

NOTE: Steven High, as CHA President, submitted this 'response' to the National Post after it published three pieces that attacked the Canadian Historical Association Council's recognition of the genocide against Indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, the newspaper refused to publish it and instead published an Op-Ed praising a fringe history publication that regularly mocks Indigenous residential school survivors. It was also written for the Journal de Montréal which also published a one-sided piece.

Recognizing Genocide in Canada

By Steven High, President of the Canadian Historical Association

“Our inability, as a society, to recognize this history for what it is, and the ways that it lives on into the present, has served to perpetuate the violence. It is time for us to break this historical cycle. We encourage Canadians to recognize this history for what it is: genocide.”

- [Canadian Historical Association, Canada Day Statement Recognizing the Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, July 1st, 2021](#)

A group of (almost) entirely white, mainly retired, historians and political scientists, with only a few subject specialists among them, have received wide media attention in the *National Post* and the *Journal de Montréal* this past week for condemning the Canadian Historical Association for recognizing the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Only 5 of the 53 signatories are even members of the CHA. That their [open letter](#) was originally published in a fringe publication that regularly mocks Indigenous residential school survivors – going so far as to publish historic photos of smiling children taken by school authorities for promotional purposes with captions such as (and I quote) “[More children forced to smile at gunpoint](#)” – is not flagged as a problem is telling.

It is also telling that these same media outlets failed to cover the open letter penned by Indigenous historians, all active specialists in the history being questioned, and mostly Canada or university research chairs (the most prestigious appointments in our university system):

“The CHA council’s statement is grounded in that recent historic scholarship and is shaped by the time we live in, where the truths about residential schools, and other genocidal policies and practices impacting Indigenous child welfare and health, were designed specifically to eradicate First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people and destroy their Nations. This understanding is being informed by new facts and information

revealed because of new archival and oral history collections. Consequently, different interpretations have emerged. ... The statement explicitly puts forth the position most historians of Indigenous-settler history have argued for the last 30 years.” ([Shekon Neechie Board](#))

The overwhelming response to the Canada Day Statement amongst Canadian historians has been positive. Indeed, if there has been a critique it is that it has taken so long. Scholarly associations around the world regularly issue statements of this kind when appropriate, but to recognize genocide in our own country is a difficult thing. It is far easier to recognize genocide in China. But it is essential that we look on our history critically, asking the hard questions even if the answers are challenging and make many of us feel uncomfortable. A historian’s job is not about comforting the comfortable.

The critique of the Canadian Historical Association’s genocide statement leans heavily on a distinction between “cultural genocide” and “genocide” – a distinction which does not exist in international law. Cultural genocide is genocide. I would invite readers to read our original statement for this definition and how it applies to the long-view of Canadian History.

For a telling example of the latest research, I would point you to an August 2021 article in [Scientific American](#) by Ian Mosby and Erin Millions that speaks to the horrors of Indian Residential Schools and the extent to which the government knew just how deadly they were:

“The goal of Canada’s Indian residential school system, after all, shared that of its U.S. Indian boarding school counterpart: “[Kill the Indian, and save the man.](#)” More than 150,000 children were taken from their homes between 1883 and 1997, often forcibly, and placed in distant boarding schools where the focus was on manual labour, religious instruction and cultural assimilation.”

Yet the open letter getting attention is the one that juxtaposes “activist” (and somehow compromised) historians and “objective” (and therefore true) historians – which is dishonest and only serves to feed the stale old “culture” and “history” wars of the last quarter century.

Historians and the history discipline do not stand apart from politics: all history is political. Indeed, the most political statement in the world is one that insists it is not political. Our Canada Day Statement acknowledges that historians, in the past, have contributed in “lasting and tangible ways to the Canadian refusal to come to grips with this country’s history of colonization and dispossession.” The National Post coverage in recent days confirms this.

We can and must be better than this.

I will end with the recent open letter from Indigenous historians on the Board of Shekon Neechie, as it is an essential point: “this is not merely an interpretive debate limited to the ivory tower. It has very real and significant current implications for our society. If this is a question of “ethics and values” as the open letter purports, we assert that taking up space to

challenge the use of the word genocide while Indigenous communities across the country are raw and grieving, is another example of the blind, callous and unethical conduct that has characterized so much of the research 'on' Indigenous peoples within Canada.”