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RACISM AND MILITARISM

A well known communist publicist and labor historian traces the connection between conscription and the White Australia Policy.

FROM THE POST-WATERLOO era to the 1955 Menzies Government intervention in Malaya, a series of conflicts and agreements on Australia's military responsibilities colored relations with Britain. The main value in assessing past Australian resistance and acceptance in imperial military arrangements is to underscore the changes and the dissimilarities faced by anti-war and anti-conscription campaigners of the Vietnam era, who must operate under a Government bound to American rather than to British strategy, to Asian rather than to European and Middle East expeditionary force commitments. And the field of action is an Australia where monopoly corporations have by this developed vain and vaulting Asian ambitions of their own, which require that a great and powerful friend should hold the umbrella.

While recognising change and dissimilarity it is important to keep in mind that the same weapon is available today to those who would raise conscript armies for foreign adventures as was employed more than a century ago by the initiators of Australia's role as a colonial war base: the White Australia Policy. The White Australia Policy, once underwritten by the British Navy, has a new meaning in the age of Asian liberation. The metropolitan countries of imperialism and their "metropolitan extensions" like Australia and New Zealand were all beyond the reach of retaliatory action by peoples invaded, bombarded, ravaged and robbed. White Australia can no longer be sure of this exemption, or of freedom from a revived Japanese threat, now that Asia is on the road to full independence, France has been expelled, Britain has to retreat west of Suez and American imperial fortunes in the Pacific and Indian Ocean are fast waning.

The Australian metropolitan extension of Britain did not easily develop its resistance movements in the last century. So many of the original land-takers and officials came from military and naval families or jingoist middle-class and lower aristocrat groups; they were infected with the colonialist and white-supremacy attitudes of the time, and passionately loyal to the Mother Country. In military matters the colonial states often had to be pushed toward greater self-reliance.

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The overseas British settlements' reluctance to assert national military dignity was indicative of the colonists' attachment to the Motherland. A 1836 petition came from Canada against British garrisons' withdrawal. When in 1871 the last British troops boarded the Orontes for home, the writers agreed it was a sad day for Canada. Newfoundland's pleas to retain the puny garrison of 300 were "piteous"; New Zealand gave up its British regiment "amid heartburnings". The Colonial Under-Secretary Knatchbull-Hugessen was almost tearful over the Treasury's rejection of Tasmania's claim for compensation in view of the loss of garrison spending . . . a loss much deplored.

"We have tainted it with our convicts . . . we have (temporarily) impoverished it by the withdrawal of troops," he said. Australian colonies at last offered to pay for imperial troops if they would not be withdrawn in emergencies, as had happened in Crimean, Afghan, Indian and anti-Maori wars. Secretary for War, Lord Cardwell was in 1868 flatly refusing to leave the overseas British with these symbols of their dependence . . . the redcoats. The last British troops sailed from Australia in 1870, and by 1873 the Cardwell broom had swept clean in the hands of the overseas British. The moist eyes at Sydney quays bore no resemblance to the scenes as the last defeated redcoats parted company with the British colonists of America.

Recruitment in Australia for British colonial wars began with the convicts. Significant numbers of Australian convicts, acceptable both as police and soldiers by a not-very-particular Motherland, fought Indians, the Afghans, Chinese, Maoris and others. And in the 1840's, Australia saw her initiation as an imperial place d'armes. N. N. Russell and Co., Sydney foundrymen, cast mortars, tried them out in the Sydney Domain and shipped them to New Zealand to ensure Maori Chief Honi Heke's defeat in 1846. Twenty-four pounder guns, cast in Sydney to shell Maori pahs, and oxen to haul them followed. (The first Australian Merchants of Death honored the traditions of their profession: Governor Gipps in Sydney had to display some energy to end the profitable Australian arms shipments to the Maori warriors).

This Maori war was the writing on the wall for those colonists who thought they could rely on Britain for military protection: Governor Fitzroy was to send away so many troops to New Zealand that N.S.W. and Victoria and even the Fort Macquarie convict settlement were virtually without garrisons. Convicts, wasters, deserters from whalers were used to supplement the Maori war forces. Thus a war for theft of Maori lands and extermination of the rightful occupiers, fought in utter dishonor, in breach of pledged word, ushered Australia into the world as a base for colonial
military expeditions. By this time Whitehall had already enunciated the White Australia Policy. Minister for Native Affairs Richmond, one of the directors of the war in N.Z., provided the idea for slogans: he described the way of life of the Maoris then being dispossessed at bayonet point as "beastly Communism."

Sir George Grey, British Viceroy in New Zealand, said that there should be enlisted "on the declining Victorian goldfields a few thousand men to fight the Maoris and then settle on land confiscated from the Maoris who had taken up arms against the Queen." Some 2,500 from Australia donned jackets of "fine scarlet cloth, tastefully trimmed with silver," for "search and destroy" operations in which they burned Maori villages and killed Maoris; they often found that the Maoris were better soldiers than they, these displaced gold-diggers from Ballarat and Bendigo, these sweepings of Sydney and Melbourne streets and land-stealing adventurers. Reward for mercenary slaughter of Maoris was 50 acres and a town lot for a private, 60 acres for an Australian corporal, 80 for a sergeant, 200 for a subaltern and 300 for a captain. Their commander, Major-General Duncan Cameron, considered the Maori "a noble foeman worthy of British steel" and the colonial volunteers "greedy, land-hungry and pettifogging." A few humanitarians in Australia denounced the Maori wars.

The Maori wars marked an important turn in Anglo-Australian military relations. Australia had emerged as a supplier of manpower for colonial wars, since the gold rush had greatly augmented the population and left a redundant pool.

Britain's post-Waterloo ascendancy was ending; the rise of formidable imperial rivals forced her to draw more on the blood and bone of overseas Britons.

Volunteer movements gathered new strength and meaning. Brewer Sir Daniel Cooper (the Coopers are still big Tooth's shareholders) was generous with his money. James Burns, a founder of Burns Philp and Co. (Parramatta Troop, N.S.W. Lancers), who already had South Seas ambitions, and Richard Windeyer, who provided a descendant for the imperial trust, Colonial Sugar Refining Co., were among the promoters of indigenous militarism. Sir James Fairfax (Sydney Morning Herald) headed the Patriotic Fund to back the 1885 Sudan expedition. Acting N.S.W. Premier Dalley offered the troops without being asked by Britain: 800 men and 244 horses sailed from Sydney, captured a donkey, burned a few native huts and committed wanton vandalism at Tamai and elsewhere and were back home in four months without having been admitted to battle by the British.

The Sudan expedition perhaps brought the first line-up of imperialist v. anti-imperialist forces, and their sentiments have relevance today.
David Buchanan, the radical M.L.A., said the expedition was "scandalous in its illegality and inherent baseness." Under no circumstances should Australia send troops to fight in such wars. He denounced "this bloodthirsty enterprise of ours, where our men have gone forth to slay peoples with whom they have no quarrel, who have done them no harm, and who are engaged in a death struggle for their own rights and liberties, and against the bitterness of unbearable oppression." On the other side of the fence the "dollars for diggers" men of Korean and Vietnam war periods could have located predecessors. The Melbourne Argus said the despatch of Australian troops to the Sudan would win more British attention to "colonial wants and colonial interests."

"For every man we send to the Sudan," said the Sydney Morning Herald, "ten may come to replace him (as migrants) and every pound we spend may mean ten coming here for investments." And so it was when Australia sent 17,000 troops to the Boer War. The Register, for the Adelaide Establishment, said that the cost of Australian troops in South Africa would be "repaid twofold by appreciation of Australian credit in the financial markets of the Old World." Cardinal Moran, Catholic Primate, denounced "a raid by capitalists on a self-governing country."

The Echo of Sydney could not forget White Australia's "Yellow Peril" preoccupation when it hailed the Sudan expedition of 1885: "We have put on a complete manhood . . . In the watchful eye gigantic shapes of danger loom even now upon a near horizon." The idea was that if Australia helped Britain in Africa, Britain would defend White Australia against "Asian hordes." Sydney's streets were gay with cheers and bunting when an Australian expeditionary force sailed to help Tsarist Russians, Italians, Austrians, Americans, Japanese and British suppress China's Boxer Rebellion. "Yellow Peril" outpourings and imperial unity slogans were turned on ad nauseam. The Australian troops in China "punished many villages," blew up river junks, did police work and collected tickets on railways. Britain's General Sir Alfred Gaslee who commanded the Victorian and N.S.W. forces in China noted "how excellent a political effect has been produced by their appearance on so remote a stage as North China of these fine contingents from the Australian Commonwealth.

"They have been an object lesson not only to the foreigners, but also to our Indian subjects, of the patriotism which inspires all parts of the British Empire." Australian military expeditions could now be brandished as a threat against all Asians.

Britain supervised every step in the building up of Australian federal armed forces. Major-General Bevan Edwards was brought to Australia in 1889; he reported that Australian armed forces
must be organised on a federal basis, that there must be a uniform Defence Act, federal military college and federal munitions factory. This was, in effect, a demand for federation, and there is no doubt that British War Office pressure speeded the States into a Commonwealth. The Edwards report influenced the 1890 and 1891 federation conventions and, while the States bickered on other issues, they were unanimous for national defence. Rear-Admiral Henderson came from England to ask for an Australian Navy; the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Fisher, and Admiral Sir George Tryon agitated for it. However much the Labor Party may claim credit for the Royal Australian Navy, defence was strictly bi-partisan and under British supervision. Liberal Prime Minister Alfred Deakin ordered the battle-cruiser *Australia* and the cruisers *Sydney* and *Melbourne* in 1909.

Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher was to carry out the plan put forward by the British war chief, Lord Kitchener, for a wider universal conscription, to raise what Prime Minister Gorton would call today “an Israeli-type army” to strike at others.

Although the Fisher Labor and Fusion Governments from 1912 to the beginning of World War I in 1914 authorised 27,749 prosecutions of young men and boys for failure to register and imprisoned no less than 5,732 men and boys for rejecting military training, the chief historian of the anti-conscription struggle, Dr. L. C. Jauncey had to conclude: “One of the features of the enactment of compulsory military training in Australia was the feeble opposition to it.” Socialists, militant trade unionists, Industrial Workers of the World, pacifists, progressive churchmen and Irish-Australians provided the minority opposition.

Lord Kitchener was obviously not interested in defending the Australian mainland: few ever were till the Japanese southward thrust of 1941-42. Kitchener, with sardonic humor, invented the Brisbane Line: 80,000 men were to defend Australia on the Maroochy River just north of Brisbane, and the rest could fight for the Empire on foreign battlefields.

The conscription of youths from the age of 12, with training up to 26 years of age, the Boer War and Boxer expeditions and immigration of British ex-soldiers had provided, by August, 1914, quite a pool of men almost ready to send to defend the Suez Canal, storm the Dardanelles and then bleed in France.

Australia did not have 5 million people till 1918. The volunteer rate, therefore, was fantastic. Over 417,000 men enlisted; 328,639 men and 2,131 women served overseas. Just on 60,000 were killed (nearly as many as for the U.S. forces) and many died from wounds and disease after the war. Over 226,000 men were casualties,
but there were some 320,000 recorded casualties because numbers were wounded again after being sent into action. King George V and others believed in "human wave" attacks on German barbed wire. Under General Gough, the 5th Australian Division suffered 5,500 casualties in a short but suicidal thrust at Fromelles on July 19, 1916. In July, August and September, 1916, Australians were sent time and again into the charnel-house of Pozieres. Losses were so disastrous and Australia had been so bled for manpower that the British knew the only way to get substantial reinforcements was through total conscription.

Further appalling losses in the Ypres offensive of July-August, 1917, preceded the second referendum vote on conscription. The aggregate of deaths and woundings in World War I . . . about 320,000 . . . was not far behind the total of men sent overseas, nearly 329,000.

In World War II casualties were one in six in the forces, and the dead were 33,000, not much more than half the 1914-18 total of nearly 60,000. The First World War distorted Australian economy and trade. Imports were smaller in volume but higher in price. Average annual value of exports in 1914-18 fell by nearly £1 million a year, despite soaring commodity prices on world markets. Ships were scarce and freights astronomical. Consumer demand for factory and farm goods was slowed by diversion of spending power to war loans and war taxes. Imported raw materials and goods grew scarcer and scarcer. Lack of labor, due to heavy volunteering, restricted local output. In 1910 there were 45 million sheep in N.S.W., in 1920 34 million . . . and the loss was by no means all due to drought. Both urban and rural employers were afraid of losing more labor.

Despite the sound material reasons for rejecting any further heavy outflow of labor the referendums for conscription at the end of the years 1916 and 1917 were only defeated by narrow majorities.

The slender majorities leave no room for doubt about the depth of pro-British, pro-Empire sentiment in Australia. On the other hand of course, this makes still more heroic and significant the campaigns and successes of socialists, the I.W.W., many Labor Party and trade union leaders, churchmen, pacifists and the solid force of Australian-Irish affected by the 1916 Easter Rebellion and British oppression in Ireland.

White Australia chauvinism had greatly aided the pro-imperial leaders of Britain and Australia in imposing universal military training on the people before World War 1, and was employed
cynically and hypocritically. The conscription historian Dr. Jauncey says of pre-war propaganda: “To overcome opposition in trade unions advocates of compulsory military training spoke of the “Yellow Peril”, both China and Japan being involved in this spectre. Compulsionists told the workers that Japan was only waiting for Britain’s entanglement in a European war and then ‘Asiatic hordes’ would descend on Australia, an assertion happily disproved later in the World War.”

But White Australia chauvinism was also used on the anti-conscription side. Dr. Jauncey relates that anti-conscriptionists told rural people that “colored labor” would replace whites on farms. “Vote No and Keep Australia White” met the eye on hoardings throughout the Commonwealth, he says, and “this phase of the conscription issue secured many supporters for the anti-conscriptionists.” Henry Boote, usually a principled socialist and an outstanding anti-conscription leader, said: “If we vote to send white workers out of the country, we vote to bring colored workers in.”

Australia has passed from the British imperial orientation to the American, and the deep-rooted pro-British sentiments which withstood such dire trials in the 1914-18 war cannot influence conscription for the Vietnam War. The clash of European empires in the Pacific no longer decides Australian military strategy, nor does Japan present an immediate threat. The vast majority of Asians have won national independence.

A screen of British, French, American and Dutch colonial governments and foreign concession-holders and occupiers in China will never again divide Australia from the peoples of Asia, and even our most backward Liberal Party politicians know that Australians cannot withdraw from east of Suez: we must find our future with Asia. And so the White Australia Policy takes on an even more portentous meaning, with its revamped slogans “Better stop them there than here” and “forward defence” on the one hand, and “Fortress Australia” and “White Bastion” concepts on the other.

The future anti-conscription campaign will be fitted to Australia’s strategic course, which Canberra’s unreconstructed colonialists now try to trace through the mists and marshes of American politics. Washington’s greater attention to Europe, disintegrating alliances in the Pacific, its Vietnam crisis, balance of payments problems that will remain intractable while the Pentagon tries to police the world, resistance to US domination abroad and the upsurge of Anglo-Saxon America for new aggressions against 20 million Afro-Americans and the peace movement will exert their press and pull in Australia. The curve and coil of politics in Nixon’s
America are unpredictable. Urban Afro-Americans and students have shown that guerilla resistance is not just for the mountains and forests and greater domestic upheavals seem likely under rulers’ provocations. Middle East policies are on shifting sands, NATO remains in disarray despite a shot-in-the-arm from the Czechoslovak affair, the East and South-East Asian military alliances are in decomposition and a desperate Nixon calls for Japanese rearmament. The revival of Japanese armed menace to Australia, a major Zaibatsu raw materials base, cannot be dismissed. It could scarcely inspirit Canberra yesmen, and, for the peace movement, would be double-edged in impact.

"More military power for lower cost" is a Pentagon slogan of portent for Australians of call-up age. Client states should pay and provide more, and higher raisings of satellite levies and more reliance on sophisticated weapons and mobile sea and airborne forces could greatly reduce the $4.8 billion yearly drain and the number of US overseas bases. General Robert Wood and State Department Ambassador R. McClintock canvassed these ideas at Canberra talks.

"Fortress Australia" is a logical jumping-off place for giant air troop-carriers and swift ships. Upgrading of North-West Cape communications base, surveys of Western Australian harbors, the mysteries of Pine Gap "Joint Defence Space Research Facility" near Alice Springs and other US establishments in Australia and the R and R descent from Vietnam — getting the indigenes accustomed to the American presence — fall into the pattern. So, perhaps, do Mr. Gorton’s advocacy of a mobile "Israeli-type army", which would require far wider conscription, and the State Department-orientated DLP’s proposal that Australia should provide "four or five divisions to help South-East Asian governments in event of threats."

US land bases in Australia are conveniently beyond reach of demonstrators and public, in regions holding the minimum of people and maximum of strategic materials, missile and air sites. US naval build-up in the Indian Ocean is proposed — hence NW Cape extensions — and nuclear weaponry is out of sight in its warm expanses. Demonstrators cannot march on Pine Gap as on Aldermaston, or protest at NW Cape as at Sasebo. But conscience can oppose war without excursions into saltbush and sand.

If conscription is extended, as RSL haters of "wogs and bogs" demand, then the potential in the Australian struggle for national independence and peaceful relations with Asia is promising. The Dead Sea fruits of Vietnam intervention have been too ashy for millions to swallow. Non-socialist Asia is less and less willing to
submit to tutelage or join Pentagon-rigged military alliances. "Aid" bribes have been little advance on traditional beads and looking-glasses.

The universities in 1914-18 disgorged imperial chauvinism: their cadet corps quickly furnished the first AIF officers, with one celebrated defection. Australian universities no longer dwell in this mood: change beyond recognition in student and staff attitudes, reflected widely in intellectual life, has dramatically assisted the anti-conscription movement.

Today's conscription issue has not evoked schism in Labor Party and trade unions as in 1916-17. While much vital energy remains unreleased in the trade unions, wider conscription and interventions would create economic pressures likely to stimulate peace action. Canberra's apprenticeship for promotion to one-stripe gendarme in SE Asia is not bought in a cheap market: living standards must suffer.

While the Irish have been assimilated and another Dr. Mannix will not emerge to denounce conscription, the cloistral isolation of the Catholic priesthood from the peace movement is being reduced, if only to the extent of tolerance of lay peace activity. The general migrant attitude is among the imponderables: while the generation of displaced persons is politically dubious, it could hardly be assumed that those who voluntarily left Europe for greater security in Australia would be keen to shed blood to bolster the crumbling crusts of empires for which they have no national sympathies. Other imponderables are the corrosions caused by China's Cultural Revolution and the Czechoslovak invasion.

Australian capitalism in 1916-17 was in its formative era. This engendered some anti-imperial and anti-conscriptionist spirit. Today Australian capitalism is monopolist, but its ranks include many alarmed by massive US, Japanese and other foreign capital incursions, designed to convert the land to a quarry and lift profit take-outs till they undermine national solvency. A pallid nationalism appears now in government ranks; nationalism born of external economic and political pressures and concern over relations with Asian neighbors must grow. But while Canberra's thinking remains gyved by anti-liberation neurosis and while yes-manship to the chief patron of the petty Asian despots we are supposed to underwrite stalks so unashamedly through Australian policy-making, then certainly all potential allies in the battle for national independence and against conscription for wars of intervention will have to be sought out and welcomed.