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Fighting the Enemy: Australian Soldiers and Their
Adversaries in World War II (review)

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The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 208-209
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2003.0019>



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nationalist discourse” and modern military prostitution. Choi argues that while silencing these victims (“the dominant mode of operation in Japan as well as in other Asian countries”) prevents healing, a nationalistic discourse of reparations also “does not heal the psychic and subjective wounds but deepens them when not properly executed”; instead she urges finding “a space so they can speak the pain of war memories and their subjectivity grounded on pain transformed” (407).

The chapters in *Perilous Memories* vary in style as well as content; some rely heavily on academic jargon while others present heartrending stories with effective simplicity. Anyone interested in the Asia-Pacific War, the politics and poetics of memory, how history serves the purposes of the powerful and how it can be made to serve the needs of the powerless, will find something of use in this volume.

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Fighting the Enemy: Australian Soldiers and Their Adversaries in World War II, by Mark Johnston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-521-78222-8; xi + 206 pages, figures, maps, notes, photographs, conventions and abbreviations, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$54.95.

What do soldiers think of “the enemy”? Do they necessarily and unequivocally see the opposing force merely as “the enemy”? Are they driven by unqualified animus? Logically, since each side is aiming to kill the

other, it would seem that the individual combatants ought to be fired by hatred of their opponents, thereby reducing their immediate conflict to one of essential simplicity. After all, in warfare, action must beget at least an equivalent reaction or one’s own life is in acute danger, and the gratuitous surrender of existence is not normal behavior in any circumstances. Wilde may not have been thinking of battle when he wrote “for each man kills the thing he loves,” yet, as Mark Johnston shows, there are subtleties and ambiguities involved in the clash of armed warriors. A core hatred may not be manifest in conscious antipathy, and the business of fighting may be rationalized professionally into “just doing my job,” leaving other and deeply felt issues suppressed.

In any case, “the enemy” is not a constant and homogeneous category. Taking the opinions of Australian soldiers as his case study, Johnston demonstrates the fact that there were marked distinctions in the ways they judged their opponents. To begin, he stresses the fact that the Australians faced several “enemies” in two vastly different phases of war. The first of these was in the Middle East, where they faced three different sets of opponents: the Italians, the Germans, and the Vichy French. The second was the Pacific, where they faced the Japanese. While a degree of anger was a common element, their attitudes varied toward each of these “enemies.”

The Italians, whom the Australians first encountered at Bardia in Libya in December 1940, were rarely taken seriously. The Australians brought to the fight a racially based sense of superiority, which was seemingly

justified by experience. For reasons that lie beyond the scope of this book, the Italians—conscripts facing volunteers—generally had little heart for the war. Consequently, they were mostly (but not always) ineffective soldiers. Johnston makes a poignant distinction: “Italian attacks on Australians were seldom intimidating and, clearly, Italian aggression was cause for surprise, though rarely anxiety. The opposite was true of Australian advances, which were often frighteningly aggressive” (24).

In contrast, the Germans, whom the Australians met at Tobruk and Crete in April 1941, were seen as the “real” enemy because they were “worthy opponents.” One Australian observed that “Nazi courage is undeniable, proving that the German is potentially a superior racial type” (32). The irony of this is that they were, accordingly, capable of doing serious damage to the Australians, although the latter continued to claim an inherent superiority “man for man,” as attested by prowess with the bayonet.

Falling somewhere between the Italians and the Germans in the Australians’ estimations were the Vichy French encountered in Syria in June 1941. These were seen as misguided in having allied with the Germans, skillful but prone to treachery, and frightened by the bayonet—a standard criticism of Australia’s opponents. The Australians’ attitude was somewhat patronizing toward the Vichy French, for although they were “the enemy,” they were also kin to the Free French, a fact that may have ensured that animosity toward them did not last beyond the campaign.

It was altogether different with the Japanese, whom the Australians met in Southeast Asia and the Pacific in 1942 and against whom they fought bitterly until 1945. The conflict was fueled by deep-seated racial hatreds, as John Dower has shown in *War without Mercy* (1986). While they proved themselves a formidable opposition, this was attributed to fanaticism and to an inferior, brutish quality of humanity. Japanese atrocities and acts of suicide did nothing to dispel such notions. Rather, they enhanced the Australian conviction of being morally superior. This belief persisted for a long while after the war. It also accords with Admiral Halsey’s perspicuous injunction at New Caledonia in 1942, emblazoned on a sign at Tulagi harbor, that the object of the war was to “Kill Japs.”

The outlines of most of what Mark Johnston has to say are already well known. His achievement is to have infused a solid body of individual and personal detail to the story. He offers the ideas and observations of ordinary soldiers on a matter commonly overlooked in war histories that focus on strategy or on the narrative of campaigns. In so doing he not only complements his earlier book on the experiences of Australian soldiers in World War II (*In the Front Line*, 1996) but also draws attention to a variable of which all historians of military conflict should be aware: Even in warfare, antagonisms, like loyalties and sympathies, may not be undifferentiated.

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