact in itself was enough to inspire enthusiasm for the war effort among the majority of Australians. Australia would have the opportunity to prove itself for the first time while doing its duty in defending the ‘Mother Country’ from an unwanted aggressor.

When war was first declared there was a widely held belief that it would be over within a few months. In fact, as men left for the front they reassured their families with the belief that they would be home by Christmas. As the war continued and news of allied defeats and high numbers of casualties reached the home front, surprisingly, Australians became even more enthusiastic in their support. “The more destructive the war became, the more people were fascinated by it. Hundreds of charitable organisations were set up to raise funds for anything and everything – £13,802,301 was raised by ‘Patriotic’ funds... The ‘gifts’ ranged from aeroplanes to motor transport to the ‘comforters’ women knitted.”

While it lacked large numbers of troops to contribute to the British war effort, Australia gave everything it had and this included primary produce and other vital supplies. In fact, during the war years Government passed the War Precautions Act, which gave it the freedom to make new laws more easily and thus focus the entire strength of the nation on the war; ”...so in effect the Constitution which normally limited the Commonwealth’s power was suspended for the duration of the war and six months afterwards.”

Some of the new powers exerted by the Government were censorship of media and personal correspondence, internment of persons living in Australia who came from “enemy countries” and the
requisitioning of farmers’ crops. “The government was keen to make sure that Australian wheat, wool and meat reached Britain and helped the war effort there. So it passed a law giving it the power to compulsorily acquire the whole wheat and wool harvests.”

The added powers acquired by the Government during the war years further fuelled the division in Australian society between those for total dedication to the war effort and those against. “The strongest believers in the war could not understand how others in society might not share their attitude that the war demanded every person’s full and total commitment. Others, however, believed that there were other priorities that still should be pursued -- particularly when the economic costs of the war pushed wages down and prices up.”

Another divisive issue in Australia during the war years was conscription. Australia already had national service, a form of conscription that meant that men could be called up for home defence, but they could not be sent overseas. Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes believed in absolute and total support for the war and he became convinced that in order to provide this Australia needed more troops, which meant conscription. Hughes required a majority in the Senate in order to make this amendment to the Defence Act and he was several votes short. In an effort to persuade Parliament by showing that the Australian public supported the introduction of conscription Hughes decided to hold a national referendum.

Officially the 1916 referendum would not mean anything, the Government had essentially suspended the Constitution for the duration of war anyway, but it still required the support of the Senate. When Hughes announced the referendum he assumed a strong "yes" majority, he had no way of knowing that instead he had asked a question that would see Australian society became bitterly divided. This division became evident by the narrow margin of the result; 51% voted 'no', achieving a majority over the 49% who voted 'yes'.

As the war progressed and numbers of casualties rose it became even more urgent for Australia to provide Britain with more troops. Hughes decided once again to try a public vote on the issue of conscription. Once again the issue divided the nation and even split Hughes’ Labor party. “During the two conscription referenda campaigns of 1916 and 1917 the country was in all truth ripped apart.” In spite of this Hughes was convinced that conscription was the right way to go. However, the referendum was defeated for a second time, this time by an even larger margin.

The role of women on the home front during the war years was very significant. Women were some of the biggest supporters of conscription. They believed that fit young men who had not enlisted were selfish and cowardly. There are records of women publicly humiliating men who they believed should be at the front by handing out white feathers “...with this most mundane, ludicrous symbol of cowardice, they launched forth to humiliate those they saw as being fit enough to ‘join the boys at the front’, the men ‘shirking their duty’." This was perhaps one way that women felt they could contribute to the war effort. They were not able to enlist and, unlike the Second World War, they did not have the opportunity to move into new areas of work in order to release men for service.
Engulfed by war

While Australians did not experience the extreme shortages of basic supplies that civilians in other parts of the world did, there were very few areas of Australian life that were not affected by the Second World War. During the war years Australia experienced a reduction in manpower that forced employers to accept women into traditionally male occupations, Australian soil was attacked for the first time and huge numbers of soldiers were taken prisoner by the Japanese leaving those at home with no idea of whether their loved ones were alive or not.9

As the Second World War continued, particularly after Japan joined the war, Australia threw all of its weight behind the war effort. The Government encouraged those on the home front to make sacrifices. People were expected to deny themselves luxury and avoid any wastage or excess. “Everyone was encouraged to go 'all in' to support Australia and Australians at war.”10 All extra money and resources were to go to the war effort. In fact, the Government introduced War Bonds and all Australians were encouraged to invest all extra money in the war effort. This campaign of “Austerity” by the Government, while very restrictive, gave all Australians a chance to feel like they were contributing to the defence of their country.11

Other ways that Australians on the home front contributed to the war effort were by joining volunteer organisations such as the Red Cross and by the early 1940s women had the opportunity to join women’s auxiliary services in the armed forces. The Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS), Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) and the Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service were established so that women could move into support roles and release enlisted men to fight overseas. Women also solved the problem of manpower shortages in farming areas. By joining the Women’s Land Army thousands of women kept farms running and vital crops growing throughout the war.

More and more emphasis was put on preserving supplies for the troops overseas and by 1942 rationing of food and clothing was introduced on the Australian home front. This meant that in order to buy items of food or clothing Australians had to hand over a ration coupon as well as money. “Rationing of clothing began in June 1942 and rationing of food followed. Petrol had been rationed since October 1940 and restrictions were not lifted until February 1950. Beer, in short supply, was rationed, as were cigarettes and tobacco. When either beer or cigarettes were available at shops, long queues formed, hoping to get their ration before the shopkeeper sold out his meagre allowance.”12

In addition to rationing Australians were encouraged to recycle anything that could be reused, especially anything made of rubber or aluminium. Adults held on to practically everything including empty toothpaste tubes, while “…School children collected bottles, newspapers, old tyres or anything else that could be recycled for the war effort.”13

Further pressure was put on Australia’s resources when large numbers of American troops began to arrive in 1941. The Americans needed a base in the Pacific in order to fight the Japanese and for much
of the war Australia was this base.\textsuperscript{14} The presence of the Americans had an enormous impact on many Australians. Firstly there was the issue of African-American soldiers. Prime Minister Curtin initially would not allow the “black” soldiers into the country as they were ‘undesirable’ under the White Australia Policy. Curtin was soon required to capitulate to the Americans, however, as Australia was reliant on them for defence.\textsuperscript{15} Once here, the African-American soldiers were treated better by most Australians than they were by white American soldiers. Secondly, there was some tension between US and Australian soldiers. The Australians felt that the Americans were better paid and this affluence meant that they were more appealing to Australian women. To some extent this was true as a number of Australian women married American soldiers during this time.\textsuperscript{16}

“As Japanese forces attacked northern Australia, the government encouraged the belief that the country was in imminent danger of invasion... But even while encouraging the threat of invasion, the government imposed strict censorship on the details of the attacks, as they felt the public might panic if they knew the truth.”\textsuperscript{17} While sheltering the public from the truth they encouraged them to be vigilant in preparation. Air raid drills were carried out regularly, people put black out curtains up in their homes, taped up their windows and kept buckets of sand nearby to put out fires.\textsuperscript{18}

With the Japanese attack on Australian soil, Japanese-Australians joined Germans and Italians as those considered ‘enemies within’. Persons living in Australia who were born in one of these ‘enemy countries’ were forced to register with local police and had to obtain permission to travel, others were actually interned in prison camps. “In September 1942 internment of enemy aliens reached its peak, with almost 7,000 people behind barbed wire in 18 camps around southern Australia.”\textsuperscript{19}

**Public dissent surfaces**

The early 1960s saw Australia become involved in another nation’s domestic conflict. Not officially declared a war, Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam conflict had a profound effect on all Australians and became the catalyst for a decade of change, which included progress in relation to Indigenous and women’s rights.

In keeping with the widely held belief that the spread of communism had to be stopped, Australia responded to the appeal by the South Vietnamese Government for assistance in stopping the attempted take over of the region by communist forces in the North. Australia’s initial commitment to the conflict was very nominal and simply done to appease the United States with whom Australia was closely allied.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1964, for the first time, the Australian Government passed an amendment to the Defence Act providing that soldiers called up under the National Service Scheme could be asked to serve overseas. This went against a long held belief in Australia that conscripts should only be used for home defence, but resistance to the move was minimal at this early stage. “Public acceptance of the introduction of conscription for overseas service was aided by the widespread assumption, evident in newspapers and
journals at the time, that it had been introduced for deployment in a wider conflict against Indonesia, and was thus relevant to the immediate defence of Australia.”

In early 1965, not long after the announcement regarding conscription was made to the public, a small group of Australian women met to form the protest group Save Our Sons (S.O.S.). “Save Our Sons was a non-party, non-sectarian organisation... Its aim was to oppose, on humanitarian, religious or pacifist grounds, the conscription of youth for service overseas.” They organised petitions, protested outside registration centres and aided conscientious objectors. These women were highly indicative of the early protest movement. “Despite popular mythology, which portrays the Vietnam protest movement in terms of flower-bedecked, long-haired student radicals in colourful ‘hippy’ clothes demonstrating in the streets, the protest movement, at least in its early stages, was overwhelmingly dominated by the middle-aged.”

The movements of relatively small groups of middle-aged protestors were of very little interest to most Australians during the early years of the conflict. Slowly, however, concerns about sending conscripts as well as questions over whether or not Australia should actually be involved in Vietnam, began to spread throughout Australia. By 1966 a significant number of Australians had united against the war and the arrival of American President, Lyndon Johnson, was their first opportunity to organise a large protest. “A total of 20,000 demonstrators marched in Sydney and Melbourne – but an astonishing one and a half million turned out to cheer the President, whose impending visit apparently boosted support for the Australian military commitment, from 56 per cent of the population in 1965 to 61 per cent in October 1966.”

“By 1969 anti-war protests were gathering momentum in Australia. Opposition to conscription mounted as more people came to believe that the war could not be won.” There were many reasons why more Australians began to turn against the war, but the strongest motivator was the images of war broadcast across Australian television networks every night: “...people who had never taken a political stance in their life found themselves lining up on demonstrations, driven to protest by images of maimed children and slaughtered civilians.”

In early 1970 US troops were ordered into Cambodia, formally a neutral territory, a move which was highly unpopular and only served to harden anti-war sentiment in Australia. Throughout the year the protest movement continued to grow and became very organised in its appeal for an end to the war. Before the years end Australia would see the biggest public demonstrations in its history. “In the well-known Moratoriums of 1970, more than 200,000 people gathered to protest against the war in cities and towns throughout the country.”

“The third and last Moratorium was held on 30 June 1971. The government ignored it, but on 18 August announced that all Australian troops would be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of the year.” Whether the removal was a response to the mass protests or a concession of defeat is debatable, in all likelihood it was a combination of both.
Australia’s involvement in the war was very far from being considered a success and soldiers returned to a nation that had been almost completely divided over the conflict. “The war was the cause of the greatest social and political dissent in Australia since the conscription referendums of the First World War. Many draft resisters, conscientious objectors and protesters had been fined or gaoled, while soldiers sometimes met a hostile reception on their return home.”

Discussion Topics

1. Why do you think Australians became even more enthusiastic about the First World War when news of high numbers of casualties reached home?
2. From what you have read do you think Australia was at more or less risk of being invaded by the Japanese as was believed on the home front?
3. What was it about Australia’s involvement in Vietnam that led to such violent protests in Australia?

What to Watch

- Australians At War: Trying Not to Remember
- Colour of War: The ANZACS
- Aust History - World War 2: The Home Front
- When The War Came To Australia 1992 Complete Series
- Save Our Sons (s.o.s.)
- Black Soldier Blues

On the Web

- The Bombing of Darwin
- John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library
  http://john.curtin.edu.au/
- War Brides
  http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/ww2/war_brides.htm
- Australian War Memorial
  http://www.awm.gov.au

Study Guides

- Black Soldier Blues
References


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