



Question 2: 1917: the worst year of a hideous war (for Australia and Australians) wrote Max Blenkin, defence correspondent Australian associated press, December 14, 2016. How accurate do you think this statement is?

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The 'worst' year of World War One is often determined by numbers and statistics, thus when Defence Correspondent, Max Blenkin, entitled his recent Associated Press article "1917: the worst year of a hideous war [for Australia and Australians]"¹, it was clear what he was referring to. The article focusses on quantifiable factors, such as weather conditions, battle successes and number of casualties. However, numbers can only reveal so much. I think Blenkin was right that 1917 was the worst year for Australians and Australia, but not only for the reasons he suggested. In this essay, I am going to look closer at why 1917 was the worst year, not just for Australian soldiers, but also Australia civilians and for Australia as a country.

At the beginning of the war conscription was not needed because volunteers provided ample troops. By the year 1917 that had changed, Australia was struggling to provide the numbers that were needed. The word about the monstrous number of Australian casualties and the horrors of war had been spread across Australia, few believed a quick end to the war was likely. The pressure from Britain on the Australian Government to make sure they carried out the commitments they had made was continuing to rise. The government ran recruiting campaigns but failed to reach targets. Prime Minister William Hughes held a referendum asking Australians if they support a conscription. The referendum stated "Are you in favour of the proposal of the Commonwealth Government for reinforcing the Commonwealth Forces overseas?"² This was narrowly rejected with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against.¹

Before 1917 Australia was already divided between the Catholics and Protestants. In 1917 conscription took this sectarian divide to a new level and Australia had polarized into the pros and the anti's. Prime Minister William Hughes was the leader of the pros and his opposition Daniel Mannix who was the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne was leader of anti's. There was bitter public disputes between the two groups which split Australian society in half. This was the most significant political cataclysm in Australian history but is forgotten because it was lost in the shadows of WW1. This event is one that notably sets 1917 apart from the other years in WW1.

Stan Correy wrote in an article for ABC "Families and communities were divided over whether to strike during wartime, but it didn't stop hundreds of thousands of people rallying in cities around the country."³ The great strike of 1917 tore Australian society apart and put the government under extreme pressure. Australia was still greatly involved in the war so it was a controversial time to have such a large action. The strike was triggered by the introduction of time cards. Labourers did not like the new system and believed it was turning them into machines. Workers from railways and tramways began to walk off the job, more than 77,000 workers in NSW⁴ alone. This affected NSW financially and politically and

¹ Blenkin, M. (2016). *1917: the worst year of a hideous war*. [Web page]. Retrieved 31 of July from <http://www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/1917-the-worst-year-of-a-hideous-war/news-story/cbe2aba15ed9cd07adcc85d58293543c>

² *Conscription referendums, 1916 and 1917 - Fact sheet 161*. (2017). [Web page]. Retrieved 12 of August from <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs161.aspx>

³ Correy, S. (2017). *Why the Great Strike of 1917 still matters today*. [Web page]. Retrieved 5 August from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-28/100-years-on-the-great-strike-of-1917/8748132>

⁴ Wilson, A. (2017). *Sydney Carriageworks: 1917 General Strike loss that shaped a movement*. [Webpage]. Retrieved on the 12 of August from

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/visual-arts/sydney-carriageworks-1917-general-strike-loss-that-shaped-a-movement/news-story/8793832d2f26aab2313e8336396ea20d>

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the business of Sydney ground to a halt for six weeks⁵. The impact of the great strike damaged Australia at a time when it was already fragile.

342,825⁶ Australians had already enlisted by the year 1917 and the number was still rising. An issue that arose from this was there were many positions left unfilled. Many farmers enlisted, leaving an insufficient supply of agricultural workers. As a consequence food supplies started to diminish. Australia could not turn to England for help because their supply of food from farms was also running low. The shortage of stocks in Australia forced food prices to rise and the working man was struggling to feed his family. The situation worsened when transporting goods by ship was stopped after Germany announced unrestricted submarine warfare. A plan to bring in food rationing was proposed to try and reduce food consumption in the food shortage. Unfortunately the shortage continued and added stress on Australian society.

Individuals are what shape a nation. If the individuals are damaged the nation is damaged. World War One did not just affect the soldiers and the people in the Australian Imperial Forces, it also affected everyone on the home front. Every time someone was killed a family was broken, and the trauma rippled through whole communities. Seeing the title of an article in the local paper called 'Coming Home, Hero's From the Front'⁷ and then seeing the list 'Invalided and Wounded'⁸ put a cloud over the Australian society as it became an all too regular occurrence. The cloud grew even darker in 1917 as the year unfolded casualties mounted. This became Australia's costliest year. The casualty lists grew longer than ever before. In no other year was the tragedy of the War so powerfully reflected in the general mood of the Australian people.

In 1917, Australia still a young nation was not unified. The additional stresses of war brought much controversy and conflict. "War tore not just at individual heartstrings, but at the very fabric of Australian society, straining the bonds that held people together."⁸ This quote Martin Crotty wrote in his book 'The great mistakes of Australian history' is especially relevant to the year 1917 because of the political circumstances surrounding conscription and the complications in society, some of which are the great strike and food shortage. The year 1917 stands out with regard to 'worst' more than the other years of WW1 because of how damaged Australian society was.

⁵ Spicer, D. (2017). *Great Strike 100th anniversary exhibition puts important Australian history on show*. [Web page]. Retrieved 8 of August from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-05/great-strike-100th-anniversary-sydney-exhibition/8778042>

⁶ *First World War 1914-18*. (2017). [Web page]. Retrieved 1 of August from <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>

⁷ *Casualties*. (2012). [Web page]. Retrieved 8 of August from <http://splash.abc.net.au/home#!/digibook/1502379/the-home-front>

⁸ Crotty, M. (2006). *The great mistakes of Australian history*. Retrieved from https://books.google.com.au/books?id=y945KcaEQUAC&pg=PT59&lpq=PT59&dq=food+restrictions+1917+australia&source=bl&ots=-bdh82AXKc&sig=piriLpt0zSBbybcR1io-vcNdw_w&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwivKiGrr_VAhWCFZQKHbICATwQ6AEIWTAI#v=onepage&q=food%20restrictions%201917%20australia&f=false

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Worst can be looked at from many angles and perspectives. When Max Blenkin made the statement “1917: the worst year of a hideous war [for Australia and Australians]”⁹ in a recent article, he only looked at one angle of worst, the quantifiable factors. In my essay I looked at worst in relation to the Australian nation and how its people in 1917 were experiencing political and moral upheaval. Before drawing conclusions we must understand and accept the different aspects of such powerful words. While acknowledging the obvious it is essential that we explore deeper than the surface and beyond what is initially apparent.

⁹ Blenkin, M. (2016). *1917: the worst year of a hideous war*. [Web page]. Retrieved 31 of July from <http://www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/1917-the-worst-year-of-a-hideous-war/news-story/cbe2aba15ed9cd07adcc85d58293543c>

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