A serious battle was conducted on the home front in Australia during World War I. The home front was the boundary where trenches were dug against disloyalty and sedition, against those within who challenged the mainstream culture. One aspect of this battle was the increased monitoring of groups and individuals. This saw the passing of new legislation to empower the often disparate military and intelligence organizations. In several places a sharp juxtapositioning of the dominant conservative culture against marginalized ‘radical’ cultures occurred. There were several challenges to the dominant culture; the story of the Russians in Brisbane being one amongst many based on political causes. The formation and growth of an official club, the Russian Workers Association, gave these alienated working migrants an association and a voice. With time, this voice began to represent a very specific identity for Russians in Brisbane, and indeed wider Australia. This paper looks at the characterization of the Association and its members in selected intelligence documents. Taking an historical approach, I argue that a clash between the “language of bureaucracy” and the “language of revolution” pervaded the official treatment of the Russian Workers Association. Conclusions drawn from these documents confirm that the conservative intelligence culture overestimated the ‘threat’ posed by the Russians.

Many scholars have explored the home front battle in Queensland and the escalating conservative response to the threat of sedition. The RWA is examined by Raymond Evans in several key works that illuminate the social and political turmoil in Brisbane.3

1 This paper was presented to the Second Annual Rhizomes: Re-visioning Boundaries Conference of The School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies, The University of Queensland, in Brisbane, 24–25 February 2006.
2 To contact the author of this article, write to her at L.Curtis@griffith.edu.au
3 The term ‘Russian’ in this article refers to the State rather than to an ethnicity. The Russian Empire was highly multi-ethnic and religious and the Russians arriving in Brisbane were representative of this diversity. This Russian group in Brisbane will be referred to as the Russian Workers Association (RWA).
Queensland. Work by Boris Christa, Thomas Poole and Eric Fried bring to life the forgotten events of Russian activism in Australia. More recently, Elena Govor includes analysis of Brisbane radicals in *Australia in the Russian Mirror* and *Russian Anzacs*. Kevin Windle links Australian radicals with the Soviet Union through his examination of the career of ‘sailor, journalist and revolutionary’ Aleksandr Zuzenko.

This paper explores key trends in World War I censorship documents on the Russian Workers Association. A mismatch comes to light between the threat posed by the RWA and the assessment of any such threat by the intelligence complex. Official treatment is dismissive of the alternative perspective presented by Russian activists. At the height of suspicion, censors demonise radical politics and characterise Russians as criminals who are a danger to the community. This perception of the RWA was directly linked to the application of new wartime legislation, which implicitly perpetuated suspicion of and hostility towards non-British subjects. This paper argues that coordinated Federal censorship largely misunderstood and hence overestimated the RWA.

**Russians on the edge of the world**

Prior to World War I, Australia—like Britain—was sympathetic to political and religious exiles from the so-called last bastion of autocracy in Europe, particularly so after the abortive revolution of 1905. Settlers, exiles and escaped prisoners travelled via Siberia, journeying often with great difficulty over the border to Pacific ports. Japanese steamers provided passage to Asia and finally Australia, rumoured to have favourably lax entry controls. To give an indication of numbers, Evans cites 2,000 refugees entering Queensland between 1911 and 1914, joining the 800 Russians already present in the 1911 census. By 1918 the Queensland Russian community had approximately 4,000 of Australia’s 6,000 Russian residents. The majority of these

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10 It should be noted that I am not examining Russian activism in the 1920s or later connections with Comintern agents. The majority of primary texts for this analysis are from 1917 to 1919 or before.
11 One or two Russians even entered Queensland showing theatre programs in lieu of identity papers— the programs were dutifully processed by Brisbane officials! Solomon Stedman, ‘From Russia to Brisbane, 1913’, *Journal and Proceedings of the Australian Jewish Historical Society*, vol 9, 1959, p 22; Christa, ‘Russians’, p 637.
lived in Brisbane and exerted the strongest Russian influence in any city during this time.

The personalities and development of the RWA deserve detailed attention themselves, yet this is beyond the scope of this paper. Eric Fried has completed extensive work into the backgrounds and affiliations of Russians in Brisbane before and during the war.13 Not all Russians were political exiles or even activists; however, a very specific group of radical exiles operated through Brisbane. These Russians had a wide range of sometimes conflicting political affiliations and many had participated—some in commanding roles—in uprisings and subversive activities in Russia leading to trial and imprisonment. It was their influence that became increasingly dominant in the local Russian Club, formed in January 1911. Originally a moderate organization aiming to support newly arrived compatriots, its leadership had changed by December that year and F.A. Sergeyev (the experienced career Bolshevik, Artem) directed the future of the Association. In 1912, the name had been changed to the Union of Russian Emigrants and an even more class-orientated title adopted in 1915, Union of Russian Workers. This same Association—albeit under several different leaders (namely Nikolai Lagutin, Peter Simonoff and Aleksandr Zuzenko)—participated in the Red Flag March in 1919 and declared itself to be a Soviet in August of that year. The Russian Workers Association soon attracted the attentions of the Queensland Police through its members’ political speeches at Domain meetings and interaction with other socialist organisations. The RWA also published a series of strongly political newspapers.14 Of particular relevance to the censorship process was the stream of letters in and out of the RWA’s PO Box 10, South Brisbane. Censored correspondence reveals that Russians interested in the RWA were in every state in the Commonwealth. To some concerned intelligence agents, this amounted to a coordinated national network of malcontents needing to be closely monitored.

The behaviour of Russians with political ties in Brisbane was similar to that of Old World immigrants in the New World elsewhere. In his study of the Red Scare, Robert Murray points to the formation ‘autonomous groups of proletarian immigrants speaking the same language and having the same ethnic background’ operating within socialist groups in the United States.15 Recently arrived immigrants tended to translate economics, politics, class and law in terms of a European setting. Sally Miller notes that politically conscious immigrants from the Old World brought with them a ‘much more pronounced class spirit characteristic of professional revolutionaries than had been present before’.16 Their perceptions had been shaped by the oppressive classroom of their homelands. The situation of the radical immigrant in Australia is different from the American case in terms of sheer numbers, though not necessarily in revolutionary fervour.

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13 See Fried, ‘Russians in Queensland’.
14 Ekhov Avstrali [Echo of Australia], 1911–1914; Isvestia Soyusa Russikhh Emigrantov [Bulletin of the Union of Russian Emigrants], 1914–1915; Rabochaya Zhizn [Workers’ Life], 1915–1918; Znanie i Edinenie 1918, in English as Knowledge and Unity 1918–1921. Other related newspapers include Deviatyi Val [The Ninth Wave] and Nabat [The Alarm Bell].
16 Sally Miller, The Radical Immigrant, Twayne, New York, 1974, p 120.
The dominance of Bolsheviks in the Association confirmed long-standing suspicions about the immigrants. In 1912–13, for instance, concerns were raised about Asiatic Russians, especially those without passports. The Queensland police indicated that ‘about 75% of those alleged immigrants are of the criminal class’. Despite intelligence that ‘several Russian agitators, who were accustomed to the revolutionary methods carried on in Russia, were found to be advocating similar drastic measures here’ during the critical 1912 General Strike, an early precedent was set regarding the fledgling RWA: ‘it entirely consists of the criminal class’. This erroneous assessment by the Queensland police criminalised those who participated in political activism. Correspondence flowed between the State and Federal agencies; for Queensland, ‘the main thing [wa]s to shut them out’. Unfortunately for state officials, the Prime Minister’s office felt that ‘the non-possession [of a passport] may indicate nothing more than that the person was a political offender, who under the different conditions of Australian life might prove a desirable immigrant’. It was only a matter of time, however, before official suspicions were transformed into expressions of a formal intelligence gathering machine ‘securing the public safety and the defence of the Commonwealth’. The catalyst for this shift was the advent of the Great War.

Defence of the Commonwealth

In 1914 Parliament prepared Australia to defend the British Empire, surrendering once more to the pull of imperial allegiance. This time, however, the fight was in Europe and not some far-flung colonial outpost. This burden was not lost in three key pieces of wartime legislation that set up the parameters for the experiences of Russian activists, indeed any individual or group who challenged the loyalty of the home front. The War Precautions Act, and later the Unlawful Associations and Aliens Registration Acts, were highly significant in empowering the web of federal agencies that monitored and controlled opposition. This legislation changed the official treatment of foreigners—potential British enemies—in Australia. Once Australia might have been seen as an outpost where it was possible for foreigners (preferably white, healthy and able to work) to be assimilated. Now alien citizens were subject to an intense, coordinated exercise in surveillance.

Among other things, the War Precautions Act comprehensively targeted the movements and communications of aliens. The regulations aimed to counter enemy sabotage of the war effort by silencing unofficial interpretations of Australia’s participation. The detention of any person in military custody was permitted if ‘such detention is desirable for securing the public safety and the defence of the Commonwealth’, and in the coming years many Russians were detained under this Act. The circumstances of their incarceration added to their perception of being held in a capitalist cage. A lack of understanding of the experiences and aims of the

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17 Detective Sergeant P. O’Hara, Criminal Investigation Branch, Queensland Police to Department of External Affairs, 13 February 1913. A1/1, 15/11795, National Archives of Australia (NAA).
18 Peters, Customs House, Brisbane to Atlee Hunt, Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 9 August 1913. A1/1, 15/11795, NAA.
19 O’Hara to External Affairs, A1/1, 15/11795, NAA.
20 Chief Secretary’s Office, Brisbane to Prime Minister, 18 August 1913. A1/1, 15/11795, NAA.
21 Joseph Cook, Department of the Prime Minister to the Premier of Queensland, 27 November 1913. A1/1, 15/11795, NAA.
Russians further compounded their treatment by officers who increasingly saw Russian activism only in the context of protecting home front integrity, rather than as part of an international movement. The majority of officers did not appear to recognise that Russian activism was primarily directed towards changes in Russia and that most RWA members considered their return to their homeland to be imminent. Any Australian activism—energetic though it could sometimes be—was a mere sideline.

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, it is unlikely that alternative understandings, challenging the political and economic identity promoted by the government, were viewed with any less antagonism than they were at the height of the war. However, what is likely is that the war provided the climate in which such understandings were observed exclusively in terms of their opposition to the policy of all hands on deck for Britain. Home front cohesiveness necessitated the internment, surveillance and censorship of enemies as a war precaution. One’s German heritage, talk of Irish independence, or subscription to radical journals were no longer elements of individual personhood; they were explicit expressions of group sedition, corroding the edges of the home front. Australia’s British identity was reinforced as those of enemy (that is, conspicuously foreign) origin, regardless of their convictions or immigration status, were deemed disloyal and dangerous. What changed as a result of the war conditions is that the mere physical presence of others became threatening in itself to the conservative mainstream. Mirroring developments in Europe and the United States, debate and political activism were now fast becoming socially and legally intolerable.

**Monitoring the disloyal and the disaffected**

*Invisible ink! Propaganda against England and the Allies! Even bloody warfare!*  
Wartime legislation buttressed the state by deepening scrutiny of the population. It implicitly continued the authorities’ hostility towards, and often misunderstanding of, opposition groups. Regional offices reported on local affairs to Headquarters in Melbourne, which briefed London; in turn, international information would be forwarded by London. In this way Brisbane could perceive the identity and propaganda of its little RWA in the light of wider developments, for example, the activities of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the United States and union radicalism in the United Kingdom and Canada. Thus it was as part of a global intelligence network that Queensland was dealing with the burgeoning political sub-culture of its Russian community.

A key instrument of that network was the weekly Intelligence Reports on Enemy Trading and Other Suspicious Actions.  
Censorship asserted bureaucratic control over history being made. It simultaneously supported emergent conservatism whilst smothering radicalism. Australia had strong colonial roots and an officialdom whose

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24 Censors’ Notes, RE1257, MP95/1, 168/21/29, NAA. All subsequent references to Censors’ Notes will only specify the item number and series.

25 This article is based on a selection of Intelligence Reports produced by the 1st Military District (1MD) in Brisbane, 2MD in Sydney and 3MD in Melbourne. District offices produced several prefixed reports, each targeted towards specific areas of disloyalty. See BP4/2 and MP95/1, NAA. The Intelligence Reports themselves are running commentaries on the written wanderings of thousands of correspondents until censorship wound down in the later half of 1919. Uncensored insights into the thoughts and activities of citizen and officer alike, they document the Great War at the grassroots level.
nature it was to be concerned. In the context of the Great War it was a patriotic duty to identify, track and isolate all subversive voices. Military intelligence threw its nets wide into the community, pulling enemies to be interned as well as conscientious objectors although it is quite likely that some revolutionaries operated outside this field. Elena Govor observes that ‘Australian military authorities had a tendency to see Bolshevist propaganda where none existed’. Censors’ notes on the Russians in Brisbane confirm this statement. It seems clear that on the one hand, surveillance was unlikely to find foreign spies, and on the other, it beat up innocuous activities into sinister signs.

The turning point for the RWA was the revolution in Russia. For its members the revolutionary period was one of momentous historical process, despite conflicting stances on desired outcomes. For Australian authorities, however, revolution was associated with traumatic social upheavals and bloodletting in British society, and a trigger for social anxiety. The fear of sedition was exemplified through the intense interest stimulated by news from Russia. Conservatives could not fail to notice that ‘czars, kings and other kinds of grand dukes ha[d] bolted’. The emotional boost these events had on political refugees is best summed up by one Russian who stated: ‘There is no more time to write, we must start to work, for there is no better time than the present to see Bolshevism rule the world’.

However, 1918 and 1919 were not good years for the Russians in Brisbane. Russia was no longer viewed as the steamroller of Europe, but rather as a traitor that had succumbed to the sickness of revolution. Russians in Australia were seen as key collaborators in the perpetuation of this sickness. Queensland censors raised the concern that the RWA represented ‘a sort of club room where the malcontents can discuss their propaganda’. This was indeed the case. However, the censors’ main concern was the mere existence of malcontents on Australian shores. That they should have the opportunity to indulge in free speech was an outrage. Even worse, other aliens (such as Irish IWW-ites) were ‘consorting with Russian undesirables’. It was feared that ‘the threatened influx to Australia of enemy and other undesirable aliens [wa]s already taking shape’. No longer a refugee from a repressive system, the Russian activist was typed as ‘a pretty kind of mad dog to let loose on the community’. An active and vocal group of Russian Bolsheviks whipping up Soviet-mania amongst unemployed and discontented workers and returned soldiers was an undesired development.

26 For instance, there is a noticeable silence on prominent Bolshevik Artem. He did not comply with orders to register nor did he seek official documents or sponsorship when he returned to Russia after the February Revolution in 1917. While he is mentioned in passing in few early Queensland Police reports, Australian authorities seemed unaware that he was submitting reports to the Russian Prosveshchenie [Enlightenment] during his six years in Brisbane and were not able to analyse his identity in the Censors’ Notes when he sent letters back in 1918. See Q2851 and Q812, BP4/2, NAA.
27 Govor, Russian Anzacs, p 186.
28 QF2877, BP4/2, NAA.
29 M. Procharoff, Peeramon, via Cairns to A. Zuzenko, PO Box 10, South Brisbane, 28 November 1918, QF2558, BP4/2, NAA.
30 QF4331, BP4/2, NAA.
31 RE1017, MP95/1, 168/8/14, NAA.
32 QF4343, BP4/2, NAA.
33 RE1099, MP95/1, 168/15/20, NAA.
The persistent and radical examinations of revolutionary Russia emanating from the RWA were interpreted as aggressive, militant, dangerous, violent and of a criminal nature. Censors emphasised that ‘it is noticeable that rarely is a Russian letter scrutinized in which the revolutionary spirit is not aggressively displayed. The conclusion to be arrived at is that if there are law abiding Russians in Australia they do not write letters.’ With rising alarm censors reasoned that even for Russians in isolated areas such as Broken Hill, ‘the militancy is strong within them and they are looking for an excuse to break out. They are always on the side of disorder’. At this critical point, concern was raised that this sort radicalism was not only threatening home front stability, but also the political future and moral health of British Australia.

In an effort to halt the spread of a red peril, Britain prevented the return of exiled radicals via territory controlled by the Allied Intervention. Officers here made it clear ‘that Russians are not going to leave Australia until Bolshevism is smashed’. The determination of many Russians to return to their homeland was not fully understood. It was seen either as undermining British authority or as some form of lunacy. One censor labelled it an anxiety to throw oneself ‘into the human cauldron into which the Bolsheviks have converted Russia’. Indeed, Russians who clamoured for information on how to secure passports were labelled ‘belligerent types’. But agitation over the loss of their choice to return to a now free Russia could be seen as the point of consensus amongst often politically divided Russians. Instead of quietly accepting their fate, Russians brought their concerns with them into wider labour protests against the government. This strategy did not always work to their advantage, as evidenced by the conservative wrath unleashed in the events of the Red Flag Riots.

Trouble spots around the country were seen as being ‘well dosed with Bolshevistic literature’. The analogy of Bolshevism as some sort of degenerative poison, a disease, was a timely one that exploited public fear of the influenza epidemic. This ties into an older current that constructs White Australia as young, innocent (or susceptible) and unsullied, needing to be protected. By linking Bolshevism and Russians with criminality, belligerency, poison and mad dogs, the presence of these foreigners was constructed as an unsettling force that became too dangerous to be at large.

A loud and sharply unsettling voice belonged to that of unrecognised Soviet consul Peter Simonoff. A prolific writer and confident speaker, Simonoff’s zeal took on a new meaning when he was appointed as Soviet representative in Australia. His leadership was not overwhelmingly popular with all Russians, nor consistently effective. Nevertheless, he was most successful in arousing the ire of the censors and the wrath of military authorities: ‘Simonoff has been a danger to the community all along’; ‘Everyday this man is at liberty some new and dangerous deed is done against the empire’; ‘Is he up to fresh mischief? One can imagine anything while he is...

34 QF2877, BP4/2, NAA.
35 QF4420, BP4/2, NAA.
36 QF4328, BP4/2, NAA.
37 MF2495, BP4/2, NAA.
38 MF2871, BP4/2, NAA.
39 MF2667, BP4/2, NAA.
loose’. Simonoff grew as the arch-rebel at the centre of all propaganda, and his attempts to engage in official dialogue on the issue of Russian passports were thwarted. He was finally imprisoned in 1919 under the War Precautions Act.

The censors were unable, or unwilling, to distinguish between news of revolutionary Russia, support for revolution and the broader ideals of radical politics, and calls for revolution in Australia. RWA correspondence predominantly falls into the first two categories. Only a small proportion of correspondents ever instructed workers to rise up in armed struggle or guerrilla-style sabotage. Techniques employed by the wider labour movement, such as strikes, boycotts and street marches, were the advocated forms of protest. Even RWA publications were predominantly watching Russia. References to confrontation were in response to the threats Russians felt they were increasingly facing. In September 1918 Simonoff informed his Melbourne comrades that Brisbane was facing ‘a new organisation … composed of returned soldiers and hooligans, who threaten openly to smash the Russian Workers Union … but let them try it’. The open hostility of the authorities is clear when the censor blithely responded: ‘Possibly the returned soldiers who, thank God, are not all hooligans, may yet take the law into their own hands’.

The isolation and trepidation felt by many Russians cannot be ignored. A Russian in north Queensland confided that he ‘cannot call life anything but suffocation’. They were subject to the double-blind of misunderstanding and censorship. It was noted by RWA secretary Zuzenko in the months before the Red Flag March that ‘the repression is hitting us more and more’. Others lamented that ‘one cannot leave and one has no money or work’. After the Red Flag Riots, the Russians in general were harassed and the RWA fragmented. The critical concern of the censors—the development of a Soviet—did not eventuate until after the Red Flag Riots and deportations. The official shift occurred in August 1919, when under new leadership ‘the alliance … ceased to be a cultured enlightened circle for Russians. The future task … revolutionary communist propaganda among the English speaking workers’. This change could be seen as directly linked to the mounting pressure of federal surveillance, rather than to a meteoric increase in the desire to spark revolution in Australia.

It is unlikely that Australian authorities were ever inclined to recognise the differences within radical politics. Wartime regulations accelerated the lumping together of all perspectives as dangerous propaganda and the inclination to see ‘nests of Russians’ all over Australia. Censors were generally dismissive of the validity of any left-wing activism and proclaimed that ‘the word socialist nowadays covers a multitude of

41 For instance, MF1280 and MF1967, BP4/2; and RE1313, MP95/1, 168/21/29, NAA.
42 P. Simonoff, Brisbane to Russian Association, Little Collins Street, Melbourne, 5 September 1918, MF1740A, BP4/2, NAA.
43 Henry Caplan, Halifax, Macquade Mill to W. Kaplan, Russia, 27 August 1918, RE1238, MP95/1, 168/21/29, NAA.
44 A. Zuzenko, Russian Association, Brisbane to V. Petruchenia, 3 Tennyson Street, Kensington, Melbourne, 4 February 1919, MF2581, BP4/2, NAA.
45 J. Maruschek, MF1448, BP4/2; and P. Mirkin, GPO Sydney to L. Mirkin, Siberia, 9 April 1919, RE1724, MP95/1, 168/54/73, NAA.
46 The Soviet Alliance in Brisbane to Fedoroff, PO Box 115, Haymarket Street, Sydney, 14 August 1919, RE1863, MP95/1, 168/54/73, NAA.
47 MF2679, BP4/2, NAA.
This assessment of left-wing radicalism, which became almost universally viewed as Bolshevism, was one that drew heavily on the circumstance that it existed outside the legal framework for approved home front activity.

**Conclusion**

The Russians in Brisbane were clear targets in the loyalist battle for the home front. Russians were undesirable and disloyal on the basis of not being British. After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, Russians also represented the betrayal of the Allied cause and the Bolshevik challenge to British institutions. Russians in Brisbane were enthusiastic political activists working for change, changes primarily to working class conditions as well as for the broader success of socialism. However, it is likely that rank and file Russian activism in Brisbane during the war was linked to movements in wider labour causes as much as it was to any immediate desire to transfer Bolshevism to Australia. Certainly the core leadership of the RWA were Bolsheviks, yet it is unclear how many of these desired to propagate the class struggle in Australia at this time, as opposed to returning to participate in Russia. What is certainly the case is that Russian activists pursued their own political program in the face of intense surveillance and suppression.

This article has examined key trends in intelligence gathered on Russians and members of the Russian Workers Association in WWI Intelligence Reports. It asserts that the intelligence complex misunderstood and generally overestimated any threat posed by the RWA during the war. The story revealed through these documents is not necessarily one of action and protest on the behalf of the radical groups themselves, but rather a story of concern on the side of the authorities. The twists and turns in the wider paper trail of the Russian Workers Association present us with a snapshot of the treatment of left-wing activists, those who 'stood against the dominant beliefs and policies of their times'. Though somewhat peripheral to the story of Australia in World War I, home front surveillance assumes a greater importance today. The treatment of the disloyal during the Great War is a critical period in a long history of government concern, and in some sense the overarching themes connect to contemporary surveillance in our society today.

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48 MF1467 and MF2930, BP4/2, NAA.