

The debate about 'settlement' versus 'invasion'

Warning – First Nations teachers and students are advised that this curriculum resource may contain images, voices or names of deceased people.

Essential question

In what ways can historical terms be contested by different groups and at different times?

Glossary

colonisation: the act of one country taking over another; the invaded country is called a 'colony'. The British began the colonisation of this continent in 1788.

contested: argued against; disputed; questioned.

dispossession: having a possession taken away; often used to describe the forced taking of land belonging to First Nations Peoples.

Dreaming: the complex system of Indigenous understandings and creation narratives that form the basis of Indigenous spiritual beliefs. Dreaming relates the creation of Country and people, through the ancestral spirits, who shaped the land and gave each nation their Country. It offers rules for living (a moral code) and shows connections between all people and all things through all times.

Europeans: people from Great Britain who colonised what we now call Australia from 1788. Also known as early settlers, colonisers, occupiers, invaders, convicts and free settlers.

First Fleet: the ships that brought the first white colonisers (convicts, military and sailors) to this continent in 1788.

Frontier Wars: the organised conflict that occurred when First Nations communities fought to defend and maintain control of the Country they lived on from colonising Europeans between the 1780s and the 1930s.

mainstream narrative: the most well-known or official story, version of events or way of understanding an event or time.

perspective: a point of view that's influenced by your beliefs, experiences or background.

settlement: the act of permanently placing people in a new country or place; a colony in its early stages.

treaty: a formal agreement between two groups of people.

Introduction

There are many narratives about our nation's history. These are told from different perspectives which can often be very different from one another. Australia Day being celebrated on January 26 is something which causes a lot of conflict and debate. For many history's strongly connected to national identity and it's because of this that January 26 holds immeasurable significance to First Nations people. It's important to fully learn about our past so we can ensure a much better future for all people who call Australia home.

Invasion or colonisation

Many First Nations people consider this land we now call Australia to have been invaded by **Europeans**. The arrival of the **First Fleet** in January 1788 was the beginning of over two centuries of **dispossession**, epidemics, massacres, destruction of culture, exploitation, separation of families, and other harms caused by policies of extreme social control.

Did you know?

Australia:

- still doesn't have a **treaty** with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
- in the only nation in the world that celebrates its national day on the date that **colonisation** occurred.

Other countries celebrate their national day on their day of Independence, treaty signing (e.g. Waitangi Day in New Zealand) or another significant day.

Today, the terms *Invasion Day* and *Survival Day* are popular among many First Nations people and their supporters as a protest against the name Australia Day.

Historical perspectives

History, or descriptions of what happened in the past, can be written from many **perspectives**. Traditionally in Australia, the past has been remembered and taught from the perspective of Europeans. The perspectives and experiences of First Nations Peoples weren't generally considered. Although their negative experiences may have been mentioned factually, their stories and views weren't part of general history books.

This means that some older Australians learnt Australian history from a particular perspective. That perspective included focusing on and commemorating the struggles and experiences of early European settlers.

The idea or narrative of the 'Aussie battler' emerges from the struggles of Europeans trying to create fertile farms in a hostile, barren landscape. This has become known as the mainstream narrative of Australian history, as it represents the experiences of most of the population at the time.

Revisionism

Over the past few decades, historians have begun to examine the experiences of different groups outside the **mainstream narrative**. In Australia, for example, this has included focusing on women's specific experiences in the home, and stories of non-European groups such as Chinese people working on the goldfields in the 1800s. This is called revisionism, or revisionist history. It involves re-examining established ideas and exploring different experiences.

Revisionism has also included a re-examination of First Nations voices and experiences from the past. For the first time, First Nations people of Australia have become active voices and critics in the field of history. Many historians now pore through old documents looking for evidence of how First Nations Peoples were affected by colonialism. Their work adds to existing research and our understanding of the past. Historians challenge and argue against established beliefs in the mainstream narrative, such as the notion that Australia had a 'bloodless past'; the idea that we've never experienced war on our own soil. Often these historical debates are discussed in the media.

History wars

When John Howard became Prime Minister of Australia in 1996, he overturned his predecessor Paul Keating's focus on acknowledgement of wrongdoings towards First Nations people. Instead, he argued Australia should be proud of its British heritage and feel positive about its past. This became a national discussion called the History wars about the purpose of Australian history; is it to investigate what happened in the past, or is it an important part of a shared national culture, shared values and shared identity?

Australia Day debate

The example of Australia Day is an important one that demonstrates the different perspectives of historical debate. In 1818, governor Lachlan Macquarie declared January 26 a public holiday for Sydney. In 1938, a campaign and civil rights group called the Aborigines Progressive Association declared January 26 to be a Day of Mourning. Today, some Australians argue that January 26 isn't the most appropriate day for Australia Day celebrations. There's now much public disagreement about how the day should be remembered and commemorated. While official ceremonies are held all around the country, protest marches and events by First Nations activists and their supporters are also occurring.

Settlement? Invasion?

Many people argue that the word **settlement** is too neutral to describe the arrival of Europeans to this continent. They say that it implies that the land was empty, and it was a straightforward process for Europeans to set up their settlements and farms. However, the term 'invasion' is **contested** by others, who find it a shocking word that implies that Europeans had negative intentions when starting their new lives. Many people associate 'invasion' with a military battle. As the **Frontier Wars** haven't traditionally been taught or acknowledged as part of the mainstream narrative, many are ignorant about the fact that there were clashes and battles between two sides who wielded weapons.

Non-Indigenous people, who feel warm and nostalgic toward their European descendants, can feel uncomfortable that their family members might have committed crimes against First Nations Peoples.

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