

“Rewriting Alaska history with the word ‘Genocide’”

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Overview

This analysis focuses on an opinion article by Charles Wohlforth published in the Anchorage Daily News in July 2018 that discusses the debate whether Alaska pioneers committed genocide. This project examines the impact of Euroamerican colonists on Native populations in the US and Alaska in particular. Linguistically, it is looking at the etymology and scope of “genocide” as well as the ideas it appears in context with. The project demonstrates the lasting impact of colonialism on the Alaska Native peoples, the complexity of the word “genocide” and explores the historical background of the debate around this issue.

Historical Impact of Pioneers on Alaska Natives

- Russians undertook exploration voyages to Alaska in 1741 and proclaimed dominion over it in 1766 (Dennis et al 591).
- US Colonial Period (1867-1912):** Alaska is acquired by the US with the 1867 Alaska Purchase. The 1884 Alaska Organic Act adopted Oregon’s civilian rights for Alaska and deferred Native land claims (Dennis et al 593). In the late 1800s, Sheldon Jackson established Christian mission schools with strict English-only policy, suppressing Native cultural development (Dauenhauer 37). Additionally, some day and boarding schools for Natives were founded; boarding schools removed Native children from their families, leading to assimilation through segregation (Barnhardt). Around the same time, the gold rushers arrived, which led to deteriorating living conditions for the Natives as the non-Natives occupied many traditional hunting and fishing sites. When the rush ended in 1910, the Native population had fallen 23% from 1880 (Dennis et al 594-596). The 1905 Nelson Act established a dual schooling system in Alaska (Barnhardt).
- US Territorial Period (1912-1959):** In 1912, the Alaska Native Brotherhood was formed and started to demand full citizenship for Alaska Natives. In 1924, the federal government passed the Indian Citizenship Act (Dennis et al 596). The Alaska Reorganization Act of 1936 “authorized the creation of reservations on land occupied by Alaska Natives” with an option to create village governments (Barnhardt). During WWII in 1942, the Navy relocated Unangan residents of the Aleutians to camps in southeast Alaska. Many of them died due to unsanitary conditions; upon their return to the Aleutians in 1945, they found their homes vandalized by occupying US forces (Dennis et al 597).
- US State Period (starting 1959):** With statehood, public officials in 1960s were planning to repurpose parts of the land. Native opposition arose; in addition, the Alaska Federation of Natives was formed (Dennis et al 599). The discovery of oil and the subsequent 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act provided Native people with power and economic status they had not previously held (Barnhardt). The Native tribes were granted land and monetary compensation for land consigned to the government. In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act passed, including a “subsistence preference for rural Alaskans” (Barnhardt). According to Roderick, Alaska Natives still face many social and socioeconomic issues which “researchers have attributed [...] to the impact of colonialism” (68). At the AFN convention in 2018, Governor Bill Walker apologized for historical injustices against Alaska Natives.

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Historical Impact of Colonists on Native Americans

- John Cabot first explorer for England. His voyage “established an English claim to the continent” (Wagner 191). 1607, the English established Jamestown, Virginia as their first colony (Elliott 10;118). The British crown did not impose uniform policies and regulations; the treatment of indigenous peoples “varied widely in the British colonies, which eventually fought with each other as well as with the crown over Indian land acquisition and trade policies and defense” (Dennis et al 24).
- Relationships with Natives were mostly friendly at first; the settlers depended on their knowledge and resources to survive. (Elliott 46-48). However, latent hostility soon led to occurrences of violent conflicts (Corlett 620; 618-620). The farming practices of the English “destroyed Native traditional economies and forced tribes to move away or convert to the English lifestyle” (Dennis et al 24).
- 1776, the United States declare their independence. According to Dennis, Natives “paid a high price for their involvement. Colonial troops invaded Native communities, killing residents, burning houses, and ruining crops. They used the war as an excuse to take more Native lands.” (Dennis et al 28) The American Revolutionary War ends in 1783 and the United States become independent from Britain (Elliott 360).
- Wrone identifies six phases of US Federal Indian Policy (98):
 1. **Coexistence (1789–1828):** “the newly formed U.S. government treated Indian tribes as independent sovereign nations, often seeking their allegiance and support and negotiating with them as equals.” (Dennis et al 32) In 1819, the Civilization Fund Act was passed to provide for the education of Natives. Its funds first went to missionaries and later to federally established schools. In 1824, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was established (Dennis et al 33;38).
 2. **Removal and reservations (1829–1886):** Westward expansion led to the removal of Native populations from their lands. Treaties legally obliterated their entitlement to their land (Dennis et al 34). The Indian Removal Act of 1830 paved the way for the relocation of Natives; an option for the use of violence was implied. “By guile and by treaty, and sometimes by force, the government moved northern as well as southern tribes [to reservations] across the Mississippi” (Wrone 99). Native peoples along with whites who had intermarried were forced on the Trail of Tears, a series of forced relocations of Native American people in the 1830s (Dennis et al 171).
 3. **Assimilation (1887–1932):** After the Civil War, the federal government launched efforts for the assimilation of Natives centered around the 1887 Dawes Act, which “aimed at immediate absorption of Indians into the larger Anglo-Saxon culture” (Wrone 98). Schools and missionaries were the primary tools for this policy. “Tribes throughout the nation disintegrated under the effects of the policy, while the individual tribesman sank into poverty and cultural decay” (Wrone 101). In 1924, the US government passed the Indian Citizenship Act (Dennis et al 596).
 4. **Reorganization (1932–1945):** 1934 Indian Reorganization Act ended assimilation; the Act “protected Indian life and cultural institutions and sought to reestablish tribal governments while invigorating them with a number of innovative models, including the introduction into many of them of constitutional forms of political activity” (Wrone 101).
 5. **Termination (1946–1960):** restart of assimilative policies. A series of laws were passed to end the government’s trusteeship of Native lands and to relocate Native populations to more urban areas (Wrone 102).
 6. **Self-determination (1961–1985):** The 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 helped Native tribes to more civil rights and recognize Natives as independent nations governing themselves (Wrone 102-104).
- Goldstein argues that U.S. “remains reliant on the ever-expanding dispossession and disavowal of indigenous peoples” (1-2)



Missionaries en route to the Klondike, Skagway, Alaska, January 1898. By Eric A. Hegg. Reproduced with permission.

Linguistic Analysis

- I studied the etymology of “genocide” and the words the author connected to the idea behind the term.
- The term was first used by Raphael Lemkin in 1943 referring to the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. It was created by **blending** and **affixation** (Algeo & Butcher 252; 262) from the Ancient Greek “gēnos” for “race” or “kind” and the suffix “-cide” from the Latin “cidium” for “killing” (Dallaire & Coleman 780)
- The UN defined it in 1948 in the aftermath of the Holocaust as an act “with the intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: a) killing members of a group; b) Causing serious and bodily harm to members of the group; c) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; d) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (Andreopolous 2).
- Neu & Therrien argue that with the UN definition as a basis, the word genocide can now also be applied to “longer term practices that ultimately have the same effect [as intentional extermination]: 1. Genocide in the course of colonization; 2. Genocide as a result of ecological destruction, or ecocide; 3. cultural genocide” (16). This would mean that the word has undergone a process of **generalization** (Algeo and Butcher 232).
- In Wohlforth’s article, words like “guilty” “villains” and “victims” and “intentional extermination” (1-4) appear in connection with the idea of genocide. He asks: “Did American pioneers commit genocide? And I don’t mean cultural genocide, but the intentional extermination of Native people?” (3).
- Wohlforth suggests that applying the term in context with “Alaska pioneers and missionaries” would mean that they are guilty of “intentional extermination,” excluding cultural genocide from the original UN definition (3).
- Wohlforth is arguing against a **generalization** (Algeo & Butcher 232) and a broadening of the term’s narrow scope that would include cultural destruction of a group.
- Barkan notices a reluctance of Europeans to use the term “genocide” which is is “an emotional subject” (121). Depending on the context the term has a **taboo** character as defined by Algeo & Butcher (235).

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