

## Unit 25: Pohnpei: Showdown at Sokehs 1909-1911

### *Ponet Saul*



Figure 25.1 Map of the Federated States of Micronesia

**At the end of this chapter you will be able to:**

- locate the Sokehs Kingdom on the map of Pohnpei
- understand the events of 1909-1911
- understand the implications of such events for the people of Pohnpei

#### **Glossary**

***Corporal punishment***

Bodily, physical punishment

***Rebellion***

The act of rebelling against the established government

***Successor***

One that is replaced or followed by descent, election, appointment, etc

**What events led to the Sokehs *Rebellion* in Pohnpei?**

The most sacred location of Pohnpei, the Nan Madol in Pahn Kedira, had corners symbolising Pohnpei's eleven provinces. According to traditional beliefs, if any corner fell or crumbled, the area symbolised by that corner would be destroyed.

In 1910, the corner representing Sokehs collapsed. This meant that the Sokehs Kingdom was in trouble. Indeed, the year of 1910 proved to be a very eventful year for Pohnpeians, with a rebellion led by Chief Soumatau, Chief Samuel and his brother Lepenrerin against the German Administration.

**Why was there dissatisfaction among the Pohnpeian people under the German Administration?**

**The Boeder Administration**

During the German period of the history of Pohnpei (1899-1914), a series of important events took place in Sokehs. These events changed the lives of all of the people of Pohnpei significantly.

In 1909, Governor George Fritz was transferred from Pohnpei to Yap, and Carl Boeder, was made Governor of Pohnpei. On March 2, 1910, Governor Boeder called a meeting with the people of Sokehs, to discuss his plans. He announced changes in the Sokehs' feudal laws and in customs of holding property. Boeder also told the Pohnpeians that they were expected to give fifteen days of service to the Administration.

Boeder also introduced **corporal punishment** for disobedience, lying and any behaviour which was seen as shameful conduct towards the Europeans. At that time, the people of Sokehs showed no disagreement with Boeder's plan.

Later that year, Governor Boeder began the construction of a fifteen foot wide road along the shore of Sokehs Denipei, at the Paipalap Cliff, near the Sokehs Catholic Mission.

This road was part of Boeder's ambitious project of building a road around the whole island. As previously agreed, the labourers for the project were recruited from the local population. A nobleman, Chief Soumatau, was employed as the supervisor of the job.

**Questions and Activities**

1. Paragraph writing: In your own words, explain the traditional beliefs associated with Sokehs.
2. Who was the Governor of Sokehs until 1909 and who replaced him?
3. What happened on 2 March 1910?
4. What were Governor Boeder's plans?

## Discontent and conflict

There was dissatisfaction among the Pohnpeians working on Boeder's road construction project. Chief Soumatau himself was unhappy with his meagre wages of two German Marks. He demanded a pay rise, but Governor Boeder would not agree to it.

The workers began to plan an attack against the Government in June that year. During that month, Governor Boeder was to leave for a long trip to the Carolines, aboard the Government vessel *Delphin*. However, the June attack never took place. It was an incident on 18 October 1910 that would lead to a fully-fledged rebellion.

On that day, Pohnpeian worker Lahedeleng was severely beaten up by German supervisor Hallborn. Lahadeleng had been accused of laziness and, according to the new corporal punishment laws, was given ten strokes with a wire-lined rubber hose.

In protest, his fellow labourers stopped working and threatened Hallborn who, together with another supervisor called Heafner, was forced to take refuge in the mission. The two German supervisors were held there all morning along with Father Gebhard. The news of the protest reached Kolonia (the German capital and port city of Pohnpei) that afternoon, between 3:00 and 4:00pm, when Governor Boeder was informed of the incident.

The workers' protest escalated into bloodshed on both sides. After Governor Boeder heard about the incident at the construction site, he went to the Catholic mission at Sokehs, accompanied by his secretary, Braukman, two servants and a five-man boat crew.

As the party left the dock area at the Catholic Mission in Sokehs, they were cut down by the rebels' rifle fire. Governor Boeder was shot twice in the stomach and killed by Chief Soumatau with a bullet in the head. Soumatau cut off Boeder's hand as a proof of the killing. Braukman was shot three times and stabbed to death by the Sokehs rebels. Hallborn and Heafner were also killed, as they attempted to escape. Only one out of five boat crew members were to survive the attack.

Fearing further attacks by the rebel workers, Doctor Grischner, who took command of the German administration, began to organise a large-scale defence of Kolonia with 50 local policemen. He was also helped by a volunteer force of 400 Pohnpeians from the provinces of Madolenihmw, Uh and Kitti. Barbed wire was used to strengthen the defence of the old Spanish Fort.

The people of Sokehs prepared to defend themselves and stole guns from the German armoury in Kolonia during the night. Dr Grischner asked them to surrender themselves and return all the guns. The rebels replied that they had already fallen too deeply into sin.

### Questions and Activities

5. What was Governor Boeder's project in 1910, and how was labour recruited?

6. Why was there dissatisfaction with the German Administration among the Pohnpeian workers?
7. What was Chief Soumatau's job and why was he unhappy?
8. What event triggered the Sokehs Rebellion?
9. Were the Sokehs successful?
10. What was the name of Boeder's **successor**?
11. What did the rebels mean when they said that 'they had fallen too deeply in sin to give up now'?

### **December 1910 and February 1911; Reinforcements**

The news of the rebellion quickly spread to other German colonies. Reinforcements were brought over by the Government to increase protection: on 5 December 1910, the ship *Germania* arrived with 68 soldiers; on 13 December, the steamer *Sair* arrived from Rabaul with 70 Melanesian soldiers; on 19 December, warship *Cormoran* arrived, followed by *Emden* and *Nurnberg* on 10 January 1911. On that day, the channel dividing Sokehs Island from the main island of Pohnpei was closed by German Government troops.

On 13 January, from 7:45am to 9:00am, the three German warships shelled continuously the strong point and known rebel position on Sokehs Island. The nine hundred foot cliffs of Sokehs Island were assaulted. On the 15 and 16 January the soldiers searched the island and found 125 Pohnpeians who were then taken to prison. Palikir was invaded and another 110 prisoners were taken, most of them women and children.

Finally, on 13 February Chief Soumatau surrendered, with his five men, to the Chief of Net. On February 16, Chief Samuel surrendered in Kittu. By 23 February, the Government had taken complete control of the island once again.

At the time of his surrender, Chief Soumatau and the people still had ammunition and weapons to continue the fight. Referring to the Sokehs rebels, a German captain, Bellerthum, commented "From all that I have seen and heard of these people, I would say that they have had a very high contempt of death".

A Court sentenced the leaders of the rebellion to death. On 24 February, Melanesian police troops executed 15 men who participated in the October killings. One of them was Chief Soumatau. An estimated 426 Sokehs people were exiled or deported to Yap and Palau, in the Western Caroline Islands

#### **Questions and Activities**

12. Draw a time-line of the events between December 1910, and February 1911.

13. List the names of all the motor ships or vessels that the Germans used during the rebellion.
14. Describe what happened on January 13, 1911.
15. Why do you think the Germans executed the rebels and exiled the others?
16. Arrange the following events in chronological order:
  - (a) German war ships shelled the Island from 7:45AM to 9:00AM
  - (b) Lahdeleng was severely beaten
  - (c) Melanesians soldiers arrived from Rabaul
  - (d) Chief Samuel surrendered
  - (e) Soumatau shot the Governor in the head and cut off his hand.
  - (f) The road construction begins in Sokehs
  - (g) Dr Grischner took over the Government
  - (h) Governor George Fritz left Pohnpei
  - (i) Reinforcements arrived from German headquarters in New Guinea.

### Historical Empathy Exercise

Imagine you are a newspaper writer on Pohnpei in 1910. The Rebellion has been going a few months ago and the rebels are beginning to lose the campaign. Write what you think people might have said at the time.

**Reporter:** I am here in Sokehs where history is being made in the year of 1910. Rebel Chief Soumatau has agreed to answer a few of our questions. Chief Soumatau, why are you fighting against the Germans?

SOMATAU: I am fighting against the Germans because \_\_\_\_\_

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**Reporter:** What do you think will happen if the Germans bring in Melanesian soldiers?

SOUMATAU: Well, if the Germans bring in Melanesian soldiers\_\_\_\_\_

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**Reporter:** We're over here in Kolonia, in what used to be the Spanish Fort. I see they've begun to rebuild the Fortification. Standing a few feet from the fortification is the German Governor Dr Grischner. Governor Grischner, how do you feel about what is happening over at Sokehs?

GRISCHNER: I feel \_\_\_\_\_

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**Reporter:** Kachem is a young soldier from Melanesia. He has just arrived in Pohnpei by ship. He was ordered by German South Sea Government to come and help suppress the Sokehs Rebellion. Kachem, how do you feel about having to come here and fight against the Pohnpeians?

KECHAM: Well, I feel\_\_\_\_\_

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**Reporter:** Lahdeleng was the Pohnpeian man who was punished because he was lazy. Lahdeleng, were you really punished because of laziness or for some other reasons?

LAHDELENG: No, I was not lazy. Hallborn\_\_\_\_\_

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**Reporter:**The Rebellion is over. The chief of Net has brought Soumatau to the Germans. Soumatau, did you surrender because you were scared of the Germans?

SOUMATAU: No, I surrendered because I wanted to\_\_\_\_\_

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### Questions and Activities

17. Construct a time line of the showdown in Sokehs.

18. Paragraph writing:

Write a paragraph (100 words ) explaining how the dissatisfaction of the Pohnpeians working in the Boeder Road construction project became a fully fledged rebell