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Biological Warfare in North America and Australia

Smallpox and Colonial Violence

Discourses

A specter is haunting the history of Australia's European colonialization, the specter of biological warfare against Aboriginal Australians in New South Wales in 1788/1789. Several historians have either declared it a myth or have dismissed the idea because of the apparent lack of hard, i.e., written evidence. Only a few historians embrace the idea of biocide by smallpox.¹ New evidence suggests that those who argue that the British military engaged in genocidal colonial biowarfare are justified. In this contribution, I will discuss the discourses that accompanied, prepared, and justified the genocidal activities of white settlers. I will then examine Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians' willful infection with the variola virus by applying criminologists' definitions of sufficient evidence. Finally, I will show how smallpox has been used as a biological weapon in North America before turning to Australia.

Before discussing this evidence, one should raise broader questions that define the event horizon of such an intentional smallpox infection. Which discourses about Indigenous populations were common in colonial societies of the late 18th and early 19th centuries? The practices of killing and infecting, stealing land from, and raping Indigenous people required rationalization because they took place outside of the accustomed legal and religious order. In any case, the killing of Indigenous people was punished only in exceptional cases. Instead, the murder and robbery of Indigenous people lay within that realm of the "state of exception", constitutive for determining state sovereignty. Aboriginal Australians thus did not belong to the citizenry and had nothing except their corporeality: In Giorgio Agamben's terminology, they had become "homines sacri", the people who possess nothing but their bare life who may be killed with impunity.²

Thus, the abject descriptions of Indigenous Australians and their alleged depravity direct our gaze at their corporeality as a site of exclusion. What was the nature of these justifications that accompanied the practice of killing Indigenous populations and taking their land? There have been colonial discourses in North America and Australia that structured the knowledge and power of disposition

- 1 See Ann M. Becker: *Smallpox at the Siege of Boston*; Judy Campbell: *Invisible Invaders*; Elizabeth A. Fenn: *Biological Warfare in Eighteenth-Century North America*; Elizabeth A. Fenn: *Pox Americana*; Norbert Finzsch: *Die Frühgeschichte der biologischen Kriegsführung im 18. Jahrhundert*; David R. Petriello: *Bacteria, Bayonets*; Philip Ranlet: *The British, Slaves, and Smallpox in Revolutionary Virginia*; James C. Riley: *Smallpox and American Indians Revisited*; Christopher Warren: *Could First Fleet Smallpox Infect Aborigines*.
- 2 Giorgio Agamben: *The Omnibus Homo sacer*, pp. 10 f.

over Indigenous populations. I am not suggesting here that there was merely one discourse of exclusion. Instead, the discourses were multivocal. Discourses, especially toward the end of the 18th century, were characterized by “murmuring”.³ I will focus here on the voices of “primitivism” or “savagization”,⁴ which were paradigmatic in colonial discourse until the invention of scientific racism in the second half of the 19th century.⁵ George L. Mosse has given a simple but lucid definition: “Racism was a visual ideology based upon stereotypes. That was one of its main strengths”.⁶ However, racism is more than just an ideology as “necessary false consciousness”. There is more than just one form of racism – it has a plural.⁷

Racisms differ, among other things, in that they are directed outward or inward from society, invoke religious or racial constructs, or are directed against indigenous populations or affect enslaved or immigrant lower classes. They also differ according to their cultural environment and its history.⁸

It is necessary to add that racisms are also social practices reiterated in discourses and dispositives. Michel Foucault notes that these practices “systematically form the objects of which they speak”.⁹ Racisms involve promoting exclusions, or the actual exclusion of people due to their assumed membership in racial groups, independent of their definition. Racists explicitly or implicitly ascribe ‘racial’ characteristics of others that ostensibly differ from their group. These ascriptions do not merely propose ‘racial’ differences; they must also assign ‘racial’ preferences or “explain” ‘racial’ differences as natural, inevitable, and therefore unchangeable, or express desired, intended, or actual inclusions or exclusions, entitlements or restrictions.

In the Australian case, a visual ideology and a social practice built on stereotypes and discourses – the appearance and aesthetics of people – would justify exclusion, violence, the taking of the land, and the killing of Aboriginal Australians. This aesthetic racism had nothing to do with immutable biological characteristics because what ultimately distinguished the alleged races was culture, not biology. Wulf D. Hund has characterized different forms of racist social exclusion, of which most are not based on “race” in a symbolic representation (Fig. 1).¹⁰

According to this graph, Aboriginal Australians were classified in the fields of barbarization and savagization equally. Aboriginal Australians appear in Australian sources from 1788 to 1850 as “heathen”, “lazy”, “ugly”, and “uncivilized” “cannibals” who humiliate and torture their women. In particular, women were denied any power of attraction, yet they were considered “libidinous” and “licentious”. These “primitive savages” would not even own the land they settled on, which would be evident from the fact that they did not own plows. They would allegedly disregard property and live as hunter-gatherers, the lowest level

3 Michel Foucault: *History, Discourse and Discontinuity*, pp. 236, 248.

4 Wulf D. Hund: *A Historical Materialist Theory of Racism*, n. pag.

5 See Norbert Finzsch: *Wissenschaftlicher Rassismus in den Vereinigten Staaten*.

6 George L. Mosse: *Toward the Final Solution*, p. xv.

7 Norbert Finzsch: *Conditions of Intolerance*, p. 14.

8 Wulf D. Hund: *Rassismus und Antirassismus*, p. 14 (my translation).

9 Michel Foucault: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 54; see also Stefanie Affeldt, Wulf D. Hund: *Conflicts in Racism*; Wulf D. Hund: *Rassismus und Antirassismus*.

10 Wulf D. Hund: *A Historical Materialist Theory of Racism*, n. pag.

of human development. Their number would decrease rapidly. They would be doomed to extinction. Their languages did not deserve this designation because of their alleged lack of linguistic sophistication. All these attributed characteristics taken together amount to build up an image of inhuman others.¹¹

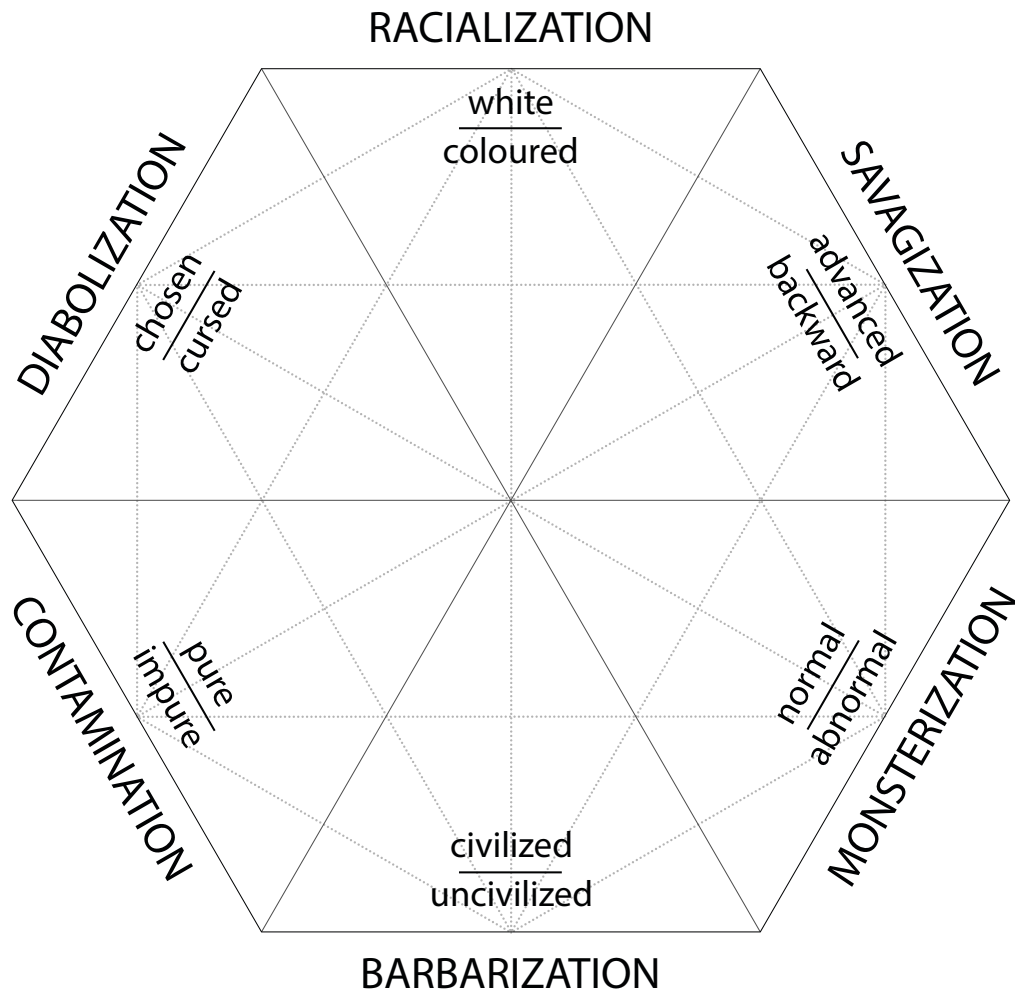


Fig. 1: Forms of racist social exclusion

Before acts of violence and destruction can be committed, perpetrators and inactive observers must agree that victims are outside the realm of punitive intervention by state power. Victims of genocidal acts have to be – by definition – sub-human or non-human. Thus, perpetrators must develop a common taxonomy of the primitive so that Indigenous peoples in Australia – as well as in North America appear worthless, uncivilized, and inhuman. I will emphasize again that this has by no means been the only form of interaction with Indigenous people: instead, there has been interaction, mutual economic dependence, and communal living between Europeans and Indigenous people, but the crucial question

11 See Norbert Finzsch: Discourses of Genocide; Norbert Finzsch: It is scarcely possible to conceive that human beings could be so hideous and loathsome.

remains how land grabbing and displacement of Indigenous people would have been possible had they not been built on a form of dislocation that had physical violence against Aboriginal Australians in tow. I will attempt to trace this discourse on the character traits attributed to Indigenous people. Notably, such statements were always linked to aesthetic judgments and supposed truths about Indigenous societies. This dispositive of racism was also applicable outside of Australia; indeed, it had been in effect even before Australia's settlement in 1788. It had been developed and tested on the example of North American Indians and inhabitants of Africa. This knowledge had long since burst the narrow confines of the small colony in Sydney insofar as it constitutes general knowledge of the time. In many respects, the discovery of Aboriginal people was nothing other than the "rediscovery" of the Africans or the Indians on Australian soil.

The necessity of waging war with biological weapons against the Aboriginal Australians no longer arose after the crisis of 1788/89 had been overcome. Although they resisted their land's creeping seizure through open military resistance, guerrilla tactics, sabotage, and refusal to work, they could not stem the tide of whites' increasingly rapid colonization of their land. Enlightenment thinking prepared and justified land seizures. This early racism did not require biology as a leading science to be successful. Instead, it made use of value judgments about Indigenous communities, which were classified as "inferior", "inhuman", and "ugly", based on various axes of judgment and thus denied the right to exist.

One of these registers of evaluation was religion or the question of whether Indians had a developed faith at all. Indigenous people in North America and Aboriginal Australians were fundamentally denied the ability to practice religion. They were portrayed as "devil worshippers" and "idolaters", although such derogatory judgments about Aboriginal Australians were rare. Among the few pronouncements in the field of Indigenous religion, however, we find those, such as Watkin Tench's from 1788, that summarizes the European view quite well:

The question of, whether they believe in the immortality of the soul, will take up very little time to answer. They are universally fearful of spirits. They call a spirit mawn. They often scruple to approach a corpse, saying that the mawn will seize them and that it fastens upon them in the night when asleep. When asked where their deceased friends are they always point to the skies. To believe in after existence is to confess the immortality of some part of being. To enquire whether they assign a 'limited' period to such future State would be superfluous.¹²

Compare this assessment with the later condemnation by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, comparing the psyche of "primitive peoples" with that of neurotics, written in 1912:

The Australian aborigines [...] do not build houses or permanent shelters; they do not cultivate the soil; they keep no domesticated animals except the dog; [...] It is highly doubtful whether any religion in the shape of a worship of higher beings can be attributed to them. [...] We should certainly not expect that the sexual life of these poor naked cannibals would be moral in our sense or that their sexual instincts would be subjected to any great degree of restriction.¹³

12 Tim Flannery: *Two Classic Tales of Australian Exploration*, pp. 25 f.

13 Sigmund Freud: *Totem and Taboo*, p. 2.

The longevity of the topos of the Aboriginal Australians' lack of religion becomes apparent. Another discursive field in which Indians and Aboriginal Australians fare poorly according to their white observers is labor. According to Enlightenment developmental theory, hunter-gatherers were far below manufacturing and trading Europeans and differed little from animals. The American historian William Robertson had emphasized that North American Indians were inferior to Europeans because they allegedly did not farm.¹⁴ This argument predicts that Indians would soon become extinct because of their lack of work ethic. Similar reasoning is found when assessing the Aboriginal Australians' will to work. This assumed lack of work ethic is often combined with the primitiveness of their dwellings. Again, this assessment's longevity is proven in Sigmund Freud's condemnation of Aboriginal Australians as "savages" in the quotation above. Since North American and Australian Indigenous peoples, according to their observers, were either abject savages or remained at the lowest level of human development, they could not build civilization and government:

We may, I think, in a great measure impute their low State of civilization, and deficiency in the mechanical arts, to the nature of the country they inhabit, the kind of life they lead, and the mode of government they live under. Civilization depends more upon the circums[an]ces under which man is placed than upon any innate impulse of his own,— the natural inclinations of man tending toward the savage State, or that in which food is procured With the least possible effort; [...] In primitive communities, generally speaking, the chiefs must be hereditary, and must have acquired power to control the Others, before much improvement can take Place; When, if these chiefs exercise their power With justice, and secure the inviolability of persons and property, industry will soon be encouraged, and various useful arts originated. [...] The North American tribes form an apt illustration of these observations, – the chiefs being mere advisers, as it were, possessing no power to enforce their counsel, and consequently no means of breaking up the Old savage habits of the tribes, and impelling them onward in the path of civilization.¹⁵

The disdain for Indigenous labor and work capacity has, in turn, been linked to other fields of discourse, most notably ethics, gender relations, and sexuality. Morally, Indians and Aboriginal Australians are portrayed as devious, cowardly, and mendacious, despite the efficacy of the image of the "noble savage", with recurring accusations that they were thieves.

Shortly after this, eight of the women, whom we had not before noticed, came down to the water side, and gave us the most pressing invitation to land. Indeed they played their part uncommonly well, and tried for some time to allure us by the most unequivocal manifestations of love. Hopkinson however who always had his eyes about him, observed the spears of the men among the reeds. They kept abreast of us as we pulled up the stream, and, no doubt, were anticipating our inability to resist the temptations they had thrown in our way. I was really provoked at their barefaced treachery, and should most undoubtedly have attacked them, had they not precipitately retreated on being warned by the women that I was arming my men, which I had only now done upon seeing such strong manifestations of danger.¹⁶

14 William Robertson: *Dr. Robertson's History of America*, pp. 224 ff.; William Robertson: *The History of America in Three Volumes*, pp. 6 ff.

15 Peter Miller Cunningham: *Two Years in New South Wales*, vol 2, pp. 46 f., 49 f.

16 Charles Napier Sturt: *Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southern Australia*, p. 194.

The discourse ascribing low morals to Indigenous peoples attributed one-sided gender relations to Indigenous people in which men violently dominated women. The trope of the Aboriginal Australians' sexual deviance, who were repeatedly accused of wife-swapping and prostitution, fits in with this assessment:

One of the surest marks of the low position of the Australian savage in the scale of the human species, is the treatment of their women. The men walk along with a proud and majestic air; behind them, crouching like slaves, and bearing heavy burdens on their backs, with their little ones stride on their shoulders, comes the despised and degraded women. They are the drudges in all heavy work; and after their lords have finished the repast which the women have prepared for them, these despised creatures contentedly sit at a distance, and gather up the bones and fragments, which the men throw to them across their shoulders, just as we should throw meat to a dog. [...] They have a custom of offering their wives to their friends when they visit them; it is also regarded as a mark of respect to strangers. Many of the men possess four wives; the old men securing the greatest number. A sister is exchanged for a daughter, and if a young man has several sisters he is always sure of obtaining wives in return. Should the ladies object, or become obstreperous, they are mollified by a shower of very sharp blows on the head with a wirri.¹⁷

For their part, however, the women thus pitied were not considered morally respectable since they were imagined as hypersexual and uninhibited, a quality that was also attributed to Native American and Afro-American women in North America. The "primitive savage" assessment was primarily based on the alleged treatment of "their" women. At the same time, the gender and sexual relations of white colonialists to Indigenous women were structured with reference to the desires of Indigenous women, who not only seemed to promise sexual fulfillment but were seen as a substitute and metaphor for the land and its conquest. Thus, Indigenous women were made doubly submissive, first as part of an "inferior", "savage" society, and second in terms of gender. Savages and women, including European women, were considered by Enlightenment theorists to be consubstantial, because they were deemed emotional, weak, and irrational. Alleged cannibalism, promiscuity, and nudity were repeatedly invoked to prove the arrested stage of Indigenous development. This verdict culminated in the regularly encountered assessment that Indigenous people were ugly. Thus, the fixed European gaze on Indigenous men and women's bodies aesthetically confirms other value judgements.

Means, Motive, and Opportunity

In criminal law, "means, motive, and opportunity" is a popular cultural summation of the three aspects of a crime needed to convince a jury of guilt in a criminal proceeding and has recently also been applied in the historiography of genocides.¹⁸ To make a case for genocide by biowarfare, one must establish these three elements. I will tackle the problem of motive first:

17 George French Angas: *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, pp. 82 ff., 88.

18 See Michael P. Jasinski: *Examining Genocides*.

On 26 January 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip proclaimed British sovereignty over the Australian continent when he planted the Union Jack on Gadigal land at Sydney Cove – gaining effective control over these lands would require genocidal practices that lasted almost 150 years. Initially, the British had two motivations to conquer Australia. The first was their fierce competition with France to control trade routes and gain access to colonial products and markets. The second was their need for penal colonies after the American Colonies had been lost in the American Revolution. Phillip's fleet carried about 1000 convicts, 200 British marines, and some civilian officials. Phillip instituted a military beach-head colony based on convict labor. At first, interactions with the local Gadigal people were friendly but soon deteriorated when the British started to take the land occupied by the local Indigenous population, disrespected religious sites, and used open violence in the process of dispossession.¹⁹ The Australian Indigenous population fought back, killing convicts who had committed rapes and robberies. This resistance constituted a significant crisis since the ground at Sydney Cove was not suited for food production. It seemed logical to expand the settlement into the fertile land at the head of the Parramatta River. This expansion, however, failed due to the military resistance of the Aboriginal people. Phillip demanded the detachment of additional 600 marines, which would have taken several months to be put in effect.

Meanwhile, colonists were already dying in large numbers from disease and malnutrition. The future of the colony seemed to be bleak. In early 1789, only one year after the First Fleet's arrival, a smallpox epidemic hit the Indigenous population, wiping out more than half of the local population. None of the convicts or marines suffered from smallpox at this time. Aboriginal resistance collapsed following this medical catastrophe. It was only then that successful farming began at Parramatta, allowing the colony to sustain itself. The motive is clear: the colony's existence depended on the grabbing of additional land from the original inhabitants.

Concerning the means, one has to delve into the medical history of the smallpox epidemic. In the 18th century, smallpox was a disease that invariably struck European and American populations. Its effect was so impressive for contemporaries that the English historian Thomas Babington Macaulay described it as "the most terrible ministers of death".²⁰ Among European populations, about one-third of those who contracted the disease fell victim to it. Among Indigenous populations, this rate could easily exceed 50 percent.

The variola virus causes the highly contagious smallpox. The incubation period is twelve days. On the twelfth day after infection, flu-like symptoms begin, i.e., fever and headache, which then turn into nonspecific pain and vomiting. On the fifteenth or sixteenth day, the typical pustules appear on the surface of the skin. There was a chance of survival if this happened, which depended much on the victim's age and physical condition. In the third week, the pustules began to dry up and slowly disappeared in the fourth week.

19 See Stephen Gapps: *The Sydney Wars*.

20 Ian Glynn, Jenifer Glynn: *The Life and Death of Smallpox*, p. 2.

Those who survived to this stage could be scarred or blinded for life but were immunized against reinfection. Infection occurred through direct human skin contact or droplet infection. There were no animal hosts that transmitted the disease. Most commonly, variola infects its human victim by the airborne route, i.e., inhalation. Theoretically, infection through wounds in the body was also possible but relatively rare. The virus appeared in all bodily secretions and retained its virulence long after it had left the body. It was clear to contemporaries that the disease was transmitted through direct contact with the sick, even though the infection concept was unknown.

In this respect, too, smallpox represented a peculiarity. In other infectious diseases, such as typhoid, bubonic plague, yellow fever, malaria, cholera, or tuberculosis, 18th-century physicians and patients did not see contagion at work. In the case of smallpox, however, the remedy of quarantine was repeatedly employed, a clear indication that it was understood that intercourse with diseased persons would further spread the disease. Contemporaries also understood that contaminated objects could spread the disease. Sometimes responsible officials, therefore, decided to burn blankets and clothing of infected people. Hence we can conclude that smallpox could be weaponized if war parties understood the connection between infection and the spread of the disease through contact with the sick or their personal belongings. Thus, means clearly existed. To address opportunity, I would like to focus on colonial warfare in North America:

In the 18th century, the accusation was raised that smallpox had been used as a biological weapon. This theory was plausible because American and English theologians and physicians had begun experimenting with so-called "inoculation" as early as 1721. Moreover, since the disease was endemic in England, and an increasing proportion of American cities' inhabitants had undergone inoculation by 1750, it can be assumed that both British military personnel and some city dwellers in North America were immune to the disease. This immunity made it possible to target the smallpox virus against Native Americans. Almost half of all those infected died in places where they had had no previous contact with the pathogen.

Inoculation must not be confused with vaccination, which was carried out with the cowpox virus from 1796 on. Inoculation, which was first practiced in 1721, involved transferring the live variola virus into an open wound. The subsequent infection outbreak with the otherwise potentially deadly virus took a much milder course, with about one percent of those infected dying. It is still unclear why the virus is deadlier when inhaled than when it enters the body through a wound. The milder course of smallpox brought about by inoculation was not only far less risky, but it also meant that patients did not feel as ill and therefore walked around endangering other people. This fact has repeatedly led to debates about whether inoculation was not more dangerous than strict quarantine. Doctors, mainly, were among those who initially ran up a storm against inoculation. In the 18th century, however, it became accepted as the best precaution against smallpox, and even English country people began to carry out inoculations on their own. In other words, although smallpox was a dangerous and contagious disease, white Europeans and Americans had a comprehensive understanding

of how the disease spread, and they had developed methods of handling this scourge of humankind.

During the French and Indian Wars in North America, the British military undoubtedly used biological warfare against Native Americans, as we will see below. Smallpox pathogens' deliberate spread was not limited to isolated episodes during the 18th century; smallpox had been used against Indians by English settlers and English soldiers as early as the 17th century. The so-called "King Philip's War" of 1675-1676 broke out – essentially because the Wampanoag and Narragansett Indians assumed that English traders had contaminated their villages with smallpox.

The best-documented event is the infamous biological warfare campaign against American Indians by General Jeffery Amherst in 1763. The use of smallpox resulted in a decidedly deadly epidemic among Native Americans that claimed the lives of several thousand men, women, and children. British troops faced a powerful coalition of Native American and French forces in the North American territory during the Seven Years' War. More than once, it looked as if the latter would gain the upper hand. However, with the end of the war, the French lost their colonies in the north to the British. The first royal governor-general of Canada and commander-in-chief of all troops in the area to be appointed was Jeffery Amherst. His heavy-handed Indian policy and a religious-political renewal movement of Native Americans turned Indian populations in the Great Lakes area against the British.

In 1762, Ottawa leader Pontiac managed to unite the Ottawa, Ojibwa, and Potawatomie peoples under his overall command. Pontiac quickly realized that the English attracted settlers to the vicinity of the fortifications who used the Indians' land for farming, thus driving off the game that the Indians hunted. Pontiac decided to drive out the English in 1762 and arranged with his allies to meet in a coordinated major assault to attack the English forts, a remarkable strategic and organizational achievement. Of the twelve English forts attacked, eight were destroyed, proving that the Indians, when united and well-prepared to strike, still posed a military threat to Europeans. Pontiac himself attacked Detroit on May 7 but witnessed that his carefully devised plan had been betrayed to the English. The Indian leader was forced to lay siege to the fort.

On 30 October 1763, Pontiac retreated into the backcountry after Colonel Bouquet, an English officer, used smallpox as a biological weapon against the Indians on Amherst's orders. It was not until 1764 that the English, after considerable effort, succeeded in gaining the upper hand against the disease-ridden Indians. In 1766, Pontiac concluded a peace treaty that essentially meant a return to the status quo ante bellum. How much Amherst was driven by his desire to exterminate the Indians is shown in his correspondence. Thus he wrote in his screwed expression to a subordinate in August 1763:

I shall only say, that it Behoves the Whole Race of Indians to Beware (for I fear the best of them have in some measure been privy to, & Concerned in, the Late Mischief) of Carrying Matter much farther against the English, or Daring to form

Conspiracys, as the Consequences will most certainly occasion measures to be taken, that, in the End will put a most effectual Stop to their very Being.²¹

In another letter of the same summer, he remarked:

I do not desire to enter into any negotiations With the Tribes Engaged in the present Insurrection, untill they have suffered a most severe Chastisement, Which must be Previous to any accommodation, or they will most assuredly break it. Indeed their Total Extirpation is scarce sufficient Attonement for the Bloody and Inhuman deeds.²²

At the time Amherst sent these letters, he had already approved plans to infect the rebellious Indians with smallpox. On 13 July 1763, Colonel Henry Bouquet had suggested that he took matters into his own hands when he noted in a post-script of a letter to Amherst, dated 13 July 1763:

P.S. I will try to inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets that may fall in their hands taking care however not to get the disease myself. As it is a pity to pose good men against them, I wish we could make use of the Spaniard's method and hunt them With English Dogs. Supported by Rangers and some Light Horse, Who would I think effectively extirpate or remove that Vermine. H. B.²³

From a report by Captain Simeon Ecuyer, the commanding officer of Fort Pitt, which Native Americans besieged, we know that smallpox had broken out only a few weeks earlier.²⁴ Thus the means for infection with variola pathogens were in place, for there was a smallpox hospital at the fort with the appropriate blankets and cloths in which the variola virus had taken root. Amherst did not need much time to think, for on 16 July 1763, just three days after the eager Bouquet suggested to him that smallpox be used against the Indians, he wrote:

P.S. You will do well to try to Inoculate the Indians by means of Blanketts, as well as to Cry Every Other Method that can serve to Extirpate this Execrable Race. I should be very glad your Scheme for Hunting them Down by Dogs could take effect, but England is at too great a Distance to think of that at present.²⁵

Warfare in North America

One could argue that with this exchange of letters, the British leadership's intentions had become unmistakably clear that the trinity of motive, means, and opportunity has been established. Still, the question remains whether these plans were also put into practice. However, from the diary of militia commander Captain William Trent, a direct subordinate of Fort Pitt's commander, we know that the Delawares' emissaries were infected with smallpox as early as May 1763, two months before Amherst and Bouquet discussed the matter. After the Delawares warned the British of approaching troops from other Indian groups and told them to leave, the commanding officer thanked them. The diary continues:

21 Amherst to Johnson, 27 August 1763. Library of Congress: Nr. 257.

22 Ibid.

23 Peter d'Errico: Jeffrey Amherst and Smallpox Blankets.

24 See Jeremy Hugh Baron: *British Biological Warfare*, p. 261.

25 Library of Congress: Nr. 114.

Out of our regard to them we gave them two Blankets and an Handkerchief out of the Small Pox Hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect.²⁶

A few months after this entry, a smallpox epidemic swept away large parts of the Indian population of the Ohio Valley. It becomes clear that the officers anticipated the effect that smallpox would have on the Indians. The genocidal intent of the British officers, especially the governor and commander-in-chief Amherst, who would have accepted any other form of extermination, also becomes evident.

Historian Philip Ranlet has shown that the distinguished naturalist Benjamin Franklin also assumed that the British had used smallpox against hostile Indians and American revolutionaries.²⁷ While the colonials laid siege to Boston in 1775, the British commanders in the city were busy inoculating their troops. A sailor reported "a number [of persons] coming out [...] have been inoculated with the design of spreading the smallpox thro' this country and camp".²⁸ Ann Becker concludes that Washington's vigilance in segregating those infected with the disease and his use of selective inoculation were critical factors in preventing a disastrous epidemic among the troops and militia outside Boston.²⁹ That same year, the defenders of Quebec purportedly sent infected people to the American camp. Thomas Jefferson was convinced the British were responsible for the illness in the lines.

'La petite verole.' I have been informed by officers who were on the spot, and whom I believe myself, that this disorder was sent into our army designedly by the commanding officer in Quebec. It answered his purposes effectually.³⁰

The British Army, under duress in the Yorktown campaign, also targeted American civilians. Major General Alexander Leslie, commander of the British garrison at Portsmouth, wrote on 13 July 1781, to his commanding officer Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis: "Above 700 Negroes are coming down the [James] River in the Small Pox. [...] I shall distribute them about the Rebels Meantimes".³¹ Therefore, it is established that British military leaders did not refrain from using smallpox as a biological weapon if they felt they were losing in a military campaign. It so happened during the French and Indian War, and it was repeated during the American Revolution.

Warfare in Australia

The Australian historian Noel Butlin and others after him very early raised the question of whether the smallpox epidemic among the Aboriginal Australians around Port Jackson in 1789 had resulted from biological warfare.³² Indeed, there is a lot of evidence suggesting that the First Fleet's British commanders

26 Albert T. Volwiler: William Trent's Journal at Fort Pitt.

27 Philip Ranlet: *The British, Slaves, and Smallpox in Revolutionary Virginia*, p. 217.

28 George Washington: Letter from Gen. George Washington to John Hancock.

29 Cf. Ann M. Becker: *Smallpox at the Siege of Boston*.

30 Thomas Jefferson: *Comments on Soulés' Histoire*, p. 301.

31 Gregory J. W. Urwin: *When Freedom Wore a Red Coat*, p. 86.

32 Noel George Butlin: *Our Original Aggression*, p. 334.

reduplicated their biological experiment on Australian Indigenous people. As in the historical examples of North America, the British detachment was under pressure. The survival of the 800 plus convicts and the 200 marines was at stake because Sydney Cove was unsuited for agriculture, and the British beachhead was confined to a tiny area.³³ The British had the means, the motive, and the opportunity to get rid of the Aboriginal Australians in their vicinity. It is plausible to assume a deliberate infection because the British had the necessary medical knowledge (means).

Some members of the officer corps aboard the ships had served during the American Revolution, which gave them first-hand knowledge of biological warfare. Major Robert Ross had served during the American Revolution and was dispatched as commander of the First Fleet garrison of marines. Captain-Lieutenant Watkin Tench likewise had seen action as a very young officer in the War against American revolutionaries. First Lieutenant George Johnson had seen action aboard a British vessel in New York and Halifax. Lieutenant Ralph Clark also had fought in the war against the American Indians before joining the marine corps that was dispatched to Australia in 1788. They did not risk becoming infected because the British marine infantry battalion and the prisoners were immune to the disease, either from previous exposure or inoculation. The conditions for a deliberate infection were also present, since skin particles from smallpox patients could be used as carriers of the disease and were on board the immigrant ships.

A possible motive for the genocide arose because the colony was on the verge of a general famine in 1788/89, which would have made the effective expulsion of the increasingly hostile Aboriginal Australians impossible. The opportunity was also there since no witnesses were present, and the epidemic could always be presented as an unfortunate result of contagion.

It is more than plausible to assume that, under the given circumstances, some officers might have thought that the problem of hostile Aboriginal Australians could be solved by infection, especially since some of the officers had been deployed in the American Revolutionary War. The bottle of deadly variola virus, taken aboard as a possible vaccine for children born in the colony, could be kept virulent with cooling fans' help. Arnold Zuckerman traced back the history of ventilation aboard British ships to the year 1741.³⁴ New research shows that "[t]here is little doubt that smallpox scabs collected in 1787, if handled professionally, would have retained significant viral activity for more than two years".³⁵ Warren's observation that the virus could have survived the voyage aboard the First Fleet ship is not based on ventilation on said ship. Instead, he stresses the relatively low temperatures at Sydney Cove in 1788/1789.

Therefore, medical historian Judy Campbell's argument that the pathogens could not have survived the long voyage from England to Australia is wrong.³⁶ In the Australian case, we have thus established motive, means, and opportunity. Noel Butlin's assessment about the possibility of deliberate infection of the

33 George Burnett Barton: *History of New South Wales from the Records*, pp. 142, 147.

34 See Arnold Zuckerman: *Scurvy and the Ventilation of Ships in the Royal Navy*.

35 Christopher Warren: *Could First Fleet Smallpox Infect Aborigines*, p. 160.

36 Judy Campbell: *Invisible Invaders*, p. 62.

Aboriginal Australians as a purposeful act of extermination is still valid. However, contrary to the Ohio Valley events thirty years earlier, there is no written order from the commanding officer or even the governor. This lack is hardly surprising since the British in Australia were not officially in a state of war with the Aboriginal Australians. The British officers had received the English king's explicit and repeated instruction, George III, to show themselves friendly and accommodating towards the "natives".

You are to endeavour, by every possible means, to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them. And if the natives any of our subjects shall wantonly destroy them, or give them any tected unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their several occupations, it is our will and pleasure that you do cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence.³⁷

A written order or note to the contrary in the diary of an officer stationed in Australia could easily have been interpreted as a royal instruction violation.

Conclusion

The British Army had already used bioweapons against the Indigenous population during the Seven Years' War and American civilians during the American Revolution. It was only logical to assume that the British detachment had deliberately triggered the smallpox epidemic of 1789/90 to destroy and/or weaken the unruly Indigenous population of Australia in such a way that they would no longer resist a spread of white settlements in the south of the country. Once the bridgehead in Sydney was secured, and the Aboriginal Australians ceased to constitute a military threat, the British colonial officers could resort to "normal" military tactics. With the emergence of a militarily and politically secured rule over a rapidly growing group of settlers, biological warfare became superfluous, especially since smallpox regularly reappeared within the Indigenous populations of the 19th century. The endemic thus weakened their long-term resistance against settler-colonialist incursion. Moreover, the construction of a "primitive savage" who ultimately lacked humanity created the conditions for individual settlers to take the law into their own hands and enforce land seizures against Indigenous people by armed family groups or with the help of the mounted police.

37 George Burnett Barton: *History of New South Wales from the Records*, p. 485.

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