

Jeffrey Ostler: “To Extirpate the Indians”

AN INDIGENOUS CONSCIOUSNESS OF GENOCIDE IN THE OHIO VALLEY AND LOWER GREAT LAKES, 1750S-1810

Indigenous Consciousness of Colonial Genocide

- Jeffrey Ostler discusses an Indigenous consciousness of genocide. He explains that Indigenous nations had a collective consciousness of colonizers’ intention to eliminate them. Ostler uses evidence to argue that Indigenous people were aware of colonial motives. He reframes Indigenous peoples as active evaluators of colonial intentions and as the first identifiers of genocidal attempts. These evaluations of colonial intentions began during early contact with settlers. Ostler uses the example of the colonial slaughter of Pequots in the Mystic River Massacre. At the time of this massacre, nations took note of colonizers’ lack of reciprocity and rejection of peace. Accusations span from the 1750s-1810s.
- As colonial expansion continued, so did awareness of genocidal actions. There was an Indigenous perception of settlers as inherently violent toward Indigenous nations. Apprehension about extirpation was expressed by many different nations: Delawares, Shawnees, Potawatomis, Ojibwes, Senecas, Mohawks, Wyandots, Miamis, and Ottawas. These concerns were catalyzed by the smallpox epidemic that was killing off their communities. Ottawa leader Egushawa said actions of settlers had resulted in “total extinction” of “numerous nations and tribes.” He explained that as you look out, you see less and less “nations of your own colour.” Coocoochee, a Mohawk woman, explained that colonizers would not be satisfied until all Indigenous people were “exterminated.” Seneca prophet Handsome Lake stated that there is a “constant fear that the white race would exterminate you.” Ostler also provides examples of Delaware leaders saying, “French and English intend to kill all the Indians.”
- Although genocide was not in American policy, Indigenous people believed that Americans wanted them exterminated. Indigenous conclusions of genocidal intent were supported by experiences of colonial violence and murder. These people had long lists of things that had happened that shaped their perception of colonizers as genocidal. They read and watched colonizers act over time, and they had access to the knowledge of genocidal attempts through spoken word and public documents.

Defining Genocide, and the Scholarship Surrounding it

- Ostler explains that the word genocide was not used in the 18th century during these English records of colonial history. The documentation of this history uses words like “exterminate” and “extirpate.” Extirpate & exterminate are synonymous: “To root out, to eradicate, to destroy.” Ostler provides an Algonquian word that was used in documentation- “Lokenummen,” meaning: “to destroy.” Ostler suggests that each of these terms can be understood as interchangeable with one another. Ostler wants to link the historical use of vocabulary surrounding genocide to the modern use, through the lens of those who experienced the colonial violence.
- Scholarship surrounding colonial genocide has been shaped by colonial legal frameworks and standards. Historians have been dismissive of genocide in relation to colonization of Indigenous nations due to the ambiguity of the language and the nuanced nature of the topic. Ostler challenges this debate by asking, if Indigenous people themselves perceived colonial attempts as acts of destruction, why don't historians account for that in the discussions of genocide?
- Ostler claims genocide shouldn't be defined by colonial historiography, but rather by the Indigenous people who experienced attempts at destruction.
- If Indigenous nations perceived colonial action as genocide, Ostler suggests the history be centred around that perception. He explains that by ignoring Indigenous perspectives on the matter, their lived experiences become erased.
- This discussion highlights that genocide cannot be denied, and that this use of language doesn't matter as much as the evidence that Indigenous people developed a consciousness that they were under threat of being destroyed.

Indigenous Resistance

- There were, and still are, numerous means by which Indigenous nations have and continue to resist colonial expansion. Ostler highlights the many ways in which this resistance occurred. He does so through the lens of Indigenous determination to defend themselves from colonial attempts at genocide. Ostler also elaborates on ways in which settlers, used military attempts and colonial aggression to try to stop Indigenous resistance. He discusses the idea that physical elimination depended on “native choice.” If Indigenous nations were willing to give up their land, they would not be killed. Through this, Ostler acknowledges that Indigenous people have never ceded their lands. Ostler provides evidence of Indigenous peoples’ refusal to flee or surrender, as they would rather die on their rightful land than flee in fear of the colonial agenda.
- Compliance was believed by some to be the best way to avoid genocide, but many believed the collective resistance against genocide would allow nations to slow or halt expansion.
- Anti-colonial opposition was one means of resistance. After a new massive wave of settlers in 1783, in the late 1780s, Indigenous peoples of the Ohio Valley and Southern Great Lakes (Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, Miamis, Ottawas, and Ojibwes) organized an international movement known as the western confederacy. This was an Indigenous coalition formed to create resistance toward imperial expansion. Very important Indigenous leaders, such as Tecumseh, asserted Indigenous sovereignty, and defend Indigenous peoples’ ability to collectively care for the lands they are on. This leader also issued statements targeting American politicians like Thomas Jefferson, and accusing them of genocide. These are acts of strategic, multi-faceted resistance, that are rooted in Indigenous resilience and resistance toward colonialism.
- Another means of resistance was suggested through the renouncing of European ways. This meant that if Indigenous people returned to their traditional ways of living and rejected colonial things such as alcohol consumption, they would be better able to rely on spiritual power to resist colonial expansion. He says the Haudenosaunee recognized that the power of the Creator is the only thing that can prevent the fear of genocide.
- Ostler discusses the collective Indigenous view of colonizers as “a war-like people.” In this way, resistance was often attempted by colonizers through the reciprocated violence toward settlers. This article provides evidence of Indigenous leaders urging their people to continue to try to make peace with Americans, but if the Americans are unwilling, then war will continue forever. Indigenous nations were not docile in the face of colonial expansion, and they asserted sovereignty through warfare when necessary.
- Ostler explains that Indigenous people knew colonial perception was that if they wanted the lands, they had to kill the people, so it was simply a matter of who killed whom first. Indigenous leaders believed that diplomacy was the best way to prevent Indigenous destruction at the hands of settlers, but when diplomacy failed, war was the only honourable course of action.
- Anti-colonial opposition-centred discussion emphasized the importance of recognizing that as the number of white settlers increased, the number of Indigenous peoples decreased.
- Ostler states that the truth is that the Indigenous people who faced this colonial expansion came to their own conclusions. They were active witnesses of the colonial genocide that was attempted. Indigenous peoples were not fooled by colonial attempts to trick and scare them.

Colonial Attempts of Genocide

- Ostler says that settler colonial societies wanted to extirpate Indigenous peoples in order to take their lands. Along with this, Ostler points out that acts of genocide did not stem from a uniform policy outlining destruction, but rather were a practice thought to be necessary, and acted upon through many varying methods. When the method of assimilation, for example, did not work, genocide was attempted. This article identifies two main means of facilitating attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples: violence and disease.
- Biological warfare: Ostler explains the use of disease and poison against Indigenous peoples was central to the colonial agenda. He provides the example from 1756 of Colonel Henry Bouquet saying that Indigenous peoples who were not compliant would be sent smallpox. Stating that all methods should be tried to “Extirpate this Execreble Race.” Along with this, Delaware visitors were given items, such as blankets infected with smallpox by officers of Fort Pitt.
- Ostler points out the “limitations of the colonial archive,” and the absence of evidence of biological warfare against Indigenous peoples. The lack of documentation was intentional. Colonizers did not want to leave a written record of their actions. Still, there is Indigenous testimony and verbal evidence of the use of biological warfare.
- Along with disease, colonizers used deceit as a means of destruction. Settlers attempted to sell Indigenous people alcohol and goods that had been infected with deadly bacteria. This exchange of European goods was framed as a means to “civilize” Indigenous nations, when truthfully, being rooted in genocidal attempt.
- Military violence: Ostler talks of militias formed with the intention of extermination. A Pennsylvania militia in 1782 massacred 96 Indigenous people, including women and children. He states his intention to “exterminate the whole Wiandott Tribe,” and to “extirpate, utterly, if possible, the (Shawnees and other nations).”
- Ostler provides examples of US officials issuing threats, explaining that Brigadier General Charles Scott returned seventeen Indigenous prisoners to their people with a message that “your warriors will be slaughtered, your towns and villages ransacked and destroyed, your wives and children carried into captivity.”
- It becomes clear that colonial expansion was never just land theft; it was a colonial project which included the attempted physical elimination of Indigenous peoples.

<div data-bbox="139 47 603 90" data-label="Section-Header"><h2>Horizontal Perception of Race</h2></div> <div data-bbox="15 118 784 1156" data-label="List-Group"><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ostler explains Indigenous perceptions of race and racial thought was absent of the racial superiority embedded in colonial racial ideology. Even anti-American Indigenous peoples did not view white people as below them. Indigenous people sought to limit American expansion, never to eliminate Americans. Race is seen as horizontal, not hierarchical. Ostler discusses how Indigenous peoples challenge the assertion of white supremacy, and question how white people could be inherently “better,” if everyone is a product of creation.• Ostler explains that Indigenous nations did not use words historically that translated to that of skin colour, like “white.” Rather, they used terms to describe characteristics of a group, separated entirely from race. Ostler refers the use of the term “long-knives” in Indigenous discussion of colonizers. This directly implies an innate quality of settlers to be inherently violent and malicious.• Indigenous people understood that colonizers were responsible for the pain brought onto Indigenous nations. This did not have to do with skin colour, just action. Indigenous racial categorization was grounded in action rather than the dehumanization of another group based upon supremest ideologies.• Ostler explains that Indigenous accounts of colonizers as “whites” or “pale faces” did not have any hierarchical intention, dissimilar to the colonial concept of white supremacy. Indigenous perceptions centred on specific qualities that were given to white people by creation.</div>	<div data-bbox="900 59 1450 102" data-label="Section-Header"><h2>Necessity of Indigenous Perspective</h2></div> <div data-bbox="827 146 1552 1448" data-label="List-Group"><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ostler’s work points out the incomplete nature of historiography surrounding colonial genocide. This is due to the absence of documentation on Indigenous awareness of the colonial agenda.• This article articulates a necessity for this history to centre Indigenous experiences and perspectives. While American scholarship has heavily dissected colonial violence and attempts at "extirpative war,” it has altogether left out Indigenous accounts and interpretations of this violence. Ostler’s discussion of Indigenous consciousness of genocide facilitates the inclusion of Indigenous narratives in the conversation of colonialism.• By leaving out Indigenous perceptions of colonialism from the history, Indigenous peoples are framed as bystanders and victims. Ostler provides the reader with evidence of Indigenous leaders acknowledging attempts at genocide and also acting strategically upon them.• Through acknowledging and understanding Indigenous perspectives and experiences, we further the proof of the colonial attempt at genocide within the history.• Ostler refutes the idea that Indigenous people were obstacles to colonial progress. He centres Indigenous people as active observers of colonialism who resisted a colonial agenda.• This work intends to point out the absurdity of historians’ conclusions surrounding the validity of genocide as an appropriate label, based purely on colonial accounts.• Ostler argues that it should not be historians’ job to decide for Indigenous people whether or not to call it genocide. There was an evident Indigenous consciousness of it, which should be the proof.</div>
<div data-bbox="232 1231 537 1275" data-label="Section-Header"><h2>A Genocidal System</h2></div> <div data-bbox="15 1302 768 3557" data-label="List-Group"><ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is important to understand that Indigenous people were up against systemic attempts at genocide. Colonization was an inherently genocidal system; genocide was not a byproduct of expansion. Indigenous people were systematically oppressed, and constant attempts were made by colonizers to stop Indigenous resistance to colonial expansion.• There was a systemic refusal to recognize the genocide that was being attempted toward Indigenous peoples: Ostler explains the 1778 Fort Pitt treaty as a colonial attempt to counter the charge that they were trying “to extirpate the Indians and take possession of their country.” This was a reaction to Indigenous claims of 20 years of ongoing genocidal attempts. The promise of Delaware lands and Indigenous representation in Congress was used to pacify Indigenous claims of genocide and ensure that accusations would dissipate.• Settlers viewed Indigenous claims of genocide as a product of their jealousy of colonial power. This provides a clear understanding of the systemic justification of genocidal pursuit by settlers. Indigenous resistance and accusations were exploited and diminished.• Religion was used as a means to justify genocide: The Delawares who chose not to convert to Christianity were threatened and told, “You will be extinct from the earth.”• British authority was imposed on Indigenous peoples through the cutting of trade relations, refusal to trade military ammunition, and the restriction of any form of gift-giving between nations. All acts that had historically fostered alliances between Indigenous nations and settlers.• Indigenous peoples came to realize that colonial attempts to pursue Indigenous alliance with either the French or the British were deceitful. Both nations had the same genocidal intention. Ostler discusses Indigenous perception of colonizers as all-encompassing. They knew that destructive violence declined once settlers got their way. Indigenous people were safer when they did not resist. Tecumseh stated that Indigenous people “are threatened with great evil; nothing will pacify the white man but the destruction of the red men... they would even kill our old men, and little ones.” Here, genocide is framed not actually as a means to take land, but rather as genocide for the sake of genocide.• Ostler describes Thomas Jefferson's “Indian policy:” three options for colonization. Plan A- Limited deportation and assimilation. If plan A didn't work, then, plan B- forcible deportations. Then, if that didn't work, plan C- “murderous cleansing.” Jeffersons policy also outlines an option for “physical killing of resistance Indians.” Ostler also provides another quote from Jefferson: “Should Indians ever go to war, we shall destroy all of them.”• US colonial strategies were deeply embedded with coercion and the exploitation of Indigenous agency and choice. Indigenous nations saw these policies as very obvious examples of central settler ideologies, which represented who they were as collective.</div>	<div data-bbox="1006 1527 1315 1571" data-label="Section-Header"><h2>Indigenous Survival</h2></div> <div data-bbox="805 1598 1552 3300" data-label="List-Group"><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Along with methods of Indigenous resistance to colonial expansion, Ostler puts emphasis on acknowledging Indigenous survival of settler attempts to exterminate them.• Historically, Indigenous peoples survival of the colonial agenda has been portrayed as something unintentional or passive. Indigenous survival of colonial expansion was, in fact, a result of their longstanding, careful observation of colonial actions, their strategic resistance to those same actions, and their ongoing fight for survival.• In this article, Indigenous survival is framed as a profound triumph that demands acknowledgment.• Through their intricate perception of colonizers and their intentions, Indigenous nations came to know that their very existence was under immense threat. This awareness shaped their reaction and their survival.• Acknowledging Indigenous peoples’ very lives have been at stake for hundreds of years recentres their resilience.• The colonial violence that Indigenous nations endured was catastrophic and targeted. When not trying to ensure their physical elimination, settlers have attempted to ensure their spiritual, political, and cultural elimination. Ostler explains that through discussing all that was attempted to be stripped from Indigenous nations highlights how much they have refused to give up.• The history is ultimately about Indigenous survival and refusal to cede their lands. This refusal was enacted through acts of Indigenous diplomacy and armed resistance.• Indigenous people did not bear the burden of colonial genocide, like many narratives would like to suggest. Alternatively, they fought it and also named it.• Assertion of Indigenous sovereignty has continued even amidst destructive and malevolent settler violence.• This article explains that Indigenous nations are anything but victims of colonial expansion; they are autonomous in the creation of their own identity and resistance to systemic genocide.</div>

Bibliography

Ostler, Jeffrey. “ ‘To Extirpate The Indians’: An Indigenous Consciousness of Genocide in the Ohio Valley and Lower Great Lakes, 1750s-1810.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 72, No. 4, (October 2015): 587-622