In the midst of severe housing crises, a short-lived series of occupations targeting disused residential properties took place in England and Australia during 1945. In the UK, the movement achieved national prominence following a campaign that began in Brighton in July of that year. A subsequent wave of squatting in 1946 would eventually involve more than 45,000 participants, many of whom took part in mass occupations of military camps. In August 1945, squatting received widespread attention in Australia, with a larger wave in the following year.

This chapter provides a history and comparison of how squatting during 1945 served as a method of informal requisitioning in the context of the failure of official wartime regulations in England and Australia to fully compel owners to make vacant properties available. In doing so, it details how squatting built on, and sought to improve, formal practices, and how it was in part legitimised by them. The use of squatting as a means of securing housing is also linked here to the rising social expectations of working-class communities and increased militancy on the part of some military veterans’ groups. In both countries, campaigns were largely localised, and veterans’ associations, sometimes working with communists, unionists and other activists, played a key role in initiating, defending and publicising occupations.

The chapter further demonstrates that, beyond the immediate goal of ending deprivation, squatters and activists sought to establish tenancy rather than eliminate rent-paying. In prioritising need over profit,
and feeding into pressures that were already intensifying a shift towards government-provided public housing, these waves challenged aspects of the property market, but largely aimed to regulate it. This would be in keeping with the character of some later squatting waves, but differed from many in that concerns regarding the protection of heritage values and the expression and enactment of alternative lifestyles were not raised, nor objectives for these issues set.

10.1 No homes for heroes?

In both countries, squatting developed primarily in response to critical housing shortages. Housing construction in Australia had come to a standstill in the early years of the Depression, and private industry had failed to make up for this when the economy improved. Public housing schemes were yet to be enacted across much of Australia. Meanwhile, the 1930s had seen a property boom in the UK, but this had been largely confined to houses for sale rather than rent. Public housing, following concerted agitation after the First World War, was more widespread than in Australia, but remained underfunded and often beyond the reach of the poorest tenants. Well-intentioned, but ill-timed, slum clearance programmes in Australia and the UK had removed some of the cheapest accommodation, while the rerouting of human and material resources to the war effort imposed a continuing freeze on private construction of homes in Australia and reduced it in the UK by up to 90 per cent.²

An increase in marriages and births, particularly towards the end of the war, placed further demand on existing housing stock. Long-term demographic shifts from rural areas to cities, coupled with shorter-term ones associated with wartime industry, upped the pressure on cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, London and Glasgow.³ Wartime provisions designed to protect low-income tenants in some cases unwittingly exacerbated shortages of affordable rental properties. In Australia, controls on prices and measures restricting the ability of owners to evict tenants and raise rents resulted in some owners preferring to leave houses empty.⁴ While Australia was spared major bombing, the UK was not, removing a further 468,000 dwellings due to heavy damage or outright destruction, with many more in need of urgent repair.⁵

In 1944, the Australian government estimated a shortage of 200,000 dwellings, with a further 82,000 unfit for habitation and another 155,000 of poor quality. By the following year, the shortfall, not counting substandard housing, was set at between 300,000 and 400,000 – in
a country with a total of just 1,618,500 dwellings.\(^5\) Regarding the UK, housing researcher Alan Holmans estimates that the gap in housing need and provision had increased by half a million during the war, with around 2.1 million extra dwellings required for 13.2 million households by 1945.\(^7\)

In both countries, residents faced increased rents, homelessness and precarity. Many couples and families were forced to crowd in with relatives or live in single rooms, garages, caravans and tents, or even on verandas. Particularly egregious examples, such as people living in horse stables and under floorboards, were regularly covered in Australian and British newspapers.\(^8\)

### 10.2 The introduction of requisitioning

Housing shortages had been identified as an issue for both territories from the beginning of the war. Australia’s federal system of government made individual states the key policymakers and providers of housing, with local government also having some input into issues such as building regulations. Due to the war, the federal government acquired additional powers, including the freedom to authorise requisitioning via successive War Moratorium and National Security acts and regulations.\(^9\)

Alongside provisions allowing the military to take over property were those enabling service people and their dependent partners, children and parents to apply directly to the owners of an empty ‘dwelling property’ for a lease. Depending on differing states’ arrangements, if this failed, the applicant could then take the owners to the court of petty sessions or a rent board to compel them to let the property.\(^10\)

In the UK, regulations also initially focused on the use of empty private dwellings for military purposes. Over time, powers were extended to allow local authorities to assist evacuees, war workers and people who had lost their homes due to bombardment. Pressured to help those suffering more broadly, in 1943 the government agreed to widen their use. Under the system then functioning in the UK, central government made policy and funded housing, with local authorities operating as the primary point of contact and delivery. As such, some 2,485 local authorities were given the power in 1943 to ‘requisition, repair and adapt empty properties for the purpose of providing housing accommodation for persons at present inadequately housed’.\(^11\)

Unlike in Australia, local authorities rather than individuals took the lead in identifying properties. They did not approach owners directly,
but passed on recommendations to the Ministry of Health and other central government bodies, which would then carry out negotiations. Owners could oppose requisitioning on the basis of plans to sell, let or use the dwelling. Once requisitioned, the council was to repair the property, select tenants and determine rents based on market rates typical for the area, with subsidies from the central government available for those in need. Housing via these processes was available for a much larger swath of the population than in Australia, where requisitioning was limited to service people, their relatives and essential war workers all the way through to 1945. Australia only suffered short-term bombing raids that were mainly focused on military targets, so the difference may have been due to the regular bombardment and displacement British residents faced. It may have also reflected differing ideas regarding the ‘deserving poor’ and different stages in the development and achievement of the idea of housing as a right in each country, as evidenced by the much lower level of pre-war public housing in Australia.\textsuperscript{12}

The idea of property owners being forced to rent out their property on the basis of need, with the state and its representatives controlling to whom it would be rented, had rarely been raised as a demand in either country prior to the war, and laws facilitating it would persist for only a few years during peacetime. In a situation of total war, requisitioning – alongside measures such as the centralisation of planning for much of the economy – was deemed not only palatable, but necessary in these and other market-based societies.\textsuperscript{13}

In both countries, continuing anger at the poverty of the Depression years, and a consequent weakening of support for (and in some cases rejection of) the existing order, had forced politicians to recognise that appeals to patriotism alone would not suffice. As a result, in what Rowse terms a ‘moral contract’, the demands of the war effort were accompanied by assurances that needs would be met and the public given some input into how deprivation was managed. Promises regarding ‘equality of sacrifice’ were made by governments in both countries. These were seen as central to maintaining morale, and the concept was regularly deployed by service people and activists in agitation around housing.\textsuperscript{14}

Related to this came pledges that post-war reconstruction would avoid a repeat of the conditions that had followed the First World War, when many troops returned to poverty and precarity. During the 1940s, this fed into a social shift in both countries as housing came to be viewed as a human right whose provision could not be solely met by the private market and would thus require greater government intervention. For Labor (Australia) and Labour (UK), party reformers’ reconstruction
plans chimed with a long-held belief in regulation, the welfare state and a mixed economy. For right-wing parties they were seen as a way to maintain social peace and ensure a healthy workforce. The combination of the White Australia Policy, low population density and attendant wartime anxieties regarding its place as what Dufty-Jones describes as a ‘bastion of British racial purity located in the South Pacific’ meant that reconstruction in Australia was also seen as a way of building up the Caucasian population and extending it across the country.

Common themes regarding rising expectations, reward for service and the belief that exceptional circumstances justified unconventional measures supported the implementation and widening of formal requisitioning. These and other factors would also vindicate and spur the subsequent use of squatting to meet its failures, initially in 1945 and again in 1946. In addition, combat experiences meant many veterans were familiar with far greater risks than those associated with squatting, as well as with the need for determined (and at times unconventional) action. The existence of the black market and other means of survival also meant that the idea of circumventing official channels was far from unknown. Overall, as historian James Hinton notes: ‘The war had unleashed popular initiative and proved that, when the chips were down, authority could be persuaded to abandon red tape and due process.’

10.3 Requisitioning in practice

Requisitioning alone could not hope to meet shortages, but it was widely supported as a means of providing relief. The fact that homes and other properties stood empty in a time of crisis was galling for many, as reflected in regular articles and letters of complaint in the mainstream media. Despite legal and moral pressure, requisitioning was defied by Australian landlords from its inception, not least because, once tenanted, the rent level would be frozen and eviction made more difficult by other wartime provisions. The wording of requisitioning provisions assisted resistance, and courts complained of a lack of clarity and direction regarding how to interpret what constituted ‘reasonable cause’ for rejecting would-be tenants. In 1941, the Australian provisions were tightened to prevent landlords from blocking the process by simply disagreeing with the rent rate offered, and were also extended to cover workers whose contribution to the war was deemed essential. In time, recently discharged service people and veterans receiving pensions and suffering from medical conditions, as well as their dependants, would be added to the list of possible applicants.
For much of the war, the regulations seem to have been unheard of across much of Australia. This is evidenced by calls from veterans’ and other organisations to introduce requisitioning years after it already had been, by newspaper reports that put their date of introduction incorrectly at 1944 and 1945, and by court reports showing they were not used in some jurisdictions until 1943 or later.  

Other than a lack of publicity, various loopholes, such as the fact that holiday homes and other properties let out for less than six months at a time were not covered, allowed owners to avoid requisitioning. Conflicting wartime regulations could also be exploited, such as in one case where apartments remained vacant because blocks designed for 30 or more people were required to have air raid shelters and the owners were unwilling, and presumably could not be compelled, to provide them. In other cases, owners falsely claimed repairs were being done and contracts for sale being drawn up, or feigned use by placing furniture or moving friends or family into properties temporarily.

Such strategies were also employed in the UK. Added to owners’ opposition was that of local authorities. Although they were swamped with people seeking housing via requisitioning provisions, councils were under no obligation to apply them. Their willingness and ability to do so were affected by various factors. Some lacked the staff necessary for processing, while others were hesitant to devote scant resources to repairing properties that would eventually be returned to owners. As in Australia, elements of the provisions were also unclear, and some councils were unwilling to act until they were guaranteed they would not be left with financial and legal burdens. For their part, central government bureaucracies proved reluctant to resolve such issues, claiming they were local matters. In the case of Conservative councils, opposition also emerged on political and class grounds. Even where councils embraced the regulations, the government’s decision to privilege owners’ returns over tenants’ needs by pricing rents at market rates, combined with limitations on subsidies, meant that requisitioning failed to meet the need for low-cost housing.

10.4 The lead-up to the 1945 squatting campaigns

Months ahead of major demobilisation, discontent in Australia and the UK regarding requisitioning increased and newspapers regularly carried reports of rules being flouted. In line with others around the world, each country’s Communist Party had come to support the war after the invasion of the Soviet Union. Although they largely opposed strikes, they
consistently campaigned to reduce inequalities and inefficiencies. In the UK, a key demand came to be for improvements in requisitioning as well as its full use by all councils.26

Communists also drew attention to housing issues in Australia, with the party’s Victorian newspaper claiming in the wake of squatting actions in August that Prahran members had already been working with the local council on requisitioning.27 For the most part, however, it was veterans’ organisations that took the lead. Following surveys of empty properties carried out by 14 sub-branches, the first public calls for direct action came at a Returned Sailors’, Soldiers’ and Airmen’s Imperial League of Australia (RSL) state meeting in New South Wales (NSW) during April 1945. The RSL had been founded in 1918 and was the nation’s largest veterans’ group. NSW Vice President W.C. Allen, citing a recent case of a veteran breaking into a house in Bondi and living there for three weeks before being discovered, was reported as saying that ‘houses kept empty should be broken into by servicemen’.28 A representative from the North Sydney branch, discussing an empty 20-room mansion in the suburb of Mosman, suggested ‘homeless families should march on it and open it as residential’.29 A month later, it was reported that the organisation was assisting a soldier to resist eviction from a squatted holiday house, with NSW RSL President J.C. Neagle stating that ‘in the present housing crisis, returned soldiers were entitled to occupy them’.30

The threat to occupy properties without first gaining permission appears, in this case, to have been primarily inspired by the aforementioned soldiers’ experiences. Squatting is, to some degree, an obvious response to deprivation and one that, in Australia (as elsewhere), dates back to the first instances of homelessness. In Australia, the term had originally been associated with the practice of British settlers and freed convicts moving beyond the official frontier to settle on, and later claim, uncolonised – and in the settler mindset ‘disused’ – land following the death and forcible removal of indigenous owners.31

From the 1890s to the early 1960s, the main form of squatting for shelter in Australia involved people camping in tents or building shacks from found materials on disused public and private land in rural areas, as well as in towns and cities and on their fringes. Some of these settlements could be quite large, with 500 huts estimated to be scattered across the Tarragindi hills and gullies around Brisbane in 1946, and one camp in NSW estimated to include 750 people in the 1950s. Such settlements would long provide shelter for indigenous Australian communities, due to their extreme marginalisation; but, for the non-indigenous population, they reached their height during the 1930s.32
Direct action regarding urban housing also had strong precedents. Anti-eviction campaigns involving hundreds of properties and thousands of community members were carried out across Australia during the Depression era. Largely, but not wholly, led by activists associated with the communist-dominated Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM), these campaigns sometimes involved reoccupying properties to force landlords to restore or rehouse tenants. In some cases, UWM militants lived in squats, such as disused train carriages occupied in the Melbourne suburb of Jolimont. Reports also surfaced of individual families surreptitiously occupying disused houses during the Depression and the war years.³³

Although occupations in Australia (and England) were often referred to as ‘illegal’ in the media, they were not defined so in law. This would change in later decades, but during the 1930s and 1940s trespass was generally considered a civil matter and criminal charges could not be laid for committing it. Property owners’ rights remained paramount, but unless other matters concerning forcible entry, criminal damage or the like were involved, disputes were usually resolved by the courts, with the police only becoming involved when directed to do so.³⁴

In 1932, a proposal put to a Melbourne conference of relief committees demanding that the state government requisition properties for the unemployed was rejected as too radical.³⁵ Despite this call, squatting does not appear to have occurred on a formally organised level during the 1930s, nor do political activists seem to have made use of it as a tactic to highlight waste or demand that disused, luxury and other properties be made available to the public. Nevertheless, anti-eviction campaigns had established a precedent for direct action in working-class suburbs; and, during 1944, Catholic activists, with some support from communists, resisted evictions on occasion.³⁶

10.5 Squatting in the UK

In August 1945, the first Australian squatting actions to fully involve veterans’ and other organisations occurred. These would receive widespread media attention and lead to reform regarding requisitioning. Although the practices discussed here provided precedents, it appears that the impetus for the Australian actions, and the media’s concerted interest in them, was directly related to high-profile occupations that had first occurred in the UK during the previous month.

The UK has a centuries-long history of the poor reclaiming disused land for food production and shelter.³⁷ Although eviction resistance
during the Depression was not as widespread as in Australia, major rent strikes following the First World War forced authorities to introduce housing reforms. Ongoing lobbying, protests, advice work, anti-eviction actions and refusals to pay rent by the unemployed, their organisations and communities further demonstrated the power of organised action in the decades prior to the Second World War. This work continued during the war with communists, Labour Party members and others working with tenants to prevent evictions and oppose rent rises.  

National precedents also came from occupations during the war itself. During 1940, communists and others cut the locks to underground railway stations to make them available as bomb shelters for working-class communities. Left with no choice, embarrassed officials authorised such use soon after. As part of this campaign, they also occupied a shelter in the luxurious Savoy Hotel.  

In Scotland towards the end of 1943, 20 families squatted in a tenement in the Clydeside town of Greenock; and in May 1945, seven families occupied an empty mansion at Blantyre.  

The most important factor in the growth of UK squatting during 1945 was the experience of Brighton activists. Harry Cowley, spokesperson and leader of what became known as the ‘Vigilantes’, had a well-developed reputation as a ‘fixer’ and agitator in the city’s working-class communities. Along with other members of the group, he first became involved in grassroots politics after experiencing unemployment following his return from military service in the First World War. During the interwar years, he and others organised protests, aggressively lobbied officials and politicians, ran an unemployed club, disrupted meetings of fascists and raised money for community members in need. They also squatted in houses for homeless families. Interviewed for a pamphlet about Cowley’s life, Alf Richardson claimed that, in 1921, after initially helping an ex-serviceman friend and his family move into an empty house, he and others had gone on to squat in a further 60 properties around the city.  

In the midst of the 1945 housing crisis, these activists came together again and were joined by other women and men, after Cowley was approached for help. Initially acting under the name of the ‘Direct Action Society’ the group’s first publicly reported action came on 2 July when they forced open the door of an empty house and commandeered it for the wife and children of a naval petty officer.  

Within a week, three more families were housed and the group was helping to connect utilities and negotiate with owners. Although English law required a court order, in practice squatters could be evicted unilaterally and illegally by the police. Faced with an organised group, as well as much media attention, they avoided this tactic in Brighton,
instead monitoring empty properties and using informers to warn them of upcoming actions. By 9 July, this approach had enabled the police to prevent a fourth occupation by securing a property before the Vigilantes arrived. As would often be the case during the following year’s squatting wave, some police and officials were sympathetic, ignoring Vigilante activity if not actively providing assistance.

The actions attracted widespread media coverage and, although reports that Vigilante numbers had rapidly swelled to 1,000 appear exaggerated, by the middle of July other occupations had taken place in Birmingham and Liverpool. Up to 30 houses were also reported as occupied in various parts of London. An action in Lewisham involved Vigilantes from Brighton, while a member of a separate group in Paddington told reporters, ‘We are going on every night putting hard cases into empty places until the council acts properly and gives ex-servicemen a square deal.’ Others, such as a group in Acton, issued threats to begin occupying houses if councils did not take action. Formal requests for requisitioning also increased. To expose the deficiencies of the prevailing system, various councils undertook surveys of empty houses and forwarded them to the Ministry of Health.

The Brighton Vigilantes worked hard to promote squatting, with their Secretary, Harold Steer, announcing he had responded to enquiries with the advice, ‘If you see a house, take it and let the law do its damned-est. We have started a movement which we hope and pray will spread over the length and breadth of the land.’ Cowley, by this point dubbed ‘The Guv’nor’ by the media, addressed a crowd of 2,000 in London in mid-July and there were reports of people from London, Sheffield, Portsmouth and elsewhere attending meetings in Brighton. Despite this, coordination appears to have been minimal and it is likely that indirect diffusion via publicity was doing as much as direct contact to spread the practice. It is also possible that increased attention had caused the media to cover instances that may have already been planned or had occurred, regardless of Vigilante activity.

The practice adopted by the Vigilantes in Brighton and by similar groups in London involved members playing a leading role in identifying and securing houses on behalf of others, as well as deciding who would move into them. Organised squatting groups from the 1960s onwards in the UK, Australia and other Western countries would similarly assist people in squatting houses and dealing with landlords and officials. However, as part of their self-help and collectivist ethos, and their critique of existing social structures, they generally did not allocate housing. Instead, they took on a support role, aspiring to empower individuals, families and others to undertake much of the work involved
while creating networks that could defend them, as required. In keeping with changing patterns of life, and for some the desire to create alternatives, a wider range of living arrangements than the conventional nuclear family were also facilitated via squatting. Although the mass squats of military camps, hotels and other large properties that took place in 1946 would involve coordination and cooperation, life was focused on individual family units, with collective elements being a by-product rather than a core organising principle. In part, the model of organisation used by the Brighton Vigilantes probably grew out of Cowley’s long-term role in the community as a ‘fixer’, but it was also a reflection of the more hierarchical nature of politics and community life during the period.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) gave conditional support to the Vigilantes via its daily newspaper. As its focus at this time was on minimising social disruption and avoiding outright conflict with the government – as a consequence of the war effort and also in the hope of forming a coalition with Labour – its members did not undertake squatting outside Scotland until 1946. Since the Vigilantes were limited in the repairs they could undertake, the CPGB argued that the efficacy of their efforts would be judged by their ability to force the government and councils to improve requisitioning.

To a large degree, this position appears to have been shared by the Brighton Vigilantes. The group, which publicly eschewed political allegiances, made statements to the media about the need to improve requisitioning and extend it into the fast-approaching post-war period. Such demands were sent to then-Prime Minister Winston Churchill and other politicians by letter. And, following a march, a rally and an address by the Vigilantes and their supporters, Brighton Council sent its own resolution to the government outlining the deficiencies of the current scheme and calling for the power to directly requisition properties, to ‘obviate the necessity of the application of unconstitutional methods’.

Regardless of its actual potential, the risk of a wider outbreak forced central authorities to respond quickly. Churchill, whose government was in caretaker mode due to that year’s extended election, advocated press censorship and police repression. This course was blocked by cabinet, in part on the basis that existing law was not being broken, but also because of the popularity of the Vigilantes’ actions.

Given that any changes would essentially mark an improvement in existing policy, rather than a major deviation, the caretaker government appears to have decided that the best course was to support councils in taking back control of the process. On 20 July, less than three weeks after the Vigilantes had first squatted in a house, the Ministry of Health
announced changes that would allow councils to directly requisition disused, habitable housing, with owners to be given 14 days’ notice. To expedite proceedings, central government officials would only become involved if owners resisted.\textsuperscript{54}

The Vigilantes believed that these reforms did not go far enough in preventing owners and councils from avoiding their responsibilities, and vowed to continue squatting. The Brighton police successfully applied for court injunctions preventing activists from doing so (as they would in similar actions against anti-road campaigners and other activists in the coming decades). Cowley was subsequently arrested and fined £31 by the Brighton County Court for removing a landlord and workmen from a property. Continuing to campaign on the issue, two Vigilantes unsuccessfully stood in council elections in November 1945.\textsuperscript{55}

Some councils shared the Vigilantes’ concerns, arguing that the changes potentially weakened existing measures, as the notice given to owners could enable them more leeway to exploit loopholes. Issues around staffing and repairs also remained. Nevertheless, when combined with further changes regarding rent controls, reform did result in an expansion in requisitioning, with the result that the need for low-cost housing was met to a limited degree. Unsurprisingly, it was in Labour-dominated areas that requisitioning was most extensive, with Bristol Council at one point applying for every dwelling advertised for sale in the area.\textsuperscript{56} The Northumberland town of Whitley Bay saw notices sent to 150 owners, while, at the peak of Vigilante activity, Brighton Council served 60 notices within two days of the new rules being introduced.\textsuperscript{57} For now, requisitioning had successfully been redirected back into formal channels, but in 1946 continuing shortcomings and the emptying-out of military properties would once again see direct action play a major role in the politics of British housing.

\subsection*{10.6 Diffusion to Australia}

On Friday 3 August 1945, two squatting actions were carried out in Sydney and Melbourne, which, while unconnected, would have a major impact on requisitioning. At 8.15pm that night, members of a previously unknown Melbourne group, the Australian Soldiers’ Legion (ASL), met up with the Wagglen family, which included a former soldier who had been wounded in Papua New Guinea, his wife and two children, in Bell St, Hawthorn.\textsuperscript{58} With the media present, ASL members gained entrance to a property and loaded furniture through a window. Although the house was in poor condition and filled with hundreds of empty bottles,
Mrs Wagglen, who had recently been served with a notice to quit the single room her family shared in St Kilda, told journalists: ‘This is the biggest thrill of my life. We haven’t had a house to ourselves for four years.’

As evidenced by the actions undertaken and threatened by individual Australian war veterans earlier in the year, forms of contention can develop in parallel without the need for direct or indirect diffusion. However, the ASL, whose members maintained their anonymity, described themselves in interviews and subsequent correspondence with the media as ‘vigilantes’. This indicates that they most probably modelled their action on the British campaigns, which, given the close ties between the two countries, had received much coverage in Australia. For some activists, direct action is a preferred method, but it is more commonly seen, or presented to audiences, as a last resort only to be used when conventional means of appeal have failed. This theme had already been present in statements from UK activists, and an ASL spokesperson prefaced his assertion that ‘The Government has consistently passed the buck on the housing question and now the Vigilantes have accepted it’ with an explanation that he had been a member of various committees and protest groups whose lobbying had failed to produce results.

Prior to undertaking its first public action, the ASL claimed to have located 41 empty houses in a habitable condition and to have already housed 13 families over the previous three weeks in areas such as Kew, Newport, Box Hill, Brighton and Camberwell. One member stated on the evening of the occupation that the organisation had 1,500 members, none of whom knew the leadership’s true identity. A separate interview saw another activist more prosaically describe the group as consisting of eight, but with plans to grow.

Regardless of the true extent of its activities and membership, the ASL’s action grabbed widespread attention. By inviting journalists and photographers to attend the seizure, the group had clearly sought this. A statement from a spokesperson reflected and fed into common themes regarding reward for service, the view that society had failed veterans after the First World War, and the special circumstances of the period:

When Australia was threatened by Japan, red tape was dispensed with and all sorts of emergency measures were put through in double-quick time. The housing shortage should also be considered as an enemy to be met by similar high-speed tactics… . The Vigilantes will rise every time the Government fails to do the right thing by servicemen… . We are the young soldiers of a generation which has learnt by the mistakes of its fathers.
On the same day as the Melbourne action, another house was occupied in a suburb of Sydney. In this case, the occupation did not involve a collective approach, but saw one man, an ex-soldier and former member of the merchant navy, occupy a house in Marion St, Auburn. Similarly echoing the idea of direct action as a last, rather than first, resort, he told the Communist Party newspaper *Tribune*, ‘Forcible possession of homes will not solve the housing problem. Only new houses will do that. But what other avenue is open to a man in desperate circumstances like me?’

In contrast to earlier incidents in Sydney, a committee of local ex-servicemen was specifically formed to support the squatter in his action. The group advised the occupier to stay put, paid for his furniture to be transported 80 km from Wollongong and informed the media that ‘If any attempt is made to evict … we can muster our forces in time to oppose any such move’. The committee, which included members of the Labor and Communist parties as well as various veterans’ organisations, then assisted him with making a legal application for tenancy. It also pledged to undertake a survey of all empty properties in the area.

The events that followed illustrate the complexities of housing during the period as well as the extent of competition for it. After initial reports claiming the Hawthorn property was being held onto by a previous tenant for ‘sentimental reasons’ associated with the loss of his wife, it turned out to be rented by an elderly man who had been intermittently hospitalised and was currently recovering with relatives. The police, for their part, stated that under the law they could take no action unless a breach of the peace occurred. Although the previous tenant expressed a willingness to work with the new occupiers to find a solution, the owner, having firstly stated she would rent the property to a returned prisoner of war, issued a letter ordering them to ‘vacate immediately and make good any damage caused during the period of occupation’.

In the case of the Auburn property, the estate agent produced a couple to whom he claimed he had let the house on the day of the occupation. It is unknown how either situation concluded.

Although only comprising two events, which coincidentally occurred on the same day, the issue of veterans occupying disused properties was covered in at least 165 articles around Australia over the course of the following week. The situation was also commented upon in several newspaper editorials, which consistently expressed sympathy regarding homelessness and overcrowding, while also warning of the ‘anarchy’, ‘jungle law’ and ‘mob rule’ that they asserted would follow if occupations were allowed to continue. This was similar to coverage the previous month in the UK, where the *Observer* newspaper had warned,
The Vigilantes only meant to help unfortunate people get bare justice, but if their methods became general, justice would be the first victim.  

For their part, Australian communist newspapers were supportive with the Guardian, which had been running a campaign against attacks by sections of the media on migrants, keen to assert that anti-immigration statements made by a Melbourne Vigilante spokesperson had not been intended to cover those already in the country. Despite a call for readers to form support committees along the lines of that in Auburn, Australian communists did not publicly engage in further squatting activity until the following year.  

As in the UK various levels of government responded quickly in Australia to the increased focus on the failures of requisitioning as well as the sense, probably overstated, that further vigilante actions were in the offing. At the local level the Mayor of Auburn pledged his support for the veterans’ committee and ordered the health inspector to make a survey of empty properties.  

Two days after the Hawthorn occupation, the ASL issued an ultimatum to the Victorian state government threatening to ‘move 3,000 strong and force you to act’ if legislation was not introduced ‘to seize all empty houses in Melbourne and Bayside areas within seven days’. The following day, the government informed the media that it ‘could not and would not tolerate threatening acts’ and that police action would meet further occupations. At the same time, the Premier announced that the state government would be introducing legislation to give councils and municipal shires the power to install tenants in disused houses, with the state government to guarantee the payment of rent. On 4 August, the government had announced its intention to order the Victorian State Accommodation Officer to send letters to 50 owners of empty houses and bungalows in Melbourne seaside districts asking them to let their buildings. It is unclear whether this was planned before the Vigilantes’ action, but no suggestion of compelling owners to rent out properties appears to have been made prior to it. In contrast to the UK, where the media had linked reform to direct action, Australian newspapers did not.  

The NSW government’s response was also to threaten squatters with police action. On the question of requisitioning, it was more equivocal but similarly showed signs of the pressure direct action had exerted. Having initially claimed that, outside of law and order, the issue was a federal matter, the Acting Premier subsequently announced on 7 August that cabinet had devoted most of its weekly meeting to housing matters, and was investigating proposals regarding the requisitioning of empty hotel rooms and houses. Although it had previously rejected temporary public
housing solutions, these, too, were now under consideration. Along with Victorian government dwellings in former military barracks, other properties would be set up and requisitioning laws extended during 1946.  

For its part, the federal government admitted that existing provisions were being circumvented through false claims of occupancy and announced that the Attorney General’s Department was conferring on ‘tenancy regulations, with a view to tightening them up’. The annual Premiers’ conference, which brought together federal and state heads of government, was held later in August and, while housing had long been on the agenda, various media outlets reported that the issue of ‘vigilantism’ was also discussed. Given the widespread coverage of the situation in the UK, it is possible that events there influenced Australian authorities to adopt these responses. due to the fear that ‘vigilantism’ could spread, although a lack of surviving cabinet and other internal documents make this impossible to verify.

10.7 Conclusion: A short reprieve before new waves of squatting emerge

In Britain and Australia, limited, yet high-profile, outbreaks of squatting in mid-1945 had rapidly forced authorities to address issues regarding homelessness and disused properties. Squatting was controversial, but drew legitimacy from the existence of formal requisitioning processes as well as the involvement of service people and their families. In many, but not all, cases, squatting was initiated, supported and carried out on behalf of homeless families by groups led by military veterans and organised along committee lines. Action and support for it were encouraged by rising expectations and decreasing deference on the part of working-class communities as well as widespread experiences of housing deprivation and the experience and exigencies of economic and social life during a period of total war.

Given these factors, a short burst of informal requisitioning activity appears to have been all that was required to stimulate reform. The promise or enactment of improvements in official processes came within three weeks of the first squats in the UK and within a week of such activity in Sydney and Melbourne. These responses appear to have been the main factor in demobilising further organised squatting activity in the short term, although police action against the Brighton Vigilantes, and threats of it in Australia, probably played a role. Squatting nevertheless continued to occur at a low level in both countries during late 1945 and early 1946.
Major squatting waves erupted in both countries during 1946. The factors that had encouraged squatting during 1945 were intensified by a further population spike and distress at the housing conditions that accompanied major demobilisation. Opportunities to meet demand via squatting were significantly widened by the emptying-out of military properties and the failure of the authorities to immediately reassign them. In the UK, tens of thousands of people squatted in rural and peri-urban military camps from the middle of the year. In Australia, where the practice was arguably more contained by state governments moving quickly to officially designate camps as temporary housing, roughly 1,000 did so, particularly in and around Brisbane.

In most cases, the authorities were subsequently forced to recognise tenancy via existing requisitioning rules or new processes. In contrast to the actions of the previous year, the majority of occupations in the UK were undertaken on an ad hoc basis. Although committees would later emerge to deal with common issues, people requiring housing generally squatted in the camps themselves, with housing generally assigned on a ‘first come, first served’ basis.

Opportunities for squatting within heavily urbanised areas also expanded, often as a result of the emptying-out of properties that governments had previously requisitioned for military and industrial purposes. The housing crisis also saw holiday homes, hotels and other intermittently occupied properties targeted. A campaign in September 1946 that saw 1,500 people housed in mainly upmarket apartments in London was initiated and run by Communist Party members, some of whom were squatting themselves. In Australia, veterans’ and Communist Party groups, sometimes one and the same, also occupied mansions and other city properties from March 1946 onwards, before assigning housing on the basis of need. The form of organisation involved in squatting in these cases cleaved more closely to that used in 1945.

Expanding need and opportunity, as well as a fresh wave of newspaper and newsreel reports, undoubtedly provided the main impetus for the 1946 waves of action. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the actions of vigilantes the year before, and the widespread and international coverage they had gained, provided a model of action that many adopted. In a small number of cases, such as in Brighton in the UK, where Cowley and his associates were active from March 1946, the same activists were involved. Various media reports in both countries during 1946 made the link between the two periods, and in some cases initially applied the term ‘vigilante’ to those involved. As the level of activity continued to grow, this was soon displaced by the term ‘squatter’, which remains in
use today. It is possible in the UK that the term ‘vigilante’ fell out of use because of its adoption by former fascists for a new organisation called the Vigilantes Action League, whose meetings were disrupted by communists in March 1946 and from whom the anti-fascist Brighton Vigilantes disassociated themselves.89

Notes

1. I am grateful to Professor Stuart MacIntyre and Professor Charlie Fox for their feedback on a draft of this chapter.
6. The figure regarding overall dwellings is based on the 1933 census, as the next was not held until 1947. The figure can be considered fairly accurate due to the lack of house-building that occurred from 1933 onwards, although dwellings lost to slum clearance may have lowered it slightly: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 36 (1944–5) (Canberra: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1945), 492; Annette Saunders, Housing the People: Victoria Park Camps 1945 to 1960 (Brisbane: Applied History Centre, University of Queensland, 1999), 10–11.


24. ‘Vacant Flat for Soldier’s Wife’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 July 1945, 8.


27. ‘Vigilantes Interview with Guardian’, *Guardian*, 10 August 1945, 1.


29. ‘Suggests March on Empty House’, *Sun*, 8 April 1945, 2.


42. ‘Direct Action to Solve Housing Shortage’, *Advertiser*, 4 July 1945, 7.


47. ‘Vigilantes Call to Government’, *Manchester Guardian*, 9 July 1945, 5.


54. ‘Better British Housing’, *Sunday Mail*, 22 July 1945, 2.


60. See, for example: ‘Direct Action to Solve Housing Shortage’, *Advertiser*, 4 July 1945, 7; ‘Shortage of Houses’, *Age*, 23 July 1945, 1; ‘Checks to Vigilantes’, *Courier-Mail*, 11 July 1945, 2.


64. ‘Vigilantes Take Action’, *West Australian*, 6 August 1945, 6.


66. ‘Mayor Orders Search for Empty Homes for Diggers’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1945, 3.


69. ‘Two Ex-Soldiers after Same House’, *Daily Advertiser*, 7 August 1945, 2.

70. The number of articles is indicated by a search of Australian newspapers using the Trove archive (https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper) on 1 August 2018, using the term ‘vigilante’, applied to dates from 4 August to 11 August 1945, and removing results unrelated to the events covered in this chapter. In comparison with media coverage the following year, articles from Australia and the UK during 1945 do not appear to feature the terms ‘squatting’ or ‘squatters’. In both countries, with the Australian media probably influenced by previous stories regarding the UK, they primarily employ the terms ‘seizure’ and ‘vigilantes’.

71. ‘Comment’, *Observer*, 22 July 1945, 4.

72. ‘Vigilantes Interview with Guardian’, *Guardian*, 10 August 1945, 1.

73. ‘Council put to Help Homeless Servicemen’, *Telegraph*, 6 August 1945, 3.

74. ‘Ultimatum to Premier: New Move by Vigilantes’, *Age*, 6 August 1945, 3.

75. ‘No Room for Vigilantes’, *Advertiser*, 7 August 1945, 1.


77. ‘Vigilantes’ Action Described as Anarchy’, *Canberra Times*, 8 August 1945, 2; ‘Cabinet Considers Compulsory Letting of Homes’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 1945, 7.

79. ‘Vigilantes Action Described as Anarchy’, *Canberra Times*, 8 August 1945, 2.


