

Soldiers' Words

A comparative study of Australians' letters and diaries
from the Boer and Vietnam Wars in the context of 20th
century theories of soldiering.

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Abstract

Despite the participation of Australian soldiers in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) and the Vietnam War (1962-1973), the number of studies focusing on the outlook of these men is considerably limited. Although examinations do exist which focus on the personal records written by soldiers on the battlefield, these are neither sufficiently comprehensive nor analytical. As a result, the historical representation of Australian fighting men in these wars is quite simplistic, necessitating further concentration on their overall outlook towards the wars in which they were fighting.

This thesis addresses that gap by systematically investigating the publicly archived letters and diaries written by Australian soldiers while fighting in South Africa and Vietnam. Despite clear parallels between these two wars, related to reasons for Australian involvement and opposition, their colonial or neo-colonial status, as well as the guerrilla nature of warfare, these wars were fought in two very dissimilar times. Thus, soldiers' archived personal records have been examined alongside 20th century scholarly opinion on soldiering, which are used as benchmarks to help determine the similarities and differences in outlook between soldiers fighting in two roughly comparable wars in two distinct periods in Australian history. This has been done while taking into account opinion and events in Australia, to determine the effect of the home front on the attitudes and behaviour of a selected sample of

soldiers fighting in these wars. The decision has been made to concentrate on records of soldiers while they were still stationed at the front, rather than also incorporate retrospective accounts from interviews or post-war reminiscences. Thus, this study aims to project a relatively unadulterated representation of a selected sample of soldiers' viewpoints while on the war front.

The resultant findings demonstrate the strength of the links between the civilians and those examined on the battlefronts during these wars. In addition, the differences in soldiers' personal expressions from the two wars show that although, generally speaking, attitudes towards war, particularly in Western countries, underwent a profound shift between the early 20th century and the 1960s, this shift was not entirely reflected in the words of these men. The selected men fighting in the Boer War - Australia's first major experience of conventional military combat – more often openly expressed dissatisfaction with the war, despite the apparent popularity of the war at home, and the risk of their being branded 'disloyal' to the British Empire. On the other hand, the sample of Australians fighting in Vietnam were often less likely to dwell on their opinion of the war itself, particularly to express disapproval, although it had far less support from Australian civilians. Despite this, those in Vietnam – fighting in a time of increased knowledge about the psychological effects of combat – were more likely to express opinion on matters such as factors influencing morale and fear, as well as aspects of the military structure itself, than those fighting in the Boer War. This does not necessarily mean that these men approved of their position in Vietnam, or of the war itself. The fact that the living conditions of soldiers had been improved significantly by militaries

after the devastating experiences of the world wars helps explain the increased reticence of these soldiers when expressing dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War. However, it is clear that home front-based factors such as self-censorship and self-defence – more valid in an unpopular war – affected their personal expressions from the battlefield more than those by the examined Boer War soldiers.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgment, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

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