

The Real First World War

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Europe's "Great War" of 1914-1918 does not deserve to be called the "First World War." That title should go to the first real global conflict, Europe's genocidal invasion of other regions that began in the final decade of the 15th Century. European historians have sought to downplay the ferocity, extent and significance of that earlier conflict by treating it as a diffuse historical process, but if we who were victims accept that view it disables our understanding of everything that has happened since then.

As few Indians are likely to know much about what actually happened, let me recount some salient points.

A decade after Columbus landed on Hispaniola in 1492, its indigenous people were extinct. They had done nothing to deserve that fate; Columbus in a letter to his royal sponsors in Spain said they were "loving, uncovetous people," with "good features and beautiful eyes," who "neither carried weapons nor understood the use of such things." Yet many were tortured to death in a vain attempt to get them to reveal non-existent hoards of gold and others worked to death or driven to suicide. Such gratuitous violence continued as Europeans extended their domains in the "New World."

Many of the smaller tribes followed the Arawak of Hispaniola into extinction while the populations of larger groups fell by as much as 85 percent, victims not only of indiscriminate violence but of induced famines and new diseases to which they had no immunity. The spread of smallpox through blankets distributed free to Native Americans and the wanton slaughter of the great herds of bison on which the "Plains Indians" depended for food, clothing and shelter were the most outrageous cases of genocide. Estimates of the numbers killed range up to 100 million.

In South America, the Conquistadores engaged in a zestful mass murder that has no equivalent to this day. Bartolomeo de las Casas (1484-1566), a Spaniard who went to the New World for fortune but was driven by the atrocities he witnessed to enter the Church, left a vivid description in *Brevissima Relacion de la Destruycion de la Indias* (*Short Report on the Destruction of the Indies*):

"One time the Indians came to meet us, and to receive us with victuals and delicate cheer, and with all entertainment, ten leagues from a great city, and being come at the place they presented us with a great quantity of fish and of bread, and other meat, together with all they could do for us to the uttermost." The Conquistadores put them all to the sword "without any cause whatsoever," more than "three thousand souls, which were set before us, men, women and children," committing "great cruelties that never any man living either have or shall see the like."

"The Christians, with their horses and swords and lances, began to slaughter and practice strange cruelty among them. They penetrated into the country and spared neither children nor the aged, nor pregnant women, nor those in child labor, all of whom they ran through the body and lacerated, as though they were assaulting so many lambs herded in their sheepfold. They made bets as to who would slit a man in two, or cut off his head at one blow: or they opened up his bowels. They tore babes from their mothers' breast by the feet, and dashed their heads against the rocks. Others they seized by the shoulders and threw into the rivers, laughing and joking ... They spitted the bodies of other babes, together with their mothers and all who were before them, on their swords. They made a gallows just high enough for the feet to nearly touch the ground, and by thirteens, in honor and reverence of our Redeemer and the twelve Apostles, they put wood underneath and burned the Indians alive. They wrapped the bodies of others entirely in dry straw, binding them in it and setting fire to it; and so they burned them. They cut off the hands of all they wished to take alive. They generally killed the lords and nobles in the following way. They made wooden gridirons of stakes, bound them upon them, and made a slow fire beneath: thus the victims gave up the spirit by degrees, emitting cries of despair in their torture."

Casas, writing as the Bishop of Chiapas, estimated that just in the Caribbean his compatriots had killed some 15 million Indians, leaving "destroyed and depopulated" the large islands of Cuba, San Juan [Puerto Rico], and Jamaica, and some 30 smaller islands.

In Australia and New Zealand, the killing was less zestful but it was more comprehensive, and there was no Casas to call attention to what happened. The Anglican Church and British authorities looked the other way as settlers in Australia hunted the Aborigines like animals, poisoned their food and water, raped their women and savaged their children, all in a deliberate campaign to reduce the indigenous population. The Aborigine numbered about 750,000 at the end of the 18th Century and about 30,000 a century later; both figures are estimates for they were not included in Australian censuses until 1971.

Australian policies to "protect" and "assimilate" the Aborigines continued the oppression into the second half of the 20th Century. It inflicted prison terms on adults for "crimes" ranging from "cheeky behavior" to "not working" to "calling the Hygiene Officer a big-eyed bastard." Government officials took infants from their parents and placed them in White families or orphanages. That "adoption" policy openly aimed at eliminating the Aborigines as a cultural group, the legal definition of genocide. In the face of mounting international criticism, the government discontinued the program grudgingly in 1970; it was not until 1997 that it noted the negative impact on the victims and their families.

In New Zealand, a country larger than Britain (103,738 sq mi to 94,526 sq miles), the first British settlers in the mid-1800s found a tribal population said to be around 100,000 - almost certainly an underestimate, for the newcomers were soon engaged in a series of "Maori wars" to expropriate tribal land. By 1896 the number of Maoris was down to 42,000.

In Africa and Asia the death tolls were far larger.

The slave trade out of Africa began with the first Portuguese explorations down the African coast in the 14th century and continued into the 19th. By the time it ended, slavers had taken an estimated 25 to 35 million Africans across the Atlantic and killed an equal number during capture and conveyance.

Within Africa too, wherever Europeans settled, they displaced and often enslaved the local

population. The “Orange Free State” established by Belgium’s King Leopold II in the Congo reduced the native population from an estimated 20 million to 8 million. Under the pretext of “civilizing the natives,” his regime established a reign of terror, mandating wild rubber collection quotas for each village and punishing unmet targets by lopping off the arms of workers. Supervisors were required to bring in baskets of limbs to show they were implementing policy rigorously.

In Namibia, the Germans massacred the Herero. In Kenya, the British ran the Kikuyu off the best agricultural land in the country, pushing over a million people into lasting poverty. A movement to reclaim the land in the 1950s resulted in a second displacement as the colonial regime hunted down, tortured and killed over 100,000 “Mau Mau terrorists.”

In South Africa, the British slaughtered the Zulu to get at the diamonds and gold in their land and the Boers (descendents of Dutch settlers) imposed racial segregation on the whole country in 1948, as India’s independence heralded the end of the era of European world domination. The system stayed in place until 1994.

Asia saw the highest death tolls of the colonial era, and as K.M. Panikkar noted in *Asia and Western Dominance* (1959), the violence began with Vasco da Gama. On his second voyage to India, he came upon an unarmed Arab vessel and, “after making the ship empty of goods” he “prohibited anyone from taking out of it any Moor” and then ordered it to be set afire.

A commentator in Portugal justified that as follows: “It is true that there does exist a common right to all to navigate the seas and in Europe we recognize the rights which others hold against us; but the right does not extend beyond Europe, and therefore the Portuguese, as Lords of the Sea, are justified in confiscating the goods of all those who navigate the seas without their permission.”

That “strange and comprehensive claim,” commented Panikkar, was “one which every European nation in its turn held firmly, almost to the end of Western supremacy in Asia. The principle that the doctrines of international law did not apply outside Europe, that what would be barbarism in London or Paris is civilized conduct in Peking, and that European nations had no moral obligations in dealing with Asian peoples, was part of the accepted creed of Europe’s relations with Asia.”

In India, the first of the “man-made famines” under British rule occurred in the decade after the 1757 fall of Nawab Siraj ud Dowlah in Bengal; it killed seven million people, a third of the population. The last famine the British created, also in Bengal, occurred in 1942-1943; it killed between 3 and 4 million. In all, the total of such deaths has been estimated at several hundred million; the Gandhian Dharampal calculated the total number of Indian deaths from all causes under British rule at 500 million.

China was never under colonial rule, but Britain fought two “Opium Wars” in the 19th century to force it to import the drug. By the first decade of the 20th Century a quarter of its population was estimated to be using the drug.

This litany of European depredations in the global South is not a mere scratching at old scars. It is, in fact, essential to understanding the “Great War” of 1914-1918. German disaffection at not having enough colonial “*lebensraum*” (elbow-room) was perhaps the most important factor that drove its competition with Britain that turned into war. In that

sense, it was a direct karmic consequence of the Real First World War.

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