From Missions to Massacres:

The Subjugation of California Indians by 3 Colonial Powers

Sarah Griffie – April 2023

Undergraduate Thesis

Author's Note:

What happened to the California natives was a series of unprovoked and brutal atrocities and it is my belief that those of us whose ancestors participated and perpetuated such horrors shall never be free from the burden of their consequences – they can never be undone. We must do all we can to rectify the sins of colonial oppression wherever we find their resulting inequities.

Introduction

The modern state of California is known around the world for many things. It is the epicenter of the entertainment industry, the home of the innovative force that is Silicon Valley, and the world's 8th largest economy.[1] One thing it is increasingly being recognized for is its long and brutal legacy of destruction and the virtual elimination of the native population that called the state home for at least 10,000 years prior to European settlement. Today the indigenous population of California is a mere sliver of what it once was, and the natives who still live there have suffered the irreparable loss of their traditions, cultures, and languages.

The Spanish were the first to explore and colonize California in the mid-18th century. They sought control of

[1] Justin Garosi and Jason Sisney, "California Is the World's Eighth Largest Economy," (California Legislative Analyst's Office, December 3, 2014), https://lao.ca.gov/LAOEconTax/Article/Detail/1.

the state's coastline where they set up a system of Catholic missions intended to convert the natives to the Christian religion and absorb them into the Spanish empire. The missions operated like religious prison camps where natives were forced to perform labor for the padres (mission priests). Native labor built, maintained, and fed the missions under threat of physical violence and thousands died of overwork and disease under the mission system.

When Mexico won its independence from Spain in the 1830s, the new government ousted the padres and granted mission lands to loyal soldiers and relatives of the new leaders. Natives were forced to work for the large landowners in the area, oftentimes under circumstances that were little better than those of slaves in the American South. They toiled on ranches and farms for the wealthy elite in exchange for food and clothing, the bare minimum to keep themselves and their children

alive. When the United States took control of the territory from Mexico less than 30 years later, it would usher in the most brutal and unequivocally destructive period of history for the natives there. Today it is widely accepted that U.S. policies and practices constituted nothing less than intentional genocide of the California Indians.

Neither Spain, Mexico, nor the U.S. can be held solely responsible for the suffering and loss of life experienced by California Indians over the centuries, rather each colonial power built upon the policies implemented by the former in addition to devising new ways to control and eliminate natives. Thus, the subjugation of indigenous Californians evolved over time, from coerced conversion and virtual enslavement of Indians under the Spanish mission system to increasingly genocidal methods employed by Mexico and the US in their attempts to control the natives, eliminate their

resistance and, perhaps most importantly, claims to their land.

Views on Native California & Colonization

The colonization of the American Southwest, including California, was a long and arduous process, undertaken by three separate colonial powers over the course of several centuries. There have been several interpretations of the events, depending on the time period in which they were written, as well as the nationality of the writers. From the time the initial colonization efforts were undertaken, people have been writing about the circumstances endured by the

native population under their various rulers. Unfortunately, many of the earliest works on the subject were written by the colonizers themselves; the religious officials who managed the nearly two dozen missions dotting the California coastline, and soldiers and settlers who set up forts and pueblos nearby to support the missions. Only a few accounts exist from the perspective of the native peoples themselves, making early accounts heavily weighted in favor of the colonizers.

One of the most common contemporary views of the early Spanish mission system in California is one which focuses on the piety and dedication of the Catholic friars who ran the missions. The cruelty inflicted on the natives at the missions was seen as a sign of the extreme religiosity and dedication of the padres, rather than as a mechanism to subjugate and control the Indian population. Father Junipero Serra, president of the California missions, wrote in 1744 regarding the strict

treatment of natives in the mission, "*a harmony between love and strictness is what characterizes a true father. It is precisely because the father loves him that he teaches him to obey. When he misbehaves, the father scolds and punishes him so that the son can correct his mistakes.*"[2] This view of the treatment of Indian people under the mission system was one of benign paternalism which regarded punishment as a necessary tactic to "correct" natives when they disobeyed any of the padres many rules.

While many contemporaries of the mission system saw the often-cruel treatment of natives as a necessary, albeit undesirable method of controlling native behavior, others who witnessed it were appalled and wrote of it despairingly. One visiting priest who witnessed mission life first-hand wrote that "*the treatment shown to Indians is the most cruel I have ever read in history. For*

[2] Serra Junípero, Writings of Junipero Serra, ed. Antonine Tibesar (Washington, DC: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1955).

the slightest things they receive heavy floggings, are shackled and put in stocks and treated with so much cruelty that they are kept whole days without a drink of water."[3]

The view of native subjugation in early California as being marked by cruelty and barbarism would come to characterize much of the literature in the post-mission era, yet interpretations in the 19th and early 20th centuries were still largely favorable toward colonization and white settlement in California which was seen as both necessary and inevitable. The view of natives as being more unintelligent and prone to laziness and criminality than whites persisted as a matter of course in writings from this period and served to subtly justify their treatment as inferior people. Writing in 1890 about the period of Secularization under a newly independent Mexico, one prominent

[3] Robert F. Heizer, Handbook of North American Indians: Volume 8 - California (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 102.

historian states that the mission Indians "*went through the daily round of toil under fear of punishment and allowed the missionaries to think and act for them in all other matters… they were becoming less and less prepared to maintain an independence in contact with a superior race.*"[4] Historical analyses during this period treated native people as unwitting victims of colonial efforts which they were unable to overcome due to their perceived inferiority compared to their colonizers. This corresponds to the long-held belief of natives as being uncivilized, child-like, and passive actors in the story of California's development.

Beginning in the mid-20th century, historians would reframe Californian Indians as active participants and resistors in the colonization process. More focus was lent to their motives and circumstances in interpreting native reactions to the various modes and systems of

[4] Frank W Blackmar, Spanish Colonization in the Southwest (New York, NY: Johns Hopkins University, 1890), 43.

subjugation inflicted upon them. The intentional destruction of native languages, cultures, and traditions would come to be recognized as cultural genocide. Where previous generations of historians viewed the missionaries as a civilizing force, doing their best to help the natives, many modern historians recognize them as a destructive force responsible for the loss of thousands of Indian lives, languages, and cultures. Both views have persisted into the present day.

One modern historical development in the study of colonial California emphasizes the ways in which native people resisted the destruction of their people and cultures, particularly within the mission system. In the 2004 book *Converting California*, historian James Sandos details numerous ways Indians usurped the authority and aims of the Padres, from seemingly innocuous acts like drawing seditious images, and practicing native religion in secret, to more overt actions like escaping, conspiring,

and carrying out revolts, and even executing priests in some instances.[5] For the modern historian, a focus on colonization in the new world broadly has shifted the focal point from venerating the colonizers to recognition of the supreme injustices perpetuated against the colonized; granting them the status of full and complex people - and participants rather than passive victims in the story of California's complicated and bloody history.

[5] James A Sandos, Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 154.

Early California

Pre-contact California was an incredibly well-populated and linguistically diverse area. It is estimated that around 20 percent of all indigenous North American languages were spoken there prior to colonization.[6] While population numbers are only estimates gleaned from archaeological evidence and early accounts of first contact, it is estimated indigenous Californians likely numbered around 300,000.[7] Most natives in the lower part of the state lived near the coastline and practiced traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyles as the dry climate characteristic of much of California wasn't well suited to agriculture. Native people could gather all the food they needed by hunting, fishing, gathering mussels and

[6] Kent G Lightfoot, Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 34.
[7] Benjamin Madley, An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 23.

other seafood, and collecting wild plants which grew in abundance in the area.[8] Native people in the southern part of the state shared much of their culture and lifestyle in common with other southwestern people like the Pueblo tribes just east of the state, in fact they often moved from summer villages close to the coast to winter homes in the nearby Mohave and Sonoran deserts which lie across the border in what are now the states of Arizona and Nevada. They gathered what was seasonally available, their staple foods being acorns, berries, nuts, roots, and other plants which formed the basis of their diet in addition to hunting and fishing.

The Indians living in the northern part of California shared their culture with many native peoples from the Pacific Northwest coast and in fact had little in common with the Indians of southern California. They lived in dense forests which received ample rainfall, subsisting

[8] Robert F. Heizer, Handbook of North American Indians: Volume 8 - California (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 612.

on a diet largely based on fishing, at which they were experts. Northern tribes living away from the coast also practiced fishing but had to rely more heavily on hunting and gathering than did the coastal peoples.[9] Indians living in northern California were spared the effects of the Spanish mission system as it never extended into their territory. Of course, this does not mean they fared much better than those in the south in the long term.

The first recorded contact between California natives and Europeans occurred in 1542 when a Spanish ship docked in San Diego Bay and came under attack by a group of Kumeyaay warriors. While they had never seen a white man, the local Indians had heard of the brutality being inflicted on tribes to the east and were determined to keep their people safe from the dangerous strangers.[10] Unfortunately for the indigenous

[9] Ibid, 19.
[10] Joel R Hyer, We Are Not Savages: Native Americans in Southern California and the Pala Reservation, 1840-1920 (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 21.

southern Californians, the Spanish staked their claim on the territory, naming it Alta California (meaning Upper California as opposed to Baja – or *Lower* California), though they did not frequently visit or attempt to settle the area for another 225 years.[11]

[11] Alfred Robinson and Boscano Gerónimo, *Life in California During a Residence of Several Years in That Territory* (New York, NY: Wiley & Putnam, 1846), https://archive.org/details/lifeincalifornia03robi, 16.

The Spanish Period (1769-1822)

Beginning in the late 1500s, Spain began building missions in what is now the American Southwest with limited success. Frequent Indian revolts took place at missions in New Mexico and Arizona which eventually led the Spanish to abandon many of them.[12] In the 1760s, Spain became increasingly uncomfortable with British and Russian expansion in the Oregon territory to the north. It was determined that settlements and forts should be established in Alta California to serve as a buffer between New Spain and the other European powers.[13]

[12] Serra Junípero, Writings of Junipero Serra, ed. Antonine Tibesar (Washington, DC: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1955), 64.
[13] James A Sandos, Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 211.

In 1769, the first mission was established in San Diego by Junipero Serra, an exuberant Franciscan missionary who had previously led congregations in nearby Baja California. Serra's party consisted only of himself and a few soldiers.[14] They would require the use of native labor to build their church and prepare the land for cultivation. The mission system was designed to work in a systematic way. Missions were always established close to Indian villages so that the missionaries would have a source of labor and a population to convert to Catholicism. They then set out working to entice the natives to submit to baptism into the Catholic religion using a variety of methods, mostly by offering them food and gifts to signal their good will,

[14] Lisbeth Haas, Saints and Citizens Indigenous Histories of Colonial Missions and Mexican California (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 24.

gaining their trust, and then extolling the benefits that could be obtained by becoming Christians.[15]

Once an Indian person agreed to, and underwent, baptism, they became what the Spaniards called "neophytes", baptized people not yet ready for assimilation into Spanish society. Neophytes were required to live on the mission grounds under the care and control of the missionaries. They were essentially wards of the mission, holding the legal status of minors, or children. Neophytes were strictly controlled by the padres and were expected to hold this subservient status for a period of 10 years, in which time they were expected to learn and adapt to Spanish customs so that they could eventually take their place within the Spanish feudal system as peasants.[16] When their 10 years had

[15] Frank W Blackmar, Spanish Colonization in the Southwest (New York, NY: Johns Hopkins University, 1890), 35.
[16] Harry Thomas Stock, "A Résumé of Christian Missions among the American Indians," The American Journal of Theology 24, no. 3 (1920): pp. 368-385, https://doi.org/10.1086/480135.

passed, the missions were to be handed over to the Christian Indians to function as their church and the missionaries would leave, moving to their next assigned place to found another mission and begin the process once more.[17]

Under Spanish law, the Indians were to maintain their title to the land on which the mission, their future church, sat, as well as all other land they had previously occupied. After 10 years of education in European customs and religion, the padres would leave, and the Indians would carry on with their lives as Spanish citizens. While relatively benign in their intended purpose and operation, the reality of the missions was much different from the expectations set out by the crown. Far from the prying eyes of Spanish authorities, missionaries ruled over their missions and its Indian populations like kings and the system never led to the intended result- self-sufficient

[17] Frank W Blackmar, Spanish Colonization in the Southwest (New York, NY: Johns Hopkins University, 1890), 38.

towns populated and administered by converted natives who had gone through the Hispanicization process in the missions.[18]

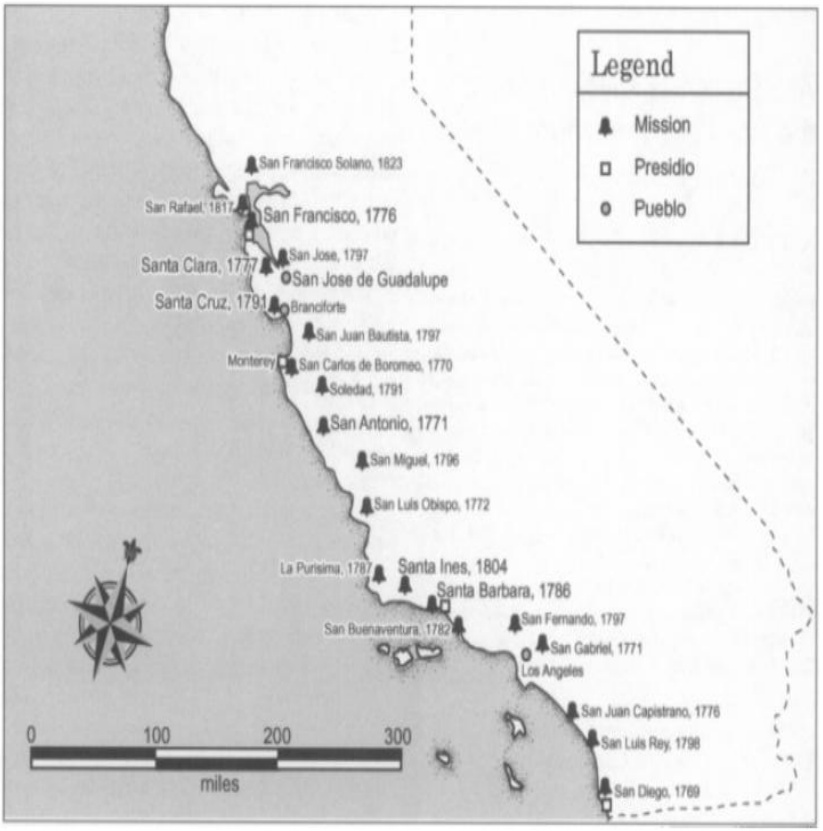

FIGURE 1. Missions, presidios, and pueblos founded during the Spanish and Mexican periods, 1769–1834. Locations discussed in the text are highlighted. (Drawing by Stella D'Oro, 2008.)

One after another, missions were erected along the California coast until they numbered nearly two

[18] Benjamin Madley, "Unholy Traffic in Human Blood and Souls," Pacific Historical Review 83, no. 4 (November 2014): pp. 626-667, https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2014.83.4.626.

dozen, the northernmost of which was just north of San Francisco. This map shows each mission and presidio established by the Spanish during more than half a century in which they occupied the area.[19] Along with the missions, Spain also established several presidios, or military forts, where soldiers were to be stationed for the protection of the mission's padres and neophytes as well as Spanish citizens whom the crown hoped to recruit to settle the area. It was hoped that pueblos (towns) would be established near the missions and presidios, where settlers from across the Spanish empire would come to bolster the population, securing Spain's foothold in the area with the goal of holding back the encroaching foreign powers.[20]

[19] Rebecca Allen, "Alta California Missions and the Pre-1849 Transformation of Coastal Lands," Historical Archaeology 44, no. 3 (2010): p. 70, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03376804, 70.
[20] Rebecca Allen, "Alta California Missions and the Pre-1849 Transformation of Coastal Lands," *Historical Archaeology* 44, no. 3 (2010): p. 70, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03376804, 69.

With the extraordinary commitment required of neophytes to convert and join the missions, one might wonder why any joined at all. Some of them certainly joined out of genuine interest and belief in Christianity- as was the case with Pablo Tac, a Luiseno Indian who was incredibly devoted to Spain and the church. Tac wrote one of the only accounts of mission life from the perspective of a neophyte.[21] Some joined because they were under threat from nearby tribes and hoped they would be safe within the mission walls and with the protection of the soldiers at the presidio nearby.[22] It is likely some of them did not fully understand what would be required of them after they agreed to baptism since the padres and Indians did not speak a common language. With so few accounts left by neophytes, it is impossible to determine what motivated most of the

[21] Pablo Tac, "Conversion of the San Luisenos of Alta California," *The Americas* 9, no. 1 (July 1952): pp. 92-106, https://doi.org/10.2307/977859.
[22] Kent G Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 85.

Indians who joined the missions. What we can know from the mission registers left behind as well as diaries and reports made to officials, is that more than 53,000 Indians were baptized in the missions during the Spanish period which spanned 65 years.[23]

As more missions sprang up, the animals the newcomers brought with them, mostly pigs and cattle, ate many of the indigenous peoples' native foods and trampled others so they could not grow.[24] This damaged the gathering potential for the foods native people traditionally relied on and led many Indians to join missions simply to avoid starvation. As more Indians joined the mission from a single tribe, the more those who remained outside of the missions would have feared for their safety from larger tribes and would have been

[23] Carey MacWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 2010), 28.
[24] Kent G Lightfoot, Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 74.

more likely to join the mission themselves. As Old-World diseases ravaged the Indian population, joining a mission would have seemed increasingly attractive to the survivors in a tribe who in some instances had lost over half of their friends and relatives in one of the many epidemics that swept across California at this time.

Regardless of how the mission system was intended to operate, Alta California was far from the administrative center of New Spain in Mexico City, over 1500 miles away from the southernmost mission in San Diego. This meant there was little oversight of the way the missions and presidios were being run. Accounts of soldiers from the presidios committing violence against nearby Indian tribes were common in colonial California. Letters from the padres to officials in Mexico City complained frequently of soldiers from the presidios raping Indian women and children, both neophytes and

gentiles (unbaptized Indians).[25] The padres worried these attacks would undermine their attempts to convert the natives.[26] Violence committed against the local natives by Spanish soldiers stationed at one of California's 4 presidios was not merely common, it was ubiquitous- and led to increasingly poor relations between the Spanish and native Californians.

Despite the concerns of the padres regarding Spanish soldiers, they themselves were often an impediment to stability and good will for the Spanish and the Catholic church. Accounts of violence, both corporal and sexual, which were perpetrated by padres at the various missions weren't necessarily widespread, but they were more common than one might expect from priests ministering to their flock.[27] These crimes

[25] James A Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 51.
[26] Serra Junípero, Writings of Junipero Serra, ed. Antonine Tibesar (Washington, DC: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1955), 94.
[27] Antonia I. Castañeda, "Sexual Violence in the Politics and Policies of Conquest: Amerindian Women and the Spanish Conquest of Alta California,"

against the neophyte population led to several bloody revolts during the Spanish period. Indians destroyed Spanish missions with such regularity that they began to be built with the characteristic red tile roofs that would come to be strongly associated with mission architecture, whereas they had originally been built with thatch roofs which natives could easily set fire to.[28] In this way the prevalence of Indian revolts would come to be reflected in the very structure of the mission buildings.

In retaliation for their harsh treatment, neophytes not only destroyed missions but sometimes took drastic action against their tormenters, occasionally going so far as to assassinate missionaries. One of the most famous incidents of native reprisal took place at Mission Santa Cruz, where a small group of neophytes devised and

Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones, 2011, pp. 39-55, https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812204346.39, 29.

[28] John G. Douglass and William M. Graves, "New Mexico and the Pimería Alta: A Brief Introduction to the Colonial Period in the American Southwest," pp. 3-46, https://doi.org/10.5876/9781607325741.c001.

carried out a plan to murder Padre Quintana, a particularly cruel man who regularly had disobedient Indians whipped with a specially crafted "cat-of-nine-tails, with short pieces of wire, which at each blow cut [the] buttocks". The story comes from one of the few first-hand accounts we have from a neophyte, a man whose father had participated in the conspiracy.[29]

The transition of native people from gentiles, to neophytes, to members of the *gente de raizon*, the Spanish term for a fully Hispanicized Catholic, was intended to be a smooth one. After baptism and 10 years of education in the missions, the neophytes were to be considered full citizens and the padres would move on, leaving the Indians to administer their own affairs in the missions, which were to become pueblos. In practice, however, padres were reluctant to give up

[29] Edward D. Castillo and Lorenzo Asisara, "The Assassination of Padre Andrés Quintana by the Indians of Mission Santa Cruz in 1812: The Narrative of Lorenzo Asisara," *California History* 68, no. 3 (1989): pp. 116-125, https://doi.org/10.2307/25462397.

their status and authority over the missions. Neither the padres nor the government of New Spain ever deemed any native population prepared to govern themselves. Over the course of more than 60 years in which the California mission system operated, it does not appear a single mission was ever recorded to have been handed over to its Indian population.

Life for neophytes who joined the mission was structured and strenuous. They worked all day at tasks assigned to them by the padres. Natives performed all of the work at the missions, from the building of the church and other buildings to its upkeep and all functions involved in the daily running of the missions. Women and children were not exempt from hard labor and were expected to perform a range of domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, and weaving. Men were instructed in building and brickwork, agriculture and served as vaqueros (cowboys) for the missions' livestock.

The neophytes' days were controlled by the ringing of the mission bells which signaled when to wake, eat, work, and retire to their quarters.[30] The vast majority of neophytes slept in bunkhouses on the mission grounds except in cases where their mission lacked the resources to feed and house them. Indians in these missions were permitted to return to their villages at mealtimes and to sleep at night before waking and reporting back to their missions for work in the morning.[31]

The majority of missions provided food and housing for their Indian population but both were woefully inadequate, even by 18th century standards. Overcrowded, drafty, and frequently infested with vermin, the conditions in the bunkhouses contributed to the spread of disease. Not only did the natives lack immunity to Old World diseases but they would have

[30] Kent G Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 60-61.
[31] Ibid

been rendered even more susceptible to dying from disease due to being overworked and malnourished. Meals in the missions mostly consisted of a type of porridge, or gruel, called *atole* which was served twice a day. For lunch, beans and meat were added to make *pazole*. This was much different from the traditional diets of the natives which consisted of a huge array of wild plants and animals which would have given them a much more balanced diet. Weakened by work and inadequate nutrition, premature death of neophytes was a common occurrence in the missions, especially among infants and young children.[32] Waves of epidemics swept through the missions at various times, reducing the population by more than half in some cases, as happened at Mission San Carlos which experienced two epidemics over the course of 24 years,

[32] Sherburne F Cook and Cesare Marino, "Roman Catholic Missions in California and the Southwest," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, 1st ed., vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), pp. 472-480, 475.

reducing the Indian population from over 800 to less than 400.[33] While the epidemics were not caused intentionally, inhumane conditions in the missions made the neophytes much more susceptible to spreading and dying from disease. From baptisms and deaths recorded in mission registers, it's been determined that in one mission, San Gabriel, 75% of all baptized babies never lived to see their second birthday.[34] The high mortality rate in the missions meant they would have required near-constant recruitment of new converts to maintain the numbers required for running the missions.

Life within the missions was designed to erase the aspects of native culture which Spaniards considered to be uncivilized. Converts were forbidden from practicing their traditions and children were often separated from

[33] Steven W. Hackel, "From Ahogado to Zorrillo: External Causes of Mortality in the California Missions," *The History of the Family* 17, no. 1 (March 23, 2012): pp. 77-104, https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602x.2012.662012, 78.
[34] Heather Valdez Singleton, "Surviving Urbanization: The Gabrieleno, 1850-1928," *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (2004): pp. 49-59, https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.2004.0026.

their families so that they would not learn the language and cultural practices of their forbearers.[35] Today we refer to these practices as cultural genocide, defined as the intentional destruction of a minority group's culture, religion, and identity by the dominant group, usually within the context of colonialism.[36] This form of subjugation has persisted over centuries in California and elsewhere in the Americas, well into the 20th century and was done for the purpose of forcibly assimilating native groups whose societies' cultural and religious practices have long been considered inferior to those of Europeans.

Neophytes in the missions were legally bound to their mission once baptized and were not permitted to leave, or to do anything else without the express permission of

[35] William C. Sturtevant, Robert F. Heizer, and Edward D Castillo, "The Impact of Euro-American Exploration and Settlement," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), pp. 99-127, 102.

[36] Elisa Novic, The Concept of Cultural Genocide: An International Law Perspective (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the missionaries. Those who ran away or took leave without permission were hunted down by church trustees (often natives themselves) or soldiers from the presidios. Punishments for these and other infractions consisted of whippings, extended periods locked in stocks, solitary confinement, or the withholding of food and water, among other more creative punishments devised by the padres.[37]

Despite the often-harsh punishments for banned behavior, native traditions and beliefs were often practiced by neophytes in secret, usually at night and in the privacy of their bunkhouses. Some missionaries punished these acts when they learned of them while others allowed them to persist, confident that the training they were undergoing would overcome the

[37] James A Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 158.

Indians' traditions over time.[38] In the end, it is impossible to know how many cultural practices, native languages, and how much traditional knowledge was forcibly eradicated during the mission era.

The Mexican Period (1821-1846)

[38] Sherburne F Cook and Cesare Marino, "Roman Catholic Missions in California and the Southwest," in *Handbook of North American Indians,* 1st ed., vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), pp. 472-480.

By the early 19th century, the Spanish empire was in decline and a desire for self-governance led Mexicans to fight a war for independence. In 1822, the Mexican Revolution succeeded in ousting the Spanish and taking control of what is today Mexico and the American southwest, including California. The new government granted citizenship to all native people within its domain and set about secularizing the missions. The intent behind secularization was partially due to a distrust in the allegiances of the Catholic missionaries who were suspected of maintaining loyalties to Spain.[39] Mexico stripped the padres of their authority over the mission Indians and indicated their intent to turn mission lands over to the newly freed natives. Mission property was supposed to be parceled into land grants that were to be issued to the Indians living there. This promise failed to

[39] Carlos Salomon, "Secularization in California: Pío Pico at Mission San Luis Rey," *Southern California Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2007): pp. 349-371, https://doi.org/10.2307/41172390, 350.

materialize, however. The missions were quickly looted of anything of value and the land was appropriated by friends and family of the new regime or offered as payment to soldiers who had fought for Mexican independence.[40]

Now landless and having lost the traditional knowledge and skills necessary to live off the land as their ancestors had, most former mission Indians were compelled to work as laborers for wealthy Mexican ranch owners to survive. Oftentimes being paid only in food and scraps of clothing, many were forced to live in circumstances similar to, or even worse than black slaves in the American South at the time.[41] Despite the promises made to the mission Indians by the Mexican government, natives often fared worse under their new rulers than they had under the padres and the Spanish.

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[40] Ibid, 354.
[41] Reséndez Andrés, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 238.

During this period, natives in California still vastly outnumbered Mexicans in the area and their labor was vital to the running of the ranchos and towns where they worked as vaqueros, servants, and agricultural and industrial laborers. However, unlike the padres in the missions, Mexican citizens who "employed" Indians had no obligations toward them and most saw them only as a cheap labor source.[42] Treatment of natives was arguably worse in the Mexican period than it had been under the Spanish due to the lack of a structure designed, at least in theory, to protect and educate natives. Unlike the missionaries, employers of Indians in Mexican California were under no such requirements to teach or provide anything to their Indian laborers.

The newly formed Mexican government, deeply indebted from their fight for independence, was either unable or unwilling to enforce its laws in distant Alta

[42] Ibid, 239.

California. Mexican California became a precarious and dangerous place to live for the native population. Despite laws against slavery and others granting natives full rights as citizens, open slavery of Indians in California was commonplace during this period. [43] Ranch owners who could not secure laborers in the numbers they required via legitimate means would raid nearby Indian villages and kidnap and enslave whomsoever they chose. [44]

Things would become even worse for the native population in 1848 when gold was discovered in California, kicking off the period known as the Gold Rush. Americans flooded into California hoping to strike it rich in the gold fields or squat on land so that they might gain title to it. Perhaps recognizing Mexico's tenuous hold on

[43] Reséndez Andrés, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 250.
[44] Joel R Hyer, *We Are Not Savages: Native Americans in Southern California and the Pala Reservation, 1840-1920* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 34.

the territory, these squatters hoped the American government would soon annex California and grant the land to them by virtue of occupation of such land. This tactic whereby Americans squatted on land in territory that didn't belong to them was successful in many other territories previously and it was one the American government did nothing to dissuade settlers from, and in many cases endorsed it.[45]

The influx of gold hunters created many problems for the Indians living in California. Americans brought with them racist attitudes and a particular contempt for Indian people, seeing them as an impediment to control of the land and resources they felt entitled to as white Americans. The powerful notion of *Manifest Destiny* was one which framed Euro-Americans as the rightful possessors of all the land between the Atlantic and

[45] Witgen, Michael. "A Nation of Settlers: The Early American Republic and the Colonization of the Northwest Territory." The William and Mary Quarterly 76, no. 3 (2019): 391–98.

Pacific oceans, and this idea fueled settlement further and further west, engaging in hostilities with the local indigenous populations. The practice of attempting to eradicate native people in order to gain control over their land and eliminate them as competition was one that was used everywhere Americans settled, and California was no exception.

The American Period (1846 – Present)

After the US annexed the state of Texas in 1845, America and Mexico went to war, a war the Mexican government was ill-equipped to fight with any success. By 1848, America was the clear winner and in exchange for peace, demanded large land concessions from Mexico. Less than 30 years after Mexico wrested control of California from Spain, the Mexican government signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ceding to the US government a vast area amounting to more than half of Mexico's total land holdings, which included the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and California, among others.[46]

With the large influx of American and Chinese people into California, natives were no longer seen as a vital source of labor but were now seen as an impediment to the miners and new immigrants. Racist views of natives as sub-human savages, views commonly held by

[46] National Archives. Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848)

Americans during this time, gave vigilante groups carte blanche to slaughter natives for almost any reason, or no reason at all. Indians, many landless and starving, sometimes resorted to stealing livestock to survive. This created all the pretense needed to muster a group of fighting men together to hunt down the guilty party and execute them. Most often, this simply meant raiding the nearest Indian village, often at night as they slept, and slaughtering everyone living there, including women and children.[47]

One of the first measures adopted by California after achieving statehood was the passage of the *Act for the Government and Protection of Indians*, a set of laws which, in name purported to serve the needs of the native population but in practice allowed white citizens the right to enslave Indians for varying periods of time.

[47] Pratap Chatterjee, "The Gold Rush Legacy: Greed, Pollution and Genocide," Earth Island Institute 13, no. 2 (1998): p. 26, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43882121.

Adult Indians determined to be "vagrant" (not gainfully employed by a white person) could be arrested and fined. If they could not pay the fine, their service as laborers would be auctioned off to the public.[48] The law further stated that any person wishing to "keep" an Indian child they had obtained from his or her relatives could be granted custody of the minor and rights to the "earnings of such minor, until he or she obtain the age of majority" which was eighteen for males and fifteen for females.[49] While the law stated that those wishing to obtain guardianship over an Indian child were required to appear with the child's relatives before a Justice of the Peace and to prove the child had not been illegally obtained, this requirement was often ignored. This provision was amended in 1860 to no longer require the consent of anyone but the person in custody of the

[48] State of California, "California Book of Statues, 1850 Chapter 133: Act for the Government and Protection of Indians," pp. 408-409, § 20.
[49] Ibid, p. 408. § 3.

child. This led to a marked increase in raids on local native villages in search of children to kidnap and indenture under the Act.[50]

California's first governor, Peter Hardeman Burnett was a slave-owner from the South who was not shy about voicing his contempt toward native people.[51] It is unsurprising that one of his first actions as governor of the state was to find a way to enslave the indigenous population in a state where slavery was explicitly outlawed. The governor gave a speech where he declared that a "war of extermination" against California's Indian population was inevitable, though he stopped just short of overtly advocating for such a war, saying "that a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races, until the Indian race

[50] Reséndez Andrés, The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 306.
[51] Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 74.

becomes extinct, must be expected. While we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert".[52] State and local municipalities put bounties on native scalps, for which they would not only pay a set price (price was based on the age and gender of the Indian who was killed), but they also reimbursed the bounty hunters for their time, the cost of their ammunition, and any other costs they had incurred in the hunting down and killing of California Indians. The California government paid millions of dollars to vigilantes in the mid and late 1800s to kill Indian men, women, and children.[53]

The US Army was also employed in the pursuit of Governor Burnett's vision of eliminating natives from

[52] Burnett, Peter. "State of the State Address." The Governor's Gallery. January 6, 1851.
[53] Kimberly Johnston-Dodds, "Early California Laws and Policies Related to California Indians," National Indian Justice Center (California Research Bureau, September 2002), 16.

California. There are numerous accounts of raids on Indian villages and massacres perpetrated by the Army during this period.[54] Unlike the charges of cultural genocide carried out by the Spanish padres, the American treatment of Indians in California clearly meets the standard of genocide, including being declared inevitable by the state government and carried out in the form of bounties and officially endorsed massacres. The legal definition of genocide is "a crime committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, in whole or in part".[55]

In the early 20th century, when it came time to implement the reservation system in California, congressional gridlock, corruption, and the general disapproval of white Californians led to only a few

[54] Benjamin Madley, An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 45.
[55] "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," UN.org Genocide Prevention (United Nations), accessed April 9, 2023, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/.

reservations being established for what remained of the former mission Indian tribes.[56] Today, there are very few organized tribes whose members' ancestors lived in the Spanish missions. Most of their descendants are not legally recognized as Indians or entitled to any of the protections, land, or services provided to recognized tribes. Most of their cultural practices, languages, and traditions have been lost to history and their people scattered and intermixed with the descendants of those who colonized and displaced and replaced their ancestors. One could argue that no other population of natives in the US was so successfully decimated.

Over the course of just a few centuries, California and its indigenous population were as thoroughly and systematically destroyed as any group in history, by one colonial power after another. The Spanish paved the

[56] Joel R Hyer, *We Are Not Savages: Native Americans in Southern California and the Pala Reservation, 1840-1920* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 81.

way for this destruction by introducing diseases that wiped out more Indian lives than they spared and taking from the natives all the things they needed to survive, including their lands, their traditions, and ancient knowledge. Without the skills to survive outside the missions, the neophytes were rendered helpless after secularization.

When the Mexicans came along, they too failed to live up to their stated aspirations of rights and land for the Indian people. Far beyond the 10 years of training, they must have hoped at last they would be able to govern their own lives and land. Instead, Mexico's inability or disinterest in following through on their promises, or enforcing their own laws allowed the state to fall into anarchy where Indians, already at the bottom of the social ladder, suffered the brunt of abuses by settlers. The Americans arrived in California to find a scattered, landless population of natives, weakened by

centuries of disease, enslavement, and colonial oppression, finding them easy targets for an extermination campaign. After so many centuries of mistreatment, they justified eradication as inevitable. With this attitude, Americans felt absolved in destroying any natives who stood in the way of their "destiny". While each colonial power contributed to the eventual demise of the vast majority of California's Indian people, only the actions of the US government rose to the level of something we recognize as genocide. Without the mission system and the anarchy of the Mexican period, the native population may have had a fighting chance in resisting American destruction.

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