Australia and the Great War, 1914 – 1918

Australia's role in the First World War, or the Great War as it was known until 1939, is central to the development of modern Australia's vision of itself in the world. In many ways it has served to create what is in some ways a second founding of the nation in the Gallipoli campaign and on the battlefields of France and Belgium. The influence of the war experience in the First, and Second, World War is evident in the way in which ANZAC day is, perhaps even more than Australia day, the country's national day.

When the war broke out in 1914, it was a certainty that, because of longstanding economic, family and defence ties, Australia, along with New Zealand, would stand alongside Britain. The then Prime Minister Andrew Fisher was quick to pledge the country's support to "the last man, the last shilling". This was no idle promise and Australia paid a high price for their loyalty to their colonizers. From a pre-war population of 5m, 417,000 enlisted in the armed forces, of which 324,000 served abroad. By the end of the war, Australia had lost 60,000 dead and 155,000 men had been wounded. The economic price was also high. The national debt, which had stood at £6m in 1914, was £325m by the end of the war.

It is possible that the first shot of the war was fired in Australia, when a shot was fired across the bow of the German merchant ship Pfalz as it tried to escape from Port Arthur only a few hours after the declaration of war. In late 1914 the light cruiser HMAS Sydney sank the German warship Emden off the west coast of the country. Also, early in the war, Australian troops captured the German radio transmitters in Rabaul and Nauru and conquered all of German New Guinea.

At first the Australian forces were intended only to defend Australia, but in 1915 the Australia New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) departed for Europe. Their first stop was Egypt and it was because they were so close that they were chosen to take part in the campaign to capture the Gallipoli peninsula, the key to shipping into the Black Sea, from the Turks. The plan was for British, French and Anzac forces to land on the peninsular at night at weak points in the Turkish defence. However, strong winds blew the troops off course to better defended spots and in the advantage was lost. What followed was months of bitter fighting in which 20,000 British and 7,000 ANZAC soldiers were killed and which ended in a successful withdrawal, but no gain for the Allies. It was at this moment of history that Australia was propelled on to the world stage. From this moment onward Australia began to think of itself as a country in its own right; as being separate to Britain and no longer a colony.

Most of the ANZAC force was sent to Europe, but the Australian Light Horse remained to fight Turkish forces in Palestine and Syria. They defended the Suez

Canal and advanced through Palestine and Syria. They also took part in what was one of the world's last great cavalry charges at Beersheba.

The main ANZAC force arrived in Europe in 1916. The ANZAC experience was similar to that of the other participants in the war; a high death toll and little gain to be shown for it. Australian forces were present at all the major battles of the war and sustained some terrible casualties. For example, in 24 hours near Pozieres the 5th Division suffered 5,000 casualties. At the battle of Bullecort, of the 3,000 men who advanced, 2339 were killed, wounded or captured.

By 1917 most of the officers were not professional soldiers. The most prominent example was General Sir John Monash, who was an engineer by training. He commanded the allied forces at the battle of Hamel so well that the general staff published the battle reports as a model. In August 1918, he commanded 200,000 troops on what way called "Ludendorff's black day", a turning point in the war. Monash was probably Australia's greatest military figure.

Unlike in other armies in the war, the Australian soldiers were all volunteers. They were also more individualistic and showed less respect for the rulebook than other soldiers. The relationship between ranks was more democratic and officer had to win the respect of their troops. All in all, they paid a high price for fighting in the war. Of the 324,000 soldiers who served overseas in the war 215,000 were killed or wounded. This was the highest proportion of any of the countries in the war and was probably due to the Australians fighting qualities, which meant that they were often used on the frontline of the fighting.

At home, the war had a significant effect on the economy. Negative effects included the end of British investment, the closure of many shipping lanes and the stockpiling of Australia's main export, wool. However, the isolation that resulted from the war meant that Australia had to make some things that had previously been imported. This led to the development of new industries. In addition, the BHP smelting company, which is now a major Australian company, saw a great increase in demand for iron and steel. The needs of the war were stimulus for the beginning of full industrialization in Australia.

At the signing of the treaty of Versailles, which marked the end of the war, Australia signed as a separate country. This reflected the fact that, at the cost of 60,000 dead, Australia had finally emerged from the shadow of Britain. The Great War was, perhaps, the beginning of modern Australian history.

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