

# On a Marxist History of the North American Indians

*A Reader's Letter and a Reply from*  
WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

TO THE EDITOR:

I have just finished reading William Z. Foster's great weapon for struggle against the "history" of the capitalist class and for socialism in our time entitled *Outline Political History of the Americas*. There are a few weaknesses, I think, which seem to crop up in most, if not all, writings on American Indian history in our country. Let us examine a few in Mr. Foster's important contribution to American history just mentioned.

He says: "At first, like everywhere else in the hemisphere, the Indians greeted the strange white man from across the sea in a friendly manner. . . . It was only later, after many deceptions, robberies, and oppressions had been practiced upon them, that the Indians began to defend themselves and their homes" (p. 52). On the contrary, it seems that the Indians on some sections of the coastlines of the country defended their country in a most unfriendly manner from the very beginning of white in-

trusions. For example, the history of the Calusa, an important tribe of Florida, begins in 1513 when, with a fleet of 80 canoes they boldly attacked Ponce de León, who was about to land on their coast, and after an all-day fight compelled him to withdraw. De León was later allowed to land by the Timucua Indians at St. Augustine.

The history of inside tribal struggles throughout Indian-white relations show a consistent friction between Indian leaders opposing any subjection by any white advance and those leaders who would favor one or the other side of colonizers or white settlers in the frontier advances. The bourgeois historians make out such Indian chiefs as Massasoit, Uncas, Tecumseh, Cornplanter, Red Jacket, Pontiac, Brant, American Horse, Little Turtle, Black Hawk, Keokuk, Gall, Spotted Tail, and others as "heroes" because of their selling-out tendencies to the whites in history. They were not "heroes" by the measurements of even these "historians" but were quislings instead. Massasoit was opposed by his own son; attempts were made on the life of

Uncas by patriotic Indians; Tecumseh could not unite the Indians by joining the British white oppressors and found opposition to his policies; Cornplanter, Red Jacket, Pontiac, and Brant were opposed violently because of their British leanings but not in favor of the Americans either; Little Turtle's peace policies were opposed by the truly great patriot, Blue Jacket, because he wanted to desert Indian struggles against the white advance; and many other quislings were opposed. This was necessary for liberation from oppressors in later times. . . .

The true Indian patriots were those who died in battle against whites wherever they could be found, whether British, French, Spanish, Dutch, or American colonists; and those half-starved great warriors in military prisons of the "bluecoats." Such patriots were Big Tree (Kiowa); Annawan (Wampanoag), beheaded by the "Christians" in 1676; Big Foot (Sioux); Big Mouth (Sioux)—shot by the notorious Spotted Tail at the entrance of his own lodge; Black Kettle (Cheyenne)—killed in attack on Sheridan's guns; Bomazeen (Abnaki); The Bowl (Cherokee); Cochise (Apache)—defeated by howitzers of Carleton; Corbitant (Massachuset) — caught and tried to kill Squanto, whom he called the tongue of the British; Crazy Horse (Sioux)—shot in back by military guard who alleged that he was escaping but better known as

lynching; Dull Knife (Cheyenne)—helped defeat the scum of the post-Civil War military under Custer and shot "as he tried to escape Ft. Robinson"; Crazy Medicine (Seminole)—hanged by "blue-coats"; Kintpuash (Modoc); Red Bird (Winnebago)—died in prison; Red Cloud (Sioux)—a warrior who never tasted defeat by any white forces; Sitting Bull (Sioux)—shot by Sgts. Red Tomahawk and Bull Head of "Indian police"; and many others too numerous to mention here. The "heroes" of bourgeois historians did not enjoy the deep respect of their people and were forgotten soon but there were some old grizzled warriors that are even today spoken of by Indians with dignity, pride and affection. They know the answers to historical events and it will stay with them as it is difficult for the white man to gain knowledge from them. Some answers are their secret.

I think that Mr. Foster missed the very important task of pointing out the real Indian patriots and played too much with the "heroes" of bourgeois historians. Some were correct but many mentioned in his book were not "heroes."

Much work, of course, with a Marxist-Leninist outlook, needs to be done in the history of the American Indian and I am now trying to contribute a little in that direction in the book I am writing.

Today the Indian lives in tents and log cabins under conditions of pov-

erty without steady year-round jobs in sight. There is no industry at hand to employ Indian workers. Their representation in political matters is still in the hands of quislings who believe that Big Business can solve their plight. They have not, in any considerable number, as yet learned of socialism as the scientific method of solving their situation in the most safe and sane manner. Discrimination is the rule in their lives—even on the reservation in many respects. They are “free” to leave the reservation as they wish—good riddance say Government “treaty” bigwigs. However, the Indians are stirring up a batch of struggle nevertheless against their imperialist masters and will win the victory which will be recorded in the history of our times. Mr. Foster’s book will be a weapon for this victory.

Sincerely,  
C. C.

REPLY BY  
WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

To the EDITOR OF *Political Affairs*:

C. C.’s letter brings the good news that he is writing a Marxist history of the North American Indians. Such a history is long overdue. There is at hand an enormous mass of written reports and general historical material about the Indians. Some of the latter stuff is of real

value—such as the works of Morgan, Radin, and others—but for the most part it suffers from the usual shallowness and class bias of bourgeois historians. The true story of the Indians of this general area and their three centuries of struggle in defense of their lives, homes, and liberties will never be told until Marxists do the job. It is an obligation of the Communist Party, the champion of all the oppressed, to see to it that this task is undertaken.

In my book, *Outline Political History of the Americas*, I was able to devote only relatively a few pages to the Indians of the United States. This was because the Indians of this country, for all their importance, comprise only a very small detachment of the many millions of Indians in the Western Hemisphere generally, and an even smaller fraction of the whole vast civilization of which I was writing. A full history, therefore, of the Indian peoples of the United States would be most timely.

The writing of a Marxist history of the North American Indians is a complex and difficult task, presenting many unique problems of analysis. The very starting point of such a history must be a complete break with the current historical misrepresentation and slander of the Indians. The bourgeois historians have falsified the history of the Indians almost as badly as they have distorted that of the Negro people. They have falsely pictured the Indians as sav-

age, treacherous, indolent, stupid, childlike, dishonest, and incredibly brutal in warfare—while they have made just as elaborate efforts to justify or obscure the genocidal policies of the whites to exterminate the Indians by any means possible. There are tendencies in our times to romanticize Indian history, to consider the Indians somewhat as museum pieces, but this trend has not liquidated the time-worn slanders against these peoples.

Obviously, this letter is no place to outline all the problems and tasks that confront the Marxist historian of the Indian peoples; but at least a few of these may be indicated. They include: an analysis of the widely varying social structures of the Indians, the trade relations of the Indians with the colonists and the revolutionary effects of these upon the former's primitive cultures, the fruitless attempts of the white oppressors to enslave the Indians, the whole story of the relationship between the Indian and Negro peoples, an evaluation of the many Indian wars, an estimation of the role of the various Indian leaders, an outline of the numerous robbing policies of the French, British, United States governments, a practical program for the Indians of today, etc., etc. And all this within a framework of the general, evolving attitudes of the Indian peoples towards the white invaders.

The Indians' cause, in view of the

existing forces at work, was historically a lost one, so far as their holding the continent was concerned. The more primitive social regimes of the Indians could not withstand the impact of the higher civilization of the whites. The Indians' tribal divisions and mutual enmities, which prevented their developing a solid united front, plus the greater numbers, better arms, and more effective discipline of the Europeans, also helped to seal the fate of the Red Man in the face of the ruthless and never-ending pressure of the ocean-like waves of white invaders.

A Marxist history of the North American Indians must be fundamentally an analysis of the Indian peoples' reactions to the ever-increasing flood of European colonists, and of the tactics and strategies used by the Indians in order to shield themselves from the engulfing deluge. The relations between the Indians and whites, during the long struggle, were very complex, and often changing, and they require careful analysis. They are not to be disposed of by wave-of-the-hand generalizations. There never was, at any time, a settled and uniform "policy" of the Indian towards the invaders—tribal divisions and a natural lack of national consciousness preventing such unified thought and action. Consequently, while some Indians took an attitude of alarm and undying hostility towards them, others tried to live at peace with the greedy

and on-pushing settlers. The relations between the two groups varied widely, in different times and places.

At the outset, contrary to C. C.'s letter, the Indians as a rule met the earliest white colonists in a friendly spirit. That was not strange, for they could not possibly have foreseen the enormous masses of whites who were to follow the first small group of pioneers, the ruthless genocide policies they would develop, and the ultimate disaster to Indian life that all this would imply. Moreover, primitive peoples, in spite of bourgeois lies, have almost always had a hand of greeting for strangers arriving upon their shores. And these particular strangers had a special lure for the Indians in the shape of the many objects of trade—beads, cloth, guns, metal tools, whiskey, etc., which were previously altogether unknown to the Indians. It was only after bitter experience with the newcomers that the Indians became disillusioned with them and took up arms to defend themselves. It is naive to think that the early Indians could have been united in a realization of the dreadful menace of the colonists and could have met the first white invaders at the water's-edge, arms-in-hand. A few Indians, it is true, did show armed resistance, but they were the exception, not the rule.

A friendly reception was the pattern that confronted the colonists along the Atlantic Coast—on the St. Lawrence, on Massachusetts Bay,

and on the Hudson, Delaware, and James Rivers. It was only later, after many hardships and injustices at the hands of the invaders, that the Indians realized something of their dangerous situation and started to make war systematically to protect their land and homes. Thus, in Massachusetts, first settled in 1620, it was not until 1635 that Sassacus engaged in the important Pequot war, and only in 1675, after the death of Massasoit (a long-time collaborator with the colonists), that King Philip, his son, with the Wampanoags, Nipmucks, and Narragansetts, was able to carry on his celebrated, but ill-fated war. In New York, similarly, the first Indian war broke out about thirty years after the earliest Dutch settlements, and in Virginia it was in 1622, fifteen years after the formation of the colony and four years after the death of Powhatan, who worked with the colonists notwithstanding their injustices, that the first serious Indian war in that area, under Chief Opechancanough, was waged. In the Pennsylvania colony, there was a similar pattern, with a long initial peace before "Indian troubles" began.

One of the disastrous reactions of certain of the Indians to the newly-arrived colonists, in various instances, was to try to use the newcomers as allies against traditional tribal enemies. Thus, Massasoit, at his very first meeting with the Pilgrims (whom he could have wiped out easily had

he been so disposed) agreed to give them the food, seeds, and land which they most urgently needed, only on the condition that they make a war alliance with him against his tribe's bitter enemies, the Narragansetts. The whites everywhere utilized this major Indian illusion, bred of tribal divisions and hostilities. They used the old rule of divide and conquer. Cortez and Pizarro also exploited it with devastating effects upon the Indian regimes in Mexico and Peru. When Cortez marched against Montezuma, he actually had more Indians in his own army, tribal enemies of the Aztecs, than there were men in the forces of the opposing Aztec chieftain. The Marxist historian must evaluate this whole division tendency, which everywhere played such a tragic role in Indian history.

Another decisive development of North American Indian strategy in the struggle against the colonists that the Marxist historian must also analyze and evaluate was the Indians' long-continued practice of joining in the white men's wars against each other, in alliance with one or both sides. Thus, the Indians took an active part in the several wars between France and England, and in the two wars of England against her colonies (1776), and against the United States (1812). With such alliances the Indians largely strove to protect and advance their own tribal interests. They were not mere mercenaries, as the bourgeois historians

would like to make them appear.

The general direction of the Indians' blows in these struggles was against their two main enemies: at first against Great Britain, and later on, above all, against the United States, which was the most virulent, of all anti-Indian influences. These war alliances with the whites, in the long run, worked out disastrously for the Indians. For the important Indian tribes were on the losing side in these big wars and they suffered catastrophically. Such Indian disasters followed the Seven Years War, ending in 1763, in which France lost Canada to England; the American War of Independence of 1776, and in the U.S.-English war of 1812. To make the defeat of the Indians in these wars all the more complete, their white allies, France and England, both completely abandoned and betrayed them at the peace table. These war alliances of the Indians with France and England must be soberly analyzed and evaluated by the Marxist historian. They cannot be dismissed simply on the grounds that the Indian chiefs who participated in them were all traitors to their peoples.

Of especially great importance to the Marxist historian of the Indian peoples must also be a careful study and appraisal of the various attempts of Indian leaders to surmount the paralyzing weakness of tribal divisions and to develop a broad many-tribe unity and policy. In such move-

ments, of which there were several, Indian political and military strategy was to be seen at its highest development. Among the most important of these wide-embracing efforts, despite the serious weaknesses of some of the leaders involved, are to be noted the wars and unity movements of King Philip (1675), Pontiac (1763), Theyendangea (Joseph Brant) (1776), and Tecumseh (1811). The role of "Prophets" or "Messiahs" in such broad Indian movements also deserves attention. They were men who rose up, claiming that they were divinely inspired to lead their peoples from the bondage of the white man.

The Marxist historian must also pay much attention to the policies of corruption practiced upon the Indian leaders, often all too successfully, by the white officialdom. This was akin to present-day employer policies of corrupting official working class leaders. Indian history is thickly spotted with cases of Indian chiefs who were thus bribed. Even outstanding Indian chiefs, such as Pontiac and Little Turtle, who in their time conducted bitterly-fought and effective major wars against the whites, in the end fell victims of the white man's blandishments. So great a danger was this corruption that not infrequently when chiefs went into negotiations with the whites, their peoples warned them beforehand that they would kill them if they allowed themselves to be cor-

rupted or deceived into yielding up sections of the tribe's territory. And more than once such executions of traitor chiefs were actually carried out. A well-known instance of this was that of the Cherokees who killed three of their chiefs who, in treaty conference, allowed themselves to be bribed or cajoled by President Jackson's emissaries. To explore this question of Indian corruption and of rank and file Indian opposition to faithless chieftains will be very valuable. It will also require a lot of solid research work.

An evaluation of the role of the many noted Indian leaders should also be undertaken by the Marxist historian. C. C. says that in my book I paid too much attention to the Indian "heroes" publicized by bourgeois historians. This is unjustified criticism. For in the limited scope of my general treatment of the North American Indians, it was impossible for me to bring forward the lesser-known figures and to analyze closely the complete roles of the respective central leaders. At most, I could interpret only the general course of events with but passing references to individual chieftains. In evaluating the Indian leaders, it must be said, we should not be perfectionists and expect them to possess qualities of clear-sightedness which, under the circumstances, they could not have. It is not the task of the Marxist historian to write an idealist, leftist book which would largely rob

the Indian peoples of their real history.

An analysis of the many Indian wars and the causes for them must, of course, be a basic part of a Marxian history such as we are speaking of. This is by no means as simple a task as it appears to be at first glance. The relations between the whites and the Indians, although always those of oppression by the whites and discontent and resistance by the Indians, were not those of constant actual warfare. Even the boldest chiefs and the most vigorous tribes lived during long generations under an uneasy peace. The Indian wars were desultory and spontaneous. They developed usually in response to an accumulation of unbearable persecutions, such as the perpetration of particularly outrageous land stealings from the Indians. A deep-cutting study of these war provocations by the whites and of the outrageous treaties by which these wars were concluded, is a much-needed phase of American history writing in general.

Special attention must be given, too, to the genocide policies of the white colonists. Their slogan was: "There is no good Indian but a dead Indian." They anticipated by centuries Hitler's genocide program against the Jews. The colonists fought to exterminate the Indians, and in the case of many tribes they actually succeeded in their murderous goal.

The struggle of the Indian peoples for survival was a centuries-long battle against hopeless odds. Already by the time of King Philip's war in 1675, the Indians of New England were outnumbered and out-gunned locally by the colonists, and by the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 the whites were at least three times more numerous on a national scale than the Indians. Small wonder, then, in the face of the ever-swelling tide of settlers, that all Indian wars were eventually lost wars and that the Red man was pressed relentlessly from East to West.

The essentially impossible position of the Indians, both locally and generally, was early sensed by their most thoughtful leaders, and this realization had very important consequences upon the struggle of the Indian peoples. For one thing, it stimulated the many attempts, remarked earlier, made by the Indians to unify into a common multi-tribal front. For another, it inspired the Indians to wage the most desperate struggles when they went on the warpath. No people ever fought more bravely in self-defense than the Indians, down to the last heroic forty years' struggle of the Sioux tribes throughout the last half of the 19th century, under Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, etc., These final wars were fought against completely impossible odds. Vestal says (*Warpath and Council Fire*): "Three times in our history an

American military force has been utterly wiped out by its enemies. Every time these enemies were Sioux." Unfortunately, too, the desperate position of the Indians' struggle in general also had the negative effect of increasing the tendency of many chieftains to take the easy way out by yielding to the bribes of the victorious white conquerors.

A Marxist history, besides chronicling and interpreting the life story of the Indian people, especially their epic struggle to defend themselves against the ruthless white invaders, must also provide a program to meet the present severe plight of these tragic peoples. This program, besides containing urgently needed economic measures, must deal with the establishment of elementary political rights for Indians, and also with the

fundamental question of national self-determination.

The terrible poverty, illiteracy, disease, and jim-crow discrimination under which the great bulk of the Indians now suffer is a burning disgrace to our country. Organized labor, which throughout its entire history has almost completely ignored the injustices done to the Indians, bears a large share of the responsibility for this outrageous situation. The Communist Party must take up the cudgels in defense of the rights of the Indian tribes, as it has done with regard to the Negro people. To this end a Marxist history of the North American Indians would be a splendid contribution.

Comradely yours,  
WILLIAM Z. FOSTER