

AMERICAN
HOLOCAUST

The Conquest of the New World

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Some of the run-away men were tied on sticks and beaten with straps. One chief was taken out to the open field and a young calf which had just died was skinned and the chief was sewed into the skin while it was yet warm. He was kept tied to a stake all day, but he died soon and they kept his corpse tied up.¹⁵⁹

If this was early California's version of what Spanish defenders later would disingenuously dismiss as merely another Black Legend, it did not last as long as did its counterpart on the continent to the south. In 1846 the United States militarily occupied California, and two years later, at Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded the land over to American control. In addition to the two centuries of previous evidence adducing the genocidal practices of Britain and the United States toward America's native peoples across the length and breadth of the continent, we therefore have in California a unique opportunity to test informally one part of the Spaniards' Black Legend defense, the part alleging that other whites treated Indians just as badly as did the Spanish. And what we find is that, on this point at least—difficult though it may be to believe—the Spanish are correct.

By 1845 the Indian population of California was down to no more than a quarter of what it had been when the Franciscan missions were established in 1769. That is, it had declined by at least 75 percent during seventy-five years of Spanish rule. In the course of just the next twenty-five years, under American rule, it would fall by another 80 percent. The gold rush brought to California a flood of American miners and ranchers who seemed to delight in killing Indians, miners and ranchers who rose to political power and prominence—and from those platforms not only legalized the enslavement of California Indians, but, as in Colorado and elsewhere, launched public campaigns of genocide with the explicitly stated goal of all-out Indian extermination.

Governmentally unsanctioned enslavement of the Indians began as soon as California became an American possession and continued for many years. It seemed an excellent idea in a land where free labor was in short supply and white wages were high. Moreover, as whites who had lived in the southern United States repeatedly asserted, California's Indians—who already had suffered a savage population loss at the hands of the Spanish—"make as obedient and humble slaves as the negroes in the south," wrote one former New Orleans cotton broker. In fact, they were even better than blacks, claimed a ranch owner in 1846, because they accepted "flagellation with more humility than negroes."¹⁶⁰

Indian docility was believed to be particularly assured "when caught young." So a thriving business in hunting and capturing Indian children developed. Newspapers frequently reported sightings of men driving Indian children before them on back-country roads to the slave markets in Sacramento and San Francisco. As with black slaves in the South, prices

varied "according to quality," said the *Ukiah Herald*, but they sometimes climbed as high as two-hundred dollars each. Bargains could be had in some areas, however, as "in Colusa County in 1861 [where] Indian boys and girls aged three and four years were sold at fifty dollars apiece." Especially "good little" Indians—or, as the *Sacramento Daily Union* described them, "bright little specimens"—might even fetch a straight trade for a horse. Given the shortage of women in California during these early years of white settlement, "a likely young girl!" might cost almost double that of a boy, because, as the *Marysville Appeal* phrased it, girls served the double duty "of labor and of lust."¹⁶¹

Not surprisingly, the parents of these valuable children could be a problem. The prospect of losing their beloved offspring to slave traders, said the *Humboldt Times*, "has the effect of making Indians very shy of coming into the Reservations, as they think it is a trick to deprive them of their children."¹⁶² And, indeed, it often was. Thus inconvenienced, the slave traders had to pursue their prey into the hills. There, when they cornered the objects of their desire, reported the California Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1854, they frequently murdered the troublesome parents as they were gathering up the children, a tactic that allowed the slavers to sell their little charges as "orphans" without possibility of contradiction.¹⁶³

Should Indian adults attempt to use the California courts to bring such killers to justice, they invariably were frustrated because the law of the land prohibited Indians from testifying against whites. Even some otherwise unsympathetic settler newspapers observed and protested this situation (to no avail), since in consequence it encouraged and legalized the open-season hunting of Indians. As one San Francisco newspaper put it in 1858, following the unprovoked public murder of an Indian, and the release of the known killer because the only eyewitnesses to the event were native people: the Indians "are left entirely at the mercy of every ruffian in the country, and if something is not done for their protection, the race will shortly become extinct."¹⁶⁴

Nothing was done, however, and so enslavement and murder, carried out by entrepreneurial and genocide-minded whites, continued on for many years. One of the more well-known incidents, described in Theodora Kroeber's popular *Ishi in Two Worlds*, occurred in 1868. Part of a series of massacres of Yahi Indians, in which ultimately all but one member of this tiny fragment of a tribe were scalped and murdered, this particular assault is distinguished by the perverse concern shown by one of the attackers for the bodies of his victims: "as he explained afterwards, [he] changed guns during the slaughter, exchanging his .56-caliber Spencer rifle for a .38-caliber Smith and Wesson revolver, because the rifle 'tore them up so bad,' particularly the babies."¹⁶⁵

It would be a mistake, however, to think of the destruction of Califor-

nia's Indians—or most of the Indians of the Americas—as the work of renegades. As early as 1850 the first session of the California legislature passed a law entitled “Act for the Government and Protection of Indians” that in fact did little more than give the imprimatur of legality to the kidnapping and enslavement of native people. Among other provisions, the law provided for the forced indenture of any Indian child to any white person who could convince a justice of the peace that the child in his possession had not been obtained by force. Justices of the peace were easily convinced, especially if the abducted child's parents had been murdered or terrorized into silence and were therefore not on hand to provide contradictory testimony. In 1860 the legislature expanded the law, extending the duration of terms of forced service and permitting the law's use to cover adult Indians as well as children.

The problem the whites were facing by this time, and that the new legislation was intended to address, was a shortage of Indian labor. About ten thousand of the rapidly dwindling numbers of Indians had been put to forced labor legally, under the provisions of the 1850 and 1860 laws (many more, of course, were enslaved without going through the niceties of a justice of the peace's approval), but this was nothing compared with the thousands who had been killed.¹⁶⁶ The shortage of menial workers, despite large numbers of Mexican, Hawaiian, and Asian contract laborers in California, led the *Humboldt Times* to champion the 1860 enslavement law while exclaiming in an editorial: “What a pity the provisions of the law are not extended to greasers, Kanakas, and Asiatics. It would be so convenient to carry on a farm or mine, when all the hard and dirty work is performed by apprentices!”¹⁶⁷

Considering the California legislature's concern for cheap—indeed, slave—labor in the 1850s, it would in retrospect seem mindless for the lawmakers simultaneously to encourage the destruction of that same Indian labor force. But that is precisely what happened. Because some Indians, who in the late 1840s had been driven into the mountains by marauding slave catchers, were thereby forced to poach on white-owned livestock for their existence, the governor of California in his 1851 message to the legislature announced the necessity for a total eradication of the natives: “the white man, to whom time is money, and who labors hard all day to create the comforts of life, cannot sit up all night to watch his property,” Governor Peter Burnett said; “after being robbed a few times he becomes desperate, and resolves upon a war of extermination.” Such a war to annihilate the Indians had already begun by then, Burnett recognized, but, he added, it must “continue to be waged between the races until the Indian becomes extinct.” A year later the governor's successor to that office, John McDougal, renewed the charge: if the Indians did not submit to white demands to relinquish their land, he said, the state would “make war upon

the [Indians] which must of necessity be one of extermination to many of the tribes.”¹⁶⁸

This straightforward advocacy of genocide by the highest American officials in the land emerged in a cultural milieu that habitually described the California Indians as ugly, filthy, and inhuman “beasts,” “swine,” “dogs,” “wolves,” “snakes,” “pigs,” “baboons,” “gorillas,” and “orangutans,” to cite only a few of the press's more commonly published characterizations. Some whites gave the Indians the benefit of the doubt and declared them to be not quite animals, but merely “the nearest link, of the sort, to the quadrupeds” in North America, while others not inclined to such lofty speculations said that simply touching an Indian created “a feeling of repulsion just as if I had put my hand on a toad, tortoise, or huge lizard.”¹⁶⁹ The eradication of such abominable creatures could cause little trouble to most consciences.

Between 1852 and 1860, under American supervision, the indigenous population of California plunged from 85,000 to 35,000, a collapse of about 60 percent within eight years of the first gubernatorial demands for the Indians' destruction. By 1890 that number was halved again: now 80 percent of the natives who had been alive when California became a state had been wiped out by an official policy of genocide. Fewer than 18,000 California Indians were still living, and the number was continuing to drop. In the late 1840s and 1850s one observer of the California scene had watched his fellow American whites begin their furious assault “upon [the Indians], shooting them down like wolves, men, women, and children, wherever they could find them,” and had warned that this “war of extermination against the aborigines, commenced in effect at the landing of Columbus, and continued to this day, [is] gradually and surely tending to the final and utter extinction of the race.” While to most white Californians such a conclusion was hardly lamentable, to this commentator it was a major concern—but only because the extermination “policy [has] proved so injurious to the interests of the whites.” That was because the Indians' “labor, once very useful, and, in fact, indispensable in a country where no other species of laborers were to be obtained at any price, and which might now be rendered of immense value by pursuing a judicious policy, has been utterly sacrificed by this extensive system of indiscriminate revenge.”¹⁷⁰

Three hundred years earlier, writing from Peru, the Dominican priest Santo Tomás had expressed exactly the same concern. The ongoing slaughter of the Incas and other Andean peoples was so intense, he warned his sovereign, that unless orders were given to reduce the genocide “the natives will come to an end; and once they are finished, your Majesty's rule over [this land] will cease.” Explained Diego de Robles Cornejo, from the same region a few years later: “If the natives cease, the land is finished. I mean

its wealth: for all the gold and silver that comes to Spain is extracted by means of these Indians.”¹⁷¹

Like the sixteenth-century Spanish in Peru, then, to some critics the genocidal Californians were simply bad businessmen, liquidating their own best draft animals in an unceasing pique of racist passion. In time, however, these critics turned out to be wrong. Other labor was found. And by the end of the nineteenth century California's population was surging past one and a half million persons, of whom only 15,000—or one percent—were Indians, most of them stored safely away on remote and impoverished reservations, suffering from disease, malnutrition, and despair.

As had happened in Virginia two hundred years earlier—and as happened across the entire continent during the intervening years—between 95 and 98 percent of California's Indians had been exterminated in little more than a century. And even this ghastly numerical calculation is inadequate, not only because it reveals nothing of the hideous suffering endured by those hundreds of thousands of California native peoples, but because it is based on decline only from the estimated population for the year 1769—a population that already had been reduced savagely by earlier invasions of European plague and violence. Nationwide by this time only about one-third of one percent of America's population—250,000 out of 76,000,000 people—were natives. The worst human holocaust the world had ever witnessed, roaring across two continents non-stop for four centuries and consuming the lives of countless tens of millions of people, finally had leveled off. There was, at last, almost no one left to kill.