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BOOK REVIEW

Australia's secret war: how trade unions sabotaged Australian Military Forces in World War II

by Hal G. P. Colebatch

Quadrant Books: Sydney; 2011; 340 pp.; ISBN: 978-0-9806778-7-4; RRP \$44.95 (hardback)



Australia's Secret War tells the shocking story of a war waged from 1939 to 1945 by certain Australian trade unions against Australia's fighting forces when the nation faced its gravest peril.

In August 1942, Australia faced its blackest days of the Second World War, with its territories already invaded by the Japanese forces and its mainland in imminent danger. At the time, Major General Cyril Clowes was preparing his defences at Milne Bay in eastern Papua. As he was making ready for an expected attack by the all-conquering Japanese Army, it would have been reasonable for him to believe that he was receiving every assistance from his home country, Australia – the nation that he and his soldiers were prepared to give their lives for. Lamentably, this was not the case.

Persistent delays were experienced in the port at Townsville. Waterside workers refused to load 155mm heavy artillery guns for dispatch to Milne Bay, demanding triple pay. The strike was eventually broken when United States troops cut the enclosure chains, threw the wharfies into the water and loaded the ship themselves. Nevertheless, the guns and searchlights missed the earlier departing ships and did not reach Milne Bay in time for the battle. If the guns had reached Milne Bay prior to the Japanese landings on the north coast of the Bay, the Japanese forces could have been destroyed before they got ashore. As it was, the Australians suffered 373 casualties, including 161 dead or missing.

Australia's Secret War by Hal Colebatch recounts this incident and relates a largely unknown episode in Australian history. Colebatch was legally trained and as an author he has written many books on a variety of subjects and has provided articles for newspapers and magazines. Even the service and ex-service communities of today have scant knowledge of what occurred. It remains one of the most disgraceful periods in our short history and has been largely ignored by biographers and historians alike. Strikes were prevalent in the coal-mining industry and on the waterfront. In 1942, 387,195 days were "officially" recorded as lost through strikes, but this did not account for all the working days lost in dependent industries. By 1945, the days lost through strike action had risen to 2,119,641. Colebatch speculates on the reasons that might have motivated the unionists, but he acknowledges that this is a complex issue.

The pretence by some writers that the Curtin Government exercised responsible control over the

activities of these key unions in World War II is patently misleading. Curtin was impotent in his efforts and his responsible Minister (for Labour and National Service), Eddie Ward, was compliant with union demands. Ward was also responsible for imposing an unbearable strain on Curtin's precarious health. In 1933, Ward had advocated the complete abolition of Australia's armed forces.

In August 1942, photographer Damien Parer accompanied the 39th Battalion on the Kokoda Trail. When he returned to Australia, he produced a newsreel film named *Kokoda Front Line* which was awarded an Oscar for best documentary in 1943. In his documentary he exhorted the Australian public to realise that the enemy was on their doorstep. He spoke of girls only thinking about going to their next dance and men complaining that they were short of tobacco. He might well have reflected on the activities of union members in his dialogue – those who put their personal interests and political ideology ahead of the integrity of their nation and the protection of its servicemen.

Having witnessed this level of treasonous behaviour during the Second World War, it is not hard to understand why a conservative government during the Cold War of the 1950s was concerned about communist activities in trade unions which eventually led to a debilitating split within the ALP. A balanced understanding of the events in Australia during the World War II would depend on an analysis of the contents of this book. And it would be interesting to know whether the traits of these unions have lasted in other forms to this present day.

An enduring and disturbing memory from the book concerns the arrival of the British aircraft carrier, HMS *Speaker*, off Sydney heads in October 1945, following the Japanese surrender. On board were some surviving Australian soldiers released from Japanese prisoner of war camps. "They had had no mail or news from their families for more than three and a half years. Most were in desperate physical straits and it was a medical rule of thumb at the time that their suffering had taken ten years off their life expectancies. Already, all but the strong had perished and many of them said later that in another month they would all have been dead: their ordeal had simply gone on too long. When *Speaker* arrived at Sydney, watersiders went on strike for 36 hours, preventing them being disembarked. It was perhaps an appropriate ending to the saga of Australia's wharves in World War II."

Rowan Tracey