

Australia and the Holocaust: A Koori Perspective

by Gary Foley©

Introduction

On December 6th 1938, less than one month after *Reichkristallnacht* in Germany, on the other side of the world a deputation from the Australian Aborigines League, led by Koori leader William Cooper, visited the German Consulate in Melbourne and attempted to present to the Consul-General, Dr. R.W. Drechsler, with a resolution 'condemning the persecution of Jews and Christians in Germany'. They were refused admittance.¹¹³

Thus, the first group in Australia to attempt to lodge a formal protest with the German government's representative about the persecution of the Jews community, were representing people who, in the previous hundred years, had themselves been subject to attempted genocide, and in 1938 were (like Germany's Jewish people) denied citizenship. Furthermore, their people too had been labelled by a white supremacist society as 'subhuman' and subjected to scientific research to establish if they were closer to apes than humans. They had also had experience of the concentration camps that white Australia had created to contain them, and which were later used in the notorious 'assimilation program' designed to 'eliminate' the 'crossbreeds', 'half-castes', 'octoroons' and 'quadroons'. The 'full-bloods' were assumed to be 'dying out' thus resolving that aspect of the Aboriginal 'problem'.

It is probable that these obvious ironies of the deputation's visit to the German Consulate were part of the group's strategy to draw attention to the similarities between what was happening in Germany and how Aborigines were being dealt with in Australia.¹¹⁴ If that was the case it must be said that their remarkable action achieved little in mobilising the conscience of mainstream Australia either in terms of the situation of Germany's Jews or that of Aboriginal Australia. Indeed, their gesture has been almost completely forgotten in Australian history.

¹¹³"Deputation Not Admitted", *The Argus*, 7 December 1938, p. 3.

But did they have a point? Were there certain parallels between the murderous Nazi/German campaign against the Jews of Europe and what had happened in the previous hundred and fifty years in Australia (and was still happening in 1938) to the Aboriginal people? Further, were there similarities between Nazi racial theories and those subscribed to by most Anglo-Australians during the 1930s and which had produced in this country a history of genocide, and white-supremacist attitudes that were the foundation blocks of the Federation of Australia?

In this essay I will attempt to provide some answers to these questions by comparing two aspects of Australia's treatment of its Indigenous population, ie racial ideology and genocide, with similar policies and notions central to Nazi ideology. I will also briefly consider what effect this may have had on Australian policy, including the performance of the Australian delegation at the 1938 Evian Conference on the Jewish refugee question.

The Australian Government and The Evian Conference of 1938

From the moment in January 1933 when Hitler became Chancellor, the Nazis had embarked on a vicious reign of terror and exclusion against the German Jewish community which continued largely unabated through to 1938 when, U.S. President Roosevelt, alarmed at the dramatic increase in Jewish refugees seeking to escape Nazi excesses in Germany and Austria,¹¹⁵ called for an international conference to be held in Evian, France in July 1938. None of the countries that attended the Evian Conference really had the interests of the Jewish refugees at heart, least of all Australia which was represented by a delegation led by a Cabinet Minister, Colonel Thomas Walter White, who had been passing through London on other business.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴see many references by William Cooper about the parallels he perceived between Nazi treatment of the Jews in, Andrew Markus, Blood From a Stone, (Melbourne: Monash Publications in History, 1986)

¹¹⁵for an idea of the information available to the U.S. President and the West, see William E. Dodd, 'Fortnightly Political Reports', Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Germany 1930 - 1941 [microform]: internal affairs, Embassy of United States of America Berlin,

¹¹⁶Paul R. Bartrop, "The Dominions and the Evian Conference of 1938: A lost chance or a golden opportunity?", False Havens: The British Empire and the Holocaust, ed. Paul R. Bartrop, (Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 54 - 78.

Paul Bartrop has said that, 'between 1933 and 1945 the Australian government pursued a policy of restricted entry toward Jewish refugees'¹¹⁷, and never was that more evident than at the Evian Conference where Colonel White was to distinguish himself by declaring Australia's position thus,

...It will no doubt be appreciated also that, as we have no real racial problems, we are not desirous of importing one...¹¹⁸

This was a strange statement from an Australian Government official, considering the previous 150 years of Australian history, and it was also remarkable given that less than 12 months earlier, on 21st April 1937, the first ever conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities had as its major resolution, under the general heading, 'Destiny of the Race', declared,

That this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.¹¹⁹

White was to later alienate Jewish delegates to Evian to an even greater extent when he chaired a sub-committee to belatedly hear from the hundred or more refugee organisations that had not been admitted to the main sessions of the Conference.¹²⁰ Jewish refugee organisations were furious, but had they been paying attention to the Australian government's position throughout the 1930's they should not have had any faith anyway. After all, the Australian Cabinet had accepted in 1933, departmental advice that said,

As a result of persecution. It is possible that large numbers of German Jews may desire to emigrate...The question arises as to whether any special precautions should be taken to ensure that the Commonwealth does not receive an undue proportion of such immigrants...it is not

¹¹⁷Ibid. p.127.

¹¹⁸AA A434, file 50/2/41837, 'Refugees from Austria: Special Committee Proposed by U.S.A., Evian', Speech by Lieut.-Colonel the Honourable T.W. White, Delegate for Australia at Evian-les-Bains Conference on 7th July 1938.

¹¹⁹Commonwealth of Australia, Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, Aboriginal Welfare, Canberra, April 1937.

¹²⁰White insisted that each group had a mere ten minutes to state their case (later reduced to five minutes as time ran out) and after several days of hearings produced a three page synopsis which was presented to, and ignored by, the final plenary session of the Conference.

considered desirable that any special facilities should be given for Jews from Germany to migrate to Australia.¹²¹

The Jews of Europe in the 1930s were to discover something about Australia that Aboriginal people had known for almost 150 years; that Australia was a racist country which had a history of attempted and actual genocide of its Indigenous peoples, and which was determined to maintain what it believed was its racial homogeneity.

Genocide in Australian History

From the beginning of the British invasion of Australia (justified on the myth of *Terra Nullius*), the Indigenous people were slaughtered on a grand scale. In Tasmania between 1804 and 1834, the Aboriginal population was reduced from an estimated 5000 people to just 200, which represented a 90% reduction in just 30 years. In Victoria it has been estimated that the Koori population declined by about 60% in just 15 years between 1835 and 1850¹²² as more than 68 individual 'massacres' were perpetrated in that period. Indeed, according to representative of the N.W. Clans of Victoria, Mr Gary Murray, of the 38 clans that lived in Victoria B.C. (Before Cook) only 24 today have living descendants.¹²³ By 1850 virtually all active resistance to the invasion had been quelled in Victoria. Census figures published in March 1857 showed that on 1,768 Aborigines were left in all of that state. So comprehensive was the 'ethnic cleansing' of Australia that out of an estimated 500 language groups on mainland Australia when the British arrived, barely half that number of languages were to survive. By 1871, one correspondent, G. Carrington felt compelled to write,

We shall never possess a detailed history of this singular and gradual work of extermination - such a tale would be too horrible to read - but we have an opportunity of seeing a similar process in full work in the colony of Queensland, and when we have seen that, we shall understand the mystery of Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.¹²⁴

¹²¹ AA A434, file 49/3/7034, 'Admi. Of German Jews - Cabinet Decision re.', Interior memorandum for Cabinet, 2 June 1933.

¹²² Fergus Robinson and Barry York, The Black Resistance, (Melbourne :Widescope, 1977), p.90.

¹²³ Gary Murray, personal interview with author, 4th September 1997.

¹²⁴ G. Carrington, Colonial Adventures and Experiences by a University Man, (London: Bell and Daldy, 1871), p.144.

By the middle of the 19th Century the situation for Aborigines in most parts of Australia looked very grim. Morris has described it thus, 'The colonial process had reduced the Aborigines to a residual minority, but they had not been eliminated. The problem was expected to resolve itself.'¹²⁵ In other words a new policy emerged dubbed, 'Smooth the Dying Pillow', it was based on the assumption that what was left of the Aboriginal populace would now die out. So whilst indiscriminate killings of Aborigines were to continue well into the 1930's, the widespread genocidal activity of early 'settlement' gave way to a policy of containment. This was typified by the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909*, which established the first Australian 'concentration camps' to provide a place for the doomed race to die off.¹²⁶

Racial Attitudes in Germany and Australia up to the 1930's

One aspect of life that Australia clearly shared with Germany in the first part of this century was the popularity of racial theories based on Social Darwinism. As Karl Schleunes wrote, 'The publication of Darwin's theory of biological evolution in 1859 had an immediate impact in Germany',¹²⁷ and when Professor Ernst Haeckel developed these theories to incorporate a general theory of human and social development, the notion was used by racists to justify their, 'conceptions of superior and inferior peoples and nations'. These were some of the major contributing elements for the Nazis to later concoct their policies against 'inferior' 'races', such as the Jews.¹²⁸

In Australia Social Darwinism was also very popular, especially among the scientific community. Andrew Markus has said that, for scientists, administrators and politicians,

...racial categories provided the organising concepts of the three groups; that racial assumptions dominated the work of academics and administrators; that while administrators took an interest in academic

¹²⁵Barry Morris, *Domesticating Resistance: the Dhan-Gadi Aborigines and the Australian State*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1989), p. 98.

¹²⁶ For description of history of NSW 'reserve' system see, Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770-1972*, (Sydney : Allen and Unwin, 1996)

¹²⁷Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi policy toward German Jews 1933-1939*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 30.

¹²⁸*Ibid.* pp. 30-33.

research, that nearly all politicians derived their racial categories from practical experience...¹²⁹

As Markus said, 'one doesn't have to read extensively to discern that a central concern of anatomists was to establish whether Aborigines were closer to the animal than human'.¹³⁰ The Elder Professor of Anatomy at the University of Adelaide in 1926 said that Aborigines were, 'too low in the scale of humanity' to benefit from 'the civilising influence of Anglo Saxon rule'.¹³¹ In the 1920's and 30's Australia's Aborigines were a treasure trove of curiosity for scientists and academics who believed that here was the 'missing link' species that would advance the cause of Social Darwinism. Consequently, thousands of Koori peoples in communities all over Australia, were subjected to the whims of 'scientists' interested in such things as similarities between Aborigines and Chimpanzees, brain capacity and cranium size (one study in 1920 concluded that, 'the average brain capacity of Aborigines was between the normal medium intelligence of twelve or thirteen year old children')¹³² This Australian fascination with eugenics and phrenology closely mirrors a similar obsession with identical notions by German society of the same period about the Jews.

Even the famous Professor A. P. Elkin, one of the most revered and 'enlightened' anthropologists in Australian history, in 1929 wrote,

...some races possess certain powers in greater degree...than do others. Thus, the Australian Aborigines and the African negroes are human and have their powers, but they are not necessarily equal to the white or yellow races'.¹³³

In Germany the same year as Elkin wrote the above, one of the leading racial theorists in the Third Reich, Professor Hans F. Gunther, said, 'If an illustrator, painter or sculptor wants to represent the image of a bold, goal-determined, resolute person, or

¹²⁹Andrew Markus, "After the Outward Appearance: Scientists, administrators and politicians", all that dirt: An Australian 1938 Monograph, ed. Bill Gammage and Andrew Markus, (Canberra: History Project Incorporated, 1982), p.87.

¹³⁰Ibid. p.86.

¹³¹Markus p.86.

¹³²Markus p. 90.

¹³³A.P. Elkin, "The practical Value of Anthropology III", Morpeth Review, 9, (1929), p. 34.

of a noble, superior, and heroic human being, man or woman, he will in most cases create an image which more or less approximates the image of the Nordic race.’¹³⁴

At the other end of the racial/social spectrum were the Aborigines of Australia and many other eminent Australian scientists of the day were to express this attitude. In Victoria, as Christie notes, ‘Throughout the frontier years (between 1835 and 1850) the intellectual argument that the Aborigines more closely resembled “the ourangoutangs than men” made it easier for the squatter to treat the Aborigines as subhuman, to lump them with the dingo and shoot them as a “rural pest.”’¹³⁵

In the meantime, particularly during the gold rush in Victoria, race became a major issue on another front. Paranoia about the numbers Chinese miners on the goldfields created numerous clashes¹³⁶ and ultimately led to the development of the ‘White Australia’ immigration policy and also played a key role in the Federation of Australia in 1901. During the early part of this century, a viciously racist press campaign against ‘the yellow peril’ saw Australian cartoonists distinguish themselves by producing ugly caricatures of evil-looking, opium-smoking, white-woman-corrupting, yellow hordes to the north, poised to pounce on white populace of Australia.¹³⁷ These cartoons are almost identical in their intent and effect to the racist caricatures that were to be a regular feature of *Der Sturmer* and other Nazi propaganda of the 1930’s.

The later genocidal behaviour in Germany was, according to Goldhagen, significantly influenced by a deeply entrenched, historical anti-semitism that pervaded German society for hundreds of years. He rejected most of the conventional explanations for the behaviour of the German people and says,

German beliefs about Jews unleashed indwelling destructive and ferocious passions that are usually tamed and curbed by civilisation. They also

¹³⁴Hans F.K. Gunther, *Kleine Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes*, (Munich: 1929), pp. 64-65.

¹³⁵M.F. Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria 1835-86*, (Sydney: Sydney University Press 1979), p.36.

¹³⁶Indeed, one of the major grievances at the Eureka Stockade had to do with discontent about Chinese miners.

¹³⁷see, Jonathon King, *The Other Side of the Coin: A Cartoon History of Australia*, (Sydney: Cassell Australia, 1976), p.69.

provide Germans with a moral rationale and psychological impulse to exercise those passions against Jews.¹³⁸

If this was the case, then it could also be said that British settlers in Australia were imbued with a similar fear and loathing of Aborigines, who they considered to be closer to apes than humans. Those fundamental beliefs, stemming from extremist, white racist notions, fuelled settler outrage when Aboriginal people sought to resist the invasion of their lands, and the numerous resultant 'punitive expeditions' bear a resemblance to the *einsatzgruppen* activities after *Operation Barbarossa* in eastern Europe. In other words, in both instances fear and loathing were powerful forces that produced both the motivation and justification for mass murder.

Genocide in Hitler's Europe and in Australia : some comparisons

In 1933 Jewish population of Germany was approx 500,000 people, or less than 1% of the total population. This is similar to the percentage of Aboriginal people in the Australian population of the time. The largest community of Jewish people was in Berlin where they numbered 160,500 and constituted 32% of the population.¹³⁹

According to the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*,¹⁴⁰ of the total pre-war Jewish population of Europe approximately 57% perished in the Holocaust. This represents almost 5,600,000 people of a total population of 9,780,000. However, an analysis of the situation in each country reveals some interesting differences, for example, 23% of German Jews and 27% of Austrian Jews died, whilst the Jews of Poland (88% dead), Lithuania (83% dead), Greece (78% dead) and Latvia (77% dead) suffered the worst casualty rates. In Denmark, of a Jewish population of 7,800 about 60 died (0.7%) and in Finland 7 out of a population of 2000 died (0.35%). So it is obvious that the Nazis were more determined and effective in the execution of the 'final solution' in some parts of Europe and less so in other parts. It is almost an illustration of the

¹³⁸ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, (London: Abacus, 1997), p.397

¹³⁹ William E. Dodd, 'Fortnightly Political Report No. 1683', *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Germany 1930 - 1941 [microform]: internal affairs*, Embassy of United States of America Berlin, 16th January 1935.

¹⁴⁰ *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing), p.1799.

Nazi obsession with *lebensraum* in action, whereby the greatest number of Jews killed were in areas where the Third Reich intended to settle.

This is similar to what happened in Australia, where the populations of Aboriginal communities of south-eastern Australia were decimated, primarily because the invasion of Aboriginal lands began in these areas, and because these lands were the areas desired as the *lebensraum* of the pioneer Australians. In NSW the original inhabitants of Sydney were ultimately wiped out and the populations of other Aboriginal groups in close proximity to white settlements were dramatically reduced. The evidence of this today is that south of the 'Brisbane Line', the Aboriginal population is small in number and widely dispersed, which is a significant indication of the extent of destruction their communities suffered. Whereas, the further north one travels in Australia the more Aborigines there are, and in some instances (like parts of Arnhem Land) minimal destruction of traditional society has occurred. This is only because the invasion began in Sydney Cove and not Yirrikala, and the major killing fields of this continent were in the south east.

In Tasmania about 96% of the Aboriginal population was killed between 1804 and 1834, whilst in Victoria conservative estimates suggest that up to 60% of the Aboriginal peoples of Victoria died between 1835 and 1850. Census figures published in March 1857 showed that only 1,768 Aborigines were left in all of Victoria. In northern Australia invasion and occupation of Aboriginal lands came later so that conflict continued well into this century. In QLD Henry Reynolds, in a 'conservative' estimate that at least 5000 Indigenes died violently during the initial invasion, whilst Raymond Evans suggests that the number of victims could easily be double Reynolds' estimate.¹⁴¹

Conclusion

As I have tried to demonstrate, Australia during the 1930s was a society that held almost identical racial theories of evolution and Social Darwinism as those that

¹⁴¹ Raymond Evans, "'The Nigger Will Disappear...'", eds. Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin, Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: a history of exclusion, exploitation and extermination, Brisbane: University of QLD Press, 1993, p. 128.

dominated the ideology of Hitler's Germany. It was the inherent assumption that 'inferior' peoples could be disposed of that led to genocidal acts being perpetrated in both societies. Many people today assume that what happened in the 'holocaust' in Europe was an aberration of history and was not possible in other Western 'civilised' nations, but in doing so those in settler-nations such as Australia, the United States and Canada are able to conveniently absolve themselves of their own bloody histories. The simple fact seems to be that in Australia the greater part of the mass murder and genocide of Indigenous peoples occurred in the 150 years prior to the advent of Hitler's rise to power in Germany, and that the most destructive phase of the Australian concentration camps occurred from the 1930s through to the 1960s. This means that the Australian holocaust not only has been unacknowledged, but also has continued in different forms for more than two hundred years, whereas the entire period of Nazi German excesses covers less than two decades.

Daniel Goldhagen has said that when it comes to specific numbers of people killed during any German operation that, 'the numbers are of great historical but of little analytical importance in this context'.¹⁴² The same applies to this country, whereby the first 150 years of occupation decimated the Aboriginal communities of Australia to at least a similar extent to the Jewish communities of Europe. It does not matter if we are talking in terms of a 'mere' 300 people murdered at Waterloo Creek in 1838,¹⁴³ if those 300 people represented 90% of that Aboriginal group we are clearly talking of a genocidal act in the same way the actions of the *Einsatzkommandos* during Operation Barbarossa are regarded as acts of genocide.

In the final analysis it seems there were grounds for comparison between Nazi Germany and Australian society in the 1930s, as William Cooper and his group had tried to illustrate with their visit to the German Consul-General in 1938. Furthermore, it seems beyond comprehension that the prevailing climate of white supremacist racism in Australia would not have played a role in Australia's decision to restrict the entry of eastern European Jews seeking to escape Nazi persecution. If this were the case, then the Jewish refugees were victims of Australian racism by their exclusion until the

¹⁴²Goldhagen, p.612.

¹⁴³see Roger Millis, Waterloo Creek: The Australia Day massacre of 1838, George Gipps and the British conquest of New South Wales, (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1992)

end of the war, as were the Aboriginal people by virtue of the genocide to which they had already been subjected, and their subsequent 'containment' in the Australian 'Gulag Archipeligo'.

The great irony of the story is that many of the Jewish refugees to whom I spoke, who came to Australia after the war, praised the warmth of the welcome when they got here, and were eternally grateful that they had arrived in a land so free of the virulent strain of anti-semitism that they had escaped in Europe. Some of them however were to soon realise the parallels between what was happening to the Aboriginal people and what had happened to them, and subsequently many members of the Jewish communities in Sydney and Melbourne were to become prominent in the campaigns for Aboriginal rights from the 1940s to the 1970s. In a way these people were unconsciously repaying the gesture of solidarity and empathy extended all those years before by William Cooper and his intrepid band of Koori resistance activists.

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