From Hun-Beast to Abstract Threat: Portrayals of the German Enemy in Australian War Posters

While books and articles on Australia’s war history occasionally discuss the jingoistic portrayal of the German ‘enemy within’ and overseas in the Australian press in WW1, they rarely mention depictions of the German enemy in the visual media. This paper investigates the portrayal of Germans in Australian posters produced during WW1 and WW2. It argues that Germany was depicted as a threat to Australia in both wars, albeit in different ways. Given the government’s need for an increasing number of recruits in the course of WW1, many recruiting posters hysterically depicted the German enemy as brutal invader. The portrayal in WW2, meanwhile, was much more subtle and rational and refrained from jingoistic portrayals of the Germans, which were now directed at the Japanese. Nonetheless, posters of both wars depicted a German invasion threat to the Australian continent, although such a danger never existed. Looking at the posters today, the viewer not only sees reflections of certain war events but, more generally, illustrations of Australian ideology and mythology. The posters particularly visualize Australia’s deep concern for the security of her borders and, connected to it, a deeply rooted suspicion of the ‘other’. Since ‘White Australia’s’ fear of invasion had existed since the very beginning of the 20th century (Hage, 2003: 52), it was logical for propagandists of both wars to invoke this image in the aid of recruiting and the selling of war loan bonds. While it is conceivable that some propagandists made use of the invasion theme because they believed in the reality of a German invasion threat themselves, to mobilise this primal Australian fear was also one of the most effective ways to unite the population behind the war effort. In addition, such posters conveyed a sense of direct involvement and strategic importance to Australians. This was particularly important in WW1 when Australia’s geographic remoteness from the theatres of war led many Australians to question the extent of Australia’s involvement, especially in later war year.

The analysis strategy utilised in this short propaganda art- and media history study consists of three different methodologies, which complement and mutually support each other. The strategy is partly based on Gunther Kress’s and Theo van Leeuwen’s grammar of visual design (1996), which helps the researcher identify ideological messages embedded in images. The second methodological approach is loosely based on Garth S. Jowett’s and Victoria O’Donnell’s 10-step propaganda analysis scheme introduced in Propaganda and Persuasion (1999: 279-298). Those analysis steps which concentrate on audience reaction and propaganda effect are not considered in this paper, which is not a reception study. Instead the following WW1 and WW2 poster case studies concentrate on the type of appeal the posters make (for example for ‘recruiting’), the target group (for example ‘young men’), the theme/myth/ideology (for example ‘invasion threat’), and the propaganda style (‘emotional’ or ‘rational’) including special propaganda techniques. Furthermore, suitable display locations (for example in waiting rooms), and most importantly, the actual portrayal of the German enemy are discussed. This latter criterion is analysed based on Sam Keen’s influential psychology of enmity study Faces of the Enemy (1986), the third methodology utilised in this paper’s analysis strategy. Keen classifies enemy images produced by various countries in the course of history and analyses their potential messages to viewers. He uses tropes such as the enemy as
“barbarian”, “beast”, “criminal”, “rapist”, or “death” in his categorization system, which is particularly suited for this paper’s analysis of the portrayal of the German enemy in Australia’s WW1 posters. The posters of WW2, meanwhile, stressed the written element and referred to the German enemy in text rather than image, which is why the analysis of these posters pays special attention to metaphors rather than visual stereotypes.

The following posters have been chosen for the intensity of their ideological content as well as the clarity of their propaganda message. The posters analysed here come from the accessible collections of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and the National Archives of Australia (NAA), of which many can also be accessed through the National Library of Australia’s (NLA) online database. The period of production played a role in the choice of WW1 posters for this paper: one poster from the beginning and one poster from the end of the war have been chosen to showcase the fact that jingoistic portrayals of the German enemy were produced from the beginning to the very end of the war. Given the fact that precise production and release dates for many Australian WW2 posters held at the NAA are today unknown, this was not a criterion for the selection of the WW2 posters for this paper. While this circumstance makes it nearly impossible to identify any potential developments in the poster portrayal of the German enemy during this war, a general trend to refer to the German enemy in text rather than image is clearly identifiable. The posters in the WW2 section are typical examples for this approach.

WW1

In WW1 the poster was arguably the most effective visual propaganda tool: posters were easy, quick and cheap to produce and reached almost everyone who left the house. In addition, they were widely accepted by all sections of the public as a means of advertising and communication. It does not come as a surprise then that governments would choose them as a favoured propaganda medium in wartime. The similarities between the propaganda posters produced by all nations involved in WW1 are striking. However, as Maurice Rickards points out in his book *Posters of the First World War*, Great Britain’s propaganda poster art differed slightly from the universal pattern of the poster designs, especially in the early war years (1968: 9). The reason for this is that until 1916, when the nation introduced compulsory military service, Great Britain had to rely heavily on propaganda posters to gather an army of tens of thousands of volunteers (Rickards, 1968: 9).

Rickards fails to mention that one of the most popular themes of the British posters, the ‘beastly Hun’, was also a popular stereotype with the propagandists of another nation, which found itself in a very similar recruiting situation to Great Britain’s. With two failed conscription referenda in 1916 and 1917 and steadily dropping volunteer numbers, the Australian government also had to rely on propaganda posters and the support of the press to recruit men into the service. The production of the posters was organized by the government and individual recruiting committees. Some designs were amateurish or were uninspired copies of British and American poster designs (Stanley, 1983: 8) but there were also many typically Australian designs, which adapted the war to an Australian setting and made use of typically Australian icons or myths, such as the kangaroo or the
bushfire. Many Australian propaganda poster artists felt that to motivate Australians to volunteer for a war fought tens of thousands of kilometres away in Europe, more was needed than appeals to loyalty to the ‘mother country’ Britain. In order to convey to Australians a sense of direct involvement and strategic importance in the war, the poster artists created images of a German invasion threat to Australia, which, in reality, never existed. Other posters educated Australians in the nature of the enemy with depictions of alleged German war atrocities and images illustrating a German threat to humanity. The style of these posters often bordered on the melodramatic and hysterical and especially those created towards the end of the war were completely detached from the reality of the war situation.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

Sydney: Government Printer
Enlist : Always Huns A.D. 451-1915; Protect our Women and Children, Join the Australian Army
c 1914-15
Poster
57cm x 89cm col.
Australian War Memorial (ARTV01149)

*Always Huns A.D. 451-1915* (figure 1) is an example for an early Australian war poster. Produced by the government as a recruiting poster in 1914-15, it targeted young Australian men who had not yet signed up and, perhaps, their families. With this poster the artist attempted to educate his audience as to the nature of the enemy, who is, allegedly, a direct threat to Australian women and children. Aiming at the viewer’s emotions, especially fear and hatred, the poster would have very likely evoked the viewer’s protective familial instinct. The German enemy is portrayed here as a biological descendent of the Huns, strongly connected to the portrayal of Asian ‘barbarians’. By extension the term ‘Hun’ would have invoked the ‘yellow peril’ in the north, which had featured in the Australian social imaginary since around the time of Federation (Hage, 2003: 52). Paradoxically, the term ‘Huns’ for the Germans had been first used by the German Kaiser himself, who had sent his troops in 1900 to fight in the Boxer Rebellion in China with the dubious advice to fight and behave like Huns (Jowett & O’Donnell, 1999: 219). Once the news of alleged German war atrocities committed in Belgium early
in WW1 spread throughout the world, ‘Hun’ became the most frequently used derogatory term for the German enemy in Allied nations. Through the indirect reference to these war atrocities and the declaration that the Germans threaten Australian women and children, the poster uses emotive devices in its call for enlistment. According to Sam Keen, the ‘barbarous’ enemy is often portrayed as an “atheist […], a denier of God and the destroyer of culture” (1986: 43). Often used by one culture to denigrate another (Keen, 1986: 43-44), the figure of the barbarian is used here to position the German enemy at a low position of humanity’s spectrum, making it easier to justify his eradication by all means necessary.

The poster’s visual composition is quite simple. The most eye-catching elements are the face of the ‘modern’ Hun from the year 1915, made salient through the lighter colour of his face and helmet and his foregrounded position, and the proclamation “Enlist” above the illustration. Framing also plays a role in the composition of this poster, emphasizing the connection between the two Huns. The positioning of the words “ALWAYS HUNS” in particular serves to connect the two characters, with the word “HUNS” also serving as a vector, which points to the face of the 1915 version of the Hun. The figure of the ‘historic’ Hun stands behind the German soldier’s head with the typical ‘Pickelhaube’, which implies that every German soldier’s thinking and behaviour is ruled by the aggressive instincts of his ‘forefathers’. There are also visual similarities between the two characters: the similarly crazed faces with their wild eyes and, in particular, the moustaches. The downward-pointed ends of the moustache of the historic Hun point in the direction of his modern counterpart below, while the ends of the 1915 Hun’s moustache point upward, towards the historic Hun. The ‘Pickel’ of the modern German’s Pickelhaube acts as an additional vector, leading the viewer’s eyes from the modern to the historic Hun. In the text below the image the words “women” and “children” are written in slightly larger letters than the other words, emphasizing their importance.

The information values of an image’s top and bottom part, as classified by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 193), can also be identified in this poster: the top section, the illustration of the two Huns, makes the emotive appeal and plays the ideological “lead role”, while the verbal element in the bottom section is informative and practical and adopts, ideologically, the “sub-servient role” (1996: 194). The “Ideal”, the top part, and the “Real”, the bottom part (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 194), are separated from each other through the use of lighter and darker colours. Given its unambiguous composition, the poster’s message is clear and would have been easily and immediately understandable to the passer-by in the street.

Norman Lindsay’s poster *Will you fight now or wait for This?* (figure 2), meanwhile, was produced at the end of the war, in 1918. A file written by staff of the Australian War Museum in 1920, which is today held at the Australian War Memorial (NAA: AWM93, 7/1/158), describes the poster series in more detail. It is the fourth instalment of a six-part poster series for the last Australian recruiting campaign in 1918 and consequently targeted young men and also, their families. The first, and today better known poster of the series, depicted the German as ‘Hun-Beast’, a monster threatening the world. The poster was criticized by members of Federal Parliament, with one speaking of “repulsive
pictorial incitements to bloodshed” (cited in Stanley, 1983: 10). Lindsay, however, wholeheartedly supported the government’s war effort and also Prime Minister Billy Hughes’s efforts to introduce conscription. He writes in his autobiography *My Mask* that he “handed [his] services over to propaganda whenever it was required of [him]” (Lindsay, 1970: 234). The six designs were issued in a specific order and the Hun-Beast poster was the first in line. It was

distributed widely and secretly. On a prearranged night copies were pasted on train and tram windows, placed in shop windows, pasted on hoardings, and exhibited in all possible ways. It came to the public as a great surprise and caused much discussion. When public interest and curiosity were at their height, the second poster (Be quick) ['Quick!'] was exhibited and was followed by the others at intervals of seven to ten days. Simultaneously with the appearance of the second and succeeding posters an appropriate mailing notice was sent to each eligible man. (NAA: AWM93, 7/1/158)

*Figure 2*

Norman Lindsay and Recruiting Authorities
"WILL YOU FIGHT NOW OR WAIT FOR ‘THIS’"
1918
Poster
Australian War Memorial (J06713)

*Will you fight now or wait for This?* (figure 2), the fourth poster of the series, shows the invading German hordes on a rampage in rural Australia. It melodramatically depicts the German enemy as barbarian and also as rapist: the bare-breasted woman in the background is about to be violated by two German soldiers. According to Keen, the portrayals of the adversary as barbarian and “rapist or destroyer of motherhood” are closely connected (1986: 58). While the woman in this poster is depicted as member of a family, children are not part of the picture. The Germans are consequently portrayed as rapists rather than destroyers of motherhood, and hence, as stated by Keen, as “unadulterated lust defiling unambiguous innocence” (1986: 58). The young woman is,
however, not the only victim in this scenario. The young man, who is backed up against the iconic Australian corrugated iron water tank is about to be executed by a firing squad; the elderly woman, who is kneeling on the ground and seems to be pleading with the German officer to spare the young man’s life, is about to be hit in the head with a rifle butt. An old man lies in the dirt, either dead or unconscious, bleeding from a gash on his forehead. It is conceivable that Lindsay had the well-publicized war atrocity stories of German looting, raping, and killing in Belgium in mind, when he created this poster and consciously aimed at creating this connection in the minds of Australian viewers.

But this emotive device was not the only technique utilized by Lindsay to involve the viewer emotionally. Vectors play a particularly important role in the composition of this poster: the three rifles pointed at the young man or the rifle directed at the elderly woman kneeling on the ground. In addition the direction of the fire and smoke in the background draw the viewer’s attention to the young woman and also the young man. Furthermore, the young man’s leg underscores the figure of the old man on the ground. The salient elements in the composition are distinguished by their brightness: the young man backed up against the water tank and the slogan at the top of the poster. The lighting makes the horrified expression on the young man’s drawn, pale face clearly visible. The faces of the Germans in the background, meanwhile, are hardly distinguishable while the faces of the Germans in the foreground are almost identical and have slightly ape-like features. By these means Lindsay dehumanises the enemy, directing all sympathy to the ‘human’ victims in this image: the threatened Australian family. Meanwhile, the fore-grounded position of the slogan adds to the verbal element’s salience, leaving the viewer little chance to escape the message. The slogan’s most important word “This” hovers over the image’s other salient element, the young man, further stressing his importance.

In contrast to the poster analysed earlier, *Always Huns*, which was vertically structured, *Will you fight now or wait for This?* has a horizontal structure. On the left is the “Given”, that which is already known and which is presented as “common sense” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 187): the brutal Hun. On the right is the “New”, that “which is not yet known, or perhaps not yet agreed upon by the viewer, hence […] something to which the viewer must pay special attention” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 187): the danger posed by the German hordes to Australian civilians. The poster’s clever composition and clear and quickly understandable message would have made this poster suitable for street display.

While it could be argued that the fire gives the setting a ‘hellish’ mood, Lindsay overall departs with his earlier supernatural approach in the depiction of the German enemy of the already mentioned first poster for the last recruiting campaign. The well-known poster depicts the German enemy as a gigantic sub-human, demonic ‘Hun-Beast’, who endangers a small, fragile world. This gave way to a more realist portrayal in *Will you fight now or wait for This?*. Here Lindsay depicts the Germans as (albeit cruel, immoral and ruthless) human beings, stressing the danger posed by the enemy to the Australian population in an ordinary setting. Nonetheless, the style of this poster would have to be classified as emotional, especially in its use of images of victimization of women and elderly people as emotive devices. It was created to arouse the viewer’s protective
familial instinct. Concern for loved ones and hatred for the German enemy were mobilised to provoke Australian men to enlist. Just like the other posters of the series this overly dramatic poster was plainly misleading: At the time of this poster’s and, in fact, the whole series’ release the German enemy had long lost his ‘frightfulness’ in the eyes of the Allies because German soldiers were deserting in large numbers and the end of the war and Allied victory was near.

Peter Stanley writes that “Australian propaganda of the Great War, though innocently patriotic in 1914, produced by 1918 some of the most persistent and misleading imagery of any non-totalitarian nation.” (1983: 16) While this innocent patriotism and early enthusiasm for the war was indeed reflected in many of Australia’s early war posters, it also has to be said that jingoistic images of the German enemy were created and released from the early war years through to the end of the war. What the public thought of these posters is, however, difficult to assess today. It is likely, that from 1916 many posters divided the Australian community rather than united public opinion behind the war effort since society was strongly divided on the issue of conscription. The nation was split, almost down the middle, into conscriptionists, led by Prime Minister Billy Hughes, and anti-conscriptionists. Conscriptionist and anti-conscriptionist propaganda differed in its portrayal of the German enemy. ‘Conscriptionists’ used the image of the German as invading rapist to prompt Australian women to send their men overseas and stop the enemy in Europe before he could advance to Australia. Anti-conscriptionists, meanwhile, “also preyed upon long-held fears of invasion, though in that case, it was the Asiatic ‘hordes’ to the North, not the ‘Huns’, who posed the threat to Australians ‘and their womenfolk’” (Shute, 1976: 18). Germans were largely absent on anti-conscriptionist posters, of which many concentrated on the exploitation of Australian workers at the hands of industrialists, big business, and war profiteers.

Anti-German poster portrayals, meanwhile, culminated in Norman Lindsay’s propaganda posters for the last recruiting campaign in 1918, which “carried with them the impetus of four years of anti-German propaganda” (Stanley, 1983: 10). Other Australian visual media, in particular films, also contributed to the beastly image of the ‘Hun’ in Australian society. Among the German villains, who featured in 15 of the 54 feature films produced in Australia during the war, were also German-Australians and German residents in Australia, who were depicted as fifth columnists and spies. In portraying them as the ‘enemy within’, the films added to the anti-German hysteria spread by politicians and certain newspapers. It is not surprising then that a strong hatred for the German enemy evolved which gripped all sections of Australian society and led to high enlistment numbers on the one hand and high internment numbers of German residents on the other. Proportionately to its population, Australia became one of the nations with the highest losses of men in WW1 (approximately 60000 in a population of roughly 5 million) and that member of the Dominion, which, again proportionately to its population, interned the highest number of German ‘enemy aliens’ (Fischer, 1989: 126), although the nation was geographically speaking one of the remotest from the theatres of war in Europe.

Given the high loss of Australian soldiers in WW1, it does not come as a surprise that the outbreak of WW2, 21 years later, saw little of the enthusiasm which had greeted WW1 in
Australia. A survey conducted by Sydney University Professor A.P. Elkin in 1941 investigated the widespread lack of interest in the war in the early war years (1941: 8), which historians also describe as the ‘phoney war’ period. Elkin suggests that among the reasons for the lack of interest might have been the fact that the new generation had been educated in pacifistic ideals such as the ‘League of Nations’ in the inter-war years, which made some reject the war in principle (1941: 13-14). In addition, the Australian population had become more sceptical towards the media and suspicious of propaganda, especially when it was revealed after WW1 that many atrocity stories about the German enemy had been fabricated. One of the consequences seems to have been that only few Australians believed the war news in the press in the early years of WW2, as revealed in Elkins’s survey (1941: 61). To motivate the public to make sacrifices of perhaps similar proportions only two decades after WW1 had ended, was hence a difficult task for Australia’s WW2 propagandists. Charged with the responsibility to whip up enthusiasm for the new war was the Department of Information (DOI), which took a new approach in the portrayal of the German enemy and most of its propaganda in general: information rather than persuasion was on the agenda.

**WW2**

In WW2 most Australian propaganda posters were created by professionals: advertising companies under contract, which were given design instructions by the Department of Information (DOI) (NAA: SP112/1, 4/7/8). The new posters made more diverse appeals, not only for enlistment and the purchase of war loan bonds but also, for example, for the preservation of resources. They often targeted specific social groups, among them housewives, workers or elderly people. The posters’ overall style was less melodramatic with a new focus on text. Most posters were composite visuals, combining large amounts of text with image; many were even letterpress only. The majority of Australia’s poster propaganda art could be described as a largely positive encouragement for people to get actively involved in the war effort. This new approach included a fairly rational and more realistic portrayal of the German enemy, who was portrayed as a more indirect threat to Australia rather than brutal invader. This kind of portrayal differed from that of the Japanese, however, who were often depicted as spies and invaders from 1942. This difference is discussed in more detail at the end of this paper. One example for the more rational portrayal of the German enemy in WW2 is a poster produced by the Department of Information with the title *ALL IN, Australians! – and keep Australia safe!* (figure 3). This poster, which can be described as a general morale poster, targeted all Australians, but especially older people, who might have been unaware of the fact that there were ways for them to get involved in the war effort. The poster presents an excerpt from a fictitious letter from an elderly British homeguard to his brother in Australia. He describes how everyone in Britain, young and old, prepares for a looming German invasion. According to the poster, there is a job for everyone, even for “men of 60” and “mothers of children”. Age or family commitment are not considered acceptable excuses in Britain given the German threat, which implies that such justifications should hence be regarded as unacceptable in Australia as well. The comment below the letter warns of apathy in Australia and asks the viewer what he would do if Britain fell and Australia were suddenly on her own.
The fact that the letter displayed on this poster was written from one brother in Britain to the other in Australia puts a clear emphasis on Australia’s close relationship with Britain. The poster conveys the impression that Australia and the mother country are brothers in arms: if Britain wins, Australia wins; if Britain falls, Australia will be left to fend for herself. The artist warns that it would be foolish for Australians to continue to live a “pre-war life”, assuming that this is not Australia’s war and that the nation’s remoteness from the theatres of war overseas guarantees its safety. According to this poster, Australia’s safety is connected to Britain’s victory, which is why all Australians need to back the war effort whole-heartedly and help the Empire to win its war against the Nazis.

While the poster’s composition relies heavily on text elements, the face of the British home guard is the most salient element. The expression on the man’s face is at the same time worried and determined, which nicely conveys the message of the poster: ‘there is danger but you can be prepared.’ The poster has a vertical structure, making its emotive appeal in the top half of the poster. The quote at the top of the poster and the letter excerpt convey Britain’s and Australia’s uncertain fate in this war. The top half of the poster also expresses the “ideologically foregrounded part of the message” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 194): Australia’s British identity and the mother country’s position as a role model for Australia. The lower half of the poster includes the more practical, down-to-earth information, the instruction to “keep Australia safe”. The other salient element of the poster, apart from the image of the home guard, is the quote from the letter at the top of the poster, written in white on black background. The word “fog”, which stands for uncertainty and an invisible danger in this context, is the central metaphor of the poster. The British home guard do not know when or if the German enemy will invade Britain and the artist implies that Australia’s future is just as ‘foggy’ in this regard. The suggestion is that the only thing that can be done in this kind of situation is to prepare
oneself for the worst, as Britain has, while Australians are not even aware of the danger to their country. The other important verbal element in this poster is the slogan “ALL IN, Australians!” a catchphrase used on many DOI posters at the time, with which the Department directly addressed the nation’s apparent lack of interest in the war.

While the German enemy is absent in the image, he is directly referred to in the text as “Jerry”. While ‘Hun’ was still a popular derogatory term for the Germans in Allied WWII propaganda, especially the British often referred to the German enemy as ‘Jerry’. Whereas the term ‘Hun’ implied uncivilized, barbarous behaviour and was essentially used to dehumanize the German enemy, ‘Jerry’ was harmless in comparison and identified the enemy as a human being. The use of the word ‘Jerry’ here then also adds to the overall more rational Australian approach in the portrayal of the German enemy.

Generally, the style of this poster could be described as half-rational and half-emotional. The poster artist appeals to the viewer’s loyalty to the mother country and invokes pride in the feeling to be ‘British’. The poster was not created to incite fear, panic or hatred for the enemy but portrays the German as a more ‘abstract’, indirect threat to Australia. Although the poster makes subtle use of the invasion theme to create a feeling of uncertainty in the viewer, its focus is not the enemy but rather the ordinary Australian and what he can do to protect the country and hence make himself proud. The poster appeals to rationale, trying to convince the viewer with arguments that Australia is very much in this war at Britain’s side and is in similar danger as the mother country. Due to the large amount of text the poster would have not been particularly suitable for display in the streets but was probably erected in locations where people had the time to read the massive amount of information provided: public waiting areas such as train stations or perhaps, ferries or trams.

Another poster of the period with the title If you won’t enlist now – WHEN WILL YOU? also exemplifies the new, overall more sophisticated Australian poster propaganda approach in WW2 (figure 4). The target group for this poster is eligible Australian men who have not yet followed the call for enlistment. The poster artist suggests that only these men who have not yet understood the threat posed to Australia by both Japan and Germany have not signed up for the AIF. Like many Australian WW2 posters, this one presents the German enemy as an indirect danger to Australia. Once again the German enemy is not portrayed in the flesh but only referred to in text, in this case newspaper articles. One of the articles displayed here, which supposedly appeared in the Daily Telegraph, claims that Germany has ordered Japan to invade Australia, its headline reading “Invade Australia, Nazi Tells Japan”. The more realistic threat of a Japanese invasion of Australia is here cleverly connected to the German enemy, who, although far removed from Australia, is still portrayed as posing an indirect threat to the nation. Another one of the displayed headlines suggests a more direct threat from Germany: “Hitler’s Plans For Us Revealed”. The article, which was allegedly written by an Australian newspaper correspondent based in London, tells of the “sinister references by Nazi propagandists to Australia’s small population and inordinately high wages […]”. Among other things, this article taps directly into Australia’s very real concern for its borders, the fear that Australia would be very vulnerable to invasion, especially the
scarcely populated north. The Axis is also referred to in metaphor in the text below the illustration as “the most devastating bushfire in history”. Here the artist makes use of a metaphor which had already been used by Australian propaganda artists in WW1. Australians would have been keenly aware of the extreme danger posed by bushfires, which quickly get out of control. The appeal made by this poster could be described as half-emotional and half-rational. The artist makes use of the ‘emotional’ invasion theme and the powerful bushfire metaphor but in a less sensationalistic way than the WW1 posters. Rather than to incite hatred, the artist’s intention seems to have been to give evidence for Australia’s direct involvement in the war and apparent strategic importance for the enemy to convince men to enlist.

The overall composition of the poster follows a vertical structure, with the emotive appeal and ideologically foregrounded part of the message, the invasion threat to Australia, in the top part and the practical information, the instruction to sign up, in the bottom part. The top half, however, also incorporates a central composition. The “Centre” is the sign with the actual recruiting appeal, the “nucleus of information” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 206), while the newspaper cuttings around it are the “Margins”. In this composition the Margins are all almost identical and play a subservient role to the Centre, from which they “draw their value and meaning” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 206). In addition most of the cuttings serve as vectors which continue to lead the viewer’s eyes back to the poster’s most salient element, the sign about enlistment. While some of the newspaper headlines as well as the actual call for enlistment in the bottom half of the poster are written in bold script and capture the viewer’s attention more than other cuttings, to read the individual articles and the information below the illustration is time-
consuming. The poster would have hence only been suitable for display in waiting areas of public buildings or bus stops and possibly on public transport.

Conclusion

When comparing the portrayal of the German enemy of Australia’s WW1 and WW2 posters, the major and most obvious difference is the overall shift from a purely emotional to a more rational style. The WW2 posters use a large amount of text to get their message across and make an effort to convince the viewer with logic and arguments, appealing to his or her rationality. The reasons for the change of propaganda tactics in the portrayal of the German enemy were manifold. Australians had been confronted with the consequences of WW1: the severe decimation of a whole generation of young men and the difficulties of those returning from the carnage to reintegrate into society. Younger Australians, especially those in higher education, were introduced to pacifistic ideals in the inter-war years and most importantly, Australians had become more media-literate. After the revelation that many atrocity stories had been fabricated in WW1, people would have been suspicious of all overtly anti-German propaganda. Another reason for the more subdued portrayal of the German enemy was the advent of the Pacific War and the rise of the Japanese threat to Australia through which the Germans became second priority. The poster propagandists clearly identified the Japanese enemy as the real threat. Kay Saunders argues that the German enemy was “never totally dehumanised” in WW2, while the Japanese were portrayed as a sub-human people (1997: 81). It is also worthwhile to think about the White Australia Policy in this context, Australia’s racial world view at the time. A whole series of DOI posters produced during the war claimed that Australians had always despised the Japanese (figure 5).

Figure 5

Unknown artist and DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION
Loving guardians of goldfish c 1942-45
Poster National Archives of Australia: C934/P1. 154. Box 12
How much of an impact poster propaganda had on Australian attitudes towards the enemy in both wars, and more specifically, on enlistment and internment numbers of enemy aliens, is difficult to assess. This would have very much depended on the individual viewer. It seems safe to assume, however, that in particular Australia’s WWI posters with their “misleading imagery” (Stanley, 1983: 16) supported the climate of intense hatred towards the German enemy overseas and German residents in Australia. The theme of the German invasion threat was continued in the WW2 posters, albeit in a more subtle way. This can be considered evidence for Australia’s deeply rooted concern for its borders, which today still exists (Burke, 2001). Today even refugees from third world countries are presented by the media and certain politicians as a threat to Australian society (Slattery, 2003; Hage, 2003: 67) and Australia’s national security was still considered one of the major issues in Australia’s 2007 federal election campaigns. The posters of the two World Wars and their portrayal of the German enemy then not only give a valuable insight into changing poster propaganda practices but also into the dominant political, social and ideological discourses of Australia’s war societies, of which some still exist today: even in peace time.

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