

Fact Sheet 4: Opposition to Māori going to war

When the Second World War began Māori leaders offered support for both home defence and overseas service. But not all openly supported Māori participation in the conflict. Some objected because they doubted the ability of Māori communities to maintain a combat force. They argued that casualties were bound to be numerous and that a population of around 90,000 could not maintain a constant flow of reinforcements. There were suggestions that Māori should be spread among Pākehā units to lessen the possibility of heavy losses. Others supported the idea of a pioneer role, similar to that performed on the Western Front in 1916-18.

As in the First World War, some iwi who had been negatively affected by the wars of the 1860s and the subsequent land confiscation objected to Māori troops being deployed overseas. They argued that any Māori unit formed should be kept in New Zealand for home service only.

A key figure once more was Waikato leader Te Puea Hērangi. She had led resistance when the government imposed conscription on Māori from Tainui–Waikato during the First World War. Some accused her of secretly supporting the Germans. Waikato men who refused to report for training when balloted in 1918 were arrested. Any who refused to wear army uniform were subjected to severe military punishments. In the end only a handful of the Tainui conscripts were ever put into uniform; none were sent overseas. But the imposition of conscription had long-lasting effects.

When war broke out again in 1939 Te Puea reaffirmed her opposition to Waikato people fighting overseas so long as the government ignored their land grievances. The government introduced conscription in May 1940 but wisely chose not to apply it to Māori. Te Puea told Prime Minister Peter Fraser in 1941, 'I'm not anti-Pākehā; I'm not pro-German; I'm pro-Māori.' Te Puea did soften her position, though, saying that any Waikato men who volunteered to enlist would not be stopped. By 1942 nearly 1000 Waikato men had volunteered for service.