



T̓silhqot'in Nation

LHAT̓' A̓̓'IN MEMORIAL DAY

Chilcotin War of 1864/65





BACKGROUND TO THE CHILCOTIN WAR

From a time before the founding of the Province of British Columbia, the Tsilhqot'in people have steadfastly protected their lands, culture, way of life including the need to protect the women and children from external threats – often at great sacrifice. The events of the Chilcotin War of 1864 exemplify the fortitude and the unwavering resistance that defines Tsilhqot'in identity to this very day.

When the Colony of British Columbia was established in 1858, the Tsilhqot'in people continued to govern and occupy their lands according to their own laws, without interference, and with minimal contact with Europeans. However, the Colonial government encouraged

European settlement and opened lands in Tsilhqot'in territory for pre-emption by settlers without notice to the Tsilhqot'in or any efforts at diplomacy or treaty-making.

In 1861, settlers began to pursue plans for a road from Bute Inlet through Tsilhqot'in territory, to access the new Cariboo gold fields. At the same time, Tsilhqot'in relations with settlers became strained from the outset, as waves of smallpox decimated Tsilhqot'in populations (along with other First Nations along the coast and into the interior).

Between June of 1862 and January 1863, travellers estimated that over 70 percent of all Tsilhqot'in died of smallpox.

OUR WARRIORS WERE FIGHTING TO PROTECT THEIR FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES & WAYS OF LIFE

Some T̓silhqot̓in initially worked on the road crew at Bute Inlet, but the unauthorized entry into T̓silhqot̓in territory, without compensation, and numerous other offences by the road crew soon escalated the situation. T̓silhqot̓in women and children were disrespected and abused, labourers were refused food, and demands by the T̓silhqot̓in for payment for entry into T̓silhqot̓in territory were denied.

In a pivotal encounter, a road-builder accused the T̓silhqot̓in crew of theft, to which they answered, “you are in our country and you owe us bread.” In response, the road-builder wrote down the names of the T̓silhqot̓in in a book and threatened to eliminate them with smallpox.

In the wake of the smallpox epidemics only months before – decimating over two-thirds of the T̓silhqot̓in population, this threat was taken very seriously. T̓silhqot̓in declared war.

Customary to T̓silhqot̓in culture the war group covered their faces in war paint, dancing and drumming in an all-night ceremony. At dawn on April 30, 1864, the group of T̓silhqot̓in warriors, led by Lhats̓’as̓’in, attacked and killed most of the men comprising the main and advance camps of the road crew, effectively ending the incursion into T̓silhqot̓in territory and the threats of smallpox and abuse. The T̓silhqot̓in party suffered no casualties.





"WE MEANT WAR, NOT MURDER"

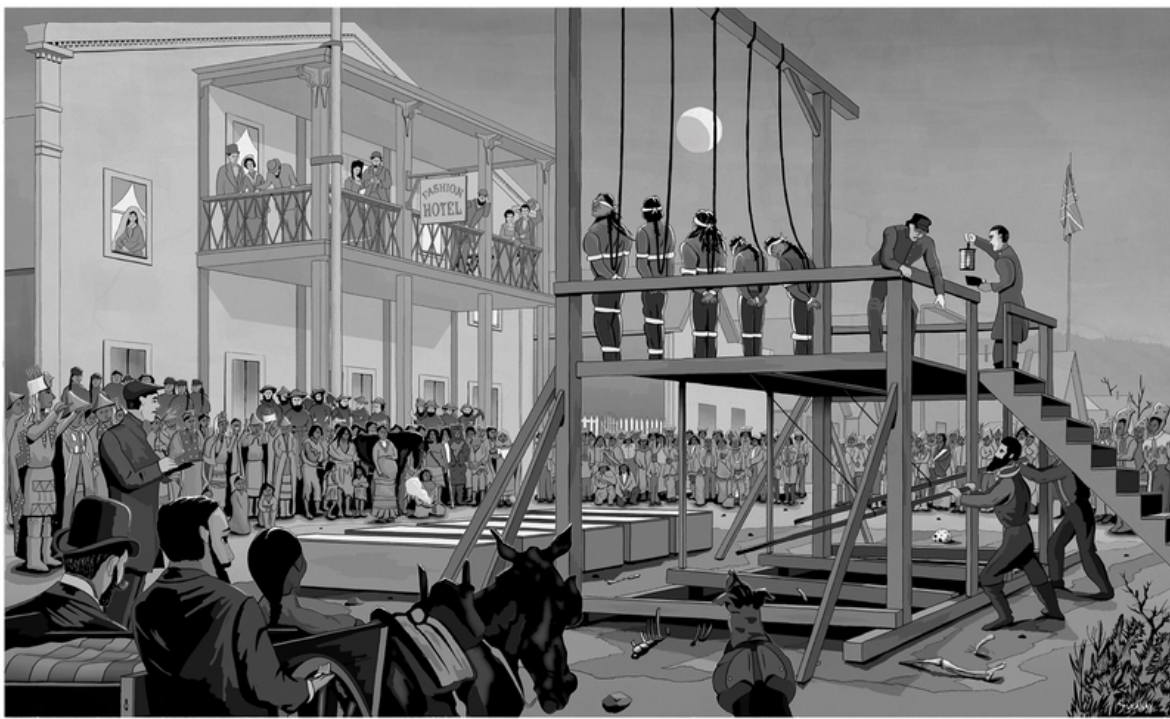
Over the ensuing days, the T̓silhqot'in warriors effectively removed all settlers from their lands, forcibly and by death if warnings went unheeded. By June 1864, the road project was abandoned and there was no settler activity between the Pacific Ocean and the Fraser River, a span of 400 km.

Meanwhile, Colonial authorities launched what the new Governor called “an invasion” of two militia groups, about 150 men. The two militias wandered without success through T̓silhqot'in territory, unable to engage or locate the T̓silhqot'in war parties in territory that was unknown to them but intimately known to the T̓silhqot'in.

Frustrated and desperate, the militia threatened the T̓silhqot'in with extermination, burned homes at Puntzi and Sutless (Nimpo Lake), destroyed fishing equipment and attempted to hinder food gathering. The militia's only casualty was a former H.B.C. trader regarded as a leader of those who disrespected the T̓silhqot'in. The T̓silhqot'in lured him into an ambush for execution.

On July 20th, unable to persuade any T̓silhqot'in to betray the war party and out of rations, the Governor made plans to withdraw in defeat. That afternoon, a T̓silhqot'in diplomatic party came to his camp. This, finally, was the first ever meeting between T̓silhqot'in and Colonial representatives.

In the ensuing negotiations, Colonial officials promised a peace accord under a flag of truce. However, when Lhat̓s'a̓?in and seven others came unarmed for this discussion of peace on August 15, 1864, the Governor was not there. To their surprise they were shackled and tried for murder. Lhat̓s'a̓?in's final comment about these trials was that “We meant war, not murder.”



MARTYRDOM OF "THE CHILCOTIN CHIEFS" BY THE COLONY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA AT QUESNELLE, OCTOBER 26TH, 1864.

—Drawn by Shawn Swanley

In the spring of 1865 the officials ambushed ʔAhan, the T̓silhqot'in headman from Sutless, as he was on his way to pay reparations for any harm to innocents as a result of the Chilcotin War.

When the Colony martyred five of "the Chilcotin Chiefs" on October 26, 1864 this was one of the largest mass executions in Canadian history. A mostly First Nations crowd of 250 people bore witness to the hangings. The sixth, ʔAhan, was hanged July 18, 1865.

Many of those who survived the smallpox epidemics or participated in "The Chilcotin War" went on to have long lives and large families with many of the T̓silhqot'in today counting them as ancestors.

Although an apology was issued by the Attorney General of British Columbia, Honourable Colin Gabelman, in 1993 for the wrongs done to the T̓silhqot'in before and after the Chilcotin War, the false promise of a truce by British Columbia weighed heavily on the T̓silhqot'in. In 1999, the Province unveiled a memorial plaque marking the gravesite of the five T̓silhqot'in chiefs who were executed in the immediate aftermath of the Chilcotin War. In part, it reads:

This commemorative plaque has been raised to honour those who lost their lives in defence of the territory and the traditional way of life of the T̓silhqot'in and to express

the inconsolable grief that has been collectively experienced at the injustice the T̓silhqot'in perceive was done to their chiefs.



"We recognize that these six Chiefs were leaders of a Nation, that they acted in accordance with their laws and traditions and that they are well-regarded as heroes by their people."

-Prime Minister Trudeau (2018)
Exoneration Speech

On March 26, 2018, the Prime Minister of Canada formally exonerated the Tsilhqot'in War Chiefs of any wrongdoing, recognizing them as heroes protecting their lands and people. On November 2, 2018, the Prime Minister of Canada came to Tsilhqot'in title lands and presented this exoneration to the Tsilhqot'in people. On October 23, 2014, the Premier of British Columbia also formally redressed the injustice of the wrongful trial and hanging of the six Tsilhqot'in chiefs and exonerated them.

Since 1865, the Tsilhqot'in people have honoured the Chiefs that lost their lives after the Chilcotin War for sacrificing everything in defence of their lands and their peoples. Such commitment and sacrifice continue to inspire the Tsilhqot'in leadership and communities, as they have fought relentlessly over the intervening years to preserve their lands and culture in the face of ever-increasing threats from the outside world.

The day that the five Chiefs were hanged in Quesnel, October 26, is honoured as a national memorial day by the Tsilhqot'in people, known as Lhat's'aŝ'in Memorial day, formally established in 1999.

The Supreme Court of Canada's historic judgment in Tsilhqot'in Nation marks another landmark in the history of the Tsilhqot'in people and their continuing struggle for recognition as the true owners and caretakers of their Tsilhqot'in homeland. Decades after the events of the Chilcotin War, the Tsilhqot'in people continue to honour the past, and those that sacrificed so much to protect their way of life, as they chart the future for their nation.



Tsilhqot'in National Government (2022)



The Tsilhqot'in National Government was established in 1989 to meet the needs and represent the Tsilhqot'in Nation and Tsilhqot'in communities of Tl'etinqox, ʔEsdilagh, Yunešit'in, Tšideldel, Tl'esqox and Xeni Gwet'in