[**Houses of horror**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1628003/houses-of-horror)

[Zarrar Khuhro](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1915/zarrar-khuhro)Published June 7, 2021

The writer is a journalist.

OF all the many genocides that history has witnessed, perhaps the most successful was the one perpetrated on Native Americans, entailing as it did not just the physical elimination of the original inhabitants of North and South America, but also the erasure and commodification of their culture.

Exactly how many died remains a subject of debate, but a recent study estimates that in 1492 the indigenous population of the Ameri­cas was around 60 million. This figure was arrived at by calculating the amount of agricultural land needed to sustain one person and then applying that to the total area far­med in the Americas. By way of comparison, Europe’s population at the time was 70m to 88m.

Once the Europeans reached the Americas the situation changed and data models tell us that by 1600, about 56m Native Americans had died. That means the wholesale elimination of 90 per cent of the American population, and about 10pc of the global population at the time. In absolute terms, this slaughter is second only to that of the European power struggle known as World War II, in which some 80m people died. The scale of this depopulation was such that global cooling took place.

Death came in many forms for the Native Americans, who saw their settlements and civilisations destroyed by murder, slavery and, most of all, disease. Smallpox, measles and the bubonic plague cut a swathe through the natives who, unlike the Europeans, had no immunity to such diseases. Once the colonialists figured this out, smallpox especially was used as a weapon against the natives in what is perhaps the first widespread modern usage of biological warfare.

Death came in many forms for the Native Americans.

Those that survived were herded off to ‘reservations’ far from their ancestral lands to eke out whatever existence they could, and thousands more died from exposure, hunger and exhaustion during these treks.

But it’s not enough to simply murder a people, one must also break them by erasing their very identity so that they can be recast in the mould of their oppressors and made ‘useful’, and so was launched a massive campaign to ‘civilise’ these ‘savages’.

Across North America, native children were forcibly removed from their parents and imprisoned in Indian Residential Schools where they were made to convert to Christianity, wear only Western clothes and were forbidden to speak their native languages. If they were to be caught speaking any language other than English, punishments ranged from beatings to having pins stuck in their tongues. These schools, run by the state and the church, were rife with physical, sexual and psychological abuse and countless children who entered them never came out again. In Canada, this continued until the mid-1970s. Repeated claims of abduction, abuse and murder were ignored.

But truth does not stay buried for long. Recently, a mass grave containing the remains of 215 children, some as young as three years, was discovered on the grounds of what was once the largest such school in Canada, the Kamploops school in British Columbia.

How many more are out there? In 2008, a truth and reconciliation committee was founded to probe these accusations. It concluded that Canada’s abduction and education policy amounted to “cultural genocide”. It estimated that in the over 120-year history of this project, at least 3,200 children had died in these mini-concentration camps for children and countless thousands had been subjected to repeated sexual abuse.

But here’s the catch: the commission was only allowed to investigate 139 of the over 1,300 such schools that existed across Canada. When it asked for funding to probe allegations of mass graves, the government refused

and the commission was wrapped up after presenting its findings in 2015. The commission’s report on Missing Children and Unmarked Burials reads: “The most basic of questions about missing children — Who died? Why did they die? Where are they buried? — have never been addressed or comprehensively documented by the Canadian government.”

And the genocide of the native population, both physical and cultural, continues in other, more subtle ways. Broken and bleeding after centuries of state-sponsored abuse, rates of crime and alcoholism are far higher in indigenous communities than any other ethnic group in Canada. Also consider that while indigenous children make up less than 8pc of Canada’s child population (according to 2016 census data), they make up a staggering 52pc of all children in foster care. The murder and disappearance rate for indigenous women (twice marginalised by their ethnicity and gender) is 12 times that of other women in Canada thanks to entrenched systemic white supremacy and a police force that looks the other way when indigenous women and abducted, raped and murdered. All too often the police themselves are the abusers, a logical outcome when it comes to a state that was founded on genocide. The past isn’t another country; all too often, the past isn’t even past.

*The writer is a journalist.*

**Twitter:** [**@zarrarkhuhro**](https://twitter.com/ZarrarKhuhro)

*Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2021*