

Canadian capitalism and the subjugation and decimation of the indigenous population

By Janet Browning
23 April 2016

Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life by James Daschuk

James Daschuk, an academic at the University of Regina, has produced a study on the health of Canada's indigenous people up to and including the nineteenth century. *Clearing the Plains* provides a devastating indictment of Canadian capitalism's subjugation and decimation of the Native Indian (First Nations) population on the country's western plains—the modern-day Prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

Daschuk's study, which is based on extensive archival research, is aimed at identifying the roots of the stark health disparity between the current-day indigenous and non-indigenous populations of western Canada. At the beginning of *Clearing the Plains*, Daschuk notes that on average, indigenous Canadians can expect to die between five and eight years earlier than other Canadians. He sets out to confirm that the deliberate economic and cultural marginalization of indigenous people by the Canadian capitalist state is the primary factor impeding improved health outcomes for First Nations people.

The book divides the history of indigenous people's health into two periods:

1. Before 1869, when the spread of “virgin soil epidemics,” such as tuberculosis, smallpox, whooping cough and scarlet fever, constituted a tragic, unforeseen, but largely organic, change driven by the expansion of trade and increased contact with Europeans; and

2. After December 1869, when, with the purchase of the “Hudson Bay lands” by the recently established Dominion of Canada, the Canadian bourgeoisie and its state mounted a concerted drive to impose capitalist relations based on private property on Canada's Great Plains. This led to a systematic policy of marginalizing the indigenous population and forcing them off their land, through violence, chicanery, and the deliberate withholding of food—that is, starvation.

Daschuk's research reveals that in the first period of colonization, indigenous people on the Plains generally enjoyed good health. Indeed, they were observed to be larger than Europeans at the time of initial contact. This was no doubt due to their high protein diet, which was mainly based on the consumption of bison.

European explorers and traders brought smallpox and measles. These and other infectious diseases had a devastating impact because the Native population had no previous exposure to them, hence the term “virgin soil diseases.” As trade spread across the continent, indigenous communities were ravaged by disease, badly disrupting their patterns of life, resulting in food shortages, weakened immune systems, and still greater depopulation.

Daschuk spends the first five chapters of his work dealing with the historical period from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, including the fur wars that commenced in the 1780s, and the subsequent period of the Hudson Bay Company's monopoly over modern-day Western Canada. The remaining four chapters, upon which

this review will concentrate, deal with the period following the 1867 merger of the largest British North American colonies into the Dominion of Canada.

The decline of the fur trade and the relentless expansion of capitalism in the St. Lawrence Valley-Great Lakes region buoyed by Britain's need for foodstuffs, wood and other resources products and by the transfer of impoverished crofters (tenant-farmers) and artisans from Europe to the “New World” pushed colonial settlement and land appropriation ever deeper into the hunting grounds of the indigenous peoples. As in Australasia, the subjugation and dispossession of the Native peoples of North America arose out of the objective logic of capitalist expansion and the incompatibility of capitalist private property and the exploitation of wage-labour with communal forms of property and social organization.

These objective forces found expression in the political leadership of the new Dominion. Daschuk's research shows that Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister and the principal architect of the union of the British North American colonies, headed a regime engaged in a colonizing process, whose logic led to the driving of the Plains Indians from their ancestral lands and their near extermination. In the quarter century following Canada's purchase of “legal title” over the Hudson Bay lands, the Canadian state forcibly subjugated and dispossessed the indigenous population of the Plains so that the Canada Pacific Railway could be built, with the threefold purpose of consolidating the Canadian bourgeoisie's control over the northern tier of North America, opening the Canadian Prairies to commercial agriculture, and providing a market thereby for manufacturers in eastern Canada.

While it is difficult to determine the exact number of Native people who died during this period as the result of Canadian authorities' acts of commission and omission, Daschuk provides several figures that give a sense of the scale of the catastrophe. In 1876, a government official estimated the total indigenous population on the western plains at 26,000. By 1891, it had fallen to 15,000, including a decline of one third during a six-year period beginning in the mid-1880s.

The Treaties and state-sponsored famine

By the mid-1870s, the bison population, upon which Plains Indians had relied for centuries for food and clothing, was in steep decline, and many of the hereditary chiefs had acknowledged that their people would have to shift from a semi-nomadic life as hunter-gatherers to one based on agriculture. Consequently, they petitioned Ottawa for treaties through which they hoped to gain assistance from the Canadian government in transitioning to agriculture. Eager for economic development and fearing armed conflict, Dominion officials saw the treaty process as a good means to strengthen the state, marginalize the Native population, and get unfettered control over prime tracts of land.

Daschuk notes that most of the Cree who attended the Treaty 6 talks at Fort Carlton in the late summer of 1876 recognized the futility of armed resistance to Dominion authority. The Cree successfully negotiated three

innovations in Treaty 6: extra assistance in their conversion to agriculture, relief in the event of famine or pestilence, and a “medicine chest.” The latter provision involved a promise to maintain a chest of basic medical supplies for Native people’s use at the house of the local representative of the Department of Indian Affairs.

Within a year of the signing of Treaty 6, a large-scale famine occurred, which Daschuk characterizes as a “Testament to Dominion indifference.”

In 1877, Treaty 7 was hurriedly negotiated to defuse an increasingly tense situation in Southern Alberta caused by armed conflict just south of the US border. Within two years, the bison were gone, and the indigenous people were resettled onto small, remote reservations that they were forbidden to leave, even to work on private farms as labourers.

At this point, explains Daschuk, Macdonald, seeing his advantage, deliberately withheld food from the hungry and completely dependent population so as to enforce subservience to the Canadian state and compliance with the new capitalist order. If recalcitrant Indians died in the process, so much the better.

As Daschuk observes, “while the Indians were starving, in many cases to death, the authorities withheld food that was available. The famine on the plains was more than the simple Malthusian equation of too many people and too few bison.”

This policy was even more criminal given that, according to Daschuk’s research, Ottawa had been well aware of the impending food crisis. As early as 1874-1875, an internal document predicted the disappearance of the bison within a decade. In May 1878, the lieutenant governor of the Dominion’s territorial government warned the minister of the interior, David Mills, that the government would have to choose one of three options: “help the Indians to farm and raise stock, feed them, or fight them.”

The famine resulted in the sexual exploitation of Native women and children by federal Indian Agents, who exchanged food for sex; created over-crowded living conditions, which resulted in a tuberculosis epidemic in indigenous communities; and led to the death by starvation of many Native people.

“Suffering at Battleford, Saskatchewan, was so pervasive,” writes Daschuk, “that it had become banal. Under the heading ‘Lost and Found’ the *Saskatchewan Herald* ran the following item on 16 December 1878: ‘Found Where the Indians starved to death, about the 1st of October, a white mare. The owner can have the same by proving property and paying expenses’.”

Daschuk goes on to report, “Even the unsympathetic editor of the *Saskatchewan Herald*, P.G. Laurier, was moved by the plight of the hungry: ‘the condition of these Indians is deplorable in the extreme. Accustomed all their lives to a diet consisting largely of animal food, the rations of flour and tea they receive here leave them but one remove from starvation.’ Laurier reported that Dickieson, the acting Indian superintendent in Battleford, had “to ‘deal single-handed with a thousand starving Indians,’ with no meat or any means of requisitioning it from his superiors.”

At Edmonton, writes Daschuk, “Indian Agent James Stewart reported on the crisis: ‘...I have never seen anything like it since my long residence in this country. It was not only the want of buffalo, but everything else seemed to have deserted the country; even fish were scarce. (T)he poor people were naked, and the cold was intense, and remained so during the whole winter; under these circumstances they behaved well, and no raids were made on anything here. They ate many of their horses, and all the dogs were destroyed for food...’”

Reports from other areas show how the distribution of meagre rations was used by government officials as a weapon, with dreadful consequences. A measure of the disastrous results of the government’s actions is the fact that the few First Nations that had not yet entered into a treaty-relationship with the Canadian state enjoyed better health. As

Daschuk notes, “Communities that entered into treaties assumed that the Canadian State would protect them from famine and socioeconomic catastrophe, yet in less than a decade, the ‘protections’ afforded by treaties became the means by which the State subjugated the Treaty Indian population. One measure of the Dominion’s oppression of the indigenous population of the prairies was the explosion of tuberculosis. The Dakota, however, did not succumb to the epidemic in the early 1880s because they were relatively free from the oppressive management of the Department of Indian Affairs and could participate in the commercial economy of the region; in other words, they were free from treaty.”

On top of implementing the federal government’s brutal policies, officials were often corruptly trying to advance their own personal interests. Daschuk cites the case of Edward Dewdney, who served as the lieutenant-governor of the North-West Territories during most of the 1880s. Dewdney had close ties to the Montana-based grain firm I.G. Baker, from which the Canadian government purchased flour to supply the reserves. Daschuk reports, “On 6 November 1883, Dr. F. X. Girard, the Medical Officer for Treaty 7, reported that flour supplied by the (Montana) company was ‘unfit for food’ and had been responsible for many deaths. In 1883 W.W. Gibson, a settler whose land was adjacent to the Piapot Reserve in Saskatchewan, stated that 130 people had died after being given rancid bacon for their work. The chief, Long Lodge, complained to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs that his people could not eat the bacon, supplied by the I. G. Baker company, to which Dewdney replied, ‘The Indians should eat the bacon or die, and be damned to them’.”

According to a federal Liberal MP, Dewdney’s firm stance on the bacon was because “his friend the contractor, who happened to be in a land syndicate with him, had 90,000 pounds of rotting bacon to dispose of.” Another Liberal MP, claimed the Cree who had been confined to the Piapot Reserve were fed rotting meat “bought in Chicago for 1 ½ cents per pound and sold to this government for 19 cents,” and that a share of the profits went to the lieutenant-governor. “Predictably,” Daschuk writes, “the Prime Minister dismissed charges that there was a connection between Dewdney, the consumption of spoiled bacon, and the sudden spike in deaths on the Indian Head reserves.”

The role of the Macdonald Conservative government

Daschuk’s study is principally concerned with the health of Native people, devoting less attention to the discussions taking place within the political establishment at the time. Nonetheless, his account does demonstrate that the political elite, and the Conservatives under Macdonald in particular, saw the indigenous population as a barrier to capitalist expansion in the west. “Macdonald’s plan to starve uncooperative Indians onto reserves and into submission might have been cruel,” says Daschuk, “but it certainly was effective.”

With the return to power of a Macdonald-led Conservative government in 1878 after a five-year Liberal interregnum, there was, explains Daschuk, a new approach to Indian policy. This new approach was bound up with the implementation of the Conservatives’ National Policy, which had as one of its central goals the “opening” of the Prairies to large-scale settlement and capitalist exploitation. “Management of the increasingly serious food situation and Indian affairs generally shifted from a position of ‘relative ignorance’ under the Liberals to one of outright malevolence during the Macdonald regime.” To ensure that the Indians were “pacified” and the western plains ready for the Canadian Pacific Railway and settlement, Macdonald personally took charge, naming himself Superintendent General of Indian Affairs.

Although Daschuk’s research demonstrates that the Canadian state combined the deliberate use of famine as a political weapon with callous criminal indifference, making it directly responsible for a catastrophic drop in the Native population, he refrains from indicting the Canadian

state for genocide.

“This study,” he writes, “has shown that the decline of First Nations’ health was the direct result of economic and cultural suppression. The effects of the state-sponsored attack on indigenous communities that began in the 1880s haunt us as a nation still.” He continues, “Identification of the forces that have held indigenous communities back might provide valuable insights into what is required to bridge the gap between First Nations’ communities and the rest of Canada today.”

This amounts to little more than a vague hope. As Daschuk himself notes, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Third World-type conditions continue to prevail on most reserves. Moreover, the conditions of First Nations people who have migrated to the cities are little better. As in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of Canada’s Native people confront desperate poverty, food insecurity and hunger, inadequate fresh water supplies, high rates of unemployment, and an increased likelihood of falling victim to violent crime.

Canadian capitalism and its state were consolidated through the dispossession and subjugation of the Native people, the seizure of their lands, the destruction of their communal property relations, and, under the “treaty-system,” the shunting of the Native people onto reserves that were denied basic resources and subject to all manner of intrusive state control. This process, as Daschuk graphically illustrates, even if he himself shies away from using the term, involved a genocidal policy toward the Plains Indians.

In the twentieth century, the Canadian state connived with the mining, oil, lumber, and hydro companies to further dispossess the Native population, while sponsoring a system of state-sponsored church-run “residential schools” that systematically abused and humiliated Native children. Last year, the government-established Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) felt compelled to designate the residential school policy a “cultural genocide.”

The oppression of the Native people down to this day has been inextricably bound up with the emergence and expansion of Canadian capitalism. It will only be ended through a movement uniting the working class—Native and non-Native—in struggle against the capitalist social order.

By producing a well-researched book that sheds light on the brutal means by which the Canadian bourgeoisie consolidated its state and the enduring legacy of this crime, Daschuk has contributed to a fuller understanding of an important historical period that remains largely unknown. *Clearing the Plains* deserves a wide audience.

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