

# **The Genocide in California's Closet**

**Robert Aquinas McNally**

**Berkeley OLLI, Jan.–Feb. 2023**

The course explores 19<sup>th</sup>-century California's long-ignored genocide against the state's Native peoples and examines the lasting lessons and effects of this dark history. It looks, too, at where we go from here and at how acknowledging the past can help redeem both present and future.

## **Time & Place**

Tuesdays, Jan. 17–Feb. 21, 2023, 1–3 p.m., Golden Bear Center, Suite 365, 1995 University Avenue, Berkeley; also live-streamed and recorded.

## **Contact**

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## **Sources and Readings**

Before each week's class, you'll receive suggested readings that will frame and deepen our sessions. Should you wish to obtain books on your own, key sources will be my book, *The Modoc War* (Nebraska, 2017); Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide* (Oxford, 2016); and Brendan Lindsay, *Murder State* (Nebraska, 2012).

## **Class Schedule**

**Jan. 17: The Genocidal Backstory to California's Only Indian War**

Largely forgotten these days, the Modoc War of 1872–73 occupied the American public mind of the time. It rattled the second Grant Administration, claimed the life of the only general officer to fall in a Western Indian war, and embarrassed the military with one stinging defeat after another. Yet, for all its drama, this fight was more than a strategic and tactical engagement. Behind and beneath the war sits the reality of California's genocide.

### **Jan. 24: From Raphaël Lemkin to Spanish, Mexican, and American California**

The word *genocide* entered the public lexicon only in the 1940s, when Polish lawyer Lemkin created the term to cover the particular variety of mass atrocity Nazi Germany was visiting upon Europe. Genocide, though, has happened many times before and since, under different regimes and varying names. Using the international legal concept of genocide as the frame, we will set the stage by examining what occurred in California between the Spanish invasion from Mexico in 1769 and the United States' annexation in 1846.

### **Jan. 31: Laying the Foundation**

Genocides do not roll out full-blown. Rather, they move through stages that escalate from bigotry, dehumanization, and discrimination to mass murder and, ultimately, denial. California's extermination campaign developed from pseudoscientific racist ideas about Natives, gave birth to laws that stripped them of legal and political rights, and led to Gov. Peter Burnett's declaration of a war of extermination funded by \$45 million in state bonds.

### **Feb. 7: Death by a Thousand Massacres**

The California genocide operated through local vigilante posses, state-funded militias, and Regular Army units that attacked Native villages, then force-marched survivors to federal reservations featuring concentration-camp conditions. At the same time, mining, logging, farming, and ranching killed game and fish, fouled rivers, and altered the pastures and woodlands that supported Native communities. Inescapable poverty added sickness and the

diseases of despair to the killing machine. By 1900, approximately 90% of the original Indigenous population had been wiped out.

**Feb 14: Erasure, from Yosemite and John Muir to Modoc Skulls and Ishi**

The genocide extended beyond physical extermination to eliminate the cultural evidence and memory of California's original inhabitants. This effort included displaying the remains of dead Natives as "specimens of natural history" in museums, renaming landscape features from Yosemite to Mt. Lassen, and creating the public fallacy of vanishing Natives and an empty, pristine wilderness.

**Feb. 21: Rebound, Resilience, Amends, Alliance**

In the end, the genocide failed. California is now home to the largest Native population in the United States and is witnessing an Indigenous cultural, political, and economic renaissance. This course-concluding session looks at contemporary Native California and asks what non-Native people can do to address the state's shameful past and redeem its present and future.