

Anti-German sentiment in Australia

German–Australians before the war

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, many Germans had settled in Australia. Most German settlers arrived in Port Adelaide, and then moved on to settle in areas such as the Barossa Valley (in South Australia), the Riverina (in New South Wales) and south-east Queensland. Many German immigrants found these regions suitable for wheat and dairy farming, the planting of vineyards and wine making. By 1914 over 100 000 people of German descent lived in Australia. Many of these had been granted full Australian citizenship before 1914, while others were second- and third-generation Australians. On the whole, German–Australians were a well-established and well-liked community prior to the outbreak of the war.

The outbreak of war

With the rising tension between the British and German Empires, German–Australian communities began to find themselves the subject of suspicion and hostility in Australia. When war broke out in 1914 this changed to outright aggression.

At the time, many German–Australians had come to think

of themselves as Australian first. Indeed many of them enlisted in the AIF. For example, the first Australian commander of the AIF, General John Monash, was the son of German migrants.

However, when Australia and the rest of the British Empire were at war with Germany, German–Australians were considered potential threats to national security. Many Anglo–Celtic Australians believed the German–Australians had divided loyalties or even that they were spies. Almost overnight, German–Australians became the target of hate campaigns. Propaganda and vicious rumours were circulated. Life became very difficult for anyone of German descent.

The Commonwealth government and legislation

Two months after the war began, the Australian government created more tension between British–Australians and German–Australians with the introduction of the War Precautions Act. The Act authorised the Commonwealth government to do whatever it felt necessary to secure the safety of the nation. This Act, together with later regulations and Acts, set out a number of restrictions on the lives of people of German descent. In particular, it specified that all ‘enemy aliens’ (foreign residents from enemy nations) had to register and report weekly to local police stations or military authorities, pledge their allegiance to Australia and the British Empire, and inform the authorities of any change of address.

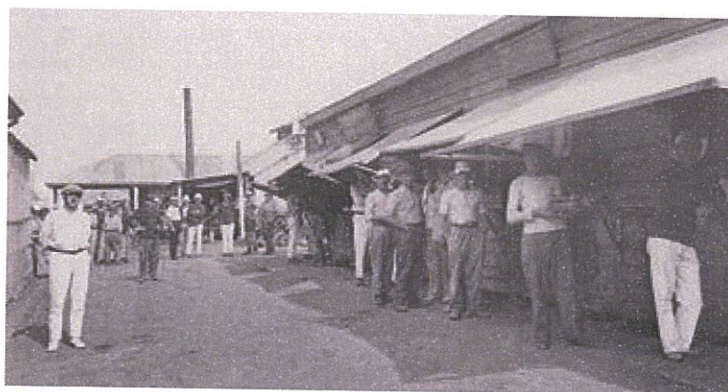
Internment

Over the course of the war, nearly 7000 people were classified by the government as ‘enemy aliens’ and imprisoned in **internment camps**. Most of these people were of German or Austro–Hungarian descent who had been residents in Australia when the war broke out. Some had lived here for many years or had even been born in Australia. There were no hearings or appeals.

Initially, internment camps were set up all across Australia, but in July 1915, all internees were moved to camps in New South Wales. Here, the three main internment camps were at Trial Bay Gaol, Berrima Gaol and Holsworthy Army Barracks. Germans who were not placed in camps were carefully watched by the police and neighbours.



Source 8.67 This poster, created by the New South Wales Recruitment Committee, uses anti-German sentiment to encourage people to enlist in the armed forces.



Source 8.68 Holsworthy Internment Camp, Liverpool, New South Wales

Hostility towards Germans in Australian society at the time was so strong that many people of German or Austrian heritage decided that life inside the internment camps would be preferable. Many of them had lost their jobs and could not feed their families. During the war, 1500 people chose to enter internment camps voluntarily.

Other reactions to the threat of the 'enemy within'

In response to the threat of German-Australians, the government closed down German schools and changed the names of towns that it thought sounded 'too German'. In New South Wales, Germantown became Holbrook; in Tasmania, the town of Bismarck became Collinsville; and in Victoria, Mount Bismarck was renamed Mount Kitchener – after the British Field Marshal, Lord Kitchener. In Townsville, the German Gardens became the Belgian Gardens.

Many families of German descent changed their names to stop harassment from the government and a war-mad community. German schools and churches were closed, German music was banned, and German food was renamed.

After the failure of the second conscription plebiscite in 1917 the anti-German campaign was increased further. People of German descent were stopped from joining the Army, and from holding civil positions such as local councillors or Justices of the Peace.

Many Australians also refused to work beside people of German descent, striking until they were sacked from their jobs. People refused to buy anything from German-owned businesses.

keyconcept: empathy

Prejudice during war time

When times are tough, whether through war, depression or natural disaster, part of the natural human response to the difficulties is to look for someone to blame.

Ethnic or religious groups such as Irish Catholics, Jews or Muslims have often been held responsible, or used as scapegoats (those seen to bear the blame), for particular events over the course of history. The general public usually knows little about the scapegoat group, which makes it easier to hate and blame. When individual members of the targeted group are actually known, it becomes easier to empathise with them.

During World War I, Germans and Turks were demonised in the press, in posters and in general conversation. In the 1917 election, Australian-born Germans were forbidden from voting. A soldier fighting in France wrote to the *British-Australasian Magazine* in 1918 objecting to the fact that his mother (an Australian-born woman of German descent) was denied the vote: 'Now this has hurt me very much ... She worked hard in every respect towards assisting the troops on this side, she paid particular attention to the Red Cross.'

However, there were still Australians who empathised with those of German descent. Some continued to mix on friendly terms with neighbours, and shop and trade with German businesses, particularly in areas like the Barossa Valley.

For more information on the key concept of empathy refer to section HT.1 of 'The historian's toolkit'.

Check your learning 8.15

Remember and understand

- 1 How many people of German descent were living in Australia at the start of World War I?
- 2 What were some of the suspicions held about German-Australians after war broke out? Who held these views?
- 3 What restrictions were placed on German-Australians as a result of the War Precautions Act?
- 4 Why did some German-Australians voluntarily enter internment camps?

Apply and analyse

- 5 Write a paragraph describing the variety of ways in which anti-Germanism during World War I impacted upon the lives of German-Australians.
- 6 Negative attitudes towards Germans, even those who were born here or were naturalised Australians, were widely held during World War I.
 - a How do you explain this reaction?
 - b Do you think the same reaction would happen today if Australia were at war with a country from which many Australian citizens had migrated?