

## Choosing War, and Choosing War Aims: British and Australian Decision-making, 1914-1918

Douglas Newton

Why did they fight? At Blackboy Hill camp near Perth in 1915, soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) sang 'Australia's Call To Arms':

And when in later years our history appears,  
Let Australia's future sons be proud to say,  
That their fathers, like our own, fought for rectitude alone,  
To protect the weaker nations 'gainst the strong.<sup>89</sup>

The song perfectly reflected the moral fireworks ignited in London. Prime Minister Herbert Asquith told the House of Commons on 6 August 1914 that Britain was fighting 'to fulfil a solemn international obligation' because 'small nationalities are not to be crushed.'<sup>90</sup> In Dublin, in September, he told the crowds that Britain was fighting for ideals: 'the definite repudiation of militarism' and 'a real European partnership.'<sup>91</sup> At the Guildhall, in November, he defined shining chivalrous goals: Britain would fight on 'until Belgium recovers in full measure all and more than all that she has sacrificed, until France is adequately secured against the menace of aggression, until the rights of the smaller nationalities of Europe are placed upon an unassailable foundation, and until the military domination of Prussia is wholly and finally destroyed.'<sup>92</sup> Britain was fighting to liberate others, not to expand her Empire.

Did the decision-makers keep faith with this? Did they show every caution in entering the war? Did they keep a tight rein over war aims?

### Choosing War: London

Why did Australia go to the Great War? The answer is incontrovertible: because the British government chose war. How then did Britain come to choose war? Two moments stand out.

- *First*, on the afternoon of Sunday 2 August 1914, the Asquith Cabinet decided by a narrow margin to promise British naval support to France, thus deciding that Britain and the Empire would enter virtually any European war in which France was engaged – whatever the cause. The decision was driven by the argument that Britain must show loyalty to her two Entente partners, Russia and France, lest *they* threaten the future safety of her Empire. The decision was also intensely controversial – it prompted four Cabinet resignations over the next two days. Belgium was immediately irrelevant to the promise to France. It came *before* the German ultimatum to Belgium of Sunday

evening was known in London (on the afternoon of Monday 3 August). The only declaration of war relevant on Sunday was the German declaration of war upon Russia in the evening of Saturday 1 August. In this sense, Britain's mobilisations of both her fleet and her army, from Sunday 26 July up to the night of Saturday 1 August, were in response to threats to Russia.

- *Second*, on Tuesday 4 August, deep in the evening, a rump of the Asquith Cabinet opted for an instant declaration of war against Germany. This second decision was prompted by the German invasion of Belgium, which began that morning. The decision to go to war – urged by the Tory press and politicians for ten days as a war for Entente solidarity – could now be presented as a war to save Belgium.<sup>93</sup>

### Choosing War: Melbourne

Why then did Australia enter the war? Any answer must stress Australia's subservience: her government made *no* ultimate choice for or against war. It simply received the news from London that Australia was at war on Wednesday 5 August.

Nonetheless, during the crisis, with a federal election looming, Australia's decision-makers jumped the gun, and certainly leapt ahead of the 'Defence Scheme' of 1913. One essential decision was made:

- About 6 p.m. Monday 3 August (that is, about 8 a.m. London time, same day), a handful of ministers of the Joseph Cook Cabinet authorised a cable to London, offering an expeditionary force of 20,000 men, to anywhere, for any objective, in any formation desired by London, at Australia's expense. It was immediately released to the press. This was *before* Sir Edward Grey's only full statement of the British position in parliament on the afternoon of Monday 3 August. In fact, Australia's cable was sent some forty hours before the British Cabinet finally decided upon a declaration of war.<sup>94</sup>

'Why did Australia go to war?' Lurking behind the question is the 'other people's wars' debate: so determined are some historians to reject that jibe, that they insist Australia entered the war on the basis of a hard-headed assessment of the German threat and Australia's national interest. This can scarcely be reconciled with the documentary evidence. London decided Australia's belligerent status. Neutrality, of course, was impossible – as a matter of law.

89 *West Australian*, 29 March 1915 and Object 178540338, NLA

90 House of Commons Debates, 6 August 1914, Vol. 65, c 2079

91 *The Times*, 26 September 1914

92 *The Times*, 10 November 1914

93 See Douglas Newton, *Darkest Days*, London: Verso, 2014

94 See Douglas Newton, *Hell-bent*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2014

But Australia's decision-makers could decide *when* to offer military contributions, *how much* to offer, *where* to send any forces, and *for what*. They could decide upon a reckless and deep immersion in war, without regard to objectives or high diplomacy, or they could carefully measure costs against objectives, husband resources cautiously, and press for on-going consultation on the purposes for which Australians would die. They opted for recklessness.

Let us backtrack to earlier decisions that amounted to a commitment to send an expeditionary force to assist Britain in virtually any British conflict.

- Every Australian defence plan, from General Hutton's of 1904, to General Gordon's 'Defence Scheme' of 1913, spruiked expeditionary warfare, praised the spirit of 'offence', and denigrated any focus on 'the defence alone of Australian soil.'<sup>95</sup>
- All these schemes highlighted threats from Asia – the 'Eastern Power' identified in the 'Strategical Considerations'<sup>96</sup> of 1912 and the 'Defence Scheme' of 1913.
- The men and shillings were lined up in effect at the Imperial Defence Conference of 1909.<sup>97</sup> But as Mordike and Lockhart have shown, the Imperial Conference of May-June 1911 was the key moment of commitment to expeditionary planning.<sup>98</sup> An element of the underhand was obvious. Pledging to transfer Australia's navy to Admiralty control during wartime, George Pearce, Defence Minister, remarked it was 'far wiser to leave it unwritten.' Prime Minister Andrew Fisher added 'We shall do things, and not talk about them.'<sup>99</sup>
- Colonel James W. McCay was typical of imperially-minded Australian officers urging expeditionary warfare. Writing in 1911, he disparaged the defence of the Australian continent alone as 'horribly ignoble', 'deployed' even the name 'Defence Force', asserted 'White Australia' as central to defence, claimed imperial and Australian interests 'are one', and promoted 'offence' as the best form of defence.<sup>100</sup>

- Pearce formally approved expeditionary planning on 30 December 1912.<sup>101</sup>

None of this should suggest that a commitment to an expeditionary force reflected a political consensus in Australia by 1914. There was no such consensus, as John Mordike's research has shown.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, in July-August 1914, in offering both an expeditionary force and the instant transfer of the RAN to the Admiralty, ahead of British requests, the Australian government invited London to take it for granted. And London did so.

What was the impact? On the eve of the war, *The Times* editorial exulted that Australia was loyal, even though she had 'no voice' in choosing war.<sup>103</sup> Ten days later *The Times* added: the Dominion force 'is instantly under the orders of those who direct the movements of our Armies. They will go, without question and with eager alacrity, wherever they are sent. They will do what they are told to do. Theirs is not to reason why.'<sup>104</sup> Imperial subservience was assumed – and praised.

The alacrity of Australia's offer was breathtaking. Charles Masterman, a highly placed British Liberal, remembered that, early in the crisis, 'Asquith, after reading messages from the Dominions declaring their intentions to sally forth and attack whatever German possessions might be in their neighbourhood, observed, "Isn't this extraordinary?"'<sup>105</sup>

### Dishonesty

It is worth stressing that *all* those who chose war in July-August 1914 were dishonest after the event. The sins of the German elite may shine scarlet. But *all* sides misrepresented their crisis diplomacy.<sup>106</sup> For instance, we know that Bethmann Hollweg was dishonest in his address to the Reichstag of 4 August 1914.<sup>107</sup> We know from the Lichnowsky memorandum of the recklessness of the Berlin elite.<sup>108</sup> But similarly we know from the Sukhomlinov trial of August 1917 of the recklessness of the Russian elite in 1914.<sup>109</sup> We know enough of the recklessness of Isvolsky, Paléologue, and Poincaré, to indict them also.<sup>110</sup> We know that the French military elite incited the Russians to

95 [Hutton] 'Defence Scheme' [1904], 3(A), MP826/1, NAA; [Gordon] MH 1/11, AWM113, AWM

96 :1856/1/33, MP84/1, NAA

97 Australia agreed 'to take its share in the general defence of the Empire.' See *Naval and Military Defence of the Empire*, Wellington, 1909, p. 32

98 John Mordike, *An Army for a Nation*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992; Greg Lockhart, 'Race fear, dangerous denial', *Griffith Review*, 32 (2011)

99 CID, 29 May 1911, CAB 38/18/41, NAUK

100 J. McCay, 'True Principles of Australia's Defence', *Commonwealth Military Journal*, August 1911, pp. 395-402

101 1856/1/33, MP84/1, NAA

102 See Hamilton to Asquith, 5 and 14 April 1914, in John Mordike, "We Should Do This Thing Quietly", Canberra: Aerospace Centre, 2002, pp. 89-90

103 *The Times*, 3 August 1914

104 *The Times*, 13 August 1914

105 L. Masterman, *C. F. G. Masterman*, London: Frank Cass, 1968, p. 269

106 See K. Wilson, ed., *Forging the Collective Memory*, Oxford: Berghahn, 1996

107 R. Lutz, ed., *Fall of the German Empire 1914-1918*, New York: Stanford University Press, 1969, Vol. I, pp. 9-13

108 H. Young, *Prince Lichnowsky and the Great War*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977

109 W. Fuller, *The Foe Within*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006

110 M. Hayne, *French Foreign Office and the Origins of the First World War, 1898-1914*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993

upgrade their partial to general mobilisation.<sup>111</sup>

From the British documents, we know of many jarring facts: the lies that Grey told the parliament when he denied that Anglo-Russian naval negotiations were underway in July 1914; the blindsiding of the parliament with assurances of Britain's 'free hand'; the impetuosity of Churchill, whose early naval decisions encouraged the Russians; the suppressions from the British White Paper of documents showing Russian pressure; the Tory clamour for a now-or-never war for the Entente, irrespective of Belgium; the insincere exploitation of the German invasion of Belgium to meld together a Liberal-led majority for war; the 'jockeying' of the Cabinet by a clique of Liberal-Imperialist ministers, who pre-empted Cabinet decisions; and, finally, the decision of a mere rump of the Cabinet to declare war late on Tuesday 4 August.<sup>112</sup>

Australia was also dishonest. When our 'Parliamentary Papers' on the 1914 crisis appeared, only eleven of the cables exchanged between Melbourne and London were reproduced, starting only on 3 August. Of course, none of the Governor-General's private cables or letters to London appeared, that is, those boasting of his having prompted Australia's early steps toward war, before British requests. Naturally, the private notes of Lewis Harcourt, Colonial Secretary, disparaging Australia's moves toward mobilisation as 'premature' and 'unnecessary', remained private.<sup>113</sup>

### Choosing War Aims: London, Paris, Petrograd, Rome

In shoring up its alliances, Britain allowed war aims to escalate.

First, let us review the early wild talk of men in high places. Lord Curzon: 'I should like to see the lances of the Bengal Lancers fluttering down the streets of Berlin, and like to see the dark-skinned Gurkha making himself at ease in the gardens of Potsdam.'<sup>114</sup> Austen Chamberlain: 'not till the German armies have been rolled back by the Russians on the east and by the other allies on the west, not until our forces meet in Germany, can victory be won or a lasting peace secured.'<sup>115</sup> Winston Churchill: 'The pressure on Germany will never be relaxed, until she has surrendered unconditionally.'<sup>116</sup>

So too Charles Masterman, Britain's propaganda chief. In November 1915, he outlined 'The Only Possible Peace Terms': France must gain 'a natural and defensive boundary ... the Rhine', swallowing up much of western Germany; 'German, Austrian, Russian Poland shall be united under the Czar', thus swallowing up much of eastern Germany; Italy must have the Trentino 'and the whole of Italy irredenta'; Turkey must be 'torn to fragments'; Serbia must gain Bosnia-Herzegovina; 'the German fleet should be surrendered and either sunk or divided up among the Allies'; German colonies must be 'trophies for the nations who conquered them.'<sup>117</sup>

What war aims were formally drawn up? Australia was entangled in a stir-fry of these:

- Pact of London, September 1914 (PUBLIC) – all the Entente Powers foreswore a separate peace, which pleased all opponents of an early peace.<sup>118</sup>
- British promises to double Serbia's territory, 1914-15 (SECRET).<sup>119</sup>
- Russia's 'Thirteen Points', September 1914 (SECRET)<sup>120</sup> – Russia's ambitious schemes for expansion into eastern Europe, and at the Straits.
- Straits and Persia Agreement, 8 and 12 March 1915 (SECRET)<sup>121</sup> – This agreement underpinned the Gallipoli campaign, because its ultimate purpose was to reward Russia, to keep her fighting.<sup>122</sup> In return for Constantinople and the Straits, Russia supported British and French claims 'in other regions of the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere.'<sup>123</sup> Britain also gained the oil-rich 'neutral zone' in Persia (Iran).<sup>124</sup> Thus, the British 'sphere of influence' in supposedly neutral Persia expanded to more than 25 times the size of Belgium.
- Lewis Harcourt's Cabinet Document 'The Spoils', 25 March 1915 (SECRET) – If Russia gained Constantinople, Britain had a long shopping list: annexations in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Pacific; Britain, her Dominions, and Japan should keep all German Pacific colonies. But to counter 'Australian prejudices' against Japan, Harcourt suggested 'sweetening the pill' by giving Bougainville

111 E. Kiesling, 'France', in R. Hamilton *et al.*, eds. *Origins of World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 251

112 Newton, *Darkest Days*, Chapters. 4, 8, 12, 15, 17, 24 and 25, especially pp. 295-97

113 *European War: correspondence*, in *Papers Presented to Parliament, Vol. V, Session 1914-17*, and see Newton, *Hell-bent*, pp. 91, 92, 93, 101, 221, 228

114 *The Times*, 11 Sept. 1914

115 *Morning Post*, 16 December 1914

116 *Economist*, 6 February 1915

117 *Daily Chronicle*, 15 November 1915

118 Chirrol to Hardinge, 11 Sept. 1914, Hardinge Papers, 93, Cambridge University Library

119 H. Hanak, 'The Government, the Foreign Office and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 47, 108 (January 1969), p. 164

120 W. Renzi, 'Who Composed "Sazonov's Thirteen Points"?', *American Historical Review*, 88, 2 (1983), pp. 347-57

121 C. Lowe and M. Dockrill, *Mirage of Power: Volume 3, The Documents*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, pp. 501-14

122 W. Renzi, 'Great Britain, Russia and the Straits, 1914-1915', *Journal of Modern History*, 42, 1 (1970), p. 6

123 *Ibid.*, p. 11

124 O. Bast, 'British Imperialism and Persian Diplomacy', in *Didgah*, London: British Council, 2015, p. 87.

and the British Solomons to Australia.<sup>125</sup>

- Théophile Delcassé's 'Terms of Peace', 11 April 1915 (SECRET)<sup>126</sup> – the French Foreign Minister's schemes for French aggrandisement.
- Treaty of London, 26 April 1915 (SECRET) – Asquith actually postponed the landings at Gallipoli for a fortnight, so they might bounce Italy into war.<sup>127</sup> It worked. On 26 April, Italy signed up. In return, Italy was promised a hunk of Austrian territory, a share of the Ottoman Empire, a war indemnity, and a £50 million loan. Under Article 15, the powers also agreed to squash the Vatican's peace diplomacy. No Australian had any inkling.<sup>128</sup>
- De Bunsen's 'Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey', 30 June 1915 (SECRET)<sup>129</sup> – Britain should pocket Mesopotamia, and specifically Mosul's oil.
- 'McMahon-Hussein correspondence', July 1915-March 1916 (SECRET)<sup>130</sup> – inconsistent promises of independence to the Arabs.
- Sykes-Picot Agreements, January-May 1916. (SECRET)<sup>131</sup> – The grandest game of colonial shuffleboard, with Britain and France scrambling for the Ottoman Empire.
- Inter-allied Paris Economic Conference, 14-17 June 1916 (PUBLIC) – Paris in June 1916 was vacationland for economic nationalists. The 'Paris Resolutions' proclaimed post-war imperial trade blocs and an economic boycott of Germany. Prime Minister Hughes boosted the deal. In fact, it strengthened the German militarists: Germany's war could be credibly depicted as defensive.<sup>132</sup>
- Bucharest Conventions, 17 August 1916 (SECRET)<sup>133</sup> – territorial and cash bribes to induce Rumania into the war.
- Paget-Tyrrrell Foreign Office memorandum on war aims, August 1916 (SECRET)<sup>134</sup> – Austria-Hungary to be dissolved, and France to get Alsace-Lorraine.
- Lloyd George's first speech as Prime Minister, 19 December 1916 (PUBLIC)<sup>135</sup> – the war was waged for 'reparation, restitution' and 'guarantees' against aggression.
- Entente Reply to President Wilson, 10 January 1917 (PUBLIC)<sup>136</sup> – the Entente disavowed war for 'selfish interests', but was silent on secret treaties and economic boycotts.
- Briand-Cambon letter, on French war aims, 12 January 1917 (SECRET)<sup>137</sup> – French plans for annexation of the Saar and control of the Rhineland.
- British pledges on captured German colonies, January 1917 (PUBLIC)<sup>138</sup> – Walter Long, Colonial Secretary, promised never to return them.
- British War Cabinet reports, by Louis Mallet, Lord Curzon, and Lord Milner, April-May 1917 (SECRET)<sup>139</sup> – all recommended colonial swaps, seizures, and punitive indemnities, while Curzon's report amounted to 'an annexationist's dream.'<sup>140</sup>
- Franco-Russian 'Left Bank of the Rhine' Agreement, March 1917 (SECRET)<sup>141</sup> – Russia supported France's claims in the Rhineland; France gave Russia 'complete liberty' in the east.
- St-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreements, 19 April 1917 (SECRET)<sup>142</sup> – second helpings for all in Asia Minor.
- Colonial agreements, 1914-17 (SECRET). The horse-trading is worth stressing: Britain conceded the bulk of Togo and the Cameroons to France, while France accepted Britain's annexations of Egypt and Cyprus;<sup>143</sup> and Britain agreed to French domination

125 CAB 63/3, NAUK

126 A. Lennox, *Diary of Lord Bertie of Thame 1914-1918*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924, Vol. I, pp. 143-4

127 Hankey diary, 6-9 April 1915, in *Supreme Command, 1914-1918*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1961, Vol. I, pp. 300-301, and Grey to Bertie, 10 April 1915, W. Renzi, *Shadow of the Sword*, New York: Peter Lang, 1987, p. 208

128 UK. *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 671

129 A. Kliemann, 'British War Aims in the Middle East in 1915', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3, 3 (July, 1968), pp. 237-251

130 Walter Laqueur (ed.), *Israel-Arab Reader*, New York: Penguin, 2016, p. 11

131 *Ibid.*, 13-16

132 V. Rothwell, *British War Aims and Peace Diplomacy 1914-1918*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, Ch. VII

133 'Memorandum', 19 July 1916, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Part II, Series H, First World War*, Washington: University Publications of America, 1989, Vol. 2, p. 334

134 Rothwell, *War Aims*, pp. 42-44

135 House of Commons Debates, 19 December 1916, Vol 88, cc.1333-94

136 J. Scott, *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 1921, pp. 35-38

137 D. Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany, 1914-1919*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1982, pp. 48-51

138 William Roger Louis, *Great Britain and Germany's Lost Colonies, 1914-1919*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967, p. 78

139 Louis, *Lost Colonies*, pp. 70-73, D. Stevenson, *The First World War and International Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 112

140 G. Smith, 'The British Government and the Disposition of the German Colonies in Africa', in P. Gifford and W. Louis, eds., *Britain and Germany in Africa*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, p. 288

141 Stevenson, *French War Aims*, pp. 52-6

142 Stevenson, *First World War*, p. 142

143 *Ibid.*, pp. 107; 125

of Morocco, sweeping aside remaining German rights (all achieved under Articles 141-154 of the Treaty of Versailles). In March 1917, the Entente confirmed the Anglo-Japanese (Balfour-Motono) agreements, endorsing Japanese conquests. (This incitement of Japanese militarism climaxed in mid-1918 with Britain, France and the USA approving Japanese intervention in Siberia.)<sup>144</sup>

- London Conference on the St-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreements, August 1917 (SECRET)<sup>145</sup> – second helpings in Asia Minor confirmed.
- British support for Alsace-Lorraine's return to France, September-October 1917 (PUBLIC)<sup>146</sup> – speeches by Asquith and Lloyd George.
- Declarations of support for new nations in Eastern Europe, summer 1918 (PUBLIC)<sup>147</sup> – self-determination for subject peoples under Austrian rule.

Now let us note the contrast between these mostly secret deals and the shining phrases.

#### **Lloyd George's Caxton Hall speech, 5 January 1918 (PUBLIC)**

After Passchendaele (and Australia's 38,000 casualties), and with Russia in revolution, Lloyd George shifted ground. He disavowed 'aggression', and proclaimed that Britain fought only for 'the justest of causes'. There was 'no demand for a war indemnity.' Germany's colonies were 'held at the disposal of a Conference.' Alsace-Lorraine deserved only 'a reconsideration.' Britain fought for ideals: the 'sanctity of treaties', 'self-determination' for all, and 'some international organisation' to prevent war.<sup>148</sup> So, after 41 months of war, moderation prevailed. But only a month later, Lloyd George told the Supreme War Council that 'no body was bound by a speech.'<sup>149</sup>

#### **'War Aims of the British People', February 1918 (PUBLIC)**

According to this iconic National War Aims Committee pamphlet, Britain was saintly in her restraint: 'seeking no selfish or predatory aims of any kind, pursuing, with one mind, one unchanging purpose: to obtain justice for others, that we may thereby secure for ourselves a lasting peace. We desire neither to destroy Germany nor to diminish

her boundaries; we seek neither to exalt ourselves nor to enlarge our empire. We fight for the common salvation of all from the perpetual menace of militarism and the curse of recurrent wars. We aim at nothing which we cannot openly state before all men.'<sup>150</sup> Of course, this was mere political junk food.

A very different spirit prevailed behind closed doors. Four examples must suffice.

Preparing to negotiate with Picot in December 1915, Sykes pointed to a map of the Middle East and told the War Committee: 'I should like to draw a line from the "e" in Acre to the last "k" in Kerkuk [*sic*].' The line was a thousand kilometres long, from Palestine to northern Mesopotamia: France would get everything north of the line, Britain everything south.<sup>151</sup>

Or London in February 1916: Foreign Office staffer Lancelot Oliphant asked Picot if he might kindly 'show us exactly what part of the *Kamerun* the French would like.' He complied, indicating 'in a casual way with a blue pencil' a big chunk for France. Oliphant agreed. Thus, Britain gave France some 143,000 square miles, but kept 34,000 square miles, 'bigger than Scotland,' as Oliphant boasted later.<sup>152</sup>

Or April 1917: Austen Chamberlain told the Curzon Committee that the grand annexations being planned might lead neutrals to think 'that we were meditating the carving up of the world.'<sup>153</sup> Of course, British dominance of the Ottoman Empire, dressed up as 'autonomy', might suffice. As Tory soldier-MP Aubrey Herbert advised the Foreign Office in July 1917: 'If we get the luggage it does not matter very much if the Turks get the labels. When Lord Kitchener was all-powerful in Egypt his secretary was wearing a fezz. Mesopotamia and Palestine are worth a fezz.'<sup>154</sup>

Or early August 1918, the eve of the Battle of Amiens (where the Australians would suffer almost 6,000 casualties), when Hankey, the War Cabinet Secretary, reminded Balfour that Persian and Mesopotamian oil were 'vital for the next war', and therefore 'the control over these oil supplies becomes a first class British War Aim.'<sup>155</sup> Victory in Europe would secure such distant war aims.

144 Ian Nish, *Alliance in Decline*, Oxford: Athlone Press, 1972, Ch. XI; J. Bradley, *Civil War in Russia, 1917-1920*, London: Batsford, 1975, p. 66

145 P. Helmreich, 'Italy and the Anglo-French Repudiation of the 1917 St-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreement', *Journal of Modern History*, 48, 2 (June 1976), pp. 99-139

146 *The Times*, 27 September and 12 October 1917

147 Rothwell, *War Aims*, 222-33; K. Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976

148 Lloyd George, *British War Aims*, New York: Doran, 1918

149 2 February 1918, in CAB 25/ 120, NAUK

150 C. McCurdy, ed., *War Aims of the British People*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918

151 War Committee, 16 December 1915, CAB 24/1/51, NAUK

152 Rothwell, *War Aims*, pp. 11-12

153 E. Goldstein, *Winning the Peace*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1991, p. 17

154 Rothwell, *War Aims*, p. 136

155 H. Mejcher, 'Oil and British Policy towards Mesopotamia, 1914-1918', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 8, 3 (1972), p. 386

## Choosing War Aims: Melbourne

Australia's one true war aim was to assist Britain to defeat Germany – or, more truthfully, to be unstinting in supplying men in the hope that Britain would keep Australia safe in future, from Japan. From the outset, Australian politicians boasted of their absolute loyalty. They offered men without qualification. In his 'Annual Report' in 1915, George Reid, Australia's High Commissioner in London, gushed that Britain and Australia were united in this war, like 'enraptured lovers' – 'Two hearts that beat as one.'<sup>156</sup>

In February 1915, Prime Minister Fisher abandoned his initial insistence on an Imperial Conference. He bowed low, telling Harcourt that 'when the King's business will not fit in with our ideas, we do not press them.'<sup>157</sup> Recklessness ruled. In October 1915, the newly installed Prime Minister Hughes told parliament: 'I do not pretend to understand the situation in the Dardanelles, but I know what the duty of this government is; and that is – to mind its own business, to provide that quota of men which the Imperial Government think necessary.'<sup>158</sup>

When given a first opportunity for Australia to contribute to high diplomacy, a summons to Lloyd George's Imperial War Cabinet in March 1917, Hughes left Australia voiceless. Winning the May 1917 election was his priority. Hughes stayed home, and refused to allow Reid or Fisher stand in. The Imperial War Cabinet's very first item of business in March 1917 was to express 'great regret' that no Australian was present.<sup>159</sup>

Did Australia have anything to say on specific war aims? James Catts, Labor MP, asked Hughes in parliament in September 1917 (during the disastrous Third Battle of Ypres) if Australia had made any representations to London on adding territory, on captured colonies, or if Australia had put forward 'any peace terms', or remarks on the terms of others. Hughes answered: 'no representations' on territory; nothing on peace terms; 'None have been submitted.'<sup>160</sup>

The only war aim that Australia pressed was the need to keep captured German colonies. Britain promised in January 1917 never to return them. But Australia's 'slightly delirious' campaign against Japanese annexations counted for nothing when the Balfour-Motono agreements were signed in February 1917.<sup>161</sup>

The absolutely dominant motive for Hughes was race. 'White Australia' was being defended, he maintained,

in France and the Middle East. During the conscription referendum of October 1916, Hughes shouted it out: 'When the British Empire goes down White Australia goes with it.'<sup>162</sup> In Hughes's circle Japan loomed largest. Keith Murdoch told Hughes the AIF was lukewarm on conscription, because they were fighting 'against an enemy who is not to them nearly as great an object of enmity and dread as the Japanese.'<sup>163</sup> Hughes's thinking was plain: Britain could only be blackmailed in the future to save Australia – from Japan – if Australia was profligate now.

Did Australia's unswerving loyalty gain her a voice – for limited war aims? Not a bit. Neville Meaney has summarised the sidelining of Australia: regarding Gallipoli, Australia was 'neither consulted nor informed about the British plans'; on Japanese entry into the war, London 'was not disposed to consult Australia'; on war aims and the shunning of peace during 1917-18, Hughes 'had no part in making British policy'; Lloyd George simply 'took the Dominions' assent for granted.'<sup>164</sup>

## Choosing to Fight On

Britain often led the Entente in rebuffing all opportunities for a negotiated peace. A list of opportunities would include the following: ambassadorial mediation in Washington, late 1914; Colonel House's shuttle diplomacy, early 1915 and early 1916, producing the 'House-Grey Memorandum'; the 'Neutral Conference for Continuous Mediation', Stockholm and The Hague, from February 1916; the German and American Peace Notes of December 1916; the Francis Hopwood mission in Copenhagen, February 1917; the Prince Sixtus peace initiatives, December 1916-June 1917; the Russian proposals for an inter-Allied conference to revise war aims, May-June 1917; the Anglo-German negotiations on prisoners of war, June 1917 and June 1918; the Reichstag Peace Resolution, July 1917; the Papal Peace Note, August 1917; the Kühlmann peace approaches, September 1917, and many more.<sup>165</sup>

What an indefatigable fatalist one must be to argue that every 'peace move' was bound to fail anyway, that every 'peace trap' was a German conspiracy to divide and conquer, or that only on-going war could pummel Germany into democracy. Were the cynics right – such as Balfour, who claimed in March 1916 that American mediation was simply 'not worth five minutes thought'?<sup>166</sup> To argue that all German approaches were ruses to get a breathing space before renewing the war really is the White Queen's memory, with knobs on – claiming to remember things that

<sup>156</sup> *The Times*, 7 October 1914 and Reid, 5 April 1915, in *Papers Presented to Parliament*, Vol. V, p. 247

<sup>157</sup> House of Commons Debates. 14 April 1915 Vol. 71, cc16-18

<sup>158</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, 29 October 1915, p. 7022

<sup>159</sup> War Cabinet, 20 March 1917, CAB 23/40, NAUK

<sup>160</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 13 September 1917, p. 2034

<sup>161</sup> Louis, *Lost Colonies*, p. 78, Rothwell, *War Aims*, p. 72

<sup>162</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1916

<sup>163</sup> Murdoch to Hughes, 27 December 1917, Murdoch Papers, MS 2823/2/5, NLA

<sup>164</sup> N. Meaney, *Australia and World Crisis, 1914-1923*, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009, pp. 44, 59, & 247-8

<sup>165</sup> Scott, *Peace Proposals* and W. Steglich, *Die Friedensversuche der kriegführenden Mächte im Sommer und Herbst 1917*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 1984

<sup>166</sup> J. Cooper, 'The House-Grey Memorandum', *Journal of American History*, 59, 4 (1973), p. 961

never happened.

And what of Australia? Australia's decision-makers did not ask for light on these things – and did not get any. Up until the autumn of 1918, Hughes in particular played loyal bellhop to Lloyd George, deriding any 'premature peace'.

Typical was the reaction of Australia's government to the German and American Peace Notes of December 1916. When news arrived, the Federal Parliament was sitting. Alfred Hampson, a Labor MP, asked Hughes if Australia might 'use its influence to bring about an honourable peace.' Hughes mocked him.<sup>167</sup> Australia was not consulted about any reply. Instead, after the American Note came in, Lloyd George sent a soothing telegram to Hughes to read in parliament. The war was 'for humanity and civilization'; Australia would fight 'however long the path to final victory'; Lloyd George promised 'no faltering in our determination that the sacrifices which we, and you, have made, and have still to make, shall not be made in vain.'<sup>168</sup> Such bilge sufficed.

The parliament debated war aims again in early April 1918. Hughes put a resolution vowing that Australia would 'fight on to secure a victorious peace and the freedom of the world.' Labor proposed an amendment urging instead an 'honourable peace'. Labor MPs denounced Hughes and his 'tyrannous censorship' for stifling all public discussion of war aims in Australia. The amendment was lost; the Nationalist MPs sang 'God Save the King'.<sup>169</sup>

### Choosing Darkness

It is crucial to acknowledge that the parliaments, and the people, in both Britain and Australia – not to mention the troops – were mostly left in ignorance on war aims. But in late 1917, there was a spectacular unveiling of the Entente's secret treaties, courtesy of Trotsky. The *New York Times* and *Manchester Guardian* began to publish extracts in November.<sup>170</sup> Then, on 12 December 1917, the *Manchester Guardian* published two documents: the Straits and Persia Agreement of March 1915; and the Franco-Russian 'Left Bank of the Rhine' Agreement of March 1917.<sup>171</sup> The ferociously hungry Entente cat was out of the bag.

The Straits and Persia Agreement in particular mattered, to Australia – because it exposed the true objective of the Gallipoli campaign, spoils for Russia. Next, on 18

January 1918 the *Manchester Guardian* published the Treaty of London.<sup>172</sup> This also mattered. Clearly the landings at Gallipoli had helped get Italy's signature on an annexationist treaty.

Would the people of Australia read these treaties? No. It was the choice of the Hughes government to leave Australians fighting on – in the dark. In December 1917, the government tightened the censorship. George Pearce, as Minister of Defence, announced 'Prohibited Publications' – more than 220 books, pamphlets, newspapers and journals – anywhere the 'secret treaties' might appear.<sup>173</sup>

### German Singularity?

Should we forget all this and focus only upon the German threat? Does the *Kaiserreich* exhibit a singular evil that vindicates the struggle against it? The case appears to rest on five pillars.<sup>174</sup>

**One**, the war was ideological, because the *Kaiserreich* was a singularly dangerous anti-democratic autocracy, pitted against Liberal Britain's parliamentary democracy. **Two**, the German elite, without parallel, perverted religion to serve national ends. **Three**, the German elite uniquely planned and recklessly launched a premeditated offensive war, which threatened Australia. **Four**, in waging war, a matchlessly aggressive Germany violated international law and committed atrocities. **Five**, Germany uniquely planned vast annexations and economic dominations, which, if realised, would have harmed Australia's interests.

If we use comparative perspectives, looking critically at all the nations caught up in the vultures' frenzy that was the Great War, none of these pillars stands firm. The following statements align better with the evidence.

**One**, Germany, in common with most belligerents, drifted toward authoritarianism during the war; but her politics was increasingly polarised, dissent simmered, and the domination of the Right was never complete.<sup>175</sup> Liberal democracy wilted in every war-making nation, but the most deeply anti-democratic state at war was Tsarist Russia. Britain, a class-bound parliamentary oligarchy, should not be retrospectively democratised.<sup>176</sup> Everywhere, including Australia, enthusiasm for war and enthusiasm for democracy were at opposite ends of the political spectrum.<sup>177</sup> All 'bitter-enders', everywhere, dreamt of shoving victory down the throat of reform.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>167</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 13 December 1916, p. 9714

<sup>168</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 20 December 1916, p. 10283

<sup>169</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 4 April 1918, pp. 3595-3646

<sup>170</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 26 November 1917

<sup>171</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 12 December 1917

<sup>172</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 18 January 1918

<sup>173</sup> *Gazette*, 12 December 1917

<sup>174</sup> For example, Bruce Gaunson, *Fighting the Kaiserreich*, Melbourne: Hybrid, 2018

<sup>175</sup> H. Gatzke, *Germany's Drive to the West*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966

<sup>176</sup> See H. Matthew, *et al.*, 'Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party', *English Historical Review*, 91, 361 (October 1976), pp. 723-52

<sup>177</sup> See K. Murdoch to Elliott, 9 May 1918, Murdoch Papers, MS 2823/34, NLA

<sup>178</sup> See Esher to Derby, 31 May 1917, in K. Wilson, *A Study in the History and Politics of the Morning Post 1905-1926*, Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1990, p. 146

**Two**, most of the warring states put God in national uniform, and no state did this more avidly than Orthodox Russia. Christian clergymen willing to mix blood and holy water, and bless the war, could be found everywhere.<sup>179</sup>

**Three**, all sides planned for *offensive* war. There is no consensus on whose recklessness and rapaciousness was most to blame for unleashing and prolonging the catastrophe of 1914. And there never will be, because key men have covered their tracks or lost their papers to the flames. There is no one true cause to be discovered, because it was a systemic failure.<sup>180</sup>

**Four**, before 1914 military planners everywhere contemplated violations of international law. During the war, all sides committed atrocities, the starvation blockade being one. Russia's atrocities behind the lines against Jewish minorities probably eclipsed German atrocities.<sup>181</sup>

**Five**, almost all the warring governments planned to seize territories, to extend empires, to profit economically, as per the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and to erect post-war imperial trade blocs.<sup>182</sup>

Admirable as critics of the *Kaiserreich* may be in skewering that regime, it is still important to engage with comparative history, as Fritz Fischer himself suggested. In the 'Foreword' to his major work, Fischer provided the overarching truth: 'all great powers had "annexationist" policies in the age of imperialism.'<sup>183</sup> In the second German edition, Fischer paralleled German war aims and Entente war aims, as revealed in 'the Allied secret treaties'. He urged 'scholars of the future' to examine these. 'Viewed in this light,' he wrote, 'the present book is simply a contribution towards a general appreciation of the war aims policies of all the belligerents.'<sup>184</sup> Arguably, Fischer was an equal-

opportunity hater of right-wing vultures of all stamps.<sup>185</sup> His name is not a moral bleach that can whiten our own sepulchres.

The reality of a German threat cannot justify all that was done to resist it – unless the ends justify the means. Were German evils really so singular? Or were they symptomatic of the New Imperialism? As Geoffrey Barraclough argued long ago, 'What we are dealing with are not the failures of individuals but the failures of a class.'<sup>186</sup>

To conclude. One: Britain's rushed choice for war in July-August 1914 determined Australia's war. Two: Australia's rushed decision to send a publicised offer of military support, ahead of Britain's decision, was reckless. It invited London to assume Australia's imperial subservience – and she did. Three: as Britain assembled her coalition, those dealing in war aims opened their mouths wide. Australia had no 'national' interest in most of these. Indeed, 'national' interest scarcely fits. Australian leaders acted as if governing an imperial dependency, and a hireling people – so war aims were left to London. Four, in choosing on-going war, Britain also smothered opportunities for peace. On this, Australia was scarcely ever consulted. Five: both the British and Australian governments were consistently dishonest about choosing war and war aims. Darkness prevailed. Neither the wickedness of the enemy, nor the dangers of defeat, should distract us from these historical realities.

---

179 P. Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War*, Oxford: Lion, 2015

180 For recent debates, Trachtenberg, H-Diplo ISSF Forum No. 16 (2017), and H-Diplo Article Review Forum 713 (2017)

181 See N. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, London: Harvard University Press, 2012, E. Lohr, *Nationalising the Russian Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003

182 R. Bunselmeyer, *The Cost of the War*, Hamden: Archon Books, 1975

183 F. Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1967, p. x

184 *Ibid.*, p. xii

185 J. Joll, *Ibid.*, p. xv; *The Times*, 18 Sept. 1965

186 G. Barraclough, *Agadir to Armageddon*, London: Holmes & Meier, 1982, p. 41