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Decolonizing American Indian History: Cherokee Ethnogenesis
Janna LM Rogers, Janna.Rogers@OkState.edu
PhD Student: US History; Race and Ethnicity; Public
Oklahoma State University

ABSTRACT

- Objective** Genocide as a lens for American Indian history has gained wider acceptance within the academy based on historical evidence and a rise in interdisciplinary holocaust studies. This essay shows Cherokee history requires a penetrating understanding of the vehement climate of race relations that followed the American Revolutionary War through the Indian Removal era. Was settler colonialism and dispossession from tribal territories a template for ethnic cleansing? Was religious conversion and Americanizing Indigenous peoples at the core of shifts in Cherokee identity? The myth that Cherokee relinquished Indian identity continues to spark scholarly debates over assumptions that the Cherokee preferred Euroamerican culture and traditions. Debates of Cherokee identity continue among historians, legal scholars, federal policy-makers, anthropologists, and throughout Indian Country. The anthropological term *ethnogenesis* is used in this essay to refer to delineated Cherokee markers of cultural group identity that shifted over time. Markers that identified the Cherokee as an ethnic or racial group include shared common language, common ancestry, common culture, and common territory or ancestral homelands.
- Results** Assimilation of white culture was a tool to resist and survive westward expansion. Federal agendas and settler violence aimed to annihilate essential foundations of Cherokee life. Cherokee, adaptation of “white” identity was a response to federal policies of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Cherokee ethnogenesis was influenced by federal policies of assimilation and federal agendas of Indian removal from the southeastern United States. In response to those policies the Cherokee acculturated politically, socially, and religiously. Acculturating and assimilating into larger society was a means of surviving policies of westward expansionism rooted in a complex history of genocide. Unsolidified Cherokee cultural and ethnic identity resulted from racialized violence, inter-cultural relations with larger society, intermarriage, religious conversion, and engagement with foreign governments. Cherokee makers of racial and cultural group identity shifted over time which altered tribal identity.
- Methodology** This research is framed within the context of genocide and holocaust studies. Original language extrapolated from primary sources includes the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.