

10-2015

Book Review: Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian: the Crime that Should Haunt America

Mark Meuwese
University of Winnipeg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Meuwese, Mark (2015) "Book Review: Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian: the Crime that Should Haunt America," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2: 127-130.

DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.9.2.1329>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol9/iss2/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Book Review: *Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian: the Crime that Should Haunt America*

Mark Meuwese

University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian: The Crime that Should Haunt America

Gary Clayton Anderson

Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014.

472 pp. US\$29.95 hbk. US\$19.95 ppb.

Reviewed by Mark Meuwese

University of Winnipeg, Canada

Since the early twenty-first century, historians have paid increasing attention to the violent impact of European and American colonial expansion on the Indigenous peoples of North America. Whereas formerly historians focused on the persistence and agency of indigenous peoples in North American history, an increasing number of historians such as Ned Blackhawk, Karl Jacoby, Jeff Ostler, and Ben Madley are trying to uncover “the true magnitude of the violent encounter with the indigenous inhabitants of North America.”¹ To better comprehend and more precisely analyze the colonial violence inflicted on indigenous peoples of North America, many of these historians are using concepts developed by the recent interdisciplinary fields of settler-colonial studies and genocide studies.

An ambitious and controversial addition to this historiographic trend is Gary Clayton Anderson’s *Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian*. Anderson, a well-established historian of indigenous peoples in the American West, builds upon his earlier book *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2005) to argue that ethnic cleansing best characterizes the European and American treatment of Native Americans in the United States from the era of first European settlements in the seventeenth century until the allotment policy of the federal government in the late nineteenth century. At the heart of Anderson’s book is the question of what the impact of Anglo-American expansion was on the indigenous peoples of the United States (4). According to Anderson, there are two extreme views on this question. One is that the impact is simply ignored. The other extreme view is that the Anglo-American expansion was genocidal. Anderson has little sympathy for either view. While Anderson is correct in pointing out that American history textbooks too often still downplay the impact of settler-colonialism on Native Americans, he simplifies things by claiming that genocide did not occur in the United States because there was never a sustained and intentional state policy of mass killings of indigenous peoples. Anderson surprisingly uses this narrow definition of genocide as it is outlined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in order to justify the rejection of the concept in the United States context. In doing so, Anderson dismisses Raphael Lemkin’s original and broader concept of genocide from the 1940s as well as the recent approaches by genocide scholars which view genocide as a structural process that is not contingent on the state or on the intention to destroy.

In Anderson’s opinion, scholars who invoke genocide to describe the experiences of Native Americans “only devalue what actually happened to people in Central Europe, Cambodia, Rwanda, and even perhaps Darfur” (10). Moreover, Anderson suggests that it is illogical to use the concept of genocide in North America because many Native American groups survive to this day. Finally, genocide did not take place in the United States “primarily because moral restraints prevented it” (13). Although Anderson admits that massacres of Native American communities took place, most constituted war crimes committed by frontier settlers or soldiers who acted against central orders of the (federal) state. He also downplays the significance of the massacres in all of American history by concluding that they did not amount to more than 2,000 casualties.

Having forcefully and provocatively rejected genocide as a possible analytical tool, Anderson argues that ethnic cleansing is the proper label to describe the impact of Euro-American expansion on American Indians. Borrowing from the earlier mentioned Rome Statute as well as from historian Norman Naimark who has written on campaigns of ethnic cleansing in twentieth century Europe, Anderson defines ethnic cleansing as the forced deportation of populations.² According to Anderson, early modern European intellectuals such as Grotius, John Locke, and Emer de Vattel rationalized the dispossession of the indigenous peoples of North America by characterizing them as hunters and gatherers who did not make proper use of the land and natural resources of North America. Frontier settlers and the American government consistently used this ideology of dispossession to force indigenous peoples from their homelands. Because of moral constraints such as the desire to transform Native Americans into property-owning farmers, this process of ethnic cleansing never degenerated into mass killings. At the same time, Anderson morally condemns the ethnic cleansing campaigns by labeling them as crimes against humanity.

Following the complex and sometimes confusing introduction about the definitions of genocide and ethnic cleansing, Anderson proceeds with a detailed and chronological analysis in sixteen chapters of how the indigenous peoples of the United States were forcibly removed from their lands. Because of Anderson's insistence that genocide did not take place he frequently feels compelled to remind readers that specific massacres or deportations should not be viewed as genocide but only as war crimes or crimes against humanity. This approach sometimes forces Anderson to render incomplete accounts of frontier wars that can clearly be constructed as genocide. For example, when discussing the Pequot War in southern New England from 1636 to 1638 in chapter two, Anderson leaves out how Puritan officials systematically hunted down surviving Pequot women and children in the aftermath of the infamous destruction of the main Pequot village of Mystic. Moreover, Anderson does not discuss how, at the end of the war, New England authorities distributed Pequot captives among indigenous allies and formally declared the Pequots no longer to exist as a nation or group. Although the policies of the New England colonies against the Pequots in many ways fit the United Nations definition of genocide, Anderson narrowly views the Pequot War as a conflict over land in which both sides committed murderous attacks.

Anderson takes a similarly debatable standpoint when discussing the French wars against the Natchez of Mississippi and the Fox or Mesquakie of Wisconsin in the early eighteenth century. Although Anderson admits that French officials employed the rhetoric of extermination against both groups and organized destructive military campaigns against the Natchez and the Fox nations which resulted in massive casualties and in the dispersal of hundreds of Natchez and Fox captives as slaves, he concludes somewhat arbitrarily that the two conflicts "hardly reached a level of genocide" (64). At the most, Anderson is willing to view the brutal French attacks on Natchez and Fox villages filled with women and children as crimes against humanity. However, since members of both groups survived in adequate numbers, neither the Natchez nor Fox people experienced genocide at the hands of the French.

Anderson's focus on ethnic cleansing is on much more solid ground when he discusses the early nineteenth century federal policy of Indian Removal. While frontier settlers demanded the expulsion of Native Americans from desirable lands located between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River, federal officials supported it by framing deportation as a benevolent policy to protect indigenous people against violent and uncivilized frontiersmen. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 made possible the relocation of all Native American groups across the Mississippi River. The federal government initially attempted a combination of bribery, threats, and the promotion of factionalism to convince indigenous communities to sell their homelands to the American government in return for a promise of federal support in a new territory in the West. Federal pressure greatly intensified during the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and his successor Martin van Buren from 1829 to 1841. Jackson rejected the idea that Native Americans had any rights to their lands and supported state governments to remove Indian groups from their territories. This latter policy was highly controversial since under the American constitution only the federal government was permitted to maintain relations with Native American tribes. Shortly after becoming president Jackson also authored the Indian Removal Act of 1830 which authorized the federal government to

negotiate relocation treaties with indigenous groups in the eastern United States. After tremendous pressure from federal agents and state officials, almost all Native American groups signed removal treaties. While most historical studies of Removal focus on the well-known Cherokees, Anderson also discusses the deportation of the Choctaws, Seminoles, and the Sac and Fox of southern Illinois. By the early 1840s, approximately 80,000 out of an estimated 100,000 American Indians had been forcibly relocated across the Mississippi River. Although Anderson convincingly describes Removal policy as ethnic cleansing, he does not consider whether the large numbers of deaths that indigenous groups suffered from diseases, starvation, and accidents while being deported to the West can be considered as having had a genocidal impact on Native American groups such as the Cherokees.

The second half of Anderson's book covers the ordeals of Native Americans west of the Mississippi River during the second half of the nineteenth century. This portion of the book deals with well-known episodes in American history such as the gold rush in California, the Overland Trails to Oregon, the Minnesota-Dakota War of 1862, the 'Indian Wars' of the Great Plains, and the final resistance by Geronimo and his Apache followers in the Southwest. Not surprisingly, Anderson interprets the violent conflicts between the various Native American groups and the American government in the West exclusively from the perspective of ethnic cleansing. This approach has certain advantages as Anderson is able to tie together various federal policies and military campaigns that took place across a large territory and during half a century into one coherent narrative. Anderson is particularly convincing in describing, based on extensive research of American military and federal archives, how the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains fought an increasingly desperate struggle to preserve their extensive hunting territories from encroachment by American soldiers, surveyors, miners, railroad companies, and ranchers.

At the same time, Anderson's refusal to consider that genocide may also have taken place forces him to downplay the rhetoric of exterminating the Indians as repeatedly voiced by senior military commanders such as Generals William Sherman and Philip Sheridan. Because Sherman and Sheridan were often overruled by federal officials who insisted on peaceful negotiations rather than war, Anderson concludes that Native Americans did not become victims of genocidal campaigns. However, the US army frequently attacked villages of peaceful Indians and also systematically destroyed the food supplies of indigenous communities. These military strategies can be constructed as genocidal since they targeted entire indigenous groups and did not make a distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Anderson also does not take into account that the destruction of the remaining buffalo herds by professional hunters on the Great Plains in the 1870s can be construed as having a destructive impact on Native American groups whose livelihood and cultural identity depended on the buffalo. Once forced onto reservations, the formerly nomadic groups were exposed to limited food rations and unsanitary conditions which resulted in high mortality rates and an overall decline of their health.

Some of the book's strengths are unfortunately also its weaknesses. While the book gives a comprehensive survey of many of the conflicts between American Indian groups and Euro-Americans over a period of three centuries, some are not covered at all or only very briefly. For example, Kieft's War in New Netherland, a brutal war in which Dutch colonial officials on at least two occasions organized genocidal massacres in which hundreds of Algonquian villagers were killed in the early 1640s, is not covered at all by Anderson. Similarly, the notorious massacre of 170 Piegan (Blackfeet) men, women, and children by a US army unit led by Colonel Eugene Barker in Montana in the fall of 1870 is only briefly discussed in one paragraph on page 264 and then only within the context of American army strategy. Anderson does not describe or speculate what impact this destructive attack may have had on the group-cohesion of the Piegan. This touches on another potential weakness with Anderson's approach, which is that it is ultimately written from the perspective of Euro-American policy makers. Although Anderson does occasionally a fine job of including Native leaders and the role of factionalism within some of the indigenous groups such as the Lakotas, he does not reflect on what the impact of all the forced relocations and massacres had on the survivability of the indigenous communities. While it is true that the *Indian wars* of the nineteenth-century United States do not resemble the genocides of the twentieth century which are associated with mass-killings on an industrial scale,

using the Holocaust as the yardstick for the *Indian wars* of the American West sheds little light on the traumatic experiences of relatively small Native American groups such as the Yuki of northern California or the Modoc of Oregon who barely survived the onslaught of murderous attacks, relocations, starvation, and diseases brought on by American settlers and soldiers. Despite the author's refusal to consider genocide as having been a factor in European and American expansion, *Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian* is a valuable and deeply researched addition to the recent historiography that forces us to more carefully analyze the impact of settler colonialism on the indigenous peoples of North America.

Endnotes

- 1 Jeff Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Benjamin Madley, "California's Yuki Indians: Defining Genocide in Native American History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Autumn 2008): 303-332. For the quotation, see Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn*, 2.
- 2 Norman N. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).