

Thousands of native children died in Canada's residential schools

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8 March 2013

Recent media reports have noted research showing that at least 3,000 children are now known to have died while attending Canada's aboriginal residential schools. The findings were released last month by Alex Maas, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission researcher managing the Commission's Missing Children Project. Maas claims that the results are part of the first systematic search of government, school and other records, and provide primary documentation identifying deaths, when they occurred, and the circumstances.

For over a century, a system of residential schools operated in Canada under financial and administrative arrangements between the Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and United churches. In all, over 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children passed through more than 130 residential schools in virtually every part of Canada. An estimated 70,000 to 80,000 former students of residential schools are alive today.

The Canadian government established this system in the 19th century, with the first schools opening in the late 1870s. Funded by the Department of Indian Affairs, and run by the churches, these schools were integral in the government's strategy for opening up Canada's vast northwestern territories to European settlement. Under this strategy, Canada's native peoples were herded onto "reserve land", while their children were taken away and placed in residential schools under the so-called "civilizing" influence of the churches and other state agents. The last of these schools closed in 1996.

The schools were based on models taken from youth reformatories and jails. Children were collected from their parents, sometimes at gunpoint by police, and cut off from their families. Once delivered to the schools, they were subjected to a controlled and disciplined environment that combined religious instruction with basic skills training. Living conditions were harsh, with many children physically beaten and sexually abused. Thousands contracted tuberculosis and died while in school custody.

The nature of what happened in these schools has become a bitter contest between native activists and residential school survivors on the one side, and church and state officials on the other. Activists allege murder and genocide, and have made angry demands for investigation, prosecution and compensation. The state for its part has spent tens of millions on a "truth and reconciliation" process in an attempt to avoid liability and bolster its political allies.

Battle lines between these camps first hardened in the 1990s, when activists organized an independent Tribunal into Canadian Indian residential schools, convened under the auspices of the UN-affiliated International Human Rights Association of American Minorities. The tribunal's June 1998 Vancouver hearings documented that every act defined as genocide by the UN Convention of 1948 occurred in Canadian residential schools. The tribunal concluded that Indian residential schools were conceived and operated for more than a century as an enormous system of terror aimed at children, as part of a larger program of ethnic annihilation and land theft.

The testimony supporting these claims was at times shocking. Elder Irene Favel told a 1998 town hall forum: "I went to residential school in Muscowequan from 1944 to 1949, and I had a rough life. I was mistreated in every way. There was a young girl, and she was pregnant from a priest there. And what they did, she had her baby, and they took the baby, and wrapped it up in a nice pink outfit, and they took it downstairs where I was cooking dinner with the nun. And they took the baby into the furnace room, and they threw that little baby in there and burned it alive. All you could hear was this little cry, like 'Uuh!' and that was it. You could smell that flesh cooking."

The year 1998 was also when Colin Tatz's published his discussion paper *Genocide in Australia*. The paper examined the genocidal practices perpetrated against Australian Aborigines, and would be followed by court cases related to the "stolen generations." (See "Genocide in Australia - Report details crimes against Aborigines") These events occurred within the context of Australia's "history wars" over the government's treatment of its Aboriginal peoples. (See "What is at stake in Australia's 'History Wars'?")

By the year 2000, Canadian churches faced more than 10,000 lawsuits from survivors. Claiming that these suits would bankrupt their institutions, the churches successfully lobbied the government to enact legislation limiting the scope of lawsuits and assuming primary liability for residential school damages. Courts in Alberta and the Maritimes subsequently denied survivors the right to sue the churches for violation of their civil rights and for genocide. Later on, judicial decisions across Canada restricted the claims of survivors and prevented them from suing the churches for any issues beyond tort offenses of "physical and sexual abuse".

It was in this context that the largest class action lawsuit in Canada to date, brought on behalf of tens of thousands of survivors

across Canada, culminated in 2007 with the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The Agreement established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission “to contribute to truth, healing and reconciliation.” The commission, whose mandate expires in 2014, was granted \$60 million in funding.

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered to Parliament a statement of apology on behalf of the Government of Canada to survivors of residential schools. In the apology, the prime minister stated that the entire “policy of assimilation” implemented by the system of residential schools “was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.” While the prime minister spoke of this policy as one of “killing the Indian in the child”, the allegations of actual child murder and genocide were neither acknowledged nor addressed.

Both the opposition Liberals and the NDP toed the official line. Opposition Leader Stéphane Dion acknowledged the government’s shared responsibility and complicity in the abuse of thousands of aboriginal children, but said not a word on the more serious allegations. The Bloc Québécois’ Gilles Duceppe and the NDP’s Jack Layton both offered similarly limited apologies.

In short, the Parliamentary apology capped earlier legislative and judicial proceedings and signalled that allegations of murder or genocide were not to form any part of the official history.

Since then, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the media have promoted this official line. The commission, chaired by aboriginal judge Murray Sinclair, produced a report entitled “They Came for the Children.” Both the commission and its report have taken fire for refusing to deal with the more serious allegations. However the commission, in a struggle to maintain its credibility, has in turn blamed the federal government for withholding documents vital to its core mandate. In December 2012, the commission filed an application with Ontario Superior Court asking the court to clarify the government’s obligations in this regard.

The commission also agreed to support the “Missing Children Research Project.” The project originated with the Commission’s Working Group on Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, which noted: “Questions into incidents of death and disappearance in the residential schools were raised publically in early 2007, although survivors and their supporters have been concerned with these issues for many years.”

Project manager Alex Maas’ preliminary findings on the deaths of 3,000 children were reported in February. They were quickly disputed by native organizations, however. For instance, Maas’ report claimed 222 children died in the entire Northwest Territories. However, at just one territorial residential school location at Fort Providence, there are 300 children buried in a single common grave.

Maas’ research attributed many of the residential school deaths to tuberculosis. Media reports have claimed that the deaths were often due to institutional ignorance of the disease’s prevention and treatment. A February 18 CBC report, for example, noted: “For decades starting in about 1910, tuberculosis was a consistent killer—in part because of widespread ignorance over how diseases were spread.” The statement, however, is incorrect: people at that time knew quite well how tuberculosis was spread.

For instance, according to the Lung Association, the “Sanatorium Age” in Canada began in 1896. The sanatorium was designed to treat the disease by the “demonstrated value of rest, fresh air, good nutrition and isolation to prevent the spread of infection.” This was the exact opposite of how residential schools operated, in which sick children were routinely mixed with the healthy in atrocious living conditions. The fatal results were both foreseeable and preventable.

These practices were so obviously contrary to TB treatment as to attract contemporary concern. In 1907 Dr. Peter Bryce, chief medical officer for the federal Department of Indian Affairs, wrote to Deputy Superintendent for Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell: “I believe the conditions are being deliberately created in our Indian boarding schools to spread infectious diseases. The death rate often exceeds 50 percent. This is a national crime.”

Bryce went on to write a book published in 1922 titled *The Story of A National Crime: Being a Record of the Health Conditions of the Indians of Canada from 1904 to 1921*. In this book Bryce cited evidence that in every school he inspected staff regularly and deliberately housed healthy children with those sick and dying of tuberculosis, then denied treatment and care to all of them. Bryce also claimed that school staff and their church employers regularly concealed or distorted the enormous death rate and the cause of death of so many children.

The commission and the mainstream media continue to evade issues of knowledge and intent, which inevitably lead to questions of state and church policy, and finally to genocide. Tellingly, and perhaps chillingly, the article brushes up against all of these questions with Maas’ quote that “student deaths were so much part of the system, architectural plans for many schools included cemeteries that were laid out in advance of the building.”

Tuberculosis continues to infect and kill Canada’s native peoples at an alarming rate. According to Health Canada, the country’s aboriginal populations are disproportionately affected by TB, a disease fuelled by social factors like overcrowding and poverty—conditions rife on many native reserves.



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