



TITLE: Contribution of Genocide Studies in Shaping History Writing about Indigenous-European Encounters in Southern America during the 15th and 16th centuries.

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ABSTRACT

The Holocaust, a pivotal event in modern history, has significantly shaped historical methods, especially in the study of mass violence. This paper delves into how the field of Holocaust Studies—from concepts such as genocide, bureaucratic violence, agency, and memory—has transformed how we understand Europe's colonisation of the Americas. Through looking at topics such as the role of disease, the warfare of reason, and the agency that indigenous people exhibited, modern historians get to grips with the brutality of the conquest with a gaze that was historically only applied to the horrors of the 20th century.

INTRODUCTION: HOLOCAUST STUDIES AND THE GENOCIDE FRAMEWORK

The term genocide, coined by Raphael Lemkin after the Holocaust, provided a key to reviewing colonial brutality. His definition highlighted the destruction of the basic elements of a national group's existence, including political and social institutions, culture, religion, and economic survival. He vehemently blamed Columbus as an infamous and brazen instigator of genocide who created the historical hook of the future conquest in Spain's encounter in the Americas, through the widespread enslavement system and precipitating massive casualties. Lemkin's concept encompassed more than the formal version subsequently ratified by the United Nations in its 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. The United Nations wording characterises genocide as deeds perpetrated with the purpose of annihilating, wholly or partially, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious community, including systematically slaughtering members, intentionally inflicting bodily or mental injury, imposing inhuman living conditions, obstructing births, and forcibly relocating children of the group (Stone, 2008).

Dan Stone's (2008) analyses emphasise historiographical changes: At one extreme stands a cohort of scholars contending that genocide was the fundamental hallmark of colonial history in the Americas. The most vocal and divisive figure among this cohort is Ward Churchill. He proclaimed that the American holocaust was and continues to be unmatched both regarding its scale and concerning the extent to which its brutality persisted over time, perpetrated not by a single entity but by multiple parties. They characterised their adversary solely in racial terms. Another prominent advocate of this perspective is David E. Stannard. Stannard challenged individuals who decline to label the almost complete annihilation of Indigenous peoples in the Western Hemisphere as genocide, arguing on the grounds that it was the inadvertent, inevitable consequence of epidemic diseases sweeping across the region.

Despite substantial documentation of widespread mistreatment of Indigenous populations by colonisers, various authors have explicitly rejected applying the term genocide to interpret the

colonisation of the Americas. Historian James Axtell has asserted that genocide is anachronistic when strictly describing the overwhelming majority of interactions between Europeans and Native peoples. Certainly, no European colonial administration ever attempted to annihilate all Indians purely on racial grounds. The vast majority of settlers did not incline to kill Indians, as they were considerably valuable for trade and labour, and those who did attack aimed specifically at temporary political or military opponents. Others have concurred with Axtell in disputing the application of the terms genocide and holocaust to characterise interactions between Europeans and Native Americans. Certain specialists in the Nazi Holocaust have maintained that for atrocities to warrant the label genocide, they must encompass the complete and prolonged deployment of state power driven by the intent to accomplish total racial eradication. The foremost advocate of this position is Steven T. Katz, who asserts that the Holocaust (the deliberate extermination of European Jews) is historically singular because no government ever before in recorded history set out, as a matter of intentional doctrine and executed policy, to physically annihilate every man, woman, and child belonging to a demographic group. By contrast, colonial policymakers in America, according to Katz, generally sought to safeguard Indian lives during periods of peace, since they were required for valuable labour, beneficial trading partnerships, and strategic military alliances. Katz and other proponents of the Nazi Holocaust's singularity contend that genocide should be defined in a significantly narrower and strictly more exclusionary manner than the 1948 United Nations convention explicitly allows. Their detractors maintain that by doing so, they diminish the suffering of numerous victims targeted by racial and ethnic hatred. While historical records from each colonial power in the Americas include documented instances of unequivocal state-sponsored eradication of Indigenous populations, these, as Axtell asserts, were exceptions rather than norms and primarily targeted not all Indians but only a limited number of distinct tribal communities (Stone, 2008).

A debate also emerged between liberals and post liberals. Liberals guided by researchers such as Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn liken genocide to government-directed mass slaughter, regarding the Holocaust as the exemplar. Opponents contend that this omits various nonfatal genocidal measures (e.g. compulsory sterilisations, cultural erasure). The post liberal framework includes analysts like Ward Churchill and Tony Barta who underscore structural violence and colonial settings. They assert genocide can occur without explicit intent (e.g. settler colonial displacement) and call for recognising cultural destruction (Stone, 2004)

There were also contemporary developments in genocide research. Researchers like Ben Kiernan and Donald Bloxham compare the Holocaust with genocides (e.g. Armenian, Rwandan) to reveal shared mechanisms (e.g. cumulative racialization, racial branding). While Jurgen Zimmerman and Mark Levene positioned the Holocaust within Europe's colonial past and modern nation-building. Dirk Moses underscores the racial century (1850 to 1950) as an era of linked genocides fueled by imperial expansion and moral nationalism. Dirk Moses links colonial genocides to broader patterns of state-sponsored violence. Moses argues that the Holocaust should be clearly perceived both as a singular occurrence and as part of wider genocidal processes. He endorses Lemkin's foundational concept of genocide as an instrument for safeguarding every cultural community, promoting ecumenical unity and preventive morality (Stone, 2004).

REASSESSING VIOLENCE AND INTENTIONALITY

Disease as a Weapon: European illnesses entered the Americas virtually from the time Columbus and his men first encountered their New World inhabitants. However, the deliberate mass extermination of the native peoples did not commence until Columbus's reappearance. Columbus's subsequent journey

signified the genuine onset of the Americas' subjugation. On the northwestern coast of Hispaniola, the fleet docked at a site in early January 1494. As soon as the vessels were emptied, disease erupted among the sailors. It swiftly circulated among the local inhabitants. Within days, the commander's physician observed that one-third of the Spaniards were unwell, while indigenous deaths were widespread. The most current and pioneering medical conjecture attributes the outbreak to influenza, transported by pigs from the Canary Islands. This alien contagion swept through native groups with a ferocity unmatched in their entire past. In the aftermath of the epidemic they had triggered, Spanish forces advanced, pursuing gold from the locals or hints of its whereabouts. They bore infections wherever they journeyed, irksome yet seldom lethal, except to the indigenous they met. Each time the plundering, ailing, and heavily equipped Spanish troops ventured on missions, joined by fierce armoured dogs bred to slaughter and mutilate, they targeted the already disease-weakened local societies, demanding provisions, women, slaves, and anything else the soldiers craved. The leader undertook the effort to structure their erratic bondage of natives. Their sole pursuit was gold, so every non-child island native was mandated to present the Spanish with a set amount of valuable ore every three months. When the ore was submitted, the individual received a marker to hang around their neck as evidence of tribute payment. Columbus launched a plan termed repartimiento or native allotments—a network of encomiendas. This entailed distributing not land, but entire populations and societies, assigning them to potential Spanish rulers. The ruler had the liberty to act as he desired. The outcome was a surge in brutality (Stannard, 1992). In 1519, Hernando de Cortés directed the Spanish domination of the Aztec domain, ending with Tenochtitlan's downfall in 1521. The effort led to millions of losses through battle, sickness, and bondage. Spanish units toppled sanctuaries, torched records, enforced Catholicism, and purposefully unravelled Aztec heritage.

South America: Peru and Chile, abode of the Incas and among the most opulent and vast empires worldwide, enveloping nearly the full western shore of the South American continent, housed at least 9,000,000 souls just years before European arrival, perhaps as many as 14,000,000 or beyond. As in other areas, the invaders' maladies preceded them. Well before the century's end, scarcely 1,000,000 Peruvians survived. At minimum, 94% of the populace had vanished. Between 8,500,000 and 13,500,000 persons had been obliterated. Natives endured whipping, hanging, submersion, dismemberment, and dog attacks as the Spanish and others sought more gold and silver than the locals could furnish. A cunning European tactic to secure their aims involved entombing native leaders in soil up to their waists after they relinquished all possessions they held that day. In that defenceless state, they were often struck with lashes and instructed to divulge the rest of their riches' locations. When compliance failed, more dirt was amassed around them, and lashings persisted. Then additional soil. More strikes ensued. Ultimately, they were encased up to their shoulders and finally their mouths. Upon reaching this territory, conquerors ravaged the Incas' routes and crossings, farming platforms, and channels. They pillaged extensively, packed storage sheds and silos, and senselessly butchered llamas by the thousands. Convinced El Dorado lay in the Amazon, the conquerors propelled thousands of natives ahead in their frantic hunts for gold and mines amid the jungles. Others faced being gathered and marched from their Andean dwellings to coca plantations on the stifling borders of lowland tropical rainforests. There, their breathing was assailed by odd, crippling, and fatal diseases. Toil in silver mines was grimmer, descending into shafts drilled as deep as 705 feet into the ground. Whole valleys, once brimming with flourishing hamlets and hundreds of thousands of native dwellers, were emptied of human existence. Some locals sought to evade oppressive Spanish mine conscriptors. They retreated to the lowlands, yet there they unwittingly exposed themselves to settings where European plague diseases prospered. These maladies, encompassing measles, mumps, typhus, influenza, diarrhoea, scarlet fever, and hemorrhagic smallpox, were transmitted more readily in the warm, damp lowland climate.

And then there was Brazil. The indigenous inhabitants of Brazil were well advanced on the route to annihilation. The land's overseers and commanders eroded the natives incrementally and slew many. From 1552 to 1561, with epidemics in 1554, 1556, and 1559, European-borne diseases scourged the coast and interior, heavily preying on the diminished frames of enslaved natives (Stannard, 1992).

Systematic Brutality: Inga Clendinnen (1991) explores Cortés's harsh cruelty as a deliberate tactic of terror. She argued that Aztec conflicts prioritised seizing foes for sacred offerings over territorial ruin. Fights resembled duels among warriors, with triumph signalled by blazing temples and tribute calls. Their focus on taking prisoners alive, rather than slaying them, made them ill-equipped for the Spanish relentless slaughter and siege strategies. She exposed the Spanish tactics of practicality and mind games. Horses, steel blades, and cannons offered superiority but had a deep mental impact on the natives. For instance, cannon shows stunned native watchers, who perceived them as strikes against the earth. Cortes's strangling of Tenochtitlan, paired with calculated famine and disease (smallpox), defied customary battle codes. Ruining aqueducts and causeways revealed European all-out war tactics. She stressed that conquest wasn't fated but forged by misinterpreted exchanges (Moctezoma's gifts, viewed by Spaniards as surrender or payoffs, signified strength and partnership in Nahuatl tradition) and insisted that historical texts require sharp critique for distortions, as Spanish and native stories embellished events to align with post-conquest aims [Diaz glorifies the saga, spotlighting Spanish valour; codices fault Moctezoma's stillness (e.g., Quetzalcoatl legend) for the fall].

John Varner (1983) documents the conquistadors' use of war dogs, mirroring Nazi psychological torture. The Caribbean islands served as the initial stage for European canine violence in the Americas. Christopher Columbus's second journey included 20 mastiffs and greyhounds. These dogs were officially presented as food inspectors to identify poison, yet their role swiftly transitioned to battle. The earliest recorded deployment of dogs as weapons occurred on May 5, 1494, when Columbus landed in Jamaica. The Spanish released a massive dog that pursued, attacked, and ravaged the fleeing Taino. Historians noted that a single dog matched the strength of ten men against the natives. In the 1495 Battle of Vega Real, Bartolome de las Casas detailed how mastiffs slashed open stomachs, severed throats, and gutted victims like hunted deer, massacring hundreds in less than an hour. After Columbus's exit, governors Francisco Bobadilla and Nicolás Ovando entrenched the use of dogs for terror. Bobadilla relied on them to compel labour in gold mines, while Ovando intensified savagery during the 1504 Higüey War. Dogs such as Becerrillo and Leoncico emerged as emblems of fear. The Taino and Caribs developed a profound dread of European canines, often capitulating without a struggle to escape being shredded. The conquest of Nueva España (Mexico) brought a deliberate increase in canine tactics. Hernando Cortés's 1519 campaign featured mastiffs and greyhounds. Cortés employed dogs to shatter native resolve. At Cempoala, a dog signalled the presence of Aztec scouts, resulting in their deaths. In discussions with Montezuma's delegates, Cortés orchestrated mock fights where dogs—illustrated in native codices as “ocelot-spotted” with glowing eyes—alarmed Aztec illustrators documenting Spanish power. The Tlaxcalans, once adversaries, joined Cortés after observing dogs mutilate prisoners. Following Tenochtitlan's collapse, Cortés used dogs to eliminate Aztec priests and nobles resisting Christian conversion. In Coyoacán, insurgents were tossed to the dogs. When Cortés ventured to Honduras in 1524, acting governor Alonso de Zuazo utilised a ferocious greyhound in legal affairs, menacing native artists with mauling if they altered land documents. Dogs also crushed uprisings.

Ideological Foundations: Extermination is feasible only if the targeted community has been depicted as worthless, outside the network of reciprocal duties, a danger to others, immoral sinners, or subhuman. Among the most impactful key architects of linguistic portrayals of Native Americans was

Peter Martyr. Within his depiction of Indigenous American populations, numerous of his subjects appear ferocious and brutal, inclined toward cannibalism, demonic devotion, human sacrifice, sodomy and zoophilia. Their conflicts, savage and unending, provided continual demonstration of their inherently feral character. Numerous akin beasts exist devoid of the accoutrements of civilisation. They appeared evidently subject to the domination of a demon. The conviction that the New World constituted the devil's domain was pervasive among Spaniards and among other European voyagers and settlers since the sixteenth century onward. The staunch core critics of Indigenous society regarded them as tantamount to Aristotle's slaves by nature, unfit for freedom. Those portrayals of Native Americans as cognitive underlings and ethical deviants offered justification to those who rationalised subjugation, dispossession and annihilation. Initial accounts and chroniclers of England's inaugural colonial enterprise depicted the New World as a diabolical realm and Native Americans as its servants. And via the benevolent emissaries of Christians, English authors asserted, some might be rescued from bondage and be guided into truth and redemption. British conviction in divine guardianship of their New World undertakings also holds that epidemic illnesses that devastated native communities soon following initial contact were both a judgment against sinful natives and an act of mercy to God's own chosen (Stone, 2008).

In his work, David E. Stannard (1992) examines the intellectual and spiritual foundations of genocide, terming it a demonic principle, through the lens of Christian doctrines on sexuality, the body, and violence blessed by faith. To highlight this sinister logic, Stannard points to Elie Wiesel's vision of death camps as places of hellish sacrifice and notes Hitler's depiction of Jews as subhuman "vermin," showing how mass killing was supported by degrading rhetoric. Stannard traces genocidal passion to early Christian asceticism: Self-harm and celibacy (Figures like Origen undertook self-castration or celibacy, seeing sexuality as a spiritual peril); Denial of the flesh (Desert hermits and monastic codes urged suppressing bodily desires, often via harsh acts like self-flagellation and solitude); and Tie to religious power (Celibacy linked to divine authority, with sexual restraint signalling heavenly favour). Stannard next views the medieval crusading spirit as a blueprint for genocide. By the 11th century, papal orders endorsed the killing of non-Christians. Papal Bulls granted war spoils to Christian victors, blending economic gain with sacred mission. This mix of zeal, greed, and racial contempt shaped a doctrine portraying genocide as divinely ordained warfare—a doctrine Columbus and his heirs carried to the Americas, marking indigenous peoples as pagan targets for destruction.

INDIGENOUS AGENCY AND MEMORY

Holocaust Studies emphasis on victim narratives inspires re-evaluation of indigenous perspectives. Krippner (2001) examines Spanish legal texts, such as the *proceso Contra tzintzincha tangaxoan*, to reveal indigenous agency, thus questioning histories favouring conquerors. Krippner argued that native accounts were conveyed and recorded by Spanish scribes, leading to misrepresentations; the *proceso* replicates Spanish judicial styles to legitimise Cazonci's execution (Cazonci was the ruler of the Purepecha Empire who resisted the expansion of the Aztec Empire), concealing its political purpose and overlooking indigenous defiance tactics, like escaping or quiet non-cooperation, perpetuating the stereotype of native passivity. He emphasised native agency and defiance. [The natives supplied gold and silver to](#) Cortés, yet opposed additional requests. The murder of settlers in Tacambaro exhibited persistent resistance, and after the death of Cazonci, indigenous leaders worked with Franciscan missions to retain influence, exemplifying resilient adaptation.

Stern (1992) challenges histories shaped by political agendas, promoting decolonial approaches that emphasise indigenous perspectives, much like Holocaust survivor narratives. He disputed the

European-centred discovery tale, pointing out that native peoples had long resided in and moulded the Americas. Stern disapproves of moves to strip 1492 of its political context, insisting that the conquest was intrinsically political, obscuring conflicts over power. At the Potosi silver mines, indigenous workers vied with Spaniards for dominance. Native communities steadily eroded Spanish economic dominance, sustaining their influence through secret commerce and handmade crafts. Stern underscores native ingenuity, exemplified by Diego Caqui's management of vineyards, maritime fleets, and llama caravans in the 1580s, which countered the stereotype of idle victims. Indigenous leaders deftly got along with the power structure of the colonisers—Tlaxcalan nobilities had long-lasting advantages for their involvement with Cortés and helping. The Andean kurakas (local rulers) paid royal officials to prevent the continuation of the practice of encomiendas in the 1560s. Religious people like Las Casas and Franciscans promoted spiritual beliefs to save souls, which, not unlike the lay colonisers, clashed with the treatment of the natives, and Indigenous adaptations of Christianity undermined Spanish plans—Andean Taki Onqoy devotees (1560s) promoted the return of ancestral deities and shunned co-operation with the conquerors. Stern believes that native spirituality was never fawning or fixed and interwound it with Christian themes while resisting cultural loss.

Stern (1992) dismantles the Black Legend by emphasising indigenous resilience. Berkeley scholars (Borah, Cook) estimated the jolting decline in native populations (90% mortality in Mexico by 1600), which has been linked to disease and repression.²³ Stern acknowledges the catastrophic impact but is critical of stories that dismiss the agency of the natives. Andes gradual population decrease was part of sustained resistance.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion highlights the fundamental discussion at the core of the term genocide. Although philosophers such as Stannard and Churchill focus on the systematic annihilation of Indigenous populations through disease, displacement, and cultural annihilation, those like Katz and Axtell suggest for a restricted definition with explicit intent by states. However, as the case of the Spanish conquest with their calculated methods – biological warfare, enslavement, and ideological branding of the Indigenous people as subhuman – reveals, colonial violence was not simply exploitation. It was a genocidal logic that flowed from the structural necessity of settler colonialism to destroy native societies, even though there were economic pragmatics or policies that were 'fractured'. The overall principle of the Holocaust thus forces historians to face the question of morality and method to extend the study of genocide to colonial cases, seeing that intent can be transmitted in the form of systemic apathy as much as an explicit plan. Equally important is the involvement of an ideological framework in legitimising violence. Early chroniclers such as Peter Martyr with his dehumanisation rhetoric, or the blending of religious fervour and racial disdain during the period of the Crusade, offered a template for colonist extermination. Christian dogmas of purity and providence served to justify conquest to some, but still normalised atrocities– from Cortés' psychological warfare techniques to the brutal labour regime in Potosí mines- as Stannard points out. Such frameworks resemble the Nazi regime's ideological marketing of Jews, illustrating that the reduction of the human is a prerequisite for the mass violence of different epochs. However, this paper also examines Indigenous passivity. By focusing on agency- represented in forms of legal resistance, economic adaptation, and spiritual reinterpretations - this research mirrors the Holocaust Studies' concentration on victim narratives. Diego Caqui and Taki Onqoy's movement are one such example of resilience, which subverted the colonial domination in the middle of oppressive systems. In a similar way, Stern's decolonial critique repudiates the myth of

'discovery' Eurocentric overviews, advocating that historians bring in Indigenous perspectives that defied erasure

In summary, the fusion of Holocaust methodologies and colonial history does not equate atrocities, but shows commonalities in the pattern of state violence, ideological Othering and the collective memory. There should be a historiography on genocide that doesn't diminish colonial genocide's scale and doesn't bury Indigenous resilience. Further, future scholarship must bridge these fields in analysing the memory of the Holocaust and of Indigenous trauma for creating a reparative justice and preventive ethics. By engaging with the complexity of the past, we recognise that the conquest of the Americas was not an orphaned lamentable event, but a seminal episode in the world history of mass violence - an echo which still influences present-day understanding of power, identity, and survival.

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