The war to end all wars: 

Honouring the dead by learning the lessons

“The war to end all wars” ushered in a century of violence on an unprecedented scale. A hundred years on, the lessons to be learnt appear buried beneath a barrage of commemorative activities.

MAPW believes that Australia could best honour those who died by learning from the past. This series of papers outlines our failure to do so, and some ways forward.
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Cover art - Gassed is a 1919 painting by John Singer Sargent about the WWI mustard gas attacks
http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/2143

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3. The War Profiteers - World War I

Image - Munitions workers painting shells at the National Shell Filling Factory in Chilwell, Nottinghamshire.
The War Profiteers: WW1
Douglas Newton

In the decade before the Great War, the nations of the world spent vast sums on armaments – that were meant to achieve security and deter war. A vast raid on the public coffers took place, enriching fragments of the economy, at the expense of the rest. The European Powers roughly doubled their spending on armies. All had plans for war that were ‘increasingly offensive’.

This created a huge vested interest in armed preparation. Not surprisingly, that vested interest sought to influence political decisions and budgetary priorities. It spawned lobbies and leagues to boost the dogma of armed preparedness. Supposedly, only unmatched power could keep the peace.

Private arms and shipbuilding firms became gigantic enterprises. They wielded enormous power. In Germany, the leading firm was Krupp. In Britain, three great firms dominated, Vickers, Armstrong, and the Coventry Ordnance Works. Austria-Hungary had the famous Skoda works, France the Schneider-Creusot works, Russia the Putilov factory. These firms had many international links, such as that between Vickers and Harvey United Steel in the USA.

As owning the ‘kill chain’ became immensely lucrative, a culture of corruption developed. Personnel moved frequently between the arms firms and the war ministries. Scandals multiplied. For example, in 1913 Krupps was found guilty of bribing German war ministry officials to dish rival firms. Similarly, in 1914 Vickers was implicated in bribing Japanese officials to secure naval contracts.

Periodic scaremongering fuelled arms spending. Powerful interests orchestrated these scares. In Britain in 1907, Lord Esher, a defence planner, told Admiral Fisher that ‘An invasion Scare is the mill of God which grounds you out a Navy of Dreadnoughts, and keeps the British people war-like in spirit.’ In 1909 naval hysteria erupted when the manager of the Coventry Ordnance Works claimed to have evidence of German accelerated shipbuilding. ‘Meanwhile we have been in the throes of a naval scare. Well engineered, it will bring us our eight dreadnoughts,’ wrote Esher.

The European firms exported arms, and sold designs, to many nations. For example, in December 1913 Vickers announced that it had gained a fifteen-year concession to build the ‘Russian Artillery Works Company’ in Russia. By 1914 Krupp estimated that over half of its gun production over the preceding decade was exported. Before 1914, the expanding Japanese navy, so feared by naval defence planners in Australia, was mostly British-built.

The export of arms meant that weapons supplied by one nation might be turned against it in wartime. The arms build-up in Turkey before 1914 provides a case study. Germany and Britain were rivals there. In December 1913 Vickers and Armstrong gained a thirty-year contract to equip the Turkish arsenal and manage all naval shipbuilding. British firms were completing two battleships in British yards for Turkey when war broke out in 1914. Britain promptly seized both ships.

But the Germans were far ahead in Turkey. So, when war erupted, it was Krupp artillery that dominated the Gallipoli peninsula. Nonetheless, British-made arms were there also. Vickers had supplied all ammunition for the British-built Turkish battleship Mesudiye. Three of her Vickers guns were deployed as on-shore batteries. Thus, British-made shells and guns were among those confronting British and French ships in the Dardanelles in February and March 1915. It is possible that some British-made mines were among the 403 mines laid by the Turks there – British naval officers certainly believed so.

Of course, the outbreak of the First World War boosted the immense power of the war industries. This was obvious even in the neutral United States. From 1914, a vast trade in war-related supplies – and loans to support it – exploded across the Atlantic. American trade with Europe almost tripled from 1914 to 1916. Owing to the British naval blockade of Germany, this trade was overwhelmingly with the Entente Powers (Britain, France and Russia). President Wilson’s administration dared not challenge this ‘war boom’. US neutrality came under intense pressure when German submarines threatened the trade. This was undoubtedly a factor in the US decision to enter the war in April 1917.

When the war ended, Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary in 1914, looked back in his memoirs at the whole sorry record of vast armaments that failed to achieve security or deter war. He concluded: ‘The moral is obvious: it is that great armaments lead inevitably to war’.

Dr Douglas Newton taught history at Macquarie University, Victoria University of Wellington New Zealand, and was an Associate Professor in European History at the University of Western Sydney from 1991 to 2008. His two most recent books are Hell-bent: Australia’s Leap into the Great War (Melbourne: Scribe, 2014) and The Darkest Days: The Truth Behind Britain’s Rush to War, 1914 (London: Verso, 2014).
6. 'Armaments for Russia', The Times, 4 December 1913.
7. 'Turkish Naval Dockyards', The Times, 3 December 1913 and 'Reorganisation of the Turkish Navy', The Times, 4 December 1913.
4. The International Arms Trade Now

Peter Wigg
The International Arms Trade Now

Peter Wigg

The current $70 billion international arms trade is larger, and more aggressive in its marketing, than at any previous time in history, flooding the world’s trouble spots with weapons. This includes everything from warships, battle tanks, and fighter jets, to machine guns and ammunition, frequently stockpiled and poorly stored. 2,000 people die in armed conflict somewhere in the world every day; and for every death there are many more people maimed, disfigured or dispossessed. The vast majority are civilians. Nineteen countries use tens of thousands of child soldiers. Others engage in ethnic cleansing, or persecution of minority groups. Some governments, such as that of Saudi Arabia, buy many times more arms than they can use, and sell them on to other countries in their region. Others, such as that of Papua New Guinea, fail to act when army and police personnel sell weapons on to civilians, including criminal gangs, with disastrous consequences.

The UN is repeatedly confronted with the negative impacts of this global situation. The ready availability of weapons leads not only to human suffering, political repression and crime, but also the destabilisation of whole regions. Investment is discouraged, and the peaceful work of the UN is repeatedly undermined in delivering food aid, improving public health, eradicating poverty, protecting refugees, and so on. Addressing the UN Security Council on this subject in 2014, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declared: ‘The world is over-armed and peace is under-funded.’ Main players in the sale of arms, however, are permanent members of the UN Security Council, with the power to veto anything restricting their actions.

Remarkably, this trade is largely uncontrolled compared to that of other internationally-traded commodities. Although some governments have rules regarding arms exports, enforcement is generally weak or non-existent. Even Security Council arms embargoes are routinely violated. For the most part the arms trade is an international free-for-all – a lawless zone, determined only by what is financially profitable and/or politically expedient. Until the recent establishment of the Arms Trade Treaty, we have never asked those who manufacture and distribute arms, or their governments, to take account of the consequences, nor to discriminate in whom they sell their products to. Yet a private arms industry cannot be counted on to place national security, peace or human rights interests above the pursuit of profit. In fact, a sales-driven arms industry is best served by the undermining of these very concerns.

The arms trade is also remarkably corrupt, accounting for 40% of all corruption in international trade. Brokers of arms sales are often also involved in drug trafficking and people trafficking. Yet governments of countries producing arms – including the US, Russia, Germany, France and the UK – promote deals on behalf of the manufacturers, turning a blind eye to corruption, and supplying incentive payments themselves. Poor countries with limited finances for health, education and transport, such as Tanzania and South Africa, for example, have been induced by such payments to spend inordinate amounts on high tech weaponry.

The trade is also characterised by secrecy and a consequent lack of public scrutiny. Deals enabling arms exports from Australia, for example, are almost all classed as ‘commercial in confidence’. Even MPs asking questions in parliament obtain limited information. The mass media in Australia rarely mention the subject, despite its global importance. Arms sales between governments are used, in fact, as a sort of secret diplomacy; governments enable sales, or purchases, in return for favours.

In this bleak landscape, a significant milestone was achieved, in December 2014, when the Arms Trade Treaty came into effect. Signatory countries commit to assessing the likely results of arms transfers and blocking them where there is an overriding risk of serious human rights violations. Australia has signed and ratified the Treaty.

Though a hopeful sign, there remains much work to be done, especially in encouraging additional countries to accede to the Treaty and to ensure that states parties implement their obligations. It is imperative that the current flood of weapons to actual or potential armed conflict zones ceases, and that other means of resolving conflicts be relentlessly pursued.

Dr Peter Wigg is a psychiatrist and current convenor of the Victorian branch of the Medical Association for Prevention of War. He has a particular interest in the causes of armed conflict and its avoidance and the international arms trade. Between 2009 and 2012 he worked on Doctors Without Borders projects, treating victims of armed conflict in the Middle East and Sri Lanka.
3. IHS, Global Defence Trade Report (IHS Inc, 2015)
4. GunPolicy.org, Papua New Guinea – gun fact, figures and the law (University of Sydney, 2015)
6. Barnaby Pace, Corruption in the arms trade: money making in the shadows (fairobserver.com, 2013)
“There is really only one story worth telling about the Great War: it was a common European tragedy – a filthy, disgusting and hideous episode of industrialised killing. Not the first, and not the last. It was unredeemed by victory. The uplifting element of the story lies in the struggle to avert it.” Douglas Newton, in “The Darkest Days: The truth behind Britain’s rush to war, 1914”

MAPW:
The Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia) is a professional not-for-profit organisation that works to promote peace and disarmament. MAPW aims to reduce the physical, psychological and environmental impacts of wars. We have branches in every state and territory in Australia.