

The Anzacs' Battle with the Historians

The Anzac centenary has come and gone, and the centenary of the Armistice too. Alec William Campbell, the last surviving member of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps of the First World War, passed away in 2002. All the veterans of that war, from all countries, have now gone. The War to End All Wars is now well and truly over.

Thus, after eleven years of dawn services at the Australian National Memorial in Villers-Bretonneux, the French hosts were hoping to sleep in this year. Australian public opinion was incensed. Scott Morrison stood firm, and the Western Front dawn service will go ahead as scheduled this April 25. The First World War Anzacs are also honoured at dawn on Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula, and of course in Australia, where every year well over 100,000 people attend dawn services throughout the country. Additional dawn services are held in Malaysia, Thailand and Papua New Guinea to honour those who served in the Second World War.

These days the dawn services on April 25 commemorate the sacrifices of all veterans from Australia and New Zealand. Of course, both countries also celebrate Remembrance Day on November 11, but that's a commemorative day shared with the rest of the Western world. Anzac Day is different, and distinctively Antipodean. It is at the same time an expression of solidarity with the larger West and a declaration of independence from it.

That schizophrenic quality is what makes Anzac Day doubly controversial. Many Australian and New Zealand intellectuals (especially republican ones) resent the annual reminder of the crimson thread that ties their countries to the United Kingdom and the wider Western world, while at the same time abhorring the patriotism of the masses who rise before dawn to celebrate their hard-won independent national identities. It's a double-whammy of unwelcome competition for the cosmopolitan intellectual point of view. And it happens every year.

Just in time for this year's Anzac debate comes *First Know Your Enemy: Comprehending Imperial German War Aims & Deciphering the Enigma of Kultur*, ([download it here](#)) by John A. Moses with Peter Overlack. It's a shame that *Anzac* isn't in the title, since the book strikes at the heart of the cosmopolitan war against Anzac Day. It assaults the "presentism" of latter-day Anglophone historians who selectively reconstruct the Australian and New Zealand world of 1914 to support their own political agendas rather than portraying it (as nearly as possible) as it actually was.

For Moses and Overlack, there is a big difference between conscientiously recognising that our personal prejudices may influence the ways we understand history, and intentionally distorting history to match our personal prejudices. The fact that there are many ways to think about history doesn't imply that all ways of thinking about history are equally valid. Moses and Overlack are determined to present the German threat as it was, as it was perceived by the Australians and New Zealanders of 1914, and as it was meant by the Germans themselves. They explain why (most of) Australia and New Zealand supported the war effort and had good reasons for doing so. They thoroughly debunk the "futility of war" narrative. And they firmly place Anzac commemoration within the heroic fight for Western civilisation against the barbarism of German militarism.

It is all too easy today to lose the heroism of the First World War in the shadow of the Second World War. The Second World War was captured on film, with Adolf Hitler playing the ultimate villain and his black-clad personal security force, the SS, murdering six million Jews. Yet Moses shows how Hitler built on an existing military-state foundation with deep roots in German history. The Holocaust was not perpetrated by the Kaiser and his intellectual army of militarist professors, but it was made possible by them. As the Kaiser himself is apocryphally said to have telegraphed Hitler in 1940: "Congratulations, you have won using my troops."

As dominions of the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand entered the First World War on August 4, 1914, in response to Germany's gross violation of Belgian neutrality. The Kingdom of Prussia had guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium in 1839, and its successor state Germany reaffirmed this commitment in 1870. Yet in August 1914 Germany demanded that Belgium open its borders and lay down its arms as German troops marched through the country to invade France. Belgium refused, and as a result suffered German occupation, war crimes and near-starvation for the next four years.

Germany's Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, usually characterised as a "moderate" leader, expressed his frustration that Britain would go to war against Germany for the sake of a mere "scrap of paper"—the guarantee of Belgian neutrality. The British ambassador in Berlin, Sir Edward Goschen, explained to the Chancellor that a "solemn compact simply had to be kept, or what confidence could anyone have in engagements given by Great Britain in the future?" Goschen reported Bethmann-Hollweg's reply as: "But at what price will that compact have been kept? Has the British government thought of that?"

Bethmann-Hollweg was certainly right about the price—to Britain, to Belgium, to France, and to dozens of other countries, not least Australia and New Zealand. Even to Germany. But the fact that a "moderate" German civilian leader of 1914 thought that international treaties should be swept aside for the sake of military expedience tells you all you need to know about Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany. Those other scraps of paper, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, were swept aside as well. Treaty commitments against the bombardment of undefended towns, the targeting of hospital ships, and the use of poison gas in combat were all torn up by Germany in the first year of the war.

Remarkably, hundreds of German academics, jurists and even German theologians issued open letters defending German atrocities in the "Rape of Belgium" as necessary for the survival of German "*Kultur*". Germany's crimes in the very first

month of the war included the summary execution of some 6000 civilians for not facilitating the German advance and the burning of the Catholic University of Louvain as a warning to the rest of Belgium. Similar (if not worse) crimes were perpetrated on the Eastern Front. The brutality of the German forces was no secret; it was the pride of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, or “educated middle class”. It wasn’t Rudyard Kipling who first compared the Germans to the Huns. It was the Kaiser himself.

Imperial Germany truly was the ISIS or Taliban of its day, and Moses (who is an Anglican priest as well as a professor of history) traces German militarism to deep religious roots in German Lutheranism. He contrasts the historical role of the Lutheran Church as the administrator of the Prussian state with that of the Anglican Church as the conscience of England—and by extension of Australia and New Zealand. According to Moses, Lutheran theology since Luther himself had portrayed the role of the Church as “only relevant in the private sphere” with “no brief to interfere in the business of politics”. Taking its cue from St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (“the powers that be are ordained of God ... they are God’s ministers”), the Lutheran Church made itself complicit in the crimes of the German state.

The Anglican Church, by contrast, sought to act as the moral compass of the state. It still does—much to the chagrin of many of its more conservative parishioners. As a result, Moses argues, the “British Empire, as many at the time were convinced, stood for genuinely Christian values against the putatively pagan values of the German Empire”.

And thus in the second half of 1915, at a time when Germany’s Lutheran pastors were exhorting their congregations to follow the Kaiser to victory, Australia’s Anglican priests were busy organising the “solemn day of commemoration” that would become known as Anzac Day. Representatives of Australia’s other denominations were involved as well, but Anglican ministers had the closest associations with government. Roman Catholic rules at the time prohibited “participation at public

events where prayers might be said by heretical and schismatic” Protestants, in Moses’s slightly purple prose. The sometime bush missionary, sometime army chaplain Canon David John Garland was appointed secretary of the Anzac Day Commemoration Committee of Queensland on January 10, 1916, and the “father of Anzac Day” continued to shape Anzac Day traditions right down to his death in 1939.

Throughout his account of Garland’s organisation of the first national Anzac Day, Moses puts the emphasis on *solemn*. For Moses, Garland was “a leader ... who understood how a solemn public service of commemoration should be appropriately organised and performed”. Like Memorial Day in the United States, which emerged in the wake of the American Civil War, and Remembrance Day in the UK and Canada, Anzac Day is a holiday marked by an ultimately victorious nation to remember its losses in war. There are no “Victory Day” celebrations in the Anglo-Saxon world, despite the fact that the West won both world wars. It’s hard to imagine what the Germans of 1914 would have made of that.

Why should Australia and New Zealand have gone to war in 1914 for the sake of Belgian neutrality? That was exactly the question asked by Bethmann-Hollweg of the British. And one might go on to ask why Canada and Newfoundland took up the cause, or indeed why the United States intervened on the Allied side, instead of (as in 1812) invading Canada. Especially where America is concerned, old Marxist arguments based on imperialism and new Marxist arguments based on racial solidarity just won’t cut it. An imperialist America would have done far better to ally with Germany and pick off British outposts at their most vulnerable. And racially, the two largest ethnic groups in America were German and Irish. No Anglophile tendencies there.

Despite a hare-brained German plot to induce Mexico to invade the United States in 1917, the United States was never seriously threatened by imperial Germany, and German dominance of continental Europe would hardly have hindered American global trading interests. As a result, the moral case for war, buttressed by Woodrow

Wilson's call to make the world "safe for democracy", remains strong (though certainly not unchallenged) in the United States.

Australia is another matter. Many Australian historians have been notably less patriotic in their appraisals of their own country's motives for going to war with Germany in 1914. Or put another way, they have formulated a radically different interpretation of Australian patriotism that prioritises Australia's narrow national interests (in the form of limiting Australian casualties) while decrying what they see as nationalistic and non-inclusive celebrations of Australian militarism (which they derisively call "the Anzac myth"). Moses consistently uses the dismissive phrase "Australian historians and publicists" to refer to "left-nationalist" writers who embrace the "presentism of left-wing thought". He sees them as "ill-informed and ideologically biased [commentators] who seem only to believe what they want to believe".

Moses excoriates "Left-wing critics of Australia's entry into the Great War" for seeking "to dominate the historical-political consciousness of citizens" through a selective reading of the past. In Moses's telling, these "presentist" writers wilfully ignore the depth of religious sentiment and the adherence to the British Empire of the Australians of 1914. He might have added: the risk-tolerance. Today we are shocked at the fact that some 15 per cent of all Anzac recruits lost their lives in the war. But death was much more pervasive 100 years ago. For example, statistics for England and Wales show that roughly 15 per cent of all women of the time died in childbirth (equivalent statistics are not available for Australia). That does nothing to diminish the tragedy of premature death, but it does put things in perspective.

But the most important charge of "presentism" levelled by Moses is the idea, widespread today, that "Germany constituted no threat to Australia during the era of Anglo-German rivalry". The seven chapters by Moses lay out the civilisational challenge posed by imperial Germany to Australia's Western values, while the three chapters by Overlack describe Germany's specific plans for waging war against

Australia and New Zealand. The book as a whole thus combines a history of ideas (Moses) with a history of operations (Overlack). But Overlack says virtually nothing about the Anzacs themselves, Gallipoli, or the Western Front. His subject is Germany in the Pacific.

Australians today are used to seeing Manus Island in the news, but it is likely that few could locate it on a map. It is the westernmost major island of the Bismarck Archipelago that surrounds the Bismarck Sea off the northern coast of New Guinea, the territory once known as Kaiser-Wilhelmsland. Yes, in a slightly alternative history, it could have been the Germans running Manus Island.

In the late nineteenth century, the German empire was on a buying spree all across the South Pacific, having purchased the “rights” (such as they were) to several island chains from the decaying Spanish empire. In the early twentieth century Germany held on-again, off-again negotiations with Portugal to purchase East Timor, too. Strong German influence over the Netherlands also created an ever-present possibility that Germany would take effective control of the Dutch East Indies, today’s Indonesia. In fact, Kaiser Wilhelm fled to the Netherlands at the end of the war. He was still there when the Nazis marched in two decades later.

Overlack details how Germany’s Pacific cruiser squadron planned to raid Australian shipping, loot remote ports in Western Australia and Queensland, and even bombard Sydney. They were especially keen to draw British naval resources away from the North Sea and to delay (or better, sink) Australian troop transports. They hoped that a massive loss of life at sea would reinforce Australian political opposition to the war. Dozens of Allied ships were in fact captured or sunk by the German raiders in the Pacific, and the transfer of the Anzacs to Egypt was delayed by several weeks as a result. Anyone who wants a graphic illustration of German ambitions in the Pacific can visit Sydney’s Hyde Park, where a gun from the German cruiser *Emden* is mounted in the south-west corner, poised to fire down Oxford Street to Taylor Square.

That Germany's East Asia Squadron didn't do more damage is due in part to the diligence of the Australian authorities, who immediately seized several German ships that were in Australian waters at the outbreak of war—ships that the Germans had intended to convert into colliers. Credit also goes to the timely dispatch of the all-volunteer Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force to occupy German outposts in New Guinea. Much more important, however, was the fact that Japan entered the war on the Allied side. It may seem strange to think of Japan as having once been responsible for Australian security, but it was the Japanese who effectively neutralised the German threat in the Pacific. It didn't do so out of friendship: Japan went to war in order to acquire German-administered Shandong Province in China. Had Germany made a credible counter-offer, things might have turned out very differently.

If anything, Overlack understates the German threat to Australia. In the early 1900s, Germany was eager to acquire overseas colonies for emigration and settlement, and all of Western Australia had a white population of only 300,000; the Northern Territory, less than 4000. In the event of a total defeat of Britain, including a German victory over the Grand Fleet in the North Sea, it is not unlikely that Germany would have demanded substantial portions of northern and western Australia for colonisation. In such a scenario, Australia would have been in no position—legal or practical—to say no.

The idea of Germans in Darwin is not as fantastical as it sounds. Japan might very well have stayed neutral early in the war to see which way the winds were blowing, Germany might very well have won the 1916 Battle of Jutland, and Japan almost certainly would have joined Germany in the carve-up of Russia in 1917. Had there been a Germany–Japan axis in the First World War, back when Germany still had Pacific ambitions, things might have gone very badly for Australia. And if Britain had lost the war, it is very unlikely that the United States would have come to Australia's rescue.

Though they mostly avoid current events, it is clear that both Moses and Overlack advocate a muscular foreign policy for Australia that closely aligns the country with other liberal democracies. Moses claims in his preface that “This book will show why the ability to stand up and fight when national security is challenged is still an urgent necessity.” Moses asserts, and Overlack clearly shows, that Australian national security was severely challenged in 1914 by German aggression, and that Australia’s only viable course of action was to participate fully in the British war effort. They are at pains to emphasise that the Australian Anzacs fought (and many of them died) to protect Australia, and that their struggles and sufferings were thus not in vain.

Perhaps this focus on the necessity of Australia’s participation in the war is inevitable in the light of the “presentist” Australian narrative of the futility of the war, of Anzacs going overseas to fight other people’s battles. But if one accepts the authors’ argument that Australia had no choice but to defend itself against Germany, several persuasive chapters of this book are wasted on establishing the high moral fibre of the British Empire and the Anglican Church. After all, although it is certainly reasonable to defend oneself in the face of foreign aggression, it is not particularly noble. The two qualities are not mutually exclusive—the heroism of the Royal Air Force in 1940 was both necessary and noble—but Moses and Overlack seem to miss the point that they have very different foreign policy implications.

If, as Moses would have it, the Anzac story shows that “the ability to stand up and fight when national security is challenged is still an urgent necessity”, what does it show when national security isn’t challenged? It’s hard to imagine any country threatening Australia in the near future. If the overall conclusion to be drawn from Anzac history is that Australia fought the First World War primarily in self-defence, then surely the main lesson to be learned for today is that Australians should look out for themselves, save \$36 billion a year in defence spending, and disarm. That’s the lesson New Zealand has learned. Why not Australia, too?

Yet if we take the many eloquent Australians quoted by Moses at their word, they didn't go to war to defend Australia. They went to war to defend their honour, the freedom of others, and the future of Christian civilisation. They risked life and limb in an idealistic war of choice, not an unavoidable war of necessity.

The idealism of Australian soldiers showed in their morale. In 1918, it was Australian troops under Australian command who made the crucial breakthrough at Amiens that ruptured the German lines and presaged the end of the war in France. They did so alongside another group of soldiers who were fighting a war of choice: the Canadians. By contrast, French troops, who were fighting a war of necessity on their very own soil, mutinied in 1917 and were unreliable in 1918, despite having taken losses no worse than those sustained by the Anzacs.

There is no more noble testament to the power of ideals than the continuing dedication to duty of Australian volunteers right up till the end of the war. To turn their sacrifices into a narrative of the futility of war, as so many Australians do today, is a betrayal of the ideals that they fought for, no matter how sympathetic or well-intentioned the purpose may be. Moses and Overlack recognise this, and are rightly critical of such "presentism" in present-day tellings of the Anzac story. But in their eagerness to establish that Australia's war was one of necessity, they, too, come close to writing present debates into past events.

Australians didn't go to war in 1914 because they were afraid of German encirclement. They went to war in 1914 because it was the right thing to do. It is obvious from the tone of his book that Moses shares this sentiment. A book that made this straightforward argument would have been a better tribute to the values that Moses clearly holds so dear.