



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2025 Winner | Victoria

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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 either World War One OR World War Two?

Australia's entry into World War II is often attributed to loyalty to Britain; however, this oversimplification fails to capture the complex motivations behind Australia's involvement. While allegiance to Britain was indeed a factor, Australia's decision to enter the conflict was influenced by a blend of geopolitical realities, economic considerations, and an emerging national identity that came into focus as the war progressed. This multifaceted decision reflected not only a sense of duty to global partners but also concerns about regional security and economic stability. Initially, Australia's ties to Britain guided its policy, but the threat of Japanese invasion in the Pacific forced Australia to reassess its reliance on the Empire, ultimately leading to a strategic pivot toward the United States (Bridge & Fedorowich, 2003). In this context, Australia's engagement in WWII was as much a response to pragmatic security concerns and shifting national interests as it was to historical ties with Britain.

When Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced on September 3, 1939, that "Great Britain has declared war...and as a result, Australia is also at war," he captured the automaticity with which Australia aligned with Britain's stance (Source 2 D; Smith, 1945). This decision reflected the sentiment many Australians shared at the time; they still saw themselves as "British subjects" with an enduring commitment to the Empire (Beaumont, 2013). Menzies and his government viewed supporting Britain not only as a duty but as a strategic necessity, given the ideological threat that Nazi Germany posed to Western democratic values (White, 1981). Australia's participation in the war was thus seen as an extension of its role in World War I, a conflict that had left a significant mark on Australia's national consciousness and forged a collective identity centred around shared sacrifice for the British Empire. Historian Joan Beaumont argues that "Australia's attachment to Britain in the late 1930s was profound," capturing the emotional depth of Australia's connection to Britain and the Empire (Beaumont, 2018). For many Australians, supporting Britain in WWII was as much about defending the values of civilization as it was about fulfilling an imperial obligation.

Despite the strong influence of British loyalty, Australia's sense of duty to Britain was soon overshadowed by the rapid expansion of Japanese forces in Southeast Asia, culminating in the fall of Singapore in 1942. This event marked a turning point in Australia's approach to the war (Macintyre, 2009). Britain's inability to defend its Pacific territories made it clear that Australia could not rely solely on the Empire for protection. Prime Minister John Curtin's subsequent declaration, "Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom," signalled a pivotal shift in Australia's foreign policy and strategic orientation (Source 2 A; Edwards, 2005). Curtin's alignment with the United States was a pragmatic decision that reflected Australia's realisation that its security interests in the Pacific would not always align with British priorities (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017).

This pivot towards the United States illustrated Australia's emerging independence in foreign policy, a departure from the automatic alignment with Britain that had characterised its approach to WWII (Broome, 2019). Historian David Day describes this realignment as a

“watershed moment” for Australia, marking a newfound awareness that the country’s strategic needs required alliances rooted in mutual interests rather than historical ties (Macdougall, 2006). Britain’s focus on its European defences had left Australia isolated and vulnerable to Japanese aggression, a reality underscored by the Japanese bombing of Darwin in 1942 (Australian War Memorial, 2024). Historian Geoffrey Blainey argues that Australia’s priorities had “firmly focused on the Pacific,” with the United States, not Britain, becoming Australia’s principal wartime ally (Johnston, 2000). This shift reveals that while British loyalty had initially guided Australia’s entry into the war, the practicalities of survival demanded a more self-reliant and adaptable approach.

For individual Australians, motivations for enlistment in WWII varied widely, reflecting economic pressures, personal duty, and the allure of opportunity rather than a singular allegiance to Britain. The economic devastation of the Great Depression had left many Australians impoverished and unemployed, making military service an attractive option. Merv Lilley, a rural labourer, described the draw of the military as “three square meals...and five bob a day,” capturing the reality that many Australians joined the armed forces for economic stability in a time of financial hardship (Source 2 F; Beaumont, 2018). This economic motivation was especially compelling among young men with limited job prospects, demonstrating that enlistment was often a practical solution rather than an expression of imperial loyalty.

For Indigenous Australians, enlistment offered a rare opportunity for education and advancement that was otherwise denied in civilian life (Source 2 B; Waters, 2016). Oodgeroo Noonuccal, known as Kath Walker before the war, joined the Australian Women’s Army Service in 1942. Reflecting on her decision, she stated, “One of the reasons I joined the army was it was the only way I could learn ... the only way that the Aboriginals could learn extra education at that time” (Walker, 1999). Noonuccal’s words highlight the challenges Indigenous Australians faced in accessing education and illustrate how military service became a pathway toward self-improvement and equality for some. Reg Saunders, who became the first Indigenous Australian officer, echoed a similar sentiment of loyalty, stating, “I never fought for anybody but Australia...my loyalty was purely Australian” (Source 2 E). For many Indigenous Australians, enlistment was a commitment to their homeland rather than the Empire, and they saw military service as a means to challenge their marginalised position within society.

Beyond economic necessity and patriotic duty, some Australians enlisted out of a cultural and ideological commitment to Britain. For these individuals, Britain’s stand against Nazi Germany was a moral crusade to defend civilization against fascism (West, 1984). Charles Janeway, a young Australian from South Australia, illustrated this sentiment when he described his family’s resolve to “do to the Germans what they had done to us” (Source 2 F). For Janeway and others, WWII was a moral struggle, a battle not just for territory but for the preservation of values they believed to be essential to the British Empire and, by extension, Australia.

Russell Braddon, who later became a notable memoirist, summed up his enlistment motivation with brutal simplicity, stating, “I wanted to go and kill Germans” (Lake & Reynolds, 2010). Braddon’s words capture the visceral response many Australians felt toward the Axis powers, and for them, enlistment was not only about duty or economic stability but an opportunity to fight a perceived evil. This alignment with Britain illustrates

that for some Australians, enlisting in WWII was driven by deeply held ideological beliefs, viewing the conflict as a defence of values such as democracy and justice.

While loyalty to Britain influenced Australia's initial engagement, WWII ultimately catalysed a shift toward a more independent Australian identity. Curtin's pivot to the United States underscored a transformative moment in Australia's international relations, reflecting a newfound sense of pragmatism and self-reliance (National Museum Australia, 2022). This change signalled Australia's growing awareness of its unique position within the Pacific, one that required alliances directly relevant to its security rather than based solely on imperial tradition.

This evolving independence was not simply a policy change; it represented a cultural shift in Australians' self-perception. Australians increasingly saw themselves as distinct from Britain, and the diversity of motivations for enlistment—from economic necessity to patriotic duty to ideological commitment—highlights the complexity of Australia's identity on the global stage (Macintyre, 2009). WWII thus became a proving ground for Australia's identity, demonstrating that Australians could define their path, both in war and in the peace that followed.

In retrospect, WWII marked a significant turning point in Australia's development as a nation with its own voice and strategic priorities. Britain's inability to protect Australia in the Pacific War catalysed a re-evaluation of old loyalties, with Australia beginning to see itself as a nation that would pursue its interests first. The enduring significance of this period lies not solely in Australia's victory but in how WWII reshaped Australia's perception of itself and its place within a global framework no longer exclusively tied to Britain. This period marked the start of Australia's journey from dominion to autonomous nationhood, demonstrating that true allegiance arises not from historical ties alone but from a nation's ability to adapt, survive, and define its priorities (Cochrane, 2015; Australian War Memorial, 2024).

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