

We need a command of Japanese! - Flows of knowledge between Japan and Australia during WWII

Yasuko Hassall Kobayashi

Wars often destroy our lives physically and psychologically. But at the same time, wars also create different flows (mobilities) of knowledge, people and capital. Through these mobilities, different social spaces are created which would not have happened otherwise. This presentation pays attention to how the value of Japanese language shifted in Australia during WWII.

The primary aim of the Pacific War for the Allied forces was to conquer the Empire of Japan. This required the gathering of information regarding the Japanese Imperial Army, a difficult task taken on by the Allied military intelligence. It is well known that the US military force created an intelligence sector, Allied Translation and Interpretation Service (ATIS), to gather information about Japan and also to better understand the incomprehensible psychology of Japanese soldiers.

Though it is not much mentioned, this important military intelligence agency, ATIS, was in fact set up in Australia, in Melbourne (and later on it moved to Brisbane), when General Douglas MacArthur moved to Australia from the Philippines. It began with a handful of Australian 'linguists'. How did they obtain Japanese personnel who had a command of Japanese, so they could read the language and obtain key information? Australia did provide a few Japanese language courses for Australian students at University level before WWII, but such courses were not sufficient to provide enough human capital. Consequently, Australian military intelligence was forced to scavenge for personnel with a sufficient command of the Japanese language. Ironically, the value of the enemy's language saw its height during WWII, and Australia also obtained much information about the enemy country Japan, through their interrogations of Japanese Prisoners of War.

Although Australia is often left out of the narrative of WWII in Japan, the two nations were in fact connected through flows of knowledge and people beyond Asia. This presentation will focus on this overlooked history to reconsider the space of Asia and the Pacific during WWII. And by doing so, it will also show that mobilities/flows of knowledge create different spaces from those of state relations.