

Internment Camps in New Zealand, during the Great War.

Motuihe Island and on Matiu (Somes) Island in Wellington Harbour.



The outbreak of war in August 1914 dealt a blow to New Zealand's German population. Despite having established themselves as part of the social, cultural and economic fabric of the dominion since their arrival in the early 1840s, many German residents experienced during the course of the war a virulent campaign of public hostility which, in many instances, was reflected in the antagonistic tone adopted by the popular press. The government, led by Ulster-born William Massey, acted swiftly, introducing legislation to expel German residents from their places of employment and placing restrictions on their movement; those considered a danger to domestic security were interned on Somes Island in Wellington and Motuihe Island in Auckland.



Image 1: Motuihe Island, Hauraki Gulf, 1920. *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, Ref: WA-62683-F. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22867152>.*

Enemy aliens

The government believed that Germans and other enemy nationals based in New Zealand posed a significant threat to the empire's war effort, and moved to restrict their ability to aid their home nations. Mail censorship and the posting of armed guards at vulnerable places was increasingly complemented by the supervision of individual 'aliens'.

Any person born in a country at war with the British Empire – including those who had subsequently been naturalised as British citizens – was classified an enemy alien. (From May 1916, so were their New Zealand-born wives.) From December 1914 they were expected to register with the police and inform them if they were intending to travel more than 20 miles from home. Centralised registration of all enemy aliens was introduced in September 1917. All enemy aliens were liable to summary arrest and detention if suspected of espionage, and faced execution if convicted of this crime.

Aliens lived in a climate of suspicion and dread, viewed with fear and, in some cases, hatred, by a nervous public. The government convened an Alien Enemies Commission in June 1915 to consider public claims about 'disloyal' enemy aliens, and from that September the Minister of Defence had the discretion to intern any enemy alien at his pleasure. By the end of the war around 500 aliens had been interned on Somes Island in Wellington Harbour and Motuihe Island near Auckland. Most of those detained were reservists in enemy forces, passengers and crew from visiting ships, and locals suspected of sympathising with the enemy.

From early 1916 the government began to restrict the property rights of enemy aliens in New Zealand, reasoning that under certain circumstances assets should be liquidated to help fund the British war effort. Regulations issued in February 1916 banned the redistribution of enemy property through wills, and from April the Attorney-General (a Cabinet minister) was empowered to appoint the Public Trustee as custodian of enemy property. Aliens were required to register their property with the Public Trustee, and 'enemy companies' had to surrender their income to the government. (These were mainly overseas companies with interests in New Zealand).

The War Regulations gave Defence and the police broad powers to root out all forms of possible sedition or espionage. From November 1914 police (and military police) could arrest any suspicious person at will, and search any building or ship suspected of being used for illegal purposes. Anyone could be arrested for spreading 'false reports', trespassing on military land or a telegraph station, possessing telegraph equipment without permission, signalling with lights at night, or publicising information of value to the enemy. The regulations were extended in September 1915 to cover the incitement of 'lawlessness' and the carriage of guns or explosives without permission.



Image 2: German prisoners of war on Somes Island during World War One. Taken by an unknown photographer circa 1916. Courtesy of Alexander Turnbull Library. Reference: 1/2-112327-F

During World War I, several hundred German and Austrian nationals in New Zealand were interned as “enemy aliens” on Motuihe Island and on Matiu (Somes) Island in Wellington Harbour. The internment camp housed the “better class” internees, including the German and Austrian Consuls and German businessmen. When New Zealand occupied Samoa in 1914 (then a German colony), the internees included the Governor of German Samoa, Erich Schultz, officials from the German Samoan Justice, Customs, and Post and Telegraph Departments, and Telefunken engineers who were then completing the Apia radio station.

Fourteen marine cadets from the *Elsass* were also interned on Motuihe, having been captured in Apia, Western Samoa, in 1914 after they had arrived there from Pago Pago (American Samoa, the USA at that time not involved in the War), mistakenly believing they could join Graf Speer’s German squadron there.

Life on Motuihe for the internees was not hard. They were given reasonable freedom to roam the island during the day to fish, collect fruit, or swim. Some were even allowed to accompany the camp commandant on trips to Auckland to buy supplies which not available at the canteen. It was a situation of mutual respect and trust. The internees were regarded as being of such a high calibre that they could be trusted not to abuse the freedom given.



Image 3: Peeling potatoes at the outdoor kitchen, temporary tent camp at the time of the influenza epidemic, Motuihe Island, December 1918.

Alfred Schultz Album, photographer Reinhold Hofmann and Museum of Samoa's To Walk under Palm Trees: The Germans in Samoa.

Barracks

Many of the German and Austrian nationals interned in 1914-1918 were accommodated in the barracks.



Governor's Cottage

After numerous complaints by the German Governor that his accommodation was not worthy of his "honoured guest" status, the Swiss Consul reported in 1917 that Schultz had been moved to the "practically newly built bungalow of some six or eight rooms".



This photograph, taken in 1917, shows the Governor's cottage in the foreground. Behind it are the Camp Commandant's cottage and the barracks building at the top of the road.

One of the main internment camps in New Zealand during the First World War was on Motuihe Island. By late 1917, Motuihe Island held 56 internees. (At the same time, 277 internees were held at Somes Island in Wellington.)

Forty-one of these internees had been part of the German settlement in Samoa or German New Guinea when New Zealand forces seized the colonies early in the war, including the Governor of German Samoa, Dr Erich Schultz, his chief judge, and other senior officials. Many of the German Austrian nationals interned in 1914-1918 were accommodated in the barracks building on the northwest headland of Motuihe.

Life in the camp

Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Harcourt Turner was placed in command at Motuihe. He bestowed a high level of trust on the internees. They were practically given complete freedom of the island from 8.30am to 6pm and could fish, swim, play games or roam at their pleasure.

Bill Wiggins served for a while as a guard on Motuihe Island. He tried to join up for the Expeditionary Force in 1914, aged 15 - but his mother intervened. Instead, he was sent to guard ammunition works in Mt Eden, and then the prisoners on Motuihe Island. He recalls:

"I was sent to Motuihe Island to guard the German internees and prisoners of war. They were such fine people. To me they were a different, educated kind of people. We had the Governor of Samoa there, Dr Schultz, and a couple of doctors....They had their own cookhouse. They could have visitors. We were a happy little camp. Colonel Turner used his launch, the Pearl, to come up to Auckland and would take two prisoners of war – Snowy Paulsen and Mr Freund. One was a deckhand, one looked after the engine. Frankie Wainwright, my mate, was Colonel Turner's orderly. He had to go with the Colonel up to Auckland, and he'd be in charge of the prisoners. They went into Queen Street and done all their shopping. We thought nothing of it. Just as well people didn't know how they were treated. If you told them prisoners of war were up in Queen Street shopping, which would be the end of it, wouldn't it?"

(Quoted in *An Awfully Big Adventure: New Zealand World War One veterans tell their stories*. Edited by Jane Tolerton, 2013.)