

**NATIONAL WINNER
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**JACINTA SAYNOR
CASUARINA SENIOR COLLEGE**

CONSCRIPTION WWII

To what extent can Australia's decision to reject conscription during WW1 be contested?

The issue of conscription was highly contested in Australia during World War 1 (WW1), beginning in 1916 and lasting throughout the remainder of the war. Prime Minister William "Billy" Hughes proposed introducing conscription, which imposes compulsory military service on the young men of Australia, and gives the government the power to force them into overseas service.¹ The suggestion of conscription deeply divided the nation, igniting the Australian conscription debate. Organisations such as the Salvation Army and newspapers supported the notion,² while associations including the Anti-Conscription League and the Women's Peace Army were formed against conscription.³ Overall, conscription was rejected by the general Australian public, voted against in separate plebiscites in 1916 and 1917.⁴ Conscription was rejected by Australia in WW1 mainly for idealistic reasons rather than realistic reasons. Conscription was such a contentious issue in Australia that even the reasons behind rejecting it were highly disputed. Soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) opposed mandatory service for fears conscripts would be unreliable soldiers or may comprise of loved ones. Conflictingly, many believed on the home front that conscription was morally wrong, while others thought Australia had already sacrificed enough for the war effort. However, there were also many Australians who understood the realistic reasons behind why conscription could be positive.

Many volunteer servicemen disagreed with mandatory service because they did not want to serve beside conscripts, or feared family and friends may be forced to fight. Those already members of the AIF believed conscripts would not be committed or may not properly support their comrades, as their failure to volunteer indicated they did not want to serve. Many of the Australian diggers believed "any eligible male with any guts" would enlist to fight for their country.⁵ Those who had to be forced to join the AIF would therefore be cowardly and unreliable on the frontline. Soldiers of the AIF did not support Hughes' policies, especially his staunch support of conscription. From the trenches of Messines in mid-1917, Private Charlie Marlow wrote a letter to his brother, Jim, criticising Hughes' re-election. Marlow stated he would "certainly not vote for Hughes'... and if Jim

¹ Australian War Memorial. 2019. Conscription. June 21. Accessed June 5, 2020.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/conscription>

² Veterans South Australia. 2016. Whose side are you on? Australia's Conscription Debate in 1916. October 14. Accessed June 14, 2020. <https://veteranssa.sa.gov.au/story/whose-side-are-you-on-australias-conscription-debate-in-1916/>

³ New South Wales State Library. 2020. World War 1 and Australia. Accessed May 27, 2020.

https://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/wwi-and-australia/recruitment_and_conscription

⁴ Australian Government: Department of Veteran Affairs. N.D. Wartime Australians: Billy Hughes. Accessed May 19, 2020. <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/media/file/wartime-australians-billy-hughes#3>

⁵ Basset, Jan. 1983. The Home Front 1914-1918. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

was [on the Western Front] he would say the same,” adding, “very few soldiers vote[d for] Hughes.”⁶ Additionally, soldiers of the AIF did not want to their loved ones exposed to the terrors of the war. On March 8th 1917, Private Ernest Allen wrote in a letter home “the boys are glad [conscriptio] failed,” stating the soldiers “would be sorry to see their mates ... come over to fight.”⁷ Those who knew the horrors of the Western Front did not want to see their families and friends subjected to the brutal experiences and “awful conditions” they had endured, nor see “the terrible sights” of the war.⁸ Australian soldiers rejected the highly contested proposed conscription in WW1 because they believed conscripts would be unreliable soldiers and did not want loved ones to endure the hardships of the war, even though realistically they needed more men.

Australians also opposed conscription due to the moral issues of coercing men into war and expropriating their choices. These people supported liberty, protesting it was unconscionable for the government to send people to fight under duress. Some considered the impact of voting yes to conscription could be equated to “doom[ing] a man to death,” as though they were signing “the grim death-warrant of doom” personally.⁹ These people believed it was iniquitous to the point of murder to force men to leave their families and jobs to fight. While training in Melbourne in early September 1916, Private Marlow wrote in a letter to his mother about “lot[s] of men coming into camp now – I think they must be frightened of conscription.”¹⁰ This demonstrates that even those eligible for conscription would rather volunteer than potentially have their choices cruelly taken from them. Badges circulated in 1916 promoted “serving as free men, not conscripts,” which appealed to many who believed mandatory service was a serious breach of personal rights and civil liberty. Despite being an idealistic view, many Australians believed it was immoral to force young men to fight in the war.

Some anti-conscriptionists argued that Australia had already done her share or that the war was unrelated to the fledgling nation.¹¹ As a dominion of the British Empire, Australia was automatically part of the conflict when Britain declared war on Germany on August 4th 1914.¹² The patriotism that

⁶ Marlow-Paterson, Allison. 2014. *Anzac Sons: The Story of Five Brothers in the War to End all Wars*. Newport, NSW: Big Sky Publishing

⁷ Australian War Memorial. N.D. Conscriptio 1916-17. Accessed May 26, 2020. <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/conscriptio>

⁸ Burness, Peter. N.D. "1916: Australians in France." Australian War Memorial. Accessed May 26, 2020. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/event/ww1/1916/essay>

⁹ Basset, Jan. 1983

¹⁰ Marlow-Paterson, Allison. 2014

¹¹ Sarre, Rick. 2018. It's time Australia's conscientious objectors of WW1 were remembered, too. November 9. Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/its-time-australias-conscientious-objectors-of-ww1-were-remembered-too-106169>

¹² Anzac Portal. N.D. World War I and Australia 1914 to 1918. Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1>

invigorated the nation in 1914 had gradually given way to war weariness and by the time of the contested conscription debate, many believed Australia had already sacrificed enough. Private Frank Parker of the AIF remarked “who was the king? What was his name?” when interviewed about his wartime experiences,¹³ demonstrating the soldiers’ lack of faith in Britain.¹⁴ Gallipoli survivor, Alec Campbell, believed Australia’s involvement in the First World War was a “mistake,” and that the nation should “never go to war with a foreign power again ... if it has nothing to do with Australia,” only in order to “protect our shores from attack.”¹⁵ Campbell and many others like him believed that, with fighting so far away, the war was irrelevant for Australia. By the end of 1916, 40,000 Australians had become casualties on the Western Front, with a further 76,836 casualties suffered by the AIF in 1917.¹⁶ From a population of less than 5 million, these were staggering numbers. They prompted people to believe Australia had sacrificed enough and vote no in the plebiscites held 28th October 1916 and 7th December 1917.¹⁷ Many Australians shared the opinion that the First World War was irrelevant to Australia, idealistically believing the young nation had given enough to the war effort.

However, conscription during WW1 was not rejected by all Australians. The 1916 plebiscite proved how deeply contentious the issue was, with those for conscription defeated by a narrow margin of 51.6% to 48.4%.¹⁸ In 1917, the gap had widened slightly to 54% against and 46% for.¹⁹ There was still a total of 2,102,716^{20 21} votes for conscription across both plebiscites, proving that people in Australia could understand the physical reasons behind introducing mandatory service. When war first broke out in 1914, enlistment numbers were so high the AIF was “turning men away.”²² At the peak of enlistments in 1915, 165,000 young Australians volunteered for overseas service, but this

¹³ ABC. 2018. World War I: How Australia reacted to the outbreak of conflict. August 4. Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-04/world-war-i-australian-reaction-to-outbreak-of-conflict/5603588?nw=0>

¹⁴ Curtis, Jonathan. 2014. 'To the Last Man'- Australia's entry to war in 1914. July 31. Accessed May 26, 2020. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/AustToWar1914

¹⁵ (King 2014)

¹⁶ Australian War Memorial. N.D. First World War 1914-18. Accessed May 25, 2020. <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>

¹⁷ National Museum of Australia. N.D. Conscription Referendums . Accessed May 27, 2020. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/conscription-referendums>

¹⁸ Old Treasury Building. N.D. The First Conscription Referendum - 1916. Accessed May 27, 2020. <https://www.oldtreasurybuilding.org.au/the-first-conscription-referendum-1916/>

¹⁹ Queensland Government. 2019. The divide deepens —conscription in 1917. Accessed May 27, 2020. <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/conscription-in-1917/index.aspx>

²⁰ Queensland Government. 2018. A divided nation—conscription in 1916. Accessed May 27, 2020. <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/conscription/index.aspx>

²¹ Queensland Government 2019

²² New South Wales State Library. 2020. World War 1 and Australia. Accessed May 27, 2020. https://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/wwi-and-australia/recruitment_and_conscription

eventually dropped to only 45,000 in 1917.²³ Less men enlisted as the war progressed due to the high casualty numbers, even though this was the time when volunteers were most needed and eventually led to the suggestion of conscription. Australians understood that realistically, they needed more men to replace the soldiers lost in the AIF and many supported conscription for this reason.

To a significant extent, the contentious suggestion of conscription was rejected in Australia during WW1 due to idealistic reasons. There were many physical reasons mandatory service would have been effective, which some Australians could understand as the margins were close in both plebiscites. Even amongst those who rejected the idea of conscription, there was contestation about the reasons why conscription should be refused. Many Australians had the idealistic notion that Australia had already contributed enough to WW1 and therefore did not need to implement conscription. Others believed it would be morally wrong to remove people's right to choose. Volunteer servicemen also rejected conscription, fearing conscripts would be unreliable soldiers and that mandatory service may force loved ones to join the conflict. The majority of Australians believed that conscription should not have been implemented and voted against it, significantly due to idealistic reasons.

²³ Australian War Memorial. 2018. Enlistment Statistics, First World War. December 14. Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1>

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Source Analysis:

Source 1:

Marlow-Paterson, Allison. 2014. *Anzac Sons: The Story of Five Brothers in the War to End all Wars*.
Newport, NSW: Big Sky Publishing

This book was chosen as it comes from a dependable publishing company, Big Sky Publishing, and has up to date information as it was written recently, in 2014. The source is also full of primary sources including photographs, letter excerpts and postcards. The book was used to provide valuable and direct insight into the thoughts and feelings of Australian soldiers serving during WW1, including their opinions on conscription.

Source 2:

Burness, Peter. N.D. "1916: Australians in France." *Australian War Memorial*. Accessed May 26, 2020. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/event/ww1/1916/essay>

This webpage is a reputable source, evidenced by its website, the Australian War Memorial, and recognized author. Peter Burness is a senior historian at the Australian War Memorial and has several publications on the subject of Australia in WW1, such as entries to the *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*. The source was used to provide contextual information on what Australian's faced during WW1, both on the home front and abroad. It also showed foundations for the conscription debate and demonstrated official perspectives on conscription during WW1, illustrating opinions of those in the government and organisations.

Source 3:

Basset, Jan. 1983. *The Home Front 1914-1918*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

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This book was mainly used to gain an insight into the motivations and challenges on the home front, and how these influenced the public's view on conscription. The author, Jan Basset, is a recognised historical author with books such as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Australian History* and *Guns and Brooches*, which adds credibility to the source. Further reputability is added through the use of various primary sources from numerous organisations and people, including letters and posters such as *The Blood Vote*.