



# The Fifth Column in World War II: Suspected Subversives in the Pacific War and Australia

*Robert Loeffel*



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Any Australian who lived through World War II would remember the frightening posters warning that 'Enemy Agents are Listening' and 'Loose Lips Sink Ships.' The Fifth Column was the name given to the Axis agents believed to be lurking in Allied countries. Their mission was to carry out acts of sabotage, cause fear and confusion and spread rumours on the home front. The Fifth Column was attributed with being responsible for the Allies defeat of 1940 and also for the Japanese victories at the start of the Pacific War. Yet, for all this hype, the Fifth Column never truly existed as it was imagined. In Australia the Fifth Column panic began in 1940, was sustained into 1941, before being fiercely reigned at the beginning of the Pacific War. It affected the home front and the troops fighting on the frontline and was characterised by widespread fears, accusations and rumours concerning an array of individuals and groups that reveal much about existing prejudices in Australian society.



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