



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2025 Winner | South Australia

Grace Collins

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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 Two.

After listening to Robert Menzies’ radio broadcast declaring war on Nazi Germany, barely over one hour after Great Britain’s declaration with time differences in mind¹, one might be forgiven for thinking that both as a country and individually, our allegiance to the European nation ultimately explained our involvement in World War Two. However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that there were several factors at play, and that the influence of our relationship with Britain declined as the war progressed – particularly after Imperial Japan initiated its rapid expansion in South-East Asia², and Britain’s inability to protect Australia was realised³. The first direct attacks on Australian soil led to a paradigm shift in our foreign policy⁴ – with the United States becoming a vital ally in the Pacific⁵ – and an increased sense of duty to Australia arose amongst individuals as a collective response to the Japanese threat⁶. For Indigenous Australians, despite the discrimination faced at the time, loyalties to Australia rather than Britain were often motivating elements⁷, while enlistment provided valuable opportunities for increased educational access and improved pay⁸. Moreover, 1939 marked the end of the Great Depression⁹, with Australia’s unemployment rate falling to its lowest rate at 0.95% due to wartime activities¹⁰. An accurate picture of why Australia and individual Australians went to war in WWII must consider these dynamics.

The effects of traditional British influence on Australian affairs diminished when Australia could no longer rely on Britain for defence and shifted towards the United States. In the early 20th century, Australia thought of itself as ‘98% British’¹¹. Its population largely consisted of those with British and Irish heritage, although Germans and other smaller groups were also

¹ National Library of Australia (n.d.) [War in Europe Again - 'My Melancholy Duty'](#), National Library of Australia, accessed 5 November 2024.

² ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee (Queensland) (n.d.) [1942 - An Overview of the Battle for Australia](#), ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee, accessed 5 November 2024.

³ Department of Veterans' Affairs (17 August 2021) [Australia and the Second World War](#), Anzac Portal, accessed 5 November 2024.

⁴ Curtin J (27 December 1941) [Extract from Prime Minister John Curtin's 'The Task Ahead', The Herald \(Melbourne\), 27 December 1941](#) [Source 2A], Australian War Memorial, accessed 8 November 2024.

⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica (7 November 2024) [Australia - WWII, Pacific, Involvement](#), Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 8 November 2024.

⁶ Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.) [Reflections on Enlistment in World War II: In Their Own Words](#), Anzac Portal, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁷ Department of Veterans' Affairs (4 October 2024) [Indigenous Australians in service during World War II](#), Anzac Portal, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ National Museum of Australia (n.d.) [Height of the Great Depression](#), Australia's Defining Moments Digital Classroom, accessed 7 November 2024.

¹⁰ Reserve Bank of Australia (n.d.) [The Spectre of Inflation](#), Reserve Bank of Australia, accessed 7 November 2024.

¹¹ Hancock W.K. (1930) *Australia*, Ernest Benn Ltd, London.

present¹². The systems of the federal government ‘are, for the most part, merely a superstructure imposed on the Westminster system’¹³ and the Australian Constitution derives much from its British counterpart¹⁴. Significantly, Australia was both militarily and economically dependent on Britain¹⁵, with over 69.46% of exports destined for the shores of Britain and British Possessions¹⁶. It comes as no surprise then, that it was the ‘melancholy duty’¹⁷ of, then Prime Minister, Menzies to announce on the 3rd of September 1939 that, ‘Great Britain has declared war upon her [Germany] and that, as a result, Australia is also at war... There can be no doubt that where Great Britain stands, there stands the people of the entire British world’¹⁸. This statement articulated that due to our traditional ties – historical¹⁹, cultural²⁰, and political²¹ – wherever Britain went, Australia would follow. Australians were people of the ‘British world’²². However, Menzies was ‘a staunch monarchist’²³, and influence of his personal loyalties should not be discounted. Nonetheless, at war’s outbreak – despite wariness of a threat from Imperial Japan²⁴ – the 6th, 7th, and 9th, divisions of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were sent to aid Britain in the European and Mediterranean theatres of war²⁵, with several Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ships and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) crews also deployed²⁶. Thus, when Japan entered the war in 1941²⁷, projecting its power across South-East Asia, Australia was not in a position to defend itself²⁸. Since World War One, ‘Australia’s defence plan relied on the support of the British, particularly the British naval base in

¹² Melleuish G (2020) [Australian Identity in the 21st century](#) [PDF], Parliament of Australia, accessed 8 November 2024.

¹³ Parliament of Australia (March 1996) [Professor Neville Meaney "The Commonwealth and the Republic: An Historical Perspective."](#), Parliament of Australia, accessed 7 November 2024.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Department of Veterans' Affairs (2020) [Shifting Tides: Australia and the Pacific in the Second World War](#), Anzac Portal, accessed 7 November 2024.

¹⁶ Parliament of Western Australia (n.d.) [Facts and Figures 1939](#), Parliament of Western Australia, accessed 7 November 2024.

¹⁷ Menzies R (3 September 1939) [Extract from Prime Minister Robert Menzies' radio address to the Australian people, 3 September 1939](#) [Source 2D], Australian War Memorial, accessed 8 November 2024.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stevens G (18 October 2013) *The United Kingdom and Australia: Shared History, Shared Outlook* [speech], Australian British Chamber of Commerce, Sydney.

²⁰ Melleuish G (2020) [Australian Identity in the 21st century](#) [PDF], Parliament of Australia, accessed 8 November 2024.

²¹ Parliament of Australia (March 1996) [Professor Neville Meaney "The Commonwealth and the Republic: An Historical Perspective."](#), Parliament of Australia, accessed 7 November 2024.

²² Menzies R (3 September 1939) [Extract from Prime Minister Robert Menzies' radio address to the Australian people, 3 September 1939](#) [Source 2D], Australian War Memorial, accessed 8 November 2024.

²³ National Portrait Gallery (n.d.) [Ming Vase \(Sir Robert Menzies\)](#), National Portrait Gallery, accessed 7 November 2024.

²⁴ Department of Veterans' Affairs (17 August 2021) [Australia and the Second World War](#), Anzac Portal, accessed 5 November 2024.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Imperial War Museums (n.d.) [A Quick Guide To Japan's Role In The Second World War](#), Imperial War Museums, accessed 7 November 2024.

²⁸ Department of Veterans' Affairs (2020) [Shifting Tides: Australia and the Pacific in the Second World War](#), Anzac Portal, accessed 7 November 2024.

Singapore²⁹. Notably, Australia had also invested in the construction of this installation³⁰. In 1941, two brigades from the AIF's 8th division were positioned in Singapore to bolster defences there³¹. By early 1942, the 6th and 7th divisions had been ordered back to Australia for combat in the Pacific³². Following the Fall of Singapore, it became increasingly evident to Australians that Britain did not have the resources to protect itself and its colonies simultaneously³³ – with one newspaper reporting that ‘all through weary months, in which defences were known to be inadequate, the United Kingdom turned deaf ears to every plea’³⁴ – and we looked to the US for aid³⁵. Fortunately, the US was looking for a base of operations in the Pacific³⁶. This formed the foundation for what has since become widely considered Australia's most important strategic relationship³⁷. The shift from old world to new world was summed up neatly in *The Herald* by newly elected Prime Minister John Curtin on December 7th, 1941, when he wrote that, ‘I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom’³⁸. It is evident then, that when our national security was at risk, previous relationships could no longer sustain Australia's immediate wartime alliances.

In light of a direct threat from Imperial Japan, Australians' sense of duty and defence of their nation become a decisive factor in enlistment. An article in *The Canberra Times* on February 16th, 1942, reported the Fall of Singapore, describing ‘Australians are... throwing everything they can command into the fight... The Fall of Singapore will mark the rise of a spirit in Australia that will defy defeat’³⁹. Although intended to reassure civilians, this type of writing illustrated how increasing danger in South-East Asia cemented Australians' resolve to fight. On 19th February 1942, Australians experienced the first foreign attack on mainland Australia with the devastating bombing of Darwin⁴⁰, although the government – conscious of morale – employed censorship, lowering the death toll from approximately 250 to 17⁴¹. As per the lyrics

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ National Museum of Australia (n.d.) [Fall of Singapore](#), National Museum of Australia, accessed 7 November 2024.

³¹ Department of Veterans' Affairs (17 August 2021) [Australia and the Second World War](#), Anzac Portal, accessed 5 November 2024.

³² Ibid.

³³ Op. cit.

³⁴ The Canberra Times (16 February 1942) ‘[The Fall of Singapore](#)’, *The Canberra Times*, accessed 7 November 2024.

³⁵ Curtin J (27 December 1941) [Extract from Prime Minister John Curtin's 'The Task Ahead'](#), *The Herald (Melbourne)*, 27 December 1941 [Source 2A], Australian War Memorial, accessed 8 November 2024.

³⁶ The National WWII Museum (n.d.) [The Pacific Strategy, 1941-1944](#), The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, accessed 7 November 2024.

³⁷ Flinders University (4 January 2020) [Born in Ambiguity: The Historical Context of the U.S.-Australia Alliance](#), Jeff Bleich Centre, accessed 7 November 2024.

³⁸ Curtin J (27 December 1941) [Extract from Prime Minister John Curtin's 'The Task Ahead'](#), *The Herald (Melbourne)*, 27 December 1941 [Source 2A], Australian War Memorial, accessed 8 November 2024.

³⁹ The Canberra Times (16 February 1942) ‘[The Fall of Singapore](#)’, *The Canberra Times*, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁴⁰ National Archives of Australia (n.d.) [The bombing of Darwin](#), National Archives of Australia, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁴¹ Government of Western Australia (n.d.) [Loose Lips Sink Ships](#), Western Australian Museum, accessed 7 November 2024.

of Lee Kernaghan's song, 'When the First Bombs Fell', there were 'Armed invaders in Australian skies'⁴². A poster circulated by the Australian government in 1942⁴³ depicts a Japanese soldier marching across the globe, boot over Australia and rifle pointed at the continent, with the caption 'HE'S COMING SOUTH...It's fight work or perish'⁴⁴. This embodied the reason why many Australians joined the defence forces after 1941, and encouraged them to do so. It pressed upon Australians their duty to defend the country from outside threats, and many Australians went to war on that basis.

For Indigenous Australians, the decision to enlist was not fuelled by loyalties to Empire – the 'loyalty was purely Australian'⁴⁵ – but rather a combination of opportunities for education, pay, and greater equality⁴⁶. In the case of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, formerly known as Kath Walker⁴⁷, volunteering for the army was 'the only way I could learn...it was the only way that the aboriginals could learn extra education at the time'⁴⁸. This is indicative of the lack of access to education, amongst many other rights, that Indigenous Australians experienced⁴⁹. Noonuccal trained as a Wireless Operator in the Australian Women's Army Service⁵⁰, later becoming an activist for the rights of Indigenous peoples – eventually Queensland State Secretary of the Federal Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advancement⁵¹. Due to systemic disadvantage, compounded by the effects of the Great Depression, employment was difficult to find⁵². In the words of Alec Kruger, 'We would be fighting for our country... Even full descent Aboriginal people were getting paid real money and being employed to do army jobs ... I was ripe for a bit of real money and ruination'⁵³. Prior to this, Kruger had been employed by the Bloomfield family for seven years and informed that his wages were being deposited into a trust fund he could only access upon turning 18⁵⁴. This was blatant inequality, and further highlights the significant hardships Indigenous people faced. Over 3000 Indigenous

⁴² Musixmatch (2015) *When the First Bombs Fell*, Musixmatch, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁴³ *Australian government poster, 1942 | "He's coming south"* (1942) [Source 2C], Australian War Memorial, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Beaumont J and Moss T (2018) [Source 2E] *Extract from Joan Beaumont and Tristan Moss, 'Australian Military Forces in the Second World War', published in Beaumont & Cadzow (eds) Serving Our Country: Indigenous Australians, War, Defence and Citizenship, 2018*, Australian War Memorial, accessed 8 November 2024.

⁴⁶ Department of Veterans' Affairs (4 October 2024) *Indigenous Australians in service during World War II*, Anzac Portal, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁴⁷ Shrine of Remembrance (2013) *Extract from a source published in 'Indigenous Service', Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne, 2013* [Source 2B], Australian War Memorial, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Op. cit.

⁵⁰ Op. cit.

⁵¹ Abbey S (n.d.) *Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920–1993)*, Australian Dictionary of Biography, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁵² Beaumont J and Moss T (2018) [Source 2E] *Extract from Joan Beaumont and Tristan Moss, 'Australian Military Forces in the Second World War', published in Beaumont & Cadzow (eds) Serving Our Country: Indigenous Australians, War, Defence and Citizenship, 2018*, Australian War Memorial, accessed 8 November 2024.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *Alec Kruger (1924–?)* (n.d.), Australian Dictionary of Biography, accessed 7 November 2024.

Australians⁵⁵ were involved in WWII; an opportunity to overcome barriers in education and employment through active service.

The end of the Great Depression was also the start of WWII⁵⁶ – and war service provided a source of income for those lacking work⁵⁷. In 1939, the unemployment rate in Australia was 8.76%⁵⁸. Four years later, this had fallen to 0.95%⁵⁹ – a historic low⁶⁰ – with two-thirds of the nation's civilian workforce employed in the war effort⁶¹. Recruitment for the defence force was a major factor⁶², as was the expanded public service and wartime goods production⁶³. The incentives were well outlined by a quote from Merv Lilley featured in *Australians: Flappers to Vietnam* 'thousands and thousands of characters on the dole and the breadline knew they'd get a job in the army... they were all in there for the three square meals . . . and five bob a day'⁶⁴. The prospect of stable employment and pay was thus another significant appeal to many entering the war.

This is not to say that Australia's relationship with Great Britain did not play a part in Australia and Australians' decisions to go to war, for it was a factor – particularly in 1939. However, this influence waned over time, especially when the Japanese threat and Britain's limits became evident – instead our alliance with the US became increasingly important. A sense of duty became a motivating factor for many, as did opportunities for Indigenous Australians, and income for the unemployed. It was a combination of these elements that truly explained why Australia and individual Australians went to war in WWII.

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(Excluding footnotes and bibliography).

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⁵⁷ Reserve Bank of Australia (n.d.) [The Spectre of Inflation](#), Reserve Bank of Australia, accessed 7 November 2024.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Keneally T (2014) [Source 2F] [Extract From Thomas Keneally's Australians: Flappers to Vietnam](#), Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2014, pp. 140 – 141, Australian War Memorial, accessed 7 November 2024.

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