

BROKEN NATION

Australians in the Great War

JOAN BEAUMONT

by the influenza pandemic) changed the demographics of the Australian population. The 1933 national census revealed 21,500 fewer men aged 35–39 years—who had been 16–20 in 1914–19—than in the 30–34-year-old cohort. The gender balance of Australian society changed too. Whereas in 1911 there were 109 men for every 100 women between 25 and 44 years of age, in 1933 there were 98 men for every 100 women between 35 and 39. The demographic ‘gap’ would have been even more pronounced had there not been unusually high levels of migration in the 1920s (an average of 121,000 per year between 1921 and 1928, as opposed to 57,000 per year between 1901 and 1908).⁵⁶

This might not literally be ‘a lost generation’, but it must have seemed like it. So many young men who would have made a productive contribution to post-war Australia, providing labour and leadership and becoming husbands and fathers, had gone. Since another 160,000 men had been wounded, the damage to Australian social life was incalculable. Not for nothing did Manning Clark call the 1920s in Australia ‘the age of the survivors’.⁵⁷

Added to this was the less quantifiable embittering of public life. No community can wage battles as polarising as the conscription debates of 1916 and 1917 without carrying scars. Post-war Australia remained divided for years into the camps the war had spawned: a broken nation in which the volunteer was pitted against the ‘shirker’; the conscriptionist against the anti-conscriptionist; and, though sectarianism was not created by the war, the Catholic against the Protestant. The insults, calumny and accusations traded in the hysteria of the war years were not forgotten—they echoed down the years. Even in April 1939, the incoming Prime Minister Robert Menzies had to defend himself against attacks from his political opponent, Earle Page, for his failure to enlist in World War I. As his mother—who flew, for the first time, to Canberra to defend him—explained, Menzies’ family had urged him to stay at home after two brothers had enlisted.⁵⁸

The war had also given free rein to a xenophobia and insularity that continued beyond the peace. The hapless ‘enemy aliens’ who had been interned during the war were not reintegrated into Australian society at the war’s end, but rather hounded out of the country. Among those who bayed for their deportation were

returned soldiers who thought German-Australians had ‘got in first [with land claims] whilst our men were fighting’. They were joined by professional associations, such as the Australian branch of the British Medical Association, which wrote to the prime minister claiming that it was not in the public interest for doctors of alien birth and qualifications to continue to practise in Australia. Since the federal government itself was keen to eliminate German competition within the British Empire, and the Treaty of Versailles stated that all prisoners of war and interned civilians should be repatriated ‘with the greatest rapidity’, mass deportation was introduced with the same ‘arbitrary and ruthless determination’ that characterised internment during the war years. By September 1919, some 6150 people had been deported, 5414 of whom had previously been interned. Others were family members or enemy aliens who could not face staying in the country that had turned so viciously against them.⁵⁹

The paranoia about left-wing radicalism that Hughes and other loyalists had exploited during the war years also persisted into the post-war years. The IWW may have been crushed, but there was now a new enemy in communism—almost literally, since the Australian government decided to send Australian troops to Russia as part of the Allied military intervention against the Bolsheviks. The internal security apparatus that the Australian state had created—purportedly for the duration of the war only—therefore was not completely dismantled. The offices of the censor and other agencies were closed, but their vast records on the Australian population were transferred to the Investigation Branch set up after the war as part of the Attorney-General’s Department. Meanwhile, although the *War Precautions Act* was repealed in 1920, some regulations continued, and in 1926 an amendment to the *Crimes Act* resurrected many of the provisions of the *Unlawful Associations Act*. Under surveillance now were communists, non-British migrants, Irish nationalists, left-wing radicals and trade unionists.⁶⁰

The loyalist elements of Australian society also remained mobilised against the ‘threat’ from the left. Initially, they conducted vigilante-style attacks against meetings of radicals and Russian-Australians in 1918 and 1919. The streets of Brisbane, for example, erupted in the so-called Red Flag Riots in the later

months of 1919. Then, in later years, citizen forces were raised as they had been in 1917, to counter strike action, for example, by Victorian police in 1923. And when the Great Depression brought financial ruin and unemployment to many returned soldiers, their disillusion found an outlet in 'secret' armies—notably the Old and New Guard in New South Wales and the White Army in Victoria. The threat posed by these groups to the authority of Australian governments was never especially serious (even though they had high-level support, including from senior businessmen, conservative politicians and military leaders). They were certainly not comparable to the paramilitary organisations of the right and left that destroyed democracy in Weimar Germany. But even if more Dad's Armies than *Sturmabteilungen*, they reflected the degree to which the war had left a potential for violence within the Australian political culture.⁶¹

In many ways, then, post-war Australia was polarised and dominated by the forces of conservatism and reaction. Some historians have lamented that the shattering of the ALP federally meant that the 'party of progress' was overtaken by the 'parties of reaction or resistance'. The reforming energies of the pre-1914 period were dissipated and Australia lost the capacity for political and social experimentation which had placed it in a vanguard internationally in the years before 1914. This conclusion needs some qualification. Dominant though the non-Labor parties were at the federal level from 1917 to 1941, they were not monolithic and, under Prime Minister Stanley Bruce (1924–29) and the cautious reforming liberalism of Joseph Lyons (1931–39), they initiated their own agendas of national and infrastructure development. At the state level, too, power alternated between Labor and non-Labor, with Queensland having a long period of Labor government (and abolishing the *bête noire* of the left, the Legislative Council, in 1922). Yet despite this, the image of Australia as an inward-looking society, focused on grief and the rancour of the war years, is impossible to dispel.⁶²

The Anzac legend

For all its negative legacy, World War I provided a foundational narrative of Australian nationalism in the form of the Anzac 'legend' or 'myth' which,

BROKEN NATION

- 56 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census*, 2012–2013, <www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features952012-2013>, viewed 20 April 2013.
- 57 Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, first published 1963, Melbourne: Penguin, 2006, p. 255.
- 58 See A.W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, vol. 1, 1894–1943, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993, pp. 274–8.
- 59 See Fischer, *Enemy Aliens*, Ch. 15.
- 60 *ibid.*, pp. 306–7.
- 61 See Raymond Evans, “Agitation, Ceaseless Agitation”: Russian Radicals in Australia and the Red Flag Riots’, in John McNair and Thomas Poole, *Russia and the Fifth Continent: Aspects of Russian–Australian Relations*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1992, pp. 126–71, and Raymond Evans, “Some Furious Outbursts of Riots”: Returned Soldiers and Queensland’s “Red Flag” Disturbances, 1918–19’, *War & Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1985, pp. 75–98. For the secret armies, see Andrew Moore, ‘Guns Across the Yarra: Secret Armies and the 1923 Melbourne Police Strike’, in Sydney Labour Group (ed.), *What Rough Beast? The State and Social Order in Australian History*, Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1982, pp. 220–33; Andrew Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier: Conservative Paramilitary Organisations in New South Wales 1930–32*, UNSW Press, 1989; Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop: Australia’s Secret Army Intrigue of 1931*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1988. For Australian intervention in Russia, see Jeffrey Grey, ‘A Pathetic Sideshow: Australians and the Russian Intervention 1918–1919’, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 7, 1985, pp. 12–17; Peter Burness, ‘The Australians in North Russia 1919’, *Sabretache*, vol. XXII, no. 4, 1976, and Peter Burness, ‘The Forgotten War in North Russia’, *Defence Force Journal*, vol. 22, 1980, pp. 31–41.
- 62 See Rob Watts, *The Foundations of the National Welfare State*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987, pp. 2–7, for further discussion of this issue.
- 63 For a discussion of the evolution of the Anzac legend, see Joan Beaumont, ‘The Anzac Legend’, in Joan Beaumont (ed.), *Australia’s War 1914–18*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995, pp. 149–80.
- 64 For further discussion, see Joan Beaumont, ‘Prisoners of War in Australian National Memory’, in Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad, *Prisoners of War: Prisoners of Peace*, Oxford: Berg, 2005, pp. 185–94.
- 65 Inglis, *Sacred Places*, p. 9.
- 66 *Sunday Herald Sun*, 26 April 2009. This argument is developed more fully in Joan Beaumont, ‘Nation oder Commonwealth?’, pp. 43–68.
- 67 For public opinion and Iraq, see Murray Goot, ‘Public Opinion and the Democratic Deficit: Australia and the War Against Iraq’, *Australian Humanities Review*, issue 29, May 2003. For the positioning of Iraq and Afghanistan in the Anzac lineage, see ‘For Freedom’s Flame’, by Rupert McCall, read at the 2009 Anzac Day ceremony at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. For Howard, see Mark McKenna, ‘Howard’s Warriors’, in Raimond Gaita (ed.), *Why the War was Wrong*, Melbourne: Text, 2003, p. 184.