

# *Australia's influence on the Treaty of Versailles and post-war tensions in the Pacific*

A paper based on a presentation to the Institute on 27 November 2018 by

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*Dr Baker summarises the traditional view of the Treaty of Versailles as taught in Australian schools, outlines his recent research in the Royal United Services Institute Library, and describes Australia's foreign policy during the Great War, including the role played by our prime minister, William Morris Hughes, at the peace conference. He concludes that the sins of Versailles were not all the fault of the European powers – as far as the Pacific was concerned, Australia was more than complicit.*

**Key words:** Great War; World War I; peace conference; Treaty of Versailles; William Morris Hughes; Australia; Australian foreign policy; Japan; New Guinea.

This paper will deal with the Treaty of Versailles and what it meant for Australia. First, though, I wish to highlight the importance of the Royal United Service Institute's Ursula Davidson Library – which has just taken up residence in The Anzac Memorial in Sydney's Hyde Park – and the role libraries can continue to play in modern scholarship, despite the fact that academe is undergoing its biggest change since the invention of printing some 500 years ago. Special collections, like the Ursula Davidson Library's collection, remain a vital research resource, even though university libraries are downsizing their print-on-paper collections and research today is almost all digital.

## **A Traditional View of the Treaty of Versailles**

In 1968, before a career in academic librarianship, I used to teach modern history at Sydney's Cabramatta High School. I thought I knew all about the treaty of Versailles. In simple terms, I taught that:

- the treaty was responsible for the complicated web of nation states that plagues us to this day;
- the treaty was in large measure a cause of World War II;
- the treaty imposed the injustices of the Rhineland, The Saar coal mines, the Czechoslovak frontier, Danzig and the Polish Corridor, and the treatment of Austria;
- following the collapse of three great empires, the national frontiers drawn up in 1919 lasted until 1938/9 and that, with some notable changes, their influence survives to this day; and
- against the background of the then current Cold War, these arrangements contributed to anxieties that survived to that day.

In connection with the importance of understanding the treaty's influence on today's world, I did admit that the peacemakers' utopian dreams were not in vain with regard to the League of Nations and that to a degree we have them to thank for the United Nations Organisation.

Yes, I did teach some positive results of the treaty, but the Australian spin I put on my teaching was that the treaty represented all that was bad in the old world; that the European Powers had ignored President Wilson's determination to make the world safe for democracy and secure an end to war as an instrument of policy; and that the evil aspects of the treaty were not Australia's fault – we were somehow removed from the evil process.

I taught that Lloyd George and Clemenceau made Germany pay; that Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch had predicted in 1919 that the harsh terms of the treaty would bring disastrous consequences on those who imposed them; and that John Maynard Keynes had written to Austen Chamberlain from the conference in May 1919: "We have presented a draft treaty to the Germans which contains in it much that is unjust and much that is inexpedient" (Gilbert 1964: 7). I agreed with Keynes' claim that Versailles implemented a "Carthaginian Peace" (Keynes 1919).

I taught that the treaty created the grievances that Hitler had relied on in justifying German actions in the lead up to World War II and that he had some justification in comparing it unfavourably in its harshness to the vanquished to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

## **Research in the Ursula Davidson Library**

In the 50 years 1968–2018, not even two visits to Versailles and the Hall of Mirrors had caused me to change my view that the treaty and its sad consequences were not of Australia's doing. Then, early this year, I was asked to review the Royal United Services Institute's Ursula Davidson Library prior to its move to the Anzac Memorial in Sydney's Hyde Park; and,

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specifically, to prepare a paper on the Versailles Treaty and Australia. The twin tasks sent me to the shelves and the musty stacks. What I discovered led me to revise my ideas on the Treaty of Versailles and convinced me that Australia had had a hand in the three most controversial aspects of it: reparations; mandates; and race policy; and that, taken together, these aspects influenced the coming of World War II and the nature of that world war in our region.

The books acquired by the library in the years leading up to, during and post-World War I show the development of an embryonic and enduring defence and foreign policy that the Australian prime minister, William Morris (“Billy”) Hughes, took to Versailles with significant results. They do not portray Australia as an innocent bystander!

A scan of the literature held in the Ursula Davidson Library (and it deserves much more than a scan), reveals that the defence and foreign strategic concerns Hughes inherited when he took over from Andrew Fisher, who was finding the strain of wartime administration too much, were:

- maintaining the White Australia policy;
- restricting or preventing Japanese expansion in the Pacific;
- keeping the British maritime superiority in our region, as it was considered that Australia could not be effectively defended once an enemy lodgement on the mainland had been achieved; and
- defining Australia’s place in the British Empire relationship.

These concerns were to be the driving forces behind Hughes’ significant performance at Versailles and Australia’s influence on the post-Great War world.

### **Australia’s World War I Foreign Policy and its Pursuit**

Before I browsed the Royal United Services Institute’s collection, I understood that, in the words of the prime minister who took Australia to war, Andrew Fisher, we went to war in 1914 to support the mother country to the “last man and the last shilling”. After browsing, I still think family sentiment was part of it, but the rows of musty volumes have revealed a foreign policy, that, given our position as a dominion and part of the British Empire, we perhaps were not entitled to have – it motivated our participation in the war and our belligerence at the peace conference. That policy stemmed from a fear of Japan following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. That fear was behind the creation of an Australian navy, but it was also behind a policy of keeping a strong British presence to our north and drove opposition to any British-Japanese alliance.

To visit our troops abroad and to pursue these issues, Hughes went to England in 1916. He was unsuccessful in opposing Anglo-Japanese co-operation, but, dissatisfied with British prime minister Asquith’s prosecution of the war, successfully took his ideas on total war to the British people. This ultimately gained him access to official circles and forced Asquith to include

him in the delegation to the 1916 Allied Economic Conference in Paris. His successes in 1916 and the contacts he made provided a base from which to pressure British public opinion and politicians in 1919. From his 1916 visit on, Hughes operated on two levels to influence the outcome of the war for Australia. He pushed the limits imposed on dominion prime ministers in gaining access to official meetings; and he operated in the public arena to have Asquith’s and United States president Wilson’s constituents support his ideas.

Hughes’ experience at the Imperial Conference convinced him that the dominions were being kept in the dark with regard to key post-war issues and he began to build his own influence base. He returned to England for the 1918 Imperial War Conference leaving Sydney in April. He travelled by way of the United States to talk to Wilson – this annoyed the British Government which regarded itself as the conduit through which dominion governments were to talk to foreign powers. In the United States, however, Hughes did more than talk to Wilson. He talked to Wilson’s electors on the west coast, urging them to convince Wilson of the rightness of Hughes’ position on containing Japanese expansion in the Pacific and of the value of the White Australia policy.

His assessment of the situation in France after the battle of Hamel and his visit to Clemenceau in July, followed by the August battles in which Australian formations played such a significant part, convinced him that the end of the war was near, whereas most pundits were planning on the war going on into 1919. He decided to stay on in London to advance Australia’s interests at the peace conference.

On 7 October 1918, Germany made overtures for peace. On 12 October, Hughes was in Paris at the invitation of President Poincare to receive the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. In presenting it, Poincare supported a dominion presence at a future peace conference, arguing that the peace terms must be such as would command approval of all the Allies and not merely the approval of President Wilson. Hughes was able to build on the support which went back to 1916 and, along with Borden from Canada, win agreement for separate representation for the dominions at the peace conference.

This achievement of independent representation at the peace conference should not be underestimated. Before Versailles, some form of Empire federation was being discussed. It can be argued that after dominion representation at the peace conference, the Statute of Westminster was an inevitability. The copy of the Treaty of Versailles on the wall at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra is the first international agreement signed by Australia. It is important as an artefact of our independence.

### **The Peace Conference**

#### ***Reparations***

Hughes was prominent in the debates on reparations. He was vice-president of the commission of the League

that dealt with reparations, and, although Australia was not to be a major financial recipient, his oratory probably had the effect of putting pressure on Asquith to strengthen British demands. His arguments for a new post-war economic order, one which would keep Germany from resuming a dominant world economic position and regaining colonial interests and commercial and military capability in the world, were to result in such arrangements as the Polish Corridor, the separation of the Sudeten Land and other arrangements to keep Germany poor.

### **Mandated territories**

Hughes demanded annexation of the occupied German colonial territories so forcefully that he came close to destroying the conference. He was opposed by Wilson because it would have given the Japanese the islands north of the equator and because it clashed with the ideals enshrined in Wilson's proposed League of Nations. An A-class and B-class of mandate were proposed by Smuts, but this proposal was rejected for application in the Pacific, with the opposition led by Hughes. Bean reports that:

*"At this juncture, Lieut.-Commander John Latham, a lawyer on the staff of Sir Joseph Cook, suggested to Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary of the British Delegation and of the Council of Four, a form of mandate that should meet the views of both sides where the captured territory was remote from other powers but lay next to that of a nation to whom it was mandated: in these cases, Latham urged the mandatory nation might be allowed to apply its own laws to the territory, subject to safeguards of native interests and a prohibition on fortifying the territory."* (Bean 1946: 523)

A compromise was reached when Latham's modified C-class mandate gave Australia and New Zealand administration of the former enemy islands south of the equator. It was a mandate that Hankey assured Hughes "could be regarded as 'the equivalent' of a 999-year lease as compared with a freehold" (Whyte 1957: 392). Australia had achieved a *cordon sanitaire*.

### **Racial policy**

Because he wished to keep the mandated territories, particularly New Guinea, free of Japanese migration by imposing the White Australia policy on them, Hughes moved to block a Japanese attempt to have the principle of racial equality written into the Charter of the League of Nations. Hughes did not achieve a majority for his position, but, by threatening to appeal to voters on the United States west coast (where perception of a Japanese Pacific threat was strong) to put pressure on President Wilson, he achieved his aim.

Hughes managed to block each subsequent amendment calling for racial equality, despite the fact that he was receiving contrary advice from his own department. The Director of the Pacific Branch of the Prime Minister's Department lamented, "How much

better it would have been to accept the Japanese amendment in one of its least noxious forms ... As it is, we have been perhaps the chief factor in consolidating the whole Japanese nation behind the imperialists" (Frei 1991: 99).

### **Pacific Post-War Tensions**

It would be a mistake to blame all the post-war tensions in the Pacific on the Versailles arrangements. The United States sins of omission had much to do with it. The United States did not ratify the Versailles Treaty (although Wilson signed it), nor did the United States join the League of Nations. This left America's attitude to the Japanese-held mandates and to Japanese settlement and militarisation of them, ambiguous. It can be argued that the United States retreat into isolationism was a greater threat to peace, especially in the Pacific, than any of the Versailles Treaty arrangements.

Apportioning the blame for moving Japan from the position of ally in the First World War to an opponent in the Second World War is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is my contention that the volumes in the Ursula Davidson collection show it began in Paris in 1919 and that Australia was involved in the process. Certainly, by 1936, Lieutenant Commander Tota Ishimaru's book *Japan Must Fight Britain* (Ishimaru 1936) had been translated into English and Japan's grievances were there for all to see.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to correct the impression that the sins of Versailles were all the fault of the European powers and to show that, as far as they affected our part of the world, we were more than complicit. But I would not like to leave the discussion in the negative. Sixty thousand Australians had given their all for the ideals enshrined in the charter of the League of Nations. Hughes and his team performed brilliantly in contributing to Australia's first international agreement which Lloyd George, speaking in London in June 1923, described as:

*"This great international instrument. It is the most important document of modern times. It has reshaped for better or for worse much of the geography of Europe. It has resurrected dead and buried nationalities. It constitutes the deed of manumission of tens of millions of Europeans who, up to the year of victory, 1918, were the bondsmen of other races. It affects profoundly the economies of the world; it contains clauses upon the efficacy of which may depend the very existence of our civilisation."* (Lloyd George 1923: 207)

On balance, almost 100 years on, Australians should be proud of their country's contribution to the first international agreement to which our country put its name. In being proud, however, we should realise that at Versailles we:

- established ourselves as a nation with an independent foreign policy;

- gained a strategic advantage to our north that, in the shape of the mandated territory of New Guinea and, now an independent nation, Papua New Guinea, is with us to this day;
- contributed our share to the reparations nightmare that was a cause of World War II; and
- offended Japan to a point that may have contributed to that nation being on the other side in the next conflict.

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