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Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Australia)

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Despite the rhetoric at the war's outbreak of how Australia would stand united beside its British motherland, and in direct contrast to the public memory of World War I in Australia as an episode that brought the nation together, the Great War was a deeply divisive experience for Australians. Ethnic, sectarian and class differences had been successfully accommodated in the nation that federated in 1901 through mutual tolerance and a series of compromises. But the strains of war generated discontent, bitterness, conflict and division, to which the government responded with a range of repressive measures.

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Introduction

Australian collective memory of World War I is dominated by happenings at the battlefront. This tendency will only increase during the centenary years as the Australian government leads commemorations of military battles and campaigns, most notably those that took place on the Gallipoli Peninsula, on the Somme, and in Flanders. Relatively little of the centenary will

focus on the home front, which tends to be seen as unremarkable and unproblematic, with the consequence that wartime divisions within Australia are largely overlooked in Australian collective memory. Early in 2014, for example, a Queensland minister assisting the premier during the Anzac Centenary program stated, "When war was declared in 1914, the Queensland community came together to support each other."[1]

Academic understandings are very different. Research by a bevy of Australian historians, including Raymond Evans, Bobbie Oliver, Joy Damousi, Marilyn Lake, Joan Beaumont, Gerhard Fischer and, more recently, Robert Bollard, demonstrate a deeply divided society. While it is true that the declaration of war was initially met with an overwhelmingly positive response, by the time of the Armistice in November 1918 the fabric of Australian society had been riven by bitter debates over conscription, worker's rights, the presence of so-called "enemy aliens," and accusations of disloyalty to the war effort. Social differences were rendered into major fault lines and debate was replaced by vilification and repression.

Pre-War Australian Society

Australia was a relatively young nation when war broke out in August 1914 – after several years of debate, the disparate colonies had agreed to federate in 1901 – and possessed a distinctive (white) history as both a penal settlement and social laboratory. By 1914 Australian society was reasonably cohesive but undercurrents of ethnic, religious and class tension were visible. Aboriginal Australians were not regarded as part of the nation and were, along with those of Asian and other non-white backgrounds who were systematically excluded through immigration restriction, deportation and other forms of official discrimination, effectively non-citizen residents.[2]

Ethnic Tensions

Australia in 1914 was primarily an Anglo nation that accommodated, for the most part relatively comfortably, significant ethnic variations within the overall British, or "white," framework. The Scots were regarded as unproblematic, although the Irish were more difficult. The Irish were some of the earliest economic migrants to Australia, escapees from poverty and famine in their homeland. They also maintained their own culture and, while tolerated by the largely Protestant-Anglo community, were viewed with a measure of suspicion. Those of Irish descent had made up a large portion of the convict population, and had been involved in convict uprisings, bushranging and the Eureka Rebellion, perhaps in reaction to a society that mimicked "the bigotry and oppression of British rule in their native land."[3] In 1914, approximately one in five Australians was of Irish descent.

The Germans in Australia, the largest group of non-British immigrants, formed a distinctly visible community, with their own German clubs in many towns and cities, as well as their own Lutheran schools and churches. There was also a significant German press in operation in Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales, while many towns, particularly in South Australia, bore German names, such as Lobethal and Hahndorf.[4]

White Australians were extremely wary of the presence of non-European migrants, particularly Asians and Pacific Islanders. It was popularly believed that they posed a threat to both the purity of the white race and, with their seemingly willing acceptance of lower wages and poorer working conditions, white workers' jobs. Indeed, one of the first acts of the very first federal parliament was to pass legislation that restricted immigration to Australia on racial grounds – the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901.

Religious Diversity

Ethnic diversity led to and mirrored religious differences and tensions, particularly between Protestants and Catholics. 21 percent of the Australian population were Catholic in 1914, the majority of whom were of Irish descent.[5] Attitudes towards Irish Catholics in the Australian colonies were sometimes hostile: "The accepted image of the Irish Catholic was that of an obnoxious, dangerous inferior."[6] Sectarian bitterness increased after the introduction of education reform beginning in the 1870s, when the colonies implemented various acts to establish the public school system. The new system of state education was made free, compulsory and, controversially, secular.[7] This angered many Catholic leaders, who felt the new system was designed to destroy, or at least weaken, the Church in Australia. They responded by establishing their own schools. Catholic children were encouraged to attend – parents who sent their children to state schools were accused of being bad Catholics and

were threatened with the withdrawal of the sacraments.[8] This two-tier education system effectively divided Australian school children, and to a broader extent, the Australian community, along religious lines. Australia maintained a separation of Church and State, but the "establishment" was clearly Anglican.

Economic Issues

The religious and ethnic divisions translated loosely into class divisions as the Australian working classes were disproportionately Irish-Catholic. At the time of federation Australia was coming out of a decade of significant economic and industrial unrest. Economic depression after the boom of the gold rushes in the 1850s led to the rise of new unionism as workers sought to establish their position in relation to wages and conditions. Struggles between the union movement and employers led to a number of significant strikes in the 1890s among shearers, miners and shipping workers over matters including minimum wages, working conditions, and the rights of workers to unionise.[9] The Harvester Judgement of 1907 established the foundations of the modern Australian industrial system, including minimum wages and compulsory arbitration over industrial matters.[10] Despite what became known as the "Australian settlement" – featuring compulsory arbitration and the living wage for workers, and industry protection for employers – underlying tensions and deep inequalities remained.[11]

War and Mobilisation

Australia was in the midst of a federal election when war broke out in August 1914. Both the prime minister, Joseph Cook (1860-1947), and the leader of the Labor Party, Andrew Fisher (1862-1928), gave immediate support to Britain. Cook declared that "when the Empire is at war, so is Australia at war," while Fisher said that Australia would "stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling."[12] The following month the ruling Liberals conceded defeat and Labor leader Fisher became the new prime minister, with William "Billy" Hughes (1862-1952) as attorney general. The new Labor government immediately organised the nation for war by raising the first contingents of the AIF and establishing various war-related administrative and legal structures.[13]

Legislative Machinery for Repression

As well as mobilising in a positive sense by marshalling the nation's resources for the war effort, the federal government also mobilised Australian society through repressive measures directed at controlling discontent, protest and subversion. One of the first pieces of legislation passed was the War Precautions Act in late October 1914, an act couched in terms of government defence of the Commonwealth that permitted the Federal government "far-reaching and arbitrary powers to restrict civil liberties."[14]

Within the stipulations of the act, the government introduced censorship of the press. Newspaper articles, cartoons, photographs and interviews with returned servicemen were subjected to censorship, and publishers were not permitted to inform readers whether their content had or had not been censored. Publishing information about the movements of Australian troops was restricted, publication of any material that might prejudice recruiting was banned, and the censor was allowed to enter premises on suspicion of the publication of illegal material. Significant restrictions were also placed on freedom of speech. The act gave the government the power to prosecute those accused of spreading information "likely to cause disaffection or public alarm," or anyone who was seen to be publicly either assisting the enemy or prejudicing recruiting.[15]

The passing of the Unlawful Associations Act in December 1916 further increased the government's repressive powers, this time targeting the radical socialist group, the Industrial Workers of the World. The act made both members of this group and other groups similarly declared illegal liable for up to six months of imprisonment should they encourage or countenance the harm or destruction of people or property. An amendment in 1917 made mere membership of such groups illegal.[16]

War-Weariness, Conscription and the Enemies Within

The early and widespread enthusiasm for the war effort gradually dissipated as the effects of the war and mobilisation hit home. Australian political, social and economic relations became increasingly strained, and the Hughes government increasingly turned

on those it considered less than fully committed to the war's prosecution.

The Role of Hughes

Although provisions of the War Precautions Act had been used from the time the act was passed, internal repression was rapidly stepped up after Hughes replaced Fisher as prime minister in October 1915. Growing losses at the front after April 1915, when Australian soldiers went into action in the Dardanelles, reverses on the Western Front through early 1918, and the need to maintain solidarity amid growing war-weariness at home all played a part, alongside Hughes' penchant for brinksmanship and operating in a sense of crisis, in generating a more repressive atmosphere within Australia. As Stuart Macintyre has written, "free from the constraints of caucus, Hughes seemed a law unto himself."[17] Hughes used the tactics of division to assemble fragile wartime coalitions that kept him in power but gave no quarter to anyone less than fully committed to the war effort. According to Macintyre, Hughes "made it clear that the needs of the nation at war took precedence over its citizens' civil liberties."[18]

Loyalists and Disloyalists

The dominant sections of the Australian community rallied to Hughes' cause, if not the man himself, and cast themselves as loyalists. They were predominantly, if not uniformly, of Anglo descent, anti-Bolshevik and anti-socialist, loyal to the Empire, and committed to winning the war. Mirroring the pre-war divisions within Australia, those not belonging to this "positive integrating bracket" as it has been termed, were regarded as dangerous internal enemies.[19] They were further marginalised from the mainstream and distanced from the loyalists through the often vicious political rhetoric of wartime Australia. This emanated from the political leadership of the country, with Hughes to the fore, and was widely echoed and supported in the major daily newspapers.

The War Comes Home

The divisions increased as Australians on the home front began to feel the brunt of the war's effects. During the early months Australians were united in the belief that German expansionism had to be stopped.[20] However, this initial sense of unity and patriotism rapidly diminished in the face of the escalating economic and emotional pressures. In 1914 unemployment rates rose dramatically, from 5.9 percent at the beginning of the year to 11 percent by the end.[21] Industrial unrest gradually increased, peaking in 1917. Again driven by the economic strains of war – falling real wages and wartime shortages – this strike originated in state railway workshops in Sydney, where employers had imposed "speed up" measures on the workers. The strike quickly spread so that 76,000 workers – approximately 14 percent of the state's workforce – eventually took part.[22] Soon workers from nearly every state were striking as unionists' anger over the government's mobilisation of loyalist "scab" labour to take over the crippled railways, wharves and other important sectors manifested as refusal to work.[23] Unrest over the economic strain of war was not restricted solely to striking male workers. As Judith Smart has written, frustration and anger over the rising cost of living resulted in local demonstrations. In Melbourne, there was "wild commotion" in the streets of the city and inner suburbs as working-class Australians protested against inflation, unemployment and rising costs of living. Radical and working-class women, faced with the increasingly impossible task of managing the household budget in the face of rising food prices, rioted in August and September 1917.[24]

Grief, Loss and War-Weariness

The emotional toll of the war also increased with time. Australian forces suffered few casualties in 1914, but losses spiked sharply with the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, became worse in 1916 with the Somme campaigns, and reached a peak in 1917 with nearly 77,000 casualties.[25] Falling enlistments in 1918 were but one sign of the war-weariness that afflicted Australia as the war dragged on, causalities increased and the burden of grief grew. By the latter stages of the war Australians were in a state of emotional exhaustion. The war had divided them according to ideas of loyalty along class, religious, political and ethnic lines, demanded they deal with sectarian bitterness and class conflict, and forced them to confront what McKernan called the "overwhelming fear that Australia would never be the same again."[26] Constant anxiety about loved ones fighting overseas, coupled with these bitter tensions and strains, took a toll on Australians at home – a toll that would be felt even more as thousands of returned servicemen attempted to fit back into civilian life upon the cessation of hostilities.

Conscription Campaigns of 1916 and 1917

The divisions and strains within wartime Australia coalesced around the conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917. Hughes, after returning from a lengthy journey to the United Kingdom in 1916, urged upon Australians the need for conscription as voluntary enlistment failed to generate sufficient recruits to replace the increasingly ghastly losses. Two bitter campaigns and plebiscites followed, in October 1916 and December 1917, both of which saw a narrow majority in favour of retaining voluntarism.

The debate regarding voluntarism versus compulsion invoked ideas of loyalty and disloyalty and caused a major split in Australian politics and society. The extreme bitterness of the campaigns was exacerbated by the fact that the question of conscription ignited the simmering social tensions of pre-war Australia. As Joan Beaumont wrote, "for both sides conscription became the vehicle for giving voice to much wider concerns and anxieties which reflected a deep social polarisation."[27]

Pro-conscriptionists – typically loyalist Anglophile, Protestant, middle-class individuals – believed that Australia's contribution to the war effort must not be halted by the apathy and indifference that appeared to have gripped Australian society. They demanded the conscription of Australian men who "could not see their duty for themselves" and labelled anti-conscriptionists German lovers, slackers and weaklings, accusing them of cowardice, treachery and desertion of the men who were already fighting.[28]

Anti-conscriptionists, conversely, believed that compelling a man to kill was improper and immoral and called pro-conscriptionists butchers who wanted to sacrifice young Australians when the nation had already made ample sacrifices. The anti-conscriptionists – a loose coalition of factions of the working class, Irish, Catholics, liberals, unionists and pacifists – held rallies and open forums denouncing conscription and, in many instances, the war itself. Both the October 1916 and November 1917 plebiscites returned a negative vote. But not before Hughes and his supporters had been expelled from the Labor Party and set up a new Nationalist government, and not before bitter and sometimes violent debates had spilled out into the streets, divided towns and cities, and pitted families, friends, neighbours and co-workers against one another.[29]

Conscription Debates and Pre-War Divisions

The conscription debates reopened and exacerbated the pre-war divisions in Australian society. Middle-class Australians had long been concerned about the sectional loyalty and militant nature of the labour organisations, while members of the working class, already feeling the effects of rapid inflation, rising costs of living and challenges to their working conditions, asked why their bodies and labour should be conscripted while the middle classes did not have their wealth conscripted, making instead easy monetary sacrifices in the name of patriotism.[30] Pre-war religious and ethnic tensions intersected with these class divisions. Irish Australians, for example, challenged the appropriateness of their being forced to fight alongside the British, particularly after their violent suppression of the Irish Nationalists' Easter Uprising in April 1916. The Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Daniel Mannix (1864-1963) provided a leading voice for Catholics in the anti-conscription campaigns. He expressed, as Patrick O'Farrell (1933-2003) wrote, the sense of oppression and injustice many Catholic Australians (the majority of whom were also Irish) felt towards the ruling Protestant establishment. He was a vocal figure in the 1917 campaign, attracting crowds of up to 100,000 to his public addresses.[31] Irish Catholic and working-class Australians thus became a suspect element of the Australian community. Hughes, for example, complained in 1917 to David Lloyd George (1863-1945) that "The Irish question is at the bottom of all our difficulties in Australia. They – the Irish – have captured the political machinery of the labour organisations – assisted by syndicalists and the I.W.W. people. The church is secretly against recruiting. Its influence killed conscription."[32] Hughes was writing about the outbreak of the general strike in New South Wales in 1917, and his arguments were not tenable. The significant point, however, is the fashion in which all opposition – to conscription, to new labour practices, to the war effort – was represented as an undermining of the war effort by labour radicals, Catholics and the Irish, who were treated either as one and the same or as in close alliance. Indeed, the entire Catholic Church was at times represented as disloyal by Hughes, in the press and by other denominations.[33]

Interestingly, however, the most significantly persecuted racial minorities in pre-war Australia – the Aboriginal peoples and others of non-European backgrounds – suffered little from wartime racial and ethnic hysteria. They were not permitted to serve in the AIF and were consequently largely immune from allegations of disloyalty. Several hundred Aboriginal Australians did enlist despite the prohibition, and Aboriginal people and supporters later often cited their war service in claims for better citizenship

rights.[34]

Unionists and Radicals

If the Irish working-class were regarded with suspicion, they at least enjoyed some safety in numbers. Political radicals, striking unionists and socialists were openly accused of being disloyal and anti-war. In September 1915, anger and frustration over poor working conditions among the miners at Broken Hill – who produced the lead necessary for Allied weaponry and ammunition – spilled over into the public sphere when the miners struck. Though their campaign for lowered working hours was eventually successful, they were vilified in the press for their "deliberate and...wicked perversity" and it was suggested they were acting like "agents of the enemy".[35] Such strikes led to an increasing sense of suspicion of unionists that grew stronger as the war dragged on. Perhaps the most suspect was the syndicalist organisation, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The "Wobblies," as they were commonly known, openly opposed the war, advocated for international unionism, and promoted strikes and sabotage as industrial weapons. They earned the intense ire of Hughes and, as Robert Bollard suggested, the "reflex action" of the government to classify any industrial action or dissent as IWW-inspired "magnified this organisation in the minds of a terrified conservative constituency."[36] Between late 1916 and August 1917, 103 of the IWW's leading members were imprisoned and several deported, usually on exaggerated charges.[37]

Anti-German Hysteria

Also at the margins was the German-Australian population. By 1914 there were some 33,000 German-born Australians in the country, plus many more of German descent. When war broke out there were initial signs of goodwill, with at least some newspapers encouraging Australians of British background to be sympathetic towards the feelings of German Australians and the plight they now found themselves in, while many German Australians assured their fellow Australians of their loyalty. However, deepening hostility and persecution quickly followed as the government sought to heighten public support for the war, as wartime propaganda demonised the German enemy and as casualties began to mount.[38] Newspapers frequently worked up anti-German sentiment by telling sensationalistic stories and singling out individuals to incite both the authorities and vigilantes to take action. Unionists refused to work alongside "enemy" labour. Anti-German leagues were set up across the country where the more committed xenophobes could campaign for the internment of all Germans, the outlawing of the German language and other similar measures. Returned soldiers were often at the forefront of the anti-German campaigns, perhaps in part a reflection of the viciousness and hatred of a war that employed weapons such as poison gas.[39]

Australia copied much of its "enemy alien" legislation from Britain. The use of the German language was progressively banned throughout Australia, German schools, newspapers and clubs were closed, German place names were changed, and Germans were prevented from voting or for standing for public office, in effect a removal of one of the most basic rights of citizenship – the right to participate in democratic politics. They were also excluded from owning shares, selling land or operating companies. These anti-German measures were initially only applied to men of military age and Germans not normally resident in Australia, such as those manning ships in Australian harbours at the time when the war broke out. However, they were gradually extended to cover German nationals normally resident in Australia, Germans who had been naturalised, and then anyone whose parents or grandparents were German, even if that person was born in Australia.[40]

This effectively converted members of the German Australian community from citizens in 1914 to outcasts who could be treated like criminals by the military authorities. Over the course of the war nearly 7,000 Germans were interned in camps across Australia, some 4,500 of whom had been residents in the Commonwealth prior to the war. Internment could be based on suspicion, and there was no one to whom internees could apply for redress if they thought they were being treated unjustly. At the end of the war some 6,150 were "repatriated" – many of whom had never set foot on German soil before. The government's internment policies had been most harshly applied against community leaders and successful businessmen, and along with other internments, disenfranchisement, the changing of place names, the banning of the German language, and the closing of Lutheran schools, these measures effectively destroyed the German community in Australia.[41]

Conclusion

The First World War cost Australia even more than is obvious at first glance. As well as the 60,000 dead and 150,000 wounded, the grief at home, and the tremendous financial cost of the war, the conflict dealt an enormous blow to the liberal political culture, destroyed the German community, and created an atmosphere of ethnic hostility, sectarianism, suspicion, sorrow and division. Unlike other nations, democracy in Australia held, but the damage to the social fabric and social relations was substantial, and would take decades to repair. The popular understanding that Australia came together as a nation through its First World War experiences stands in stark contrast to historical reality. Indeed, the extent of the division demanded a mythological counter-narrative to mask and repair the damage that World War I did to Australian society, hence the still current claim that the war brought Australians together.

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Notes

1. ↑ Walker, Ian / Elmes, Glen: ANZAC centenary fundraising appeal launched, issued by Queensland Government, online: [1] (retrieved: 27.03.2015).
2. ↑ Evans, Raymond et al.: 1901 – Our Future's Past. Documenting Australia's Federation, Sydney 1997, pp. 22-28.
3. ↑ Bollard, Robert: In the Shadow of Gallipoli, Sydney 2013, p. 57.
4. ↑ Tampke, Jurgen: The Germans in Australia, Melbourne 2006, pp. 104ff.
5. ↑ Ibid.
6. ↑ O'Farrell, Patrick: The Catholic Church and Community. An Australian History, 3rd edition, Sydney 1992, p. 54.
7. ↑ See Grundy, Denis: Secular, Compulsory and Free. The Education Act of 1872, Melbourne 1972.
8. ↑ O'Farrell, Catholic Church 1992, p. 186.
9. ↑ See Bellanta, Melissa: 16 August 1890, The Maritime Strike Begins. On "Utopia" and Class War, in: Crotty, Martin / Roberts, David Andrew (eds.): Turning Points in Australian History, Sydney 2009, pp. 74-86.
10. ↑ Macintyre, Stuart: The Oxford History of Australia Volume 4. The Succeeding Age 1901-1942, Melbourne 1993, p. 146.
11. ↑ Macintyre, Oxford History 1993, pp. 45-70.
12. ↑ Argus, 1 August 1914, online: http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/376537 (retrieved: 1 April 2015).
13. ↑ Beaumont, Joan: The Politics of a Divided Society, in: Beaumont, Joan (ed.): Australia's War 1914-1918, Sydney 1995, p. 38.
14. ↑ Ibid.
15. ↑ For a comprehensive overview of censorship regulations under the War Precautions Act see Scott, Ernest: Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918 – Volume XI. Australia During the War, 2nd edition, Brisbane 1989, pp. 64f.
16. ↑ Macintyre, Oxford History 1993, p. 170; Beaumont, Joan: Broken Nation. Australians in the Great War, Sydney 2013, p. 260.
17. ↑ Macintrye, Oxford History 1993, p. 168.
18. ↑ Macintyre, Oxford History 1993, p. 161.
19. ↑ Fischer, Gerhard: "Negative Integration" and an Australian Road to Modernity. Interpreting the Australian Homefront Experience in World War I, in: Australian Historical Studies 26/104 (1995), p. 467.
20. ↑ McKernan, Michael: The Australian People and the Great War, Melbourne 1980, pp. 4f.
21. ↑ Macintyre, Oxford History 1993, p. 146.
22. ↑ McKernan, Australian People 1980, p. 8.
23. ↑ For more on the 1917 strike see Bollard, Shadow 2013, pp. 112-140.
24. ↑ Smart, Judith: Feminists, food and the fair price. The cost of living demonstrations in Melbourne, August-September 1917, in: Damousi, Joy / Lake, Marilyn (eds.): Gender and War. Australians at War in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge 1995, pp. 274-301.
25. ↑ Beaumont, Joan: Australia's War, in: Beaumont, Joan (ed.): Australia's War 1914-1918, Sydney 1995, p. 23.
26. ↑ McKernan, Australian People 1980, p. 9.
27. ↑ Beaumont, Politics 1995, p. 46.
28. ↑ McKernan, Australian People 1980, p. 7.

29. ↑ For an interesting analysis of the nature of some of these riots and meetings see Smart, Judith: The Right to Speak and the Right to be Heard. The Popular Disruption of Conscriptionist Meetings in Melbourne, 1916, in: Australian Historical Studies 23/92 (1989), pp. 203-219.

30. ↑ For a recent analysis of the labour movement attitude towards conscription see Bollard, Shadow 2013, pp. 73-98.

31. ↑ For the Catholic response to conscription and the role of Mannix see O'Farrell, Catholic Church 1992, pp. 298-353.

32. ↑ Kildea, Jeff: Paranoia and Prejudice. Billy Hughes and the Irish Question 1916-1922 in: Brownrigg, Jeff / Mongan, Cheryl / Reid, Richard (eds.): Echoes of Irish Australia. Rebellion to Republic, Galong 2007, p. 156.

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34. ↑ Stanley, Peter: "He was black, he was a White man, and a dinkum Aussie." Race and Empire in Revisiting the Anzac Legend, in: Das, Santanu (ed.): Race, Empire and First World War Writing, Cambridge 2011, pp. 221f.

35. ↑ Bollard, Shadow 2013, p. 49.

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37. ↑ For more on the arrests of the IWW "Sydney Twelve" see Bollard, Shadow 2013, pp. 100-110. For the Western Australian Perspective on the IWW see Oliver, Bobbie: War and Peace in Western Australia, Crawley 1995, pp. 79-84.

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39. ↑ McKernan, Australian People 1980, pp. 150-177.

40. ↑ See Scott, Official History 1989, pp. 105-144 and Fischer, Gerhard: Enemy Aliens. Internment and the Homefront Experience in Australia 1914-1920, Brisbane 1989 for an overview of anti-German policies between 1914-1918.

41. ↑ For the internment of Germans and the legacy of anti-German hysteria during the war see Fischer, Enemy Aliens 1989.

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