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**THE BLACK WAR IN TASMANIA (1824-1832):
A CONFLICT SEEN FROM BOTH SIDES**

Christensen C.S.

The conflict known as the Black War was one of the most violent and consequential frontier wars in Australian history. Fought in Van Diemen's Land (modern-day Tasmania) between the mid-1820s and 1832 it pitted British colonial settlers, soldiers and authorities against the island's Aboriginal peoples. The war resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Aboriginal Tasmanians and more than two hundred colonists and soldiers, and it culminated in the destruction of Aboriginal society as it had existed for tens of thousands of years. While the term "war" was not consistently used by contemporaries, the scale, organization and sustained violence justify its use by modern historians. The article examines the Black War from both perspectives: that of the British colonial society attempting to establish control over land and resources, and that of the Aboriginal Tasmanians defending their country, kin, and way of life.

Keywords: Tasmania, Aboriginals, Black War, colonial settlers, colonization, Tasmanians, Great Britain, Guerrilla Warfare, question of genocide, the Black Line, European settlement, British colonization, Flinders Island.

**ЧЕРНАЯ ВОЙНА В ТАСМАНИИ (1824-1832 ГГ.):
КОНФЛИКТ, РАССМАТРИВАЕМЫЙ С ОБЕИХ СТОРОН**

Христенсен К.С.

Конфликт, известный как Черная война, был одной из самых ожесточенных и последовательных пограничных войн в истории Австралии. В период с середины 1820-х по 1832 гг. на Земле Ван-Димена (современная Тасмания) происходили столкновения британских колониальных поселенцев, солдат и властей с коренными народами острова. В результате войны погибли сотни аборигенов Тасмании и более двухсот колонистов и солдат, а кульминацией стало разрушение общества аборигенов, существовавшего

десятки тысяч лет. Хотя современники не всегда употребляли термин «война», масштабы, организация и постоянное насилие оправдывают его использование современными историками. В статье Черная война рассматривается с двух сторон: с точки зрения британского колониального общества, пытавшегося установить контроль над землей и ресурсами, и с точки зрения аборигенов Тасмании, защищавших свою страну, род и образ жизни.

Ключевые слова: Тасмания, аборигены, Черная война, колониальные поселенцы, колонизация, тасманийцы, Великобритания, партизанская война, вопрос геноцида, Черная линия, европейское поселение, британская колонизация, остров Флиндерс.

Aboriginal Tasmania before European settlement

By analysing causes, strategies, experiences and consequences on both sides the article aims to provide a balanced and historically grounded account of a conflict that continues to shape debates about colonialism, genocide and historical responsibility.

Prior to British colonization in 1803, Tasmania was home to an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 Aboriginal people divided into several distinct nations, each with its own language, territory and social organization. These societies had adapted over millennia to Tasmania's varied environments, from coastal regions rich in shellfish to inland forests and plains supporting hunting and seasonal movement [1, p. 5].

Land was central not only to subsistence but also to spiritual and cultural life. Country was understood as a living entity, shaped by ancestral beings and maintained through ritual, law and careful use. Violence existed between groups, but it was regulated by custom and limited in scale. There was no precedent for the kind of total, sustained warfare that European colonization would introduce [4, p. 262].

Early contact with Europeans – sealers, whalers, and explorers was often violent and disruptive. Aboriginal women were frequently abducted, disease spread rapidly and traditional patterns of life were destabilized even before permanent

settlement expanded. These early encounters laid the groundwork for later conflict [2, p. 59-60].

British colonization and the growth of tension

British settlement began in 1803, initially as a strategic outpost and later as a penal colony. By the 1820s the colony had expanded rapidly, driven by land grants to free settlers and former officers, as well as the assignment of convicts as labour. Sheep farming required vast tracts of land, fencing, and the exclusion of aboriginal people from their traditional hunting grounds [11, p. 52].

From the colonial perspective, land was considered terra nullius, belonging to no one in a legal sense, despite the obvious presence and use of land by Aboriginal communities. This ideological framework allowed settlers to view Aboriginal resistance as criminal rather than political or military.

Competition over land and resources has intensified. Settlers reported attacks on shepherds, stock theft and the killing of isolated Europeans. In response, settlers and soldiers carried out reprisals that often-targeted entire Aboriginal groups, regardless of individual responsibility. Violence escalated in a cycle of attack and retaliation [11, p. 53].

Aboriginal resistance and Guerrilla Warfare

For Aboriginal Tasmanians the conflict was a war of survival. Dispossession meant starvation, the breakdown of social structures, and the loss of sacred places. Resistance took many forms, including ambushes, raids on isolated huts, spearing of livestock and attacks on shepherds and soldiers [4, p. 263].

Aboriginal fighters made effective use of their intimate knowledge of the landscape. Dense forests, rugged terrain, and mobility allowed small groups to strike quickly and disappear. Their tactics resembled guerrilla warfare aimed at disrupting colonial expansion rather than defeating British forces in open battle [2, p. 158-159].

Importantly, resistance was not random or purely reactive. Some groups coordinated attacks, targeted symbols of colonial power and sought to reclaim access to key resources. Oral traditions and later accounts suggest that Aboriginal leaders played strategic roles, although colonial records rarely acknowledged this [10, p. 84].

Colonial responses and militarization

As violence increased, the colonial government adopted increasingly militarized responses. Martial law was declared in 1828, granting settlers and soldiers broad powers to use lethal force against Aboriginal people. Rewards were offered for the capture of Aboriginal men, women and children, reinforcing the dehumanization of the Indigenous population.

Roving parties, small, mobile groups of soldiers or armed settlers were deployed to hunt Aboriginal people. These parties often acted with little oversight and were responsible for numerous massacres. From the colonial viewpoint, such measures were seen as necessary to protect lives and property, though they frequently blurred the line between defence and extermination [10, p. 135].

Settlers lived in genuine fear. Isolated farms were vulnerable, communication was slow and rumours of attacks spread quickly. Many colonists perceived themselves as besieged and believed that decisive action was required to secure the colony's future [1, p. 188].

The Black Line

The most infamous colonial operation was the so-called *Black Line* of 1830. This massive campaign involved more than 2,000 soldiers, settlers and convicts forming a human chain across settled districts to drive Aboriginal people onto the Tasman Peninsula, where they could be captured [5, p. 55].

The Black War, which was never officially declared a war, and which facilitated the establishment of the first European settlements in Tasmania, began around 1803 and reached its peak in 1820. The conflicts of the Black War culminated in the violent Black Line, an operation that resulted in the capture and deportation of nearly all of Tasmania's Aboriginal people. The Black Line was a human chain consisting of 500 soldiers, 700 settlers and 800 convicts, stretching from north to south of Tasmania. Reports indicate that two Aboriginal people were killed during this operation. This chain succeeded in forcing the Aboriginal people from their ancestral lands to make way for British settlers.

Following the completion of the Black Line between December 1830 and February 1835, 50 Aboriginal people were captured and returned to their traditional settlements and approximately 200 more Aboriginal people from other areas of Tasmania were deported to Flinders Island in the Bass Strait. Numerous Aboriginal people captured during this period died between their capture and deportation.

From a military standpoint the operation was a failure. Only a handful of Aboriginal people were captured and most evaded the line altogether. However, the Black Line had significant psychological and political effects. It demonstrated the colony's willingness to mobilize enormous resources against a small, vulnerable population and marked a turning point toward forced removal rather than outright warfare.

For Aboriginal Tasmanians the Black Line reinforced the reality that the entire colonial system was aligned against them. It further disrupted movement, access to food and social cohesion, accelerating demographic collapse [5, p. 122]

George Augustus Robinson and the policy of removal

In the early 1830s the colonial government turned to a new strategy under George Augustus Robinson, a lay preacher who believed that Aboriginal people could be "conciliated" and removed peacefully. Robinson negotiated with surviving groups, promising protection, food and the possibility of returning to their lands [2, p. 201-202].

Many Aboriginal leaders agreed to accompany Robinson, often under duress or with limited alternatives. They were relocated to Wybalenna on Flinders Island, where disease, despair and cultural disintegration led to high mortality rates.

From the colonial perspective, Robinson's efforts were seen as humane and progressive, ending open conflict and reducing settler anxiety. From the Aboriginal perspective, removal represented the final loss of land, autonomy and hope. Promises were broken and exile proved as deadly as warfare [2, p. 202-203].

Tunnerminnerwait (c. 1812-1842) was an Aboriginal Australian known for his acts of resistance against the colonial occupation of his territory, acts which earned him a death sentence. A member of the Parperloihener clan of Tasmania, he is also

known as Peevay, Jack of Cape Grim, Tunnerpareway; the British-born colonial official George Augustus Robinson called him Jack Napoleon Tarraparrura [12, p. 30].

Tunnerminnerwait first met the British-born colonial official George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of Aboriginal Peoples, who would play a significant role in his life on Robbins Island in June 1830. In his time Robinson was considered a do-gooder, typical of the Victorian era, a peacemaker with humanitarian views. Robinson's role is now viewed negatively, particularly by the present-day Aboriginal community. G.A. Robinson established a small community, complete with a church, which he named "Point Civilisation". Most of the Aboriginal people who lived there had been relocated under various pretexts from their ancestral lands in Tasmania. "Point Civilisation" is sometimes described as a social factory whose purpose was to convert alleged "savages" into Christians [12, p. 32].

Tunnerminnerwait worked for G.A. Robinson as a guide on expeditions around the island from 1830 to 1835. In October 1835 Tunnerminnerwait travelled with Robinson to Flinders Island, a settlement where the remaining Indigenous population was deported [12, p. 32].

Robinson described Tunnerminnerwait as "an extremely willing and industrious young man," who was "stout and well-built, good-humoured, and performed work equal to that of any white man". A portrait of Tunnerminnerwait was painted by the deported artist Thomas Bock between 1831 and 1835. It was published in James Fenton's History of Tasmania.

Casualties and the question of genocide

Estimates suggest that between 600 and 900 Aboriginal Tasmanians were killed during the Black War, compared to just over 200 settlers and soldiers. These numbers do not account for deaths from disease, starvation, or the long-term effects of displacement.

Historians continue to debate whether the Black War constitutes genocide. While there was no single, explicit policy calling for extermination, the cumulative effect of violence, dispossession, and forced removal resulted in the near destruction

of Aboriginal Tasmanian society. Many scholars argue that intent can be inferred from actions and outcomes, rather than from formal declarations [4, p. 266].

Experiences of the war

Colonial diaries, letters, and newspapers reveal a society gripped by fear and moral ambiguity. Some settlers expressed remorse and sympathy for Aboriginal people, while others advocated harsh measures. Economic survival, racial ideology and personal loss all shaped individual attitudes. Aboriginal voices are less visible in the written record, but they survive through oral histories, later testimonies and archaeological evidence. These sources speak of loss, courage, adaptation and resilience. Despite overwhelming odds, Aboriginal Tasmanians resisted for years and maintained cultural identity even in exile [6, p. 122].

Memory, myth and historical interpretation

For much of the twentieth century the Black War was downplayed or omitted from Australian history, replaced by myths of peaceful settlement. In recent decades, scholarship and public debate have challenged these narratives, emphasizing frontier violence and Indigenous resistance [7].

The Black War has become central to discussions about reconciliation, historical justice and national identity. Understanding the conflict from both sides does not mean equating power or responsibility but rather acknowledging the complexity of human motivations and the structural inequalities inherent in colonialism [6, p. 122].

The conflict known as the Black War stands as one of the most violent and transformative episodes in the history of British colonization in Australia. Fought in Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania) between approximately 1824 and 1832, it involved sustained armed conflict between British settlers, colonial authorities, soldiers and convicts on one side, and the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania on the other. Although contemporaries did not always describe the events as a formal war, the duration, organization, strategic intent and casualty levels place the Black War firmly within the category of frontier warfare [1, p. 211-212].

The Black War was a conflict shaped by competing worldviews, asymmetrical power, and incompatible understandings of land, law and sovereignty. Rather than presenting a single narrative, it examines the war from both sides: the British colonial society seeking to secure territory, economic stability, imperial order and the Aboriginal Tasmanians resisting dispossession, violence, plus cultural destruction. While acknowledging the profound imbalance of power, the chapter treats Aboriginal resistance as purposeful, strategic and political rather than incidental or criminal [9, p. 123].

Aboriginal Tasmania before colonization

As mentioned before European invasion, Tasmania was home to an estimated 6,000-10,000 Aboriginal people divided into several nations, often grouped by historians into regional blocs such as the Big River, Oyster Bay, North Midlands, Northwest, and Southeast peoples. Each group possessed distinct languages, territorial boundaries, kinship systems and cultural practices. Archaeological evidence indicates continuous occupation for more than 35,000 years, making Aboriginal Tasmanians among the world's oldest surviving cultures [6, p. 111].

Land often referred to as *Country* in modern scholarship was central to all aspects of life. It was not owned in a European sense but maintained through reciprocal obligations between people, ancestors and the environment. Seasonal movement, fire management, hunting, rituals ensured sustainability and reinforced social cohesion. Conflict between groups occurred but was governed by law, ritualized violence and mechanisms of reconciliation.

Early European contact, particularly with sealers and whalers from the late eighteenth century onward, was frequently violent. Aboriginal women were abducted, men were killed, and disease spread rapidly. These encounters destabilized communities long before the establishment of permanent British settlements, creating demographic and social vulnerability that would later be exploited by colonization [9, p. 122].

The Establishment of British rule

British settlement began in 1803 as part of imperial rivalry with France and soon developed into a penal colony. By the 1810s and 1820s the colony expanded rapidly as land grants were issued to free settlers and retired officers, while convicts provided a cheap labour force. Sheep farming became the dominant economic activity, requiring extensive land clearance and fencing [3, p. 22-23].

Colonial ideology was shaped by the doctrine of *terra nullius*, which denied Aboriginal sovereignty and framed the land as legally unoccupied. Aboriginal presence was acknowledged only as an obstacle to progress. Within this framework, Aboriginal resistance was criminalized rather than recognized as warfare or self-defence [3, p. 25-26].

As settlers encroached on hunting grounds, Aboriginal people lost access to food, sacred sites and movement corridors. Livestock displaced native animals, restricted fence movement, and violent encounters became increasingly common. The structural violence of dispossession laid the foundation for open conflict.

Escalation into war

By the mid-1820s violence had escalated into what can be described as a low intensity but widespread guerrilla war. Aboriginal groups conducted raids on isolated farms, huts and shepherds, spearing sheep and cattle and attacking symbols of colonial occupation. These actions were not random; they targeted vulnerable points in the colonial economy and aimed to reclaim access to land and resources [7].

Aboriginal fighters relied on mobility, surprise and deep environmental knowledge. Dense forests, button grass plains and rugged terrain enabled small groups to evade pursuit and strike selectively. Leadership structures, though poorly documented in colonial sources, appear to have existed at both local and regional levels.

Colonial society interpreted these attacks through a lens of fear and racial ideology. Newspapers depicted Aboriginal people as savages or criminals, reinforcing calls for decisive action. Individual settlers often isolated and poorly defended

experienced genuine terror and loss, which in turn fuelled demands for military protection and retaliation [7].

Colonial reprisals and frontier violence

Settler reprisals were frequently indiscriminate. Entire Aboriginal camps were attacked in response to the actions of a few individuals. Soldiers and armed settlers carried out punitive expeditions that resulted in numerous massacres, many of which went unrecorded or were euphemistically described in official correspondence.

The asymmetry of violence was stark. Firearms, horses and organized military units gave colonists overwhelming advantages. Aboriginal casualties far exceeded those of settlers and deaths from starvation and disease compounded the toll of direct violence. Women and children were frequent victims, undermining the long-term survival of communities.

Despite this, colonial authorities often portrayed themselves as reluctant participants, forced into violence by Aboriginal aggression. This narrative obscured the underlying causes of the conflict and justified increasingly extreme measures.

Martial law and the roving parties

In 1828 Governor George Arthur declared martial law, formalizing the colony's state of war. This measure authorized settlers and soldiers to use lethal force and suspended normal legal protections for Aboriginal people. Bounties were offered for the capture of Aboriginal men, women and children, incentivizing violence and kidnapping.

Roving parties, small, mobile units of soldiers or armed civilians were deployed to hunt Aboriginal groups. These parties operated with minimal oversight and were responsible for many killings. From the colonial perspective they represented a pragmatic solution to an intractable problem. From the Aboriginal perspective they embodied a system of organized terror.

Martial law did little to end the conflict. Instead, it entrenched hostility, displaced Aboriginal groups further, and accelerated population collapse.

The Black Line: total mobilization

The culmination of colonial military strategy was the operation known as the Black Line in 1830. More than 2,000 men, including soldiers, settlers and convicts formed a human chain intended to sweep Aboriginal people from settled districts onto the Tasman Peninsula.

Military the operation was a failure. Only a handful of Aboriginal people were captured, and most evaded the line with relative ease. Politically and symbolically, however, the Black Line was significant. It represented the total mobilization of colonial society against a small Indigenous population and revealed the limits of military force in resolving the conflict.

For Aboriginal Tasmanians the Black Line further restricted access to food and movement, intensifying starvation and dislocation. It demonstrated that coexistence was no longer possible under colonial rule.

Following the failure of military solutions, the colonial government embraced a policy of removal led by George Augustus Robinson. Presenting himself as a humanitarian, Robinson sought to persuade Aboriginal groups to surrender and relocate to government settlements, promising safety, food, and eventual return to their lands.

Negotiations occurred in the context of extreme coercion. Many Aboriginal people agreed to accompany Robinson because they faced starvation, constant pursuit, and the destruction of their families. Removal effectively ended open warfare but replaced it with confinement and exile.

The main settlement at Wybalenna on Flinders Island proved catastrophic. Disease, inadequate food, harsh climate, and cultural disintegration led to high mortality rates. Promises of return were never fulfilled [13, p. 111-112].

Casualties and demographic collapse

During the Black War an estimated 600-900 Aboriginal Tasmanians were killed directly through violence, compared with just over 200 settlers and soldiers. These figures understate the true impact, as they exclude deaths from disease, malnutrition and psychological trauma. By the 1840s only a small number of

Aboriginal Tasmanians survived in exile. The destruction of language groups, social structures, and connections to land amounted to the near erasure of a people.

Genocide and historical debate

Whether the Black War constitutes genocide remains a subject of scholarly debate. Critics point to the absence of an explicit written policy calling for extermination. Others argue that genocide can be inferred from patterns of action, intent expressed in correspondence, and the foreseeable outcomes of colonial policy [5, p. 165].

Modern historiography increasingly recognizes that the cumulative effect of violence, dispossession and forced removal meets international definitions of genocide. The debate itself reflects broader tensions in Australian society about responsibility, memory and national identity.

Aboriginal voices and experiences

Aboriginal perspectives are underrepresented in written records, but they survive through oral histories, later testimonies and cultural memory. These sources emphasize loss, resilience and resistance. Even in exile, Aboriginal Tasmanians maintained cultural practices, kinship ties and a sense of identity.

Resistance did not end with removal. Cultural survival, storytelling and later political activism form part of the long legacy of the Black War.

Colonial memory and mythmaking

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Black War was marginalized in official histories. Narratives of peaceful settlement and inevitable progress dominated public memory. Only from the late twentieth century onward did historians begin systematically documenting frontier violence. This reassessment has had profound implications for debates about reconciliation, land rights, and historical justice.

The interpretations of these events have varied over time. Henry Melville, who arrived in Tasmania in 1827, did not hesitate to assert that the Aboriginal people were “mercilessly massacred”. This opinion was grudgingly accepted by John West, a journalist and minister, who arrived in 1839. In 1870 the historian and educator

James Bonwick published “The Last of the Tasmanians”. After gathering numerous testimonies, he recounted the precise circumstances of 16 massacres that led to the deaths of at least 300 Indigenous people.

Conversely, James Erskine Calder, the colony’s chief surveyor since 1829 and anxious to restore his reputation, published “Some accounts of the War” in 1875, which relied solely on written reports submitted to the authorities. He concludes that the war, however long, was merely a “small affair” during which at least five times more settlers than Aboriginal people died. He attributes the near disappearance of the latter to tribal wars and diseases, admittedly perhaps introduced by Europeans, but which they refused to treat.

This convenient explanation was not challenged until 1948, when Clive Turnbull, a war correspondent in Asia and Europe, published “Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines”. After researching contemporary newspapers and official archives, and despite the lack of conclusive evidence, he established a link between the Nazi massacre of Jews and the British massacre of Aboriginal people [13, p. 4-6].

When in 1969 Brian Plomley, then the most renowned Australian historian, challenged Turnbull’s conclusions and the validity of Bonwick’s sources, arguing that “the gratuitous attacks and mistreatment inflicted by settlers were limited to a few individuals”, his interpretation, reiterated in 1992, was widely accepted. Keith Windschuttle echoed this sentiment in his book “The fabrication of Aboriginal history”, published in 2002. He asserted that twice as many settlers were killed as Aboriginal people and that British settlers could not have committed such massacres. [8, p. 103].

Instead of settling the debate once and for all, this book reignited it. Its sources, methods, and conclusions are challenged by virtually all contemporary historians who, conversely, question the classification of the events as genocide [7].

The terms *Black War* and *Black Line* were coined by Henry Melville. Lyndall Ryan suggests that this conflict be referred to as the Tasman War. She also argues for the creation of a public memorial to honour the dead of both sides. Her colleague

Henry Reynolds concurs: “Aboriginal patriotism is seldom acknowledged, and there is even less of a willingness to celebrate their heroism. Even more fundamental is the failure to recognize the 1824-1831 conflict as a war. This would be less of an issue if Australia did not devote so much effort to commemorating wars, an imperative that has intensified in recent years” [8, p. 104-105].

Conclusion

The Black War was not an inevitable clash between incompatible cultures, but the result of deliberate policies, economic expansion, and contested visions of land and sovereignty. For British colonists, it was a struggle to secure a precarious settlement and impose order. For Aboriginal Tasmanians it was a fight for survival against dispossession and destruction. Analysing the war from both perspectives reveals not only the tragedy of the conflict itself, but also the broader dynamics of colonialism that shaped it. The legacy of the Black War continues to resonate in Tasmania and beyond, reminding us that the foundations of modern societies are often built upon unresolved violence and contested histories.

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Data about the author:

Christensen Carsten Sander – Doctor of History (PhD), Independent Researcher (Billund, Denmark).

Сведения об авторе:

Христенсен Карстен Сандер – доктор истории (PhD), независимый исследователь (Биллунд, Дания).

E-mail: arroyoinfancia74@gmail.com.