

**Beastly Huns, fifth columnists, and evil Nazis:
Australian media portrayals of the German enemy
during WW1 and WW2**

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Abstract

Wartime media portrayals of the enemy serve not only a short-term propaganda purpose in aid of recruiting or the selling of war loans bonds. Portrayals of the enemy also often underscore a nation's innermost fears, values, and myths. Australia's WW1 poster and film portrayals of the 'beastly Hun' and 'invading German hordes' illustrate an early stage in the young nation's social imaginary which at that time involved an almost complete identification with Britain and an obsession with racial purity and the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. The films go as far as demonising German residents in Australia as fifth columnists and spies. Closely connected to this was the nation's fear of invasion which had been prevalent in Australia's social imaginary since the 19th century.

The film and poster portrayals during WW2 reveal another stage of development in the nation's social imaginary: the dehumanisation of the German enemy is subordinated to the construction of a distinct Australian character and values, among which Empire loyalty still holds an important position. Australian films of the period do not portray the German enemy as an inferior race but stress his moral inferiority instead. The 'fight with clean hands', for example, is presented as an Australian value. The posters, meanwhile, depict the German as a more abstract evil threat. Nevertheless the underlying theme of many of these films and posters is still the threat of invasion.

Australia did not have conscription for military service in Europe during both world wars (there was limited conscription in WW2 but this did not extend to service in Europe), so it relied heavily on visual propaganda for recruiting and getting the nation behind the war effort. Despite this fact, investigations of the portrayal of the German enemy in Australian visual culture during the two wars have been scarce. This is the first thesis-length investigation of the portrayal of the German enemy in Australian films and posters during WW1 and WW2. The portrayals are textually analysed and interpreted in the context of the nation's unique social imaginary and identity discourses. This study contributes to two different areas of academic research. First, it adds an Australian perspective to existing investigations of Allied media portrayals of the German enemy. Second, the historical approach reveals the development of the country's social imaginary over the first half of the 20th century. It exposes the long history of some of its most prevalent aspects, chief among them the nation's fear for the safety of its borders, which still exists today.

Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled “**Beastly Huns, fifth columnists, and evil Nazis: Australian media portrayals of the German enemy during WW1 and WW2**” has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number: HE28JUL2006-D04810 on 6 September 2006.



Antje Kirsten Gnida (Student ID: 40795292)

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Much of the research for this thesis was conducted in Australian archives and would not have been possible without the support of some individuals in particular. I am especially grateful to Simon Drake and Ben Nguyen at the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) for making my film research an enjoyable experience. I also thank the staff at the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and the Australian War Memorial (AWM) for their support.

The majority of the images in this thesis and film clips on the accompanying DVD are courtesy of the NFSA, NAA, and AWM and are acknowledged where used. Permission for the use of the stills and film clips of Charles Chauvel's feature films *Forty Thousand Horsemen* and *The Rats of Tobruk* was obtained by arrangement with the copyright owner, The Estate of Charles Chauvel c/-Curtis Brown (Aust) Pty Ltd. The stills and film clips from Noel Monkman's feature film *The Power and the Glory* are used with permission of the copyright owner Rothschild Australia. Norman Lindsay's poster *Will You Fight Now or Wait for This* is used with permission of the copyright owners H. C. & A. Glad and the National Library of Australia (NLA).

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Previous Publications

Part of an earlier version of Chapter 6 entitled: “German moral inferiority vs. Australian values: the German enemy in Australia’s WW2 films” was incorporated into a chapter with the title “Anzacs Others” co-written with Catherine Simpson in Anthony Lambert, Renata Murawska, Catherine Simpson (eds.) *Diasporas of Australian Cinema* (forthcoming May 2009).

Part of an earlier version of the above-mentioned Chapter 6 was also presented at the bi-annual Australian and New Zealand Film and History conference in Melbourne, in November 2006.

Parts of earlier versions of Chapter 2 entitled “From Hun-Beast to bushfire: the German enemy in Australia’s WW1 posters” and Chapter 5, “Australian military dependence on Britain and the indirect German threat: the German enemy in Australia’s WW2 posters” are published as “From Hun-Beast to Abstract Threat: Portrayals of the German Enemy in Australian War Posters”, *NEO: A Journal for Higher Degree Research Candidates in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, No. 1, 2007, <http://www.scmp.mq.edu.au/hdr/journal/issue/2008/antje/>.

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Preface

The idea for this thesis originated in 2003, at a time when I was conducting research for a documentary film and TV production company in Sydney. At the time, this company was interested in initiating a German-Australian co-produced documentary television series and was looking for subjects. I was given the task to conduct some preliminary research and soon discovered fascinating crossroads in Australian and German history. While the long history of German migration to Australia is interesting in itself, the most exciting stories seem to have originated in the two world wars. When I set out with my research I had not even been aware of the fact that many Germans, including German Australians, had been interned in Australia in both wars. While the history books I came across mentioned the negative portrayal of Germans in the press in the context of the anti-German climate at the Australian home front, particularly in WW1, hardly any of them mentioned films. Since I was aware of the fact that Australia had a very active film industry at the beginning of the 20th century, I was interested in how Australian films portrayed Germans and how they might have affected Australian attitudes towards Germans. While it soon became clear that the latter could not be properly assessed in hindsight due to a lack of detailed sources on the reception of these films with audiences, I found out that a number of films from both war periods had survived in the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). During my early research I also came across a number of posters, which portrayed the German enemy in interesting ways, which is why the original thesis proposal was extended to include another visual medium, one, which offered a 100% “official” view on the German enemy. In the course of the years it became clear that the most interesting thing about the portrayal of Germans was not simply its nature but what it said about Australia, about the nation’s understanding of its own identity. This thesis has been a long and at times exhausting journey, but with new and exciting revelations around every corner; a journey, which allowed me as a German to better understand Australia’s history and contemporary society and the German’s place within it.