Timeline of Canadian Colonialism and Indigenous Resistance
Simplified Game Version

Please note: Indigenous peoples have a rich history on Turtle Island going back thousands of years. The colonial history represented in this timeline, then, is only a small fraction of that whole.

■ 1600s
Indigenous Welcome
Indigenous nations are generally welcoming when Europeans arrive on their territory. They trade with the strange newcomers from a position of strength and prosperity, having developed cultural, political, and ecological systems that have grown and flourished over the course of millennia. Europeans view Indigenous lands with amazement and envy, having degraded and destroyed most of their natural resources and ecological systems.

Terra Nullius & the Doctrine of Discovery
To justify the appropriation and exploitation of the riches of First Nations' land, European governments develop the Doctrine of Discovery and the legal concept of *terra nullius*. These legal doctrines say that the Turtle Island is "empty land" that belongs to no one. According to this reasoning, Indigenous nations and the ownership or title that they exercise can be ignored because they do not have permanent settlements, farms, Christianity, state governments, or "real" culture or civilization. Colonial governments grant themselves absolute title to the land by virtue of "discovery." They say that Indigenous peoples only have subservient usage rights, but cannot genuinely own land or exercise sovereignty any more than the "beasts of the field."

■ 1700s
Resistance to Settlement
Though European governments have defined the land as legally 'empty,' when waves of settlers begin arriving, Indigenous communities resist the theft and destruction of their land through diplomatic and military means.

Royal Proclamation
Settlers and colonial governments have to contend with the presence and pressure of First Nations on territories that they want to exploit. So the British Crown releases a Proclamation acknowledging "Indian title," but also creating a process by which this title can be extinguished – treaties. The Proclamation outlaws individual land transfers, meaning treaties must be made on a nation-to-nation level.

■ 1800s
Treaties
Indigenous nations make treaties with colonial governments in order to safeguard their land and way of life. They see the treaties as initiating mutual relationships that must be maintained and renewed. In return for accepting existing white settlements, they are generally promised an inalienable 'reserve' of their traditional territory to live on, and are told that they can continue their traditional use of the rest of their territory.

Indian Act
With Indigenous nations asserting their treaty rights and still trying to use their territories and reserves in traditional ways, colonial governments turn to assimilation as way of eliminating their 'Indian problem.' In Canada, efforts to assimilate natives center on the 1876 Indian Act. The Act defines who is 'Indian' without any consultation, excluding many individuals that Indigenous communities consider members. It makes it particularly easy for women and their children to lose their status. Nations are broken up into smaller 'bands' and existing leaders are not recognized. A Western
electoral system is imposed on most bands, ignoring traditional selection processes and excluding Indigenous women. The overall goal is to 'civilize' aboriginals by Christianizing them and forcing them into permanent agricultural settlements. 'Civilizing' programs are to be funded by the sale of reserve land. Processes are created for individuals to be enfranchised as Canadian citizens and individual property owners, and for Indigenous nations to be assimilated into the bottom of the governmental order as municipalities. Canadian politicians like John A. MacDonald assume this assimilation is inevitable, and will be seen as desirable by Indigenous peoples.

late 1800s - early 1900s

**Indigenous Resistance to ‘Civilizing’ Efforts**

Many elected band councils refuse to use the limited authority granted to them by the Indian Act. Almost no individuals choose to become enfranchised, and most nations refuse to recognize individual deeds granted to those who do. Nations also resist attempts to alienate more of their land, often successfully. Farming programs are deemed a failure. Missionaries struggle to make progress, and they become frustrated by their inability to halt traditional ceremonies. On the prairies, the Cree and Métis launch an armed "rebellion."

**Cultural Repression and Residential Schools**

Since Indigenous peoples will not voluntarily ‘civilize’ themselves (i.e. assimilate), the Canadian government decides to force them. It bans spiritual and cultural practices. Indian Affairs and its on-reserve agents exercise totalitarian control over the lives of aboriginals, forcing them to adopt European norms. Most importantly, Indigenous children are taken away from their families, homes, and cultures for schooling in settler culture. Attendance in residential schools is mandatory, and children are punished for speaking their language, or engaging in spiritual and cultural practices. Conditions are deplorable: thousands die from malnutrition and disease. Death rates reach as high as 69% in some institutions. Thousands of students are physically and sexually abused; traumatized survivors return home years later to family they barely know.

With land loss and ecological destruction making most Indigenous communities destitute, they have little means to resist the colonial clampdown. Bands are also isolated by the fragmentation and trauma they have suffered, and the restrictions placed on travelling off-reserve. Initially, they tend to hope that residential schools will help their children adjust to new realities and flourish – and in turn, help their communities do the same.

1940s-60s

**Indigenous Activism**

Ironically, residential schools and military service help foster a consciousness of being 'Indian' rather than simply members of particular bands and nations. 'Pan-Indian' organizing and resistance begins in earnest with the formation of groups like the National Indian Brotherhood, a forerunner of today's Assembly of First Nations. Campaigns to improve the lot of Indigenous peoples find support among settler civil society. This pressure forces the Canadian legislature to consult Indigenous people on the Indian Act for the first time. The Act is reformed, and some of its more draconian aspects are softened.

**White Paper**

Trudeau's Liberal government introduce the 'White Paper on Indian Policy.' It uses a rhetoric of individual rights, reminiscent of that used by the Civil Rights Movement, to justify assimilation. It envisions eliminating reserves, the Indian Act, and any recognition of individual 'Indian status' or collective aboriginal rights. The existence of aboriginal title is denied, and treaties are dismissed as irrelevant in the context of modern Canada.

1970s-80s
Red Power and Court Battles
Fuelled by outrage at Liberal arrogance, the Red Power movement asserts aboriginal sovereignty and calls for treaties to be honoured. Its emphasis on pride in Indigenous identity also births a cultural and spiritual renaissance.

Having regained access to the courts and control of band finances. Indigenous groups challenge government control of hunting, fishing, and their land. Eventually the Supreme Court acknowledges the continued existence of aboriginal title, to the chagrin of Trudeau's Liberals.

**Canadian Constitution & Indian Act Amendment**

Bowing to the inevitable, Section 35 of the 1982 Canadian Constitution recognizes the "aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada." It leaves these rights undefined. Similarly, after a century of pushback, Bill C-31 amends the Indian Act, eliminating sexist provisions which meant that women lost their Indian status and band membership if they married non-status men. Affected women (and their children) could apply to restore their status. This 1985 "Act to Amend the Indian Act" also finally eliminates enfranchisement, and grants bands greater bylaw-making powers, as a kind of municipal and subservient self-government.

### 1990s - present

**Comprehensive Land Claims Process**

Colonial governments continue to insist that the extinguishment of aboriginal title and rights is a prerequisite to the negotiation of land claims and self-determination. Many First Nations feel forced to come to the table, in order to halt or moderate devastating resource development on their land. In order to take part in the negotiation process, Indigenous groups must also borrow large sums of money from the government. These debts give the government significant leverage, and will come out of future settlements. On-reserve living standards can be desperate, and government services will only be brought up to settler standards (or something like it) through the signing of these 'Self-Termination' deals – as Mohawk policy analyst Russell Diabo has called them. These final agreements would convert First Nations into municipalities and their reserves into fee simple (i.e. individually-owned) lands. No compensation for past crimes, injustices, or mismanagement is allowed, and First Nations must release the Crown from any future compensation claims.

**Indigenous Peoples' Strategic Position**

Indigenous communities have been damaged by centuries of colonialism, but continue to exist on their traditional territories, often in more remote and relatively untouched areas. A cultural revival continues, and some form of "aboriginal title" can no longer be denied. Meanwhile, colonial governments and corporations dream of new and never-ending cycles of resource exploitation on Indigenous land, often with catastrophic ecological implications. Indigenous Nations are generally the biggest challenge to these plans for economic "development."

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The most important sources for this timeline game were:


[http://temagami.nativeweb.org/workfair/docs/Federal-Indian-Policy.html](http://temagami.nativeweb.org/workfair/docs/Federal-Indian-Policy.html)


This timeline game is based on a longer more detailed article written for issues 5.4-5 of *The Leveller* (leveller.ca). An updated version can be found at:

[link here]

Comments, criticisms, and questions can be directed to:

timothyblinks@gmail.com or ipsmo@riseup.net