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**Country** EXPLAINER

## What you need to know about the Frontier Wars

Every year the nation stops to remember wartime conflicts from Verdun to Vietnam. But where is the same reverence for the wars fought on our very own soil?

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Source: NITV

**WARNING: Content may be distressing**

The term Frontier Wars refers to the conflict between European colonists and First Nations people from 1788 onwards.

As the British sought to establish a colony in Australia, Indigenous nation groups resisted.

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This conflict resulted in Australia's first wars and was a violent history that included organised battles and open massacres.

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We are still learning more about this history, but as distinguished Professor Marcia Langton said during a forum at this year's Garma festival, “there remains a denialist approach” to Frontier Wars in our national curriculum.

These early conflicts are explored in NITV & SBS's unflinching new three-part documentary series [The Australian Wars](#), in which filmmaker Rachel Perkins travels across the country to give voices to many stories from that period of history.

Here are some facts about this extensive era of conflict to get you started.

## How long it lasted and the death toll

It began with the arrival of the British in 1788 and lasted into the 1930s.

We may never know the exact number of people who died but academics and historians have made estimations of the death toll.

[Research from the University of Newcastle](#), which identifies and records sites of frontier massacres, found at least 10,000 Indigenous people were killed in 416 massacres between 1780 and 1930.

The research project's lead, historian Emeritus Professor Lyndall Ryan, said more massacres were recorded between 1860 and 1930 than between 1788 and 1860.

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## How frontier warfare spread

Frontier massacres happened across Australia and increased as colonial forces moved around the country.

It's important to know that there were laws and legislation put in place to help escalate



frontier violence.

Let's consider some examples.



For years, calls have been made to properly memorialise those who died during the frontier wars. Source: AAP

As the British began to colonise New South Wales, and with no treaty in place with First Nations people, Sydney became the first battleground.

On April 9, 1816, Governor Lachlan Macquarie ordered three regiments to lead a military expedition against the Dharawal people in the Nepean region.

This resulted in the Appin massacre, where at least 14 Dharawal men, women, and children were chased over a cliff near Appin to their deaths.

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After decades of conflict continued in NSW, there was a shift in December of 1838, when seven men were publicly hanged at the Sydney Gaol.

As the National Museum Australia states, these men were "the first British subjects to be executed for massacring Aboriginal people."

The trial established that "murder had been committed at Myall Creek" and that "the accused were guilty of this crime".

In Tasmania, Aboriginal resistance to British occupation resulted in the Black War'.

This war, according to National Museum, began in about 1824.

And by 1830 "a virtual state of war existed and many settlers were demanding that something decisive be done".



An illustration of interactions between the palawa of Tasmania and early settlers. Source: Supplied

In response, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur "ordered thousands of able-bodied settlers to form what became known as the 'Black Line'" – a human chain that crossed the settled districts of Tasmania.

The National Museum also claims that the Black War was "the most extensive conflict in Australian history", and was "extremely violent".

It's also important to know that frontier conflict had a devastating impact on the population of First Nations people.

For instance, as the colonial frontier moved north to Queensland, more violence was recorded.

Europeans settled in the state in 1825, after Brisbane was selected to become a penal settlement "for the more difficult convicts".

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According to The Bringing Them Home Report, within this new colony "extreme violence accompanied the rapid expansion of European settlers, particularly in the north."

"This violence and the spread of introduced diseases resulted in a rapid decrease in the Indigenous population.

"Kidnapping Indigenous women and children for economic and sexual exploitation was common."

As years went on, “fears were expressed that Aboriginal people in Queensland faced extinction”, the Queensland government states.

## **There were key figures and warriors who led the resistance**

There were resistance leaders across the country, in every new state and colony.

Though there were likely many more such heroes, some well known names include those of Pemulwuy, Windradyne, Tunnerminnerwait.

Pemulwuy was a Bidjigal Cleverman who witnessed the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. Though there were initial attempts on behalf of the British to establish friendly relations, their belief in 'terra nullius' and the mission to establish a colony, ie steal land, doomed these efforts.

The theft of Country and the struggle for resources saw increasing conflicts between the invaders and the Aboriginal people of the Eora, Kuringgai, Dharug and Tharrawal nations.







'Aboriginal Warriors' by Joseph Lycett (1815-1822). Source: National Library of Australia

Pemulwuy led guerrilla warfare against the vulnerable English, whose precarious attempts at establishing crops and farmsteads were thwarted by the Bidjigal man's small, roaming bands.

His campaign would last 12 years, and did real damage to the colonists, so much so that a great price was placed on his head. He was shot and killed in 1802.

In 1841, Parperloihener man Tunnerminnerwait led a similar campaign in present day Victoria, striking small huts and outposts with short, sharp attacks, burning the colonists buildings to the ground.

Accompanied by other famous names, Truganini and Maulboyheenner, he also shot two whalers whom he suspected of having abducted a friend.

After being tried and caught, he and Maulboyheenner were sentenced to hang, becoming the first public executions in Victorian state history.

Windradyne was a hero of the Wiradjuri resistance, a key figure in the Bathurst War of 1824.

When Governor Brisbane came to power the pace of settlement greatly increased west of the Blue Mountains, placing competition on traditional food sources. Windradyne began leading attacks on small farming outposts using guerrilla warfare techniques.

His story stands out for the fact that he was eventually pardoned by the Governor when he appeared at the Parramatta festival.

You can read more about how they fought for their people and their land against colonial forces here.

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As well as tuning in for *The Australian Wars* on Wednesday night, there are also plenty of online resources to learn more about what happened.

There's also the [Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia map](#), the [Bringing them Home Report](#) (1997), The [Frontier Wars Stories](#) podcast by Boe Spearim, [Common Ground's](#) website, the [National Museum Australia](#) and [Australian Museum's](#) online collections.

"If there was ever a time for the Australian people to understand how their nation was born, the time is now," said Rachel Perkins.

"To shift the relationship, it will need the momentum that comes with widespread community understanding. And this is why I chose to call this series *The Australian Wars*.

"We need to understand the fundamental truth of what happened, and we need a way to talk about it that makes it our own."

**The Australian Wars premieres on Wednesday 21 September at 7.30pm on SBS and NITV.**

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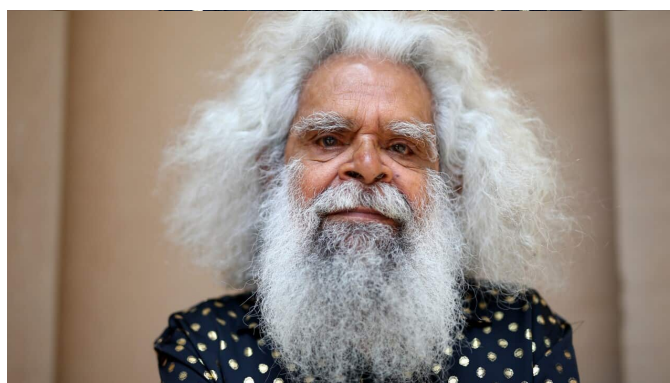
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