

Crimes against First Nations, Colonial Dispossession. Forcibly Separated from Their Families and Placed in Church-run Schools

What Is the Difference Between Swastikas and Crosses?

By [Kim Petersen](#)

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On 24 July 1534, French navigator Jacques Cartier voyaged to the Gulf of Kaniatarowanenneh (River of the Mohawks, St Lawrence) and planted a cross on the shore of Gaspé. It signified claiming possession of the territory on behalf of the king of France, Francis I. Donnacona, chief of Stadacona (Québec city), was unhappy at this effrontery. Surmising this, Cartier lied and downplayed the significance of the 9-meter (30-ft) cross.

A Thought Experiment

Imagine that your childhood experience was being forcibly separated from your family and placed in church-run schools. Imagine hearing that you were a savage; being forbidden to speak in your savage tongue; being forced to dress in your oppressor’s sartorial; being made to pray to the oppressor’s god; being fed strange, insalubrious, unpalatable meals; being used as slave labor; being subject to beatings; and, even worse, being sodomized or raped. If you survived this cruel assimilation project, how would your feelings be toward the government, its gendarmerie, and the church? And what of your feelings toward the cross, that ubiquitous symbol of your stolen childhood and your people’s dispossession? [1]

The Blowback to Colonialism

On Canada Day, 1 July, a statue of the British navigator James Cook was torn from its pedestal and tossed into the murky waters of the Inner Harbor of Camosack (Victoria). Afterwards, several wooden red dresses, commemorating missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, were arranged in the bronze Cook’s sted. Half a block away, a statue of queen Victoria situated on the lawn in front of the Parliament Buildings somehow eluded the anti-imperialist fervor of the day. However, the Victoria statue in front of Winnipeg’s Manitoba Legislature did not escape its fate. It was decapitated and toppled, as was the statue of the current monarch, Elizabeth. Victoria’s head was thrown in the Assiniboine River. [2]

Then, sometime between 16 July and 17 July, a steel cross atop Mt Ts’uwxilum (known to

most by its anglicized spelling of [Mt Tzouhalem](#)), in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, was cut down. People are drawing a link between the removal of the cross with the revelation of unmarked graves at former Indian Residential Schools in Canada. The taking down of the Mt Ts'uwxilum cross came on the heels of a confirmed 160 unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Kuper Island Residential School on Penelakut Island (the restored First Nation designation for Kupfer Island).

Ladysmith Chemainus Chronicle [spoke to](#) Penelakut member Steve Sxwithul'txw, an acclaimed filmmaker and a survivor of the Kuper Island Residential School, who started a GoFundMe with his partner Michele Mundy and Tom LaFortune for Vancouver Island First Nations to search former residential school sites on their territory. Is fundraising something First Nations should have to do?

"I think it's important that the government fund this. In no way shape or form that First Nations should be funding this. In no way shape or form should a residential school survivor be fundraising to find bodies," said Sxwithul'txw.

Sxwithul'txw demands accountability of the government and churches.

The work is going to continue for the next number of years — the unearthing of our lost children. We can keep unearthing them, but at the same time, what is going to happen? Who is going to be accountable? Is the Government of Canada going to take responsibility? They're culpable. Same with the churches. So what's going to be the process? I'm asking non-Indigenous Canadians to apply for answers. Write to your MP to get answers and move forward with investigations.

The government and churches are culpable, but so is the [RCMP](#).

North Cowichan mayor Al Siebring knows of the devastation caused to many lives by the residential schools, but he nonetheless bemoans the removal of a cross first placed on Mt Ts'uwxilum in 1976: "That is not how we as a society should be dealing with our past. We need to respect each other and get along." [3]

In other words, Siebring says the symbols of colonialism — the symbols of the institutions that brought about the dispossession of First peoples and sought their disappearance through assimilation — should remain on display or should not be summarily removed. This sentiment is expressed for a symbol now merged with genocide that was erected on the mountain named after chief Ts'uwxilum on the territory of the Quw'utsun (Cowichan) people.

Would Siebring argue similarly for mutual respect regarding swastikas displayed as symbols in Europe? [4]

As for how to deal with the symbols and symbolism, of course, First Nations should be consulted and lead the way. However, there is also an argument to be made that the current generation of non-Indigenous Canadians, who are ashamed of the heinous crimes of previous generations and wish to repudiate these crimes by removing the symbols of oppression, have a right to repurpose the spaces to better reflect sincerity for [reconciliation](#).

The Cross and Original Peoples

Meanwhile, although reconciliation is the buzzword, many actions speak to the continuation

of [colonial-settler dispossession](#). For instance, the Mi'kmaq still struggle against government ennui and white racism for their [right to harvest lobster](#) as they have done [centuries before the White Man arrived](#). The Wet'suwet'en First Nation are [still resisting](#) the construction of a pipeline through their unceded territory, [abetted by the RCMP](#). [Mi'kmaw groups are opposed](#) to the construction of a LNG export facility in Mi'kma'ki (Nova Scotia) and have an [understandable fear](#) of “man camps” that would house the construction workers. And the RCMP are [still killing Indigenous people](#).

I just got out from [#Gidimten](#) clan territory on [#Wetsuweten](#) yintah, where RCMP conducted an aggressive, pre-dawn raid. Six land defenders arrested: pic.twitter.com/JkKempHUGM

— Jesse Winter (@jwints) [February 6, 2020](#)

Yet, the moral solution is clear. If you steal something, then elementary morality demands that you return what you have stolen — in the same condition and with additional compensation as required. [Land back](#):

Land Back is really about the decision-making power. It's about self-determination for our Peoples here that should include some access to the territories and resources in a more equitable fashion, and for us to have control over how that actually looks. — Jesse Wenté, a dad, husband, and Ojibwe man

Dolefully, it seems that colonialism in both its historical and present-day forms remains a cross Indigenous peoples are forced to bear.

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Notes

1. I am not indigenous to Turtle Island, and do not pretend to know what it feels like to have experienced what the Indigenous people of Turtle Island have experienced. I can only attempt to imagine it.
2. [Queen Victoria's legacy](#) is tarnished by her reigning over the racist dispossession of peoples throughout the British empire.
3. Quoted by Kevin Rothbauer, “Cross that overlooked Cowichan Valley from Mount Tzouhalem cut down,” *Cowichan Valley Citizen*, 22 July 2021, A1 and A35.
4. It is acknowledged that Nazis purloined the swastika from the East where it was a common symbol with a positive connotation and a long history for Hindus and Buddhists.

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