Musket Wars

Page 2 – Overview

MCH, 2019c

1818 p. 52

Between 1818 and the early 1830s, thousands of Māori were killed in a series of conflicts often called the Musket Wars. Many more were enslaved or became refugees. Although estimates vary, more deaths may have been caused by these conflicts than the 18,000 New Zealand lives lost in the First World War. At a time when the total population was perhaps 100,000 (compared to more than a million in 1914–18), the Musket Wars had a massive impact on these islands.

Unlike the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s, the Musket Wars were New Zealand-wide. They began because of rivalry between the northern iwi Ngāpuhi and Ngāti Whātua, but all the tribes were soon trading to obtain muskets. Some of the heaviest fighting took place in the South Island between Ngāti Toa and Ngāi Tahu. Sometimes, as in the kai huanga (eat relations) dispute on Banks Peninsula in 1826–27, the fighting was even closer to home. Only the threat from Te Rauparaha and Ngāti Toa attacks on the region ended this bitter internal feud. In 1835 Ngāti Mutunga and Ngāti Tama took the fighting offshore when they devastated pacifist Moriori during their invasion of Rēkohu, the Chatham Islands.

These wars have been seen as an example of the 'fatal impact' of contact with Europeans. Māori are said to have grabbed all the guns they could afford and killed as many rivals as they could. But was the introduction of European technology alone responsible for these wars?

Naming the wars

In her book *Taua*, Angela Ballara questions the validity of the term 'musket wars': the musket contributed to Māori history, but did not determine it. These wars were about tikanga (custom) and often involved the settling of old scores. Ballara argues that they would have occurred regardless the musket was merely ew technology that Māori had always fought rival kin groups. Warfare was both 'an integral part of the Maori political system' and a 'legitimate cultural response to offences or crimes of any kind'. Conflict increased as the population grew. Resources were depleted and insults demanding a response multiplied. Wars were fought in autumn – after food for winter had been stored – using hand-to-hand weapons such as mere and patu. They were often ritualised affairs that caused relatively few deaths. The victors gained land and booty and increased their mana (status). The

Updated 3rd edition reference

Classroom topics

Classroom ideas - the Musket Wars

Related maps

Kororareka

Related content

We have **1 event in history, 15 biographies, 3 articles,** related to Musket Wars.

made conflicts more destructive.

Ballara and fellow historian James Belich point out that muskets contributed less to the bloodbaths of the early 19th century than the 'humble spud, which created the food surpluses war parties (taua) needed to supplement captured supplies and human bodies'. As Gavin McLean points out, neither 'Potato Wars' nor 'Taua' stuck, so Musket Wars they became.

losers sometimes had to migrate to a less desirable, unpopulated area.

The first muskets peddled by European traders were unreliable and slow to reload. Trained warriors armed with taiaha and patu (long and short clubs) were more effective than those armed with muskets. When Ngāpuhi used muskets in battle for the first time, around 1807, they were overwhelmed by conventionally armed Ngāti Whātua.

Ngāpuhi sought to buy as many of these costly weapons as they could. From 1818 Ngāpuhi taua armed with muskets wreaked havoc across the North Island. Their victims faced death, slavery or exile. Fighting escalated in 1821 when the Ngāpuhi leader Hongi Hika acquired 300 muskets. Over the next few years he led huge musket armies against iwi from Tāmaki (Auckland) to Rotorua. Ngāpuhi suffered heavy casualties, but their opponents were crushed despite retreating into fortress pā.

Once all tribes had muskets there were no more easy victories. Pā that had been adapted to withstand musket fire were harder to capture. By the 1830s the strain of maintaining campaigns and the impact of European diseases were taking their toll. Warfare gave way to economic rivalry.

Share this item

HOW TO CITE THIS PAGE

'Overview', URL: https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/musket-wars/overview, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 2-Apr-2019

Musket Wars

Page 3 – Beginnings

Hongi Hika: Warrior chief

The Ngāpuhi chief Hongi Hika is usually seen as responsible for beginning the Musket Wars. An important influence on Hongi's leadership was the defeat of Ngāpuhi by Ngāti Whātua in the battle of Moremonui at Maunganui Bluff, Northland in 1807 or 1808. Though some Ngāpuhi were armed with muskets, they were successfully ambushed by Ngāti Whātua using traditional hand-held weapons who took advantage of the time it took to reload muskets. Hongi survived by hiding in a swamp, but his uncle and two brothers were killed. Hongi felt obliged to avenge this defeat. By 1815 he was the undisputed leader of his people and convinced of the shock value of muskets used in sufficient numbers.

Hongi made contact with European visitors to the Bay of Islands and in 1814 ventured to Sydney. Here he met Samuel Marsden of the Church Missionary Society, whom he encouraged to go ahead with his plan to establish a mission at the Bay of Islands. This was set up later that year under Hongi's protection. European ships now came to the Bay of Islands in greater numbers. Hongi guaranteed their safety, greatly increasing his opportunities to exchange food and supplies for European technology, including tools and weapons. Other mission stations were established under his protection at Kerikeri and Waimate.

The leaders of other iwi and hapū complained to Marsden about Hongi's monopoly of the relationship with the missionaries. For his part, Hongi was angry that the missionaries refused to trade in muskets and powder. But he made the most of the iron tools and agricultural implements they were willing to trade.

Hongi put the many slaves captured on southern campaigns from 1818 to work increasing the yield from his land. While he experimented with wheat and corn, his main concern was to ensure that large quantities of potatoes and flax were grown to exchange for muskets and powder with the crews of visiting ships. Muskets didn't come cheap, and some Māori starved while pork and potatoes were sold to visiting Europeans.

As he acquired guns Hongi set about seeking utu (revenge) from Ngāti Whātua for the Moremonui disaster. In 1818 he headed further south, leading a taua that destroyed 50 villages as far away as Tolaga Bay on the East Coast. Some 2000 slaves were taken so that

Classroom topics

Classroom ideas - the Musket Wars

Related content

We have **17 biographies, 3 articles,** related to Musket Wars.

they could be put to work dressing flax to exchange for muskets. In 1821 Hongi attacked rivals in the Auckland–Coromandel region, capturing another 2000 forced labourers.

In 1820 Hongi and the young chief Waikato accompanied the missionary Thomas Kendall to Cambridge, England to assist with the compilation of a Māori dictionary. Hongi was more interested in getting his hands on some of the 'thousand thousand guns' he had heard were stored in the Tower of London.

Hongi met King George IV and was presented with gifts, including a suit of armour. Hongi traded most of his gifts in Sydney on the way home for 300 muskets, but kept the 'coat of mail'. This saved his life during a battle with Ngāti Pāoa at Mauinaina, beside the Tāmaki River, in which he was hit twice by musket shots. His survival gained him a reputation for invulnerability.

This boost to Hongi's arsenal not only altered the balance of power in the north, but prompted an arms race that would have consequences for decades to come.

Share this item

HOW TO CITE THIS PAGE

'Beginnings ', URL: https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/musket-wars/beginnings, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 30-Oct-2019