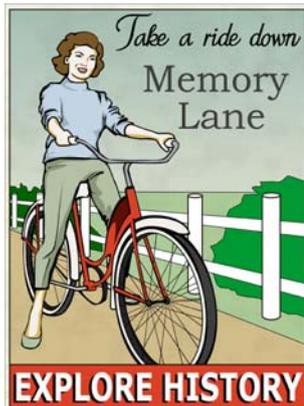




90 YEARS
1916-2006

RETURNED & SERVICES LEAGUE

WWW.SERVINGTHENATION.INFO



STUDYING DECADES: 1930s

This study of decades in Australian history will help you develop an understanding of key aspects of the period, the place of the returned servicemen and women in their society, and the role and influence of the RSL in shaping that Australian society.

This decade saw much of the world suffer a Great Depression.

Australia was, in many ways, one of the hardest hit nations economically; and yet we did not experience the social dislocation that occurred in some countries, such as Germany.

What was the experience of the returned soldiers during the Depression? Was their experience similar to or different from that of other Australians?

The key focus questions to consider are:

- *What happened to the returned soldiers during the Depression?*
- *Did they suffer more or less than others?*
- *How did the RSL help its members and other returned servicemen?*
- *Why was there no revolution in Australia during the Depression?*

The Price of Liberty is Eternal Vigilance

The Depression period is usually said to have begun with the collapse of the Wall Street stockmarket in the United States.

The collapse of the value of shares meant that many people lost the money they had invested. Many of these had financed their investments by borrowing from banks. Banks now began calling in their loans. Business went bankrupt or had to scale back, and this created unemployment. Unemployment meant fewer taxes were raised by governments, so they had less to spend, and had to cut back on their programs — leading to more unemployment. In Australia’s case, much of our economy was financed by international borrowing, particularly from Great Britain, and as governments had to pay off these loans that also meant less money was available to spend in Australia to try to stimulate the economy.

Look at Source 1 to see what this meant to Australia.

Source 1 Unemployment among trade unionists in each state and Australia 1923-38 (%)

YEAR	NSW	V	Q	SA	WA	T	AUST
1923	9.2	5.4	7.1	4.6	5.7	3.8	7.1
1924	12.6	7.1	6.4	4.6	5.5	3.8	8.9
1925	11.0	8.6	6.6	4.3	6.1	7.8	8.8
1926	7.4	6.4	8.4	5.2	7.1	13.9	7.1
1927	7.0	7.4	5.9	7.2	5.4	11.1	7.0
1928	11.3	10.9	7.0	15.0	8.2	10.6	10.8
1929	11.5	11.1	7.1	15.7	9.9	13.4	11.1
1930	21.7	18.3	10.7	23.3	19.2	19.1	19.3
1931	30.8	25.8	16.2	32.5	27.3	27.4	27.4
1932	32.5	26.5	18.8	34.0	29.5	26.4	29.0
1933	28.9	22.3	15.3	29.9	24.8	19.1	25.1
1934	24.7	17.4	11.7	25.6	17.8	17.9	20.5
1935	20.6	14.0	8.7	17.6	13.4	15.9	16.5
1936	15.4	10.7	7.8	10.8	8.1	12.7	12.2
1937	10.9	9.0	7.3	8.2	5.6	7.3	9.3
1938	9.9	8.6	6.4	8.3	5.7	7.9	8.7

Ray Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers*, University of Adelaide Press, 1978, page 13

- 1 If we say that Depression is a large increase in unemployment, when did the Depression start in Australia?
- 2 When did it end?
- 3 When was it at its worst?
- 4 Which state was most affected by it? Suggest reasons why.
- 5 Which was the state least affected by it? Suggest reasons why.
- 6 For how long did the worst of the Depression last?
- 7 While these unemployment figures are very high, most workers did not become unemployed. Why do you think the Depression experience might be different for different people?

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How did the Depression affect returned soldiers? Look at these sources and answer the questions that follow.

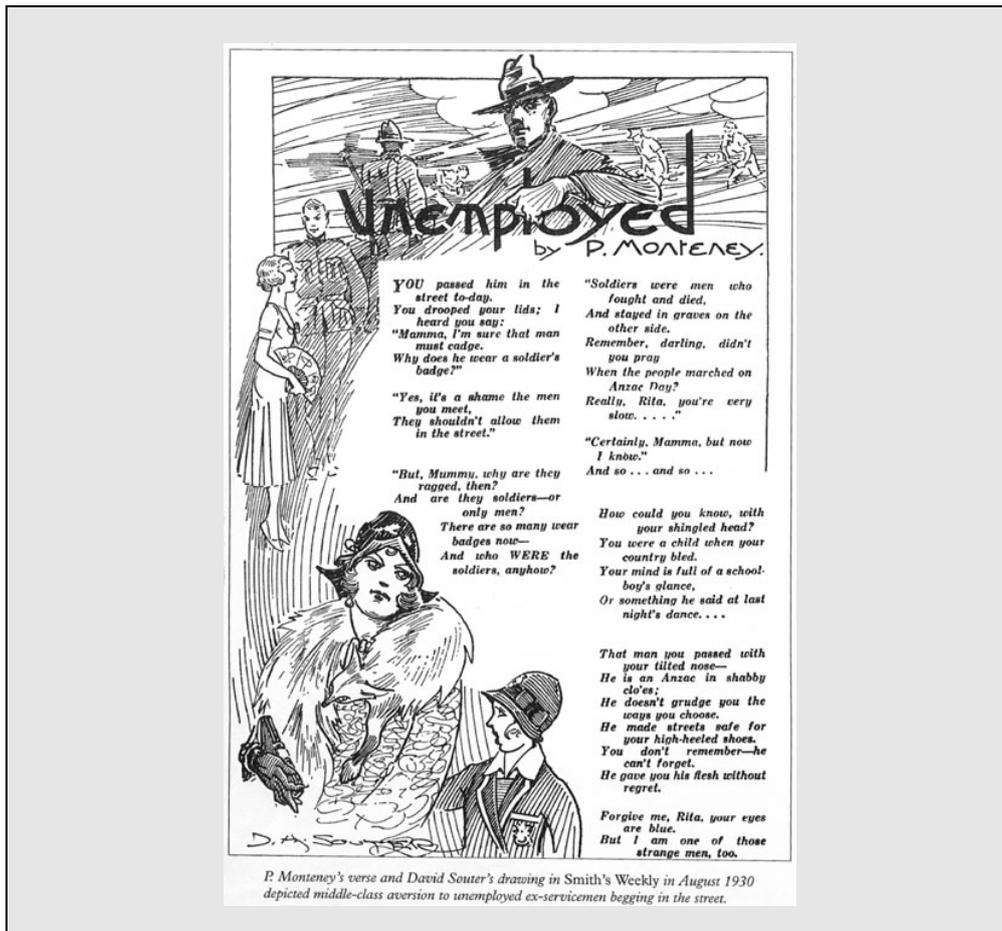
Source 2 Unemployed



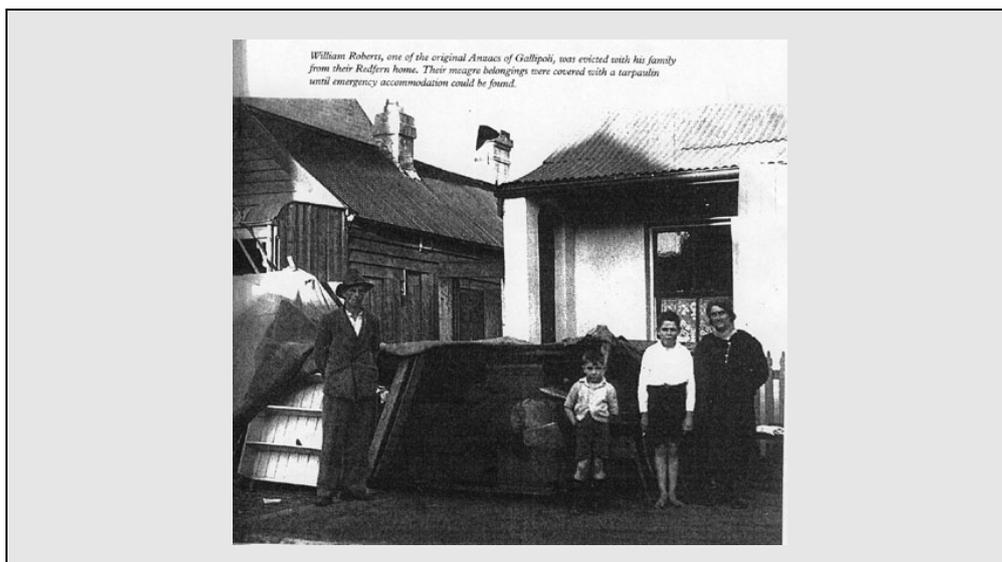
This ex-serviceman spent much of the Depression standing outside Sydney GPO with a placard begging for work.

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Source 3 Cartoon of unemployed



Source 4 Digger Evicted



Illustrations in Michael Cannon, *The Human Face of the Great Depression*, PO Box 598, Morningson 3931, 1996 pages 25, 79, 39,

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8 From this evidence about the experience of the returned soldiers, decide whether each of the following statements is likely to be true, false or cannot be known from the evidence:

- A Many soldiers were affected by the Depression True
 False
 Cannot tell from the evidence
- B All soldiers suffered during the Depression True
 False
 Cannot tell from the evidence
- C Soldiers were worse affected than others True
 False
 Cannot tell from the evidence
- D Soldiers' experiences in war would have helped them during the Depression True
 False
 Cannot tell from the evidence
- E The existence of the RSL would have helped soldiers during the Depression True
 False
 Cannot tell from the evidence

Now look at this additional evidence to see if it helps you with those statements.

Source 5 Extract from the minutes of a country RSL sub-branch

1930	9 Sept	Grant of £10 for the relief of unemployed Diggers.
	11 Nov	Provide half the wage of two unemployed Diggers for the rest of the year if the local Council will provide the other half.
1931	3 Nov	Members unable to pay their subscription will be made financial and treated as guests at all functions.
1932	12 Jul	Truckload of firewood sent to Williamstown RSL unemployed.
1934	9 Jan	Members to cut firewood for unemployed Diggers in Melbourne.

From JF Power (ed), *Sixty Years, Traralgon RSL sub-branch 1927-1987*, Traralgon, 1987

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- 9 How did this RSL sub-branch help?
- 10 Do you think other branches would have acted in a similar way? Why?
- 11 Do you think such actions would have made a difference?
- 12 Do you think such actions are evidence of good citizenship, or just of helping you own mates? Explain your ideas.

Source 6 An historian's claim

In his book *A Bad Smash. Australia in the Depression of the 1930s*, historian Geoff Spenceley, asks this question about the Depression: To what extent, if any, did the Depression actually lead to a deterioration of the quality of people's lives?

In answering the question, he makes these points:

- The Depression undoubtedly increased unemployment, especially among the working classes, and unemployment was a worrying and undesirable thing. For many it was undoubtedly both physically and psychologically devastating.
- However, most of this increased unemployment was for a relatively short time. Many people were used to periods of unemployment during the 1920s and had strategies to manage it. People have recorded such experiences as sharing with family or neighbours, scrounging wood or coal for fires, perhaps an occasional 'cash-in-hand' job for a friend, re-using and re-cycling rather than buying, keeping hens and growing some vegetables, doing a 'midnight flit' (leaving at night to avoid paying rent).
- Other means of help also existed — private charity was available to many, and the Government organised dole schemes whereby men received payment for some government work.
- In fact, he argues, it may be the middle classes, rather than the working classes, who suffered the greatest change to their daily way of life. For many middle class people the experience of unemployment was new and traumatic, and they did not have the methods and the culture to cope with it.
- Some people even benefited from the Depression — people on fixed wages, such as teachers, found that the buying power of their money actually increased.

13 Underline key points made in each dot points above.

14 We probably cannot know if Spenceley's claim is true or not; but we can speculate on whether it might be true, by thinking about the situation of the returned soldiers. In the table below list the elements that might have made the Depression experience easier for ex-soldiers than for others, and also those factors that might have made it more difficult. One example has been done in each case.

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Factors that might have made the Depression experience less severe	Factors that might have made the Depression experience more severe
Army life would have meant that ex-soldiers had experience of 'roughing it'.	Many ex-soldiers had physical and mental damage that made them more vulnerable.

There was also political unrest in Australia during the Depression.

In 1929 the Australian Labor Party had been elected to power. Prime Minister James Scullin did not seem to have the policies to deal with the Depression, and many people wanted to replace the government before the next election. This was in fact done with the New South Wales Labor Government led by JT Lang, who was 'sacked' by the Governor of NSW, Sir Phillip Game. Many were asking the question: would the Governor-General do the same thing to the Prime Minister? And if not the Governor-General, was there anybody else who might do so?

In some countries the answer was the returned soldiers. The existence of ex-soldiers helped create a revolutionary atmosphere — military-trained men, used to following orders from leaders, acting as a coherent body, capable of using force to achieve an end, with a desire to act for what they see as the good of the nation, then actually acting to bring about change.

Did this exist in Australia? Look at the following sources.

Source 7 An old man's memories

In 1980 historian Michael Cathcart met an old soldier settler who told him the story of what had happened one night in about 1931 in country Victoria:

I was out on the farm at the time. I got a call late one night. Be at Major Sproat's place, first thing in the morning. When we got there, we were told that we'd have to form an organisation to protect the town. We were all sworn to secrecy. They didn't know who it was: whether it was the communists or who. But we had to guard the bridges, and the main buildings, and things like that. We didn't know whether it was the Irish or the communists.

Harris was head man here. But he said that he didn't know. Some of us thought it was going to be the Catholics. And the Catholics were guarding the convent because they thought it was us.

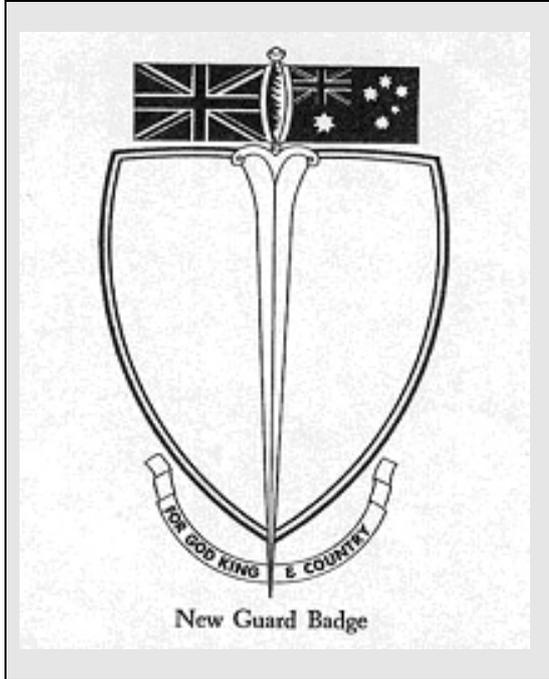
Whoever started [the rumour] should have been shot. We were so close to shooting each other that I wouldn't like to say. If one shot had been fired, the whole town would have been at it.

Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop. Australia's secret army intrigue of 1931*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988

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- 15 What does this story tell us about tensions in Australia in the period?
- 16 What does it tell us about the potential that existed for ex-servicemen to influence political affairs?

Source 8 The New Guard



One new organisation that started in 1931 in New South Wales had a large membership of ex-soldiers. It was the New Guard. The New Guard openly said that in time of civil unrest it was prepared to put armed men into the streets to seize control of the vital public utilities (communications, water, supply, gas and electricity supply) and maintain order.

Look at the New Guard's badge.

- 17 Identify the five symbolic elements in the badge.
- 18 What do these suggest were the main values of the New Guard?

Source 9 Other military organizations

The biography of Australia's greatest military leader in World War 1, General Sir John Monash, lists these organisations of returned soldiers as existing in the 1920s and 1930s:

- White Guard (a secret group)
- League of National Security
- Order of the Silent Knights
- Imperial Patriots
- Warringah Constitutional Club
- Knights of the Empire
- Empire Loyalty League

Many of the members of these organizations were returned soldiers and influential business leaders. Monash was called on several times to lead such groups of men in overthrowing the federal Labor government that was seen as causing or not being able to deal with the problems of the Depression. Monash refused, calling it 'treason'.

Adapted from Geoffrey Serle, *John Monash. A biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1982 pages 517-521

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19 What might have happened if Monash had agreed with these requests?

20 Is it 'treason' to seek to overthrow a legitimate government if you think its policies are wrong? Does it make a difference if the policies are illegal? Discuss your ideas. We know that these organizations of ex-servicemen did not try to seize power — but they might have. Why didn't they? Why was there no returned-servicemen led revolution in Australia to overthrow the Australian Labor Party government led by James Scullin?

21 Look at the following possible factors and explain in your own words why revolution did not occur.

Possible reason	Explanation
Every government that was in power in Australia 1931, the worst period of the Depression, was voted out at the next election.	
Governments were fairly quick to create a system of relief for the unemployed — involving food, clothing, firewood and limited work.	
While unemployment reached nearly one third at its peak, this peak only lasted a very short time.	
For many people unemployment was not a new experience, and they had effective strategies for reducing its impact on them.	
The potential leader of such a movement, Sir John Monash, would have nothing to do with it.	
While there were many unemployed, they were located in particular areas, and were not concentrated in numbers and place.	
Governments sent many unemployed, including some potential leaders, to country areas to work for the dole.	
Not all unemployed had the same aims and values. There were great differences between them and what they saw as being best for Australia.	

22 How would you now answer these questions posed at the start of this unit?

- **What happened to the returned soldiers during the Depression?**
- **Did they suffer more or less than others?**
- **How did the RSL help members and other returned servicemen?**
- **Why was there no revolution in Australia during the Depression?**

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