

In the 1860s, Mni Sota Makoce, the vast lands claimed by the Dakota people in the northern Great Plains, stood at the center of a multi-sided struggle for North America's political future. The Dakota based their territorial claim on Indigenous understandings of sovereignty that emphasized ancestral connections and traditions of self-governance but allowed for mobility and shared land use within agreed upon conventions. In contrast, Great Britain and the United States of America acted on a European definition of territorial sovereignty as absolute, giving the state total control within its borders to the exclusion of any other polity's claims. That definition supported British and American imperial ambitions to colonize the Great Plains with white settlers at the expense of native claims to the land. In 1862, long-simmering disputes over who ruled Mni Sota Makoce exploded into armed conflict between the United States and the Dakota (Legg, 2024). When Dakota refugees fled north to lands claimed by Britain, the conflict became entangled with a broader continental crisis that involved the American Civil War and the struggle for settler self-government in British North America.

By looking at the Dakota War, as this conflict came to be labelled, as part of a broader transnational crisis occasioned by the U.S. Civil War, I hope to show how race, borders, and contradictory understandings of sovereignty culminated in the expulsion of the Dakota from territories on both sides of the 49th Parallel and helped to redefine the power of the nation state. My project contributes to the study of the Dakota War by situating the conflict within the larger arc of settler imperialism in the North American West. I will analyze Dakota understandings of sovereignty alongside Eurocentric versions to demonstrate how these conflicting views led to war. Building on scholarship of the Dakota War and western expansion, I will demonstrate that the American Indian Wars and the U.S. Civil War were part of a broader continental process and bring the Dakota's evolving relations to these multiple states into one narrative. Through their conquest of the West, Britain and America, the most powerful imperial forces of the nineteenth century, developed their concepts about the sovereign nation-state, where they dealt with competing claims of colonial settlers, semi-sovereign institutions such as the Hudson's Bay Company, and Indigenous tribes.

I will analyze a range of primary sources including testimonies by U.S. soldiers and fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Company, alongside journal entries by the Metis of the Red River Settlement and the Sioux Indian Correspondence from the British Colonial Office (located at the University of Alberta archives). This will allow me to compare and utilize decolonial, transnational, and community-based Indigenous methodologies to break through colonial understandings of Indigenous agency and resistance. In this, I will restore complexity and continuity to the Dakota's evolving relationship with sovereign institutions, tribes, and states. This project fits into the University of Calgary's "Ahead of Tomorrow" initiative and the Faculty of Arts strategic plan, which fosters cross-cultural understanding through Truth and Reconciliation. I have access to an extensive library collection on Indigenous history, and expert supervision from Dr. Beau Cleland and Dr. Frank Towers, both specialists on the 19th century United States, and the American Civil War in a global and transnational context.

Most scholarship views the resistance by Indigenous tribes against colonial societies through a single-state lens, and by doing this many nuances are missed. Following the Dakota and their diaspora across imperial borders sheds light on broader questions of Indigenous sovereignty, violence across state lines, and competing consolidations of the West by the United States and British North America (West, 2023). By understanding the Dakota War against the backdrop of the U.S. Civil War and these competing settler colonial projects, we can understand how the war's fallout affected British, American, and later Canadian relations with Indigenous peoples for years to come (Rensink, 2018). This transnational history of the Dakota people offers insight on how Indigenous agency and resistance adapted past the Civil War-era, and how this mutual incomprehension of borders and sovereignty has shaped contemporary understandings of state relations with Indigenous peoples around the world.

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