

# TOPIC 7: The Enemy

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

---

Facing the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918 were the soldiers and airmen of the German Imperial Army. Anti-German feeling was strong in Australia throughout World War I, and some of those of German birth were interned. Home front propaganda turned the Germans into so-called Huns and barbarians, whose armies were capable of any atrocity against civilisation. German soldiers were depicted with ape-like features and shown, in one cartoon, as capable of spiking babies on their bayonets.

To have a German name was to arouse suspicion, no matter how far back one's ancestors might have arrived in Australia. Faced with that kind of prejudice, one member of the AIF, Les Schwartz of Toowoomba in Queensland, actually deserted in England and joined the British Army under the assumed name of Walter Merritt, where he rose to be a Lieutenant and was awarded a Military Cross for bravery. During the war, he was considered a traitor for deserting and his mother was told there was a bullet waiting for him when he returned home. He did so in 1922, to a hero's welcome as a decorated veteran.

There is evidence in soldiers' letters and diaries of little mercy being extended to the German enemy in the heat of battle. At such moments it was every man for himself. Under attack by German soldiers, one Australian wrote:

*... my blood was up and I was like a fiend.*

Most men, however, would have acknowledged the professionalism of the German soldier and none, if they valued their lives, would have underestimated his fighting ability. Equally, the Germans respected the Australians. A German battalion commander wrote in late 1918:

*Forces confronting us consist of Australians who are very warlike, clever and daring. They understand the art of crawling through high crops in order to capture our advanced posts ... The enemy infantry has daily proved themselves to be audacious.*

*“Forces confronting us consist of Australians who are very warlike, clever and daring... The enemy infantry has daily proved themselves to be audacious.”*

## AIMS

---

Students at Level 1/2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appreciate that the German soldiers were similar to Australian soldiers</li><li>• Understand that a variety of attitudes existed among the Australian soldiers</li><li>• Identify caricatures of the enemy</li></ul>
Students at Level 2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Critically analyse images of the enemy</li></ul>

## CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

---

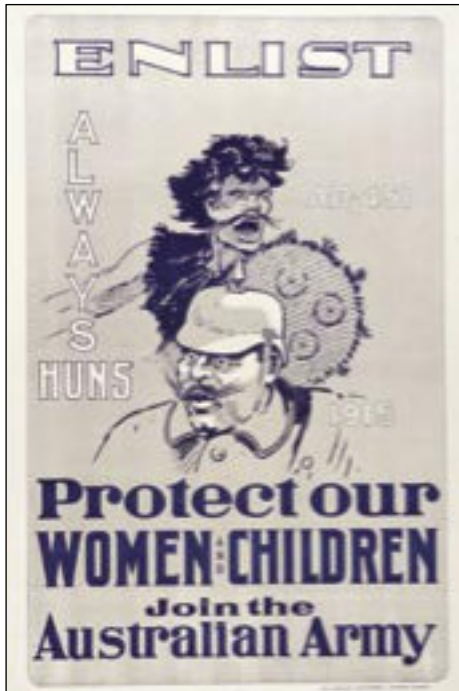
Level 1/2/3	<p>A key idea in this section is for students to consider what might influence their attitude to people whom they do not know but with whom they are in conflict. How do they treat these strangers — as a hated enemy, or as an enemy that deserves to be humanely treated?</p> <p>A way of starting this in the classroom is to have students look at caricatures today in political cartoons. How do the cartoonists depict people? Do they really look like that, or is the cartoonist trying to ridicule them? What attitude towards them does the cartoonist want you to have?</p>
Level 2/3	<p>At this level students consider some of the pressures that existed to determine reactions to the enemy — including hate propaganda, the unacceptable behaviour of some of the enemy, the blood-lust experienced by some Australians in combat. Reference could be made back to recruiting images and training with weapons to help enrich students' understandings here.</p>



AWM E03403

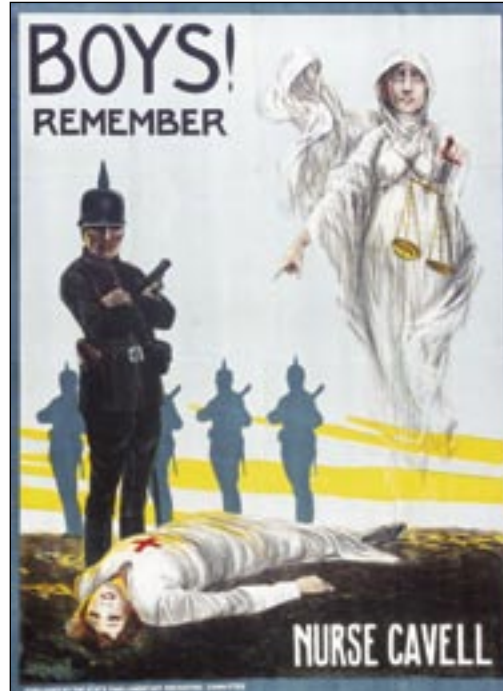
German soldiers captured in the struggle for the main Hindenburg Line.

- Here are some images of the enemy that were presented to Australians. What are your reactions to them? In each case look at how the Germans are presented, and how the artist tries to get you to react strongly against them.



AWM ARTV01149

A recruiting poster, c 1915



AWM ARTV08902

A recruiting poster, c 1915

Now look at these photographs of German soldiers.

- Do you think they were similar people to the Australians?
- Do you think they had similar battlefield experiences to the Australians? Explain your reasons.



AWMA01551

Wounded Australian prisoners of war at the German collecting station on morning of 20 July 1916.



AWM H12400

German Army troops wearing gas masks during trench action.

- ▮ Look at the variety of attitudes in the sources below. What is the attitude to the Germans in each case?
- ▮ Why do you think there would have been different attitudes to the Germans? List some possible reasons.

#### SOURCE A

There was a chap, a big, tall man, you know, and he had his jaw shot away, and he's got another bloke with broken legs or something and he's got this chap on his back. He's staggerin' back along the road, and when they saw me, they had to [salute]. It made me very near cry to think of it. And I used to go up and pat 'em on their back, and then they'd point to their big bottle that they had and it was full of coffee and cognac and I'd have a drink of this ... and give them some, and then they'd sit down and pull out their post-cards and they'd show you their photos of their wives and their children and the farms they were on. And when I saw all these things I thought, well blimey, what's it all about? ... It's all right for people that are victorious, to march in, but think of the defeated people going back, to the horror of it all.

#### SOURCE B

To-morrow we hope to be on the road to Berlin ... we are ready, fit, and well, and with God's help we will punish the Bosch [Germans] for his cruelty to the weaker races.

[V]ery keen to get to grips with those inhuman brutes ... to do something to help wipe out such an infamous nation ... I am sure that God will take a strong hand in the war and thoroughly punish Germany.

#### SOURCE C

Staggering through the gloom we saw a man ... Poor beggar I have seen worse looking mess-ups but he was bad enough - his left eye was gone ... he was a mass of blood and looked as if he had been through a sausage machine. He pleaded something in German ... it was a moan, or a prayer - so I gave him my hand to hold and said as nicely as I could 'All right old chap.' ... The thought struck me 'How can men be so cruel' ... and we helped him along.

#### SOURCE D

In one trench I saw three or four Germans pinned in. The side of the trench had closed in pinning them as they stood. The tops of their heads were blown off with machine guns. It was a horrible sight. Blood and brains had trickled down their faces and dried ... I was filled with delight to see so many Huns killed and could not help laughing.

#### SOURCE E

This afternoon we got 15 German Red Cross prisoners, they were marched down & searched & 13 of the dogs were found to be carrying daggers and revolvers they [were] promptly put against the wall & finished.

(Source A, Bill Harney, *Harney's War*, Currey O'Neil, South Yarra, 1983, page 52

Sources B-E quoted in Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1990, pages 10, 245-6, 247, 283)

- ▮ List some words that apply to the Australians' attitudes to the Germans in these sources — such as hatred, compassion, etc.