

Fact Sheet 3: Māori participation in overseas wars

The South African War of 1899-1902 (often called the Boer War) was the first overseas conflict to involve New Zealand troops. New Zealanders reacted with great patriotism to the British Empire's call to arms. Wi Pere, the MP for Eastern Māori, offered to lead a contingent of 500 Māori to South Africa, but Imperial policy officially excluded 'natives' from fighting. It was considered unacceptable to use non-white troops in a 'white man's' war.

This did not stop a number of Māori with mixed ancestry enlisting for service under their English names. The authorities turned a blind eye to such enlistments. Māori communities also helped raise funds to support the South African war effort. A large carnival at Wellington in March 1900 was one of a number of such events. Māori entertained the audiences with haka such as 'Kikia te Poa' (Kick the Boer).

When the First World War broke out in 1914 there was some division amongst Māori as to whether they should participate. The four Māori MPs supported full involvement. The MP for Northern Māori, Te Rangi Hīroa (Peter Buck), enlisted and sailed with the first Native Contingent in February 1915. Originally it was not intended that this contingent would be a fighting unit. Eastern Māori MP Āpirana Ngata believed Māori involvement would strengthen their claims for equal status with Pākehā.

Other Māori opposed the war effort. Waikato leader Te Puea Hērangi questioned why Māori should fight for an Empire that had within living memory invaded, occupied and confiscated Māori land. When military conscription was applied to Māori in 1917, Waikato and other iwi that had suffered land confiscation in the 19th century mounted a campaign of resistance.

At the start of the First World War Imperial policy still excluded 'native peoples' from fighting in a war among Europeans. Again Māori enlisted for service using English names. Mounting casualties and the need for reinforcements on the Gallipoli Peninsula forced a change in Imperial policy. The Native Contingent got its chance to fight and eventually 50 members of the Contingent lost their lives at Gallipoli.

After Gallipoli the Native Contingent was reorganised as a Pioneer Battalion to serve on the Western Front. Pioneers were the labour force of the military, digging trenches, building roads, railways and carrying out other logistical tasks. This was essential and dangerous work, often carried out under fire.

By the end of the war, 2227 Māori (and 458 Pacific Islanders) had served in what became known as the Māori Pioneer Battalion. Of these, 336 died on active service and 734 were wounded. Other Māori enlisted (and died) in other New Zealand battalions.