

# Residential Schools:: Assimilation or Genocide?

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Robin Collins's informative and comprehensive piece, which first appeared in the Indian Residential School Research Group [newsletter](#), is freely available to all readers.

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## **Residential Schools: Assimilation or Genocide?**

**Robin Collins**

**Indian Residential School Research Group  
Newsletter**

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*St. Paul's Anglican Indian Residential School, southern  
Alberta*

The deliberate destroying of a culture for the benefit of the colonial enterprise is the destruction of a people, whether or not their physical bodies were intended to be destroyed. Does that fit within the legal definition of genocide? Does it matter?

There is plenty of evidence to show that the architects of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system thought their mission was to educate and to elevate their young charges so that they could better accommodate the intruding modern world. This followed the disappearance of First Nations livelihoods which, for example, were based on furs, fishing, trapping and the collapsed buffalo hunt.

Christian denominational schools were thought to be better (and cheaper) than a secular option run directly by the state. Churches would substitute what they saw as civilizing indoctrination and training geared towards agriculture or industry for the First Nations' own "simple Indian mythology" and traditional means of subsistence.

The Anglican, Roman Catholic, United/Methodist and (to a lesser extent) Presbyterian churches had teachers with the training and missionary enthusiasm. And as historian J.R. Miller writes, First Nations were not initially opposed to the new schooling regime, "only to aspects of it that threatened their identity."

Some schools were no doubt brutal places, but not all, as is shown by the experiences of people like Cree playwright Tomson Highway, former Dene Chief Cece Hodgson-McCauley, Senator Len Marchand and Chief Clarence Jules (who was later Chief of the Kamloops band and attended the Kamloops Indian Residential School.)

Marchand has written: "The reader might be expecting me to tell a few horror

stories about physical and sexual abuse at the residential school. But I know of no incidences at KIRS.”

But former Assembly of First Nations leader Phil Fontaine broke the silence when he stated in a CBC interview in 1990, that “In my grade three class... if there were 20 boys, every single one of them...would have experienced what I experienced. They would have experienced some aspect of sexual abuse.”

The churches (at least publicly) shared the view of the Department of Indian Affairs that the primary purpose of the IRS was either integrative (combining of cultures) or assimilative (supplanting one culture with another).

This was not the view of Indigenous groups who emphasized that the schools should only “promote economic development, not cultural assimilation.” And particularly during the early years, conditions within the residential schools were poor, with sub-standard accommodation, food and healthcare, and often delivering unimpressive scholastic results.

Conditions in the schools were, however, sometimes better than reserve conditions, and parents were known to line up to have their children registered. As Brian Giesbrecht writes, “From early in the colonial period, there was a general agreement that European-style education was the best way to help Indigenous people whose lands and way of life had been taken from them [and that] both education and integration into the non-Indigenous culture and society were necessary for Indigenous people to survive.”

By 1948, a Special Joint Committee of Parliament concluded that the schools should be less oppressive, less negligent, and the assimilationist project should evolve into “education for citizenship,” so as to enable students to eventually join the mainstream. From the early 1940s onwards, the schools began to shut down (see the chart, below).

By the 1970s, school administration started to be transferred to band councils and Indian educational committees.

WAS IT GENOCIDE?

*Daily Colonist, November 16, 1907*

Historical events officially termed genocides are quite limited in number: Among them are the Holocaust, Armenians killed by the Ottomans during WWI, the 1930s famine in Ukraine, the Rwanda catastrophe of 1994, and Srebrenica in 1995. Yet the Uyghurs in China, the Darfur civil war, and even the activities of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia do not yet have sufficient international consensus to qualify.

In the Genocide Convention and at the United Nations, the concept is very specific. It involves efforts towards extermination, not only mass murder. The UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect states unequivocally, “[T]here must be a proven intent on the part of perpetrators to physically destroy” a group. “Cultural destruction does not suffice.”

Few dispute the fact that Indian Residential Schools (IRS) in Canada were often harsh, draughty and disease-ridden, nor that Christian religious indoctrination was part of the curriculum. There were instances of criminal sexual abuse, and corporal punishment for children culturally unfamiliar with severe disciplinary measures was a particularly cruel practice.

Many assessments of the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada exist. These include the 1906 report of Chief Health Inspector Dr. Peter Bryce; the Special Joint Committee report to Parliament in 1948; the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (2006); Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s apology on behalf of Canada in 2008; and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (TRCR) released in 2015, followed by the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG 2019).

Another critic of the claim of IRS being genocidal is Douglas Farrow, Professor of Theology and Ethics at McGill University. He points to the claim of John Milloy, author of *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*, that the high mortality rates “were primarily due to the policy of paying churches on a per-capita basis.” This, Farrow underlines, “incentivized over-crowding and the dangerous admission or retention of sick students. It was inexcusable, but it was not genocide.”

## TUBERCULOSIS

One thing that is clear is that death rates from disease (particularly tuberculosis) were far higher in IRS (and higher still on reserves) than in the general population of Canada, but they dropped dramatically — across all populations — once vaccines were discovered and deployed, beginning in 1921.

(Even today, however, long after the closure of the schools, First Nations people living on reserves have a rate of TB that is 40 times higher than the general population.) Tuberculosis is a highly infectious, bacterial disease, and often an indicator of poverty, overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions.

## FROM CULTURAL GENOCIDE TO GENOCIDE

While the TRC Report obliquely refers to physical (or traditional) genocide in its Summary volume, (“Canada did all these things”), it used the term ‘cultural genocide’ throughout, and did so in order to distinguish what happened from physical genocide: “The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this [assimilation] policy, which can best be described as ‘cultural genocide’.”

The phrase was used earlier by former Prime Minister Paul Martin in 2013 and (controversially) also by Beverley McLachlin, while still Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in May of 2015. It is now frequently used. The act of genocide, though, does not extend to ‘cultural genocide.’

Then the MMIWG Report proclaimed that the higher-than-national murder rates for Indigenous women and girls were “caused by state actions and inactions rooted in colonialism and colonial ideologies” and constituted “race, identity and gender-based genocide.”

This change in terminology was not universally supported, certainly not by the late Erna Paris, an expert researcher in the genocide and Holocaust subject area, and a respected advocate for the International Criminal Court.

While Paris accepted the 'cultural genocide' term, she angrily denounced what she called the "gratuitous charge that Canada has committed, and continues to commit, genocide against its Indigenous populations." The Inquiry conclusion "that Canada is a genocidal state," she wrote in the *Globe and Mail*, "lines up with the distortion of language characterizing much of contemporary political discourse." And, she cautioned, whether we get to reconciliation or not will "depend on the tenor" of the words we use.

But following purported discoveries of possible unmarked graves (signals detected by ground-penetrating radar) at the sites of former IRS institutions, initially at Kamloops, British Columbia in May 2021, the national tone changed dramatically.

In the months following the announcement of the 215 graves, the governing council of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) issued its 2021 Canada Day statement, entitled *The History of Violence Against Indigenous Peoples Fully Warrants the Use of the Word 'Genocide'*, claiming: "Settler governments ... have worked, and arguably still work, towards the elimination of indigenous peoples as both a distinct culture and physical group."

## DISAGREEMENTS

There was however a backlash from a group of more than 60 Canadian historians, including such highly-regarded individuals as Margaret MacMillan,

Robert Bothwell. This group, in their Open Letter, rejected CHA's "broad scholarly consensus" that what happened in Canada was genocide. An activist CHA, they decried, was "insulting and dismissing the scholars who have arrived at a different assessment."

One of the most significant signatories of the letter was J.R. Miller, a preeminent scholar of Indian Residential Schools, and not one to shy away from criticism of them. But he rejected any claim that there is evidence of "an intent to destroy [Indigenous peoples], in whole or in part" in Canadian policy. While supportive of the TRC Report overall, he also stated that the TRC's blaming social problems that Indigenous people face today on the schools "looks tenuous at best."

In *From Truth Comes Reconciliation*, a collection of essays assessing the 3,766-page TRC Report, editors Rodney Clifton and Mark DeWolf included authors who felt the TRC rules of evidence fell far short of balanced treatment, let alone stringent legal standards. Oral statements were welcome, but substantiating evidence was not mandatory, and cross-examination was not permitted.

Former Manitoba Judge Brian Giesbrecht (who wants to abolish the Indian Act and all vestiges of a race-based system in Canada) refers to the problematic inclusion of testimony from appointed 'honorary witnesses' who "never witnessed anything, positive or negative about the residential schools." He argues that "unverified and difficult-to-believe claims [...] undermine the credibility of the Commission and its Report."

Most testimony was negative and, unsurprisingly, critical of the school experience. Still, the TRC Report does acknowledge that "much of the discussion of the history of residential schools has overlooked both the positive intent with which many staff members approached their work, and the positive accomplishments of the school system. Although they certainly believed the system was underfunded, [staff] devoted much of their lives to educating and caring for Aboriginal children." [Summary TRCR, page 128.]

A belief that genocide — not just assimilation — is the inevitable consequence of imposing a 'settler-colonial society' on an Indigenous population will conflict with more complex analysis that many credible historians over decades have conducted. The late archaeologist and ethnohistorian Bruce Trigger (who, for his meticulous research, was adopted by a clan of the Wendat [Huron] Confederacy) offered this 1985 evaluation of early Indigenous-European settler relations:

"Settlement in Canada, unlike that in the United States, had not been dominated by violent clashes with native groups over rights to land. The St Lawrence lowlands had been largely stripped of their native inhabitants by epidemics and wars among the Indians themselves prior to European settlement."

Despite clashes, Trigger wrote, “the French treated the Indians who lived within the present borders of Canada as producers of a valued [fur trade] asset...” and, furthermore, “the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which prevented the uncontrolled expansion of settlement, made overt conflict between Indians and Whites minimal.”

## EVIDENCE?

To date, no remains of children have been found at a half dozen residential schools where excavations have taken place, including most recently the dug-out basement of a Manitoba church at the former Pine Creek Residential School.

*Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Roman Catholic Church on the Pine Creek Indian Reserve*

There have been problems accessing some residential school records, many of which were purged between 1936 and 1954, although persistent researchers such as Nina Green have successfully located many “missing” residential school children in documents located in overlooked government and church archives. More disruptive of the narrative, critics Giesbrecht and Flanagan insist that “There is no record of a single student being murdered at a residential school – never mind thousands — in the 113-year history of residential schools. Nor — and this is key — are there any records of Indigenous parents claiming that their children went to residential schools ‘never to be seen again.’” The national ‘mass hysteria’ that resulted from the Kamloops announcement more than two years ago may be subsiding. Some media are now more careful about their headlines (not “mass graves” today nor “remains of 215 children” as the Kamloops Band press release stated, but “possible burials”, “ground disturbances” and “targets of interest.”)

And as Douglas Farrow quotes Chief Sophie Pierre (who attended the St. Eugene’s IRS in Cranbrook, B.C.): “There’s no discovery, we knew it was there, it’s a graveyard. The fact there are graves inside a graveyard shouldn’t be a surprise to anyone.”

## HAZARDS OF TRUTH-TELLING

Many Canadians now know of the cancelling (and firing) of Dr. Frances Widdowson, a scholar of Indigenous policy for more than two decades; the dismissal of Abbotsford, British Columbia teacher Jim McMurtry for insisting that tuberculosis was the primary killer of Indigenous children; and the tragic suicide of Toronto District School Board Principal Richard Bilkszto who questioned the claim that Canada is a “bastion of white supremacy.”

Despite a growing number of claims being challenged, NDP Member of Parliament Leah Gazan in October 2022 organized a unanimous resolution in the House of Commons declaring residential schools an act of genocide.

She has now gone further to equate legitimate challenges to that narrative with “denialism” and therefore a “hate crime” that should be prosecuted. This strategy may not succeed but it would make a column such as this one riskier to publish and therefore harder to find.

Gazan has been joined in her quest by Kimberley Murray, Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools, whose report has called for “the implementation of both civil and criminal sanctions” against “prolific violence” that is said to take place “via e-mail, telephone, social media, op-eds and, at times, through in-person confrontations.”

But when the RCMP’s Kamloops detachment opened a file to investigate the “discovery of 215 children’s remains,” Truth and Reconciliation Commission Chair Murray Sinclair accused the police of “typical heavy-handed[ness]” and of intimidation. The RCMP subsequently withdrew and handed over the investigation to the Kamloops Band (and Chief Rosanne Casimir.)

A *National Post* article tried to absolve the Indigenous leadership of exaggeration or obfuscation and to blame instead “foreign news outlets” and “activists”, but in truth it was Chief Casimir several weeks after the initial Kamloops announcement who put forward a motion claiming that “the mass grave discovered at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School reveals Crown conduct reflecting a pattern of genocide against Indigenous Peoples...” The Assembly of First Nations Chiefs voted in favour of her resolution at the AFN’s Annual General Assembly in July 2021 and reissued it

that December.

And now, in her new book *Doppelganger*, Naomi Klein laments anti-vaxxers' appropriation of orange T-shirts, a symbol of justice for "Indigenous survivors of the genocidal Indian residential-school system."

DO NOT SPECULATE: EXCAVATE!

There remain many unanswered questions. A wide berth has been given to conjecture and personal stories. So far, very few excavations of rumoured burial sites have been undertaken. Some have been blocked or delayed by band leaders who believe investigation would involve "trespassing on sacred ground" and constitute "continued genocide."

Yet, independent forensic excavations should clear up much of the mystery surrounding the burial sites, and in particular the Kamloops residential school accusations. It is expected that remains will still be found in abandoned community cemeteries.

We will all benefit from honest and full disclosure. The silencing of critics, on the other hand, only increases scepticism and suspicion, thus delaying the oft-proclaimed goal of reconciliation.

Robin Collins

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