

The Invisible "Guns": Disease and Native Americans

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

For a long time Native Americans had lived completely isolated from the rest of the world. They had never been exposed to diseases such as measles, smallpox, and influenza, so they had no resistance to them. They had no vaccines and no medicines to fight these diseases.

A Native American might visit a trading post and shake hands with a European who had one of these diseases. The European might become ill but would probably recover because he had been exposed to the disease before. The Native American, however, would return to his tribe, fall ill, and, in all likelihood, infect other members of his tribe.



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Contact with Europeans introduced deadly diseases to Native American societies.

Once a disease was introduced into a Native American village, people began dying. Sometimes 50 to 90 percent of the people would die. Worse, all the people would get sick at the same time. That meant there were few villagers left to hunt, tend crops, and nurse the sick.

Smallpox hit Native Americans in the Northeast in 1633, causing a 95 percent death rate among some villages along the Connecticut River. In 1620, the Huron numbered around twenty thousand people. By 1640, disease had slashed that number in half.

In the Pacific Northwest, diseases killed nearly one out of three Native Americans. Between 1780 and 1820, half of the Native Americans living in the northern Rockies died.

The winter of 1839-1840 was especially devastating. It became known as the "smallpox winter." Estimates say that eight thousand Blackfoot, two thousand Pawnee, and one thousand Crow died from smallpox that winter.

For the most part, these infections were accidental and spread unknowingly. There was nothing anyone could have done about them. However, there were some exceptional cases in which Europeans used disease as a weapon against Native Americans. During a siege of a British fort in 1763, the fort's commander invited some of the Delaware, who had staged the attack, to a truce in order to talk peace. As a greeting, the commander presented the Delaware with a handkerchief and two blankets that he knew were infected with smallpox. During the next few months, hundreds of Delaware in the Ohio Valley died.



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Generally, Europeans did not intend to transmit diseases to Native Americans.