

New Zealand government celebrates centenary of seizure of German Samoa

Tom Peters
5 September 2014

On August 29, the New Zealand government held a ceremony outside the Auckland War Memorial Museum to mark 100 years since the seizure of German Samoa—the first action taken by NZ military forces in World War I. The event was part of the government’s five-year centenary program, which involves spending tens of millions of dollars to sanitise and glorify WWI in order to condition workers and youth for new imperialist wars.

Auckland has a Samoan population of well over 100,000, making it the largest Samoan urban population in the world. Very few attended the ceremony. Aside from government officials, diplomats, soldiers and high-school students, it was attended by around 150 people, including some descendants of the NZ military forces involved.

The ceremony was a crass celebration of the seizure of the German colony that whitewashed the imperialist character of the enterprise. For the New Zealand ruling class, like its counter-parts around the world, the war was to fulfil its long-standing ambitions to expand its colonial possessions. In the 1870s, Prime Minister Julius Vogel unsuccessfully sought permission from Britain to annex Samoa, which was split in 1899 between the US and Germany. Germany had established copra plantations on the islands, which profited from the exploitation of indentured labourers from Melanesia and China.

WWI provided the opportunity for New Zealand to expand its possessions in the South West Pacific. In exchange for Samoa, and a share of the highly profitable phosphates extracted from Nauru (which was seized by Australia), the New Zealand government sent more than 100,000 troops to fight in Europe and the Middle East—one tenth of the NZ population at the time. Some 18,500 died and more than 40,000 were wounded.

On August 15, 1914, nine days after the declaration of war in Europe, two troopships left New Zealand for Samoa, accompanied by three cruisers. They were also escorted by two Australian warships and a French cruiser.

German defences in Samoa were virtually non-existent but the movements of Germany’s battleships in the Pacific, the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*, were unknown.

In the event, New Zealand forces landed without a single shot being fired. There were no German soldiers in Samoa and the governing officials turned themselves in without resistance. NZ’s 1,400-strong landing force was replaced two weeks later by a smaller force of 360 soldiers.

Samoa was the second German colony seized by the British Empire (the first was Togoland). Shortly afterwards, on September 11, Australian forces took German New Guinea.

Navy chaplain Colin Mason opened the Auckland ceremony by saying it paid “tribute to those who put themselves in harm’s way to preserve freedom” and was an opportunity to “re-dedicate ourselves to the work of vigilance required to both honour and preserve the sacrifices made for freedom and peace.”

Governor-General Sir Jerry Mateparae, the former chief of the Defence Force, said the invasion “fulfilled a great and urgent imperial service” on behalf of Britain by seizing the German wireless station in Samoa. He read from a telegram sent by Colonel Robert Logan, the first New Zealand administrator of Samoa, which declared that “the vast majority of the natives are in sympathy with the British occupation of Samoa.”

The operation had nothing to do with preserving freedom and was greeted with considerable fear in Samoa. The August 29 *New Zealand Herald* quoted 103-year-old Mele Ioelu, who still remembers the day the troops landed: “[W]e all ran to the church to hide. Other families had built underground shelters and so they went down there to stay until the soldiers left. They were big men who wore their uniforms proudly. But they had big guns strapped across their backs—and I was always afraid I’d

get shot one day.”

Far from bringing “freedom and peace” to Samoa, NZ imposed a military dictatorship. One of Logan’s first orders was to violently disperse thousands of Chinese indentured labourers, who had walked off the copra plantations and gathered outside the court house after hearing about the landing. Logan imposed strict racial segregation, banning Chinese people from entering Samoan houses. Intermarriage between Chinese and Samoans was later outlawed and some couples were forcibly separated.

The occupation was catastrophic for Samoa. In 1918 the failure of NZ authorities to quarantine a disease-carrying ship in Apia Harbour led to the introduction of the deadly influenza virus, which wiped out about 8,500 people—one fifth of the population. Mass graves were dug to bury the bodies. Logan’s administration provided grossly inadequate medical services. He infamously replied to a request for help from a girls’ school by saying: “I do not care if they are going to die. Let them die and go to hell.”

New Zealand colonial rule was oppressive. All vestiges of traditional Samoan authority were removed and the administration gave itself sweeping powers to banish “trouble makers” from villages. On the plantations seized from Germany the system of indentured labour continued. Samoans who petitioned for self-government were hunted down, exiled and imprisoned. Villages were routinely ransacked and families terrorised by police searching for protest leaders. In 1929 police opened fire with rifles and a machine gun on a crowd of unarmed protesters in Apia, killing 11 people and injuring 50, including women and children.

These experiences, which are remembered with intense bitterness by Samoans, were not mentioned by the governor-general or by the Minister for Pacific Island Affairs Peseta Sam Lotu-Iiga. The latter blandly declared that NZ’s occupation of Samoa “started a relationship” between the two countries “that has had its peaks and troughs... [but] is based on friendship, shared values and a common vision for the future.”

Samoa was not granted formal independence until 1962. Since then it has remained dependent on New Zealand and mired in economic backwardness and poverty. Large numbers of people survive on subsistence farming, while money sent from relatives in NZ and other countries accounts for a quarter of GDP.

According to a UN report last year, 25 percent of the population lives below the “basic needs” poverty line. According to another UN report in 2011, more than 40

percent of men aged 20 to 29 were not working or studying. Conditions in neighbouring American Samoa, which is still a US colony, are just as bad. New Zealand businesses profit from the desperate conditions in Samoa and other Pacific island nations by employing thousands of seasonal migrant workers on low wages.

The official ceremony’s whitewashing of New Zealand’s emergence as a colonial power in the Pacific should be taken as a warning to the working class in New Zealand and throughout the region. A hundred years after the outbreak of WWI, the geo-political situation in the Asia-Pacific is extremely tense and the ruling elite is again preparing to defend its interests in the region by military means.

New Zealand and Australia now regard China as an intruder into what they regard as their sphere of influence in the Pacific. Samoa’s government is currently in discussions with a Chinese company over a \$200 million port development proposal. At the same time, Beijing has attempted to expand its influence by offering the governments of Tonga, Fiji, Samoa and elsewhere larger loans and more aid money than Wellington or Canberra, with fewer strings attached.

In recent years, Wellington has greatly strengthened its military and intelligence cooperation with the US. Both Labour and the current National Party government are supporting the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia, a strategy to encircle China militarily and ensure US dominance over the region. In return, Washington is supporting the interests of New Zealand imperialism in the Pacific.

Just as it is celebrating past colonial conquests, New Zealand, in concert with its allies, are preparing for new ones. Last November NZ hosted US and other foreign troops for the country’s biggest ever international military exercise, Operation Southern Katipo, which was explicitly designed to prepare for intervention in the event of a hostile government coming to power in a Pacific island state.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact