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‘Know your enemy: German war aims and Australian involvement in the Great War’, *Honest History*, 10 March 2017

Any discussion about the origins and significance of Anzac commemoration will be baseless if it fails to take account of the reasons for Australasian involvement in the Great War against imperial Germany and her allies. Why? The answer is twofold.

First, had the British government decided not to resist German aggression and stood aside, it would have acquiesced in Germany’s effective domination of Europe and been reduced to the status of a mere client state. A further consequence would have been that all the French and Belgian overseas territories would have been forfeited to Germany. In addition, the Dutch East Indies would have been placed at the disposal of the German navy and so the Kaiser’s Germany would have established a world-wide hegemony, having secured dominance then of not only the Atlantic but also of the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Secondly, this would have meant that the Pacific dominions and dependencies of Britain as well as those on the Indian Ocean rim would have been directly subjected to pressure from German naval forces, namely the East Asian Squadron, and required to submit to any demands the Germans cared to make. So, in August 1914 the imperial cabinet in London was faced with a simple choice. One would either have to choose to let the Kaiser’s army implement its Schlieffen Plan, in short to occupy Europe from the Channel coast in the West to the Ural Mountains in the East – or one could stand up and fight them like men. Given the temperament of the British people it is not surprising that they chose to fight.

It is, therefore, quite absurd to assert that either the British or Australian governments were ‘hell-bent’ on fighting the Germans just out of lust for battle, that is, to get sacrificially involved in a conflict that seemed to have had nothing to do with the Pacific dominions. Those historians who have suggested this have failed to assess the implications of German war aims or of the political culture that had given rise to them.¹ Indeed, if one were to concede that the Pacific dominions and dependencies of Britain would be directly affected by the outcome of an Anglo-German conflict and that they themselves had been objects of German expansionist ambitions, then it could not be argued that the dominions should not have been involved.

The corollary to this is that the imperial connection had been of central significance to the defence and future existence of all overseas dependencies of Britain. But to concede this reality would undermine the case upon which current arguments for an Australian republic are built. Did the antipodean colonies have a republican destiny which was evident from the middle of the 19th century at the latest and were they already launched on that trajectory? The imperial connection at that time, it is argued, actually hindered this historic development. But when one stands back and sees the unfolding of Australian history in its global context republicanism appears as a devoutly wished-for consummation of dreams of much more recent vintage.

Such views can, of course, only be expressed if the imperialistic aims of other Powers such as Germany and Japan are not taken into account. And that is why there is a debate among those historians on the one hand who are aware of German war aims and those on the other who bridle against taking cognisance of them. There is

absolutely no excuse for not doing so because there are numerous studies available in English as well as German that provide this information.

For example, the pioneering studies of Fritz Fischer have all been translated, as well as those of John Röhl, Volker Berghahn, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, HW Koch, Annika Mombauer and many others. Anglo-American scholars such as Paul M. Kennedy and more recently John Horn and Alan Kramer in Dublin as well as Cornell-based Isabel Hull have immensely extended our knowledge of both imperial German war aims as well as war crimes. The evidence for German ‘peculiarity’ in this regard is overwhelming and its roots are to be sought deep in the cultural history of Prusso-German militarism.

This paper will examine the way in which German political will during the Bismarckian-Wilhelmine era was formed as an essential exercise in comprehending the nature of the enemy who believed that almighty God had chosen Prussia-Germany to impose her *Kultur* on the entire world. If you have God on your side – *Gott mit uns* – then your ambitions will certainly be realised.

It is no doubt something of a challenge for contemporary historians to find themselves forced to come to grips with issues of international relations that were understood by our predecessors in frankly religious or theological terms. Think Luther, Hegel, von Ranke and von Treitschke, for example. The influence of these towering figures of German religious, political and intellectual history in shaping Prusso-German political will may not be underestimated.

In fact, German intellectual leaders had assumed that their role was to explain exactly why the Germans were so superior and hence different from their enemies. That was part of their duty towards the nation; namely to think out in advance what future policy should be, *die Politik im voraus denken*. They perceived themselves as the ‘heralds of policy’. In practice this meant that the parameters of future national policy were crystallised first in the mind of the nation’s foremost scholars. It was their vocation to adumbrate the shape of Prusso-Germany’s role in the real world. This led them to make such historically ponderous pronouncements that with the German decision for war of 2 August 1914, the ‘Ideas of 1914’ had blotted out the so-called ‘Ideas of 1789’. ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’, as the famous slogan of the French Revolution formulated, it had been superseded by the Prusso-German idea of *Kultur*.

What indeed were the Ideas of 1914? They were the polar opposite of those of 1789 that had established the flabby doctrine of the sovereignty of the people and what flowed from that. Instead, the new spirit of 1914 upheld the sovereignty of the military monarch, of order and discipline, duty and self-sacrifice for the nation.

These were the essentially masculine virtues as distinct from the effeminacy of the Ideas of 1789. In short, the Ideas of 1914 promoted the strength and superiority of Prussianism. German poets, preachers and authors outdid themselves in their patriotic exuberance.² That, of course, was a phenomenon evident among all nations at war. In the case of Prussia-Germany, however, there are extensive studies that document the remarkable extravagance of German patriotism that by far exceeded the similar production of all other belligerents.

Striking, in particular, was the war theology that developed in Germany. According to this, God is not a God of peace who only takes up his sword to defend the weak but really a God of war who had chosen Prussia-Germany to execute His will for all

human kind, in short to be the “Hammer of God” forging the disparate nations of the earth to fit them into the Teutonic mould.³

This may, of course, be explained psychologically by comprehending the anxiety of a people who perceived themselves to be geographically landlocked between the barbarians of the Slavic East and the pretentious and superficial civilisations of the West, as Thomas Mann memorably formulated it.⁴ The reality was, though, that their determination to survive grew into a ruthless lust for conquest. This was rationalised by such arguments as that they were called by destiny or ‘the God of Battles’ to fulfil their vocation on earth in a *furor teutonicus*.

Alternative peaceful solutions did not recommend themselves to the Wilhelmine power elite. Consequently, it is essential to understand why the Prusso-German power elite chose the course they did. They appeared to be convinced that almighty God had planned a future for the world to be dominated by their unique and superior *Kultur*, that is, a civilisation based on the power and values of the Prusso-German military elite. And their values were shared by the vast majority of the German ruling classes.

The Germans themselves had not really begun to reflect critically on all this until after the defeat of 1945. Numerous professors at West German universities, mindful of their long established role as ‘mentors of the nation’, turned their attention to consider how and why the God of history had led the nation into the abyss. In doing this, liberal-minded German professors post World War II proved to have been harrowingly honest teachers, acutely aware of their role as historical-political pedagogues. They appreciated the deleterious pedagogic impact of their predecessors in office who had inculcated a politically dangerous ideology into their students, namely that Prussia-Germany was destined by the God of history to ‘lead the world to glorious times’.

One has to appreciate that the *Kaiserreich* was a realm ruled over by an autocratic emperor who was, as Professor John Röhl has shown in his masterly biography, incurably vain and wrong-headed. Indeed, Wilhelm II was in fact the most powerful individual ruler in the entire world, certainly unrestrained by constitutional provisions to the extent that his maternal grandmother, Victoria, and her successors were in Britain. And he was surrounded by chancellors, ministers and service chiefs who inhabited a world of intrigue and political manoeuvring dedicated to maintaining the existing Bismarckian political order. They were the core of the power elite who resisted with all their being the possibility of any kind of social change.

In retrospect, all this appears quite bizarre when one recalls that Germany had produced the largest and best organised social democratic labour movement, one that was remarkable in that it was not at all committed to revolution, as the bourgeoisie had feared, but rather would have preferred a genuine parliamentary democracy and accepted a liberalised monarchy, as in England. Of course, some German-educated liberals actually understood this, but the regime was not interested in social developments such as had occurred in Britain as illustrated by such innovative legislation that was enacted under the Liberal government of Asquith and Lloyd George in 1911, namely the *Parliament Act 1911*.

Nothing could have demonstrated the differences in constitutional thinking between the rival cousins better than this act. Effectively, the British bourgeoisie, for

ideological reasons deprived the peers of the realm of all vestiges of real political power. Seen in retrospect it was like a bloodless revolution. But such a thing would have been unthinkable in Germany, as a study of politics during the Wilhelmine era confirms. Constitutional change such as demanded by the Social Democrats and genuine liberals was emphatically rejected. Parliamentary democracy for the Wilhelmine power elite was simply not a discussable alternative.

No less a personage as Thomas Mann in 1918 had testified as much in his famous *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*. But soon after the German defeat in 1920 Mann confessed to having had second thoughts about German military-political culture, especially its anti-Semitism, and so it comes as no surprise that he and his German-Jewish wife fled their homeland after the rise of the Nazi movement, first moving to Switzerland and then to the United States.⁵ In fact, the advent of the Third Reich led many German intellectuals to emigrate in protest against the barbarism of the regime and its persecution of citizens of Jewish extraction.

German ‘peculiarity’ did not manifest itself first with the Hitler movement, of course, and it is not just explained by the fact of the Reich’s continental location, sandwiched between Slavdom in the East and the European powers of the West. In short, there arose in 19th century Germany a distinct cultural nationalism that grew in influence since the time Goethe’s death (1832), an awareness that became politicised in the era between the failed 1848 revolutions and the movement that led to the Prussianisation of the Reich under Otto von Bismarck in 1871.

As the English born and trained historian Paul Kennedy had shown in his magisterial study, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (1984) Prussia had calculated that both German foreign and domestic policy would always be determined by the need to avoid at all costs following in Britain’s wake. That meant in principle having no alliances with Britain because that would be sure to give encouragement to German liberals and social democrats to intensify their demands for real parliamentary reforms, such as making the government responsible to the Reichstag, the federal legislative assembly based as it then was on adult male suffrage. This would have been a step towards genuine liberalism, a move which the conservative elite most devoutly wished to avoid.

In addition, a British alliance would have thwarted the Kaiser’s dream of building a first class navy to challenge Britain’s. What need would the land-locked Continental Power of Prussia-Germany have for a ‘blue water’ navy if they were aligned to the world’s greatest sea power? But, no, the Kaiser and his Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz were determined to proceed with their extravagant plans to build a battle fleet which the Reich in reality could ill-afford.⁶ They called it their ‘Risk Fleet’, by which they meant to convey the idea that it would be so formidable that any navy, especially the Royal Navy, would be risking its existence to engage with it.

The other sense of risk, suggesting that the entire enterprise was a very risky business for Germany’s very existence, did not seem to occur to its foolhardy advocates. But some German critics of naval expenditure referred behind the Kaiser’s back to the *Luxusflotte, luxury fleet*. Indeed, Germany’s ‘dreams and delusions’ (Fritz Stern) of future world political pre-eminence were so intoxicating that only a few personages among the power-elite could see that *Weltpolitik* was fraught with danger.

The wary ones included experienced diplomats such as Wilhelm Solf (1862-1936), Count Peter Wolf von Metternich (1853-1934) and Prince Karl Max von Lichnowsky

(1860-1928). They tried in vain to promote the idea of cooperation with Britain but they did not have the ear of the Kaiser or any of the hawks in industry, commerce or the armed forces.⁷ Indeed, the policy makers in Berlin seemed to suffer from what post-1945 German historians such as Fritz Fischer and Imanuel Geiss called *Konzeptionslosigkeit*, meaning a total inability to conceive of alternative solutions.

One may put this inability down to a propensity to place one's faith in a seemingly realisable wish-dream. In this case the German wish-dream was that of world domination, an idea that emerged out of the afore-mentioned Hegelian-Neo-Rankean philosophy of history. This infused the German bourgeoisie and aristocracy in general with the belief that the way in which world events were unfolding (historism) indicated beyond all human doubt that Prusso-Germany was functioning in the vanguard of human history and had a glorious destiny to fulfil under the providence of almighty God. There exists an extensive literature on this issue in which the German 'mind' is seen to have developed in the opposite direction from that of the liberal West.⁸

If one is tempted to think that the political implications of German historism are really quite implausible one has only to recall that Soviet Russian foreign policy which threatened the world with dire consequences over many decades was underpinned by the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism that was undeniably very persuasive to many people. This was not only a doctrine of totalitarianism but actually a variant of historism. Its advocates were apparently convinced that they were in possession of an ideology that was the key to understanding world history.

Indeed the historism of imperial German philosophers and historians was the right-wing precursor of the left-wing historism of Marxism-Leninism. Of course, in the era prior to 1914 very few scholars in the more pragmatic West were familiar with this phenomenon. That is why one should not overlook the 1907 Eyre Crowe Memorandum. This was the product of a remarkable English civil servant in the Foreign Office who was the son of an English consular official Joseph Archer Crowe (1825-1896) and his German wife. Their son, Eyre Crowe, was born in Leipzig in 1864 (died 1925) and had been educated in Germany until he was 18-years-old. He was then sent to Eton where he had virtually to learn English from scratch. When he became an English civil servant he enjoyed the unique privilege of being genuinely bicultural. His assessment of the trends in German foreign policy at that time was prescient. Crowe understood the peculiarity of German thinking better than most of his colleagues and was perfectly right in his observation that Germany would inevitably resort to war in order to fulfil her presumed destiny.⁹

In short, Eyre Crowe identified or at least confirmed the volatile peculiarity of his German cousins. Certainly, the ruling elite had been so acculturated in Hegelianism and Neo-Rankeanism that they were unable to assess the world other than through the lens fashioned and polished with such apparent expertise by their illustrious mentors. And their reading of Prusso-German and world history had convinced the vast majority of the *Bildungsbürgertum* that by 1914 the Fatherland had arrived at a threshold, indeed, a point in history when momentous, apocalyptic world-political decisions had to be made that demanded the exertion of political will on an unprecedented scale.

In short, national confidence would be tested from the upper echelons of the power elite, extending through to the professoriate of the universities, to the vast majority of Protestant pastors and further to the level of students at Germany's famed secondary

schools (*Gymnasien*) as well as to established and widely read authors and journalists. Indeed, with the outbreak of war in August 1914, patriotic enthusiasm had gripped the overwhelming majority of the population and this was expressed in an unprecedented output of essays, and poetry from the pens of predominantly *Bildungsbürger*.¹⁰ This literature welcomed the war as the world-historical breakthrough of the German spirit which would now go on to fulfil its God-planned destiny.

If there were any doubts expressed that Prussia-Germany was riding a crest of a wave that might crash with disastrous results they were disposed of by arguing that the nation had no other choice but to pursue this great course and confront the apocalypse. But the predominant sentiment was that the triumph of the German cause which was identical with the will of God, namely the conversion of the world through the imposition of German *Kultur*, would change everything for the better, not only for the nations of the earth but also at the same time bring about the spiritual elevation of all Germans, regardless of class to higher levels of achievement in both the material world as well as in the world of the mind. It was an idea that has an eerie similarity to that of Karl Marx who predicted that when the proletariat had triumphed in the class struggle a new species of being would inevitably emerge.

But for right-wing Germans, as the research by such scholars as Klaus Vondung and Karl Hammer among others has shown, the 'bourgeois' mind had been conditioned to think 'apocalyptically', that is, in terms of a history moving towards an apocalyptic event, after which under providence a new world would emerge in which the German spirit was paramount. As Klaus Vondung observed:

The German apocalypse of 1914 was a final grand attempt by the mentally insecure *Bildungsbürgertum* to realise the quintessence of its experiences and hopes in which the vision of the redemption of the world by means of the German spirit included the reconstruction of the representatives of this spirit, even if it was not directly expressed.¹¹

With the Great War the *Bildungsbürgertum* wanted to turn the page of history and produce the 'revolution of the spirit' that Fichte had already anticipated before 1815. So educated Germans from Fichte, to Hegel, to von Ranke and finally the neo-Rankeans, perceived themselves to be acting in the service of the 'world spirit', to redeem the world and in taking over the political leadership infuse it with a new ethical standard for humanity. *Aus dem spirituellen Sendungsanspruch der Gebildeten folgte in letzter Konsequenz ein gesellschaftspolitischer Führungsanspruch*, meaning, 'The spiritually derived claim to spiritual-intellectual leadership led logically to a claim to social-political leadership in the world'. *Am deutschen Wesen mag die Welt genesen*. (Emmanuel Geibel) meaning roughly, 'By the German *spirit* the world shall be made whole', was a phrase often used out of context to re-enforce the idea that the German 'mind' cultivated world-political ambitions. The translation of *Wesen* is usually 'being' or 'essence' but here most English writers prefer "spirit" as the closest word in this particular context.

The fact is that many German writers advanced the view that all German institutions were infused by or products of a unique home grown 'spirit' that made them distinct from all others. For example, the Prusso-German army was celebrated as the emanation of the Teutonic spirit and consequently the victory of the German army would be a victory for the German spirit. A military failure of German arms could never be realistically envisaged.

If by any chance such a failure did happen it would be the equivalent of a world-political catastrophe and signify the collapse of human history, indeed the very end of the world. Of course, that did not happen in 1918 but many Germans perceived it in this way. As Klaus Vondung has observed, the loss of the war had a cathartic effect on only a few; most were blinded in their ability to comprehend the painful reality which had contradicted everything that the representatives of the German spirit had earnestly yearned for.

But the apocalypse of the German spirit was to unleash an even more terrible sequel. The phoenix that arose from the ashes of Versailles resembled more the well-known German eagle because the German ‘spirit’ had been seduced by a ‘pied piper’, not of Hamelin, and certainly not a mythical one, but namely of Munich in the person of Adolf Hitler, later nicknamed behind his back by his generals as ‘the Bohemian corporal’.

The enigma of Hitler’s success has fascinated numerous historians and psychologists. It would be incorrect to suggest that Hitler miraculously embodied the German ‘spirit’, as previously understood by the educated bourgeoisie and aristocracy, because he demanded something completely new, namely *total subservience to his person*.

This was the irreducible kernel of the so-called National Socialist Revolution. Hitler had demanded in short that every Aryan German submit his or her will to him personally, to abandon all individual initiative and render unconditional obedience to him as leader. This was the essence of the *Führer* principle. To that extent National Socialism was a new form of authoritarianism, different from Wilhelminism.

However, there were undeniable strands of continuity between the pre-1918 era and that which dawned with Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933. These included particularly anti-Semitism, militarism, the cult of unquestioning obedience to authority, an abiding disdain, bordering on hatred, for parliamentary democracy and liberal values, and, of course, imperialism on a grandiose scale. Without doubt Bismarckian-Wilhelmine Germany was indeed the matrix of the rogue state of Adolf Hitler.¹²

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1 Some of these issues are discussed in my previous article: ‘[The fallacy of Presentism in Australian history](#)’, *Honest History*, 23 August 2016.

² Klaus Vondung, ed., *Das Wilhelminische Bildungsbürgertum: Zur Sozialgeschichte seiner Ideen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 153-171. ditto, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (München: DTV, 1988).

³ Karl Hammer, *Deutsche Kriegstheologie* (Frankfurt am Main DTV, 1971); 147-158 *passim*.

⁴ Thomas Mann, *Die Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, (Frankfurt am Main : Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993)

⁵ Inge & Walter Jens, *Frau Thomas Mann: das Leben der Katharine Pringsheim* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2005), 159-266, *passim*.

⁶ Both the Kaiser and von Tirpitz had been greatly impressed by the American naval officer, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan’s famous book, *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (1890) and ordered that a copy be placed in the library of every German naval vessel for the edification of the officers. Enthusiasm, however, for what critics called the *Luxusflotte* was less than warm among leading army personnel for whom the projected fleet was a childish enterprise squandering resources that should have been more sensibly devoted to strengthening the army. See Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War* (1991).

⁷ Lichnowsky actually published a pamphlet in 1916 in which he accused Germany of deliberately provoking the July-August crisis that led to the Great War. See John Röhl, *Zwei deutsche Fürsten zur Kriegschuldfrage: Lichnowsky und Eulenburg und der Ausbruch des 1. Weltkriegs* (Düsseldorf Droste, 1971), 39-64. This is available in English translation.

⁸ In addition to the above mentioned works of Klaus Vondung see Friedrich Lenger, *Werner Sombart, 1863-1941 Eine Biographie* (München:C.H. Beck, 1994).

⁹ See Jeffrey S. Dunn, *The Crowe Memorandum: Sir Eyre Crowe and the Foreign Office Perceptions of Germany 1918-1925* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2013).

¹⁰ Thomas Hollweck, "Durchbruch zur Welt: Thomas Mann" in *Das wilhelminische Bildungsbürgertum* edited by Klaus Vondung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976):106-118, *passim*. See also the chapter therein by Klaus Vondung, "Deutsche Apokalypse 1914" 153-171, *passim*.

¹¹ Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland*, 205.

¹² Woodruff D. Smith, *The Ideological Roots of Nazi Imperialism* (New York/Oxford: OUP, 1986), 232-258, *passim*.