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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>To be published:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Australia in WW1: Grieving and Divided</td>
<td>Joan Beaumont</td>
<td>early June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Devastating Aftermath: Australia’s War Legacy</td>
<td>Ross McMullin</td>
<td>early June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The War Profiteers: WW1</td>
<td>Douglas Newton</td>
<td>early July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The International Arms Trade Now</td>
<td>Peter Wigg</td>
<td>early July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Civilians and War - Then and Now</td>
<td>Sue Wareham, Amanda Ruler</td>
<td>early August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. From Gas to Nukes: Banning the World’s Worst Weapons</td>
<td>Tim Wright</td>
<td>early August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. We’ll Be There: How Australia Decides To Go To War</td>
<td>Paul Barratt</td>
<td>early September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Australia and War – the US’s Quiet Accomplice</td>
<td>Richard Tanter</td>
<td>early September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lost Opportunities for Peace</td>
<td>Daryl Le Cornu</td>
<td>early October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The Illusion of Victory</td>
<td>Ian Bickerton</td>
<td>early October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Commemoration and the ‘Normalising’ of War</td>
<td>David Stephens</td>
<td>early November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. A Century On, Seizing the Opportunities for Peace</td>
<td>John Langmore</td>
<td>early November</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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
9. Lost Opportunities for Peace

Daryl Le Cornu
Once at war, the opposing great power coalitions threw all their resources and manpower into what they hoped would be a quick and decisive victory. Meanwhile, there was a significant minority on both sides who were opposed in principle to what they saw as a war fought in the interests of the political elites. They believed that a continuation of the war would wreak havoc on the lives of the vast majority of the people of Europe. For the duration of the war these people proposed a negotiated peace based on democracy, disarmament and a reformed international system.

In Britain, the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), formed in September 1914, advocated a negotiated end to the war based on the democratic control of foreign policy (which included no secret treaties), the formation of an international council (later called a ‘league of nations’) and disarmament. These UDC principles were held in common by a wide variety of ‘peace groups’ throughout the War.

The International Women’s Congress (IWC) held at The Hague in neutral Holland in April-May 1915, attended by over 1200 participants from 14 countries, articulated the most thorough plan for an early end to the war. The IWC’s 20-Point Plan elaborated on the UDC principles and added women’s suffrage and an international court. Two delegations of women personally presented the 20-Point plan to leaders of both the neutral and belligerent countries, followed up by meetings with US President Woodrow Wilson in which they implored him to lead the neutral nations in a public push for mediation.

In May 1916 President Wilson committed the United States, still a neutral, to the establishment of a ‘league of nations’ at the end of the War and made the ‘league of nations’ a key plank of his election platform in November. By the end of 1916, with war weariness having an impact on the populations of both sides, the prospect of a negotiated peace and the idea of a ‘league of nations’ were being contemplated in some official circles.

The dramatic announcement of the German and American Peace Notes in December 1916 heightened expectations that peace may be within grasp. President Wilson put both sides under further pressure in his ‘Peace Without Victory’ speech to the US Senate on the 22 January 1917 in which he made a forceful case for a negotiated settlement and a ‘league of nations.’

During 1917 there were a number of developments that held out the promise of an early negotiated end to WW1: the Russian Provisional government proposed a conference to revise Allied war aims (to make a negotiated settlement with Germany more likely); a proposed conference in Stockholm for socialists from both sides to discuss terms of peace; and the Reichstag Peace Resolution of July 1917. Then in August 1917 Pope Benedict proposed a concrete 8-Point plan based on a return to the status quo regarding territory and colonies, as well as a ‘league of nations’ and disarmament.

In addition to public pleas for peace there were a number of secret peace initiatives, the most significant being the Kühlmann Peace Feeler of September-October 1917. German foreign minister Kühlmann proposed to the British a deal that would see Germany restore Belgium in return for Germany and Austria-Hungary losing no territory and the end to Allied plans for an anti-German commercial war after the war.

In the last two months of 1917 the public spotlight was on the United States and the new Bolshevik leadership in Russia. Fighting ceased on the Eastern Front and in December the Bolshevik government made an offer of a six-point program for a general non-annexationist peace. This was rejected by the Allies and then nullified by the German-imposed Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918.

Meanwhile, President Wilson’s Fourteen Points Speech in January 1918 proposed a peace based on many of the principles that ‘peace groups’ had advocated since the beginning of the War. In October 1918 Germany accepted a peace based on Wilson’s Fourteen Points. However, at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference most of Wilson’s Fourteen Points were nullified in negotiations with the ‘Big Four’ Allied leaders (of the USA, Great Britain, France and Italy). Only the last point, the creation of the League of Nations, survived.

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10. The Illusion of Victory

Ian Bickerton

“PEACE” by Pavel Constantin
The Illusion of Victory

Ian Bickerton

Most people think that victory in wars brings lasting benefits to those who allegedly win. An appraisal of the social and political consequences of wars suggests that this is not the case. The so-called rewards of victory in modern warfare are either exaggerated or false. When we look at the ostensible benefits of victory a generation—say about 25 years—after a war has ended, it becomes inescapably evident that the circumstances and behaviour of the defeated belligerent rarely conforms to the demands and expectations of the victor. Consequently, long-term political and military stability, or a just and durable peace, are denied to the victorious power and to the defeated enemy.

Wars seldom produce amity. Victors seek to consolidate what they gained, and losers seek to regain what they have lost. Victors often have to spend huge sums on armaments and defence to maintain their position of superiority, and defeated enemies and victors alike often seek to realign themselves; and rather than peace, prosperity and growth, an uneasy armed truce prevails, which dissipates energies and resources that might have been utilized more productively. Victory is sometimes more expensive than defeat.

Despite six cataclysmic years of destructive global total war, World War II changed little in ideological terms and settled even less in territorial and geo-political arrangements. The war was fought ostensibly to contain Fascist expansionist dreams in Europe and Asia. However, almost immediately following the defeat of Italy, Germany, and Japan, the major allied victors resumed their pre-war suspicion and hostility toward each other. To the United States and the United Kingdom, and their lesser allies, Soviet Communism appeared an even greater threat than that formerly posed by Fascism. In China also, Mao Zedong and his victorious forces were regarded as a threat to the stability of East and South East Asia. Germany and Japan benefited from this process as capitalistic bulwarks against Communism.

The end of the war did not bring peace to either victor or vanquished. For the next half-century the world remained locked in an ideological contest and (nuclear) arms race - the Cold War. It brought misery, deprivation and terror to much of the world’s population. The United States expected to enjoy the benefits of “pax Americana” enforced by an overwhelming US military and economic superiority. But now the U.S. sees its own democratic institutions under threat at home, faces an economic challenge from an increasingly assertive awakening China, and finds itself engaged in a “War on Terror”.

The Soviet Union believed that the war had enabled it to achieve security on its Western front, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in 1991, the remnants of the Soviet republics found themselves politically chaotic and locked in ethnic and civil wars. Unified Germany, on the other hand, is revitalized and economically strong and politically stable.

The post-World War II phenomenon of defeated nations rising from the ashes to renewed prosperity, and the perpetuated insecurity of the victors, are characteristics of most—if not all—post-war periods in the 19th and 20th centuries. From the Anglo-French and Napoleonic wars of 1793-1815, major wars have invariably been followed by a revival and reassertion of power on the part of the “defeated” nations and a relative decline in the sense of security and economic predominance on the part of the victorious powers.

Wars no longer end with surrender ceremonies and ticker-tape parades. They end in a fog of ambiguity with uninvended consequences, and it is easier to discern what’s been sacrificed than what has been gained. Recent wars fought by the United States and its allies—including Australia—demonstrate this truism only too clearly. The biggest unforeseen development of our recent and present wars in the Middle East has been the rise of the Islamic State in the Levant and the increase in power and influence of Iran. It is hard to see how the United States, Australia, and the other allied powers have benefited from our so-called “victories” in the Middle East. It is time we adopted new, more creative, approaches to resolving conflicts.

Ian Bickerton is Honorary Associate Professor in the School of Humanities and Languages at the UNSW. He has taught in the US and elsewhere, subjects including modern US history, U.S. foreign relations and the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He has also written on warfare’s unintended consequences.
“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.