**THE NATIVE AMERICANS**

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Too often the Indian is associated with the Hair raising ‘cowboys and Indians’ films where the Indians are always portrayed as the ‘baddies’, or they are seen through the idyllic love poems or songs.

The true story of the American Indian is much different. It is one of the most brutal stories of genocide in modern history.

The original, pre-conquest population of North America is estimated as from 10 to 12 million. As many as 280 distinct aboriginal societies existed in North America prior to Columbus. They spoke about 450 distinct languages. The Indian peoples developed great civilizations, most notably those of the Incas and the Aztecs, and they contributed a great deal to world culture and the welfare of the human race: they domesticated corn, potatoes, peanuts, pepper, tomatoes, pumpkins, pineapples, coca, and other vegetables and fruits; they cultivated tobacco, and made discoveries of at least 59 drugs that are use today in medical science.

The year of 1622 marked the beginning of the century-long conflict between the Native Americans and the white settlers. The slogan ‘The good Indian is a dead Indian’ was used for more than 200 years. The motive for the genocide against the native peoples was to dispossess them of their land and resources and to get rid of people who could not be exploited. The means were varied and included not only outright mass extermination, but also slavery, bounty-hunting (scalping for profit), massacre of women and children, the assassination of leaders, death by european-introduced diseases, the forced relocation of peoples. Even the pronouncement in the Declaration of Independence that ‘all men are created equal’ was not true for the Native Americana. They looked upon as savages, as non-persons, not even worth mentioning. The American government forced the Indians to sign treaties that were nothing but enormous land-robbery. They had to depend upon the good will (or lack of it) of the US government. By 1900 the Indians had been reduced to about 250,000. The Civil Rights Act of 1924 theoretically gave the Indians outside the reservations the same rights as any other citizen of the United States. But they were not given any chance to make use of these rights.

In 1953 the US government passed the Relocation Act, giving the Indians the right to dissolve their reservations and to settle in the cities, and the Termination Act, which meant the annulment of all treaties signed between the government and the Indian tribes, and an end to the special status of the Indian. It was declared that the Indians today are subject to the same laws as other citizens. Thus the opportunity was immediately taken to extend civil and criminal law to the Indian reservations. The Indians have become helpless victims of the courts.

While a number of Native American tribes and nations were fully annihilated, some groups managed to survive as ethnic communities, like the 130,000 Navajo, the 72,000 Cherokee, the 60,000 Sioux and the 35,000 Pueblo.

Today there are about 764,000 American Indians. Nearly 40% of them live on reservations. There are approximately 200 of them. The largest is the Navajo Reservation with 70,000 inhabitants. The non-reservation Indians live partly on rural areas near the reservation or in urban communities, where they have been driven by economic necessity To search for a job. There is a sizable Indian population in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Omaha, Minneapolis and Chicago. The social and economic conditions found on reservations are terrible: misery, suffering, graft and corruption are widespread. Most Indian homes are dilapidated, unsanitary and crowded. Many reservations have no running water and the only water supply is ponds, creeks and wells. There is a high death rate for children and a high suicide rate. The average educational level of all Indians is five school years. Even a United States Commission on Civil Rights noted in 1973 that the Indian was the poorest American, the most forgotten and oppressed national minority in the country.

All this at the bottom of the stuggle of the Indians for civil rights. In 1968 the American Indian Movement was founded in Minneapolis. AIM tries to unify all existing Indian organizations and improve life in the Indian ghettos. In 1973 the American Indian movement demanded an examination of the 371 treaties that had been violated by the US government. The Longest Walk from California to Washington, D.C in 1978 was also initiated to bring national attention to the Indians’ problems.

The Indians feel sympathy and solidarity from inside the United States and from abroad.