What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 8: Extermination of the Aborigines and the Nazi holocaust

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Below we are publishing the eighth part in a 10-part series written by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. *The remaining parts are available at the following links:* Part 1 , Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5, Part 6, Part 7, Part 9 *and* Part 10.

The nineteenth century witnessed a vast transformation in human affairs, including the political organisation of the world. As the historian C. A. Bayly noted: "In 1780, the Chinese Empire and the Ottoman Empire were still powerful, world-class entities, and most of Africa and the Pacific region was ruled by indigenous people. In 1914, by contrast, China and the Ottoman states were on the point of disintegration, and Africa had been brutally subjugated by European governments, commercial firms and mine-owners. Between 1780 and 1914, Europeans had expropriated a vast area of land from indigenous peoples, especially in northern and southern Africa, in North America, central Asia, Siberia, and Australasia." [1]

In the course of this transformation, arguably the greatest in human history, what happened in the Australian colonies—starting with the settlement of Tasmania—provided data for those theories that sought to explain the rise of European capitalism, and its increasing domination of the world, in terms of race.

In 1824 the "Black War" erupted between Tasmania's aboriginal population and the British settlers. It was provoked by the increasing encroachment of the new pastoral economy on Aboriginal tribal territories. Governor Arthur responded by pointing to the need to drive the "black savages" from settled areas. There appeared to be no simple answers, Arthur opined, "unless a war of extirpation" were sanctioned, which he would not authorise unless driven to do so by "absolute and inescapable necessity." In other words, while it was not Arthur's intention to wipe out the Aboriginal population, he would have done so if it were deemed necessary. In the event, it proved not to be. The Black Line—a line of 2,200 men, stretching 120 miles, or half the length of Tasmania—constituted a massive display of force by the army and the settlers against the island's tribal Aborigines. Although it proved unsuccessful in driving them into the southeastern corner of the island, it eventually enabled George Augustus Robinson to arrange the transportation of those who remained to Flinders Island.

If extermination were not the stated aim of colonial policy, it was clearly one of its consequences. In 1830, the Colonial Office warned Arthur that his policies should have neither the avowed or secret objective of exterminating the Aboriginal race. But with the expansion of settlements across southeastern Australia, clashes with local tribes increased and it became clear to James Stephen, under-secretary of the Colonial Office from 1836 to 1847, that just such an extermination was taking place.

Commenting on a dispatch of April 1938 from Governor Gipps, detailing a clash with Aborigines in northern NSW, Stephen wrote: "The causes and consequences of this state of things are alike clear and irremediable nor do I suppose that it is possible to discover any method by which the impending catastrophe, namely the extermination of the Black Race, can long be averted."

The following year, upon receipt of another dispatch from Gipps, Stephen wrote: "The tendency of these collisions with the Blacks is unhappily too clear for doubt. They will ere long cease to be numbered amongst the Races of the Earth. I can imagine no law effective enough to avoid this result ... All this is most deplorable but I fear it is also inevitable. The only chance of saving them from annihilation would consist in teaching them the art of war and supplying them with weapons and munitions—an act of suicidal generosity which of course cannot be practised." Again, in 1841 he wrote: "I am more and more convinced that these evils are irremediable and that the extermination of the whole Race is no very remote event." [2]

Aborigines and the "march of civilisation"

As historian Henry Reynolds has pointed out, while Stephen had never set foot in Australia, he had been associated with the Colonial Office since 1813 and, in his capacity as its permanent head, studied dispatches from its four colonies. He was an astute and measured man, not given to rash judgements. But what he said "over and over again was that the frontier settlers were in the process of exterminating the Aborigines; they were guilty of what, since the 1940s, has been called genocide and that the government was powerless to stop them." [3]

As the colonial settlements expanded, the killing of Aborigines—even the prospect of their total extermination—came to be justified on the grounds that they were an inferior race, destined to give way to a superior one, and eventually to die out.

In his evidence to a Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria in 1858, William Hull explained that "it is the design of providence that the inferior races should pass away before the superior races ... since we have occupied the country, the Aborigines must cease to occupy it." [4]

Aboriginal extinction, as Russell McGregor notes, was held to be a corollary of their primitive state. "A race so undeveloped and immature could not possibly survive in competition with superior and progressive Europeans, any more than the dinosaur could survive in the age of mammals. Having stagnated for untold ages in an evolutionary backwater, the Aboriginals now had the modern world thrust suddenly upon them. And the outcome of that encounter was, to the majority of late nineteenth century scientists, self-evident. James Barnard, vice-president of the Royal Society of Tasmania, opened his paper at the 1890 meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science with the assertion: 'It has become an axiom that, following the law of evolution and survival of the fittest, the inferior races must give place to the highest

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type of man, and that this law is adequate to account for the gradual decline in the numbers of aboriginal inhabitants of a country before the march of civilisation.'" [5]

The "march of civilisation" was far from a peaceful, gradual process. In 1880, the weekly paper, the *Queenslander*, described the activities of the Native Police as follows: "When the police have entered on the scene, then the conflict goes on apace. It is a fitful war of extermination waged upon the blacks, something after the fashion in which other settlers wage war upon noxious wild beasts, the process differing only in so far as the victims, being human, are capable of a wider variety of suffering than brutes. The savages, hunted from their places where they have been accustomed to find food, driven into barren ranges, shot like wild dogs at sight, when and how they can." [6]

In all the social sciences, the doctrines of racialism were accepted as a given. For the famous English economist, Alfred Marshall, writing at the turn of the century, the global domination exercised by the British Empire, and the character of bourgeois rule within Britain itself, resulted from racial superiority.

"There can be no doubt," he wrote, "that this extension of the English race has been a benefit to the world. A check to the growth of the population would do great harm if it affected only the more intelligent races and particularly the more intelligent classes of these races. There does indeed appear some danger of this evil. For instance, if the lower classes of Englishmen multiply more rapidly than those which are morally and physically superior, not only will the population of England deteriorate, but also that part of the population of America and Australia that descends from Englishmen will be less intelligent than it otherwise would be. Again if Englishmen multiply less rapidly than the Chinese, this spiritless race will overrun portions of the earth that otherwise would have been peopled by English vigour." [7]

According to the British eugenist Karl Pearson: "The struggle [between races] means suffering, intense suffering, while it is in progress; but that struggle and suffering have been the stages by which the white man has reached his present stage of development, and they account for the fact that he no longer lives in caves and feeds on roots and nuts. This dependence of progress on the survival of the fitter race, terribly black as it may seem to some of you, gives the struggle for existence its redeeming features; it is the fiery crucible out of which comes the finer metal." One example of "masterful human progress, following an inter-racial struggle" was evident in Australia, where a "lower race" had given way to a "great civilisation." [8]

Such views were being advanced well into the twentieth century. In 1930, the former Inspector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, J.T. Beckett, noted that the "end is in sight, and the next generation will grieve over the extermination of the Australian, as the past generation shed crocodile tears over the annihilation of the Tasmanian." [9]

The policy of "absorption"

While it was widely accepted that Aborigines were a "dying race", government authorities in the 1930s became increasingly concerned by what they saw as the problem of so-called "half-castes". This became one of the central concerns of the 1937 Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities. The Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, Cecil Cook, told the conference that the policy of the Commonwealth was to do everything possible to convert the half-caste into a white citizen. This policy, he declared, should be extended to the Aborigines, for unless "the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black." [10]

While not clearly elaborated, the route to the "ultimate absorption" of the "black population into the white" was as follows: full-bloods would die out, leaving only half castes, who would, eventually, be assimilated into the general, white, population. But for this to occur, the half-castes had to be separated from the rest of the Aboriginal community. Herein lay the origins of the policy of forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities.

The most forceful advocate of the "absorption" policy was the Western Australian Commissioner of Native Affairs, A.O. Neville. "Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were ever any aborigines in Australia?" he asked the 1937 conference.

Neville's opponents denounced his perspective as nothing less than the extinction of the Aboriginal population. In its analysis of the conference, the Association for the Protection of Native Races declared that the "absolute extinction of the native race appears to be the objective of the Commissioner," while its secretary, William Morely, claimed that "Mr Neville's view of absorption really means extinction of the native race of Australia." The vague talk of absorption, he said, meant "progressive extinction." The vice-president of the NSW Labor Council, Tom Wright, a member of the Communist Party of Australia and a prominent critic of the administration of Aboriginal affairs, wrote that it had been "clearly shown" at the conference that "the inclination of those in authority is to aim at the elimination of the aborigines by means of a gradual but planned 'vanishing.'" Absorption, he insisted, was nothing more than a euphemism for extinction. [11]

The roots of the Holocaust

As we noted at the outset, Windschuttle attempts to cover over the real history of violence committed against the Aboriginal people by dismissing any comparisons with the Holocaust. There is no question that the Nazi genocide of the Jews was a unique historical event. But that is not to say that it can be detached from the whole historical development of capitalism, or analysed simply as a "German question." On the contrary, the extermination of European Jewry can only be understood within the framework of the world development of the capitalist system. In the first place, the aggressive foreign policies of the Nazis—above all against "Jewish Bolshevism" in the East—which led to the Final Solution in Poland, represented the continuation of an attempt of the German capitalist class—a latecomer to imperialist expansion—to find its "place in the sun".

The program of Nazi racialism was not some alien import into European bourgeois ideology. Rather, it was the vilest expression of the racial theories that constituted a crucial component of the ideology accompanying the conquest and extermination of "inferior" races throughout the nineteenth century. The intimate links of Nazi ideology with the entire body of Western racial theory were graphically demonstrated in the 1930s, when attempts in Britain to organise a campaign against Nazi doctrines failed—because of lack of agreement over the significance of racial differences. While it was agreed that the Nazis were going too far, the foundations of "racial science" were nevertheless still accepted. [12]

Before the genocide of European Jewry, there was the holocaust of World War I. As Rosa Luxemburg explained, it produced such a shock because "the destructive beasts that have been loosed by capitalist Europe over all other parts of the world have sprung with one awful leap, into the midst of the European nations. ... The 'civilised' world that has stood calmly by when this same imperialism doomed tens of thousands of heroes to destruction, when the desert of the Kalahari shuddered with the insane cry of the thirsty and the rattling breath of the dying, when in Putamayo, within ten years, forty thousand human beings were tortured to death by a band of European industrial robber barons, and the remnants of a whole people were beaten into cripples, when in China an ancient civilisation was delivered into the hands of destruction and anarchy, with fire and slaughter, by the European soldiery, when Persia gasped in the

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noose of the foreign rule of force that closed inexorably about her throat, when in Tripoli the Arabs were mowed down, with fire and swords, under the yoke of capital while their homes were razed to the ground—this civilised world has just begun to know that the fangs of the imperialist beast are deadly, that its breath is frightfulness, that its tearing claws have sunk deeper into the breast of its own mother, European culture." [13]

The same can be said of the Holocaust. The Nazi genocide was unique, but its roots lay in the theory and practice of extermination of colonial peoples, including the Tasmanian Aborigines, that had marked the expansionist drive of all the Western capitalist powers over the previous century and a half.

Notes:

1) C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, p. 2
2) cited in Reynolds, op cit, p. 89
3) Reynolds, op cit, p. 91
4) cited in Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, p. 15
5) McGregor, op cit, p. 48
6) cited in Reynolds, op cit, p. 105
7) cited in Frank Furedi, *The Silent War*, p. 64
8) cited in McGregor, op cit, p. 58
9) cited in McGregor, op cit, p. 124
10) cited in McGregor, op cit, p. 178
11) ibid
12) McGregor, op cit, p. 202
13) Rosa Luxemburg, "The Junius Pamphlet" in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p. 326

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