

The Simpson Prize 2023

How significant was Australia's contribution to the Allied military victory on the Western Front in 1918?

The legend of the ANZACs is an indelible part of Australia's history and culture, often seen as the defining point of our nation. But many sources neglect to mention the contribution that Australia made to the war. Throughout the course of World War One, over 324,000 members of the Australian Imperial force served in the war as part of the Allied forces (Curtis, 2014). Australian popular history, as well as many primary and secondary sources, indicate that Australia's contribution to this victory was immense. Other sources suggest that Australia's support was insignificant in ensuring victory. These valid but conflicting perspectives can be used to debate the significance of Australia's contributions. Overall, it can be seen that Australia's contributions were significant when taking into account the size of her army. The presence of Australian support directly influenced success in several battles. However, Australia's army was not large enough to make an appreciable impact on the war as a whole, and thus Australia's contribution seems insignificant when taken in context.

Despite its small size, it can be argued that Australia made a significant contribution to the Allied military victory on the Western Front in 1918. Australian troops were involved in several key victories during their involvement in World War One. During the German advance on the Western front, over 29 days, Australian troops captured and protected "no less than 116 towns and villages" (Monash, 1920). A memorial plaque at Amiens Cathedral describes the Australians who "participated in the victorious defence of Amiens" (Amiens Cathedral, 1920). The capture and release of towns was a key factor in the Allied victory and the presence of Australian support was likely seen as momentous by the people whose homes and lives were saved in this battle. The Australian troops were also a highly effective fighting force. Despite making up just 9 ½% of the British army, Australian troops captured 23% of prisoners, 23 ½% of guns and 21 ½% of the territory that was captured by the British army (Monash, 1920). The first time that all 5 Australian divisions fought together, the Battle of Amiens, "was so overwhelming" that the German Chief of Staff called it the "black day of the German army" as a result of the devastation caused by the Australian troops (DVA, 2022). Australia thus had a significant role in many operations and was successful at achieving many of its aims.

Long before the fighting ever reached the Western Front, Australians were making key contributions to the war. The first significant contribution to the war made by Australia was in late 1914 when the HMAS Sydney destroyed the SMS Emden, a German raider (AWM, 2021). They continued to perform upon reaching the Western front. On 4 July 1918, Australians fought in the battle of Hamel, reaching "the peak of their fighting performance". From August, they participated in "a series of decisive advances" (AWM, 2021). Australia also provided essential moral and physical support to the rest of the British army. In early 1918, when Germany launched its last major offensive and split the British and French

armies, “it was largely the Australians that plugged the gap and held the line” (Abbot, 2014). Had Australia not been able to step in, Germany may have achieved victory in this battle, and the Allies may not have achieved victory when they did. Australian forces were also willing to design new strategies to achieve their aims. An Australian-led attack that captured Hamel was based on principles of secrecy, deception and the collaboration of different factions. This battle lasted less than 2 hours, with less than 1000 men lost (Pope, 2021). The successful battle of Amiens, which was considered by Germany to be the beginning of the end, was based on these tactics. Australia’s contributions to the planning of military offences were vital in ensuring that these crucial battles were won by the Allies.

Australia’s contribution to the Allies’ military victory must nevertheless be put into perspective against the contributions of other nations. “Australia’s military forces were never large enough to influence the outcome of the war by themselves”, making up just 4.8% of Commonwealth troops (Crawley, 2015). The size of Australia’s army rendered them insignificant in comparison to other countries, to the extent that many recollections of the war fail to mention Australian troops when recounting the Allies’ endeavours. Australia certainly did not directly contribute much to the end of the war, as troops were not fighting in the final months. Australian troops were relieved in early October and did not re-enter the fighting before the end of the war a month later (AWM, 2021). Australians also suffered significant losses on the battlefields without seeing much success. The Gallipoli campaign, which many Australians consider to be our greatest contribution to the war, ended in defeat. Many resources were wasted on failed campaigns such as this. Australia’s courage at the battle of Somme is often applauded, but it is often overlooked that in 6 weeks, more than 23,000 Australian troops were killed, with “almost as many dead and wounded as the force had suffered in the 8 months on Gallipoli” (DVA, 2022). Despite this sacrifice, few gains were made during this campaign. Australia did send almost 300,000 troops to the Western Front, but apart from bolstering infantry numbers, Australia contributed very little to the war. Few Australians were in positions of leadership and the country had no say over their involvement in the war. Australian military leaders had very little say in military tactics or operations, higher decision making or even in the deployment of Australian troops. This means that their contribution had little relevance to the eventual military victory that was achieved on the Western Front in 1918. Despite the pervasive Australian pride in our soldiers, many Australian troops considered themselves to be a part of the Commonwealth or British war effort, rather than the Australian army. Crawley (2015) states that “The AIF and the RAN were both Australian and British”. Most Australian troops believed that it was their contributions to the British military effort that was significant. No single army, particularly not one the size of Australia, was able to win the war alone. Instead, it was the “many parts, acting in conjunction ... that was ultimately victorious over Germany in 1918” (Crawley, 2015). As a small military, Australia was never able to make a significant difference to the outcome of the war, regardless of its efficiency.

If an analysis of Australian literature and popular culture regarding World War One were to be conducted, it would likely conclude that Australians had a significant impact on the war. But many of these claims are false or exaggerated, and many works “fail to place their battles

within a broader context of who was fighting on Australia's left and right" (Crawley, 2015). While there is no doubt that the courage and sacrifice shown by many Australian troops were exemplary, it must be noted that "it is difficult to judge conclusively" how significant Australia's contribution to the war was (Beaumont, 2013). The war was a multinational effort, and the contributions of individual armies can hardly be singled out when it was the combined Allied forces, consisting of troops from around the world, that was eventually successful. To single out one army as having made a significant contribution "is to ignore the immense complexity and scale on which this war was fought" (Beaumont, 2013). Australia's contributions were significant for an army of her size. There is no doubt that "by 1918 Australian soldiers were both professional and adept at fighting and killing" (Crawley, 2015). But the size of the Australian population and Australia's lack of agency or participation in decision-making prevented Australia from ever making a significant contribution when her efforts are placed in context. While it can be argued that many of Australia's allies fail to recognise the significance of her role, it is clear that Australian ideals of World War One do not reflect the significance of Australia's contribution on a global scale.

The significance of one country's contribution to a combined military victory is impossible to objectively discern (Beaumont, 2013). Australia's contribution was no doubt significant to Australia in the making of the nation, and it was of immense importance to the people that were directly impacted by exposure to the Australian Imperial Force. The significance of Australia in the overall military victory is less marked. The size of Australia's army prevented it from being exceptional in its contributions to victory (Crawley, 2015). It can be argued that no one country had a significant impact on the war, but that it was the combined strength of the Allies that resulted in a military victory on the Western Front in 1918.

Word count: 1415

Bibliography

Abbott, T 2014, *Anzac Day 2014: National Ceremony commemorative address* | *Australian War Memorial*, Awm.gov.au, viewed 23 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/speeches/commemorative-address-2014-anzac-day-national-ceremony>>.

Beaumont, J 2013, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 517–518.

Crawley, R 2015, 'Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum: Contextualising Australia's Military Effort During the First World War', *Australian Historical Studies*, pp. 79, 64–80.

DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) 2022, *Australians on the Somme 1916 to 1917*, Anzac Portal, viewed 17 October 2022, <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/western-front/somme-offensive>>.

DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) 2021, *Australians on the Western Front 1916 to 1918*, Anzac Portal, viewed 17 October 2022, <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/western-front>>.

DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) 2019, *Hundred Days 8 August to 11 November 1918*, Anzac Portal, viewed 17 October 2022, <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/western-front/hundred-days>>.

DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) 2021, *World War I and Australia 1914 to 1918*, Anzac Portal, viewed 16 October 2022, <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1>>.

Extract by Krumeich, G 2014, Translated from 'Der Erste Welt Krieg: In 100 Objekten (The First World War: In 100 objects)', *Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin*, p. 18.

First World War 1914–18 | *Australian War Memorial* 2021, Awm.gov.au, viewed 16 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>>.

The Government of the Commonwealth of Australia 1920, *Commemoration of the Australian Soldiers of the Battle of Amiens, Memorial Plaque, Amiens Cathedral, France*

Monash, J 1920, 'RESULTS', in *The Australian Victories in France, 1918*, Hutchinson & co, London.

Pope, C 2020, *Turning Retreat into Victory: How Did the Allies Win the Western Front in 1918?*, History Hit, History Hit, viewed 17 October 2022, <<https://www.historyhit.com/defeat-to-victory-western-front-1918/>>.

Stephens, A 2014, 'We didn't choose to join WWI - nothing has changed - ABC News', *ABC News*, 4 August, viewed 16 October 2022, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-04/stephens-we-didnt-choose-to-join-wwi-and-nothing-has-changed/5628878>>.

'To the last man'—Australia's entry to war in 1914 2014, Aph.gov.au, viewed 16 October 2022, <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/AustToWar1914>.

Wilde, R 2018, *The Causes and War Aims of World War One*, ThoughtCo, viewed 17 October 2022, <<https://www.thoughtco.com/causes-war-aims-world-war-one-1222048>>.

World War 1 2022, Wa.gov.au, viewed 16 October 2022, <https://webarchive.slwa.wa.gov.au/federation/fed/040_wwar.htm>.