

# New Zealand in Samoa

## Page 1 – Introduction

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# MCH, 2014h

### New Zealand's administration of Samoa, 1920-35

New Zealand was ill-equipped to cope with the Western Samoa mandate it was allocated by the League of Nations in 1920. After occupying German Samoa at the outbreak of the First World War, the New Zealand administration was blamed for mishandling the 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed more than one-fifth of the local population.

Responding to the policies of a tactless and authoritarian colonial administration, many of Samoa's inhabitants joined the League of Samoa, an opposition movement known as the Mau. Tensions caused by the Mau's passive yet effective resistance erupted in violence on 28 December 1929 — 'Black Saturday' — claiming the lives of up to 11 Samoans and one New Zealand policeman. For many Samoans, the actions of New Zealand officials in the weeks that followed the tragedy heightened a deep sense of injustice.

In 2002, New Zealand's Prime Minister, Helen Clark, visited Samoa. Her formal apology for the mistakes made during New Zealand's early administration brought some closure to an uncomfortable chapter of the country's history.

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- New Zealand's capture of German Samoa
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# New Zealand in Samoa

## Page 2 – Background

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The Samoan archipelago, located in the south-west of the Pacific Ocean, comprises six main islands, two atolls, and numerous smaller islets. Its closest neighbours, the northern islands of the Tonga group, are 210 km to the south-west.

In the late 19th century the Samoan islands became highly desirable to Britain, Germany and the United States as a refuelling stop for coal-fired shipping. A civil war broke out between local factions backed by each of these powers.

**Samoans were not consulted** when Britain, Germany and the United States agreed to partition the islands following the end of this civil conflict in December 1899. Germany acquired the western islands (Savai'i, 'Upolu and seven smaller islands), while the United States acquired the eastern islands (Tutuila and the Manu'a group) to support its Pacific fleet.

**When war broke out in Europe in August 1914, Britain asked New Zealand to seize the wireless station at Apia in German Samoa as a 'great and urgent Imperial service'.** The dominion's response was swift. Led by Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Logan, the 1385-strong Samoa Advance Party of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force landed at Apia on 29 August. There was no resistance from German officials or the general population. Next day a proclamation by Logan established a New Zealand-run British Military Occupation of Samoa. Read more about the capture of German Samoa.

The relative quiet of New Zealand's wartime administration was shattered by a devastating influenza pandemic in November 1918, which killed approximately 8500 Samoans, about 22% of the population. For survivors, the disaster, and especially the administration's bumbling response to it, was seared into memory. It became the foundation upon which other grievances against the New Zealand administration would be laid.

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# New Zealand in Samoa

## Page 3 – Colonial administration

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The League of Nations formally allocated New Zealand the Class C mandate of Western Samoa in December 1920. Samoan leaders were not consulted as other nations decided the islands' future.

### Colonial rulers

#### NZ Administrators, 1914-62:

- Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Logan (1914-19)
- Colonel Robert W. Tate (1920-23)
- Major-General George S. Richardson (1923-28)
- Colonel Stephen S. Allen (1928-31)
- Brigadier-General Herbert E. Hart (1931-35)
- Alfred Turnbull (acting) (1935-43)
- Alfred Turnbull (1943-46)
- Lieutenant-Colonel F. W. Voelcker (1946-49)
- Guy R. Powles (1949-62)

Prioritised using MFAT, 2010a  
for its figure of 1919

Legislation was already in place to support the mandate. On 1 May 1920, the Samoa Constitution Order had replaced the military occupation with a civil administration. The Samoa Act 1921 provided the foundations of government until Western Samoa's independence 40 years later.

The Samoa Act established the British colonial model as the basis for civil administration. New Zealand's Governor-General appointed an Administrator to hold executive power. The position, based in Apia, reported to the Minister of External Affairs in Wellington.

Law-making power was held by the Administrator and a local Legislative Council, although Wellington had final authority. Most Council members were administration officials, with local Europeans given a small minority of seats.

Samoans initially had no role in government. The *Fono of Faipule*, an advisory body of Samoan leaders established by the German administration and retained during New Zealand's military occupation, was not given legal recognition until 1923. Samoans first sat on the Legislative Council in 1928.

New Zealand was ill-equipped to cope with the Samoa mandate. It had no formal foreign service, so officials were seconded to Samoa from New Zealand's public service. Few stayed on for more than one three-year term, or took the time to learn the language or fully understand the culture.

Between 1914 and 1935, New Zealand appointed Administrators from military backgrounds who tended to take an autocratic approach to governance. They lacked experience of

Pacific Island cultures, and were often ignorant of or unsympathetic towards Samoan customs and practices.

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# New Zealand in Samoa

## Page 4 – Sowing seeds of discontent

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Like most colonial powers, New Zealand developed paternalistic policies towards Samoans. In the words of one Administrator, they were 'a splendid but backward Native race', with 'no thought for to-morrow, and no vision as to the future of these islands'. It was an attitude deeply resented by Samoans.

Officials felt a duty to control and civilise Samoans for their own good, believing they could not adequately provide for themselves in the modern world. Health, education, and economic development were immediate priorities. Building programmes focused on district hospitals, nursing stations and schools, while attempts were made to promote community order, cleanliness and productivity.

Of the early Administrators, Major-General George Richardson (1923-28) was the most passionate in his attempts to modernise Samoans. Richardson was initially well-received because he tried to learn the language and listen to local opinion. But, supported by the newly empowered *Faipule*, he began to impose regulations in a tactless and authoritarian manner without the agreement or understanding of the people.

Richardson's attempts to increase productivity intruded into daily life and custom. He proposed to individualise land holdings and remodel villages to make more effective use of the available land. 'Time-wasting' customs such as *malaga* - travelling parties for the distribution of fine mats - were prohibited, and the popular pastime of village cricket was restricted.

Most of all, Samoans objected to interference with traditional authority and rights over titles. The 1922 Samoan Offenders Ordinance caused particular resentment. It gave the Administrator powers to banish chiefs and remove their titles, powers previously reserved for *matai*. By 1926, the legislation had been used against more than 50 *matai* for offences that often seemed trivial.

Local Europeans and 'half-castes' such as Olaf Nelson had their own grievances. They objected to their poor representation on the Legislative Council and their exclusion from the New Zealand Parliament. Many were related to Samoans by birth or marriage, and they resented suggestions that they placed their own interests before those of Samoans. A ban on importing alcohol, and a proposal for its complete prohibition, further roused European anger.

By 1926, anti-New Zealand feeling was strong throughout Samoa. Despite very different aims, a shared sense of dissatisfaction reinforced by memories of the 1918 influenza pandemic united local Europeans and Samoans against the administration.

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# New Zealand in Samoa

## Page 5 – The rise of the Mau movement

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### 'Samoa mo Samoa'

Samoa has a history of opposition to European rule. Formal resistance had occurred on two occasions during the German colonial era, and several petitions had already challenged New Zealand's administration. But the opposition that emerged in the late 1920s was organised and widespread.

This new opposition had its origins in two public meetings held in Apia in October and November 1926. These provided a forum for local Europeans and Samoans to document their collective grievances and prepare formal submissions to the New Zealand government.

Richardson blocked a Citizens' Committee plan to meet New Zealand's Minister of External Affairs. He believed that Samoans were being stirred up by a handful of local European agitators.

I do not approve of a political meeting which mixes Native politics with European politics, as its tendency must be to disturb the peace, order, and good government of the Natives.

Richardson, in a letter read out in English and Samoan at the meeting held at Apia on 12 November 1926 (from *AJHR*, 1928)

In March 1927, the Citizens' Committee confirmed the principles of an organisation called the League of Samoa. It became known as *O le Mau a Samoa* - 'the firm opinion of Samoa' - the Mau. Its slogan, *Samoa Mo Samoa* - 'Samoa for Samoans' - envisaged a Samoa without New Zealand.

Support for the Mau grew rapidly. The *Samoa Guardian*, established with assistance from Olaf Nelson in May, promoted the cause in direct opposition to the pro-government newspaper, *The Samoa Times*.

The Mau were soon represented in all but two of Samoa's districts. The central committee established its headquarters at Vaimoso under the leadership of Tupua Tamasese Leolofi III. While the administration estimated that about two-thirds of Samoa's population supported the Mau, the Mau themselves put the figure at closer to 90%.

A much-anticipated visit by New Zealand's Minister of External Affairs in June 1927 inflamed matters. It prompted Richardson to issue a proclamation ordering the Mau to disband and promising to deport non-Samoans who continued to interfere in 'native affairs'. With Europeans now less willing to play a public role in the Mau, Samoans assumed greater control of the movement.

The Mau began a systematic campaign of passive resistance to the administration. District councils, village committees and women's welfare committees stopped meeting. Villages

ignored visiting officials and children were withdrawn from government schools, some of which were forced to close. Coconuts were left to rot rather than be made into copra, and banana plantations were neglected. Births and deaths went unregistered. Instead of paying taxes, Samoans raised money for the Mau.

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# New Zealand in Samoa

## Page 6 – Stepping up the Mau campaign

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In September 1927, New Zealand appointed a Royal Commission to hear grievances against its Samoa administration. Despite hearing evidence from more than 150 witnesses, the Commission reported three months later in support of Administrator George Richardson's actions and policies. It also upheld his view that the Mau was inspired by a small group of local Europeans and their Samoan accomplices.

The Natives have no real grievances either against me or the Government, and I am confident of my ability to handle them once the influence of the European committee is removed.

Richardson in *AJHR*, 1928, Volume I, A-4B, Exhibit No. 52A

Key Europeans and 'half-castes', including Olaf Nelson, were deported to New Zealand in early 1928. Nelson continued resistance activities from Auckland. He petitioned the New Zealand government, and received support from the opposition Labour Party. In 1928 he published *The Truth about Samoa*. The *Samoa Guardian* newspaper, banned in Samoa, was re-established as the *New Zealand Samoa Guardian*.

That year Nelson presented a petition to the League of Nations in Geneva that outlined Samoan objections to New Zealand's administration. Of the 9300 adult Samoan men, 8000 had signed the petition. The Permanent Mandates Commission denied Nelson a hearing.

Meanwhile, the Mau intensified its campaign. In January 1928 Mau policemen, dressed in a uniform of a purple *lavalava* with a white stripe, began enforcing a *sā* - ban - on European stores in Apia. An observer described them as 'a genial smiling lot ... fraternising and laughing with the khaki clad police of the Administration.'

Richardson too stepped up measures. His request for two New Zealand-based Royal Navy warships to be sent to Samoa was granted in February 1928. Marines from HMS *Dunedin* and *Diomedé* helped to enforce laws prohibiting Mau activities and made arrests.

The Mau remained 'cheekily defiant'. When the arrest of some 400 Mau filled detention centres to breaking point, hundreds more gave themselves up. In a deeply humiliating experience for Richardson, the facilities were unable to cope and the prisoners were released. Richardson left Samoa in April 1928.

The new Administrator, Colonel Stephen Allen, believed that the Mau would gradually decline. In his view, it could be eradicated through firm police action. There were two violent clashes between police and Mau in 1928. The second, in November, saw Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III arrested and jailed in New Zealand for six months.

Throughout 1929, Allen believed the Mau was 'slowly dying', yet tensions simmered beneath the surface. They would erupt in violence on 'Black Saturday'.



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# New Zealand in Samoa

## Page 7 – Black Saturday

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The worst incident in New Zealand's relationship with Samoa occurred on Saturday 28 December 1929. It was precipitated by a fracas that erupted during a Mau parade along Apia's waterfront to welcome home two members who had been exiled in New Zealand. The incident culminated in police opening fire on the crowd, leaving at least eight dead.

The fracas was caused by an attempt by the police to arrest the Mau's secretary, who, provocatively, was marching in the parade. The Mau had earlier been warned that such action would be taken if any wanted men marched, and the administration feared for its authority if it failed to carry through on its threat. The marchers vigorously opposed the arrest attempt, and additional police arrived. As the situation deteriorated, some of the police fired their revolvers at the crowd, and then began retreating towards the police station in a side street, pursued by Samoans. During this movement Constable Abraham was caught and clubbed to death.

As the mob approached the station, a police sergeant fired a Lewis machine gun from the balcony in an effort to deter them. An experienced machine gunner, he directed the fire over the heads of the crowd. But three other policemen, panicking at the thought that the rioters might get under the balcony and burn the building down with them in it, fired at the crowd with their rifles. Tragically, this fire mortally wounded the prominent Samoan leader Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III. It also killed Migao, Leota Anese, Tapu, Ainoa, Faumuina of Savai'i, Vele and Tu'ia.

To the New Zealanders, this traumatic event had been caused by the Samoans' resistance to the arresting party. The coroner, New Zealander John Luxford, concluded that the use of firearms had, in the circumstances, been justified. Naturally, Samoans took a very different view. To them the police had made an outrageous attack on an innocent crowd. The Mau made much of the machine-gun fire, claiming it had been directed at the crowd – and were angered when the coroner ruled this out (a verdict that was seemingly borne out by the limited number of casualties). The killing of Tamasese, who was apparently trying to restrain the crowd at the moment he was shot, left a deep sense of grievance among many Samoans. This was exacerbated by the administration's actions in the following weeks.

### The administration's response

Convinced that the Mau had lost heart, Administrator Stephen Allen adopted aggressive measures to ensure its complete collapse. On 13 January 1930, after the Mau refused to give up its headquarters and surrender wanted men, he declared the organisation seditious and the wearing of the Mau uniform illegal.

As many as 1500 Mau men took to the bush. They were pursued by an armed force of 150 marines and seamen from HMS *Dunedin*, recently arrived from New Zealand, and 50 military police. A seaplane supported military excursions into the bush to hunt down the fugitives.



At the present moment he [the Samoan] is in the position of a sulky and insubordinate child who has deliberately disobeyed his father, as the administrator is generally termed, and no peaceful persuasion will induce him to submit. There is no alternative, therefore, but to treat him roughly ... force is the only thing which will appeal to the Samoan.

Commodore Blake, commander of the marines, in *Lagaga: a short history of Western Samoa*, pp. 137–8

Samoa's inhabitants supported the Mau by supplying them with food and shelter, and providing reports on New Zealand operations. Marines attempted to prevent such activities by raiding villages, often at night and with fixed bayonets.

The Mau eluded the marines, but by mid-February both sides were showing signs of fatigue. In March, with the assistance of local Europeans and missionaries, Mau leaders met New Zealand's Minister of Defence and agreed to disperse.

Brigadier-General Herbert Hart (1931–35) replaced Allen as Administrator in April 1931 and an uneasy stalemate ensued. Men were arrested for showing support for the Mau, so women rallied supporters and staged demonstrations. A surge in support when Olaf Nelson returned from exile in 1933 was quickly suppressed with his re-arrest and deportation the following year. The Mau appeared finished.

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## Page 8 – Towards independence

The Labour Party victory in New Zealand's 1935 general election broke the political stalemate in Samoa. A 'goodwill mission' to Apia in June 1936 recognised the Mau as a legitimate political organisation, the Samoan Offenders Ordinance was repealed, and Olaf Nelson's exile was revoked. The Mau held majorities in both a newly elected *Fono of Faipule* and the legislative assembly.

But dissatisfaction remained. Samoan self-government was slow to emerge, due in part to the Great Depression and the Second World War. A worldwide trend towards decolonisation after the Second World War and increased pressure from the newly formed United Nations led New Zealand to prepare for Samoan independence.

Western Samoa achieved independence on 1 January 1962. Tupua Tamasese Maeole, son of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, became joint head of state with Malietoa Tanumafili II, the son of New Zealand Administrator George Richardson's *fatua* (adviser), Malietoa Tanumafili I.

On 4 June 2002, nearly 90 years after New Zealand's Samoa Advance Party first stepped ashore at Apia, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, returned to Samoa. Speaking to delegates assembled to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Samoa's independence, she offered 'a formal apology' that brought some degree of closure to an uncomfortable chapter of New Zealand history:

On behalf of the New Zealand Government, I wish to offer today a formal apology to the people of Samoa for the injustices arising from New Zealand's administration of Samoa in its earlier years, and to express sorrow and regret for those injustices.

Helen Clark, speech at State Luncheon, Apia, Samoa, 4 June 2002

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