



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2025 Winner | Queensland

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'Australia's relationship with Great Britain explains why Australia and individual Australians went to war'. Discuss the accuracy of this statement with reference to World War One.

On August 4, 1914, after weeks of escalating tension, Great Britain officially declared war on Germany. As a dominion of the British Empire, Australia was automatically at war. Throughout the war, approximately 416,809 Australians enlisted (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2023). Yet, the motivations of those involved were puzzling. The war was a distant concern for Australia, being fought on foreign soil, and the reason many individual Australians volunteered is often simplistically dismissed as loyalty to Britain. **While the historical relationship with Britain accounts for Australia's participation in WWI on a national level, individual Australian soldiers were driven by forces far more profound and personal.**

Australia's entry into WWI was motivated by loyalty and a sense of duty as a dominion of the British Empire. The British Imperial Government retained responsibility for Australia's foreign policy in 1914, and so Australia found itself at war alongside them (Curtis, 2014). This patriotic obligation to defend the 'mother country' played a central role in Australian politics and was reflected in the rhetoric of Australian politicians during the 1914 election campaign. Opposition leader Andrew Fisher articulated his famous line supporting the British war effort '... to the last man and last shilling' in a campaign speech delivered on July 6, 1914 (Australian War Memorial, 2019). These sentiments were echoed by Prime Minister Joseph Cook in a speech delivered at Horsham on August 1, 1914, where he declared, "[...]all our resources in Australia are in the Empire, and for the Empire, and for the preservation and the security of the Empire" ('Grave Situation', Sydney Morning Herald, 1914, p. 21). These statements reveal Australia's commitment to contributing extensive resources to the British war effort. However, the government's willingness to provide resources extended beyond mere rhetoric. The establishment of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was a direct response to Britain's call for assistance. The government pledged an immediate force of 20,000 troops to support British military operations (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2024). This commitment was not solely driven by political obligation; it was also influenced by a strong sense of loyalty among Australians who identified with their British heritage. Thus, loyalty and patriotic duty rather than political obligation propelled Australia into war in 1914.

Individual Australians exhibited a variety of motives for volunteering during World War One. In 1914, droughts impacted incomes for many, making military wages extremely attractive. Corporal RE Antill describes in a letter to his family dated November 17, 1914, how he joined the AIF for a steady wage as he anticipated soon becoming unemployed: "Philpott had only about 3 days' work left . . . there is a drought on . . so I thought I would join the army." (Australian War Memorial, 2024). Many also joined seeking the thrill of adventure, believing the war would be over by Christmas. As General E. M. Higgins stated in 1917, men would join the army "[...] if they wanted occupation or excitement or a world tour . . ." (Gammage, 1974, pg. 21). Another significant driver for Australian men was the immense societal pressure of duty to the community. Private A.J. McSparrow writes in a letter dated November 17, 1914, "I have [enlisted] ... and I don't regret it in the very least ... it is every young fellow's duty." (Gammage, 1974, pg. 8). Many felt a moral obligation to their country and fallen brethren to fight and honour their sacrifice. This sentiment intensified as the war progressed and casualty lists from the front lines were published. Fear and shame were also significant factors, with Victorian Mint Official N.G. Ellsworth describing the shame he would feel if he did not sign up for the war, writing in 1917, "If I had stayed at home, I would never have been able to hold my head up & look any decent girl in the face" (Gammage, 1974, p.g. 8). Some felt not volunteering was an act of cowardice whilst others enlisted out of fear for Australia, others still out of hatred of Germany (Gammage, 1990, p 9). Therefore, whilst some individuals enlisted out of loyalty to the British Empire, it is misleading to attribute all, or even most individual volunteers solely to this motivation.

Aside from personal motivations, Australians were also influenced by the persuasive and often manipulative propaganda disseminated by the government and affiliated organisations to bolster the war effort. Since the recruitment system relied solely on volunteers, propaganda techniques were utilised, featuring emotive imagery and slogans. The poster, "Must it come to this? Enlist!" features a caricature of Kaiser Wilhelm II with a hand poised over Australia (Appendix 1) (Pike, VAP Service, 1914-1918). The tactics of fear and anger are employed through these features, convincing the public that Australia requires protection though there is no evidence Australia was ever a military target of Germany. The Australian Win the War League's c. 1915 poster (Appendix 2) features a young man leisurely enjoying the surf,

juxtaposed with a slogan reminding viewers of soldiers in the trenches. This contrast evokes feelings of guilt and patriotism, compelling audiences to reflect on their duty to those serving on the battlefronts (Win the War League, c. 1915). The 'Enlist in the Sportsmen's 100' poster of 1917 contained an image of Lieutenant Albert Jacka, VC, a celebrated Australian war hero, surrounded by young men engaged in different sporting activities (Appendix 3). Alongside the slogan "Pick Up and Play The Game", athleticism is associated with military prowess, suggesting healthy, fit Australian men should lend their sporting ability to the battlefield, reinforcing the over-glorification of war (Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee, 1917). This manipulation continued in the journalistic press. Reports from the battlefronts were often altered to cloud the judgement of those yet to volunteer. John F Williams, author of *Anzacs, the Media and the Great War*, wrote for the UNSW Press in 1999, "The lies, exaggerations and errors of the battlefield were turned into official communiqués [...] A leader writer might then compound everything [...] and distort the product further with fantasies of his own." The distortion of the truth presented only a singular, manicured view. Reports focused on the heroism and bravery of Australia's soldiers during the Gallipoli landing while downplaying the 10,000 casualties within the campaign's first months (State Library Victoria, 2024). Missives exaggerated victories and skimmed over disasters, preying on the values and ideals of citizens to convince them to enlist. Without access to reliable information, many soldiers likely joined out of ignorance and naivety. Combined with the manipulative imagery of the propaganda posters, many men would have volunteered not out of loyalty, but because they were essentially coerced. Thus, attributing Australians joining the war as allegiance to Britain is misleading, as it ignores the overt manipulation by influential public propaganda that blinded and pressured potential volunteers.

When the personal drivers of non-Anglo-Australian soldiers who served during the First World War are considered, it is clear that the motivations for enlistment stretch far beyond simple loyalty to Britain. Of the more than 420,000 volunteers from Australia, most were of British descent, with over 90% of migrants in Australia in the 8 years before 1914 being from the United Kingdom (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023). However, thousands of non-British Australians also volunteered their services during the First World War. Due to the discriminatory regulations enforced on volunteers, such as the Defence Act of 1903, which stated: "Aborigines and half-castes are not to be enlisted. This restriction [applies] to all

coloured men,” non-Anglo-Australians had to work significantly harder to be recognised as eligible fighters. It can be inferred that possibly thousands more non-white Australians would have also volunteered for the armed forces, if not for regulations deeming them “not European enough” (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023). Despite such restrictions, men from diverse backgrounds volunteered, most prominently First Nations Australians who served against obvious bias. An estimated 1,000 Indigenous soldiers volunteered (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2023), along with roughly 6,600 Irish men and women (Century Ireland, 2023), and 213 Chinese Australians (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). With no ties to Britain, it is improbable that these men considered the defence of the empire to be their foremost priority. Maynard (1918) suggests that Aboriginal soldiers likely went to war for many of the same reasons as non-Indigenous soldiers: travel, adventure, supporting mates, belief in the war effort or because they were subjected to aggressive recruitment campaigns. These factors were also probable drivers for some Irish soldiers who as Nationalists were loyal to Australia but not to Empire (Imperial War Museums, n.d.). Many Chinese Australians were second or third-generation Australians whose ancestors immigrated during the gold rush and were willing to fight for their country, though laws and policies were against them (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Many non-Anglo Australians likely aspired to be seen as equal to white Australians and believed that by enlisting they would achieve this recognition. Therefore, motivations for enlistment extended far beyond loyalty to an empire they had no connection to, further challenging the notion that loyalty to Britain was a primary driver for individual enlistment.

The assertion that Australia and Australian individuals joined the First World War solely because of loyalty to Britain is simplistic and inaccurate. While it is true that Australia entered the war because of its historical ties to Great Britain, the courage and sacrifice of individual Australian soldiers cannot be dismissed so simplistically. To suggest the ideals they died for were based solely on loyalty to a distant country is to undermine their true motivations. A myriad of personal motivations together with manipulative government propaganda provides a more comprehensive and complex explanation for their participation in the First World War.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1:



Accession Number: ARTV06030

Pike, VAP Service, Must it come to this?, 1914 – 1918, Australian War Memorial (2024) Propaganda Posters, Propaganda. <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/resources/anzac-diversity/european-anzacs/propaganda>

Appendix 2:



Source 1 A - Simpson Prize - An Australian recruitment poster issued by the Win the War League. C. 1915 (AWM ARTV00141) Australian War Memorial (2024) The Simpson Prize 2025, WWI Sources. <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2025> .

Appendix 3:



Accession Number: ARTV05616

Sportsmens' Recruiting Committee, Troedel and Cooper Pty. Ltd, Enlist in the Sportsmens' 1000, 1917, chromolithograph on paper, 98.7 x 73.2 cm Australian War Memorial (2024a) Propaganda Posters, Propaganda. <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/resources/anzac-diversity/european-anzacs/propaganda> .

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<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/resources/anzac-diversity/european-anzacs/propaganda> .

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Source 1 A - Simpson Prize - An Australian recruitment poster issued by the Win the War League. C. 1915 (AWM ARTV00141) Australian War Memorial (2024) *The Simpson Prize 2025*, WWI Sources. <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2025>.

Source 1 C, Australian War Memorial (2024) *The Simpson Prize 2025*, WWI Sources.
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Source 1 E, Extract from John Maynard's *'The First World War'*, published in Beaumont & Cadzow (eds) *Serving Our Country: Indigenous Australians, War, Defence and Citizenship*, 2018 Australian War Memorial (2024) *The Simpson Prize 2025*, WWI Sources.
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2025>.

Source 1 F Simpson Prize Australian War Memorial (2024) *The Simpson Prize 2025*, WWI Sources. <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2025>.

Source 1 G, Australian War Memorial (2024) *The Simpson Prize 2025*, WWI Sources.
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