

The Forgotten War

Anarchist Affinity

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Contents

Windradyne	3
Yagan	3
Jandamarra	4
Further Reading and Resources:	4

The First World War is the war the Australian ruling class wants us to remember. They are spending hundreds of millions over the next two years making sure we never forget. It's the war they would have us believe created Australia. And Australia was created in a war. But it was another war. A war our rulers would rather pretend never occurred.

Australia began with an invasion. In 1788 nearly eight hundred convicted criminals and nearly four hundred military personnel landed in Sydney. They began construction of an advance base of operations, and kicked off a war of conquest that would span 140 years.

When the invasion commenced there were at approximately 750,000 people living in 350 distinct nations on the Australian landmass. By 1900, only 93,200 first Australians survived. At least twenty thousand Aboriginal people were killed or murdered in untold battles and massacres from Hobart to the Kimberley. Approximately two and half thousand white invaders were killed as Aboriginal people resisted extermination.

The heroes of Aboriginal armed resistance are not remembered. The Australian War Memorial refuses to acknowledge their struggle as a "war". In legislation, the Australian War Memorial is established to commemorate "wars and war-like operations in which Australians have been on active service" which includes "any military force of the ground raised in Australia". Presumably, then, the following people do not exist.

Windradyne

In January 1824 the Wirudjuri people under the leadership of Windradyne embarked on an ambitious guerrilla war to roll back the expanding white settlement of Bathurst. Over eleven months the Wirudjuri burnt out stations, dispersed sheep and cattle and killed settlers. By August the Sydney Gazette stated that the Wirudjuri had exposed "the strength and wealth of the Colony... to destruction". New South Wales Governor Thomas Brisbane declared martial law in the Bathurst area, regular soldiers were dispatched from Sydney, and by December a series of massacres had claimed the lives of over one thousand Wirudjuri men, women and children.

Yagan

In 1829 white invaders established a colony at Swan River in what is now Western Australia. Noongar people first attempted to isolate and avoid these settlers, but a series of murders by white settlers in December 1831 eventually led to an armed response by Noongar warriors. Initially warriors under the leadership of Yagan and Midgegooroo responded to the depredations with acts of traditional retribution (spearing), however as white violence escalated Yagan in particular pursued an armed campaign against the settlement. Crops and buildings were burned, livestock was scattered, and an ambitious series of robberies was conducted. Yagan's interactions with white settlers were not always hostile, and he was eventually killed by two shepherds he had befriended. They shot him, and cut off his head to claim a reward offered by the colonial government. Yagan's head was pickled and taken to England to be publically displayed.

Jandamarra

By 1890 white settlers were colonising the Kimberley region. Jundamurra was a Bunuba man employed as a tracker in the service of the white Police. In 1894 he was deployed against his own people. Jundamurra rebelled. He killed liberated prisoners, seized weapons, and commenced a three year guerrilla war against white settlers, soldiers and police. Eventually his band was tracked down, and Jundamurra was captured and killed. Like many other black resistance fighters, he was beheaded and his remains were put on public display in England.

Jandamarra, Yagan and Windradyne are but three of the names that have (barely) survived a deliberate campaign of forgetting and denial. The vast majority of black resistance fighters were simply murdered and forgotten, with their actions dismissively explained away.

The Australian ruling class wish to minimise, and forget black resistance and white atrocities because remembering has important political consequences.

The acts and history of resistance demonstrate the reality that this continent's original peoples never ceded their right to self-determination. Far from surrendering or fading away in the mists of time, Aboriginal peoples fought tooth and nail to defend their lands, laws and people.

This war of conquest and resistance was economic as well as genocidal. Cattle and sheep were crucial to the first capitalist accumulation and extraction on this continent, and Aboriginal resistance often focused on economic warfare against these interests – the dispersal or spearing of herds and the burning of farms and crops. The white response to economic warfare was genocide, with the burning or a crop or death of a single white settler met with wholesale massacres. It is no coincidence that massacres follow the cattle from Gippsland and the mass murder of Gunai in the 1840s to Coniston and the massacres of the Warlpiri, Anmatyerre and Kaytetye peoples in 1929.

To recognise this is to recognise something about the system of land ownership in White Australia. Every plot of land, every house, factory and cattle farm, is built upon the murder and destruction of Aboriginal peoples. There are reasons the Australian ruling class would rather forget the frontier wars and remember Gallipoli, but no matter what they might say, it was the war of conquest unleashed in 1788 is the war that created Australia.

The invasion and conquest of this continent created the Australian state, as colonial administrations were erected and then consolidated. The invasion and conquest laid the basis for the first cycle of capitalist accumulation to occur in Australia, as agriculture and mining extracted wealth from stolen lands. And it is the invasion and conquest that created the Australian working class, as hundreds of thousands were transported or enticed with the promise of stolen land.

Further Reading and Resources:

For more information on Windradyne, Yagan, Jandamarra, and many other figures who led or engaged in armed resistance to the white invasion of this continent, check out *The Forgotten Rebels: Black Australians Who Fought Back*, by David Lowe. All quotes in article from this source.

Gary Foley's Koori History Website is the goto place for all manner of documents, articles and resources on koori history. Of particular relevance to this topic is Foley's index of resources on Genocide in Australian History.

Also recommended for those of us in Victoria, the Victorian Massacre Map.

The Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner Commemoration Committee and Dr Joe Toscano have published this excellent booklet on one instance of armed resistance that is of particular relevance to us here in Melbourne. Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner were Tasmanian Aboriginal fighters who survived the genocide in Tasmania, only to be executed in Melbourne for their resistance to the expansion of white settlement in Victoria.

First Nations Liberation continue to resist the regime of colonisation in Victoria to this day.

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