

Since 1492: A History of Atrocities and Struggle

Cynthia Peters

BEFORE YOU READ: What happened in 1492? What does “atrocious” mean? What could help you prepare to read this article?

Historians believe that before 1492, there were more than 10 million Indigenous people living north of Mexico. By 1900, most of them had been killed; less than 300,000 Indigenous people were still alive.¹ White European invaders killed Indigenous people in various ways:

- They spread diseases like smallpox, measles, and influenza.
- They had advanced weapons (like guns), and they used them to attack Native people.
- They forced tribes to move away from their land and on to reservations. Many Native people died from starvation or from the cold.²
- They made it hard for Native people to follow their traditions. For example, they built railroad tracks through their land, and they killed all the buffalo for sport.³

During the 20th century, the U.S. government continued committing atrocities against Indigenous people. On reservations, Indigenous people were extremely poor. They had poor health care and education. They had high death rates and high infant mortality rates. Apparently, it wasn't enough that so many Native people died. People representing the U.S. government attacked Native culture, languages, and family connections:

- They sterilized Native women against their will.⁴
- They kidnapped children from families and forced them to live in boarding schools, where they were not allowed to speak their language.
- They adopted Native children into white families. Today, in some tribes, one out of four Native children are growing up in white families.⁵



Read the poem on pp. 54-55.

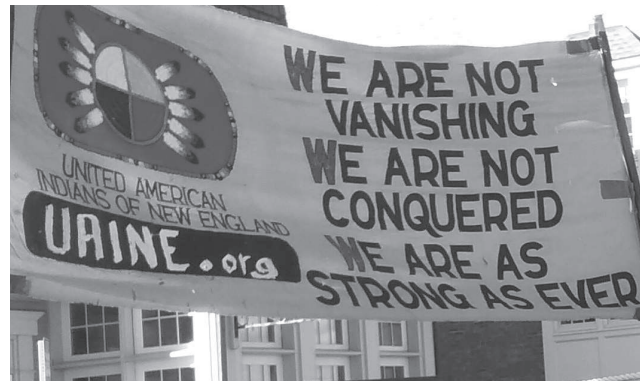


Photo from Day of Mourning in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

- They continue to displace Native people from their lands, and pollute their lands with nuclear waste and oil pipelines.⁶ (See pp. 28-31.)

Despite these atrocities, Native people persist. They are setting up schools to teach Native languages and traditions. They are fighting to protect their lands and water. They are using income from casinos to support their tribes.⁷ They are setting up truth and reconciliation processes (see p. 55), so that there can be some healing from the crimes committed against them. Today, there are 5 million Native Americans.⁸

AFTER YOU READ: In Indigenous culture, it is common to show gratitude to the ancestors. By reading this article, what have you learned about North American Indigenous people's ancestors?

Cynthia Peters is the editor of The Change Agent.

Sources: 1. <worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/american-indian>; 2. <www.history.com/news/native-americans-genocide-united-states>; 3. <www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/05/the-buffalo-killers/482349>; 4. <www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/543.html>; 5. <www.wgbh.org/news/post/forced-removal-native-american-children-parents-exposed-13-minutes>; 6. <www.zinnedproject.org/materials/native-american-activism-1960s-to-present>; 7. <newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday>, “The myth of Indian casino riches,” 4-19-17; 8. <www.ncai.org/about-tribes/demographics>.