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**White Man's War:  
Māori Stance Against Conscription in the Great War**

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New Zealand imposed conscription during WWI due to the fact the country was a part of the British Empire and was therefore required to contribute troops to the war effort on their behalf. Conscription, or compulsory military service, was used to quickly and effectively mobilize large numbers of soldiers to fight in the war. New Zealand introduced conscription through the Military Service Act of 1916, which required all able-bodied men between the ages of twenty and forty-five to register for military service. It was imposed initially only on Pākehā, or New Zealanders of European descent, leaving the Māori out of conscription. The conscription for the war in Europe brought division between the Māori in Aotearoa<sup>1</sup>, some going against the Crown and others gathering their support for the imperial power. One's iwi<sup>2</sup> and familial ties would play into what position one would take on the subject. During the time, the Māori objectors to conscription often hailed from Waikato on the North Island. These people were not only objectors due to their ideas on pacifism but partly due to Europeans' colonization of their land in the nineteenth century. Immediately after the outbreak of the war in Europe, Sir James Allen, the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, promised the British a number of men to fight alongside the British military for the entire duration of the war. Knowing of this resistance to conscription from the Waikato people, Allen extended the conscription to the Waikato-Maniapoto land district in 1917.<sup>3</sup> The second Māori King and leader of the Waikatos, Tāwhiao, had a significant impact on the ideas coming from the Waikatos, at this time who continued to believe in the statements that he had made while in power during the nineteenth century. A quote

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<sup>1</sup> Māori word for New Zealand

<sup>2</sup> The largest social unit in Māori society

<sup>3</sup> Henry Holland, *Armageddon or Calvary: the conscientious objectors of New Zealand and the process of their conversion* (Brooklyn: H.E. Holland, 1919), 9

attributed to Tāwhiao states, "I will leave the issue of war to you—the white man."<sup>4</sup> Here, Tāwhiao showcased how many Māori felt on the issue of the war in Europe, a war that did not concern them or their interests as indigenous peoples. The previous ideas on the war within the Waikatos, the impact of colonialism from the British, and the complications from the New Zealand government, were driving factors into why the Waikato and other Māori people opposed conscription during World War I.

Historians often tell the same narrative on Māori involvement in World War I, retelling the stories of those who fought in the war in the west. Numerous Māori people were seen as wanting to join the effort for the British, while others were against fighting for the imperial force yet historians often do not get deep into what occurred for these reactions to happen. Three historians, Alison Fletcher, Timothy Winegard, and Monty Soutar, have all contributed to this conversation about the indigenous people in the war. Each of the historians has relied heavily on primary sources, from letters to official documents from the New Zealand government.

Winegard delves into five different indigenous groups from separate British dominions; in his argument, he states that the indigenous peoples of the dominions willingly participated in all aspects of the war and that their inclusion was only for the interests of the British due to their racial ideas about the indigenous people and their traits as indigenous people.<sup>5</sup> He also describes the ideas and thoughts coming from Britain that harmed the Māori, forming a strong background to the Māori who objected to the conscription. All three historians agree to the reason why Māori people agreed to participate—to gain equal rights and lead to justice for their people—and touch

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<sup>4</sup> "Maoris And the War," *Evening Post*, May 4, 1916, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19160504.2.82>.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy C Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

on the reasons why some Māori did not approve with the war effort. Fletcher delves more into the involvement of the Māori who refused to participate in the war efforts and how this was tied into their iwi and the ideas of colonialism that they found to be distracting to their own problems in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> Soutar gathers a larger idea in his book, focusing on the traditions—and like the other two historians—the colonial powers that the British imposed onto the Māori in New Zealand.<sup>7</sup> There is limited scholarship on the Māori who were objectors to the war, those mentioned did include Māori objectors and included them in the history.

By the start of the twentieth century was vast, the British Empire including dominions such as Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand, and South Africa. Objection to conscription was not unique to the New Zealand case; nevertheless, most British colonial troops consisted of volunteers. Countries under British control, such as Australia and India, did not introduce conscription as they had amassed enough volunteers and professional soldiers for the effort. Others, such as Canada and New Zealand, had to conscript men to add to their military. At the beginning of the war, the imperialist power did not utilize indigenous populations within their dominions for their military until that manpower dwindled. The indigenous Australians were barred from joining the war effort explicitly, with the Defence Act stating, "Aborigines and half-castes are not to be enlisted."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, by 1917, the act was revised to allow men with at least one European parent to join.<sup>9</sup> The First Nations people in Canada faced conscription by 1917 but challenged the act and were successful in opting out of conscription in 1918.<sup>10</sup> Notably,

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<sup>6</sup> Alison Fletcher, "Recruitment and Service of Māori Soldiers in World War One." *Itinerario* 38, no. 3 (2014): 59–78.

<sup>7</sup> Monty Soutar, *Whitiki! Whiti! Whiti! E!: Māori in the First World War* (Auckland: Bateman Books, 2019)

<sup>8</sup> *Defence Act* 1903 (Cth).

<sup>9</sup> *Defence Act* 1903-1917 (Cth).

<sup>10</sup> *The Military Service Act* 1917, S.C. 1917, c. 19

the greatest objectors in Canada were farmers and French Canadians<sup>11</sup>. Within all of these cases, the history and experience of the indigenous men who served were overshadowed and rewritten by non-indigenous soldiers. The experience of serving also would provide the indigenous people with a catalyst for advocating for equal rights within their dominion and in the eyes of the Crown.

Colonization efforts that started in the nineteenth century had a significant impact on the Māori and their opposition to conscription in New Zealand during World War I. Prior to colonization, the Māori had their own distinct culture, language, and political and social systems. The British Empire, alongside the European New Zealand government, would impose several government actions that would disrupt Māori societies. The Treaty of Waitangi—created in 1840—would be disputed and misinterpreted by the Māori for the ideas presented to them in it. The treaty would stand as the focal point for the Pākehā-Māori<sup>12</sup> relationship going forward and would serve the purpose of legitimizing the colonization of New Zealand by Britain. Originally written in English and translated into te reo Māori, the document's language, when translated, changed the meaning of essential ideas to the Māori. There is no hard evidence that the British willfully distorted the translation, and the debate on the mistranslation of the treaty continues into the twenty-first century among scholars. Yet there are major translation issues that were not brought up by the British when discussing the treaty with the Māori leaders, a sign that the British aimed at confusing the Māori for their own benefit. The English version of the treaty states that the Crown would hold the pre-emptive right to purchase Māori land from them.

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<sup>11</sup> G.W.L Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 348

<sup>12</sup> Pākehā referring to Europeans in New Zealand

However, the Māori version had no mention of 'pre-emption' within their translation.<sup>13</sup> Rarely did any Māori, before colonization, understand the concept of selling land or private land ownership. Land ownership within the colony was an idea that the Crown wanted to expand and exploit for colonial gain. These differences in language would aid in the British exploiting and deceiving the Māori. The Crown would use the treaty to buy land from Māori cheaply and sell to European immigrants. By doing this, the government would fail to protect the rights of the Māori described in the treaty. The treaty would begin the process of the Māori losing their autonomy of their land and the beginning of tensions between the two parties. With these tensions growing and more problems arising from the treaty and power of the Crown, the next five years would lead to the 'New Zealand Wars.'<sup>14</sup>

The New Zealand Wars were battles fought mainly on the North Island between Māori and British forces beginning in 1845. The New Zealand Wars and its effects, rather than the Treaty of Waitangi, would solidify the Empire's power and end Māori self-determination.<sup>15</sup> Numerous government policies passed between the 1840 signing of the treaty and the beginning of the World War I upset the relations between Europeans and Māori people. These policies often stemmed from the ongoing issues coming out of the war. The New Zealand Settlement Acts of 1863 would enable the colonizers to confiscate any land from Māori iwi "who engaged in open rebellion against Her Majesty's authority."<sup>16</sup> This included the Waikato iwi who lost

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<sup>13</sup> Te Tiriti o Waitangi, 1840.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy C. Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> New Zealand Settlements Act 1863 27 Vict 8.

most of their land. By 1865 the idea of pre-emption was eliminated in an amendment to the Acts and allowed anyone to buy land from the Māori directly.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the Acts, the Native Land Court was created and negatively impacted the land ownership rights of the Māori. The Native Land Court had long-term effects on the Maori. In 1885, the *New Zealand Herald* wrote that those affected lived in tents or on the ground and that the only relief from the suffering came from getting drunk.<sup>18</sup> These acts, along with others such as the Native Township Act, would lead to the land owned by Māori to a measly 7.14 million acres, in contrast to the over 100 million acres they occupied prior.<sup>19</sup> The Māori-King Movement, Kīngitanga in te reo, began in 1857 in response to the growing worry of the Europeans taking over their land and to unite as one to represent themselves to the Crown. Certain iwis located in the North Island came together to determine who would represent them. Pōtatau Te Wherowhero, leader of the Waikato-Tainui iwi, was crowned King, and it was his son, Tāwhiao, who would formulate essential ideas that the Māori used in the early 20th century. After Tāwhiao came into power following his father's death in 1860, relations between Maori and Pākehā deteriorated. Nevertheless, as a pacifist, he would reinforce his non-violence stance to his people. One idea from Tāwhiao used to back objection to the conscription was, "Beware of being enticed to take up the sword. War results in things becoming like decaying, old dried flax leaves. Let the person who raises war beware, for he must pay the price."<sup>20</sup> Upon the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Te Rata Mahuta held the position of King and was assisted in his

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<sup>17</sup> New Zealand Settlements Act 1863 27 Vict 8.

<sup>18</sup> "Untitled". *New Zealand Herald*, August 1, 1885, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH18850801.2.21>.

<sup>19</sup> Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Angela Ballara, *Te Kīngitanga: The People of the Māori King Movement* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1996), 57.



duties by his cousin, Te Puta. The Waikato iwi was active in their resistance to conscription due to their loss of land and the ideas of these past leaders.<sup>21</sup>

As the British joined the war in 1914, the government relied on volunteers to join the war efforts. Nevertheless, after suffering a significant loss and a drop in the number of volunteers for the NZEF<sup>22</sup>, Prime Minister W.F. Massey drafted a conscription bill in 1916. Any man—who is of European decent—between the ages of twenty and forty-five was able to be called up to serve. One iwi, in particular, would resist enlistment, the Waikato iwi on the North Island. Under Te Rata and Te Puta, Waikato would push against the war for multiple reasons. A talk between Prime Minister of Defence James Allen and paramount chief Te Heuheu Tukino outlined why he believed the Waikatos were not enlisting. Tukino stated that the Waikatos were "adhering to prophecies made by Tāwhiao" using a quote from the King, "As to war, I will leave it to you—the white man."<sup>23</sup> Allen encouraged the iwi to reconsider and not dwell on the "imagination of the past."<sup>24</sup>

Important figures within the iwi also would restate quotes and ideas from Tāwhiao, including Haunui Tāwhiao, his son. As the first of the Māori soldiers were going out to war, he referred to his father's words from 1881: "The killing of men must stop; the destruction of land must stop. I shall bury my patu<sup>25</sup> in the earth and it shall not rise again...Waikato, lie down. Do not allow blood to flow from this time on. War shall not come to this island. It has been

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<sup>21</sup> Soutar, *Whitki! Whitki! Whitki! E!*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> New Zealand Expeditionary Force

<sup>23</sup> "Maoris And the War". *Evening Post*, May 14, 1916, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19160504.2.82>.

<sup>24</sup> "Maoris And the War". *Evening Post*, May 14, 1916.

<sup>25</sup> Pre-European Māori weapon, similar to a club

outlawed. Any man who starts a war in this country shall pay for it.”<sup>26</sup> The idea of war not being brought to the island was critical; leaders did not want conflict to arise that would further the oppression of their people by colonizers and sympathizers. North Island Māori objectors saw this quote as a way to show that the notion of war was not accepted by the Māori and would not enter the island. Yet the King—Te Rata—told Dr. Māui Pomare, a health officer to the Māoris, that it would be the people’s choice to enlist. Te Rata would hold by this idea throughout the remainder of the war.<sup>27</sup> Kingitanga leaders met in 1915 to discuss the position that they would take on the war, in which they concluded to hold the King’s position of neutrality and would not encourage their men to enlist.<sup>28</sup> Listing their ideas in their newspaper—*Te Paki o Matariki*—they stated that they would not stop anyone from enlisting and would defend the land if attacked but did not want their sons to be shipped overseas. The members would list the Treaty of Waitangi and its idea that the Queen had promised to protect their people and Tāwhiao’s pacifist ideas.<sup>29</sup>

The Waikato were not the only Māoris to resist but were targeted directly by the New Zealand government in 1917. At this time, the First Māori Contingent fell below the quota, and due to the lack of enlistment from the Waikato, the conscription would be forced upon them. In September 1917, Allen attempted to communicate with the Waikatos in a telegram and addressed their lack of enlistment, "They have one more chance. They cannot expect me to visit them again till they fall into line with their brother Maoris throughout New Zealand, who have so nobly done their duty."<sup>30</sup> Allen urged the men to enlist to avoid the necessity of conscription. Still, the

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<sup>26</sup>Michael King, *Te Puea* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), 77.

<sup>27</sup>Soutar, *Whitki! Whitki! Whitki! E!*, 222.

<sup>28</sup>Soutar, *Whitki! Whitki! Whitki! E!*, 225.

<sup>29</sup>“Te Whawhai.” *Te Kopara*, May, 1915.

<sup>30</sup>“Maoris And Service”. *New Zealand Herald*, September 14, 1917, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19170914.2.28>.

Waikato resisted, sticking to their ideals that they had their nation and King and did not want to contribute to the violence for their colonizers. By 1918, the conscription was enforced, and on June 11th, police arrived in Te Paina to arrest those who ignored conscription. Seven Māori men were arrested, including Te Raungaauga Mahuta—the brother of the Māori King—and brought to Auckland.<sup>31</sup> *Hawke's Bay Tribune* stated that "Dr. Pomare hopes that the whole of the Fourth Maori Contingent will be furnished by the Waikatos, a thing that this numerous and war-like tribe could easily do."<sup>32</sup> Pomare represented the Western Maori electorate and was embarrassed by the low enlistment rate from the Waikato and the Taranaki. The language used by Pomare demonstrated how, even between Māori, the Waikato and their ideas were unpopular with those supporting the war. Those iwi on the North Island would continue to resist and fight the stereotypes placed upon them.

As the year came to an end, it was clear that the war was almost over and one hundred eleven defaulters were arrested and seventy-four dispatched to camp.<sup>33</sup> On November 28, 1918, Te Raungaauga Mahuta and those with him at the time of arrest were discharged and allowed back to Waikato. With the continuing Influenza Pandemic, the government had to make a choice on what to do with the remainder of Māori defaulters. The Assistant Adjutant-General stated that it was no use to proceed with the trials, and that the ballot roles were created from unreliable outside resources.<sup>34</sup> Finally, by May 1919, any Māori defaulters still being held for trial were let

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<sup>31</sup> "Maoris And the War". *New Zealand Herald*, June 12, 1918, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19180612.2.32>.

<sup>32</sup> "Native Contingents". *Hawke's Bay Tribune*, September 10, 1915, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/HBTRIB19150910.2.16>.

<sup>33</sup> P.S O'Connor, "Recruitment of Maori soldiers," *Political Science* 19, no.2 (1967): 81.

<sup>34</sup> Soutar, *Whitki! Whitki! Whitki! E!*, 271.

go and sent home without pay. Noting that this was drastically different from non-Māori defectors who were kept in New Zealand prisons for the next part of the decade.<sup>35</sup>

Conclusively, the effects of colonization by the British during the nineteenth century carried into the early twentieth century in New Zealand creating a divide between people on the issue of supporting the war effort. Noting the government actions that were taken to displace indigenous people and limit the Māori in their self-determination, a portion of the Māori population would actively dodge the conscription. Even after the conclusion of the war, the Māori would continue their struggle against the colonizers up into the twenty-first century. The effects and ideas that formed from colonization can be vastly different between iwi, hapū, and individuals, and there was no one reaction to the conscription.

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<sup>35</sup>“For Ten Years”. *Evening Post*, May 22, 1919,  
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19190522.2.85>

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