

New Zealand Police during the 1914-18 war

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Section 1: Introduction

The 1914-18 war period deserves study as a distinct unit of time in the history of the New Zealand Police.

The official histories bisect the period: Hill's study is of the 1886-1917 period and Dunstall begins his survey in 1918. Yet arguably these four years, 1914-1918, are a coherent unit of time that should be understood in their own terms. The country was under a unique legislative regime and set of political priorities which had profound social consequences and which allocated the police unique roles which deserve to be understood.

During this period the police were in effect the intelligence system of the country. The official histories obscure this. They divide the period because they are concerned with a quite different thesis. Hill makes this plain: New Zealand, he argues, like other 'developed' societies saw the onset during the late nineteenth century of many decades of 'social order' achieved not by coercion but by 'hegemonic' power. By 'hegemonic' Hill draws on the Gramscian idea of hegemony as power achieved by mobilising consent (1) rather than by exerting coercion. He argues that by the end of the 1880s the police had gained 'respect and confidence' and had the role of protecting the 'tranquil' society obedient by consent to correct beliefs and behaviours 'unnoticed or taken for granted' in the population (2). He is therefore required to discount some facts of police history to fit his model. The period under Commissioner Cullen is one when the long-term trend to hegemonic control was 'halted or even (at times) reversed' (2). In effect Hill admits his thesis of a slow and inexorable bedding in of hegemonic power is not supported by empirical data. By implication he can only fall back on a 'great man' theory and acknowledge John Cullen as a sort of anti-hero who subverts the plot. Mark Derby (3) reinforces this approach in his study which 'has relied very heavily on this justly acclaimed work' (p 10). That approach fails to explore this 1914-18 period as a case study when police resources, tactics and bureaucratic machinery matured rapidly in practice to answer a set of politico-social exigencies.

The following text takes a case history approach to the 1914-18 wartime period:

Section 2: Cullen v. O'Donovan

Section 3: Core Business – demand v. resources

Section 4: Core Business – crime fighting

Section 5: Non-compliance with conscription

Section 6: Aliens, espionage & sedition

Section 7: New Zealand Police as a professional body

1. Gramsci A. Selections from the Prison notebooks. New York: International Publications; 1971.
2. Hill R. The Iron Hand in the Velvet Glove. The Modernisation of Policing in New Zealand, 1886-1917. Wellington: Dunmore Press in association with the New Zealand Police and the assistance of the Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs; 1995.
3. Derby M. Czar Cullen. Police Commissioner John Cullen and coercive state action in early 20th century New Zealand: Victoria University of Wellington; 2007.