

How did assimilation through institutionalization affect the Native American people?

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Plan of Investigation

How did assimilation through institutionalization affect the Native American people? In order to answer this question, the institutionalization of youths must first be contextualized by analyzing the ideologies, instigators, and political policies surrounding the matter. Secondly, the Native American perspective regarding these schools will be examined. Lastly, the effects of boarding schools and missionary schools will be analyzed by examining their repercussions. This investigation analyzes The General Allotment Act and Richard Henry Pratt as proponents of Native American assimilation. Furthermore, The Carlisle Indian Industrial School serves as an example of the process and Charles A. Eastman is an example of the product of these culture-specific boarding schools.

Summary of Evidence

Boarding Schools:

- “The General Allotment Act, passed in 1887, and subsequent legislation had worked to erode the traditional, communal method of tribal landholding in favor of individual ownership on reservations.” (Child, 9)
- “Reformers and politicians who favored the policy of reservation allotment also advanced the concept of placing Indian children in residential schools where they would speak English, learn a vocation, and practice farming.” (Hoxie, 78)
- Richard Henry Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879 as the first off-reservation, federally administered boarding school for Native American youths. (Hoxie, 78)

- “The objective of Carlisle’s curriculum was, in Pratt’s own words, to “kill the Indian and save the man.”” (Hoxie, 101)
- “[Native American students] wore uniforms, their hair was cut, and they were forbidden to speak their own languages. Missionaries also were brought in to teach them Christianity.” (Johansen, 200)
- “Further attempts to break tribal ties included placing children with white families for the summer months...” (Hoxie, 101)
- “[Helen Hunt Jackson] and [Richard Henry Pratt] were two prominent examples of “Indian reformers,” who believed (contrary to a minority of extermination advocates) that “the Indians” could be salvaged from the ruins of conquest only if the assimilated into majority society as individual landowning farmers and urban workers.” (Johansen, 178)
- “Beginning in the nineteenth century, boarding schools played a fundamental role in the programs designed by the U.S. government to foster the assimilation of native peoples into the mainstream of American society.” (Hoxie, 78)
- “...coercion was often used to gather Indian children to the far-away schools. Rations, annuities, and other goods were withheld from parents and guardians who refused to send children to school after a compulsory attendance law for American Indians were passed by Congress in 1891.” (Child, 13)
- “...rural tribal children had to be virtually kidnapped in order to be taken to the alien schools.” (Child, 13)

Native American Perspective:

- “In all troubles between the two races, history tells us that the innocent and faithful Indians have been sufferers.” (Eastman, 117)
- “I thought, as I stood on one side and took a careful observation of the motley gathering [of students], that if I had to look like these boys in order to obtain something of the white man’s learning, it was time for me to rebel.” (Eastman, 22)
- Then, my hard-headed father broke the pause, “Here is one Sioux who will sacrifice everything to win the wisdom of the white man! We have now entered upon this life, and there is no going back.”” (Eastman, 25)
- “Indian families viewed government boarding schools as the only alternative for their children, one of the few opportunities for young people from rural areas to be educated and develop skills for future employment.” (Child, 16)
- “As family life suffered during the early reservation, postallotment, and Great Depression years, traditional methods of absorbing orphaned children into the extended kinship group were not always possible.” (Child, 17)
- “Inflexible boarding-school regulations developed into a source of conflict between parents and school officials.” (Hoxie, 101)
- “Poverty, diaspora, and disease were the combined legacies of dispossession at White Earth and other reservations in the United States. In the boarding school era, tuberculosis replaced smallpox as the largest health threat to Indians.” (Child, 12)
- “The boarding-school setting also proved to be conducive to the spread of disease. Many of the Indian deaths during the great influenza pandemic of 1918, which hit

the Native American population hard, took place in boarding schools.” (Hoxie, 101)

- “Native American parents often charged government boarding schools with ravaging the health of their children.” (Hoxie, 102)
- “Unfortunately, hundreds of Native American children did not survive the boarding school experience.” (Hoxie, 102)
- “The Meriam Report, a major investigation into Indian affairs that was published in 1928, confirmed the complaints Indian families and students had been making for years.” (Hoxie, 102)

Effects:

- The boarding-school concept had many shortcomings, but the institutions are credited with cultivating “Pan-Indianism,” an important part of native identity in the twentieth century” (Hoxie, 80)
- “Countless new alliances, both personal and political, were forged in government boarding schools.” (Hoxie, 80)
- “While fully understanding the Indian’s viewpoint, I have tried to convince him of the sincerity of his white friends, and that conflicts between the two races have been due as much to mutual misunderstandings as to the selfish greed of the white man.” (Eastman, 183)
- By [the 1930’s], inklings of Indian self-determination were surfacing in the making of policies in which Native Americans had at least some voice in plotting their futures.” (Johansen, 201)

- “The Santa Fe Indian School, founded in 1890 to educate children in the Southwest, is operated today by the All Indian Pueblo Council in New Mexico.”
(Hoxie, 80)
- “The North American Indian was the highest type of pagan and uncivilized man. He possessed not only a superb physique but a remarkable mind. But the Indian no longer exists as a natural and free man. Those remnants which now dwell upon the reservation present only a sort of tableau—a fictitious copy of the past.”
(Eastman, V)

Evaluation of Sources

Boarding School Seasons by Brenda J. Child was published in 1995 as the winner of that year’s North American Indian Prose Award through the University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London. The purpose of this book was to examine the multifaceted subject of Native American boarding schools in the year 1900 through 1940. This book’s value lies in its specific evidence and reference to the experiences and perspectives of the Native Americans regarding the boarding schools. Child analyzed letters written by Native Americans during the boarding school era as the bulk of her evidence. The author is currently employed as a professor at the University of Minnesota in the department of American studies. She has received many awards for her writing and is widely recognized for her expertise, specifically, in native culture. This book is limited because of its severe focus on portraying the Ojibwe Indian perspective rather than the Native American perspective as a whole. In addition, Child is herself of Ojibwe descent and might therefore possess a bias.

From the Deep Woods to Civilization was written by Charles A. Eastman, a Sioux Indian. The book was published in 1977 by Nebraska University Press. This book is an

autobiography and its purpose is, therefore, to record and express the life events of Charles A. Eastman. It should be noted that the author was writing to a white audience. This book is valuable because it provides a personal example from a Native American that was taken from his tribe and placed in a missionary school to learn to participate in mainstream American culture. Eastman did in fact become a member of modern society: he attended college and became a doctor. However, this book is limited because sections of his life are left out. Furthermore, Eastman was known to have a temper problem which could result in negative portrayals of men or events that are not necessarily as described. Additionally, because Eastman was a Sioux, it is likely that he identifies with other Native Americans, though he does attempt to see both sides of conflicts between the Native Americans and “the White Man”.

Analysis

In 1887, the General Allotment Act was passed. The act’s outward goal was to divide up reservation land and instead place sections of that land in the ownership of individual Native Americans as seen fit by the U. S. government (Child, 9). This act also shifted the basis of Native American living away from the tribal existence that had been followed for centuries before and therefore, began to uproot the culture and tradition of the past (Child, 9). Many of those in favor of the act were also in support of Indian schools where Native American children were taught English and a trade (Hoxie, 78). This idea was accepted as a general movement towards the assimilation of the Native American; as Richard Pratt put it, “Kill the Indian, save the man” (Hoxie, 101). It is important to note the intension of the instigators behind institutionalization when analyzing the actual effects of these boarding schools. This is because though ideas like Pratt’s may seem harsh today, others were in favor of extermination (Johansen, 178).

Native American children attending these boarding or missionary schools as students were required to, among other things, speak only English, wear uniforms, and, in the case of males, maintain short haircuts (Johansen, 200). Charles Eastman attests to this observation in his autobiography, From the Deep Woods to Civilization. His transforming experience from tribal culture to education and modern U. S. society is documented in this book, providing the reader with personal examples of the assimilation process (Eastman, 22). Many Native American parents wanted to send their children to school to receive a proper education just as Charles Eastman's father did (Eastman, 25) (Child, 16). In addition, it gave some families an option for proper care for their children during the Great Depression and post-allotment years (Child, 17). Therefore, though the boarding schools were looked down upon by some Native Americans, they did, in many cases, provide a safe place for youths.

On the other hand, there existed controversy between Native Americans and the government with respect to these schools. Children were forced to attend far off schools, especially after a compulsory attendance law was passed in 1891 (Child, 13). Brenda Child does well in her book, Boarding School Seasons, with describing the Native American perception and experience of assimilation. She writes about the terrible tolls that were taken on the Native Americans as a result of assimilation. These included extreme poverty and illnesses such as tuberculosis (Child, 12). In addition, the boarding schools themselves became breeding grounds for disease; the schools were especially hard hit during the Influenza pandemic of 1918 (Hoxie, 101). This is important because not only were the Native Americans being forced away from their cultural roots, but they were also becoming poor and ill due, in part, to the assimilation process.

However, the effects of the boarding schools were not all negative. Indeed, it was in part because of these schools that a sense of Pan-Indianism developed: a uniting spirit that all Native Americans could identify with (Hoxie, 80). Still, assimilation took effect to some degree everywhere, diminishing the tribal nature of the Indian and confining him to the few reservations that were saved from allotment or demanding a new role for him in modern society (Eastman, V). Later, around the 1930's, however, the first peek at self determination for Native Americans made its appearance (Johansen, 201). Still today, though under different administration, the Santa Fe Indian School remains in operation (Hoxie, 80).

Conclusion

The U.S. government's attempt at assimilation through the institutionalization of Native American youths greatly affected the role these people would have in the future of American society. Through the General allotment Act and the Compulsory Attendance Act, many aspects of the Native American culture were lost. The boarding and missionary schools were not always welcome in the Native American communities because of the problems they caused for the continuance of tribal culture, however, the schools did provide care for orphans and children whose parents could not afford to support their family. Furthermore, the schools provided the perfect cultural conglomeration for the beginnings of the concept of "Pan-Indianism" which gave all Native Americans a common identity. This unity lead to eventual signs of self determination that appeared during the 1930's spreading the way for the future preservation of the Native American culture if only on a small scale.

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