

Why did Australia fight in Vietnam?

Retro 2, p. 202-203. One land many stories, p. 182-183

Inquiry question.

Why was Australia involved in the Vietnam War?

How did various groups respond to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War?

From 1962 until 1972 Australia was involved in the Vietnam War. Approximately 47 000 Australian men and a large number of women served there. The decision to commit troops to the conflict centred on the fear of communism.

Why did Australia become involved in the War?

The two main alliance agreements establishing Australia security were:

- _____

- _____

The Korean War had reinforced the sense of a monolithic communist system but had also been a big step in securing a firm alliance for Australia with the United States.

The strong anti-communist stand taken by the Menzies Liberal government in the 1950s and 1960s led to Australia taking an active part in the politics of the East Asian region. We sent armed forces to Korea, as part of a United Nations force. To stop the advance of North Korea and Chinese communism. We also sent forces to Malaya to help Britain control the communist insurgents there and we were very supportive of General Soeharto's overthrow of the 'pro-communist' Sukarno regime in Indonesia.

After Australia's experience with the Japanese in WWII, we were prepared to support any United States action against what we might see as an aggressor in Asia, like communism. The Menzies government also believed in the 'domino theory', which said that if one country in South-East Asia falls to communism, they will all fall, until communism reaches Australia, which will also fall.

In 1951 Menzies had warned Australia to be prepared for a war against Soviet communists within three years. In August of that year, compulsory military training and universal conscription was introduced.

In 1955, Australian troops were sent to Malaya to assist the British against communist guerrilla forces. In March 1960, the Indonesian president, Sukarno, claimed the Dutch controlled territory of West Papua New Guinea for an independent Indonesia. Strong communist influences in the Indonesian government gave rise to a sense of threat and communist aggression.

Where did Australian troops
get sent to help battle
communism?
(inc years)

The outbreak of war in Vietnam was seen as further communist aggression. For many Vietnamese the division into north and south was artificial. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, the people had struggled against Japan in WWII and for their efforts had been promised independence by the Americans. But after WWII the Americans supported the return of the French because of the Allies agreement that all colonies would be returned to their colonial rulers.

When was Australia involved in the war in Vietnam?

Why was Menzies so worried about communism coming to South East Asia?

What part did communism play in the Menzies government's view of East and South East Asia?

Australia's involvement: All the way with LBJ

Retro 2, p. 204-205. One land many stories, p. 183

Vietnam lies north-east of Australia and is part of a region that Europeans called French Indochina.

In Australia, the defence policy was dominated by the idea that sending troops overseas to fight against potential enemies was the best way to prevent a war being fought on our soil.

The French had lost control of Vietnam as the Communist forces defeated the French in a battle. A ceasefire agreement was signed, and Vietnam was divided. The communist Viet Minh were to control the North and a government friendly to the Americans was to control the South. America was followed by its allies.



Who were America's allies?

In 1963 Diem (non-communist) was assassinated and the situation in Vietnam became chaotic. Australia already had a handful of advisers to help train the South Vietnamese army, but in 1965 the government decided to send a battalion of combat troops and the HMAS Sydney. The Labor Opposition condemned the move, although there was support at this stage from a majority of Australians. In 1966 the Liberal government was re-elected and Harold Holt was the leader of this party as he replaced the retired Minister Menzies.

Harold Holt was famous for his quote '*All the way with LBJ*'. LBJ being Lyndon Baines Johnson, the US president. This statement sums up the attitude of most Australians at the time and it was the basis of Australia's defence policy.

As the war progressed, Australia supplied more forces. We sent support units like artillery to back up the infantry. NZ also sent artillery units to Vietnam. At the wars height Australia had 3800 soldiers, sailors and airmen in Vietnam. We suffered 424 dead and almost 3000 wounded, mostly by land mines and small arms fire.

Australia was fairly successful in pacifying Phuoc Tuy Province, our area of responsibility, but the Vietcong were always there and merely resurfaced when we left.

This war was not like others with clear 'good guys' and clear 'bad guys'. Many, including Australians at home, saw us as the Americans as the bad guys and this was very confusing and demoralising for the people serving in the war zone.

There is no evidence that South Vietnam was actively looking for Australian participation in the war, a 'request' from South Vietnam was manufactured to meet the needs of the government so the government can become legitimately involved. But this 'request' was sent after the decision was made to send troops.

Why did the Australian government become involved?

President Lyndon Baines Johnson arrived in Australia in October 1966. He was the first American Head of State to arrive in Australia and so he was given a welcome usually reserved for royalty. Minister Holt had declared to LBJ "*you have an admiring friend, a staunch friend that will be all the way with LBJ*". Thousands welcomed him, but thousands also opposed to the war were also out in the streets with banners demanding an end to the war in Vietnam.

Later in 1966, the Australian people re-elected the Liberal government, and this was seen in support of the war, so the numbers of troops sent to Vietnam was increased.

Why was Vietnam divided in 1954?

When were Australian combat troops first sent to Vietnam?

How many troops did Australia commit during the war?

How did all the domestic and international politics of the 1950s contribute to Australia's decision to commit forces to Vietnam?

Why would the timing of the announcement that the government was sending troops to Vietnam been open to criticism?

Why was Harold Holt's policy of 'All the way with LBJ' unpopular with many Australians?

Vietnamese and other Communist powers, the Viet Cong has been preparing on a more substantial scale than hitherto insurgency action to destroy South Vietnamese Government control, and to disrupt by violence the life of the local people ... We have not, of course, come to this decision without the closest attention to the question of defence priorities. We do not and must not overlook the point that our alliances, as well as providing guarantees and assurances for our security, make demands upon us ... Assessing all this, it is our judgement that the decision to commit a battalion in South Vietnam represents the most useful additional contribution which we can make to the defence of the region at this time. The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia ...



Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 29 April 1965, vol. 45, pp. 1060-1.



'At the Quartermaster's Store'.

Source 1: What argument did Menzies use to send troops to Vietnam?

What argument did Menzies use to send troops to Vietnam? in cartoons like this one by Norman Hetherington ('Heth') in 1965. The Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, is depicted as having given all our supplies to the United States.

Source 2: What does this source suggest about our relationship with America?

Source 3: What criticism of Australia's 'forward defence' policy if being expressed?

Source 3



Cartoon by William G. Rushton, 1966. Fighting against communism well beyond Australian borders was called 'forward defence'. It was a policy that many Australians became critical of as the anti-war movement gained support.

The Vietnam War splits the nation

Retro 2, p. 206-207. One land many stories, p. 185-186

The 1960s social revolution

The war must be seen in the context of a society that was going through a social revolution. The same time as the war, we saw 'liberated sixties' with its long haired hippies, love-ins and 'make love not war' type slogans. It is probable that the hippie movement was partly a reaction to the war and its horrors as seen on nightly television news.

The Vietnam War was seen by many people, especially the younger generation, as representing something from the past. Ways of the old John Wayne brand of aggression and the American anti-communism ways that they thought just did not work anymore. As well as this, the new generation was better educated, and students were enrolling on one of the many universities that had sprung up in Australia.

Anti-war and anti-conscription groups

At first, in 1965, few Australians even knew where Vietnam was. But when 20 year-old conscripted men would fight in the war, people began to sit up and take note.

Australia was divided over our involvement in the Vietnam War. Debate about the wisdom of our involvement in Vietnam raged from the day that the government announced Australia's commitment to the war effort sending a battalion of troops to Vietnam. As the war developed and the nature of the war became known, people began to question the war and Australia's role. Australia's anti-war movement was strongly connected to protest against conscription, or 'National Service' as it was called.

Conscription was a controversial issue and it continued to arouse passions during the Vietnam War. In 1950 Menzies has introduced a limited form of conscription requiring 3 months full-time training and home service. This system was abandoned in 1958, but was reintroduced in 1964. When they reached their 20th birthday, all males had to register for National Service. Men were then chosen by a birth date lottery to serve for 2 years, there was a 1 in 10 chance of being selected.'

In 1966, Harold Holt announced that conscripts would be sent to fight in Vietnam. In May 1966, the first conscripted soldier was killed in action. Early protests against conscription had come from religious groups and members of the Australian Communist party.

Conscription soon became a focus of the anti-war movement, with protest organisations urging men not to register and to resist the call-up of 'draft'. Exemption from National Service could be granted if a person could prove that he was a pacifist (a person who opposes in principle all war or violence) then he could lodge a conscientious objection to service. The consequence for others was a two year jail sentence.

Youth Against Conscription and Save Our Sons were formed in 1964 to protest against the continuation of conflict. This was still a majority movement, but the protests became more extreme and widespread after the 1966 election and the return of the Liberal/Country Party.

As the war 'hotted up' in the next few years more Australians died, half of them conscripts or 'nasho', opposition to the war grew to the point where, in the Vietnam Moratoriums of 1970 and 1971, the streets of the major cities were closed as over 200 000 people demonstrated against the war. The Moratoriums (a general suspension or cessation of something) public leader was Dr Jim Cairns, a Labor Party member.

There were many groups who organised opposition the war. They included:

- _____

- _____

-
-
-

Support for the War

Support came mainly from the older generation. The men and women who had lived through the Second World War saw America as the 'big brother' who had saved us from the Japanese when the British could not. They expected that the new generation would 'do its bit' as they had done. The Returned Services League (RSL) became outspoken about the war critics of the 'long-haired layabouts' and the 'great unwashed', as the younger generation was often called.

Besides the RSL, both the Liberal and the Country Party (today called the National Party) were supportive of the war. Their foreign policy as very much tied to the United States, and, if anything, they thought Australia needed to pay its insurance policy and help the United States in case one day we needed help.