

Whose liberty? Australian imperialism and the Pacific war

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Australia presents its Pacific War effort as a fight for liberation. This article challenges that view. The Allied forces were fighting to re-impose their own imperialist control, and this includes Australia. The war is best understood as part of a long term pattern of imperialist contention. The wartime intervention in East Timor, the battle to sustain control of Papua New Guinea, the restoration of Dutch rule in eastern Indonesia and Canberra's determination to play a role in the occupation of Japan, all illustrate this theme.

After Pearl Harbor John Curtin declared 'we are at war with Japan ... because our vital interests are imperiled and because the rights of free people in the whole Pacific are assailed.'¹ It has proved an enduring explanation. In a book published last year, War Memorial historian Peter Stanley cites this as the essential rationale for Australia's Pacific War.²

But how many Asians were free?

'We have ruled here for 300 years with the whip and the club', said the Dutch Governor of Java, Bonifacius de Jonge in 1935. In Indonesia, the Dutch had long maintained the brutal 'culture system', ruthlessly extracting agricultural surpluses from the peasantry at the cost of repeated famines. Outside Java, forced labour remained common until 1942, so that the Japanese forced labour system called *romusha* was built on Dutch colonial traditions. Political activists languished at Holland's 'green hell' prison colony Tanah Merah, again

1 Kristin Williamson *The last bastion* Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984, p 125.

2 Peter Stanley *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia, 1942* Viking, Melbourne, p. 188.

foreshadowing Japanese occupation methods. Working class struggles were brutally crushed.³

In Indochina rebellion also met severe repression. During 1930 peasants staged hunger marches and seized control of landed estates, electing *Xo-Viets* (councils—a name clearly derived from Russian *soviets*) to run them. Their French rulers hit back with air and ground attacks causing 10,000 casualties.⁴ The story of the Vietnamese left in the following decade was one of constant repression, and the life of workers and peasants a continual misery. According to one observer of the massive 1937 strike movement against French capital:

The underlying cause of the social ferment is the poverty of the masses ... all too often ignored by employers whose decisions are taken far from the colonies and dictated by a cold concern for the reduction of 'general costs of production'.⁵

In the Philippines, the United States hi-jacked a local independence struggle, sending troops in 1898-99 to wrest the islands from Spain. The Filipinos still demanded their rights and a cruel war ensued. By 1902 the death toll had surpassed 200,000 from fighting, starvation, exposure, torture and disease. A U.S. Congressman's first-hand report said the Americans 'took no prisoners' but 'simply swept the country, and wherever or however they could get hold of a Filipino, they killed him.'⁶ Humorist and anti-imperialist campaigner Mark Twain savagely proposed that America create a new version of its flag, with the white stripes coloured black and a skull and crossbones to replace the stars.⁷ Once American control was secure, unequal trading arrangements ensured open American access to Philippine markets and Filipino dependency on the US economy.⁸

US Senator George Frisbie Hoar's description of the American conquest of the Philippines—'devastation of provinces, the shooting of captives, the torture of prisoners and of unarmed peaceful citizens'—applies to much western warfare in Asia. Rather than singling out the Japanese power grab for special condemnation, it makes better sense to see

3 John Keay *Last post: The end of empire in the far east* John Murray, London, 1997, p. 16. Hadiz, Vedi *Workers and the state in New Order Indonesia* Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 44-45. Lingard, Jan *Refugees and rebels: Indonesian exiles in wartime Australia*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2008, p 64ff.

4 Keay *Last post*, p. 87.

5 Quoted in Ngo Van *Revolutionaries they could not break: the fight for the Fourth International in Indochina 1930-1945* Index Books, London, 1995, p. 47.

6 Stanley Karnow *In our image: America's empire in the Philippines* Random House, New York, 1989, p. 188.

7 Karnow *In our image*, p 192.

8 Keay *Last post*, p. 117.

it as part of a wider imperialist pattern, beginning with earlier western conquests and continuing through to the brutalities of America's Vietnam war.⁹

This history includes Australia with its genocidal onslaught against indigenous people, and its colonies in the Pacific. Consider Australian rule in Papua and New Guinea before the war. Under the Native Regulations and Ordinances in Papua, according to former district commissioner David Marsh

A native wasn't allowed to drink. He couldn't go into a picture show with Europeans. When walking along the footpath the native was expected to move aside. We had the White Women's Protection Ordinance which more or less said that if you smiled at a white woman it was rape ... They also had a Native Women's Protection Ordinance which seemed to say something quite different, and didn't mean much anyway.¹⁰

In 1929, twelve years before the war for 'freedom', black workers in Rabaul struck for higher pay. Astonished to find themselves without breakfast, white *mastas* were outraged. 'My coon's not here' complained one; another grumbled that there was 'no response from the slave ... the Government ... is disgustingly lenient with the natives ... why, the only thing a native understands is a beating.' White police put the strike leaders on trial; and a white magistrate jailed them.¹¹

After the war, Australian rule remained dictatorial. In his 1992 Kokoda speech Paul Keating proclaimed that the diggers had fought and died there for the 'liberty of Australia'. They certainly hadn't fought for the liberty of the local people.¹²

Is it any surprise most Asian peoples lacked enthusiasm for the Allied war effort? For many the war was simply a nightmare brought from outside by rival thugs. In Malaya one British observer wrote: 'The Malays were not taking any great interest, and can you blame them? It was their country that was being rolled over by two vast overseas giants, who were fighting their disgusting battles in Malaya's own garden, smashing and destroying everything.'¹³ When the conflict broke out in Europe, the British Governors of India and Burma automatically proclaimed war, about which Jawarlal Nehru later remarked: 'One man, and he a foreigner, plunged four hundred millions of human beings into war without the slightest reference to them.'¹⁴ This helps us understand why, after the fall of Singapore,

9 Richard Welch, 'American atrocities in the Philippines: the indictment and the response' *Pacific Historical Review* 43, 1974, p. 233.

10 Quoted in John Waiko *A short history of Papua New Guinea* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p 77.

11 Waiko *A short history*, pp. 100-101.

12 Quoted in James Curran *The power of speech: Australian prime ministers defining the national image* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p 220.

13 Quoted in Keay *Last post*, p. 177.

14 John Latimer *Burma: the forgotten war* John Murray, London, 2004, p.17.

40,000 Indian troops defected to the Japanese, stunning the Indian military authorities. Their mood wasn't improved by news of British planes strafing angry crowds after nationalists demanded Britain 'Quit India'.¹⁵ Burmese leader Aung San (father of Aung San Su Kyi) added his own pointed comment:

We declared to the British Government ... that it would be consistent and proper for us to join the war for democratic freedom, only if we would likewise be assured that democratic freedom [applied] in theory as well as in practice. So we asked that beginning with the declaration of war, principles of democratic freedom should be applied in our case too ... But our voice went unheeded. To us then the war in Europe was plainly a war between two sets of imperialists... We therefore finally resorted to an anti-imperialist, anti-war campaign.¹⁶

Responses to Japanese conquest

Across much of Asia, colonised peoples tended to welcome the Japanese advances. They had shown it was possible to defeat the whites. This humiliation of European arrogance had a profound impact. A Sikh guard told a western internee in Hong Kong: 'The day of the British is over. I am ya boss.'¹⁷

On hearing the Japanese had landed in northern Malaya, Governor Shenton Thomas is said to have blathered, 'I trust you'll chase the little men off'. But as the Japanese advanced, whites got a shock: Chinese traders would no longer accept their credit, but rather 'insisted on cash down from the *tuans* [masters]. This abrupt ending of a system of credit notes which gave the word "chit" to the English language and was one of the most fundamental obeissances to the white presence, was a kind of death knell when sounded by a people so shrewd and intelligent.'¹⁸

The Asian peoples of Singapore were contemptuous of the way whites evacuated their own families and servants, while leaving most locals to face the invaders. But evacuation didn't always work either. Women shipping out of Singapore were attacked at sea, and were lucky to make it to Banka Island off Sumatra, where Japanese soldiers killed some and interned others. A sympathetic book about their experiences nevertheless shows how persistent was the white arrogance. Mrs Brown had left her bag with valuables on the raft:

15 Lawrence James *Raj: the making and unmaking of British India* Little, Brown & Co, London, 1997, pp. 545, 548, 564-566.

16 Aung San 'The resistance movement' Rangoon 1945, www.aung-san.com/Res_Movement.htm, accessed June 2007.

17 Christina Twomey *Australia's forgotten prisoners: Australian civilians interned by the Japanese in World War II* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2007, p. 47.

18 Lavinia Warner and John Sandilands *Women beyond the wire* Arrow Books, London, 1982, p 27, 38-39.

Responding to a lifetime's habit, she attracted the attention of the most readily available Asiatic, a Japanese soldier in this case, and indicated that she would like it fetched. The Asiatic trotted away, as obediently as ever ... and brought it back. Now, however, he opened it, examined the contents, then put it under his arm and walked off down the beach: a clear indication of the New Order in Asia.¹⁹

And even becoming captives of the New Order together didn't end bigotry towards Eurasians among white internees. According to one writer, a 'significant tension initially was race, which not even a shared antipathy towards the Japanese could entirely eradicate. The complex distinctions which had set those of mixed blood apart in the society of the colonies could not be disregarded immediately ...'²⁰ Another says that in China, 'The injuries of class and race clearly continued to be felt within the camp walls.'²¹

Even sharp critics of the Japanese saw a positive side to their successes. 'Under the Japanese', wrote Malay leader Dato Onn bin Ja'afar, 'I learned that an Asian is just as good as a European. [The Japanese] were brutal, true, but they inspired us with a new idea of what Asia might become.' Filipinos generally disliked the Japanese, but when MacArthur fled the Philippines he also acknowledged a mood of 'violent resentment against the United States'.²² Even Chiang Kai-shek, theoretically the leader of Chinese resistance to Japan, had trained at a Japanese military college in 1909 and served in the Japanese 13th Artillery Regiment.²³

Some Asians saw things pragmatically. If Japanese victory could dislodge western imperialism that was good; later if the return of the allies could drive out the Japanese that was good too, as long as the westerners came back sufficiently weakened to make independence a realistic prospect. In Burma, Aung San's tiny forces initially lined up with Japan. By 1945 they were helping the allies, but with their eyes on independence. Siam declared war on the west in the early stages, but a pro-western 'resistance government' assumed power when the Allies got the upper hand. Alan Powell quotes a man called Emboge, near Popondetta in New Guinea, who tried collaborating with the Japanese but then moved to attempting to build an independent struggle.

The *kiawa* [white men] treated us badly before the war and they deserted the people when the Japanese landed at Buna. We tried the Japanese but we did not like them at all. So all we could do is organise ourselves and

19 Warner and Sandilands *Women beyond the wire*, p. 66.

20 Warner and Sandilands *Women beyond the wire*, p. 114.

21 Twomey *Australia's forgotten prisoners*, p. 73; on the complex interplay of race issues during the Japanese advance, see chapter 2.

22 Keay *Last Post*, pp. 230, 192.

23 Latimer *Burma*, p. 31

settle our own differences before we can hope to fight the external enemies.²⁴

Ethnic Fijians signed up to fight out of a desire to prove their worth to the empire, whereas Indo-Fijians didn't because they disliked the empire and resented being paid less than whites.²⁵ In still other cases, local people simply lined up with whoever seemed to be winning in their area, or whoever conscripted them. As an inhabitant of the Huon Peninsula (eastern Papua) told Australians: 'We thought the Japanese could beat you when you left these places, so we went their way. Afterwards when you bombed and bombed we were doubtful so we made up our mind to sit in the middle, but when you hunt them from these places we will know you are the stronger.'²⁶ Thus the patchwork of allegiances was very complex:

Not only did New Guineans fight New Guineans at various stages of the war, but Fijians fought Bougainvilleans and Pohnpei people fought New Guineans serving with the Australians ... Ninety-six men and one woman suspected of collaboration with the Australians were massacred at the Iatmul village of Timbunke by people from other Sepik villages acting under Japanese orders.²⁷

That brings us to the Papuan carriers, condescendingly known as 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels'. The Australians 'recruited' these unfortunates to virtual forced labour. No one told them what the war was really about, but they soon learned how vile it was. Many were paid nothing. According to Peter Ryan: 'Recruitment in some villages was 100% of male adults ... The villages suffered severely, without men to clear gardens, hunt, maintain houses and canoes etc. Diet was deficient, disease mounted ... there was in some places near starvation and very high infant mortality...'²⁸

Doctor Geoffrey Vernon recalled that during fighting on the Kokoda Trail:

...many carriers were without a single blanket, rice was practically the only food issue, meat was withheld for two or three weeks and tobacco scarce: the regulation governing the reduction of loads to 40 lbs was

24 Alan Powell *The third force: ANGAU's New Guinea war, 1942-46* Oxford University Press, Melbourne 2003, p. 208.

25 Robert Lowry *Fortress Fiji: holding the line in the Pacific war 1939-45*, self-published, Sutton NSW, 2006, pp. 73-74.

26 Powell *The third force*, p. 216.

27 Geoffrey White and Lamont Lindstrom *The Pacific theater: island representations of World War II* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1990, p. 23.

28 Quoted in Waiko *A short history*, p. 114.

often ignored, and excessive weights and distances imposed on the carriers as if they were merely pack animals.²⁹

T. A. G. Hungerford's novel *The ridge and the river* portrayed rebellious carriers. The leading white character used violence to keep them working, then reflected bitterly:

The kanakas didn't know what it was all about—it wasn't their war, but he had to rag them and work them to a standstill carrying a bully who had never done anything but ill-treat them and abuse them—and if rumours were true, even worse.³⁰

In the late 1960s, former carriers told PNG University's Ulli Beier that about two-thirds of them had tried to escape. Reasons for wanting to abscond included bad food, sore shoulders from carrying, beatings, cold, and bombs. But whenever some did escape, the Australians conscripted their sons, so that fathers were forced back to face ghastly penalties. 'The most terrifying punishments were the so-called drum beatings in Kerema ... A fire was lit in a 44-gallon drum and when it was hot the unlucky carriers were put cross the drum and beaten.'³¹ A song still current among villagers in the 1970s ended:

The white man has brought his war to be fought on this land
His King and Queen have said so
We are forced against our wishes to help him.³²

They certainly had no reason to respect the whites, judging by Captain F.P. Brewer's description of the troops at Port Moresby when it was bombed and people thought an invasion was near.

Crowds of soldiers looted homes and shops ... Captain Fitch of the Steamship Trading Company caught an officer walking off with his golf clubs from the shipping company's offices. They took refrigerators and wireless sets. Damage was done by men throwing silks, etc about and breaking bottles. The bulk store of liquor was looted and taken into the bush. There was no wild revelry in town; it took place out in the bush ... Officials just sat around waiting.³³

The ridge and the river's protagonist muses that the locals 'had seen the plantation owners, the little tin gods, chased out by the Japanese, escaping, if they were lucky, with their lives

29 Quoted in Peter Brune *Those ragged bloody heroes: from the Kokoda Trail to Gona beach 1942*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1991, p. 52.

30 TAG Hungerford, *The ridge and the river* Penguin, Melbourne 2003, p. 151.

31 Humphrey McQueen *Social sketches of Australia 1888-2001* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia 2004, p. 176.

32 Humphrey McQueen *Social sketches*, p. 176.

33 Quoted in Paul Hasluck *The government and the people. Volume 2, 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p. 702.

... There might be a lot of very surprised planters when they tried to get labour at the old rates after the war—and there might be something more ugly.³⁴

At the time, the Government claimed Papua and New Guinea were ‘Australian’ territory, but Curtin himself was quite cynical about this in private, telling journalists that ‘New Guinea wasn’t Australia, it was only a piece of military strategy.’³⁵

As a general rule, populations that initially welcomed the Japanese eventually grew to loathe them, but it would be misleading to attribute that entirely to Japanese brutality. Certainly we should not understate that brutality, which ranged from face-slapping to grisly killings and rapes.

But more significant overall was the fact that the Japanese were badly over-extended. Japan had tried to seize a quarter of the globe. As the armies of the empire strained every sinew to hold the line against western counter-attack, they were desperately short of resources. Given malnutrition was common in Japan itself, it was hardly surprising that people went hungry all over the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Considering the resources pressures, it’s likewise not surprising that the Japanese conscripted and mistreated labourers on a bigger scale than did the Australians in New Guinea, or that the Burmese said ‘the British sucked blood but the Japanese went to the bone marrow’.³⁶ Nor that Australian POWs experienced such appalling treatment.³⁷

We are apt to judge the Japanese by how they governed at the height of the war, when their own conditions were becoming desperate. But consider how some islanders in mandated territories related to them before Pearl Harbor:

In the Japanese territories of Micronesia, the need for fighters and skilled labour elevated the role of Islanders in the empire ... Already in 1937 Islanders from Rota, Saipan and Pohnpei had petitioned to be allowed to participate as Japanese in the war with China. In World War II, when Palauan recruits were organised into a military unit, a member of the corps composed a patriotic song with the verse, ‘On our shoulders rests

34 Hungerford, *The ridge and the river* p. 152. The book also mentions (p. 9) locals collaborating with the Japanese. Likewise Osmar White describes villagers guiding Japanese patrols; see: Osmar White *Green armour* Penguin, Ringwood 1992, p. 165.

35 Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall *Backroom briefings: John Curtin’s war* National Library of Australia, Canberra 1997, p. 98.

36 Latimer *Burma* p. 124.

37 I discuss POWs in a forthcoming book, arguing that the undoubted horrors they suffered are best explained by material and social factors rather than the supposed evils of the Japanese people. For now, readers are referred to Humphrey McQueen, *Japan to the rescue: Australian security around the Indonesian archipelago during the American century*, Heinemann, Melbourne, ch 19. Another nuanced picture of Japanese prisoner guards etc is available in Christina Twomey *Australia’s forgotten prisoners: civilians interned by the Japanese in World War Two* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 2007, for example, p. 51.

the name of Palau; the opportunity for us to devote ourselves to the Emperor's country, Japan, has come.'³⁸

Manipulated and naïve? Of course, but no less than many pro-western sentiments.

Australia invades East Timor

During the campaigns for East Timor's independence after 1975, Australians made much of the supposedly warm relations enjoyed by Australian 'Sparrow Force' guerrilla fighters in that country during World War II. But there is another, much darker side, a story of contention between outside aggressors. It began before the war, as Australians and Japanese jockeyed for oil concessions in the late 1930s. Qantas even initiated regular flights to the capital Dili, which would hardly have been profitable, to increase Australian leverage with the local administrators.

We hear endless condemnation of the Axis powers for invading neutral countries, but few people know that Australian and Dutch troops invaded East Timor in violation of Portuguese neutrality. The Portuguese Governor called it 'aggression, absolutely contrary to the principles of law'.³⁹ Archie Campbell, one of the invaders, later wrote that it seemed 'our single claim to fame and glory is that we shall go down in history as the first troops of Great Britain or Australia to violate another country's neutrality in the war'.⁴⁰

The blatant aggression is clear even from Lionel Wigmore's official war history. Once the invading forces had mobilised, their commanders went to the Portuguese governor and demanded he 'invite' them in. The outraged governor said 'his instructions were definitely to ask for help only after Portuguese Timor was attacked [by Japan]. He was told that this was too late; the [Dutch and Australian] troops were on their way and must land.'⁴¹

Not that we should concern ourselves too much with the diplomatic rights of the Portuguese colonialists. What matters is that the Japanese, for reasons mainly to do with keeping Portugal out of the war in Europe, were keen to keep East Timor out of the war as well. Neither Macao nor East Timor was on the list of war objectives in the first stage of Japan's war plans because the general staff feared that taking Portuguese Timor would drive Portugal into the arms of the Allies.⁴² *So it was Australian and Dutch imperialists who brought the horrors of war to this colony.* James Dunn would later write that

38 White and Lindstrom *The Pacific theater*, p. 21.

39 Christopher Wray *Timor 1942: Australian commandos at war with the Japanese*, Hutchinson Australia, Melbourne 1987, p. 29.

40 Archie Campbell *The double reds of Timor* John Burrige Military Antiques, Swanbourne 1995, p. 22. He adds that Australian headquarters was prepared for resistance from either Portuguese or 'natives', p. 23.

41 Lionel Wigmore *The Japanese thrust* Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1957, p. 469-70.

42 Henry Frei 'Japan's reluctant decision to occupy Portuguese Timor, 1 January 1942-20 February 1942', *Australian Historical Studies*. 27 (107) October 1996, p. 281, 287. Frei also shows that both the

As a consequence of the Allied intrusion in December 1941, and the subsequent military operations in the territory, East Timor was one of the great catastrophes of World War II in terms of relative loss of life.⁴³

Did the Timorese support Australia? Only sometimes, and then often cynically. Christopher Wray quotes an account saying ‘at first the natives were suspicious’ of the diggers. Only when they were alienated by Japanese behaviour did they start helping them.⁴⁴ In August 1942 the Australians were attacked by a group of people apparently from Dutch Timor and allied with the Japanese. At one point these Timorese had shown signs of wanting to use captured Australian Corporal Hodgson for ‘spear practice’.⁴⁵

August was when the Japanese took the offensive. Once that happened the Australians faced increasing hostility from the Timorese. Those in frontier areas were pro-Japanese, or more accurately anti-European. Elsewhere the locals were ‘no longer as ready to support the Australians as they had been before when the 2/2 Independent Company had had the run of Portuguese Timor’. Moreover ‘screens of pro-Japanese natives made it hard to strike at vital parts of enemy columns’ and by 23 August, despite a Japanese retreat, unrest among the Timorese was beginning to seriously concern the Australians.⁴⁶

Sparrow Force led raids on villages that didn’t support them. ‘During the raids a number of villages were burned out, about 150 huts being destroyed’, says Wray, whose book contains a photo of Australians burning the village of Mindelo.⁴⁷

Wray tells us that some of the local people who helped the Australians did so in the mistaken belief the Australians would eventually help them overthrow the Portuguese.⁴⁸ But for all the wartime talk of liberation, there was no chance of this. On the contrary, the Australians wanted Portuguese officials to stay in their posts to maintain order. And an ugly order it was.

In late August local people at Maubisse rebelled and killed a Portuguese official. After that a Portuguese-led reprisal force attacked Maubisse, ‘burning villages and crops, carrying off women, children and animals and killing everyone else in their wake.’⁴⁹ A diary kept by Australian troops recorded their laid-back attitude to such events: ‘The private local war, Portuguese versus native, still goes on in its bloodthirsty way, and provides some

emperor and Japanese Prime Minister Tojo resisted sending troops to East Timor even after the Australians went in, for example, p. 290.

43 James Dunn, *Timor: a people betrayed*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane 1983, p. 26.

44 Wray *Timor 1942*, pp.107, 101.

45 Wray *Timor 1942*, pp. 119-120.

46 Wray *Timor 1942*, pp. 124-126.

47 Wray *Timor 1942*, pp. 148-149. See also Neil McDonad., *War cameraman: the story of Damien Parer* Lothian, Melbourne 1994, p. 176.

48 Wray *Timor 1942*, p. 131.

49 Wray *Timor 1942*, p. 131,132.

humour for sub units. One of our patrols near Mape, out hunting the Jap, encountered a Portuguese patrol out hunting some natives, they exchanged compliments and went their various ways.⁵⁰

Ultimately Sparrow Force's position became untenable as the Japanese mounted a strong offensive, while villagers became unfriendly and even hostile. A participant recalls:

Our whole method of operation was collapsing; we could not rely on the natives; under the effects of the bombings and the propaganda of the Japanese, the villagers amongst whom we had lived were becoming sullen and even actively hostile.⁵¹

As in so many places around the Asia-Pacific, it appears most villagers were friendly when the Australians had the upper hand in fighting, but became unfriendly when the Japanese looked like winning. Which makes sense: why would you be serious mates with the Australians when some of them acted like this:

Many times a native would pull into an Aussie camp, proudly produce a surat [letter of IOU used to secure provisions] on which someone had written: 'Give the bastard a kick in the arse and send the useless bugger on his way.' It added to the general enjoyment of the hard dull work of the day's patrolling.⁵²

Australian soldier Jim Landman remembers that 'when they misbehaved we killed them, and when we wanted a girl we bought one', and according to Alfredo Pires, son of a Portuguese official and a Timorese mother:

There was a saying in that war, that for punishment the Japanese were bad, very cruel, but for justice the Australians were worse. The Japanese may torture, punish, try to get you to tell, but it is not certain you will die, but if the Australians suspect you, you're dead.⁵³

The cruellest hearts were in the higher command. Archie Campbell and his comrades were haunted by the likely fate awaiting their remaining Timorese allies when the Australians pulled out.

... we are now their only source of protection. If only we could take them with us when we go, but Australian HQ has vetoed the idea ... Our poor

50 Wray *Timor 1942*, p. 132.

51 B.J. Callinan 'The August show on Timor' in Norman Bartlett (ed) *Australia at arms* Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1955, p. 209.

52 Wray *Timor 1942*, p. 87-88.

53 Landman and Pires interviewed in Michelle Turner, *Telling: East Timor: personal testimonies 1942-1992*, UNSW Press, Sydney 1992, p. 36, 38.

Timor criados look so bewildered ... our hearts are weighed down by a persistent and terrible ache.⁵⁴

Restoring white rule

By 1944 the allies knew they would win the Pacific War. Their objective now, as Anthony Eden had once put it, was to re-impose 'white-man authority'.⁵⁵

The war effort stank of racism. In setting out war aims in early 1942, the Government had emphasized the 'principle of a White Australia.'⁵⁶ Having built a nation by dispossessing others, it was hardly surprising white Australians should worry that someone might do the same to them; and in promoting the war effort against Japan, the Prime Minister built on just such fears:

From the day that Captain Arthur Phillip landed here, until this hour, this land has been governed by men and women of our race. We do not intend that that tradition shall be destroyed merely because an aggressor marches against us ... Australians, you are the sons and daughters of Britishers.⁵⁷

I quote Curtin himself because it's so common to blame racism on the Australian working class. In World War II the racist agitation came *right from the top*. General MacArthur declared that the Japanese soldier was 'only one degree removed from a savage,'⁵⁸ while that fine drink-sodden Australian specimen General Blamey called the Japanese fighting man 'a subhuman beast', and the Japanese nation 'a cross between the human being and the ape'.⁵⁹

From these august levels, hatred was promoted down through the ranks. Destroying the enemy, remarked the commander of the 7th Infantry Brigade at Milne Bay, was 'a most effective way of demonstrating the superiority of the white race' while the second in command of the 2/14th Battalion described enemy forces on the Kokoda Trail as 'cocksure hordes [out] to glut their lust and savagery in the blood of a conquered white nation'. Not to be outdone, officers lecturing Ninth Division soldiers explained that their Japanese adversary was 'merely an educated animal'.⁶⁰

54 Campbell *The double reds*, p. 132,134.

55 Richard Overy with Andrew Wheatcroft *The road to war* Macmillan, London 1989, p. 302.

56 Peter Dennis et al, *The Oxford companion to Australian military history* Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1995, p. 323.

57 'Total mobilisation ordered: we made Australia' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 1942, p. 9.

58 Quoted in Williamson *The last bastion*, p. 184.

59 Mark Johnston *Fighting the enemy: Australian soldiers and their adversaries in World War II*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 2000, p. 86.

60 Johnston *Fighting the enemy*, p. 86, 85, 87.

Critics have asked whether Australian Commander in Chief Blamey's offensives in the islands were necessary, since they cost lives without making Japan's surrender any faster. This is to mistake their purpose. In addition to restoring colonial rule, they were important for Canberra's negotiating position. Blamey told the government:

Were we to wait until Japan was finally crushed, it would be said that the Americans, who had previously liberated the Philippines, were responsible for the final liberation of the natives in Australian territories, with the inevitable result that our prestige both abroad and in the eyes of the natives would suffer much harm.⁶¹

More young men had to die because to wait for Japan's surrender might make the 'natives', and rival Pacific powers, think Australia was on the skids.

Australia's role in the post-war occupation of Japan likewise reflected Canberra's imperialist ambitions. The US Ambassador in Canberra, for example, had advice from one or more cabinet ministers that Foreign Minister Evatt wanted 'sovereignty over all Solomons, Hebrides, and Fiji groups', and planned to 'bargain for Australian ownership or domination up to the equator.'⁶² Canberra cabled the British proposing to take responsibility for 'policing' East Timor, New Guinea and the Solomons and 'share in policing' large sections of Indonesia as well as the New Hebrides.⁶³ Evatt was, as John Curtin put it, trying to secure 'the future of the white man in the Pacific'.⁶⁴

But to bargain effectively you had to be at the table. In his official war history Paul Hasluck notes that in mid-1943 there arose 'the new idea that the war effort was an admission ticket to a peace conference.'⁶⁵ By 1945 getting a ticket had become a consuming passion. Chifley reiterated in July that the underlying political objective of the Australian government in the postwar period was to gain a place and a voice in the peace settlement.⁶⁶ How to achieve this when the Aussies had been relegated to a bit part in the closing stages of the war, mopping up areas the Americans had left behind in their island-hopping strategy?

The Advisory War Council reported 'criticism that the liquidation of bypassed areas was not by itself a worthy effort for Australian forces', but there was more than pride at stake: 'from the aspect of prestige and participation in the peace settlement and control

61 David Horner, 'Strategic policy-making, 1943-45', in Michael McKernan and M. Browne, *Australia: two centuries of war and peace* Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1988, p. 293.

62 Roger Bell 'Australian-American discord: negotiations for post-war bases and security arrangements in the Pacific 1944-46' *Australian Outlook* 27(1), April 1973 pp. 15-16, 19-20.

63 James Wood *The forgotten force: The Australian military contribution to the occupation of Japan* Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1998, p. 6.

64 David Day *Reluctant nation: Australia and the allied defeat of Japan* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p. 183.

65 Hasluck *The government and the people*, p. 302.

66 Wood *The forgotten force*, p. 11.

machinery it would be of great importance to be associated with the drive to defeat Japan.⁶⁷ The trouble was that Australia's front-line role was minimal. Meanwhile Britain and Portugal maddeningly brushed aside Canberra's ambitions in Indonesia and East Timor.

All the more important, then, that Australia share in occupying Japan. This would get Canberra to the table with the big players, and at the same time help ensure a wretched fate for the hated yellow-skinned rivals. 'Australia's very life', Evatt insisted, 'depends on a just and *severe* settlement with Japan'. It would be severe all right. The Labor Party had grown up as the quintessential party of Australian nationalism, which in turn was inseparable from White Australia and from paranoia about the Yellow Peril. It was now very determined to crush Japanese aspirations, even at the cost of a long and costly occupation.⁶⁸

Canberra wanted to send a specifically Australian occupation force, but after arguments with London it grudgingly settled for Australian leadership of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF). This included British, New Zealand and Indian troops, which took control of southern Honshu and an adjoining section of Shikoku. Aussies were to administer Hiroshima, a fact greeted by an army publication with the heading: 'Australia Takes the Ashes'.⁶⁹ Oh so clever; and such Australian attitudes reflected official policy. General Blamey bluntly informed 126,000 Japanese troops in September 1945, 'In receiving your surrender I do not recognise you as an honourable and gallant foe'.⁷⁰

Canberra's envoy McMahon Ball was 'often told in Tokyo ... that Australians seemed more bitter and revengeful towards the Japanese people', and he was described in the American press as the 'leader of the revenge school'. He explained this by the need to keep the Japanese from becoming a rival again.⁷¹

The *Sydney morning herald* reported that the 'advance guards of the Australian occupation force seem to the Japanese to be frigid and unfriendly in comparison with the withdrawing Americans'; and BCOF censors, who read people's mail as part of inculcating democracy, later reported the locals had found Americans 'more kind and attractive than Australians'.⁷²

67 Wood *The forgotten force*, p. 9-10.

68 Peter Bates *Japan and the British Commonwealth Occupation Force 1946-52*, Brassey's, London 1993, p. 111 for the quotation, my emphasis); Christopher Waters *The Empire fractures: Anglo-Australian conflict in the 1940s* Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne 1995, p. 37-38.

69 Neville Meaney *Towards a new vision: Australian and Japan through 100 years* Kangaroo Press, Sydney 1999, p. 106.

70 Allan Clifton *Time of fallen blossoms* Cassell, Sydney 1950, p. xiii; David Horner, *Crisis of command*, Australian National University Press, Canberra 1998, p. 555.

71 W. McMahon Ball *Japan: enemy or ally?* Cassell, Melbourne, 1948, p. 11-12.

72 Bates *Japan and the British Commonwealth Occupation Force*, p. 115, 112.

The accompanying racism was unvarnished. The Defence Minister in Canberra told BCOF troops 'to illustrate to and impress on the Japanese people the Democratic way and purpose of life.' They did this by restricting contact with the locals. All over the country, a range of stores, hotels, trains, buildings, land areas and recreational facilities were off limits to Japanese, while officials of the occupying forces requisitioned houses from them. The Australian authorities were more rigid about this segregation policy than the Americans.⁷³ Needless to say this included sexual relations; a senior officer lectured soldier John Coffman's battalion on the dangers of 'mixing our good English blood with the blood of inferior races'.⁷⁴ It even went as far as banning Japanese from Australian church services.

Fortunately rank and file Australian soldiers often greeted this policy with 'ribald disbelief' and ignored or found ways around it, engaging in romantic liaisons and issuing invitations to church.⁷⁵ As they got to know ordinary Japanese people the wartime hatreds declined, despite the best efforts of their officers and of the Australian government:

A journalist who visited the country in January 1952, just as the occupation was being wound up, wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that people 'must be prepared for some shocks' as the BCOF men returned home [owing to] 'the degree of liking for the Japanese developed by Australians who have lived among them for any length of time'. The very headline was intended to shock: 'Our soldiers like the Japanese'.⁷⁶

Colonialism and neo-colonialism

In restoring 'white-man' authority the allies didn't scruple over methods. After the Americans recaptured Guam and the Marianas, they put islanders into concentration camps.⁷⁷ To be sure, some people in Asia and the Pacific had different expectations. A man from Wewak in New Guinea told an Australian:

Yes, we have helped you in this war, now we are like cousins, like brothers. We too have won the war. Now whatever knowledge, whatever ideas you have, you can give them to us. Before all the things we did, you gaoled us, and you fined us, all the time. But now. What now?⁷⁸

73 Wood *The forgotten force* p. 115 for the quote; John Dower, *Embracing defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II*, WW Norton, New York 1999, p. 207; Bates *Japan and the British Commonwealth Occupation Force*, p. 112.

74 Wood *The forgotten force*, p. 98.

75 George Davies *The occupation of Japan: the rhetoric and the reality of Anglo-Australasian relations 1939-1952*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia 2001, p. 177.

76 Robin Gerster 'The Forgotten Veterans of World War II' *The age*, 25 April 2006.

77 White & Lindstrom *The Pacific theater*, p. 25.

78 Waiko *A short history*, p.124.

Some people in PNG expected whites to compensate them for past plunder, and that was the starting point for many of the social movements called cargo cults in the postwar period.⁷⁹ Instead colonial plunder resumed. People throughout the islands had the bitter experience that whites confiscated gifts from soldiers, or money received for carvings, on the grounds that it must be stolen.⁸⁰ For this, Australian officers had convenient rationalisations, and Major-General B.M. Morris came up with a classic:

The native mind is one which responds most readily to an outward and visible mark of distinction. The reward of such services by payment of money or trade goods has much less value to the native than would the presentation in the name of the King and in circumstances of some ceremony, of a medal.⁸¹

The 1945 general armistice didn't disarm Japanese troops; on the contrary, the Allies instructed them to *keep* their arms and maintain law and order. In practice, European colonialists often returned to power with the help of Japanese bayonets, against the aspirations of the local people. In Vietnam, the British South East Asia Command's One Division, led by Major-General Douglas Gracey, did the job for the French.

Encouraged by the allies' democratic rhetoric, the Viet Minh national independence movement went to the airport to welcome the General, but he ignored them. He would later remark disparagingly: 'I was welcomed on arrival by Viet Minh. I promptly kicked them out.'⁸² Gracey's force handed over to the French all the arms collected from the Japanese and much of their own equipment including transport, aircraft and artillery, which would be promptly used to crush a mass uprising in Saigon against the restoration of French rule.⁸³

In Burma and India, the returning colonial troops 'were greater vandals than the Japanese had been.'⁸⁴

In Indonesia, where the Dutch had few forces at the start, British and Japanese units fought together against Sukarno's republican forces around Bandung. The greatest atrocity, however, fell to the British alone: the merciless shelling of Surabaya in November 1945. The intrepid expatriate K'tut Tantri (Vaneen Walker) who was there, recorded: 'The streets ran with blood, women and children lay dead in the gutters. Kampung [neighbourhoods] were in flames ... but the Indonesians did not surrender.'⁸⁵

79 Waiko *A short history*, p. 127.

80 McQueen *Social sketches* p. 176; White & Lindstrom *The Pacific theater* p. 28.

81 Jeffrey Grey *The Australian army: a history*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 2001, p. 148.

82 Quoted in Ngo Van *Revolutionaries*, p.103.

83 Keay *Last Post* p. 280; Ngo Van *Revolutionaries*, p. 112ff.

84 Latimer *Burma*, p. 431.

85 Quoted in Keay *Last Post*, p. 257. For another good summary of the British role see John Newsinger *The blood never dried: a people's history of the British Empire*, Bookmarks, London 2006, p. 201 ff.

Further east, Australian troops restored Dutch control. Not all of the soldiers liked doing this. George Bliss of the 7th Division recalled:

About six weeks after the war ended we were told we were going into the Celebes [Sulawesi] 'to supervise the rounding up of the Japanese'. We realised later that it was to prevent the locals organising against the return of the Dutch. We went by ship to Makasar. The feeling among the troops was mostly against the Dutch. On arrival we were lined up on the wharf, fully equipped in battle order, and marched through the town out to the Dutch barracks about three miles out. That was the first act of intimidation.

Later in Pare Pare, Bliss found the independence movement was stronger. 'All along the road the Indonesian flag was flying and people wore the red and white colours of the flag. The top brass gave orders forbidding fraternisation. Most ignored that order.'⁸⁶ Gavin Long reports that in Balikpapan: 'On the morning of 14th November between 6,000 and 8,000 Indonesians assembled ... raised banners and displayed emblems. From 10 to 15 Australian soldiers were reported to have been present inciting these Indonesians...'⁸⁷

Such public appearances weren't the norm; but anti-colonial sentiment was widespread in the ranks. Forty-five Australian servicemen on Balikpapan wrote to Chifley supporting the proclamation of an Indonesian republic and deploring the use of Japanese forces to put down the independence movement.⁸⁸ Much of the credit belongs to the Communist Party of Australia, which had mobilised in support of the Indonesian Communists (PKI). PKI leaders, transferred to Australia as prisoners from the Dutch prison camp at Boven Digul, built an Australia-wide movement with CPA support, culminating in rebellions by Indonesian seafarers and Australian union bans on Dutch ships. They managed this despite quite severe repression by Dutch representatives, whom the Labor Government allowed to arrest and even deport activists.⁸⁹

The Indonesian people, who often displayed hostility to the Australian military, were enthusiastic about solidarity from Australian trade unionists. News bulletins posted in some cities referred to Australian waterside workers' support for Indonesian strikers, the key passages prominently outlined in red.⁹⁰

Australian leaders were determined to complete their colonial mission. Peter Stanley praises the Australian military's 'valiant service in ending the brutal Japanese occupation

86 George Bliss 'Australian army coms in Indonesia' *Tribune* Sydney, 30 July 1980, p. 11.

87 Gavin Long *The final campaigns* Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p. 569. The idea of a handful of Australians 'inciting' thousands of Indonesians is, of course, patronising racism.

88 David Day *Chifley* Harper Collins, Sydney 2001, p. 423.

89 Rupert Lockwood, *Black armada*, Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1975; Lingard *Refugees* passim.

90 'Australians in favour' *The Age* 1 October 1945, p. 1.

of Indonesia's outer islands',⁹¹ but is silent on what followed the diggers' arrival. In Sumbawa after clashes between Indonesian nationalists and Japanese forces, the latter were 'ordered to instruct the Sultan that attacks must cease and that the Australian army had instructed the Japanese to shoot to kill...'⁹² And so whatever their personal sentiments, the Australian troops helped restore Dutch power, with terrible consequences. Their intervention in Sulawesi paved the way for Dutch captain Paul Westerling, who

pioneered new methods in counter-insurgency. Whole villages were held responsible for Republican atrocities in their areas, their inhabitants being lined up and shot one after another until an informant spoke out. Westerling's reign of terror is reliably estimated to have cost as many lives as the battle of Surabaya.

Emboldened by the success these methods brought, the Dutch ramped up the use of repressive tactics in Java.⁹³

The United States was soon to trumpet a new anti-colonialism, but Anti-colonial didn't mean anti-imperialist. The US reckoned that where independence movements pushed out the old colonial powers, American capital might find it easier to move in. Washington also thought that a less direct type of imperialist control, later dubbed 'neo-colonialism', was a smarter strategy, given the way nationalist movements were growing. So the Philippines became a nominally independent state, but under American tutelage. The old rigged trade arrangements quickly returned and, moreover,

Manila agreed to the exclusive use by US personnel of twenty-two military bases in the Philippines. Some, like Clark Field and Subic Bay, were of vast extent and embraced adjacent townships which were transformed into leisure-dromes of fast food, cheap sex and duty free liquor. Within these concessions, even Filipinos were subject to US law.⁹⁴

The same extra-territoriality that had so angered China and Japan was visited on the Philippines. To protect business interests and crush left wing opposition, the American leaders embraced Japan's former Filipino puppets—and they attacked the anti-Japanese liberation fighters known as the Huks, who had led peasants in land reform campaigns:

[MacArthur] pressed the Filipino collaborationist police into the service of the United States, and the United States military authorities held the two major Huk leaders for seven months as security risks. During 1945 MacArthur increasingly used United States troops to break up Huk

91 Stanley *Invading Australia*, p. 235.

92 Long *The final campaigns*, p. 572.

93 Key *Last Post*, p. 266. On Westerling see also Merle Ricklefs *A history of modern Indonesia since c. 200*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2001, p. 275.

94 Key *Last Post*, p. 196-7.

meetings and the landlords successfully agitated for the legal recognition of their former holdings ... As successor to [deceased president] Osmeña, MacArthur singled out Manuel Roxas, whom the [US intelligence service] OSS most generously described as being 'in the peculiar position of an exonerated collaboratorist'.⁹⁵

In Indochina, the Americans initially backed French colonialism because Communists were leading the national movement; but even there, the US would ultimately endorse a formally independent puppet regime in the south. In Indonesia, Sukarno's crushing of the 1948 Communist uprising at Madiun convinced Washington and Canberra that the new republic was a reasonably safe bet for the time being.

Canberra tended to embrace the new tactics of neo-colonialism, but unevenly. There was no way Papua or New Guinea would get self-government in a hurry. As for European colonies,

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Chifley government decided it was in Australia's vital interests for the European colonial powers to retain control of their colonies to provide both security for the region and the necessary material and political assistance for the colonial peoples to prepare them for eventual independence.⁹⁶

From September 1945 the Curtin Government made gestures in support of Indonesian independence, but at crucial junctures it lined up with the Dutch. This included providing eight navy corvettes and help in transferring Dutch currency to Batavia.⁹⁷ Evatt was frank enough about the government's attitude: 'Australia has become a base from which the Dutch colonies will finally be regained...As in the case of New Caledonia, we visualise the restoration of the former sovereignty.'⁹⁸

If Canberra later attempted to play a role as intermediary in the conflict, it was first and foremost because the independence forces had proved their strength and the Government was afraid other intermediaries would step in first and carve Australia out.⁹⁹ To be sure,

95 Gabriel Kolko, *The politics of war: allied diplomacy and the world crisis of 1943-45* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1968, p. 607. Roxas may have received special treatment because he knew about (indeed was signatory to) a bizarre \$500,000 payment from the Philippines Treasury to MacArthur in 1942, see Carol Petrillo, 'Douglas MacArthur and Manuel Quezon: a note on an imperial bond' *Pacific Historical Review*, 48 (1), 1979, p. 110.

96 Christopher Waters 'Creating a tradition: the foreign policy of the Curtin and Chifley Labor governments' in David Lee and Christopher Waters *Evatt to Evans: the Labor tradition in Australian foreign policy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1997, p. 42.

97 Lockwood *Black Armada*, p. 105ff, 181ff.

98 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* 176, 14 October 1943, p. 574.

99 See Philip Dorling (ed.), *Diplomasi: Australia and Indonesia's independence, documents 1947* AGPS, Canberra 1994. For example, Evatt stated in document 246 that 'Unless Australia is included in some tangible way in the Indonesian arbitration or mediation the net result would be that instead of open

Chifley and Evatt also recognised that de-colonisation in Asia was a reality which Australia, given its location, had to take seriously. It might even have a positive side; they had seen how resentment about colonial rule made Asian peoples turn to Japan early in World War II. Maybe independent nations in a neo-colonial framework would be less likely to line up with the enemy in the next war.¹⁰⁰

But a colonial racist mentality was still close to the surface on both sides of politics, exemplified by the aspiring Liberal Prime Minister Menzies, who said in 1949:

We cannot sensibly expect to maintain our own territorial integrity and our own national, racial and economic policies...if we take sides against European nations as though they were, of necessity, interlopers in countries where they have long been colonists, administrators, and educators.¹⁰¹

What a fine basis for Australia's international relations in the post-war Asia-Pacific.

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judicial arbitration, secret political bargain on Munich style might result to prejudice Australian interests.' cable, Evatt to Burton p. 228.

100 See Waters *The empire fractures*, p. 31.

101 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* vol. 201, 15 February 1949, p. 269.

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