Impact of WWI on the Homefront: Anti-German Policy of Australia

World War One had a vast impact on the whole world. When Australia joined the war effort at the beginning of August in 1914, most citizens of the young country saw and adventure that would be ‘over by Christmas’. However, by the end of the war, many soldiers had returned mentally damaged for life and the men enlisting were doing so out of a sense of duty to their fallen comrades. On the homefront, many lives changed including those of German-Australians and Australian women. While some positives came from the war and Australia managed to rebuild most things which were damaged by the war, there were some decisions made by the then government which caused hostility and devastation that lasted decades.

The anti-German policy of Australia was extremely dehumanising towards Germans, which they named ‘aliens’. Even if they had been born and raised in Australia, those with German heritage were severely suppressed by society. Germans were not allowed to vote, their churches and schools were closed, speaking German was mostly banned along with German music. On top of this, German food and towns were renamed and Germans were only allowed to sell items to other Germans. Crude imitations of Germans were even used (see Appendix A) in propaganda posters to encourage people to treat them as outcasts (Propaganda and the conscription debate, 2020). These restrictions and propaganda posters meant that Germans were not able to embrace their culture and heritage and this had a significant impact on them. They were stripped of their heritage and some even moved to socially isolated places in order to escape the brutality of Australian society. The restrictions placed upon Germans in Australia meant that they were severely disadvantaged not only socially but economically and politically as well (The German Australian Community, 2020). From an economic point of view, many acts such as the Enemy Contracts Annulment Act and a variety of Trading with the Enemy Acts, which were passed between 1914 and 1918 (Enemy contracts Annulment Act, 1915, Trading With the Enemy Act, 1914, 1916). These acts included restrictions which stated that Germans were not allowed to buy or sell land or manage a business. Suspected Germans were ordered to disclose holdings in shares, securities or bank accounts and business assets were transferred to a trustee (German experience in Australia during WW1 damaged road to multiculturalism, 2015). This meant that it became extremely difficult for German’s in Australia to earn an income and make a living for both themselves and their families. After these acts were passed, it became even harder for Germans to fit into society as many became financially unstable and were not able to purchase necessities such as food, water and clothing. Politically, German’s lost the ability to become politicians and as of 1917, they weren’t allowed to vote. This further separated them from the rest of society in Australia. Overall, Germans were practically outcast by society and many Germans had a hard time coming to terms with their forced loss of identity. Many things were damaged by the War and many were fixed easily enough, however, the impact of the discrimination Australian’s treated Germans with effectively destroyed the German community and this created a hostile environment fuelled by suspicion, ethnic hostility and sorrow which lasted for decades (International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 2020).

The role of women in society did not change all that significantly when Australia became involved in World War 1. Women were used in a variety of propaganda posters and an example of this can be seen in Appendix B where a woman and her child are pictured kissing in front of a

framed picture of the woman's husband with the words 'GOD BLESS DADDY… 45,000 AUSTRALIAN FATHERS ARE FIGHTING! WILL YOU HELP?' printed onto it. This promotes a sense of guilt in people as they would have felt guilty for not helping the war effort while others were. The woman and her child also have proud expressions and this would encourage male viewers of the poster to go to war so that they can make their own wife and children proud. Women were actively encouraged to volunteer for organisations which raised money for the war and to provided comforts for the soldiers, in doing so supporting the war effort from the homefront. These organisations include the Australian Red Cross, Citizens' War Chest, Voluntary Aid Detachments, Australian Comforts Fund and the Cheer-up Society (World War I and Australia, 2020). Volunteer work was sustained throughout the war and was mostly done by upper-class women. This can be seen in Appendix C where volunteered women are shown packing supplies for soldiers in 1916 (Centenary of ANZAC - Women and World War I, 2020). Due to the war, many women were able to work in jobs they hadn't been able to before. Lower-class women often did not have the luxury of volunteering for organisations and often their husbands stayed home as they were not able to earn enough money without a working husband. As for the families where husbands did leave for war, lower-class women often turned to fields and farms where they could earn a living for their families while their husbands were fighting. Some women did go to war; approximately 3,000 Australian women enlisted in the war to serve as nurses. Nurses cared for the wounded, wrote to their patients' families and were sometimes trained in other areas of medical care such as anesthetics. However, the war did not create any lasting changes when it came to the role of women in society. While the number of female employees did increase, the vast majority of women still worked in traditional female roles at the end of the war. By 1921, the number of women who were employed and paid actually declined when compared to the statistics from 1911 (Roles of Australian women in World War I, 2020). It was not until World War Two that many women actually took on service jobs and took up occupations that had previously been exclusively for men.

Then World War One had a significant impact upon the whole world, including the then new country; Australia. Despite bringing about change across the globe, not all that many positives came from the war, especially at the homefront in Australia. German-Australians were greatly discriminated against by Australians and decisions and acts made by the government have taken decades to repair. Women's lives were impacted by the war, though perhaps not as much as is often assumed. Real change to women's lives came about in World War Two rather than World War One. In spite of this, the war brought most of Australia together as a nation and that Australian spirit still holds strong today and is embraced by all races even those done wrong by past decisions.

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