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Five Hundred Years' War or The Longest Genocide in Human History

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Abstract

After Columbus discovered America in 1492, the native population of the Americas declined significantly. The mass decline of the Indian population was the result of tribal wars, enslavement, massacres, disease, alcoholism, loss of natural resources and land, forced displacement and violence against the language, culture and religion of the tribes, provoked by the colonists. Due to the policies and measures taken by Europe and the United States in relation to the indigenous people of America, the number of the indigenous population of America has not only been greatly reduced, but also some Indian peoples have completely disappeared from the stage of history. For a long time, this issue was hushed up and not discussed. In modern times, there is enough research on this topic. Many call it the longest and deadliest genocide in the world. The death toll is estimated at 95-114 million people.

Keywords: Indian genocide, colonialism, expulsion of Indians, ethnic cleansing, Indian reservations, assimilation, cultural genocide

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Beş Yüz Yıllık Savaş veya İnsanlık Tarihindeki En Uzun Soykırım

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Öz

Columbus 1492'de Amerika'yı keşfettikten sonra, Amerika'nın yerli nüfusu önemli ölçüde azaldı. Kızılderili nüfusunun büyük ölçüde azalması, sömürgeciler tarafından kışkırtılan kabileler arası savaş, köleleştirme, toplu katliam, hastalık, alkolizm, doğal kaynakların ve toprağın kaybı, zorla yerinden edilme ve kabilelerin diline, kültürüne ve dinine karşı şiddetin sonucuydu. Avrupa ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Amerika'nın yerli halkına karşı uyguladığı politika ve tedbirler nedeniyle Amerika'nın yerli nüfusunun sayısı büyük ölçüde azalmakla kalmamış, bazı Kızılderili halkları da tarih sahnesinden tamamen silinmiştir. Uzun süre bu konu sessiz kaldı ve tartışılmadı. Modern zamanlarda, bu konuda yeterince çalışma var. Birçoğu bunu dünyanın en uzun ve en ölümcül soykırımını olarak tanımlıyor. Ölü sayısının 95-114 milyon olduğu tahmin ediliyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kızılderili soykırımı, sömürgecilik, Kızılderili sürgünü, etnik temizlik, Kızılderili çekinceleri, asimilasyon, kültürel soykırım

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Introduction

The term "genocide" did not exist until 1944. This term is very young in the context of conflicts between people. In 1944, the Polish-Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959) coined the word "genocide" in an attempt to describe the Nazis' policy of systematic murder, including of European Jews. The word was formed from the combination of the Greek word γένος-génos-race or tribe and the Latin suffix -cide-to kill. The following year, at the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal in Germany, high-ranking German officials were charged with "crimes against humanity" and the word "genocide" was included in the indictment. But not as a legal term, but as a descriptive word.

On December 9, 1948, in the shadow of the Holocaust, as well as a result of R. Lemkin's tireless efforts, the UN adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Genocide is defined here as "one of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group."

1. Killing members of the group;
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction;
4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group¹

Body Paragraph

The issue of the American Indian genocide is still considered controversial. Many authors evaluate the massive decline of the indigenous population of America after 1492 as a clear fact of genocide. Others are in favor of evaluating the actions of Europe and the United States against the indigenous people of North and South America as not genocide, but just a sad and regrettable

¹ Convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. United Nations Treaty Series, volume, 78, No 1021. 1951. p. 277-322.

situation. But what was it really like? Should the policies and actions of Europe and the United States against Indians be characterized as genocide or not? To answer this question, let's consider the measures and policies implemented by Europe and the United States against the indigenous population of America in the context of the provisions of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The massive decline of Native American populations was the result of enslavement, mass murder, disease, alcoholism, loss of natural resources and land, forced displacement, violence against tribal language, culture, and religion, and intertribal warfare instigated by colonialists. Let's clarify each of these facts one by one.

When the issue of the genocide of Americans is discussed, first of all, the disaster caused by European diseases such as smallpox and measles, which resulted from the first contact between Europeans and the local population, is considered. Until the 1960s, when Alfred Crosby coined the term "virgin soil epidemic" there was standard information on the number of Native Americans; a total population of 8 million in the entire hemisphere and 1 million north of New Granada. After that, Anthropologist Henry F. Dobyns made a new calculation, taking diseases into account, and announced to the public that there were 75 million people in America and 10-12 million people north of Mexico before Columbus.² This means that 70, 80, maybe 90 percent of the population, about 50-60 million people were victims of the epidemic.³ This is a great fact for the proponents of the genocide, mass loss of human life... But it is a very strange coincidence that this statistic also satisfies the opponents of the genocide. According to them, Europeans did not bring pathogenic microorganisms to the Western Hemisphere to deliberately exterminate the native population. It is known that only intentional and deliberate factors are considered criteria for genocide. Europeans encountered local populations, and their diseases spread to the local population through airborne droplets, resulting in mass death. There can be no question of the fact of genocide here. But if there were no other facts, the problem would indeed be approached in this way. Proponents of the idea of genocide cite the fact that Europeans, knowing full well that the local population was not

²Alfred Crosby, "Virgin-Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 33, 1976, p. 289-299.

³David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* Reprint Edition, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford 1992, X.

immune to pathogenic microorganisms, gave them things infected with viruses, especially the smallpox virus. In this case, the factor of intentional contamination is revealed.

To shed some light on why disease became a major killer in the Americas, let's take a look at what happened where Columbus first set foot. During Christopher Columbus's 2nd voyage (1493), the ship's crew fell ill (presumably with influenza), and the natives of Cuba, Jamaica, and Spain were affected by the epidemic. Why was the epidemic spreading so fast in these areas? One reason for this was that the native population lacked immunity to Old World viruses. Another reason was the result of the difficult living conditions created by the members of the expedition during the realization of their original goals. Their goal was not to kill the local population, but when it came to their real goal, which was to search for gold, they did. The Spanish needed the knowledge and labor of the Indians to obtain gold. Every Indian, except children had to bring a certain amount of gold to the Spaniards every 3 months. After bringing the gold, a sign was hung around their necks as proof. If someone's neck was missing this, that person's hands were cut off. The gold mines in Spain were less than in the imagination of the Spaniards. In order to survive, the Indians looked for new mines to find the gold that was imposed on them as a quota, even at the cost of starvation. Famine had overtaken the Indians before they fled and hid from the oppression of the Spaniards. The disease that the Europeans brought with them was exacerbated by the bodies of the natives, exhausted and weakened by hunger. And the soldiers never stopped bragging about killing the locals.⁴ Indians were forcibly captured, turned into slaves and kept in chains. The Europeans maimed, killed, and waged war against the local population in order to prevent possible protests. The leaders of the expedition considered this violence the basis for achieving their goals. The aim here was not to kill every Indian, but to subjugate them by intimidation. Nevertheless, as a result of the violence, a large number of Indian people died of disease, malnutrition, and starvation.⁵ In short, the deterioration of living conditions made the consequences of the epidemic more painful. With this, the local population of the main islands decreased dramatically. For example, the Spanish population before Columbus was estimated at around 5 million. In 1542, the number of

⁴D. E. Stannard, D. E. Stannard., *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵ Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492–1650*, UK: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 26–39.

local populations decreased to only 2 thousand people. Already enslaved Africans were becoming the main labor force.⁶

A small number of Caribbean islanders died from the "virgin soil epidemic". It is about the time of the first encounter. But here, disease became a major killer as a result of the poor living conditions created by the Spaniards when they colonized the island. Some analysts say that the Spanish did not commit genocide because they did not make a formal plan to exterminate the Indians. We do not object, but one thing should not be forgotten that the reason for the mass death of Indians for 50 years was the result of the harsh living conditions created by the Spaniards to achieve their goals.

The history of the spread of diseases was different for different areas of the Americas. British colonization was accompanied by the creation of a market for European manufactured goods and the slave trade in the southeastern United States. The slave trade directly led to a sharp decline in the population of Indian communities. But this created conditions for the spread of more epidemic diseases. In 1696, smallpox in Virginia was spreading in parallel with the destruction, annihilation, and displacement of Indian communities from the upper Mississippi River to the Illinois, from the Carolinas to the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. It had only been 200 years since Europeans first set foot on the southwestern lands, and the local population had declined sharply. As in the Caribbean basin, the sharp decline in population was a logical consequence of European economic interests.⁷

In 1616, shortly before the arrival of the Puritans, an epidemic (bedsores, yellow fever, leptospirosis) swept through New England and lasted for 3 years. It is estimated that the epidemic wiped out 90% of the native population of the Massachusetts Bay area. When the Puritans arrived here in 1620, they saw a sharp decline in population and took it as a sign. That is, "So that there is

⁶Irving Rouse, *The Tainos: Rise And Decline of The People Who Greeted Columbus*, Ct: Yale University Press, New Haven 1992, p. 150–158.

⁷Paul Kelton, *Epidemics And Enslavement: Biological Catastrophe In The Native Southeast, 1492–1715*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2007.

an empty place for us here... God's good deed...". In the years 1633-1634, another epidemic - smallpox plagued these places.⁸

The assessment of the result of epidemics in New England as genocide is given less attention than the Pequot War of 1637. In 1636, the murder of a man named John Oldham by the Pequots led Puritan leaders to launch a military operation that would kill hundreds of Indians. Although John Oldham had no respect among the English settlers. He was banished from Plymouth Colony, where he lived, and Governor Bradford described him as "more like a cruel scoundrel than a man." The killing of such a person was the basis for the killing of 100s of Indians! Colonial forces attacked the village on the banks of the Mystic River in present-day Connecticut at night, burning an estimated 600-700 Indians along with their houses and killing those who escaped the fire. They captured the surviving Pequots and either killed or enslaved them. Then they forcibly signed a treaty on the abolition of the Pequot nation.⁹

One of the most important information discussed as genocide at a high level until 1176, that is, before the founding of the United States, is the King Philip's War (1675-1678),¹⁰ and others were the deliberate use of diseases as biological weapons, such as genocide, against the Indians who revolted in western Pennsylvania in 1763¹¹ (This accusation was first made against the British forces led by Jeffrey Amherst) and the massacre of the "Paxton boys" against the peaceful Conestoga Indians in Philadelphia in the same year.¹²

After the creation of the United States, its policy against Indians was based on territorial expansions. The philosophy of the Republican Americans was based on the principle that "freedom depends on the widespread right to private property." In order to build the "empire of liberty" described by Thomas Jefferson, Indian land had to be acquired. But how was this supposed to happen? Politicians have prepared an ideal scenario for this. Indians would sign a treaty to

⁸Matthew Kruer, "A Country Wonderfully Prepared For Their Entertainment", *The Aftermath of The New England Indian Epidemic of 1616*, *Journal of The National Collegiate Honors Council - Online Archive*, 2003 Paper 129, p. 85-104.

⁹Alfred A Cave, *The Pequot War*, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1996, p.144-154.

¹⁰Leonardo Buonomo, *A victim of king Philip's war (1675-76): Mary Rowlandson and the account of her captivity*, *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* n.º I, 1991, p. 9-21

¹¹Adrienne Mayor, "The Nessus Shirt in the New World: Smallpox Blankets in History and Legend", *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 108, No. 427. Winter, 1995, p. 54-77.

¹²John H., Brubaker, *Massacre of the Conestogas: On the Trail of the Paxton Boys in Lancaster County*, SC: History Press, Charleston 2010.

voluntarily cede their land in exchange for help in becoming civilized. But what if the Indians refused the gift of "culture"? In this case, the US politicians said that they would turn the Indians into subjects of war.¹³ And not like a war between civilized nations, but a war that would exterminate the Indians... In 1790, Secretary of Defense Henry Knox authorized such a war. He ordered war against the Indian confederation in Ohio, which rejected the US demand to give up land, saying "exterminate it if possible".¹⁴ Faced with a similar situation, President Jefferson sent a letter to the Indians near Detroit with the following content: "if ever we are constrained to lift the hatchet against any tribe, we will never lay it down till that tribe is exterminated, or driven beyond the Mississippi." Then he continued: "If the Indians start a war, in war they will kill some of us; we shall destroy all of them."¹⁵

It is clear that the refusal of many Indians to give up their land made the war inevitable. The United States was constantly at war with the Indians. During the War of Independence, many Indian tribes allied with Great Britain because they saw the new power as a great threat to their lands. In 1779, the United States declared war on the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois). As the Continental army approached, the Haudenosaunee decided not to risk it and abandoned their town. The US army set fire to the deserted town and their fields. The number of Haudenosaunee killed by the American army was 200. But the number of people who died of hunger and disease in the refugee camps reached 9,000. This meant 15% of the population. If they had decided to defend their city, the number of casualties would have been higher.¹⁶

Hostilities between Indians and the United States often followed similar dynamics. Either the Indians counter-attacked based on their knowledge and experience, or they left their cities to avoid heavy casualties. The US army was setting fire to these cities. Between 1770 and 1815, they burned hundreds of Indian towns in New York, western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee, West Virginia, western Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and western Florida. Often the

¹³Founders online: From Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison, 27 February 1 (n.d.), Founders Online. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-39-02-0500> (12.12.2022).

¹⁴Charles E. Adams Jr., *Assault on a Culture: The Anishinaabeg of the Great Lakes and the Dynamics of Change*, USA 2013, p. 98-99

¹⁵Founders online: From Thomas Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, 28 August 1807, (n.d.), Founders Online. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-6267>(12.12.2002).

¹⁶A. Tiffany Norton, *History of Sullivan's campaign against the Iroquois*, Lima, N.Y., A.T. Norton 1879.

Indian intelligence, so to speak, informed about an impending attack. That's why the army came to the empty city. Sometimes there were sudden attacks, sometimes the Indians decided to fight. At that time, it was impossible to avoid the massacre.

At the conclusion of the 1776-1815 hostilities, it can be said that the United States did not intend to kill all the Indians in the lands it claimed. On the other hand, the officials demonstrated that they had to go to all kinds of violence in terms of American interests. Most military operations did not result in mass destruction. This was sometimes caused by the weakness of the US forces themselves, and sometimes by the ability of the Indians to escape the massacre (sometimes they resisted, sometimes they compromised). Faced with the threat of depopulation, Indian leaders signed treaties in return for the concession of their lands. Thus, the fear of genocide helped the US achieve its goal of occupying Indian lands.

After 1815, the policy of the United States against the Indians entered a new phase. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Relocation Act. This act provided for the relocation of all Indians living east of the Mississippi River to the territories of present-day Kansas and Oklahoma. The resettlement of the Indians hit them much harder than the wars. East of the Mississippi, the Choctaw, Creek, and Cherokee each had a population of about 20,000. About 2,000 Choctaws, 4,500 Creeks, and 5,000 Cherokees died during the relocation from disease, starvation, demoralization, and desertion. This was approximately 20% of the total population.¹⁷

The authorities warned of the use of force against those who objected to the move. And so it happened. Opposition to relocation led to the Black Hawk War of 1832 and the 2nd Seminole War of 1836-1842.¹⁸ Was the removal process an act of genocide? Some authors say that the United States did not intend to kill Indians while carrying out this act. Therefore, there can be no talk of genocide. But one thing should not be forgotten that state officials knew based on years of experience that mass displacement of thousands of people would result in loss of their lives. Despite all this, the authorities carried out the transfer act.

¹⁷Catherine Locks, Sarah Mergel, Pamela Roseman, Tamara Spike, *History in the making: A history of the people of the United States of America to 1877*. Edition 1, Version 3, University System of Georgia Dahlonga: University Press of North Georgia 2013, p. 526-581.

¹⁸History in the Making, *Ibid.*, p. 548, 551.

The situation of the California Indians was not encouraging either. In the 50s of the 19th century, the European settlers captured the Indians, confiscated their land, and organized an irregular army to arrest them. In 1848, the number of California Indians was 150,000, and in 1860, it was 30,000. Mainly the Yuki and Yana peoples were the direct victims of the killing. Most of the population lost their lives as a result of land loss, disease caused by forced labor, malnutrition and other factors.¹⁹

The Indian wars that took place in the second half of the 19th century are considered by many historians as an act of genocide. This is especially true of the massacres of the Cheyenne (1864) at Sand Creek, the Shoshone on the Bear River (1870), the Blackfeet on the Marias River (1870), and the Lakota people at Wounded Knee (1890), which was committed by the United States Army.²⁰ As we mentioned earlier, when the Indians received information about the attack in advance, they could avoid the massacres by evacuating or resisting. Sometimes they did not hesitate to kill even women, children and old people during a sudden attack or breach of defense fortifications. As in the Sand Creek and Marias Massacre. Even the army officer Phil Sheridan used such a phrase: "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead".²¹

Violence was not the only method used against Indian communities in the West. Colonization continued with cases of loss of land, destruction of bison, spread of diseases, etc. Many western Indians were declining even more sharply. For example, in the 17th century, the number of Comanches was 40,000. At the end of the 19th century, there were already less than 1,500 people.²²

From the end of the 19th century, Indian peoples tried to solve the problem by living on reservations under US rule instead of resisting. Despite all this, violence and detention continued on reservations for even minimal supervision. In the late 1980s, a religiopolitical movement known as the Ghost Dance (Nanissáanah) became widespread in Indian reservations. According to the

¹⁹Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (The Lamar Series in Western History) Hardcover– May 24, 2016.

²⁰Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur*, CT: Yale University Press, New Haven 2007, p. 13.

²¹ Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1985, p. 180.

²² Comanche Indians, (9). TSHA, [https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/bmc72\(12.12.2022\)](https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/bmc72(12.12.2022)).

essence of this teaching, the souls of the dead will come and unite with the living, fight together to force the European arrivals to leave and bring prosperity and peace to the Indian peoples of all regions. To suppress the movement, the federal government used military force against the Lakota's, culminating in the famous Wounded Knee massacre. Sometimes this event is called the last event of Indian wars. In fact, it was the suppression of the anti-colonial religious movement by force. This, or other similar factors, made life on the reservations unbearable. The result was a sharp decrease in the population. It is difficult to collect data on all reservations. But it can be shown in the example of the Crow tribe. For example, the number of Crows was 3,000 in 1880, 2,500 in 1887, and 1,900 in 1903. 3/1 of the population was destroyed within 23 years.²³

At the beginning of the 20th century, the policy against Indians continued in a new phase. Many call it "cultural genocide" or "ethnocide". Boarding schools were opened on reservations. The essence of these schools is revealed by the expression of Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian school: "Kill the Indian, save the man." Many researchers characterize these schools as repressive institutions. Language, religion, music, art, cooking, clothing, etc. is the basis of a nation's existence. If one day you are deprived of these, then what ethnicity can be talked about. That is, it is more useful to make a nation forget its culture and national self-awareness than to destroy it from a physical point of view. In boarding schools, students were forbidden to speak their mother tongue, their clothes were changed, their hair was cut, and strict disciplinary rules were applied. Some Indian children managed to skip school. Some died of illness and homesickness. Soldiers forcibly took children from their parents and often prevented them from seeing their families until they reached adulthood.²⁴ As a result, Indian self-consciousness was being replaced by colonial thinking. When they returned home, they did not know their native language, they met people who were strangers to their world. They returned with a sense of spiritual emptiness, belonging not to their native home, but to another world, the world of white people. In the film "Lakota Woman: Siege at Wounded Knee" they called these children "apple children" with a very beautiful expression in artistic form. "White on the outside but red on the inside." They do not know where they belong and could not fully assimilate into any culture.

²³ Rani-Henric Anderson, *The Ghost Dance among the Lakota Indians in 1890*, Tampere University Press, Finland 2003, p. 435.

²⁴ American Indian boarding schools, An exploration global ethnic & cultural cleansing. Ziibiwing Center of Anishinaabe Culture & Lifeways, 2011.

Another issue considered a case of genocide was birth control. The 26 year old Native American woman who visited the California office of Dr. Connie Redbird Uri in 1972 asked, herself of Choctaw and Cherokee descent, to reverse the hysterectomy that a doctor at the Indian Health Service (IHS) had performed. The woman was devastated when Dr. Uri explained that a hysterectomy was not reversible, insisting that the IHS doctor had told her she could reverse it when she decided to have children. Dr. Uri originally thought the woman's experience was isolated. However, when she began reaching out to other Native women, she heard similar stories of sterilizations that were performed without the women's knowledge or full consent. Worried, she conducted a detailed investigation of the IHS facility in Claremore, Oklahoma. Her conclusion was stunning. In recent years, Claremore doctors had sterilized hundreds of young Native American women, sterilizing one of every four women who gave birth. Approximately 3,000 Indian women were sterilized in Indian Health Services each year, representing 4-6% of women of childbearing potential.²⁵ In addition, the fact that Indians enter into marriage with non-Indians is also sufficient.

²⁵G. M., Agosto, "Involuntary sterilization of native American women in the United States: a legal approach", 100 Neb. L. Rev, 2021, p. 1015-1022.

Conclusion

Apparently, due to the actions and policies of Europe and the United States against the indigenous people of America, the number of the indigenous population of America has drastically decreased, and some Indian peoples have been completely erased from the scene of history. Although some still exist, there is not a pure-blooded Indian among them. For a long time, this issue was kept silent and was not discussed. In modern times, there are enough studies about this. Many describe it as the world's longest and deadliest genocide. The death toll is estimated at 95-114 million.

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