

The Turbulent History of a Country

The New Zealand Land Wars are often called ‘Wars without End’, but what happened to leave such a legacy of conflict and disagreement to this day?

The New Zealand Land Wars were a series of armed conflicts that took place between 1845-1872 between the Māori, the original natives of New Zealand, and new European settlers, known as the Pākehā.

Of course, the reasons for these conflicts are complex and due to a range of different factors. One may be the conflict caused through the trading of land: settlers and the Māori held differing views about the value and use of land. In addition, the settlers brought with them new laws and politics that largely excluded the Māori.

The signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 should have meant that the Māori tribes had undisturbed possession of their lands and treasure. Before the signing of this treaty, deals of land were questionable and the treaty stated that all Māori land should only be sold to the government. This treaty was increasingly ignored by the settlers and the Māori reacted with violence.

At first, the disputes were limited to a small area. However, the conflicts spiralled because of the government's perception of the resistance of the Māori to further land sales and to their apparent lack of respect for the control of the government. British troops were called in to help overpower the Māori king and also to gain farming and residential land for British settlers.

By the 1860s, the conflict was wholly imbalanced through weaponry and manpower, with the Māori vastly outnumbered when battling against 1800 British troops. Despite their smaller numbers and lower-grade weapons, the Māori were able to withstand the unfair onslaught through cleverly-positioned settlements and carefully-planned attacks.

The Treaty of Waitangi

The Treaty of Waitangi was signed on 6th February 1840 at Waitangi. It was signed by the United Kingdom British Crown and representatives of Māori leaders. The treaty made New Zealand a British Colony and made the Māori British subjects if they agreed to sign away their rights and powers of authority. It specified that the Māori would only sell their land to the Crown and guaranteed that Māori chiefs would keep their leadership and possession of lands and treasures.

Unfortunately, the English and Māori versions are not quite the same and this has caused some controversy in interpreting the treaty, contributing to the legacy of issues that are still prevalent today.



Reconstruction of the Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Marcus King by Archives New Zealand is licensed under CC BY 4.0





The wars seemingly ended with a ceasefire and both parties failed to accept the peace terms of the other. The government confiscated large areas of land from the Māori, ostensibly as punishment for rebellion against the government, but in fact land was taken from both rebels and supporters. Although some of the land was later properly purchased or returned to the Māori, it was not returned to the original owners. The confiscation of the land impacted the economic and social development of the tribes.

The New Zealand Land Wars are often called 'Wars without End' because though the fighting ended on the battlefield, it continued in courts and around negotiation tables.

Glossary

Māori	Original natives of New Zealand.
Pākehā	European settlers.
Treaty	A formal agreement between two different parties or states.

Timeline

