2 Native American movements in the Americas

Introduction

This chapter deals with the development of Native American movements in the Americas, and focuses in particular on the United States. It will examine the situation of Native American peoples at the end of the Second World War, in the context of colonial rule and the development of the modern states. The chapter will then seek to address why the Native American movements emerged in the 1960s and what their aims and grievances were, before considering how successful the movements were in achieving those aims. Finally, it will look at how far the civil rights of Native Americans changed in the post-war period. The chapter also includes case studies of indigenous peoples in other countries of the Americas.

TIMELINE

1944 National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) formed

1956 Indian Vocational Training Act (1956) passed

1958 Battle of Hayes Pond between Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and Lumbee Indians

1961 National Indian Council (NIC) formed in Canada; National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) formed

1968 American Indian Movement (AIM) formed; Civil Rights Act contains Indian 'Bill of Rights'

1969 **Nov:** Occupation of Alcatraz by Navajo Indians

1970 Publication of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown

1972 AIM leads Trail of Broken Treaties to Washington, DC

1973 Armed confrontation between AIM members and government officials at Wounded Knee

1975 Indian Self-Determination Act passed

1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed

1992 Rigoberta Menchú wins Nobel Peace Prize for work on behalf of Guatemalan Indians

2 Civil Rights and Social Movements in the Americas Post–45

KEY QUESTIONS

- What was the situation of Native American populations in 1945?
- Why did Native American movements emerge in the immediate post-war period?
- What were the goals of the reformers in the Native American movements?
- How did Native Americans seek to affirm their identities during the 1960s?
- To what extent did the civil rights of Native Americans change from the 1960s to the 1980s?

Overview

- US federal policy towards Native Americans was paternalistic through most of the 20th century. There was an expectation that tribes would die out eventually but this gradually faded as the population recovered.
- Native Americans are comprised of discrete tribes who were often unwilling to work together, this made coordination more difficult than in the African American and women's rights movement
- The formation of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in 1944 gave Native Americans a national voice to address the issue of rights for the first time.
- Native Americans faced considerable disadvantages in terms of unemployment, healthcare and education.
- The slow progress of change led to the creation of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) in 1961, which was inspired by the black civil rights movement.
- The American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968, used increasingly radical and media-friendly stunts to put pressure on the federal government, such as the occupation of Alcatraz and the Trail of Broken Treaties.

- By the 1980s, advances had been made in terms of legislation and addressing social problems, but Native Americans were still the most disadvantaged group in US society.
- In other parts of the Americas, indigenous people were similarly disadvantaged. They were more frequently disenfranchised (deprived of the right to vote) than in the US.

2.1 What was the situation of Native American populations in 1945?

Colonisation and modernisation

The indigenous peoples of North and South America suffered heavily at the hands of the European colonists who began arriving after Hernán Cortés's victory over the Aztec Empire in 1519. In the following two centuries over ¾ million Spanish people arrived in Latin America.

The Spanish in the South and British and French in the North brought disease and sought to 'civilise' native people, while native lands were taken for derisory sums, most notably the island of Manhattan for $24 worth of glass beads and cloth. Traditions were disrespected and suppressed, but worse still was the impact of alcohol, which was introduced to the Native Americans by the white settlers. On both continents, indigenous peoples were treated as subhuman.

As the colonial period developed into the agricultural and industrial revolutions, more and more land was needed to house and feed the expanding population. The subsequent impact of these forces of modernisation on indigenous people was even more damaging than the arrival of the Europeans.

Skirmishes between settlers and natives were frequent and were later immortalised in (fictional) cowboy films. Over 50 'wars' were fought in the lands west of the Mississippi in the period from 1823 to 1900. At their conclusion treaties with the natives were signed which purported to recognise certain native rights to lands and fishing areas as well as promises of investment in the needs of the tribes.

In practice these treaties, though legally binding, were rarely honoured, owing to the superiority of settler numbers and forces and the racial and religious prejudices against native people that persisted. These prejudices were reinforced by the concept of Social Darwinism. The idea that certain races (here meaning white Europeans) were superior to others was being hotly debated at the time. Social Darwinism provided a pseudo-scientific justification for anything from ignoring native customs to genocide.

Theory of Knowledge

History and language:

The term 'genocide', meaning the deliberate killing of a large group, especially those connected by nationality, ethnicity or religion, is fraught with difficult connotations. The Second World War genocide of the Jews is widely recognised but other large-scale deaths such as the Armenian 'genocide' of 1915 are disputed. As you work through this chapter consider whether the US government can be seen as having perpetrated a genocide against Native Americans and why the term is problematic.

The ideas of the free market also contributed to the colonisation of Native American lands. The opening and exploitation of new territories was seen as part of a natural progression of capitalism, and more progressive Europeans expected indigenous people to either assimilate or die out.

Railroads and settlements brought displacement, starvation and, in some cases – such as the Trail of Tears following the Indian Removal Act of 1830 – genocide. These genocides were achieved using forced relocation to reservations, 'treaties' that were little more than diktats, and outright warfare and extermination campaigns carried out in both North and South America.

ACTIVITY

Find out more about the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the Trail of Tears. Why does the term 'genocide' apply to events such as the Trail of Tears?

Figure 2.1: A 1911 advertisement promoting the sale of former Native American land which had been taken by the government.

US paternalism and the 1887 Dawes Act

As the European colonists moved west and settled the land the Native Americans were forced off and into government-allocated reservations. Native Americans had no desire to become assimilated into the mainstream of American society. However, the government's attitude towards the Native Americans was guided by paternalism. A paternalistic government is one that interferes with people's lives, against their will, 'for their own good'. In 1887, the US Congress passed the General Allotment Act (also known as the Dawes Act). The aim of the act was to break up native reservation lands in order to 'free' Native Americans to assimilate into the mainstream.

The idea was that the reservations would be divided up among families to give them land of their own. Historian Niall Ferguson calls this idea of the property-owning democracy one of the 'killer apps' (jargon for an exceptional computer application) of Western economic success, but the concept of 'owning' anything was alien to the Native Americans

and unworkable in the often desolate reservation territory. Historian Howard Zinn claims that, in fact, much of this land was taken by white speculators who suspected there might be commercial value in it or under it, and reservations – now reduced in size – remained.

Over time it became clear that the Dawes Act was a disaster. Many Native American families were forced to abandon their barren smallholdings and head to the cities. Their situation was exacerbated during the Great Depression of the 1930s, because their lack of land meant they did not qualify for federal aid as larger-scale farmers did.

The failure of the policies of assimilation and termination (see section 2.2) had a twin outcome. It made Native Americans more determined to retain their traditional culture and way of life as opposed to assimilating to the American norm. It also made them more determined to claim their rights as American citizens. In particular, Native American leaders came to be most concerned with their right to their tribal lands.

Native Americans differed from the other groups discussed in this book in their relative lack of unity. Where other groups could be defined by colour, gender or language, Native Americans resisted homogenous definition and wanted self-determination by tribe rather than as a wider group. To Americans raised on cowboy legends, Native Americans were simply 'Red Indians', but huge differences existed between Crow in the north, Choctaw in the south-east and Navajo in the west. This meant that it would always be difficult for a grassroots group to emerge that could claim to represent them all.

Theory of Knowledge

History and generalisation:

The term 'Red Indians', which grouped the tribes into one homogeneous entity, is a generalisation that is no longer in use. The French novelist Alexandre Dumas famously claimed *'all generalisations are dangerous, even this one'*. Can you think of any dangerous generalisations that are common in the modern world?

Developments in the early 20th century

Some progress in challenging the idea of the helpless native was made by individual Native Americans such as the actor Will Rogers and the ballerina Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief, but even limited progress for others brought its own problems, with few opportunities for work on the reservations. School-educated Native Americans often had to choose between the tribe and the mainstream. This dilemma, along with the associated problems of alcoholism, is addressed in the 1969 novel *House Made of Dawn* by **N. Scott Momaday.**

N. Scott Momaday (b. 1934):

A Kiowa-Cherokee poet and writer, Momaday grew up both in small south-western communities and on reservations. This, along with his Native American father and European American mother, helped him to understand the problems facing young Native Americans. His 1969 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel ***House Made of Dawn*** describes the complex and challenging experiences of young Native Americans in the period following the Second World War and relocation. He continues to write, and was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2007 by President George W. Bush.

The first pan-Indian group to attempt to address this dilemma was formed by 50 professional Native Americans in 1911. The Society of American Indians (SAI) campaigned for better education and health facilities and for civil rights, demands that were repeated nearly 60 years later at Alcatraz (see 2.4, The occupation of Alcatraz, 1969). However, the SAI lacked internal coherence and the financial strength required to mount successful legal challenges. It also suffered from the suspicion and lack of support of the tribes and collapsed within a decade.

Despite this fragmented Native American protest and the failure of the SAI, by 1941 the position of Native Americans had improved as a result of the policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), **John Collier**. Some native lands were restored and the division of tribal lands was prohibited. Nevertheless, the options open to Native Americans were still limited and bleak. Those who sought to assimilate faced prejudice, and those who stayed on the reservations faced poverty.

John Collier (1884–1968):

Collier was a social reformer, bureaucrat and academic who became the commissioner for the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945. He was the driving force behind the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which restored certain rights to Native Americans. Though sometimes seen as paternalistic by Native American leaders, he was a vocal supporter of Native self-determination and director of the National Indian Institute until his death in 1968.

The Second World War

Despite their uneasy relationship with the federal government some 25 000 Native Americans fought in the Second World War, of whom 500 died. The most famous of the Native soldiers were the Navajo code talkers, whose unique language skills proved vital in the war in the Pacific.

These marines created a secret, seemingly unbreakable, code based on the complex Navajo language. A total of 50 000 Native Americans also worked in the defence industries. Although the war did little to help Native Americans in concrete terms, as with African Americans the experience of fighting overseas led to an increased consciousness of rights and a willingness to question the paternalism of the government. It also gave white and black Americans who served with Native Americans an insight into indigenous people.

In 1945, Collier's term as head of the BIA ended. The bureau itself was moved from Washington to Chicago, and its budget was cut. However, the greater educational opportunities that Collier had worked for were beginning to show results, helped by Roosevelt's 1944 GI Bill, which provided college education for Second World War veterans.

There was also an increased number of Native Americans employed in the BIA. These factors combined to make Native Americans less reliant on non-natives to provide the skills needed to assert their rights.

Therefore, by 1945, there had clearly been progress. More Native Americans were educated and working in the professions; voting rights were being enforced; and the formation of the National Congress of

American Indians (NCAI) in 1944 gave indigenous people a national voice.

However, huge problems still existed. The issues of broken treaties had not been addressed, and so land rights were a major issue; young Native Americans struggled with the conflict between traditional and modern ways; and poverty and health problems were rife.

Figure 2.2: Navajo military code talkers using a portable radio set, Solomon Islands, 1943.

ACTIVITY

Draw a two-circle Venn diagram with one circle to represent Native American problems and the other to represent the problems of one of the other groups covered in this book. As you progress through the book, fill in the diagram to show which problems the groups had in common and which were distinct to Native Americans, blacks, young people or women.