

NEW ZEALAND'S TROUBLES IN WESTERN SAMOA

By J. B. Condliffe

NEW ZEALAND'S governance of Western Samoa has been fraught with increasing difficulty and disillusionment. The capture of the islands in 1914 appeared to be a long-deferred fulfilment of the dreams of successive generations of New Zealand statesmen — Grey, Selwyn, Vogel and Seddon — all of whom saw their country as the natural leader of the island peoples. Their vision ranged as far as Hawaii, which even in 1897 Seddon urged both upon the Colonial Conference and upon President McKinley and Secretary Sherman as a rightful field for annexation by New Zealand. The failure of British statesmen to develop a Monroe Doctrine for the south Pacific caused chagrin in New Zealand, and vigorous protests were made to the Colonial Office as French, German and American influence extended there. Annexation of the Cook Islands in 1901 was small consolation.

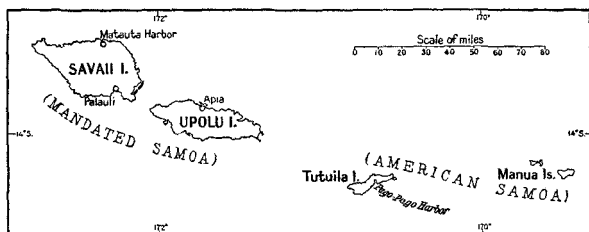
Trouble began almost immediately after the capture of Samoa at the beginning of the World War. The incidents of the first few years indicated that New Zealand had undertaken a more complicated task than she realized. The importation of more indentured Chinese laborers, which was strongly opposed by the Labor Party, and the liquidation and reorganization of the German plantations as a state enterprise struck at the foundations of Samoa's commercial progress. In 1918-19 official negligence allowed the influenza epidemic to enter the islands. The American Navy, which successfully fought the epidemic in American Samoa, proffered help; but its services were not accepted and thousands of natives died, leaving behind them a memory that years of effective public health work has failed to soften.

The Paris Peace Conference gave New Zealand a mandate over the island, and a period of calm succeeded the troubles of the war years. It lasted until 1926, when the New Zealand Administrator quarreled with a group of prominent European traders. There is ample evidence that energetic measures, especially in public health, were taken in this period. The New Zealand officials had the best intentions. Their mistakes were of method and understanding.

There can be no reasonable doubt that the more recent difficulties, which have just culminated in military intervention and a riot in which eight Samoans, including the high chief Tamasese, lost their lives, date from the agitation launched by disaffected white traders at a meeting held on October 15, 1926. From this meeting sprang both the Citizens' Committee and the Mau, or native league. The Citizens' Committee, headed by the Hon. O. F. Nelson, must bear a large share of the responsibility for arousing the natives, always prone to intrigue, to a state of rebellion and defiance of authority. It is a pity that they did not remember the wise old chief's remark to Robert Louis Stevenson: "I begin to be tired of white men on the beach."

Subsequent mishandling of the situation has now presented the Citizen's Committee with excellent material for agitation on behalf of the natives; but a dispassionate examination of the documentary evidence proves conclusively

that their original motives were personal hostility to the Administrator and defense of their commercial interests against his policy of state action on behalf of the natives. Their tactics have been condemned in scathing terms by a Royal Commission presided over by the Chief Justice of New Zealand, a condemnation which was subsequently endorsed by the Permanent Mandates Commission at Geneva. They find scant support even among the critics of governmental policy in New Zealand; but their propaganda is skilful and incessant. It is devoted mainly to keeping alive the rebellion in Samoa and to influencing public opinion in the United States. New Zealand opinion, naïvely self-conscious, chafes under the half-truths reproduced in certain American papers, knowing that the difficulties in Samoa are not really comparable with those faced by the United States in Caribbean countries and the Philippines.



On the other hand, the New Zealand administration of the mandate has displayed a lack of imagination and a curious failure to profit from the experience gained in handling Maori problems and administering the Polynesian people of the Cook Islands. It is probable that the world would have known little of these failures and that there would have been little overt discontent among the Samoans if the Administrator had not antagonized Mr. Nelson. Critics of the government and experts on Polynesian customs would have forced an improvement of administration without undue difficulty, if in the meantime the situation had not been embittered by an incessant campaign in which motives were often misrepresented. The Samoans today believe that New Zealand has forced upon them an expensive public health policy and a large debt, and recent incidents have convinced them that it is ruthlessly militaristic and vindictive. Public opinion in New Zealand, conscious of the best of intentions and mindful also of heavy subsidies to Samoa from the New Zealand Treasury, is puzzled by all this hostility. The hostility of the traders it recognizes as human, even if unscrupulous. There is some doubt as to the wisdom of a previous government's drastic action in deporting the chief agitators, thereby enabling them to pose as martyrs in the Samoan cause; but there is little real sympathy with them.

The chief critics of governmental policy within New Zealand are the Labor Party (opposed on principle to "strong" methods of government) and the leaders of the Maoris, who feel that there has been an almost complete failure

to understand the native situation. A typical expression of their view is contained in the following statement by Sir Apirana Ngata, who has since become Minister of Native Affairs and Minister in charge of the Cook Islands:

"Our policy is superb in its simplicity; our intentions, their justice and honesty, cannot be questioned by any tribunal in the world. Our methods may be seriously questioned by the anthropologist. . . . We have probably overestimated the receptivity of the Samoan mind. We have probably not sufficiently appreciated that the social structure of the Samoan people has not been uprooted as was that of the Maori nearly a century ago; that, therefore, it is not as advanced from a Pakeha standpoint as that of the Maori today. We have much to learn of their customs relating to land tenure. We do not thoroughly understand the status and position of their hereditary chiefs. We have not given ourselves sufficient time to learn about the Samoans from themselves before launching at them reforms which we think would be for their benefit because they have proved beneficial to their relatives here and in Rarotonga."

There is no disposition in New Zealand to evade the responsibilities of the mandate. One newspaper, indeed, has suggested that it would be wise to transfer the mandate to the Colonial Office, which is farther away, has larger resources of trained personnel, and is less susceptible to propagandist agitation. The notion fostered by Samoans in Hawaii, and by their ill-informed American sympathizers, that the United States should take control of all the Samoan islands, is obviously an international absurdity. The demand for self-government is almost equally naïve. The Samoans have displayed no aptitude for the kind of self-protection necessary in the modern world. New Zealand will retain the mandate and work steadily to remove the native grievances.

The government under whose unimaginative and unyielding régime the trouble began is out of office. A new Administrator and several new departmental heads have been appointed. The present government has steadily adhered to its policy of requiring submission to authority as a precedent to negotiation, but has thus far been met with a stubborn refusal. The recent unfortunate incident in which Tamasese and seven of his followers were shot down will undoubtedly prolong and embitter the dispute. But with such men as Sir Apirana Ngata available for consultation, and with the Labor Party holding the balance of political power, we may be sure that every effort will be made to bring about a reconciliation.

The initiative must lie with the authorities. It would seem wise for them to be a little less insistent upon the preliminary submission of the Mau before negotiation. Sir Apirana Ngata has stated in the House that in his opinion "the ideal would be to remove the majority of those who now govern Samoa." In the same speech he commented on the wisdom of going slowly and particularly of avoiding insistence upon rigid legality. "Imagine," he said, "the feelings of a Maori at the scion of a royal race being imprisoned in Mt. Eden jail for not paying a head-tax of about £2, while thousands of Maoris wander round New Zealand wallowing in debt. Of course I am only giving the Polynesian view."

Here is real understanding of the essential human elements of the problem. Moreover, public opinion in New Zealand is thoroughly roused and determined to remove the blot on its reputation. Prof. Siegfried twenty years ago commented on the vanity which characterizes public life in the Dominion. Not the

least element in that vanity has been the conceit that, of all native races, the Maoris have come best through the strain of adaptation to modern industrial life. Indeed, this was the chief reason why the Dominion urged that it be entrusted with the mandate for Samoa. Its self-respect demands that the present situation shall be remedied.

In the meantime the situation in this remote Pacific island raises into clear relief the problems involved in the successful working of a mandatory system. It is often suggested that the mandatory principle offers the best means for the government of backward peoples. Gilbert Murray has recently suggested that Britain recognize the general principle by tabling the reports on its colonial possessions for regular examination by the Permanent Mandates Commission. A realist might well ask, however, whether the experience of Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Southwest Africa, New Guinea and Samoa justifies the belief that mandatory government is even as good as government where a single experienced power has full control.

Recent events in Samoa raise anew the question as to what is the ultimate authority behind a mandate, and who chooses or changes the mandatory. It will be remembered that the representatives of New Zealand at Versailles demanded annexation and were persuaded to accept the mandatory system only when the mandates were divided into three classes, Samoa being placed in the third or "C" class, the one most nearly approximating annexation. A powerful body of opinion in New Zealand still holds that the mandate is derived from the Allied and Associated Powers rather than from the League.

The terms of the mandate are drawn without exactitude or legal precision. A New Zealand legal authority recently pointed out that they are "probably the most loosely drawn international agreements ever promulgated, giving the New Zealand Government greater powers over Samoa than over New Zealand itself." Legal examination of the documents in an important test case brought out the alarming fact that an act of the New Zealand Parliament may, for Samoa but not for New Zealand, contravene common law rights or accepted legal principles of the British constitution. Tamasese was committed to a New Zealand jail for not paying his taxes. A writ of release was applied for under section 12, cap. 2, of the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679, which stipulates that "no person shall be imprisoned beyond the seas." His counsel submitted that "the Mandate was a badly drawn and unfortunate document, so badly drawn as to be capable of many interpretations." The judge interpreted it as deriving from the League Council and therefore ruled that the Habeas Corpus Act, which had been contravened, did not apply.

This decision, like a famous mandate decision of the South African courts, will probably be of great constitutional importance to the British Commonwealth. It also raises the question of the ability of such a body as the League Council to supervise or control the mandatory in any real way. The Council has no body of law at its disposal and can invoke no sanctions beyond those of public opinion. Australia and New Zealand had already, in 1925, successfully resisted the suggestion that the Permanent Mandates Commission should have increased powers of investigation. In default of such machinery the mandatory system at present, in view of these legal decisions, would appear to come very close to a system of divided responsibility and indefinite authority.

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