

'For you the war is over'

Australian POWs in Italy and the move to greater independence in Australian foreign policy 1939-1947



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Prisoners of War and Politics

Often called our 'forgotten soldiers', Australian soldiers were held in captivity in Europe, many had been in prison camps in Italy and other parts of Europe since early 1941.

But what was the Australian government doing for these men? The issue of POWs was complex, and the management of POWs was not just a military but also political and diplomatic.

The main fear when dealing with POWs was the tit-for-tat reprisals, meaning management policy and treatment of these soldiers needed to follow international law.

The problem Australia had in the early stages of the war was it was so far away from the theatre of war and had to rely on the United Kingdom to do what was in the best interests for Australia's prisoners – this would not always be the best option.



Research Aims

This thesis aims to investigate the political issues between Australia and Britain regarding POW policy, which resulted in Australia's push for greater independence in foreign policy from Britain and a new international diplomatic role.

Politically this was an important period in Australian history; Australia's relationship started to change with Britain and the United States. By examining evolving policy and practice relating to POWs both within Australia and Europe – particularly Italy – this research will enable an in-depth understanding of changes to Australia's foreign policy.



Problem

A foreign policy problem for states at war is how to protect their POWs, held by belligerent powers with which no direct international relations were maintained.

The challenge was to ensure decent treatment of POWs despite heightened risk to their well-being. The question that needs to be explained is how Australian political and military authorities dealt with this challenge, and to what extent did they seek to protect specifically Australians against wider Allied interests?

The Second World War would test Australia's resolve considering the limited development it had achieved in diplomatic relations and independent policy in the years since Federation.

To attain any form of independence, particularly during the war, the Australian government needed to decide if it would continue to follow Britain or do what was in the best interest of Australia's fighting forces and POWs.



Main prisoner-of-war camps in which Australians were held



References

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