

The abuse of native americans



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The white colonizers of the past helped turn the once “ New World” into the United States of America, a dominating world power that prides itself on being a fair, non-discriminatory and liberal country. What has been long forgotten is how they made their progress, that is, the destruction, torture, and unfair treatment of the first inhabitants of America, and how these people are treated to this day.

Early Colonization

The colonization of the Americas is dated all the way back to the 11th century when the Vikings (the Norse) settled in Greenland and Newfoundland. The contact they had with the indigenous people, the Inuits, was hostile, something that could have been taken as a sign of forewarning of the later contact between the natives and the European colonizers. These Norse colonies were not long-lived and they eventually disbanded in the 15th century.[1]

In 1492, Columbus headed the expedition to America in the name of the Spanish. Colonization and exploration grew very popular and soon most of the islands in the Caribbean had been colonized.[2]By 1494, the Spanish and Portuguese had made the treaty of Tordesillas which divided the New World between themselves. The Portuguese took all of what is now present-day Brazil while the Spanish pushed onward with conquering as much as possible.

Spanish Conquistadors

Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes, had overthrown the once very powerful Aztec Empire in Mexico who had thought him to be Quetzalcoatl, an Aztec god who had come to destroy their empire. He slaughtered thousands and people and burned some of the city.[3]Pizzaro, a second cousin to Cortes, overtook the Incas in Peru, also massacring thousand and ransacking the entire empire. What is astonishing is the pure cruelty of these men in the name of Spain who had been welcomed with open arms.[4]In an account by Waman Poma, the Incan emperor, Atahualpa, sent gifts to the Spanish. Poma wrote,

“ The presents consisted of male servants and sacred virgins. Some of the virgins were also offered to the Spaniards’ horses, because, seeing them eat maize, the Peruvians took them for a kind of human being. Until that time, horses were unknown to our people and it seemed advisable to treat them with respect.”[5]

Continued Colonization

Colonization continued on, with Spanish Florida, the English colonies of Virginia and New England, the French colonies of Acadia and Canada, the Swedish colony of New Sweden, and the Dutch New Netherland. By the 18th century, Denmark-Norway revived their colonies in Greenland and Russia took Alaska.[6]

It is quite obvious that with the onset of so many foreigners, the Europeans, clash was eminent. What wasn't so easily seen was what the Europeans brought with them-disease. Smallpox, typhus, influenza, diphtheria, and measles wiped 10 to 20 million of the indigenous population.[7]Before these

plagues, the natives had been used as servants and slaves but once they started dying out, Africans were brought to the Americas to take their place.

White Overtaking and “ Manifest Destiny”

As more and more Europeans came to the Americas, the more land they wanted to cultivate and occupy. By the 17th century, for every one Native American, there were three white Europeans.[8]

During the 1800’s, John L. O’Sullivan, the New York newspaper editor used the phrase “ Manifest Destiny.”[9]He had created a term for a long-held belief that the whites of America had the right to expand their territory to the West, that it was their duty and was approved by God in every way. People started making advertisements, paintings, and pictures to encourage the expansion.[10]

What all this did was cement the idea of white supremacy over the Native Americas. None of this was a good thing for the Native Americans because now the whites had even more a reason in their minds to continue their expansion and to continue their efforts for “ civilizing” them which meant making them live as Whites. This meant they must be Christian, must build homes and practice private property, and educate their children in a way that the dutiful White Christians saw fit.[11]

Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears

What was one of the biggest steps taken to move Native Americans so the Whites could have all access to the land was the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which was signed by President Andrew Jackson.[12]Though this act was

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supposed to be voluntary on the side of the Native Americans, community and tribe leaders were made to feel a great deal of pressure to sign the treaties that would move them from their ancestral homes to the West. This was a very controversial act and many white people were opposed to it because of how unfair it was to the Native Americans.

There was definitely greater support of the Indian Removal Act though, especially by the South because they wanted access to lands where different tribes were occupying.[13] These tribes were called the “ Five Civilized Tribes” which consisted of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Muscogee-Creek, Chickasaw, and the Seminole.[14]

The pressure grew and chiefs finally gave in. First to sign a treaty to move with promise of new land and money was the Choctaws in Mississippi. The treaty the Choctaw chief signed was called the treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek and when interviewed by the Arkansas Gazette, he said the removal was a “ trail of tears and death.” Five years after the initial passing of the Indian Removal Act, the Cherokee signed the Treaty of New Echota.[15]

The removal of the Cherokee, Muscogee-Creek, Seminole, and Choctaw was called the Trail of Tears. These tribes were moved to Indian Territory and experienced exposure, disease, and starvation during their journey. 4000 of the 15000 Cherokee that made the journey died on their way to the Indian Territory.[16]

Resistance, Victories and Defeats

Though many Indians cooperated with the American government, some fought back and tried resisting. Indian Wars broke out and they did win some, such as the Battle of Little Bighorn. The greatest victory by the Native Americans was when Tecumseh, a Shawnee leader of a multi-tribal group, allied with the British and defeated the White Americans in Detroit St. Claire's Defeat.[17]

Although they won sometimes, the Native Americans lost quite a few battles, such as the Creek War, the Sioux Uprising, the Sand Creek Massacre, and Wounded Knee. Times were very hostile and by 1872, the United States government went by a policy that meant the extermination of all Indians unless they moved to reservations so as to be more "civilized" and become Christianized.[18] Paul Wellman describes quite accurately in his 1934 book the pure torture and disregard of Native Americans during this time:

The Indian [was thought] as less than human and worthy only of extermination. We did shoot down defenseless men, and women and children at places like Camp Grant, Sand Creek, and Wounded Knee. We did feed strychnine to red warriors. We did set whole villages of people out naked to freeze in the iron cold of Montana winters. And we did confine thousands in what amounted to concentration camps.[19]

Americanization

Once the federal government had gotten most Native Americans onto reservations, they started the process of "Americanizing" them. The federal government was able to treat them almost as if the Indians were their wards because, in fact, they were. This was so because in 1871, the Indian

Appropriation Act was passed which stated that the government no longer viewed the Indians' land as separate countries and their communities as separate nations but that the land would belong to the government and the Native Americans would become wards of the United States government.

[20]This is what the Indian Appropriation Act said:

That hereafter no Indian nation or tribe within the territory of the United States shall be acknowledged or recognized as an independent nation, tribe, or power with whom the United States may contract by treaty: Provided, further, that nothing herein contained shall be construed to invalidate or impair the obligation of any treaty heretofore lawfully made and ratified with any such Indian nation or tribe.[21]

Once this was done, the government passed more laws which constricted the Native Americans even further. These laws forced them to give up their old way of life, such as moving from their traditional places of inhabitation to more "Americanized" homes. They were also made to change their appearance and their names. Men were often made to cut their hair and whole communities were made to abandon their old religious practices in favor of Christianity.[22]

Schools were created for the Native American children so as to get them used to their new lives and to also quickly "Americanize" the youth. They were forced to choose "American" names and to only speak English, abandoning their native tongue. Doing this to the Native Americans was very damaging to their tribal identity and also basically stripped them of all they had once known in favor of the strange "American" way.[23]

The General Allotment Act of 1887 (The Dawes Act)

The Dawes Act was enacted in 1887. What this did was it took once tribally-owned land and fractioned it off to the Native Americans. Families received about 80 to 160 acres while unmarried adults received about 40 to 80 acres. The rest of the land that had not been allotted was opened to railroad development and settlers not of Native American descent.[24]

The Dawes Act was enacted so as to better assimilate the Indians into American society which meant getting them to learn how to farm and eventually support themselves.

Though it seemed like this act had good intentions, the biggest reason it was enacted was unspoken, but the most important at the time. The dividing of land was to break up the Native Americans sense of culture and unity. Along with this negative aspect was the fact that the land allotted to them was not sufficient for living off of.[25]

Though this was obvious, in 1906 the Burk Act was passed which meant that all allottees were deemed competent and capable and could be taxed. If they were determined incompetent by the Secretary of the Interior the land could be taken away and leased by the federal government. In total, the Dawes Act was manipulated and executed in a way that negatively affected the Native Americans, robbing them of their land and resources.[26]

The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 (The Snyder Act)

Life was a bit easier for Native Americans if they had status as an American citizen. They could acquire citizenship if a woman married a white man,

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through military service, if they had allotments, or through special treaties.

[27]This was unfair because they had to go through special and unusual processes to even be considered citizens of the county they lived in while any white man had full American citizenship the day they were born. People realized this fact and in 1924, the Indian Citizenship Act (also called the Snyder Act) came along. It was proposed by Representative Homer P. Snyder of New York and was signed into enactment by President Calvin Coolidge on June 2.[28]

The biggest reason though for this enactment was to, once again, better assimilate the Native Americans into American society. They had already proven themselves possible good members of society by being part of the military during World War I. This act did not include citizens born before the enactment date but did include all Native Americans that were born after.

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Native Americans in WWII

Once World War II broke out, the Native Americans joined in just as they had during World War I. This earned them more respect than they had had before. Because they had always had the image of the mighty and brave Indian warrior, non-Native Americans often called their Indian comrades “chief” which could have been seen as a token of respect.[30]The movement of the Native Americans to go to war was the largest scale exodus since the Indian Removal Act during the 1800's. The war had a huge impact on the Native Americans and their lives back home. Seeing the outside world change their perspective on life. Also, they were able to find well-paying

work because of the wartime labor shortages because of the men away at war.[31]

What also brought added respect and boosted the reputations of the Native Americans was that the military used Navajo code talkers to communicate secret information in the Pacific. This code was never decoded by the Japanese.[32]

Further Racism and Discrimination

Though Native Americans had moved further up in status over time, it was not by much, Native Americans were still highly discriminated against and were not seen as equals in American society. Because of this, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was formed and was very much active during the 1960's and 1970's.[33] They worked to better the quality of Native American life and men and women leaders became powerful in doing so. One leader was a woman named Anna Mae Pictou Aquash. She put her own beliefs and demands for equality before her own safety. Because of this she was often involved in plots which led to her being in and out of jail.

One plot, though, led to her being in much more serious trouble than her usual short jail sentence. She had been arrested in South Dakota for being an FBI killer. Two agents had been killed by members of AIM and because Aquash was a prominent leader, it seemed likely by the police for her to be somehow involved and deserved to be under suspicion. She was released on bail. Aquash was caught in Oregon and fled once again, fearing for her own life and safety. Sadly, she was found dead in 1976 on a Lakota ranch. She

was not identifiable by police so her hands were cut from her body to possibly identify her.[34]

The death of Aquash made Native Americans even more aware of their status in American society because she had only stood up for her beliefs, and she had been killed for it. Her people later found a bullet hole in the back of her head and found it suspicious that the police had cut off her hands to “identify the body” which they saw as being unnecessary and a sign that they may have been covering up Aquash’s murder.[35]

Indian Reservations Today

Though the Indian Reservations were created so long ago, the quality of life has barely changed. It is extremely poor. So poor, in fact, that they are likened to developing countries.[36]60% of children are born out of wedlock and Native Americans are the third highest group in the country for teenage pregnancy. The suicide rate of Native American teenagers is three times that of the rest of America.[37]

Alcoholism is a big problem of reservations. Native Americans are four times more likely to die of alcoholism and 17 times more likely to die in an accident involving alcohol. In addition to this, they are twice as likely to be involved in an arrest concerning alcohol.[38]

One of the worst reservations is the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. It is one of the poorest in the nation. The unemployment rate is 35% to 45% and homelessness is 30%. The average income for those living on this reservation is \$6100 a year.[39]

Because of these terrible statistics, the reservations in the nation have the right to run casinos to bring in revenue through attracted tourists. They were given this right in the 1987 case, California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians. In the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988, their right was formally recognized.[40]

Conclusion

The Native Americans of the Americas have been through so much since the colonization that began hundreds of years ago. The treatment of them has been cruel and inhumane in all regards. Luckily, some acts have been taken to fix the problems these people face everyday. Hopefully in the future, they will have a better life for themselves and will experience less racism and poverty. With the help of the rest of American society, this is 100% possible.