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AN AMERICAN  
**GENOCIDE**

The United States and the  
California Indian Catastrophe

**BENJAMIN MADLEY**

"Commanding. . . . No reader of his book can seriously contend that what happened in California doesn't meet the current definition of 'genocide.'"

Richard White, Stanford University, *The Nation*

# AN AMERICAN GENOCIDE



*The United States and the California  
Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873*



Benjamin Madley

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Spanish and Mexican officials knew of this trend and its relentless death toll because Franciscans carefully recorded baptisms and mortalities. For example in 1774, Serra reported that “within a few days, eleven little babies of this mission, one after the other, took their flight to heaven. . . . A number of adults went also: some we baptized just before dying; others had been baptized before.” Despite high mortality rates, authorities maintained and expanded the mission system for decades, thus facilitating and tolerating the mass death of tens of thousands of incarcerated California Indian civilians. By 1833, Franciscans had baptized 81,586 California Indians and buried some 62,600. Harsher hit were the indigenous peoples of the coastal zone between the San Diego area and the region north of San Francisco Bay. In 1769, perhaps 72,000 California Indians lived in this area. By 1830, their numbers had plunged. In total, if 30,000 Indians populated California in 1769, an estimated 245,000 California Indians were alive in 1830. Whether or not this constituted genocide is a hotly debated topic and deserves a separate, detailed study of its own.<sup>39</sup>

On a much smaller scale, Russians also colonized and coerced California Indians beginning in 1812 at Fort Ross Colony on the wave-lashed coast north of San Francisco. In 1958, a Kashaya Pomo man, James Herman, described the Russians’ arrival, based on oral traditions: “Unexpectedly, they detected something white sailing on the water. It later proved to be a boat, but they didn’t know what it was—the Indians hadn’t seen anything like that before. Then it came closer and closer, and unexpectedly it landed, and it proved to be a boat. They turned out to be the undersea people—we Indians named those people that. Thus began Russian colonization in Northern California.”<sup>40</sup>

There, and at nearby ranches, Russian agents sometimes forced Pomo and Miwok Indians to labor for them beginning in the 1830s. According to scholar Richard Steven Street, “Sweeping into interior villages, they rounded up cow rancherías at gunpoint and took hostages—women and children—to ensure that the men would labor diligently.” Such practices replicated the established Russian system of taking hostages to compel first indigenous Siberians and later Native Alaskans to hunt for them. Yet Russians also seized and held California Indians as captive laborers. In 1853, Russian American governor Fyodor Wrangel visited Fort Ross and reported that for some harvests “they forcibly called as many Indians as possible, sometimes up to 150 persons, who for 15 months are occupied without rest in Company field work.” Moreover, “The Factory itself is forced to seek them in the tundras, attack by surprise, tie their hands, and drive them to the settlement like cattle to work: such a party of 75 men, women and children was brought to the settlement during my presence.” The following year, California’s Mexican governor, José Figueroa, visited another Russian



Fort Ross, the southernmost outpost of Russia's North American empire. This Northern California colony was also a site to which the Kashaya Pomo and Miwok people to work as unfree laborers. Dubhaut-Cilly, *Le Vocabulaire russe de la Bodega, à la Côte de la Nouvelle Albion, et de l'établissement de la Bodega, on the coast of New Albion, dépeint par Landais et Martenelle in A. Dubhaut-Cilly, Voyage Autour du Monde. Principalement A la Californie et aux Iles Sandwich, Pendant les Années 1825, 1826, 1827, 1828, et 1829 . . .* (Paris, 1833), frontispiece. Courtesy of Fort Ross Conservancy Photo Archives, Fort Ross, California.

settlement how Russians “were using, for labor . . . some Indians from the Kashaya Pomo and Miwok who they brought usually by force.” Although Russian colonialists—initially with few exceptions—did employ forced labor, it did not approach the mass death of Spanish and California Indians in California. Still, it did reinforce the dehumanizing practices toward California Indian people on which others later seem

to have drawn. Missionaries emancipated mission Indians, many indigenous Californians found themselves bound into new forms of unfree labor under Mexican rule. Mexico outlawed slavery throughout its possessions in 1829, but the practice of using unfree California Indian labor proved difficult to enforce given the dependence of missionaries and various forms of Indian servitude. Anglo-Americans and Mexicans in California demanded laborers to work on their farms, using their cattle, and staff their homes and businesses. Yet Mexican authorities suffered from a persistent non-Indian labor shortage. In the 1840s, when labor demands turned to California's large Indian population. As

Hurtado has noted, "In the 1840s Indians were practically the sole source of agricultural labor and whites used every possible means to obtain their services. Slavery, debt peonage, and wage labor all had a place in Mexican and Anglo California." Many Californians operated their vast ranchos almost entirely without Indian labor, much of it coerced. According to Native American studies scholar Edward Castillo, by 1840 there were perhaps a dozen large "feudal establishments, each with 20 to several hundred Indians, in all perhaps as many as 4,000." Contemporary sources sometimes described these workers as slaves. For example, in 1844, rancher Pierson B. Reading—who had spent thirteen years in Mississippi and Louisiana—wrote that "the Indians of California make an obedient and humble slaves as the negroes in the south, for a mere trifle we can secure their services for life." Some Californians obtained such laborers at part, by force. Two years later, at "Hopitse-wah, or 'Sacred Town,' a Pomo Indian village on the west shore of Clear Lake, the chief Hallowney told US Navy lieutenant Joseph Warren Revere, "as if he were spitting some fiery substance from his mouth [that] the Californians . . . hunt us down and steal our children from us to enslave them."<sup>42</sup>

Mexican Californians inherited the missions' deeply ingrained racial hierarchy, which placed Indians at the bottom and depended on them for labor. *Rancheros* ensnared some of these Indians in what scholars have defined as "debt peonage," "seigneurialism," or a "paternalism . . . similar to that which bound black slaves to white masters." Thus, multiple forms of California Indian servitude—as well as the profound racism that made the coercion of California Indians ideologically acceptable—existed on the eve of the Mexican-American War. These conditions set local precedents onto which US citizens and administrators then grafted their own racist traditions and unfree labor systems, even as they undid Mexican rule.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to systems of servitude, the United States would inherit a severely depopulated California. The 1830s and early 1840s had brought mass destruction to California Indians as sweeping epidemics killed more than 60,000 California Indian people. In 1833, malaria—with its debilitating fevers, headaches, and death—swept through the Sacramento and San Joaquin river valleys, spreading whining mosquitoes. Many thousands of California Indians inhabited these food-rich regions, and the impact was awful. According to former trapper J.J. Warner, "late in the summer of 1833, we found the valleys depopulated." He explained:

From the head of the Sacramento, to the great bend and slough of the San Joaquin, we did not see more than six or eight live Indians; while large numbers

of their skulls and dead bodies were to be seen under almost every shade tree, and in every valley where the uninhabited and deserted villages had been converted into parks, and on the San Joaquin river, in the immediate neighborhood of the great bend of the river, we saw a large class of villages, which, the preceding year, were the abodes of a number of these Indians, we found not only many graves, but the vestiges of a funeral pyre.

Between 1830 and 1833, Central Valley Indians died in 1833 alone.<sup>44</sup> For many indigenous peoples, from the Arctic to Patagonia, such "virgin epidemics" devastated populations and left survivors in shattered worlds. The Anglo Indian scholar Pablo Tac of Mission San Luis Rey may have been describing the 1833 epidemic when he later wrote: "In Quechla not long ago there were 30,000 souls, with all their neighboring lands. Through a sickness that came to California 2,000 souls died, and 3,000 were left." What Tac did not mention—perhaps because he was writing in Rome as he studied for the priesthood—was that the loss of 40 percent of his people was a result of contact with Spanish soldiers and that the epidemic likely smashed his world by depriving his Indians and their families, relatives, and much of his community's social fabric. Tac's experience was hardly unique.<sup>45</sup>

Other smaller disease outbreaks followed the 1833 epidemic as California Indians joined together to limit into the transpacific trade networks that brought increasing numbers of disease-bearing ships from distant ports. As in other parts of the Americas, smallpox proved both highly contagious and extremely deadly to Native Americans. In 1837, smallpox arrived at Fort Ross—likely from Alaska—killing many Pomo, Wappo, and Nounlaki people, in what is known as the "smallpox epidemic." In 1844, smallpox arrived again, this time from what is now Oregon on a ship crewed by Native Hawaiians. The disfiguring disease—often called "pinta" or "moxing sores"—killed at least eighty-five Indians at Monterey and then spread east to the Miwok people of what is now Amador County. In 1845, an unknown total number of California Indians. In sum, according to the scholar J. J. Warner, "the acute epidemics" of the 1830s killed roughly 60,000 California Indians. . . . The result of endemic disease, armed conflict, and destruction of food supplies in 1830. . . .

Warner also took many California Indian lives under Mexican rule, albeit on a much smaller scale than did disease. In the 1820s, 1830s, and early 1840s, hundreds of California Indians in battles and massacres. . . . For example, in 1830 Lieutenant Juan Ibarra's men killed at least thirty-eight