

## Cultural Genocide and the Indian Residential School System in Canada

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This text was commissioned by *Revista Liberación* in Corrientes, Argentina, in order to provide a context for understanding the history of the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada. It was published in Spanish in September, 2021.

<https://www.revistaliberacion.com.ar/nota/el-genocidio-cultural-y-el-sistema-escolar-residencial-en-canada/>

In May 2021, the remains of 215 Indigenous children were found in British Columbia, Canada by Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation at the site of the Indian Residential School in Kamloops. Despite the shock of the international community and the public in Canada alike, this tragic discovery should not have come as a surprise. For over a century, the federal government forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families, homes, and communities, and placed them in institutions - Indian Residential Schools - whose purpose was to dismantle their cultural identity and assimilate them into the Euro-Christian culture that dominates Canadian society to this day. The deaths of thousands of Indigenous children, many whose remains were never returned to their families, are central to the legacy of Canada's residential school system and colonial history.

The residential school system was a key component of Canada's strategy to permanently destroy the Indigenous social, political and family structures that had existed for thousands of years prior to the arrival of European settlers. Starting in the 1870s, and extending until the 1990s, the Canadian government established and supported institutions whose purpose was to "train" Indigenous children so that they "acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men." These are words stated to Canada's House of Commons in 1883 by Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister. The federal government's policies and actions toward Canada's Indigenous population can best be described as cultural genocide.

In 1920, Parliament amended the *Indian Act*, the primary law governing Canada's control over Indigenous peoples, to make it compulsory for Indigenous children to

attend these schools. The law allowed for “Indian agents,” that is government agents with powers under the *Indian Act*, to enter the homes of Indigenous families who disobeyed the law and seize their children. Parents who refused to hand over their children faced imprisonment. The children were brought to schools far from their communities, where they were indoctrinated in European education and Christian religion, as well as worked in the kitchens and fields until the age of 18. Children were forbidden to speak their own languages, wear their own clothes, or practice their own traditions. The conditions at the school, which the churches managed, were abhorrent. Buildings were poorly maintained, children were fed meagre diets, and inadequate supervision of administrators led to widespread physical and sexual abuse. Tuberculosis and other diseases were rampant. It is estimated that upwards of 6,000 of the 150,000 Indigenous children who attended the schools died or disappeared. For decades, survivors of residential schools and their families have been leading the campaign to expose the truth.

In the 1970s, Indigenous communities in some parts of the country were able to start taking control of these schools through negotiations with the Federal government. But it was a long process to dismantle the residential school system across the country, with the last of the residential schools closing at the end of the 1990s. For decades, Indigenous leaders have brought attention to the atrocities of the residential school system and numerous other injustices perpetrated by the federal and provincial governments, including the violation of treaties, the forced relocation of entire communities, and the denial of rights of Indigenous peoples. In 1990, Phil Fontaine, the head of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, an Indigenous political organization, spoke out about the physical and sexual abuse he had experienced as a student at a residential school. In an interview with CBC, Canada’s national public broadcaster, he called for an inquiry into residential school abuse.

Following pressure and acts of resistance by Indigenous communities across the country, in 1991, the federal government established the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to “investigate and propose solutions to the challenges affecting the

relationship between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government and Canadian society as a whole.” The Commission, led by several Indigenous commissioners from across the country, completed its report in 1996 - a three-thousand-page anthology highlighting the history of injustices and broken promises of the federal government. The chapter on residential schools brought to light the indignity and violence to which tens of thousands of Indigenous children and their families were subjected.

Even with the closure of the last residential schools in the 1990s and the RCAP Final Report, there was still a lack of political will in Canada to address the legacy of residential schools. Yet survivors were taking action in the courts, with numerous sexual and physical abuse claims being filed and class actions being formed. Ultimately these legal challenges led to the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* in 2006, the launch of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2008, and the residential schools apology delivered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008.

Led by Justice Murray Sinclair, the first Indigenous judge in Manitoba and the second in Canada, the TRC spent several years gathering residential school survivors’ testimony from across the country. The TRC released its final report in 2015, concluding that the residential school system amounted to “cultural genocide.” The Report also made 94 Calls to Action to government and civil society, from healthcare to education reform, to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation. The Calls to Action include a section on missing children and burial information. Action 74 calls for “the federal government to work with the churches and Aboriginal community leaders to inform the families of children who died at residential schools of the child’s burial location, and to respond to families’ wishes for appropriate commemoration, ceremonies and markers, and reburial in home communities where requested.” Despite the TRC’s findings and Calls to Action, the federal government has failed to follow through with honouring the Calls to Action and the Canadian public largely continues to be unaware or indifferent to the history and consequences of the colonial oppression endured by Indigenous peoples.

In June 2021, another community, Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan, came forward with the discovery of 751 unmarked graves at the site of the former Marieval Residential School [1898 to 1997]. Like the 215 children found in British Columbia in May, it is suspected that many of these graves are those of children who never returned to their families. Cowessess is leading efforts to identify each burial. Chief Cadmus Delorme said “We always knew that there was graves here”. Families knew lost loved ones were buried at the school or had never returned. As stated by Chief Delorme: “We all must put down our ignorance and accidental racism, of not addressing the truth, that this country had with Indigenous people. We are not asking for pity, but we are asking for understanding.”

There is a moral and ethical obligation for the settler Canadian public to understand and recognize the cultural genocide committed by the federal government and the church. As a settler of Argentinian origin, living on the historical lands of the Robinson Huron Treaty Territory, the Anishinaabe, Batchewana and Garden River First Nations, it is my duty – and the duty of all Canadians – to stand by Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation, Cowessess First Nation, Chief Delorme, Chief Fontaine, Justice Sinclair, and countless others who have come forward, and will continue to come forward.

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