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Enemy Aliens: Internment and the Homefront War in Australia, 1914–1920

Abstract: During the First World War, the German Australian community, the largest non-Anglo-Celtic group, became the target of a relentless campaign of persecution, internment and deportation that resulted in its dismemberment and the destruction of its socio-cultural infrastructure. Under the country’s belligerent Prime Minister, W.M. Hughes, the machinery of government was used to suspend basic civil rights and the rule of law, while Australian civilians were called upon to participate in the “homefront war” against an imagined internal enemy. The government’s aim was to serve the cause of Imperial Britain and its commercial supremacy, and to secure the future of White Australia as the home of an imaginary, exclusive “British race.”

Keywords: White Australia, race fear, law in war, German Australian community, Australian citizenship, internment, multiculturalism, ethnic cleansing

1. Introduction

If the literature about Australia’s military involvement in World War I amounts to a mountain of printed pages, the work historians have devoted to the Australian homefront can only be described as a molehill. For decades, Ernest Scott’s *Australia during the War* of 1936 was the only scholarly work with a focus on the wartime experience of Australians at home, and, tellingly, it is the only one of the twelve-volume *Official History*. In recent decades, the ratio has shifted somewhat in favour of a greater degree of socio-political and socio-cultural interest in the study of WWI, as opposed to a purely military concern, and the telling example here would be the four-volume *Centenary History of Australia and the Great War*, which devotes one of its four volumes to *The War at Home* (jointly written by John Connor, Peter Stanley and Peter Yule). This paradigm

shift began in the late 1970s and 1980s with the work of a younger generation of historians. Important works by Marilyn Lake, Michael McKernan and Raymond Evans laid the groundwork for a more balanced and critical appreciation of the homefront experience, and their findings are now usually referred to and further developed in more general accounts of Australia's role in WWI, for instance in Joan Beaumont's comprehensive *Broken Nation*.

My own *Enemy Aliens: Internment and the Homefront Experience in Australia, 1914–1920* has remained the only study so far (excepting Richard Morton's unpublished Ph.D. thesis) to provide a detailed account of the campaign against a perceived internal enemy. Specialized studies have contributed new details on individual internment camps (Monteath, Ludewig, Simons), but there is as yet no significant new material on the campaign against enemy aliens and what I have described as "the destruction of the German Australian community." *Enemy Aliens* was also the first comprehensive work on this topic that appeared internationally; it was followed a few years later by similar studies on the wartime treatment of minorities in the UK (Panayi) and the US (Nagler); these studies by and large confirmed my own findings. In the following article, I mainly rely on the argument first developed in *Enemy Aliens*, while also drawing on the work of other historians mentioned above.

While Australian homefront historians usually include references to the campaign against "the enemy at home," to practices such as legal discrimination, internment and deportation, they tend to cover these phenomena more or less as isolated events, as something that happened during and because of the special circumstances of the war and that has no connection to wider questions regarding the nature of the country and its historical development. I think the reason for this lies in what Tony Kushner has identified with regard to British historiography as "the marginalised nature of minority studies" (119). Similarly, another British historian, Colin Holmes, speaks of "the study of aliens, whether immigrants or refugees" as a "fringe activity" that is "far removed" from what might be called *mainstream history*, defined by Holmes as "the 'inside track' where 'real history' is studied and written." The problem, according to Holmes, is that the "history of internment [...] cannot be considered in isolation," that "its study leads to a range of important interlocking questions" and "significant issues." As examples, he mentions "process[es] of social control" or "the history of the role and function of the state in the extreme circumstances of war" (165).

These observations are equally relevant with regard to Australian historiography. My aim in the present essay is precisely to present an account of the homefront war in World War I that is linked to important trajectories in Australian history generally, to the history of White Australia for example, or to the issue of civil rights and the rule of law in wartime. The history of the German Australian community is not only part of a separate *ethnic history*; it asks important questions about the history of Australian multiculturalism, both in its optimistic aspect with a proud

commitment to an independent republicanism, and in its dystopian aspect as shown in the disintegration and destruction of the cultural autonomy of an important ethnic group in the name of an imagined racial exclusivity.

2. 'Hell-bent' on Taking up Arms

In 1901, the Commonwealth of Australia, a federation of six former British colonies, constituted itself as a self-governing British dominion with limited sovereignty. It could neither declare war nor opt out if the British Empire declared war. It was, however, free to determine the nature of its involvement in the European crisis of 1914, and a prudent policy would have perhaps suggested a cautious approach of 'wait and see.' Instead, the Commonwealth Government 'jumped the gun,' as it were; desperately eager to get involved, it offered the British government an expeditionary force of 20,000 troops. All costs were to be borne by Australia, and the British military command was free to determine where and how the men were to be deployed. The telegram was sent to London at 6pm on 3 August, 40 hours before Great Britain declared war on Germany (Newton 2018, 17).¹

Similarly, the Commonwealth government wasted no time importing the emergency legislation passed by the British Parliament to create the legal basis for its campaign against the "enemy in our midst." The *War Precautions Acts* of October 1914, amended several times throughout the war, and bills such as the *Trading with the Enemy Acts* or the *Unlawful Associations Act*, all based on the *Defense of the Realm Act* and associated other pieces of British wartime legislation, were rushed through the Australian Parliament with precious little debate. They gave the government "complete control over the press and the economy and enabled it to establish a centralized and militarist administration" (Crowley 1973, 224).

3. War and the Rule of Law

After William Morris Hughes became Prime Minister in October 1915, the war business of the government was conducted principally by three men: Hughes, also Attorney-General, Robert Garran, Solicitor-General, and George Pearce, Minister of Defence. Hughes boasted that "the best way to govern Australia was to have Sir Robert Garran at his elbow, with a fountain pen and a blank sheet of paper, and the War Precautions Act" (Parker). Garran's job was to formulate the *War Precautions Regulations* dictated by the Prime Minister into law, while Pearce's office had to administer the regulations made under the *Act*. Regulations became law when they were published in the daily *Commonwealth Gazette*. When the High Court upheld the government's power to fix the price of bread (*Farey v. Burvett*; Garran 1958, 173, 222), the autocratic triumvirate found that they were given "plenty of scope"

and took to ruling by regulation, by-passing Parliament altogether. As Garran wrote in his memoir:

Under the *War Precautions Regulations* [...] the powers of the Attorney-General were almost unlimited. To all intents and purposes Magna Carta was suspended and he [Hughes] and I had full and unquestionable power over the liberties of every subject. [Regulations] dealt largely with the enemy within the gates, and with persons of enemy origin – most of whom were good citizens, but a few of whom were bad and all of whom were under observation. [...] The ordinary citizen was also controlled in many ways to secure maximum efforts in the general defence programme. (1958, 221, 222)²

The “regulations factory” (Garran 1958, 222; Bond 17) run by the Solicitor-General soon churned out a bewildering collection of rules, orders and prohibitions that could be applied to enemy aliens. By the end of the war, the *Manual of War Precautions* was printed in its seventh edition, a veritable bestseller of war-time publishing; it listed no less than eighty-one separate offences (Scott 144–147). Enemy aliens were not, for example, allowed to possess motor cars, telephones, cameras or homing pigeons. Internment was only one of the many restrictions imposed upon German Australians, albeit the most severe one.

The question to be asked is whether the wide-ranging measures taken to counter the perceived threat of an internal enemy, the suspension of the rule of law and the widespread erosion of civil liberties and human rights, were appropriate or necessary. Cicero’s time-honoured dictum *enim silent leges inter arma* is often cited to legitimize the suspension of the rule of law in wartime. “The laws fall silent in times of war” is said to imply that the duty of national self-defence overrides constitutional guarantees to civil liberty, that the safety of the people becomes paramount. But was the security and integrity of Australia in any way threatened by the war? In other words: was there “an “imperative reason of security” (Geneva IV, Article 78) that would have legitimized the internment of Australian residents?³ The Australian government of the day – and generations of historians afterwards – answered in the affirmative: the safety of Australians was said to be dependent on the protection by the British navy, and if Britain lost the war, Australia would come under German rule. As Newton put it, “Hughes shouted it out” during the conscription campaign of 1916: “When the British Empire goes down White Australia goes with it” (2018, 22).⁴

The strategic and geo-political realities present a different scenario. The war was fought 17,000 km away on the other side of the world. It was soon clear that the German navy was no match for the British, and the stranglehold blockade of the German ports was proving increasingly efficient. In the North Pacific, it was Japan, reliable ally of Great Britain since 1902, and its navy that ruled the waves, and in the South Pacific, the small contingent of security forces in German New

Guinea surrendered after a minor skirmish to the Australian Expeditionary Corps, while New Zealand similarly took control of German Samoa.

In any case: the notion that Australia, a continent twice the size of Europe, with a population of 5 million hostile inhabitants of Anglo-Celtic origin, could simply be taken over by Germany as a colony, was a fallacious fantasy that revealed more about the existential insecurity of its Australian authors than about actual power relations in Europe. Furthermore, the real threat to Australian security was perceived by an overwhelming majority of Australians as coming from the North: the enemy they feared was Japan. But Japan was an ally of Great Britain, an arrangement on which the Australian government was not consulted.

What about the risk of an attack by the ‘enemy at home’? Despite all efforts by Australian authorities and civilian amateur detectives to uncover plans or acts of spying, sabotage or other hostile activities, no such discoveries were made. Ernest Scott, the author of *Australia during the War*, volume 11 of the *Official History*, frankly concedes “no ships, wharves, or buildings were blown up, burnt or destroyed within the Commonwealth during the war in circumstances indicating enemy activity.” To the official historian, this “striking fact” only proved “that any enemy subjects in Australia who may have wished to further the war aims of the fatherland were too carefully shepherded to enable them to create serious harm [...]. The efficiency of the Intelligence Section of the Defence Department, aided by the vigilance of the censorship, saved the country from such activities by the enemy within the gates” (143–144). Scott’s language, of course, gives the story away as propaganda: the experience of being arrested and interned as an enemy alien was certainly nothing like being “carefully shepherded.”

Later historians have come to a different conclusion. Legal scholar Catherine Bond, who analysed the emergency legislation enacted by the Commonwealth Government, judged that the “war-focused legislation [...] arguably went beyond what was necessary for success in wartime,” and the “law perpetuated a form of tyranny in the name of victory in war” (5–6, 6). Michael McKernan, in his *The Australian People and the Great War*, found “no evidence of any real German interest in undermining Australian society or penetrating her defense secrets,” and “no evidence of German disloyalty or treachery [...] during the war years” (157, 174). It was patently obvious that the number of German Australians and their widespread settlement over the south-eastern states offered very little, if any “potential for disruption,” as McKernan concluded: “In no real sense could the German Australians be seen as a threat to Australia’s national security” (151). McKernan’s assessment of life in the internment camps also corrects the view presented by Scott: there was “overcrowding, oppressive boredom, primitive conditions,” and, because of “the tensions and frustrations of confinement, brawls, riots even, were frequent and serious” (175).

4. From “Brothers in Adoption” to “Enemy Aliens”

The history of German immigration to Australia goes back to the very beginning of the penal colony at Port Jackson.⁵ During the 19th century, there were flourishing German Australian communities in all the major cities as well as in rural areas of Victoria, New South Wales, and especially in South Australia and Queensland. Since the first group migrations in the 1830s, immigrants from Germany had always constituted the largest non-Anglo-Celtic ethnic group. In 1861, around the end of the Victorian gold rush, people of German origin comprised 4.32% of the total Australian population. The Chinese, as the second largest group, came to 3.28% by comparison, the Italians as the third largest made up only 0.21%, while the total migrant population of 48 other ethnic communities combined amounted to 3.25%. By 1981, the Chinese had dwindled to 1.65% while the population of Germans had remained steady. From 1890 onward, the number of German Australians continued to decline in relation to the total population. Nevertheless, they still constituted by far the largest non-British ethnic group prior to the war, and they formed a very visible, prosperous and generally sophisticated community (Fischer 1989a, 19).

The history of the German Australian community is a history of assimilation and “Anglicization” (Lodewyckx 243), although *Australianisation* is perhaps the better term. Overwhelmingly, the descendants of immigrants from Germany saw themselves as Australians. They were proud of their cultural heritage but equally conscious of their political status as citizens or permanent residents of the Commonwealth. There was no conflict of loyalty. The Lutheran pastors had instilled into their parishioners a strong sense of duty towards their secular authorities: not the Kaiser, but the Queen or King of England, respectively, was their head of state.

After news was received of the breakout of war between Germany and Great Britain on 4 August 1914, Pastor Theodore Nickel, head of the Lutheran congregation at Eudunda, South Australia, sent a telegram to the Governor-General, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, to assure the Australian government and people of the allegiance of the German Australian community. Nickel was not only speaking on behalf of his own parishioners but for “all the members of our church.” As the elected president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia he was the spiritual leader of the largest group of German-speaking immigrants in the country. The cable read, in part:

Although we deeply deplore that Great Britain has been involved in the European conflict and has been compelled to declare war against Germany, the land of our fathers, we are well aware of our duty as British subjects and shall always be willing to defend the honour of our beloved King and of our dear country with good and chattels, and body and life.

In reply, the Australian representative of the British Crown sent the following telegram:

[D]eeply gratified and touched by your message of loyal devotion to King and country in the hour of trial which finds you standing in his Majesty's words: united, calm, resolute, trusting in God. Ferguson, Gov. Gen.

Both cables were published on 20 August 1914 in *Der Lutherische Kirchenbote für Australien*, the official organ of the synod, which was then in its forty-first year of publication, clearly a sign of the firm place the church held in Australian society (cf. Fischer 1989a, 14–15). The pledge of loyalty, acknowledged by the Governor-General, described the political self-understanding of an integrated community: the reference to the duties of British subjects, based on the constitutional guarantees of the Australian Commonwealth, recalled also the democratic rights of German Australians as citizens and naturalized residents.

The existence of a conflict was not denied; Australians of German descent regretted that there was a war with the land of their fathers. However, there was no room at all for doubt or misinterpretation concerning the possible suspicion of dual loyalty. The decision was unequivocal: German Australians would fight for the new country against the old. It was a decision that was legitimated both politically and in accordance with Lutheran theology: as Australians, they owed a civic duty to their government, and as Lutheran Christians they owed allegiance to their temporal, God-given authority (Fischer 1989a, 20–21).

Even though the exchange of telegrams confirmed there was no question about the loyalty of members of the German Australian community, the issue of their identity, nevertheless, constituted something of a conundrum. While the republican model of the United States allowed for a “double identity” (Walzer), as immigrant and American, the situation in Australia was more complicated: it demanded the negotiation of triple identities – German immigrant, subject of the British Crown in the Commonwealth of Australia, Australian citizen. A cultural identity, firstly, bound the German Australians to the language and culture of their homeland; it was a link most strongly felt by the more recent immigrants and one that tended to wane along with progressive assimilation. Secondly, their political loyalty was to be extended to the reigning monarch of Great Britain as the constitutional head of the Commonwealth of Australia. The countless declarations of allegiance made by spokesmen of the German Australian community to the King or Queen of England were certainly genuine; they were often coupled with expressions of gratitude by immigrants who realized that it was the political stability guaranteed by the Westminster constitutional system that had provided the conditions for their success in their new country. And thirdly, there was a national identity and loyalty felt towards Australia – the land, its people and its history of which the German immigrants had become part, as Australians (Fischer 1989b).

In theory, this conundrum of a triple identity as characteristic of the psycho-social and cultural-ideological make-up of members of the German Australian community could be easily resolved: Australia *only* had to become an independent republic, like the United States. The question of “German rights,” i.e. civil rights for non-British immigrants, had been discussed in South Australia as early as the mid 1850s, in the context of the introduction of responsible government. There was considerable opposition to the proposal to give German residents passive as well as active voting rights to the first South Australian Parliament in Adelaide, but the Germans eventually won the day (Fischer 1989a, 26–27). Thirty years later, the *Australische Zeitung*, flagship of the 19th century German-language press in Australia, ran a series of editorials, published between December 1884 and February 1885, highlighting the advantages of U.S. citizenship compared to the Australian system:

The acquisition of citizenship in the U.S. affords full equality and protection. This is not so in British colonies where the German immigrant gives up his German citizenship for a thing of little significance. Through naturalization in a colony, he only becomes a citizen of that colony [...] but not a citizen of Great Britain, although he has sworn an oath of allegiance to the Queen of England. If a naturalized German leaves his own colony, he is completely homeless, a pariah, a member of no nation, whereas the British colonist remains a Briton. [...] Should we Germans not strive to regain full civic rights in place of those which we have given up? We can only do so, if Australia declares itself independent, because in that case we shall become politically that which in our hearts we have been for a long time: Australians. (Borrie 204, 205)⁶

U.S. citizenship as a model for Australia was by no means a new idea. It had been formulated as early as 1787 by Georg Forster in his essay “New Holland and the British Penal Colony at Botany Bay” (225–248).⁷ Forster, a celebrated European author who had accompanied Cook on his second journey as a 16-year-old, had already directed the attention of his readers to the attractions of – what was then – New Holland in his international best-seller, *Journey around the World*.

In his essay on the Botany Bay project, Forster suggested that out of difficult origins – a penal colony to be settled by convicts under military rule – a new society would arise, free from the shackles of the feudal traditions of Europe, in which the convicts would be rehabilitated through their practical work in opening up the country, building cities and industries, and by becoming “future lawmakers” in a new state on the basis of democratic self-determination. The United States, which in less than 150 years had grown from similarly modest beginnings to a secure and powerful republic, was the model to follow (cf. Fischer 2010).

Forster’s was an optimistic vision born out of the belief in progress and the perfectibility of human society that was an integral part of the heritage of the European enlightenment. The “48ers,” a small group of highly educated,

liberal-democratic intellectuals and professionals, who had emigrated to Australia from Germany in the wake of the failed revolution of 1848, had enthusiastically taken up Forster's vision. As journalists and publishers of German-language journals and newspapers, they played an important role in formulating the public opinion of the German Australian community. The "48ers" saw Australia as a nation *in statu nascendi*; they had become early nationalists and proponents of an independent Australian state organized as a liberal-democratic republic (Fischer 1989b, 85–100).⁸

German Australians were generally regarded by their Anglo-Celtic neighbours as model immigrants whose contributions to the development of the Commonwealth, in politics and education, business and agriculture, industry and the arts, were widely recognized and appreciated. Thus, it is not surprising that the first public reactions after the outbreak of the war were characterized by expressions of goodwill, friendship and a recognition of a history of trouble-free relations. The Adelaide *Advertiser* reminded its readers of Australia's "long experience of the estimable qualities of her German citizens," asking that "every instinct of chivalry and good feeling [...] be invoked to secure the tenderest consideration for the lacerated feelings of these respected fellow citizens." Other papers described the German Australians as "our fellow-colonists" or "our brothers in adoption" (McKernan 152). The farmers' journal *The Land* concluded its editorial on "The Great War" by asking its readers to "remember those who are amongst us whose nationality is not ours: Deal fairly and honourably by them, ever remembering that in the time of war, as in the time of peace, they are our neighbours" (*The Land*, 7 August 1914).

However, the idealistic rhetoric of the early war editorials concealed that there were very real, if latent tensions and differences at least since the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War and the rise of the German Empire after 1871. Very quickly, the war produced a political atmosphere that brought these issues out into the open and into sharp public focus. A wave of xenophobia swept through the country, and the noble and lofty sentiments of the editorial writers were soon forgotten. Towards the end of 1914, the first "jingoistic concoctions of the British Northcliffe press" (Evans 1988, 6), stories of German atrocities, propaganda pamphlets, posters and caricatures had arrived from London, eagerly snapped up and converted into a local product. Images in Australian newspapers of the German soldier as the "Hun," racialized to resemble the stereotypical caricatures of blood-thirsty "Asian invaders," began to take hold in the consciousness of readers who were now being bombarded with accounts of brutality and "German infamy" in Belgium and France.⁹ After reports of the Anzacs dying and being wounded at Gallipoli were received at home, many Australians became "heavily committed to the war emotionally" and felt a need for a greater, psychological involvement (McKernan 177).

5. Fighting the War at Home

The homefront experience in Australia can only be properly understood if one considers the peculiar situation of a combatant country sending troops to the theatres of war some 12,000 nautical miles away, a month's journey by ship, over a period of four and a half years, suffering ever increasing casualties – while life at home, after the initial shock and some adjustment due to new economic and socio-political circumstances, tended to go on pretty much as usual. The dichotomy between “proximity and distance” (Jeffery; qtd. in Connor 114–115) was an important factor that contributed to shaping individuals' emotional attitude to the war, notably with regard to the divisive issue of conscription.¹⁰

The concept of a homefront, usually invoked metaphorically to describe the special efforts of civilians at home to support the soldiers involved in combat, needs to be taken literally here. The war was also a “civilians' war” (Stanley 151). While Australian soldiers were bogged down in the trenches in Turkey and France, Australian civilians began to fight the war at home. The *Daily Post* in Tasmania invited its readers to participate in “the delightful task of hunting up unnaturalized Germans and Austrians” (Lake 19). Spurred on by the federal government that issued “circulars to all local police stations warning of the suspected spying activities of resident Germans” (Lake 20), patriotic Australians penned “a myriad of letters [...] dobbing in” a German neighbour down the road as supposedly disloyal and a potential threat (Bond 78). Ordinary Australians organized populist Anti-German leagues that bombarded the government with chain letters calling for the internment of enemy aliens.¹¹ Local councils followed suit, sacking employees of enemy descent who happened to be on their payrolls. British Australian workers refused to work with German immigrants and went on strike if the ‘aliens’ – regarded as ‘mates’ only recently – were not dismissed. Unions began campaigning against the use of “enemy labour.”¹²

Possession of Australia was what the war was all about, or so the Commonwealth Government firmly believed. The freedom of Australia, according to Hughes, was being defended on the killing fields of Europe, and if the Allies were to be defeated, Australia would come under German rule. Hughes was certain that Australia was No. 1 on the catalogue of German war aims: “Germany had long coveted this grand and rich continent” (Horne 79). The official war historian, Charles Bean, dutifully complied: “If the allies lost, Australia would be a spoil to the conqueror” (19).

Australia was the prize target, “specially coveted by Germany,” as the Melbourne *Argus* put it, echoing the Prime Minister. Referring to British propaganda reports about German residents in England who were allegedly commanding “strategic positions” and working “from within” in preparation of a “German invasion,” the *Argus* was adamant that the enemy's “preparations here were no less perfect” and that “this country is not likely to have been overlooked any more than England or South Africa” (*Argus*, 3 March 1916). Small country syndrome thus played a role,

too: the fear of the insignificant colonial outpost at the periphery of the British Empire to be “overlooked” in world affairs. Thus, by the power of imagination and by wishful thinking, Australians had managed to transport themselves into the centre of the war. Sadly, the fantasy entailed a wish to be recognized, if only as an enemy (Fischer 1989a, 4).

6. The Theatre of War: Fighting an Imaginary Enemy

On Christmas Eve 1914, the officers in command of the Second Military District of Australia (NSW) expected an uprising of Germans in Sydney, combined with a mass breakout of internees being held in the Holsworthy internment camp, near Liverpool, on the western outskirts of the city. According to undercover agents, plans for the alleged operation had been in place since the beginning of the war, a sum of £50,000 had supposedly been raised by local German residents and 120 motor cars had been made available. In a secret memorandum to Defence Headquarters in Melbourne, the Sydney officers provided details of the sinister plot:

The plan was to seize the forts, destroy various magazines and Garden Island [naval base in Sydney Harbour] and to liberate all prisoners. Transports or ocean going ships would be seized and all would escape to sea. The insurgents would be dressed in Commonwealth uniforms which would facilitate their work and cause confusion to our people. Ferry boats were to be seized for the work on the Harbour. (AA. Vic. B 197, 2021/1/64)

Once at sea, or so the top brass believed, the Germans planned to establish contact with units of the Imperial German Navy, and the convoy was to proceed to retake the lost German colony at New Guinea, which would be used as a base for naval operations in the Pacific, threatening the Australian supply routes to Europe and the Commonwealth itself.

On 24 December, the Sydney commandant was ready to meet the imagined insurgents. Elaborate preparations had been made to quell the expected uprising:

Armed police, mounted and dismounted, were available; the Infantry Reserve was handy and special trams were ready to move them anywhere. The ‘MINER’ and the ‘OHM’ were ready for any harbour work that might be required. The Commandant and Staff were with the Inspector General of Police at his office in town. Close touch was kept with the Forts and [the Holsworthy Camp at] Liverpool by telephone. (AA. Vic. B 197, 2021/1/64)¹³

At Holsworthy, the suspected leaders of the conspiracy were under surveillance, and the guards were placed on special alert.

The secret memorandum, sketching an event that failed to materialize, conjures up visions of a war fought in the streets and on the waterways of Sydney, complete with trams shuttling to and fro to take the soldiers to the front, and with ferries and ships seized by the enemy engaged in naval actions on Sydney Harbour. It was a fantastic, fanciful vision: war as theatre, self-illusion and make believe, stage-managed by the government and the military authorities who were eagerly awaiting their cue to play their part in this exciting drama. The soldiers and police officers who waited on Christmas Eve for the action to start would have been shocked by the suggestion that they might have wasted a perfectly peaceful Australian public holiday. But the fear that lay behind their readiness to believe in such fantasy schemes of war and of conspiracies was real enough. And real enough, too, was the preparedness and keenness of Australians – officials, soldiers and civilians alike – who were eager to do battle, to take up arms to confront and defeat an enemy who existed only in their imagination (Fischer 1989a, 1–2).

7. Defining the Enemy

Soon after the outbreak of war, all Germans and Austrians living in Australia were required to report to the nearest police station and register as aliens by completing a form that included their personal particulars: name, address, date and place of birth, trade or occupation, marital status, property, length of residence in Australia, nationality, naturalization details. The local police then imposed any restrictions they thought fit; usually the aliens had to notify the police of any change of address or report to the station at daily or weekly intervals. The registrants were forced to comply, but inevitably resented the procedure as a blemish on their reputation. The officers also had to fill out a second form entitled *Report on Person reputed to be an Enemy Subject* – “secret and confidential” – noting their own impressions about the aliens they interviewed. The officers were asked whether they thought the aliens were “reputed to be anti-British” or consorted “with persons believed to be of enemy origin,” and finally had to give an opinion as to whether they believed their clients’ statements “to be frank and truthful” or whether the “aliens” ought to be examined more closely by the military authorities (AA. WA. PP14/1. 1/10/34).¹⁴

By the end of 1914, the commandants of the military districts had been given the authority to intern “enemy subjects with whose conduct they were not satisfied” while the Minister of Defence had reserved for himself the right to order the detention of naturalized subjects he thought were “disaffected or disloyal.” In 1915, the minister’s power was extended “to cover the internment of disloyal natural born subjects of enemy descent, and of persons of hostile origin or association.”¹⁵ Natural born subjects meant persons born in Australia. Once a military intelligence officer had decided an individual was disloyal or constituted a “possible danger,” that person was arrested and placed in a camp behind barbed wire from where

there was no access to the ordinary processes of judicial appeal. The government routinely refused to submit the complaints of internees to legal arbitration (Fischer 1989a, 65–66).

In October 1916, the registration regulations were extended to apply to “all aliens, whether enemy or otherwise” (Scott 109). The *Unlawful Associations Act* of 1916 and 1917 “further expanded” the Federal Government’s powers, including “the powers of deportation” (Evans 1987, 30). The enemy now included potentially everyone who opposed the government’s war policies, notably regarding conscription.¹⁶ In the end, the machinery of registration, censorship, surveillance, internment and deportation set up to control the resident “enemy” population in Australia was also being used to investigate and prosecute a wide variety of Anglo-Celtic “Britishers”: pacifists, unionists, radical socialists, Irish nationalists, anti-conscriptionists of all ideological persuasion, including sections of the Labor party, practically anybody who dared to speak out against the government’s total commitment to the war. After the war, the files collected by military intelligence were passed on to subsequent internal security organizations (Stanley 171). A precedent was established, involving the use of the state apparatus for the purpose of suppressing political opposition, that constitutes one of the most ominous features of the political culture that developed in Australia during World War I.

8. Selecting Candidates for Detention

In 1914, there were some 33,000 persons born in Germany living in Australia. The overall number of German Australians, including second and later generation migrants, had been estimated at approximately 100,000. With the total population of Australia approaching five million, it was hardly a significant number statistically (Fischer 1989a, 18). In May 1915, Defence Minister Pearce proudly announced that “we have at present a large number of enemy subjects interned in the Commonwealth, and, judging from the statements appearing in the cable messages we seem to have interned far more in proportion to our population than they have in Great Britain.” Un-interned enemy aliens were under surveillance, Pearce added, to emphasize his message: the military authorities were in “full control of the Alien Enemy Population” (*Argus*, 20 May 1915; Fischer 1989a, 126). As it was logistically impossible to imprison all German Australians, the government had early on decided on a policy of selective internment. Nevertheless, there were continuous demands by ultra-patriotic groups, often supported by jingoistic tabloids, to intern all enemy aliens. “Intern the lot!” was the popular slogan.

6,890 persons were interned in Australia during the First World War. The blanket designation ‘prisoners of war’ given them by the Australian authorities does not correspond to the modern understanding of POW, i.e. combatant soldiers captured in battle. The internees included a small number of genuine prisoners of

war, notably the surviving crew of the *Emden* and some soldiers of the Qingdao garrison, but most internees were civilian residents of Australia and other British possessions. Among the prisoners, just over 1,000 had come from dominions such as Fiji, Singapore, Ceylon or Hong Kong; their status was mostly that of naturalized British subjects in their respective colonies where they had been arrested at the outbreak of war. The local authorities routinely asked the Colonial Office in London “that arrangements be made [...] for the removal to Australia of all German and Austrian civil prisoners” for internment during the duration of the war.¹⁷ The Australian government was happy to oblige, provided a few weeks’ notice was given and the costs (3s.6d per person per day) were defrayed by the respective dominions. The transportation to Australia of these prisoners, which included Australian-born wives and their children, in some cases recalled the circumstances of convict transports during the early days of Australia as a penal colony (Fischer 1984).

The internees included approximately 700 “Naturalized British Subjects,” whose naturalization certificates were subsequently cancelled (to make sure they would never return), and some 70 “Native Born British Subjects” who were Australian by birth. At the end of the war, a total of 6,150 persons were “repatriated,” i.e. summarily shipped to Germany: a mass deportation unparalleled in Australian history. Of these, 5,414 had been interned, the remainders were family members or non-interned “ex-enemy aliens” who either had accepted the government’s offer to be repatriated or were ordered to leave the country. The total number of compulsory deportations came to 699 (Fischer 1989a, 77, 301–302, 348n).

A statistical summary – based on a roll call of 3,135 internees – prepared by the director of the office of military intelligence, gives the reasons for internment. Nearly half the total, 1,559 persons, were regarded as a “possible danger to the community.” 751 destitute migrants who had lost their jobs due to the war were interned “at own request,” while the detention of 457 persons had been ordered for violations of some of the War Precautions Regulations, mostly “failing to report.” Another “score or so,” including “several of the most important residents of the Commonwealth” had been interned on the ground of “possible interference with commercial interests.” In twelve percent of cases, no reason at all had been recorded (Fischer 1989a, 80). Although they were required to do so, many arresting officers obviously thought it unnecessary to document why a particular individual had come to be interned. If the prisoner, after all, was an alien and of enemy origin, what other reason was needed?

9. Setting up Camp

Initially, internees were imprisoned in camps set up locally in each of the five military districts. At Torrens Island in South Australia, previously used as a quarantine

station, prisoners were housed in military tents that frequently leaked; there was insufficient bedding, no facilities for cooking or bathing. Relations between inmates and guards were tense. After an attempted escape, two prisoners were subjected to a mock execution and then flogged: they were stripped naked, handcuffed to a tree and given thirty lashes with a “cat-o-nine-tails” (Monteath 2018, 83–89). This happened in June 1915, after a similar incident in Rabaul where four former German residents had been publicly whipped. When news of the “Scandal at Rabaul” made it past the censor to appear in the Australian press, and when a report on the Torrens Island flogging was smuggled out of the camp and eventually reached Germany, alarm bells must have rung at Defence Headquarters.¹⁸ The Berlin Foreign Office asked London for an explanation, via the U.S. Embassy, and the Australian government was told to supply an official report. An inquiry by senior military staff into the Torrens Island incident found “harsh and unjustifiable conduct,” including “wholesale arrest and imprisonment,” “promiscuous shooting” into tents, and “indiscriminate bayoneting indulged in apparently with freedom by the junior N.C.O.s and privates.” The camp commandant was stripped of his commission (Fischer 1989a, 194–198). Such incidents remained isolated cases, however, restricted to early operations when camp commandants were not always fully familiar with the rules and regulations that governed the administration of the camps.

The Defence Department, clearly worried about possible repercussions and concerned about Australia’s international reputation, eventually decided to close the state camps and transfer the prisoners to New South Wales. The “German Concentration Camp” – so its official name – in Holsworthy near Liverpool, southwest of Sydney, with some 6,000 internees, was by far the largest Australian internment camp. Two smaller facilities were set up in disused prisons to house prisoners of “higher” social standing: at Berrima Gaol, for naval officers and their crews, and the “elite camp” at Trial Bay Gaol, reserved for wealthy inmates, business men and so-called community leaders. A much smaller “family camp” set up in Bourke in outback New South Wales housed some eighty inmates, including wives and children, who had been residents in other British dominions and transported to Australia for internment following requests from London. On its own, the Commonwealth Government did not intern women and children (Fischer 1989a, 271).

In 1918, the prisoners from overseas were transferred to a camp in the newly-designated Australian Capital Territory. It was a brand-new facility specially constructed to accommodate some 5,000 prisoners expected to be shipped from Africa and China. As it happened, they never arrived. The British government cancelled the planned transfer at the last minute, after the German government threatened reprisals, and then the war was over. The huge camp, located in what is today the Canberra suburb of Fyshwick near the Molonglo River, was the first substantial construction project in what was to become the nation’s capital (Fischer 1989a, 154).

The military authorities soon discovered that giving the inmates more freedom and responsibility in the administration of the camps was remarkably efficient in reducing disciplinary tensions and improving the morale of the internees. Thus, a degree of internal self-government was established. An elected Camp Committee functioned as a kind of executive authority in charge of all aspects of life in the camps; it also represented the interests of the inmates in dealings with the Commandant. The Committee controlled the camps' well-stocked canteens; the profits made were used to subsidize activities in need of public support, such as orchestras and theatres. Various sub-committees were elected to overlook essential services (sanitation, food, public works, business activities, sports and education, cultural affairs, etc.).

The internees were given permission to operate businesses and to construct the required facilities. Thus, a rich social and cultural life developed within the boundaries of the barbed-wire enclosures. Like in internment camps in other countries, the internees – once given the chance to run their own affairs – managed to build a diverse communal life that was, in many ways, quite attractive in comparison with small towns anywhere. There were numerous cultural activities, theatres, orchestras and choirs, sporting clubs, educational opportunities, internal print media, and the like.¹⁹

This does not mean, of course, that life was easy. The official visitors, consular representatives from Switzerland, Norway and the U.S. who were invited to inspect the camps from time to time, found that the internees had much to complain about: theft of their property while on route to the camp, poor and overcrowded facilities, lack of proper sanitation and protection from the weather (dust storms in the searing heat of the Liverpool plains during summer, and heavy winter rains that turned the whole camp into a sea of mud). The main concern was mental health. After years of close confinement with no privacy, separated from their families and with a bleak future to look forward to, many internees developed feelings of irritation, anxiety and depression – the well-known symptoms of Barbed Wire Disease (McKernan 174–176; Fischer 1989a, 205–206).

10. Internment and War Aims

While internment was, in many instances, arbitrary and capricious, there were nevertheless clear policy objectives linked to the government's war aims. Destitute immigrants, for example, were systematically singled out for internment. Early in the war, the Defence Department had introduced a policy of voluntary internment. Aliens who had lost their jobs because of the war could turn themselves in, and their families would be paid a modest allowance. Once interned, however, these "voluntary" prisoners were not allowed to leave the camp. Later in the war, the military officials were given the power to detain persons considered to be without

a regular income even if they did not volunteer. If the intelligence officers found that such individuals had no ties in the Commonwealth and were likely to become a financial burden on the government, it was routinely recommended that they should be deported after the conclusion of the war. Internees with a history of mental health issues were similarly earmarked for deportation. The internment system thus developed into a tool of social control (Fischer 1989a, 81–86).

The government's main objective in its campaign against enemy aliens was the destruction of the German Australian community as an autonomous, socio-cultural entity within Australian society. This aim was pursued through different avenues: the internment of prominent businessmen, the honorary German consuls, and the Lutheran pastors who were all regarded leaders of the community; the pastors were widely believed to be receiving orders directly from the German government (Fischer 1989a, 303–314). The use of the German language was banned; German schools, newspapers and clubs were closed. German place names which testified to the pioneering work of early migrant settlers were struck off Australian maps; they were changed by the *Nomenclature Act 1917* passed by the South Australian state legislature, or by local councils following petitions by patriotic "Britishers" in other states. Australians of German descent, although naturalized and often born in Australia, were disenfranchised and prevented from voting and from standing as candidates for public office. A "directed program of internment and commercial ruin" resulted in "community dismemberment in every state" and "culminated in mass deportations at the end of the war" (Cochrane 179). Before 1914, the German Australian community was actively involved in Australian public and political life, proud of its achievements and its heritage. By the end of 1918, its remaining members had gone into assimilationist hiding; its cultural infrastructure lay in ruins.

The overriding aim of the government was to serve the cause of Imperial Britain and to "future-proof" White Australia (Cochrane 182; Newton 2018, 22). The integrity of the Empire was to be maintained, its predominant role as a colonial power to be increased by further territorial acquisitions. Australia's particular interests in the South Pacific were seen as part of a grand imperial plan, although the military occupation of German Papua New Guinea and other islands did not lead, as Hughes had hoped, to outright annexation. Australia's sub-imperial ambition was more of an embarrassment to the British Government which was acutely aware of the opposition of the U.S. Government as well as the existence of Japanese interests that London could not afford to disregard. Hughes' declaration of an "Australian Monroe Doctrine" ("Hands off the Australian Pacific") was not much more than rhetorical grand-standing; it left President Wilson singularly unimpressed and hostile (McQueen 67).

Such differences, however, and London's lukewarm support did not diminish Hughes' unreserved commitment to British imperialism, even though he remained distrustful of the intentions of London in relation to safeguarding Australia's security. For Hughes, the British Empire was synonymous with civilization itself:

“the greatest confederation of free men and women that the world has ever seen” (1916, 191). His policy was meant to forge a closer link between Dominion and Home Country which then, it was hoped, would give Australia a greater voice within the Empire. To Hughes, there was no difference between Empire Loyalty and Australian Nationalism: “Australia was a nation only by the grace of God and the power of the British Empire” (Horne 110). In this nation, there was no place for a German Australian community.

11. Empire Products for Empire Markets

The economic policy of Prime Minister Hughes is central to an understanding of the internment policy of his government and its anti-German campaign. When war broke out, it provided an opportunity of realizing a long-held aim, namely “the eradication of German influences from the trade of all parts of the Empire” (Fitzhardinge 73). It was an objective that the Prime Minister was to pursue throughout the war years, and even after, with incomparable zeal. Already in 1907, at the London Navigation Conference devoted to co-ordinate Imperial policies regarding merchant shipping, he had warned about “the extent of the penetration of German shipping interests into the Pacific” (Booker 241).

Hughes’ vision of international relations was dominated by neo-mercantilist notions of trade and commerce. He saw the affairs between nations as a kind of perpetual economic warfare over the control of markets and resources, with open war as only a different form of struggle that had its basis in the competitive nature and self-interest of human beings, as individuals and countries alike. True to his vision of himself as a *Realpolitiker* he liked “to cut through the moralistic humbug,” i.e. the ideological smoke screen used to legitimize war (Booker 258). Hughes was not afraid to point out that the war was being fought for economic supremacy; this was an argument to support Australia’s unrestricted commitment rather than to oppose it (Horne 73).

The elimination of German commercial interests, both in Australia and in the South Pacific, proceeded on the basis of comprehensive legislation. *The Enemy Contracts Annulment Act* and various *Trading with the Enemy Acts*, passed between 1914 and 1918, imposed restrictions that ranged from the prohibition to buy or sell land to owning or managing a business. Australian subsidiaries or agencies representing German firms were liquidated. Aliens were ordered to disclose holdings in shares, securities or bank accounts. German Australian businessmen were arrested, interned and deported; their assets and businesses confiscated, wound up or placed under public trusteeship (Scott 137–140).

The government designed legislation not only as a wartime measure to prevent Australian products from reaching Germany, and vice versa, but also to put an end to what were considered German firms operating in Australia, regardless of whether

they were branches of foreign companies or businesses founded in Australia. Trade was to be diverted “from enemy to empire,” as the Prime Minister put it: all “German influences” were to be eradicated “root, branch and seed” (Fitzhardinge 73).²⁰ In one of his speeches while on his lecture tour in the UK in 1916, Hughes boasted about his “earnestness in tearing out the cancer of German influence [...] There is only one way in which you can do this thing. Do it with such thoroughness that the German will avoid this country as if it were the plague itself” (Hughes 1916, 66; qtd. in Cochrane 179).

The Prime Minister’s dream of a post-war economic order envisioned a closed bloc, largely autarchic: “Empire Products for Empire Markets” (Fischer 1989a, 50). It was to include the UK along with its allies and the various colonies and dominions around the world that made up the “grab-bag” (Anderson, 218) of territories that was the British Empire. The ultimate goal was to force Germany to give up all hope that it would ever be in a position where it would be tempted to try to compete with Britain for “industrial and commercial supremacy.” The Centre Powers were to be excluded from international trade; the markets of the British Empire and its allies were to be permanently closed to German products. The “pre-war natural channels of commerce,” as Hughes put it (i.e. neighbours trading with neighbours), were not to be re-opened. There was no reason why British consumers should not choose Australian cane sugar over the cheaper German beet sugar. The war, he confidently asserted in a speech given in the UK entitled “On Britain’s Past Follies,” has “rung the death knell of a policy of cheapness,” it had mistaken “mere wealth for greatness. No matter whether the wealth was in our hands or those of German Jews” (Hughes 1916, 40, 44)

Hughes even tried to enlist the help of British housewives to use a weapon at their ready disposal: boycott. If English housewives were committed to this war, he declared to delegates of the Women’s Imperial Defence Council in London (June 1916), “no British shopkeeper would dare to expose goods that have been made by the enemy [...]. I hope the women of England will insist that our shops are purged as clean of German trade as heaven is of emissaries of hell” (Hughes 1916, 171).

In the post-war scenario that Hughes imagined, Germany was to be permanently excluded from international trade. It was a fantastic vision, and hopelessly unrealistic of course. Once the war was over, the European powers almost immediately resumed trade amongst each other.

12. Race Fear, Abandonment Anxiety, White Australia

White Australia had always been a cornerstone of the identity of the European settlers on the continent, enshrined in the first piece of legislation passed by the Commonwealth Parliament, the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 with its infamous “dictation test.” Unsurprisingly, the question of race played a decisive

role in the debates concerning Australia's role in the First World War. There was hardly any disagreement in this matter: the war was being fought to keep Asian and non-white immigrants out of the country.

The racist dimension in the history of white settlement of Australia thus offers another key to understanding the nature of Australians' involvement in the war. White Australia was a complicated construct. The racism of the European settlers was directed against the indigenous owners of the country as much as against their neighbours, the people of Asia and the Pacific islands. It was a racism born out of the aggressive belief of the colonizers in their cultural and technological superiority that gave legitimacy to their supposed destiny to assume the imperialistic control over the allegedly uncivilized parts of the world. But racism in Australia had also a defensive component: it was the result of a concern over security, born out of fear of an invasion by the peoples to the north. The "yellow hordes" of Asia could easily overrun the sparsely populated continent and do to the European invaders what they, the colonists and settlers, had done previously to the indigenous owners of the land.²¹

The definition of White Australia had always been in flux and open to debate. In the mid-19th century, the focus had been largely on the growing number of Chinese immigrants arriving during the Victorian goldrush. In the 20th century, the direction of the policy had shifted against the "Japanese race" which, as Hughes imagined, was driven "by an active spirit of ambition and enterprise," similar to his view of the Germans.²² The supposed dynamic competitiveness of the Japanese people was imagined by Hughes to make them want to leave their native islands to come to Australia where they would be soon "supplemented by hordes of Chinese, Kanakas and Javanese" (Booker 62).

Correlative to race fear was abandonment anxiety: what if the British Empire and the Royal Navy was to withdraw protection?²³ In 1894, Britain and Japan had signed a commercial treaty that acknowledged reciprocal rights of trade and residence. This was followed by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 (renewed 1905 and 1911) to contain the imperialist designs of Tsarist Russia. To many Australians, with Hughes foremost among them, it was an "embarrassing alliance" (Cochrane 82). Australians' fear of Japanese expansionism grew following the victory of Japan over Russia in 1905, as did Australians' distrust of the British government when it relocated its battleships in the Pacific to Europe and left Japan in charge of defending British interests in South East Asia and the South Pacific. When the British admiralty reneged on its commitment made in 1909 to co-operatively build and maintain a Pacific Fleet that would incorporate "fleet units" provided by Australia and New Zealand and even asked the Australian government to send its battleships to the North Sea, Australian military and political authorities were greatly worried, and resentful (Briggs 317).²⁴ Why, Australians asked themselves, were they told to trust their fate to a people they refused to admit to their country? The British government insisted that the navy of its ally, Japan, was sufficient to

secure the safety of its dominions in the Pacific. Japan was, indeed, a loyal ally of Great Britain, and, in 1914, Australians' fears of a Japanese invasion were completely irrational: "Anxiety about the 'yellow peril,' particularly from Japan after 1905, which underpinned the costly, long-range, expeditionary nature of our [Australia's] war, had no strategic foundation" (Lockhart 2018, 5).

The uneasiness felt by Australians who thought they could no longer trust the rulers of the British Empire to defend their colonies on the other side of the world was not easily assuaged. Hughes' commitment to White Australia was the one area in his political vision where particular Australian interests would override loyalty and voluntary submission to the policies of the Empire. He was quite aware that the White Australia policy constituted a serious problem for the *home government*, due its strategic dependence on and economic alliance with Japan. Characteristically, in all the many speeches he delivered in 1916 during his tour of the UK, White Australia was not mentioned a single time. It was – pun intended – the white elephant in the room.

Previously in 1907, while in London to represent Australia at the Imperial Shipping Conference, Hughes had been quite blunt about White Australia. At a public meeting organized by the Independent Labour Party and the Women's Labour League, the Australian Labor Party leader unequivocally stated that Australians were unanimously opposed to "coloured immigration," notwithstanding the position of Great Britain and notwithstanding the lofty ideals of the international labour movement. As reported in the *Times*, Hughes said:

Australians would have nothing to do with the coloured races, whether they called themselves British subjects or not. When he was told that a coolie was a British subject, he for one declined to admit it. That was an attitude which the Australians would not abandon. (qtd. in Fitzhardinge 193)

At the conference, he had already advocated a policy that favoured British trade on British ships manned by British crews, in other words a "White Ocean Policy" (Crowley 1960, 190).

At the Peace Treaty negotiations in Versailles, Hughes fought tooth and nail against the Racial Equality Clause that was to be part of the League of Nations compact, because he believed it would open a back door to immigrants from Asia. His opposition alienated the Japanese, caused embarrassment to the Allies and concern even among some of his supporters at home. However, he refused to compromise and came back to Australia claiming victory (Beaumont 2013, 539–542). The C-class mandate over Papua New Guinea did, in fact, give the Australian government the power to control trade and immigration policies.

Hughes was a "race fanatic" and a man of "dark premonitions" (Cochrane 78, 77). He knew that the White Australia policy was considered a "severe insult" by the Japanese, but he could not have cared less (Cochrane 44). If the Japanese were

allowed to come to Australia, he fantasized, “hundreds of thousands” would “flock” into the country, all “trained soldiers” sent by their government, and “they would have acted as Fifth Columnists, spies, saboteurs” (Hughes 1950, 248–249). It was the same bleak fantasy born out of a profoundly pessimistic view of human affairs, driven by an irrational belief in world-wide conspiracies and a deep fear, a feeling of existential insecurity regarding Australia’s supposedly vulnerable position as a distant colonial outpost of the British Empire. It was this fantastic, obsessive, Hobbesian delusion that had motivated the Australian Prime Minister in World War I to wage war the way he did: a relentless and unforgiving, no-holds-barred campaign against an enemy, imagined or real, both at home and overseas. It was a fantasy that made him, arguably, the most belligerent statesman of World War I.

13. Ethnic Cleansing²⁵

If Japan was the real enemy, why did the German Australians had to be demonized and the “German menace” presented, against all material evidence, as the ultimate threat to Australia’s racial identity? The crisis brought about by the war offered an opportunity to pursue a strategy of what in today’s terms could be called ‘ethnic cleansing’ and it led to a tightening of the definition of White Australia. Thus, the family tree of the peoples of the United Kingdom had to be “modified” to exclude any Germanic relations: “‘Teutonic cousins’ hurriedly became ‘barbarous Huns’” (Cochrane 216). White Australia was now seen through a more narrowly focused lens: it was to be the exclusive home, not of the White but of the “British Race.” To Hughes, to be White Australian was synonymous with being of Anglo-Celtic ethnicity, a “Britisher.” “Our race” was the “British race” that Hughes romantically imagined as having come about by way of an organic historical fusion, a growing together of “Saxon, Norman and Celt” on the British Isles, who had then sallied forth to the four corners of the world to build the British Empire (Hughes 1916, 60).

Referring to the perceived Anglo-Celtic homogeneity of Australia’s population, claimed by Hughes to be even more exclusive than that of Britain itself, he time and again stressed the idea of White Australia as a bastion of Britishers whose ‘manifest destiny’ it was to keep the continent for themselves. It was a position beyond rational scrutiny. As Hughes declared in Federal Parliament, in September 1919:

We are more British than the people of Great Britain, and we hold firmly to the great principle of the White Australia, because we know what we know. We have these liberties, and we believe in our race and in ourselves, and in our capacity to achieve our great destiny, which is to hold this vast continent in trust for those of our race who come after us. (CPD, Vol. 89, 12163–12179)²⁶

“We know what we know”: according to Hughes’ credo, White Australia was an article of faith that needed no reasoning or argument in support.

The real issue, then, that was at stake in the campaign against enemy aliens was the composition of Australian society. The German presence in Australia stood in the way of an Australia that was called upon to stress a claimed ethnic homogeneity that linked the continent to the homeland of a fictitious British race. The different components that constituted the complex of the war aims of the Hughes government converged under the overriding vision of racial exclusivity. German Australian commercial interests had to be removed from within the Empire to ensure that British trade could develop free of competition by other trading nations – representing other races – perceived as a potential threat to the economic hegemony of the Empire as well as to the imaginary racial purity of its dominion in the South Pacific, 12,000 nautical miles away from “home” on the other side of the world.

If there was consensus about the aim of the White Australia policy, confusion and arguments grew about how best to defend it. The longer the war lasted, the more unsettled the domestic political situation turned out to be. Deteriorating living standards leading to bitter and drawn-out strikes, a wide-spread feeling that the costs of the war were not evenly distributed, a radicalization of Irish opposition against Britain in the wake of the Dublin Easter uprising, all contributed to a climate of increased insecurity, exploited by Hughes and his fear-mongering propagandists to conjure up the spectre of the “mighty Niagara” of Asian immigration (Booker 62).

The conflicting emotions came to the fore during the two campaigns over conscription; the race issue was extensively used by both camps to win the argument. The anti-conscriptionists, of whom only a minority was in opposition to the war in principle, saw the country being depopulated; their inevitable conclusion was the warning that ‘coloured labour’ was going to be imported to take the place of white Australians fighting and dying in Europe. The reasoning of the pro-conscriptionists was more complicated. To keep Australia safe from Japan, Hughes argued, it was necessary “to support Britain to the hilt in the hope that while Britain remained undefeated in Europe, Japan would not dare advance in the Pacific” (qtd. in McQueen 74). Conscription in Australia was thus presented as a *quid pro quo*: a strategy to prevent a possibly weakened Britain from seeking the aid of Japan “in return for post-war concessions” which might endanger Australia’s “Whites Only” stand (McQueen 74). On the eve of the 1916 referendum, Hughes exhorted the men of Australia to vote “Yes” for compulsory military service overseas: “I bid you go and fight for White Australia in France” (*SMH*, 27 October 1916).

German Australians were disenfranchised from voting in the two referenda. To their consternation and horror, they had to find out that their whole existence, individually as well as collectively, had been built on an illusion: they were denied their identity as Australians, even if they were naturalized and even if they and their

parents had been born in this country. It was a rude and painful awakening. German Australians were deprived of their civil and constitutional rights, of their property and professions; they were persecuted and attacked by enraged street mobs, sacked from their jobs, interned without trial and deported without a chance to protest or to state their case in court and prove their loyalty. “The hatred of the enemy which characterized the home front during World War I was unprecedented,” writes Marilyn Lake: “Nationalism soon expressed itself as racialism” (190). Raymond Evans concurs: “Antagonism against all Germans attained fully racist proportions,” and “[t]his racism was embodied within a pervasive institutional framework” (1988, 11).

14. Conclusion: The Governor-General’s Apology

On 26 September 1999, the then Governor-General delivered the opening address at the inaugural Australian Conference on Lutheran Education at a Gold Coast resort in Queensland.²⁷ In his speech, Sir William Deane offered an apology to members of the German Australian community present at the meeting:

The tragic, and often shameful, discrimination against Australians of German origin fostered during the World Wars had many consequences. No doubt, some of you carry the emotional scars of injustice during those times as part of your backgrounds or family histories. Let me as Governor-General, say to all who do how profoundly sorry I am that such things happened in our country. (*The Lutheran*, 25 October 1999; Fischer 2012)

The little-known apology invites reflection on a number of issues, especially in the context of the current dominance of the ANZAC story as Australia’s foundation narrative, a quasi-official historical discourse, strongly supported by Sir William Deane, that has elevated the commemoration of ANZAC Day to a de-facto National Holiday.²⁸ While the Governor-General, in his apology, refers to “scars of injustice” and family histories, and thus to individual grief and loss, it might be appropriate also to recall the experience of a collective loss the nation incurred when a significant community within its ranks was destroyed during the First World War. The story of the German Australian community in WWI offers an alternative view of Australia’s history as a nation.

The First World War confirmed the British destiny of the Australian people; it was to be a home for white Australian “Britishers,” monocultural and monolingual. The war interrupted an experiment in pluralistic and multicultural democracy that had begun around the middle of the 19th century and that had received a strong boost in the 1890s, as John Docker has shown, with the emergence of a nativist Australian national identity. This was not a monolithic, simplistic identity but one

that could well be defined as “modern,” characterized by a “unified spirit” that was nevertheless open to or curious about cultural diversity and sensitive towards alternative cultural traditions, in opposition to Anglo-Celtic mainstream orthodoxy which only perpetuated the “cultural cringe” of a society transplanted from Europe to the Antipodes.²⁹

Whereas the ANZAC narrative proclaims a breakthrough towards a new period in Australian history, the Australian home front experience during World War I suggests a return to the old, pre-1890s attitudes and values, resulting in a strengthening of previously dominant patterns characterized as “imperial sentiment, censorious Anglo-conformity” and insistence on immigration from the British Isles (Curthoys and Muecke 179). These patterns were reinforced during the war years and became the dominant mode of cultural identity in the decades following both world wars.

By the end of WWI, the once proud and prominent German Australian community had disintegrated. German immigrants, if they had not been deported, had gone into assimilationist hiding. It was the end of a process towards a multicultural society that would eventually lead to an independent Australian nation – that at least had been the hope of the spokesmen of the German Australian community who had publicly proposed the notion of a republican Australian citizenship nearly half a century earlier. As a civil, pluralistic, liberal and democratic society, Australia did not pass the test of the crisis brought about by the war in Europe. The country suffered a setback in its political culture from which it did not recover until long after the next war which, in some ways, meant a repetition of the experiences of 1914–1918. It is only a few decades ago that Australian society has begun to resume the multicultural experiment that was abandoned in the early days of August 1914.

Notes

1. Newton 2018. Cf. also Connor 85–86. For more details on the outbreak of WWI, and an exhaustive account of simultaneous events in Melbourne and London leading to the declaration of war, see the comprehensive study of Douglas Newton 2014.
2. The unrestrained casualness with which the government could make use of its powers is at times difficult to observe. One example may suffice. In November 1917, during a campaign stop at the railway station in Warwick, Qld., the PM’s hat was knocked off by an egg thrown by somebody in the crowd. The enraged Hughes demanded that the culprit be arrested, but the local police refused to intervene. Back in Sydney, Hughes immediately called his Solicitor-General. “He wanted,” recalls Garran, “at once, three sets of regulations, which he hurriedly outlined, and he gave me 15 minutes. I dictated at top speed and within 15 minutes had established a Commonwealth Police Force, disfranchised

persons of enemy origin, and created some third fortification which I have forgotten. All these matters became law in the next morning's *Gazette*. That was the highest speed record" (1932). See also Bond 42–43.

- 3 Before World War I, the notion of international human rights in relation to prisoners of war was not an issue in multinational agreements. The Geneva Convention of 1929 first laid down rules for their treatment as a consequence of experiences in World War I. Article 9 states that prisoners of war "shall not be confined or imprisoned except as a measure indispensable for safety" and "only so long as circumstances exist which necessitate such a measure" (IHL-GC-1929-2). The convention of 1949 added articles dealing with the internment of civilian internees. In language similar to 1929, it allowed internment only if "justified by imperative reasons of security" and only for as long as the "reasons which necessitated [...] internment" no longer existed (Geneva IV, Art. 78 and 132, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org>). However, there was a precedent that was relevant during World War I, namely the Convention of The Hague of 1907 (Laws and Customs of War on Land) that also used very similar language. It prohibited the confinement of prisoners of war "except as in indispensable measure of safety and only while the circumstances which necessitate the measure continue to exist," while simultaneously recognizing the "right [of non-combatants] to be treated as prisoners of war" (avalon.yale.edu; cf. also Schindler and Toman). In Australia, internment continued until July 1920, well after the cessation of hostilities and the signing of the Peace Treaty. It could thus be argued that on both counts, "imperative reason of security" and length of internment, Australia was in breach of international humanitarian law.
- 4 The quote is from a speech by Hughes during the campaign for the first Conscription Referendum in 1916 (SMH, 27 October 1916).
- 5 On the history of the German presence in Australia see Johannes Voigt 1988, and Ian Harmstorf and M. Cigler 1985. See also Fischer 1989a, 14–38: "The German Australian Community on the Eve of War."
- 6 I am indebted to Borrie for translations from the German-language press, although my conclusions are substantially different from the argument advanced in his book about assimilation.
- 7 Forster's article was written and published before the First Fleet had even left port, i.e. when the concept of a colonial settlement in Australia was not much more than a nebulous idea in the minds of some London administrators.
- 8 On the 48ers see also Fischer 2010. It is perhaps superfluous to point out that in 2021, 233 years after the arrival of the First Fleet and 120 years after Federation, the goal of an independent Australian republic seems as elusive as ever.
- 9 Norman Lindsay's controversial "gorilla man" (with only a question mark as caption) is perhaps the most drastic image. Cf. the reproduction of the image and comment in Beaumont 2013, 98. See also Imperial War Memorial website: "The Question Mark" (iwm.org.uk).

- 10 See also Lake 64: “That Tasmanians spent so much time and energy in 1916 fighting moral, sectarian, political and sectional battles is a reflection of the very real distance which separated them from the battlefields of Europe.”
- 11 See also Stanley 157: ‘Branches of the National Archives of Australia in all states contain records of denunciations and investigations that demonstrate the paranoia that soon spread, and the authorities’ readiness to take seriously even the most ludicrous or unlikely report.’
- 12 On anti-German strikes by unions and local councils retrenching German employees, see Evans 1988, 11–13. On the union campaign against “enemy labour” on the West Australian goldfields, the transportation of Yugoslav mine workers across the continent to New South Wales for internment in Holsworthy, and their eventual deportation, see Fischer 1988, 1–15.
- 13 The reference is to Australian Archives, Victoria Branch. See also Fischer 1989a, 1–2.
- 14 The reference is to Australian Archives, Western Australia Branch. See also Fischer 1989a, 73–74.
- 15 Cf. Australian War Memorial (AWM), Department of Defence: Internment Camps, Internees, etc. Information for Historian. Bean Papers.
- 16 The *Defence Act* of 1903 precluded conscription for overseas service, thus necessitating the holding of a referendum to introduce compulsory service outside Australia’s borders. The Hughes government could have legislated for conscription in parliament; it was doubtful, however, whether it had the numbers to pass the legislation. Cf. Beaumont 2015.
- 17 Australian Archives (ACT branch), CRS A458, item F 152/1.
- 18 Initially, news of the flogging at Rabaul was “greeted [...] with general approval” in Australia, and Defence Minister Pearce even sent a “message of congratulations” to the commanding officer, Colonel William Holmes, who had ordered the flogging. When the Governor-General intervened, concerned about the possibility of international repercussions, Pearce ordered Holmes not to repeat his action and admitted in parliament that the punishment had been ordered without a trial. The Governor-General subsequently sent a report to London, “stating that the men had been tried before their punishment, despite the fact that he knew this to be untrue” (Connor 87–88).
- 19 For a comparative analysis of internment in the USA, Canada and Australia see the contributions in Saunders and Daniels. For internment in the UK, see Panayi 1991. For an account of the “cultural life” in the Australian camps (Holsworthy, Trial Bay and Berrima), see also Helmi and Fischer, and Fischer 1983.
- 20 Cf. also W.M. Hughes, *The Day – And After*, 41; and Fischer, 1989a, 47.
- 21 On race fear, see Greg Lockhart, 2011 (“Race fear, dangerous denial”), and Lockhart, 2012 (“Absenting Asia”).
- 22 Quote from a speech by Hughes in the N.S.W. State Parliament, 21 March 1899, denoting the long-term consistency of Hughes’s racism. Qtd. in Booker 62.

- 23 Peter Cochrane's *Best We Forget* presents a comprehensive account of what he calls the "Australian predicament," i.e. "distrust of Britain and fear of Japan," in the context of a critique of Australian historiography that has largely ignored the racial dimensions of the country's defence policies, both prior to and after the war, and in relation to the ANZAC legend. On Australians' attitudes to Asia and Japan, see also Walker 1999 and Walker and Sobocinska.
- 24 On Australia's defence strategies, see Mordike and Lockhart 2011.
- 25 "Ethnic cleansing" is a contested term that came to prominence during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. While there is no definition of the term in international law, it has been recognized by the United Nations with regard to practices that can "constitute crimes against humanity and can be assimilated to specific war crimes. Furthermore, such acts could also fall within the meaning of the Genocide Convention" (<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.shtml>). Panayi uses the same term with regard to Britain in WWI: "Britain essentially carried out ethnic cleansing during the First World War" (Panayi 2012, 303; see also 3–4 and 264).
- 26 Hughes in a speech outlining his "Monroe Doctrine for Australia and the South Pacific," qtd. in Hudson 127–128.
- 27 I am indebted to my friend Peter Rechner, Melbourne, for making me aware of the apology and for tracking down the source of Deane's speech in the Lutheran Archives, Adelaide, and I am grateful to Sir William Deane for having provided me with a copy of the full text of his speech.
- 28 While Deane's admirable apology to the German Lutheran community is to be unreservedly applauded, I nevertheless take a critical view of his affirmation of the so-called "spirit of ANZAC" as the foundation of Australia's nationhood. For details, see Fischer 2012, 220–239.
- 29 See John Docker 1992, which builds on his earlier and groundbreaking *The Nervous Nineties: Australian Cultural Life in the 1890s*.

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