

Fact sheet 6: The impact of the war on Māori

‘We will lose some of the most promising of our young leaders,’ wrote Sir Āpirana Ngata during the war. ‘We have lost a few already. But we will gain the respect of our Pakeha brothers and the future of our race as a component and respected part of the New Zealand people will be less precarious.’

Of the more than 3600 men who served voluntarily with the Māori Battalion 649 were killed or died on active service. A total of 1712 were wounded and another 237 were taken prisoner. This casualty rate was almost 50% higher than the average for the New Zealand infantry battalions.

The Second World War was a significant turning point in the relationship between Māori and Pākehā. The contribution and reputation of the Māori Battalion was a source of great pride to the wider New Zealand community. The ceremony held at Ruatoria on 6 October 1943 to posthumously honour the Battalion’s Victoria Cross winner, 2nd Lieutenant Te Moananui-a-Kiwa Ngārimu, was one of the biggest events staged during the war years. The Governor-General, Sir Cyril Newall, Prime Minister Peter Fraser, and more than 7000 Māori from all over New Zealand attended the event. It was filmed by the National Film Unit and later screened to Māori Battalion soldiers in Italy.

The war presented Māori with new opportunities to enter paid employment. Many migrated to the urban centres to fill positions in munitions factories and other essential industries. In 1936 just over 11% of Māori lived in urban areas; by 1951 the figure was closer to 23%. Māori and Pākehā were now in greater contact with each other. This posed new challenges for Māori who had to adjust to life in the city away from the support of their whānau. Some faced discrimination in the cities when it came to things such as rental accommodation and access to places like pubs, hotels and restaurants.

The government promised that confiscation claims would be settled at the end of the war. Unlike the years after the First World War, Māori servicemen were also promised greater access to post-war rehabilitation assistance. There was some reason for Māori to look to the future with renewed confidence. Āpirana Ngata’s son Henare was an officer in the Māori Battalion. He wrote:

... in a wider sense, the fact that Maori took an active part in the war produced a number of positive things. Maori have a higher profile in New Zealand life. The Treaty of Waitangi has been given a status unthought of pre-war. Maori is no longer a declining population, nor a dying race. Can it be claimed that these changes took place because Maori men went to World War Two? Probably not. But can it be said that these changes would have taken place if the Allies lost the war?