

“Meeting For the Supremacy
of the Rugby World”:
The Role of Rugby in the History
of (White) Male National Identities
in South Africa and New Zealand
c. 1880–1981,
A Study in
Comparative and Interactive History

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South Africa and New Zealand share the historical experience of a white male-defined dominant culture in which rugby plays a crucial role in socialization and experience. Furthermore, these two countries have been the two dominant rugby-playing nations in the world since their successful tours of the British Isles in 1905 (New Zealand) and 1906–7 (South Africa). Therefore, links between the two countries have been cemented when they have played each other in international rugby matches since 1921. However, since the traumatic South African tour of New Zealand in 1981, in which New Zealand society was torn apart over whether to support the tour or make a significant statement against apartheid, no matches have been played between the two countries. Indeed, South Africa has been totally excluded from playing rugby internationals since that time. During the first rugby World Cup, held in 1987, from which South Africa was excluded, commentators in that country began to question seriously whether they would be able to compete at their former level in world competition if they remained excluded.

My paper explores the historical development of the white male dominated rugby culture in South Africa and New Zealand and the links between the two countries through their shared rugby experiences. Furthermore, I argue that the exclusion of South Africa from international rugby since 1981, and especially the refusal of New Zealand to play against South Africa has played a significant role in the moves to dismantle apartheid. Of all the international sanctions and boycotts, the rugby boycott easily has had the deepest psychological effect on white South African males who dominate the power structure of South African society.