

The World Is Burning and Canada Will Not Extinguish It

The world does not need more Canada, it needs a decolonized Canada

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It's hard to find things to celebrate right now. Between a dangerous virus and the dangerous police, the news cycle is even darker than usual. This week, Justin Trudeau and the Canadian establishment will try to interrupt that cycle and spin it into a tale of how lucky we are to be in Canada, spared the ravages and conflicts of our southern neighbour, walking a more enlightened path for the last 153 years.

Let's not be fooled. Canada was forged in the same colonial fires that created the United States—its ruling class has forever pursued the same goals, and it is beset by the same crises (albeit on a different scale and with some variation).

Indeed, the crisis we are entering is global and it will be prolonged. Economic depression, climate catastrophe, incapacity to manage public health and safety, all hitting hardest those marginalized by their race, class, gender, and sexuality. The oppressed will continue to rise up and the ruling class will continue to crack down, and the outcome of this round of class struggle is hard to predict.

What is clear is that the world order that coalesced around the Euro-American colonial capitalist system is failing, dramatically. On the eve of Canada's 153rd birthday, it would be instructive to consider the role Canada played in creating and maintaining that world order. It doesn't make for pleasant reading and I should know, having recently written it all up.

Canada's First Foreign Policy

My new book, [Canada in the World: Settler Capitalism and the Colonial Imagination](#), traces the history of Canada's relationships in the world beginning with its foundational foreign policy: its relations with Indigenous peoples. Hundreds of nations, with complex and varied political and economic systems, were actively and consciously displaced, destroyed, or irreparably diminished in order to create Canada. Genocide is an inauspicious starting point, and the fact that this origin story is celebrated as Canada Day should, itself, ring an alarm bell.

European colonialism, in what became Canada, was driven by one primary material goal: settlers wanted control of the land so that they could parcel it into private property and establish the dynamics of capitalism. This necessarily entailed removing the Indigenous people who lived on that land by a range of tactics—violence, manipulation, starvation, kidnapping children, and the establishment of police to enforce Canada's position—and this process rested on an ideological framework of white supremacy.

Though the settlers who became “Canadian” charted a particular path through this conquest, the pattern was repeated across all of Europe’s settler colonies, including the United States. Claiming to be a superior race destined to rule, settlers stole both Indigenous land and African labour—some 14 million people kidnapped, sold, or born into slavery in the trans-Atlantic slave trade—and built a capitalist economy on this foundation. Capitalism, remember, was in its infancy. As I often explain to my students, capitalism is like a game of Monopoly, and the European ruling classes ensured that they would win that game by stealing most of the property and wealth before the first roll of the dice.

The metaphor works, but it also obscures much of the horror and inhumanity that the process entailed. In the book, I detail the barbaric behaviour of the Euro-American settlers across many generations, behaviour that remains etched in the collective psychology of North American society today. Race and racism, developed to justify genocide and slavery, remain central to the experience of living in Canada or the United States. The intergenerational trauma connected to that racism—and the systematic inequality and hardship that is maintained to this day—reverberates in every victim of settler violence (from Colton Boushie to Trayvon Martin), every marginalized community without clean water (from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation to the Navajo Nation) every pipeline built through Indigenous territory without consent (from Trans Mountain to Dakota Access), and every over-policed poor community (from Jane-Finch to Ferguson).

I can already hear a certain kind of Canadian voice starting to interject. “Yes, we made mistakes in the past, but we are trying to atone for those mistakes and build a better world. We’re not like the Americans, we even have a museum dedicated to human rights!” Canada built an image of itself in the twentieth century as an enlightened, humanitarian, and honest broker in the world. If that image rings true to you, I’m here to spoil the party.

Past and Present

In every major instance of Canadian foreign policy—from the Boer War to the Iraq War, from the Russian Revolution to the Arab Spring—Canada has been driven by the same principles on which it was founded: capitalist profits and racial hierarchies. The pattern is so consistent that I occasionally wondered whether the book might get boring. As it happens, Canada found such creative ways to adapt this pattern that it would be a marvel, if it wasn’t so gut-wrenching.

Impoverished peasants and workers rise up in El Salvador in the 1930s against a despised dictator and an electricity company charging exorbitant rates. The company is Montreal-based International Power, and its boss is close friends with Prime Minister Bennett. Canada sends a warship to support the dictator in what would be remembered as La Matanza (the massacre of thousands of people) after which Canadian General Victor Brodeur enjoys a round of golf with the dictator. International Power’s profits are restored and the Prime Minister brushes off the victims as “communist Indians.”

Congolese people in the 1950s demand their freedom after decades of craven exploitation and violence at the hands of Belgium. Canadian officials insist that the Congolese are not ready—“savagery still very near the surface,” says one—but offer to send peacekeepers when the first democratic Prime Minister, socialist Patrice Lumumba, asks for help dealing with a right-wing breakaway faction. Instead of helping Lumumba, the Canadian peacekeepers refuse to share barracks with black peacekeepers, start fights in Leopoldville

nightclubs, and have to be directly ordered not to use racial slurs against the Congolese. One Canadian peacekeeper directly aids Joseph Mobutu (right-wing rebel and future dictator of the country) in the assassination of the beloved Lumumba.

The Vietnam War, crucible of American imperialism, rages into the 1970s despite anti-war upheaval and the Vietnamese peoples' staunch opposition. Claire Culhane, Canadian nurse working at a hospital near My Lai, chains herself to a chair in the House of Commons demanding an explanation for Canada's participation in the heinous war. Canadian Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent had mourned when the Vietnamese won their freedom from the French colonial "heroes", but Canada agreed to help oversee the Geneva Peace Accords. Canada uses that role to spy on North Vietnam for the Americans, enforcing Geneva's rules only when it serves American interests, and provides the American war with funding, equipment, Agent Orange, green berets, and thousands of soldiers who leave Canadian flag decals on the mirrors in Vietnamese brothels. The hospitals where Culhane works get little funding because their primary purpose is to run secret agents.

It is 2001 and George W. Bush declares a War on Terror. The Arab and Muslim world—and their diasporic communities—watch in horror as first Afghanistan and then Iraq are bombed into oblivion. The civilian death toll over the course of the wars is staggering, the destruction incalculable, the conquest complete. The intervention is expanded to encompass Libya, Syria, and Mali, and while each case is unique, there is no place where life is made better by two decades of war. Bush's invasion leaves the once-secular, prosperous Iraq mired in poverty and religious conflict. Afghans live in perpetual fear that their weddings or funerals will be bombed by Obama's drones. Despite decades of disaster, Trump considers expanding the war to dismantle Iran.

And at the centre of the 'Coalition of the Willing' is Canada. Canadian troops call Afghanistan "Indian Country" and describe Afghans as "straight out of the pages of National Geographic." Canada helps install a puppet government and then embeds its military in that government in order to oversee its lawmaking. The economy is privatized and Canadian capital gets a big piece, while misogynistic laws allowing husbands to rape their wives if they refuse sex are passed with Canadian approval. Afghan prisoners are tortured by Canadian soldiers to the point that they can't control their bowels.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Chretien does not officially declare war on Iraq, but his military cooperates fully with the occupation and Canadian companies reap the rewards, as when Nortel wins a contract to rebuild the fibre-optic network destroyed by American bombs. As the War on Terror balloons, so does the Canadian military, its budget, and its presence in Canadian popular culture. Soldiers are lionized at sporting events, even as they forcibly overthrow a democratic government in Haiti and assume control of a police force that kills thousands of Haitians. Public buildings don "support the troops" ribbons, even as those troops drop bombs on civilians in Syria and Iraq. Tanks are displayed at street festivals to entice new recruits to join the military, as it trains and supports the fascist government of Ukraine.



Former Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King (second from left) at the opening ceremonies of the All-German Sports Competition, Olympic Stadium, June 27, 1937. Photo from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The Making of the Modern World

In every case, and so many in between, Canada played its part in building and maintaining the world we currently live in; and that world is burning. Forest fires ravage the Amazon, the lungs of our planet, to facilitate the penetration of capital (Canada welcomed the rise of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro who is behind the fires). Siberian villages record temperatures of over 100 degrees, climate change already a *fait accompli* thanks to the relentless burning of fossil fuels by industrial giants (Canada is one of the worst per-capita polluters in the world). Righteous flames lick the sky above the Third Precinct in Minneapolis, lit up in response to ceaseless police violence against black people and the impunity with which it is enacted (Canadian police have a similar record). I have nothing but admiration for those who sparked that fire—no justice, no peace—but it should never have come to this.

That it did come to this is a logical consequence of nearly every action Canada has ever taken on the international stage. Anytime there has been a movement of people that seemed to push in the direction of justice, equality, social welfare—in Russia, China, Korea, Vietnam, Guatemala, Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Angola, Indonesia, or the Philippines—Canada has been there to undermine it. Whenever the forces of colonialism, or of the right and far-right, have stirred, in Germany, Spain, Portugal, South Africa, Rhodesia, Uganda, Israel, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, or the Ukraine, Canada has been eager to work with them, speak well of them, fund them, equip them, make war alongside them, train their police or sell them billions of dollars worth of Light Armoured Vehicles.

This last example, a reference to Justin Trudeau's weapons deal with the Saudi monarchy, echoes with the memory of Canadian arms sales to fascist Japan as it launched a brutal assault against China in the 1930s. Similarly, Chrystia Freeland's tight relationship with Ukrainian neo-Nazis can only be a reminder of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's

unseemly adoration of Adolf Hitler (himself an admirer of Canada's genocide of Indigenous people). Canada's brazen disregard for Venezuelan sovereignty is consistent with its denunciation of independence for India and Pakistan in the 1940s (a Winnipeg newspaper portrayed turbaned infants being abandoned by a British nanny). Torture scandals in Afghanistan draw an obvious parallel to the torture of a Somali teenager in 1993, but could also be placed alongside the Canadian cop who tortured Kenyans on behalf of Britain in the 1950s (John Timmerman was nicknamed "the Himmler of Kenya").

Canada actively called for the "quarantine" of freedom movements around the world, which of course brings us back to Canada's own segregation and containment of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, the threads that hold all of this together are to be found in that first foreign policy. Canadian Confederation itself, 153 years ago, was specifically motivated by the desire to clear all of what is now Canada of the "uncivilized" people who inhabited the lands, to make way for the "clearer northern brains" of the white race, which would bring capitalist prosperity to the few lucky enough to own land and labour. Henceforth, opponents to capitalism were considered opponents to "progress." Racial stereotypes were mobilized against oppressed people fighting for freedom and against capitalism, at home and abroad, and Canada did everything in its power to create a world governed by the British and American empires on behalf of capital. The glue in the Atlantic Alliance, the Canadian elite staked everything on this project, and from the standpoint of its own goals, it was an overwhelming success.

Their success has left the world in flames. Surely, midway through 2020, we can recognize that humanity cannot survive these capitalist, white supremacist empires. The hell they have unleashed for the past two centuries cannot adequately be captured in words, but I do my best to document Canada's significant role in creating those hells in *Canada in the World*. The problem is increasingly urgent. The world does not need more Canada, it needs a decolonized Canada, something new that will help dismantle the calamitous world order that Canada helped to build. Something we might actually want to celebrate on July 1, 2021.

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Featured image: Justin Trudeau applauds during the opening ceremony of the 2017 Canada Summer Games. Photo from [Flickr](#).

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