

World War II war crimes

As the war against Japan in the Pacific began to turn in favour of Australia and its allies, evidence was beginning to come to light of Japanese mistreatment of prisoners that included episodes of ill-treatment of prisoners of war in labour camps, the massacre or execution of captured allied servicemen, local inhabitants or civilian internees, and widespread acts of assault, torture and murder. From 1943, the Commonwealth government investigated the allegations of war crimes with a view to putting the perpetrators on trial once the hostilities of World War II were over.

The inquiries of Sir William Webb

In June 1943, Sir William Webb, Chief Justice of Queensland, was appointed as a Commissioner under National Security (Inquiries) Regulations to report on whether there had been atrocities or breaches of the rules of warfare by the Japanese armed forces. This was the first of three commissions given to Webb between 1943 and 1945 to investigate war crimes by the Japanese. The third commission was undertaken jointly with two other judges – Justice Mansfield of the Queensland Supreme Court and Judge Kirby of the New South Wales District Court.

The National Archives hold copies of reports of these inquiries, which are often referred to as the first, second, and third Webb Reports. Details are provided in the table that follows. Similar material is held by the Australian War Memorial.

Webb reports held by the National Archives

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
First Webb Report		
A report on Japanese atrocities and breaches of the rules of warfare (undated draft report)	1943–44	A10943 , item 1
A report on Japanese atrocities and breaches of the rules of warfare (final report – unsigned copy)	1943–44	A10943 , item 2
Summary of Report on Japanese Atrocities and breaches of the rules of warfare, presented to His Majesty's Government in the Commonwealth of Australia on March 15, 1944 by Sir William Webb	1944	A1066 , H45/580/2/8/1
Second Webb Report		
A report on war crimes by individual members of the armed forces of the enemy against Australians	1944	A10950 , item 1

Third Webb Report Australian War Crimes Board of Inquiry – Report on war crimes committed by enemy subjects against Australians and others	1945–46	<u>A11049</u> , roll 1 and 2*
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* available as microfilm in all National Archives offices with the exception of the Melbourne research centre

The task of supporting the work of the inquiries headed by Webb rested with the Directorate of Prisoners of War and Internees, which from 1945 came under the responsibility of the Adjutant-General of the Australian Army. Many of the records of this directorate are held in the series MP742/1. Additional material will also be found in the record series listed below.

Use the National Archives' RecordSearch database, available in all research centres and on our website, to identify records about particular incidents. Searches for items using keywords (such as the names of areas where atrocities occurred, or the names of victims or the perpetrators of crimes) are likely to identify records of interest.

Records containing information about World War II war crimes

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Canberra		
Courts-martial files	1901–ongoing	<u>A471</u>
'Cumpston Collection' of documents relating to the history of Australian foreign policy	1901–69	<u>A4311</u>
Melbourne		
Navy Correspondence files (general)	1923–50	<u>MP1049/5</u>
Navy Secret and confidential files	1923–50	<u>MP1185/8</u>
Army Correspondence files	1939–54	<u>B3856</u>
Army Series (421/– sequence files relate to AIF)	1940–42	<u>MP729/8</u>
Army General correspondence (see 336/– sequence files)	1943–51	<u>MP742/1</u>
Volumes of photographs of Australian prisoners of war and missing servicemen in the Far East and South West Pacific	1944	<u>B3843</u> , Volumes 1 and 2
File relating to Japanese atrocities during World War II	1944–45	<u>B4972</u>
War crimes investigation files	1945–49	<u>MP375/14</u>
Japanese War Criminals	1945–47	<u>MP1395/2</u>
Personal dossiers of Japanese war criminals	1946–53	<u>MP375/15</u>
Brisbane		
Deputy Crown Solicitor, Brisbane Correspondence files – includes administrative documents, witness lists, exhibits, correspondence, questionnaires and evidence.	1942–63	J1889, BL43895/1 to BL43895/27

War crimes trials, 1945–51

Between 30 November 1945 and 9 April 1951, 924 enemy nationals were tried for war crimes in 296 trials conducted by Australian military courts. The enabling legislation – the *War Crimes Act 1945* – was passed by both houses of the Australian parliament on the same day (4 October 1945). Of those found guilty by these trials, 148 were sentenced to death and executed. An additional 496 were given prison sentences.

Trials were conducted in eight venues – Labuan, Wewak, Morotai, Rabaul, Darwin, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Manus Island.