

# New Zealand and the First World War

## (Lead up to War)

On 28 June 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife Sophie were assassinated in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo. The fallout from this faraway event would ultimately claim the lives of 18,500 New Zealanders and wound a further 50,000. Places thousands of miles from home with exotic-sounding names such as [Gallipoli](#), [Passchendaele](#) and the [Somme](#) were forever etched in the national memory during what became known as the Great War.

The war took more than 100,000 New Zealanders overseas, many for the first time. Some anticipated a great adventure but found the reality very different. Being so far from home made these New Zealanders very aware of who they were and where they were from. In battle they were able to compare themselves with men from other nations. Out of this came a sense of a separate identity, and many New Zealand soldiers began to refer to themselves as 'Kiwis'.

The significance of the war on New Zealand society was summed up by a man who participated in it from Gallipoli to France. Ormond Burton went from being a stretcher-bearer at Anzac Cove to a highly decorated infantryman on the Western Front. He believed that 'somewhere between the landing at Anzac and the end of the battle of the Somme New Zealand very definitely became a nation'.

## Quick facts and figures

- The total population of New Zealand in 1914 was just over one million.
- In all, 120,000 New Zealanders enlisted, of whom 103,000 served overseas.
- A total of 2688 Maori and 346 Pacific Islanders served in the New Zealand forces.
- At least 3370 other men served in the Australian or imperial forces, among them four Victoria Cross winners.
- In all, 550 nurses served with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, and many others enlisted in the United Kingdom.
- A total of 18,500 New Zealanders died in or because of the war, and nearly 50,000 more were wounded. Of the total number who died, over 2700 died at [Gallipoli](#), and 12,500 died on the Western Front.
- The names of those who died are recorded on approximately [500 civic war memorials](#) throughout New Zealand.

## Planning for war

- The standing armies of France and Germany doubled in size between 1870 and 1914. Great Britain had a policy of maintaining a navy 2½ times as large as any rival. Germany's naval expansion sparked a naval arms race.

- A major European war had been narrowly avoided in 1908. Austria-Hungary annexed the former Turkish province of Bosnia, thwarting Serbia in the process. In response, Serbia began to mobilise (with the support of Russia). When Germany threatened war in defence of its Austrian ally, Russia and Serbia backed down.
- These tensions prompted many nations to make precise plans for military mobilisation. For Germany, any plan had to consider the possibility of a war on two fronts, so the scheme therefore involved crushing one rival quickly. Mobilisation plans were difficult if not impossible to reverse once they were begun. This was illustrated by Germany's von Schlieffen Plan, which was developed in 1905. It was based on the need to defeat France quickly before Russia had time to react. To achieve this, France would be attacked via Belgium so as to avoid French border defences. Belgium posed no serious military threat to this plan, but its neutrality had been guaranteed by Britain in 1839. Germany felt that ultimately Britain would not risk war to save Belgium.

## Death in Sarajevo

- The Serbian government was aware of a plot to kill Franz Ferdinand in May 1914. There was evidence that high-ranking Serbian military figures were involved, and those selected to kill the archduke were almost certainly armed by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, the chief of intelligence in the Serbian army.
- The Serbian ambassador in Vienna gave vague warnings about a possible assassination attempt. It was suggested that the archduke cancel his proposed visit in June, but he insisted on going. In Sarajevo he and his wife narrowly escaped one attempt on their lives on the morning of 28 June, and they continued with their official business that afternoon. But their motorcade took a wrong turn and stopped within metres of one of the selected assassins, Gavrilo Princip. Unlike his colleagues that morning, Princip did not fail.
- Germany gave Austria a blank cheque to take any action deemed appropriate. Austria-Hungary issued Serbia with a harsh ultimatum that effectively revoked the latter's national sovereignty. Although Serbia consented to almost every point in the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary exploited disagreements on a number of minor points to declare war on 28 July 1914.

## Like falling dominoes

- The next day Russia ordered a partial mobilisation against Austria-Hungary. Germany responded by threatening Russia with war if it did not stop mobilising. France reacted to the prospect of a Russo-German War by mobilising its own forces. Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August and on France two days later. When the von Schlieffen Plan was activated, the invasion of Belgium prompted Britain to declare war on Germany on 4 August. The First World War had begun.
- Across the other side of the world the last domino fell. News of the declaration of war by King George V was received in Wellington at 1 p.m. on 5 August 1914. The governor, Lord Liverpool, announced the news from the steps of Parliament to a crowd of 15,000. New Zealanders regarded themselves as British and Britain as home, so there was little hesitation in supporting Britain in its moment of crisis.

- New Zealand's emotional response to the outbreak of war was a reflection of its close ties with Great Britain. Germany's invasion of Belgium, a small country like New Zealand, struck a chord with many New Zealanders. The strongly militarist atmosphere of the time contributed to the general zeal with which most New Zealanders entered the war.

New Zealand's response to the outbreak of war was not only a matter of supporting Mother England but was also a matter of self-interest. New Zealand was dependent on the British market for the sale of the wool, frozen meat and dairy products that dominated its economy. Anything that threatened this market threatened New Zealand's livelihood. New Zealand relied on Britain's naval power to protect its physical integrity and its trade on the long haul to the British market.

On the outbreak of war in 1914 HMS *New Zealand* joined the 1st Battlecruiser Squadron of the Grand Fleet in the Baltic Sea. It saw action against the German fleet in all three of the major North Sea battles. During the Battle of Jutland in May 1916 Captain Green wore the piū piū (a waist mat or cape with long swinging strands of flax) and tiki (a neck pendant) presented during the 1913 tour, as he had in the earlier battles of Heligoland Bight and Dogger Bank. HMS *New Zealand* escaped significant damage and casualties and established a reputation as a lucky ship, which some attributed to the piū piū and tiki.

## Turning boys into soldiers

Ultimately, New Zealand's greatest contribution to the war effort was the supply of 120,000 service personnel, of whom 103,000 served overseas. The foundations of this massive mobilisation had been laid in the years leading up to war through organisations such as the Boy Scouts and through the introduction of compulsory military training in 1909.

## Compulsory military training

Growing international tension meant that there was little opposition to the passing of a new Defence Act in December 1909. This replaced the Volunteer Force with a Territorial Force. It also introduced compulsory military training. All boys aged between 12 and 14 had to undergo 52 hours of physical training each year as Junior Cadets (this was dropped in 1912). This training was supervised by their teachers. Voluntary cadet groups had existed prior to the passage of this new act.