

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# The day the guns fell silent

Australia is an unusual nation, pretending to virtue and honour, yet remarkably indifferent to the most profound events in its past.

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The celebrations in Australia's cities and towns on the evening of November 11, 1918, when news of the armistice arrived were spontaneous but haunted by the losses that had touched every community — yet the old world with its pre-1914 optimism and shattered certitudes was lost forever.

Winston Churchill said: “All the horrors of the ages were brought together. We seemed separated from the old life by a measureless gulf.” From his hospital bed, an unknown German soldier had an angry reaction to the - armistice: “Everything went black before my eyes,” Adolf Hitler said. “My hatred increased, hatred for the originators of this dastardly crime.” The flawed idealist, US president Woodrow Wilson, hailed the glory of the “righteous cause” and declared “justice shall replace force and jealous intrigue among the nations”.

Never in the 20th century has such an ambivalent and profoundly misunderstood event generated such joy. This was expected after a world conflict that involved 65 million men in battle, left nearly 10 million killed, 21 million wounded, nearly seven million civilian deaths, whole landscapes destroyed and home fronts in political turmoil. Long before the armistice, the war was branded as marking “the end of progress”.

Yet the human spirit for recuperation was still throbbing. Australia's commander, John Monash, wrote from the exhausted front: “Everybody in France is in the highest spirits. All the little villages and towns, even those which are now a mere heap of bricks, are bedecked with flags of all colours, and the emaciated and careworn villagers who have been for four years under enemy domination are at last wreathed in happy smiles.”

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The end of the war found the Australian Imperial Force in nearly every theatre, carrying before its arms the memory of Gallipoli, Lone Pine, Villers-Bretonneux, Passchendaele, Pozieres, Fromelles, Amiens, Polygon Wood, Beersheba, Ypres, Bullecourt, Messines, Hamel, Mont St Quentin and Peronne, along with many other battlefields where 62,000 Australians died and 160,000 were wounded.

As official correspondent and historian Charles Bean said, the first achievement of the AIF was its contribution to the Allied cause that denied a German victory. Its second was to register “like a shooting star” a new and unknown democratic nation to the world. And its third was to furnish Australians with an indispensable gift amid tragedy — the story of how “the

Australian nation came to know itself”.

The armistice remembrance this weekend completes our century of commemoration symbolised by war memorials with the chiselled names of the dead, the *Last Post*, the silence, the poppies and the fourth verse, “They shall not grow old”, of Laurence Binyon’s poem *For the Fallen*. What has it meant? People, hopefully, are more aware of the deepest tragedies in our history. Yet Australia is an unusual nation, pretending to virtue and honour, yet remarkably indifferent, notably in its education system, to the most profound, shocking and uplifting events in its past.

The armistice is celebrated because it was the ceasefire that ended the slaughter. It is joyous yet mournful. The war ended in victory but the peace was never won. The refrain “the war to end all wars” became a macabre irony because a more violent war would follow over the same essential question: the German question. Rudolf Hess would remark: “The Third Reich comes from the trenches.”

The Allies had made the critical decision not to fight their way to Berlin in 1919 at the cost of hundreds of thousands more casualties. From every angle it was the correct decision. None of the key allied leaders, Wilson, British prime minister Lloyd George or supreme commander, France’s Ferdinand Foch, had any interest in this course. As a consequence, there was an armistice.

So that once indomitable force, the German army, was marching home. The invaders were now in ignominious retreat. Its army was beaten but the German nation was in denial.

The returning soldiers were greeted with festivities. The new Social Democratic German leader, Friedrich Ebert, told them: “No enemy has conquered you.”

They were prophetic words, as British historian Michael Howard said:

“Many (Germans) felt they had not been defeated at all.” This bequeathed Hitler his “stab in the back” polemic. His message: Germany was betrayed from within, not defeated. The armistice and the subsequent Versailles peace treaty became the stepping stones in Hitler’s rise to power a mere 15 years later.

It would take World War II to complete the unfinished business of World War I. Foch said of the peace treaty: “This is not peace. It is an armistice for 20 years.”

The war in the West had been fought on the soil of Belgium and France. Germany was not invaded; Berlin did not fall. The armistice that ended the war was an instrument negotiated by a defeated but not fallen or occupied Germany, unlike the unconditional surrender, liquidation of the Nazi regime and occupation that ended World War II.

German historian Fritz Fischer, writing in the 1960s against a tide of resistance, held Germany’s military and civilian leaders with prime responsibility for the war. British historian David Stevenson said: “At the root of everything that followed was Germany’s decision to march two million men westward across industrial and rural landscapes that had known decades of peace.” France and Belgium had constituted no threat to Germany. The entire war in the West revolved around how to eject the Germans from their well fortified positions on French and Belgian soil.

The armistice sprang from an extraordinary crisis in Germany. It is, above all, a German story and it originated in two shattering realities. The first was the September 1918 collapse of belief on the part of German commander, Erich Ludendorff, the nation’s de facto ruler, that his military could win the war. The alarmed political parties in the Reichstag were secretly informed in early October. News that its armies were on the brink of defeat shocked the German people.

The second was a crisis that threatened Germany as city after city fell to

revolutionaries and it seemed the country would follow Russia and turn communist amid war chaos and defeat. The German uprising began with a mutiny in the fleet but the movement spread across the country with workers' councils backed by disillusioned troops. Ultimately, political revolution was thwarted only by the rapid combination of the armistice, the termination of the monarchy with Emperor Wilhelm II's enforced abdication on November 9 and the declaration later that day from the Reichstag building that Germany was a republic. In short, the armistice was pivotal in halting the German revolution. Wilhelm left for The Netherlands on November 10 after deciding in talks with chief of the general staff Paul von Hindenburg against remaining in office and deploying the army to crush the revolution.

For the men of the AIF, the armistice was a relief tinged with sadness. Their units had become their second family.

Historian Peter Pedersen captured the psychology: "Each man quietly abandoned his dream of returning to Australia and with no prospect of leave there, his platoon, and by extension, company and battalion, effectively became his family." The most emotionally intense and dangerous days of their lives were over.

The four years of war centenaries have seen thousands of Australians gather on the shore at Gallipoli on April 25, 2015, to commemorate the landing; they assembled at Fromelles on July 23, 2016, to honour the worst day in our history with the catastrophic entry on to the Western Front that saw 1917 men killed in 24 hours; and they came to Villers-Bretonneux, the small town saved by the Australians on the third Anzac Day, the chosen location of the Australian National Memorial unveiled in 1938 by King George VI, the adjoining landscape dominated by its tower.

War memory is a strange, personal and random psychology. Historian Les Carlyon captured its unfathomable mystery: "There was no logic to the way the war came to be seen in popular memory. Gallipoli, the foundation story, had an aura and Fromelles did not. Gallipoli was a defeat and Mont St Quentin an unlikely victory but Mont St Quentin never lodged in the nation's

consciousness. Simpson, the man with the donkey, was lionised and Percy Black, crucified on the wire at Bullecourt, was not.”

Compassion, gratitude and tragedy constitute the anecdotes of the war. On March 27, 1918, on the road to Franvillers and Heilly, Bean recounts the 3rd division was met with displays of welcome — women burst into tears and raised a thin cry of “Vive l’Australie”. The Diggers gruffly replied: “Fini retreat — beaucoup Australiens ici”.

At Fromelles, Victorian farmer sergeant Simon Fraser, rescuing the wounded from no man’s land, heard another man cry out “Don’t forget me, cobber.” Fraser saved the man but was killed at Bullecourt, aged 40. His account frames the Fromelles story with the *Cobbers* sculpture designed by Peter Corlett now standing in the memorial park next to the battlefield.

At Pozieres the AIF took more than 24,000 casualties in seven weeks. Lieutenant Alec Raws said: “We are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven, sleepless. My tunic is rotten with other men’s blood and partly splattered with a comrade’s brains.” He was soon killed.

A tangible legacy from the centenary process has been the building of the Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux, a hi-tech interpretative centre offering a deeply emotional experience as an entry point for Australians - visiting the Western Front. Its director, Caroline Bartlett, told the author at the opening: “The focus is not forgetting, keeping the memory alive now we don’t have people who can keep it alive for us.” Tony Abbott, whose passion made possible the Monash Centre, said: “This project will endure as long as our country lasts.”

Monash biographer Roland Perry is probably correct saying the two most important dates in Australia’s military history come from World War I — the April 25, 1915, landing at Gallipoli and the August 8, 1918, launch of the great offensive that turned the tide on the Western Front with the Australians and Canadians surging across broken German lines and Ludendorff calling it

“the black day of the German Army”.

Ashley Ekins from the Australian War Memorial provides invaluable statistics: just over 330,000 Australian served overseas. The largest age group was 21 to 30 years, 56 per cent of the total. The war lasted for 1560 days, which means, on average, 38 members of the Australian forces died each day for four years. The main theatre of casualties was the Western Front, where more than 46,000 died, nearly six times more than at Gallipoli.

The critical decision about Australia’s war role — indeed a fundamental decision about our history as a nation — came at the outbreak of the war in 1914 when Major-General William Throsby Bridges, an imperial minded Australian nationalist, decided Australia’s forces must be organised as a discreet army and must not be subsumed as willing colonials into British units. Australian sentiment and interest demanded nothing else, hence the creation of the AIF with the identity it would generate for Australia and before the world.

Churchill in his history captured the war’s grim totality: “The wounded died between the lines. The dead moulded into the soil. Every effort was made to starve whole nations into submission without regard to age or sex.

“Poison gas in many forms stifled or seared the soldiers. Men fell from the air in flames or were smothered, often slowly, in the dark recesses of the sea.”

It is no wonder that Great War recollection became a cultural phenomenon based on futility.

“My subject is war and the pity of war,” British war poet Wilfred Owen said. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway has his hero, Frederic Henry say that in the end “only the names of places had dignity ... abstract words such as glory, honour, courage or hallow were obscene.”

The war began in the furnace of 1914 nationalistic rivalry. The conflict was sustained not just by leaders but by peoples, a truth many historians prefer to overlook. The tenacity of home front commitment to the war — in most nations — is the single most extraordinary element for today's generation. The irony is that a war ignited by leaders was sustained by peoples. It became a new genre of conflict: one industrial economy fully mobilised against another, one society and people mobilised against another.

World War I, however, was not an accident. It arose from deliberate war decisions by leaders, though nobody could envisage its scale or toll. The outcome is more ambivalent than many appreciate: Germany won on the Eastern Front; it defeated Russia. On the Western Front, while defeated, it seriously weakened France and Britain, materially and psychologically. And the alliance that had fought Germany — Britain, France, Russia and the US — was left disunited and broken.

Social disintegration and ideological conflict meant any lasting peace was untenable. Germany and Italy would turn fascist; Russia went communist; the US went isolationist; France fretted it had won but a reprieve; and the British Empire pledged its soul to appeasement.

The armistice sprang from the fatal contradictions at Germany's heart — a sophisticated culture, a dominant military and a political system in dysfunction. Facing defeat and having to negotiate, Wilhelm was persuaded to make the government more acceptable and he appointed a liberal, Prince Max of Baden as chancellor in September 1918. In early October, Germany - approached Wilson in a bid to terminate hostilities. The disintegration of Austria-Hungary had left Germany alone. Facing an internal revolution, Germany was now desperate for a ceasefire. As revolution spread, Max's government fell and a new Social Democratic government was formed to stem the revolution.

In truth, Germany's defeat had triggered the revolution, not the other way round. But Ludendorff, Hitler and the German Right had the opportunistic circumstances for their "stab in the back" legend that would doom the next

generation of German politics.

The armistice that Australians honour this weekend is sustained by the sentiments that attach to nation and family.

These are the deepest ties. What was the faith that drove the Australian soldier? Monash said: “His bravery was founded upon his sense of duty to his unit, comradeship to his fellows, emulation to uphold his traditions and a combative spirit to avenge his hardships and suffering upon the enemy.”

Australia was unique: pro-war but anti-conscription.

That demands reflection: the AIF was an all volunteer force, all of the 417,000 who enlisted.

They came from cities, towns and farms. They were not strategists or cosmopolitans. But these Australians saw themselves as joined to the world and believed they had a stake in the global conflict and that judgment was correct.

The power of the Anzac story lies in its authenticity. The diaries of the soldiers reveal their fidelity to their nation and their mates. What sustained them, Bean asked of the AIF? His answer was not hatred of the enemy, not just patriotism, it lay in “the mettle of the men”.

Wars of mass mobilisation may not come again. But nationalism, for better or worse, is not dead despite two world wars and a Cold War. Nearly everywhere one looks today, national sentiment is strong or rising, manifested in different forms, witness the US, China, Russia, Britain in Brexit, Turkey, France, Indonesia, Japan, Brazil, India, Iran, Israel and many more.

The fate of an individual in 2018 hinges heavily upon what nation’s citizenship they hold. Globalisation has been an immense force for shared

prosperity but the power of culture and nationalistic identity remains at the beating heart of human aspiration. It has decades yet to run.

In his luminous 1956 book *Gallipoli*, Alan Moorehead laments “a strange light plays over the Gallipoli landing” where nothing goes right, where the Anzacs meet a conspiracy of nature and confusion, yet the story finishes in a valiant assertion of the human spirit when in 1934 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk inscribes on the memorial his message to Anzac mothers: your sons having died here “have become our sons as well”.

For the people, war commemoration has evolved — it is not about victory or glorification; it is about honouring sacrifice, kinship, national bonds and community.

A century later, people cannot really know or comprehend what the AIF did in World War I. Commemoration is about trying to be better people in recognition of those who gave their lives.

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