

POLICIES OF ASSIMILATION

One of the central methods the government used to encourage the assimilation of First Nations people into Euro-Canadian culture was through education. Schools for First Nations people existed prior to the Numbered Treaties. Mission schools, or day schools, had been introduced soon after European contact and were a significant reason for missionary immigration to Nouvelle-France. Students attended mission schools during the day and then returned to their families at night. The mission schools encouraged First Nations students to give up their traditional beliefs for Christianity and to learn European styles of living. But by the early nineteenth century, ideas about the purpose of First Nations schools began to change.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Many treaties included provisions for the government to provide schooling for First Nations youth. First Nations hoped that access to education would support the survival of their culture, while enabling their children to read, write, and interact with Euro-Canadian settlements.

The Canadian government, however, had different ideas about the purpose of educating First Nations youth. Even as early as 1847, Egerton Ryerson, the chief superintendent of education for Upper Canada, stated, "The education of Indians consists not merely of training the mind but of weaning from the habits and feelings of their ancestors and the acquirements of the language, arts, and customs of a civilized life."

THE AIMS OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

In 1879, Nicholas Flood Davin, a member of the Canadian Parliament, was sent to investigate the system of residential schools in the United States. These schools, also called industrial schools, advocated separating Native American youth from their families and reserves to encourage them to adopt European ways of life. Upon his return to Canada, Davin recommended that Canada adopt a similar policy. The government was receptive to Davin's recommendations and, following the North-West Resistance in 1885, the government became even more convinced that the assimilation of First Nations people was the best way to avoid conflict. By 1894, there were over forty-five residential schools in Canada. By the 1930s, there were eighty schools.

In 1920, an amendment to the *Indian Act* made it compulsory for First Nations youth to attend residential schools. Children as young as six were transported away from their families to residential schools, which were often established at a distance from First Nations communities to remove students from their families' influence. In the schools, children were separated from their siblings, given European-style clothing, and allowed to speak in English only. If First Nations youth were caught speaking their traditional language or talking to family members, they were punished. By discouraging First Nations languages, educators hoped that the oral stories providing the foundation of First Nations cultures would die.

Figure 9-19 In its annual report for 1897, the Department of Indian Affairs published these before and after pictures of Thomas Moore, who had entered the Regina Indian Industrial School in Saskatchewan. What point do you think the Department of Indian Affairs was trying to make by showing these pictures?



VOICES

In the days of residential schools, we attended federal day schools. Way too much religion was forced on us. Neither of my parents was Catholic, but my father had us kids baptized so we could get an education. If we didn't attend church, we suffered the consequences, whether we had a valid reason for missing church or not. The government failed to monitor the activities of some schools run by churches, where the policies were not always fair and there was often discrimination against one religion or the other.

— *Levinia Nuqaalaaq Brown, Inuk Elder, Rankin Inlet, Nunavut*

ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Since the early years of European colonization in North America, churches believed they needed to play an important part in educating First Nations people. In the establishment of residential schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches became involved, although the schools were funded by the Canadian government. The churches believed they were acting in the best interest of First Nations children and helped to further the government's assimilation goals. Because residential schools were operated by churches, many teachers were priests, nuns, or ministers. Lessons focused on four subject areas: reading, writing, mathematics, and the Christian faith.

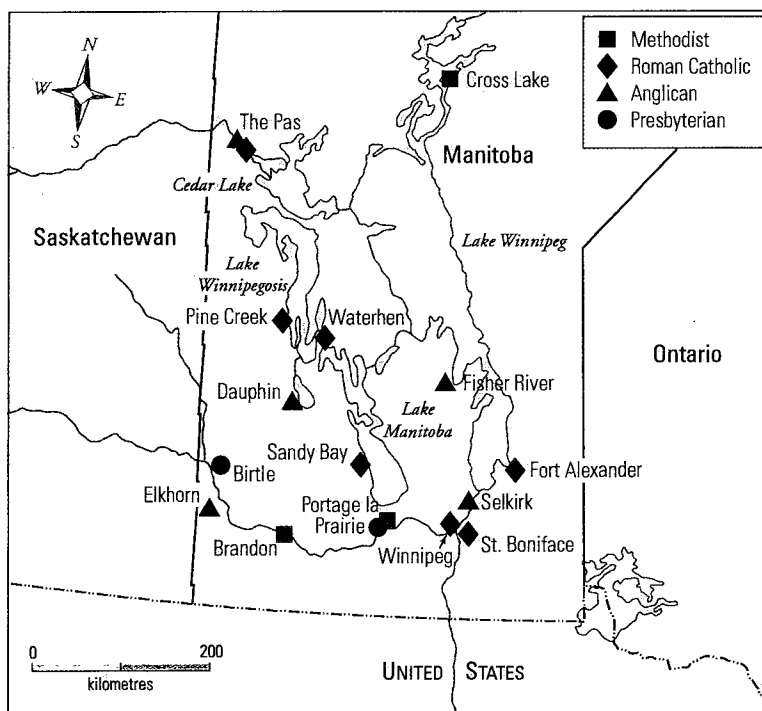
RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND INUIT AND MÉTIS PEOPLES

Although many schools were established for First Nations youth, until the 1930s, little consideration was given to educating Inuit youth. Residential schools in Arctic communities began in the 1950s. They were often more than 1000 kilometres away from the children's homes and families. Because of the distance, Inuit children who attended residential schools were away from their families for up to ten months at a time.

However, while government initiatives for educating Inuit people came late, the government simply ignored the educational needs of Métis people. The federal government focused its educational funding on First Nations and, where space permitted, Métis students who followed many First Nations ways of life. The government's educational goal was assimilation, so those who lived like Euro-Canadians already were not seen as "needing" the residential schools.

Unlike First Nations children, Métis children were not forced to attend residential schools, but many did so as one of their only options for receiving a formal education. Residential schools located near large Métis communities often had many Métis students, such as Cranberry Portage school in Teulon, Manitoba. A few schools had mainly Métis students: St. Paul's in Yukon, Île-à-la-Crosse in Saskatchewan, and St. Paul des Métis in Alberta. Métis children faced the same conditions as First Nations youth in the residential schools. Students denied a place in residential schools were also often denied a place in public schools due to racism, poverty, and a variety of other factors. Many Métis children fell through the cracks and received no formal education.

Figure 9-20 Locations of Residential Schools in Manitoba



CONSEQUENCES OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a statement of apology on behalf of the Government of Canada for the residential school system. The consequences of this method of assimilation have been devastating for First Nations people across the country, as well as for the Métis and Inuit people who attended such schools. In recent years, many former students have come forward with stories of punishment, abuse, and the effects of being deprived of their heritage and culture.

Some students were severely punished for maintaining their traditional languages, ceremonies, and beliefs. Although the type of punishment children experienced varied, there are many accounts of being deprived of food and water, being forced to do additional chores, or being ridiculed in front of fellow students. In some schools, staff used their position of power to inflict emotional, mental, physical, and, in some cases, sexual abuse on students.

One of the most damaging outcomes of residential schools was that First Nations children were taught to believe that their cultures were inferior to Euro-Canadian cultures. Children were often away from their families for months and sometimes years at a time because the government believed that students would return to their traditional ways if they visited home. After several years of being in school, many students had trouble speaking their traditional language and found it difficult to communicate with their families and community members. The problems caused by the residential school system reached beyond the individuals who attended to include other family and community members, as well as younger generations.

Another long-term consequence of the residential school system resulted from the inferior education First Nations children received compared to other Canadian schoolchildren. In most church-operated residential schools, less than half the day was devoted to learning. The rest of the day was spent in “practical education,” which consisted of manual labour and chores to keep the schools functioning. Students were taught practical skills such as sewing and woodworking. Few schools attempted to prepare students for professional or leadership positions.

As students began sharing their stories of conditions in the residential schools, many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit families refused to send their children away, regardless of the consequences. By the 1970s and 1980s, schools began to be closed down. The last government-funded residential school closed in 1996.

Review pages 273 to 275 to list the intended and unintended consequences of the residential school system. How many of the consequences were caused by Eurocentric ideas?

VOICES

Three things stand out in my mind from my years at school: hunger; speaking English; and being called a heathen because of my grandfather.

—George Manuel, *Secwepemc* (Shushwap) political activist

CHECKFORWARD

You will learn more about the consequences of residential schools in Chapter 17.

Figure 9-21 In this photo from the 1960s, a sister of the *Soeurs de Sacre-Coeur d'Ottawa* supervises a haircut in a classroom at the Pukatawagan reserve in Manitoba. Boys' hair was often cut in a European style as soon as they entered school.



VOICES

When I was in school, I was told that one of the reasons that the people came to this land was to find freedom to practise their religion. We look at these people who landed on our shores and one of the first things they did was to build a church. Their lives were changed and their churches (religions) were their anchor that grounded them. Isn't it strange, then, that after they became strong enough, they passed a law that outlawed our spirituality.

— Garry Robson, Anishinaabe Elder,
Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2010

Figure 9-22 Despite attempts by the Canadian government to suppress traditional ceremonies such as the potlatch, it survived and continues to be celebrated today. Here Chief Fred Smith distributes gifts after a Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch in British Columbia.

SUPPRESSION OF FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL TRADITIONS

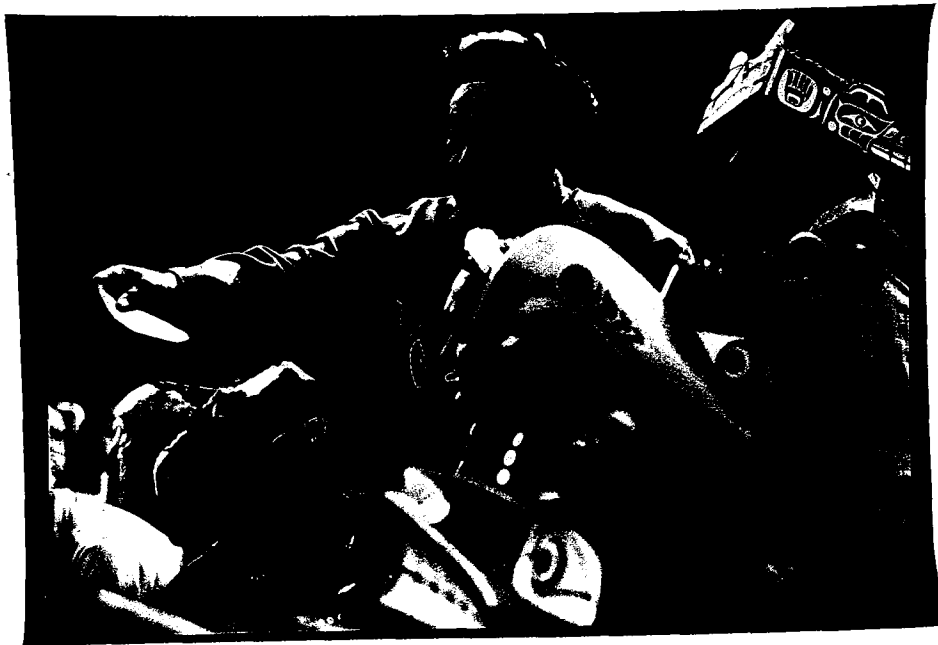
The government policy of assimilation involved suppressing and attempting to slowly extinguish First Nations languages and cultural traditions. Much of this assimilation was attempted in the residential school system. However, efforts were also made to abolish specific cultural rituals within First Nations communities. For example, amendments to the *Indian Act* forbade First Nations people from wearing traditional clothing off reserves and from practising traditional ceremonies such as the potlatch and sun dance.

SUPPRESSION OF THE POTLATCH

As you learned in Chapter 1, the potlatch was an important ceremony for First Nations of the Northwest Coast. Church groups and Indian agents looked negatively upon the potlatch because the ceremonies celebrated and reinforced traditional spiritual beliefs, and Elders used the potlatch to teach younger generations about their culture. Missionaries and Indian agents argued that if First Nations people were to be assimilated into European ways, traditions like the potlatch would have to be stopped. In 1884, a ban prohibiting the potlatch was introduced into the *Indian Act*.

Despite the ban, many First Nations continued to hold the potlatch in secret. In the 1920s, however, the Government of Canada and the Government of British Columbia increased their enforcement of the law. Many First Nations people were arrested for participating in the ceremony, and some were sent to jail. To avoid jail sentences, First Nations could hand over their ceremonial masks and gifts to authorities. The government paid them a small amount for the items and then shipped the objects to various museums in Canada and the United States.

Although the government made many efforts to abolish the potlatch, the ceremony survived. Groups such as the Gitksan and Kwakwaka'wakw continued the ceremony throughout the ban, which was finally lifted in 1951. The potlatch continues to be an important ceremony for many First Nations in British Columbia today.



SUPPRESSION OF THE SUN DANCE

The sun dance is a common name used to describe certain spiritual ceremonies practised by the Nehiyawak (Plains Cree) and nations of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) Confederacy. While the Nehiyawak and Niitsitapi ceremonies are completely different, both versions of the sun dance celebrate community and thanksgiving, while also reaffirming many traditional spiritual and cultural values. However, the ceremonies were often misinterpreted by Euro-Canadian observers, who did not understand the ceremonies' cultural significance and meanings.

While the Canadian government never officially prohibited the entire sun dance, in 1895, the *Indian Act* was amended to make it illegal to perform some aspects of the ceremony. However, as Northwest Coast First Nations had done with the potlatch, First Nations on the prairies continued to perform the sun dance in defiance of the law. In 1951, amendments to the *Indian Act* reversed the ban so that all parts of the dance could be legally performed. The sun dance remains a sacred ceremony that is still held on some reserves today.

Figure 9-23 The sun dance survived decades of government attempts to suppress parts of the ceremony. In this 1960s photo near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, First Nations people begin the preparations for a sun dance ceremony. What does the survival of the sun dance tell you about the strength of First Nations cultures and traditions?

ED How does understanding the prevalence of Eurocentrism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affect your understanding of the federal government's policies toward First Nations, such as the attempts to suppress cultural ceremonies? If you had no knowledge of Eurocentrism, would your understanding of these government policies be the same or different? Explain.



ENFRANCHISEMENT

Cultural suppression was one tool of assimilation, but the main instrument of assimilation, for many years, was enfranchisement. Until 1951, the *Indian Act* defined a person as "an individual other than an Indian." To become a "person" as defined by the act, First Nations people had to enfranchise, giving up their status under the *Indian Act*. The Canadian government believed that the offer of enfranchisement would encourage First Nations people to give up their Indian status.

However, like many government attempts at assimilation, voluntary enfranchisement did not work the way the government had hoped. Most First Nations people refused to give up their status and First Nations identity voluntarily. Between 1859 and 1920, only about 250 First Nations people became enfranchised. That number increased after 1920, when the government allowed First Nations people living off reserves to vote if they accepted enfranchisement. However, the idea of enfranchisement was not often looked upon as a viable option by the majority of First Nations people.

INUIT AND MÉTIS PEOPLES IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

While the Canadian government developed many laws and policies for First Nations people in Canada after Confederation, few policies specifically addressed the needs of Inuit and Métis peoples.

INUIT PEOPLES

Until the mid-twentieth century, European immigrants had not begun to settle in the northern lands where Inuit peoples lived and most Inuit people had continued their traditional ways of life. However, after the boundaries of Québec, Ontario, and Manitoba were extended northward in 1912, the federal and provincial governments began to argue over who was “responsible” for Inuit peoples. The paternalism that characterized the Canadian government’s attitude toward First Nations extended to Inuit peoples as well—all levels of government assumed that Inuit peoples, like First Nations, needed to be managed. In 1939, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that Inuit people were to be considered “Indians” under the *British North America Act* and were therefore the responsibility of the federal government.

When Canada and the United States built various airbases in Canada’s northern lands during the Second World War, Inuit peoples received increased attention because many were in poor health from diseases such as tuberculosis. In the 1950s, one third of the Inuit population had tuberculosis, which had spread quickly through the Inuit population due to increased contact with non-Aboriginal peoples in the 1940s. To address the problem, the government wanted to set up permanent settlements where Inuit people would be encouraged to live if they wanted medical or social assistance. Area administrators were assigned to each of these settlement areas and played similar roles to those of Indian agents on reserves.

Because the government administrators could not spell, pronounce, or understand Inuit names, and because Inuit people did not have the same system of surnames as Europeans, the government issued a tag with an identification number to each Inuk person. Inuit people were required to have their tag with them at all times. These tags were used from the 1940s until the 1970s, when Inuit people were finally recognized by their names by the Canadian government.

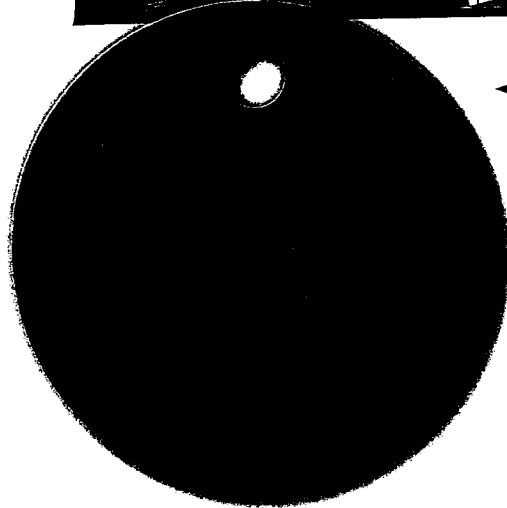
CHECK FORWARD

You will learn more about Inuit peoples’ land claims in Chapter 14.

Figure 9-26 In the 1930s and 1940s, the Canadian government began to develop health programs for Inuit people. Here, a line of Inuit children wait to be checked by Nurse Desrochers at Frobisher Bay School in what is now Iqaluit, Nunavut, around 1945.



Figure 9-27 How were identification tags an example of the government’s Eurocentrism?



ABORIGINAL PARTICIPATION IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

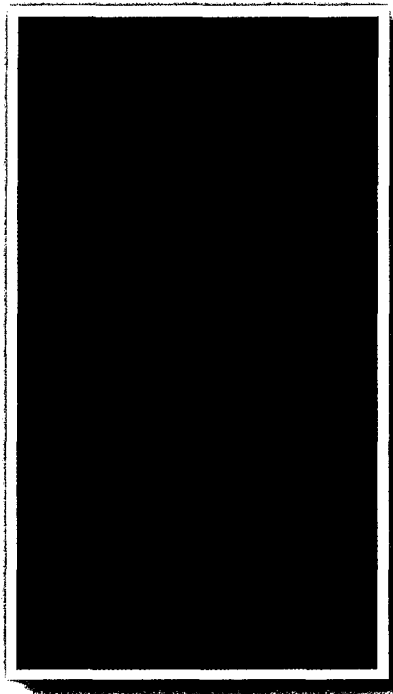
Figure 9-24 Elders pose for a picture with young Canadian Expeditionary Force soldiers from the File Hills Qu'Appelle First Nations in Saskatchewan around 1916.



During the First World War (1914–1918), many Aboriginal people volunteered for military service. The exact number who volunteered is not known, but it is estimated that more than 4000 First Nations people fought for Canada during the First World War. It is not known how many Métis and Inuit people joined Canadian forces. A number of Aboriginal women volunteered as nurses in the war, as well.

Many of these volunteers lost their lives and over fifty earned medals for bravery. For example, Henry Norwest, a Métis soldier, has been described as one of the most successful snipers in the First World War. At the time of his death on August 18, 1918, Norwest was officially credited with 115 enemy casualties. Francis Pegahmagabow, from the Wasauksing First Nation near Parry Sound, Ontario, was also an excellent sniper. His bravery earned him the Military Medal three times: at Mount Sorrel in 1916, at Passchendaele in 1917, and at Amiens in 1918. He is one of only thirty-nine members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force to receive two bars to the Military Medal.



Figure 9-25 A tinted photograph of Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow, one of the most decorated First Nations soldiers from the First World War.



THE RETURN FROM WAR

Despite the sacrifices they made to fight for Canada in the First World War, the Canadian government excluded First Nations, Métis, and Inuit veterans from any of the post-war programs they established for other soldiers. For example, First Nations veterans did not qualify to receive farmland as other First World War veterans did. In addition, many First Nations veterans could not return to live on their reserves because they had been forced to give up their Indian status when they enlisted. The hardships many veterans faced upon their return to Canada forced some men, such as Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow, to become politically active and fight for better rights for First Nations people in Canada.

RECALL... REFLECT... RESPOND

-  1. Take a historical perspective to express what First Nations people hoped an education system would provide for their children after the treaties were signed. How did this differ from the education system the government implemented?
-  2. In this period of pressure to assimilate, how did First Nations cultures change? How did they remain the same?