

Māori resistance to conscription

Maori Contingent

At the outbreak of war imperial policy did not allow indigenous people to fight in a war among Europeans. Permission was eventually granted for a Māori contingent to form part of New Zealand's war effort. A Native Contingent Committee co-ordinated Māori recruitment. The four Māori MPs, especially Apirana Ngata and Māui Pōmare, were key members of this committee.

The Native Contingent Committee set itself a quota of 150 recruits every four weeks. Achieving this soon became a struggle. Only one man in three of the second and third drafts, which sailed in September 1915 and February 1916 respectively, were Māori – the rest were mostly Niueans and Rarotongans.

'We have our own King'

A significant sector of the Māori community did not support the Native Contingent Committee. Many Māori from Taranaki and Tainui-Waikato resisted the call to fight for 'King and Country'. Their land had been confiscated in the 1860s as punishment for 'rebellion' against the British Crown. Why should they now be expected to fight for the British?

Tingitanga leader Te Puea Hērangi maintained that her grandfather, King Tāwhiao, had forbidden Waikato from taking up arms again when he made peace with the Crown in 1881. She was determined to uphold his call to Waikato to 'lie down' and 'not allow blood to flow from this time on'. Te Puea maintained that Waikato had 'its own King' and had no need to 'fight for the British King'. If the confiscated land was returned, Waikato might reconsider its position.

Māori blood cries out for utu

The attempt to meet the recruiting quota saw some members of the Native Contingent Committee – and the government – try to shame Māori into participation. Ngata claimed that every letter he received from soldiers at the front asked for more reinforcements. His waiata 'Te Ope Tuatahi' praised those iwi who had already contributed and drew attention to those who had not.

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Ng Waahi pā (near Huntly) in November 1916, Defence Minister
Allen urged Waikato Māori to 'save New Zealand from the fate

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of Belgium, and their women from being the sport of German bayonets ... If you fail now you and your tribes can never rest in honour in the days to come!

Conscription extended to Māori

When conscription for military service was introduced in 1916 it was initially imposed on Pākehā only. Pōmare and Ngata wanted it applied to Māori as a matter of self-respect. Māori blood had been spilt overseas, and Māori had a duty to respond; utu was required.

Having failed to persuade Waikato, Allen supported the extension of conscription to Māori in June 1917 but decided to apply it to the Waikato–Maniapoto land district only. As other tribes had volunteered and filled the first two contingents, officials thought this only fair. Allen knew that this was the heartland of the resistance. The inclusion of Ngāti Maniapoto caused outrage, as their rate of enlistment was much higher than that of Pōmare's own Taranaki people, who were excluded from the ballot. There was a feeling that Pōmare was taking revenge on Ngāti Maniapoto–Waikato for the defeats Taranaki had suffered at their hands in the 19th century.

To make matters worse, the government compiled the register for the ballot using information that had been gathered in complete confidence at the 1916 census. This violation of the law was apparently agreed to by the Māori MPs.

Waikato resist

When Te Paea offered refuge at Te Paina pā (Mangatāwhiri) to men who chose to ignore the ballot, Waikato were denounced as 'seditious traitors'. The revelation that Te Paea's grandfather had a German surname – Searancke – seemed to confirm her status as a 'German sympathiser'. Te Paea pointed out that the Searanckes were at least four generations removed from their German origins and that the British royal family itself was German.

Colonel Patterson of the Auckland Military District wanted Te Paea punished and planned to goad her into making anti-conscription statements in front of reliable witnesses. This would allow her to be prosecuted under the War Regulations for 'inciting men not to enlist'. Others favoured a more cautious approach, fearing such action would simply increase her prestige. The government knew that under Te Paea's leadership the campaign was at least non-violent. In 1916 two Māori had been shot and killed by police attempting to arrest the Tūhoe leader Rua Kēnana at Maungapōhatu, in part because of his active discouragement of Māori recruitment. The government did not want more bloodshed.

Māui Pōmare advised Allen that those sheltering at Te Paina were 'merely waiting to be taken to jail'. A minimal show of force would suffice.

Punishing the objectors

A crowd greeted police when they arrived at Te Paina on 11 June 1918. After being escorted into the meeting house, they read out the names of those who were to be arrested. Nobody moved and Te Puea made it clear that she would not co-operate. The police waded into the crowd and began arresting men they believed to be on their list. Mistakes were made. Te Puea's future husband, 16-year-old Rawiri Katipa, was mistaken for his older brother; a 60-year-old was also arrested. Each of the seven men selected had to be carried out of the meeting house.

King Te Rata's 16-year-old brother, Te Rauangaanga, was also seized. Police caused great offence by stepping over the King's personal flag, which had been protectively laid before Te Rauangaanga. Te Puea intervened, calming the shocked onlookers and blessing those who had been seized. She told the police to let the government know she feared no law, or anything else 'excepting the God of my ancestors'.

The prisoners were taken to the army training camp at Narrow Neck, Auckland. Those who refused to wear uniform were subjected, like other objectors, to severe military punishments, including being fed only bread and water and being supplied with minimal bedding. When this failed to break their resistance, some were sentenced to two years' hard labour at Mount Eden prison.

Te Puea supported those who had been arrested by bringing them food (which never seemed to reach the inmates) and attempting to visit them in prison. She was a source of great inspiration to the prisoners. One of those detained, Mokona, described how Te Puea would sit outside the prison so they could catch a glimpse of her when they went to the toilet. This was enough to make them want to 'invent an excuse to go to the whare mimi. The fact that she was there gave us heart to continue.'

Resistance maintained

Māui Pōmare decided to make a direct appeal to Tainui to abandon their resistance. This personal approach failed dismally. The fact that their men were now in prison merely hardened Tainui's resolve. When Pōmare attended a hui at Waahi pā in 1918, he was greeted with abusive haka composed specially for his visit. This culminated in the act of whakapohane (a bare-buttock salute to an unwelcome visitor).

By 1919 only 74 Māori conscripts had gone to camp out of a total of 552 men called up. When the war ended, the Māori in training were sent home, and all outstanding warrants were cancelled. Deciding what to do with the defaulters in custody was trickier. Despite the military's objections, Cabinet decided in May 1919 to release all Māori prisoners. This decision was never made public because the government was determined not to treat other defaulters so

leniently.

The imposition of conscription on Waikato and Ngāti Maniapoto had long-lasting effects. The wounds it caused were probably only healed by the Tainui Treaty settlement in 1995.

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