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978-1-107-01493-0 - Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War

Timothy C. Winegard

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Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War

This pioneering comparative history of the participation of indigenous peoples of the British empire in the First World War is based upon archival research in four continents. It provides the first comprehensive examination, and comparison, of how indigenous peoples of Canada, Australia, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa experienced the Great War. The participation of indigenes was an extension of their ongoing effort to shape and alter their social and political realities, their resistance to cultural assimilation or segregation, and their desire to attain equality through service and sacrifice. While the dominions discouraged indigenous participation at the outbreak of war, by late 1915 the imperial government demanded their inclusion to meet the pragmatic need for military manpower. Indigenous peoples responded with patriotism and enthusiasm both on the battlefield and the home front and shared equally in the horrors and burdens of the First World War.

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Note on the text

This comparison will detail the participation of the indigenous populations of the five British Dominions – Canada, Australia, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa – during the First World War. Any author investigating aspects of indigenous history must, if by peer scrutiny alone, delineate approaches to descriptive nouns and chronological representations. Given the multiplicity of indigenous nations within the respective Dominions, they did not represent monolithic, homogenous entities. Many indigenous peoples felt a stronger affiliation to clans than to either their nations or their indigenous collective (unknown prior to European contact). Moreover, enduring animosities still existed between traditional enemies. Therefore, grouping them as Aboriginal Australians, for example, is seemingly specious. Fundamentally, however, based on the dominant policies of Dominion and imperial governments, this generalization is not only unavoidable, but is also representative of trans-national themes, and is indicative of the social and political environments in all Dominions and the United Kingdom during the years of, and surrounding, the First World War.

Indigenous nations or groupings will be explored when they are important to the arguments or are imperative to understanding regional policies and decisions. Given the multitude of indigenous dialects within five diverse Dominions, the use of indigenous languages will be kept to a minimum unless central to explanation. For example, the Maori word for non-Maori peoples is *Pakeha*. This word will be used to describe non-Maori New Zealanders, as it was adopted into New Zealand society. In general, however, European terminology will be used, not out of ignorance or thoughtlessness; rather, to enhance readability and, more importantly, to adhere to contemporary convention.

As a rule, this work adopts the language present in the contemporary documents and bureaucratic discourses, although many of the terms used, such as kaffir or half-caste, are now deemed derogatory and politically incorrect. The term indigenous represents those peoples present in the Dominions prior to contact. Indian will be used to describe those

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indigenes of North America. The term Eskimo will embody the peoples of Arctic Canada and Newfoundland-Labrador. Métis will be used to describe a distinct people of European and Indian lineage. Indigenous Australians will be referred to as Aborigines, and at times as full-blood or half-caste, as this differentiation was paramount in Australian policy and practice. Indigenous South Africans will be referred to as black (or native) and coloured, as the Union of South Africa afforded different freedoms and management to these groupings. Lastly, the New Zealand Maori will be identified as such.¹

The use of these labels, which many associate with subjugation, dishonour and Eurocentric ideology, is not a concession to their negative connections; rather, it is an attempt to relate accurately the contemporary attitudes, opinions and legal arrangements represented in these words by the societies, peoples and decrees which used them. To employ more current words or phrasings, or to surround in quotation marks to affirm the flawed construction of a label, is to impart a consciousness to policy makers and populations that did not exist at the time in which this history takes place.

Defining settlers from the British Isles is also challenging. Many considered themselves Scottish, Irish, Welsh or English. Conversely, settlers in the Dominions from the British Isles felt strong connections to the metropole and shared many of the same cultural and societal values and increasingly identified themselves with being British. Hence, in most instances, the term British will describe settlers from the British Isles.

Lastly, the term contact represents the first encounters between indigenous peoples and Europeans. This is not to impart that indigenous nations do not have, based on archaeological evidence, oral traditions and scientific theory, lengthy records of terrestrial occupation and socio-cultural evolution prior to the arrival of Europeans. Contact infers that indigenous peoples underwent an unavoidable cataclysmic crisis, unparalleled in their known previous histories, due to the introduction of disease and the adoption of killing potential through the use of European weapon systems. By the dawn of the twentieth century, indigenous populations, save for those of South Africa, were moribund, due to deadly disease, warfare, and contact with peoples of differing genetic dispositions and viral immunities.

¹ Although the Maori Contingent of the First World War was officially designated the 'Native Contingent', it is more commonly known as the 'Maori Contingent', and will be referred to as such. The term native was not officially, and legally, replaced with Maori until 1947.



Map 1 The Western Front, 1914-18.

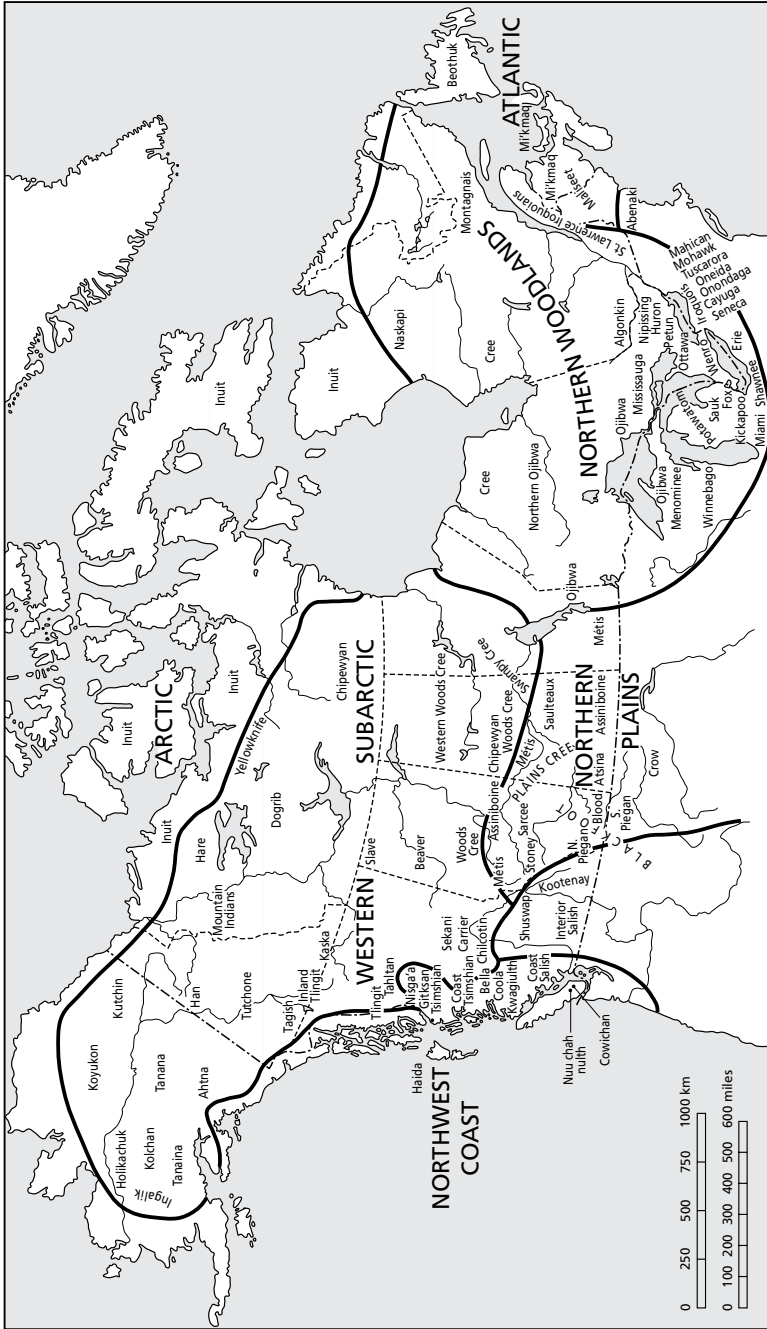
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Map 2 Indian nations of Canada and Newfoundland.

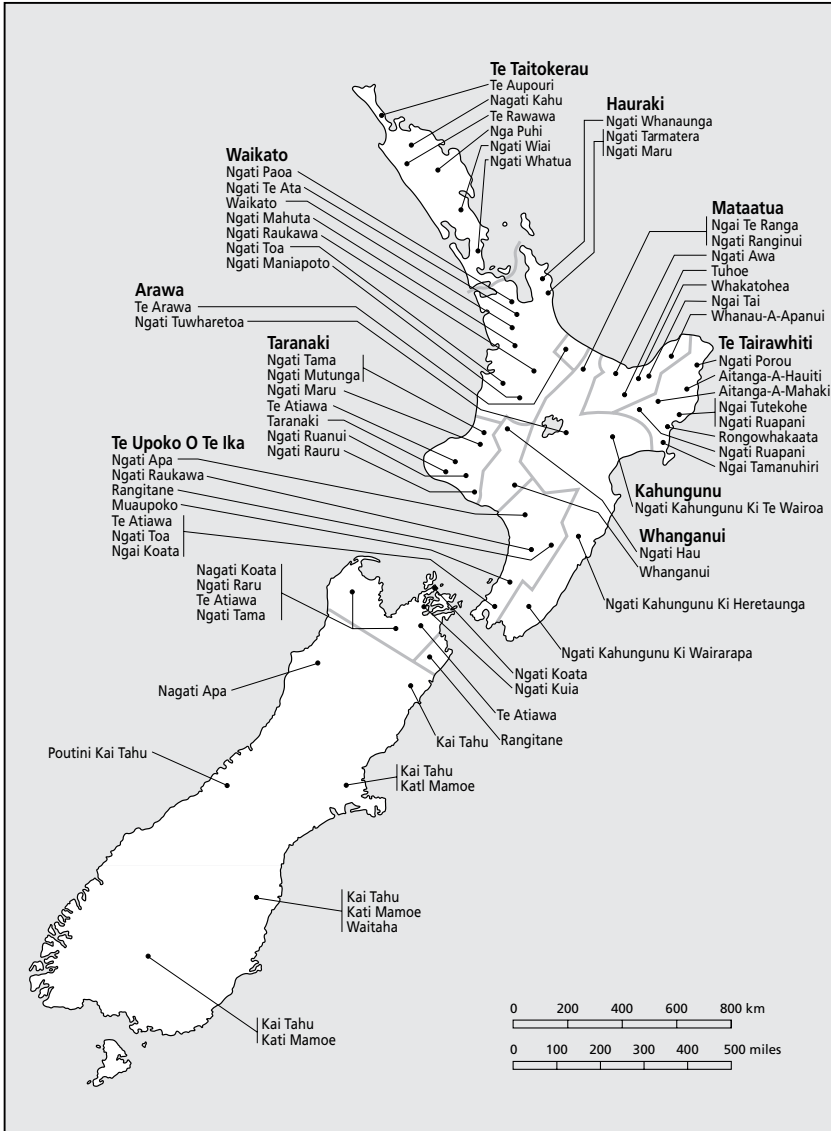
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Map 3 Maori *Iwi* (tribes) of New Zealand.

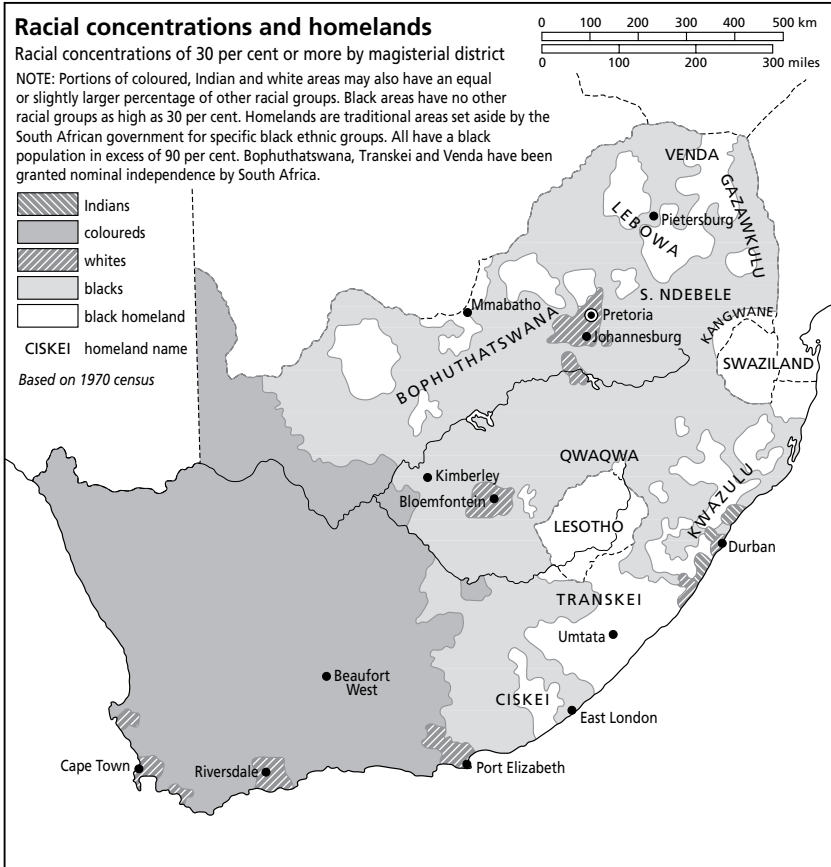
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Map 4 The 1913 South African Natives Land Act: distribution of lands and ethnicity.