Were the English Colonists Guilty of Genocide?

“The Pequot War Reconsidered”
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Summary of Reading

-there are people who would argue that the war was premeditated genocide
-however, the author argues that in the Pequot War of 1637, people believed that the English colonists were simply protecting themselves

The war was not about racism:
-it is important to understand that the war do not occur because the English were intent on killing the Indians because they simply were Indians, although the English did view the Indians through racial stereotypes
-for example, the Narragansetts formed an alliance with the English in October 1636, which shows collaboration between the two groups
-after this, the Mohegans, the Massachusetts and River Tribes joined the British-Indian alliance, and were joined later by the Mohawks
-the war was for the survival of the English colonies

How war broke out:
-there were several English colonists murdered by the Pequots:
  * two English captains were killed in 1634, which included John Stone, who kidnapped several Indians
  * in the next two years, six more of the English colonists were killed
  * John Oldham was murdered in 1636, which led to the war
-the Pequots had not punished those that were guilty of these crimes, and they abolished the terms of the treaty that they signed
-there was also a rumor that the Pequot did not trust the English, and threatened to attack the English and their allies
-efforts to negotiate failed
-ninety Englishmen, led by John Endecott, participated in a raid to punish and warn the Indians on Block Island for their actions
-during the raid, the area was destroyed, several Indians were wounded, and one Indian was killed
-the Pequots then raided the English several times
  * nine were killed, and two women were captures during an attack on April 23, in Wethersfield, Connecticut
  * thirty other colonists were killed in other raids (this amounts to about 5% of the colonists in Connecticut)
-the Pequot tried to form an alliance with the Narragansett, their aim being to destroy the population of Europeans in the area
-the colonists of Connecticut and Massachusetts made war to defend themselves
-it is important to understand that both sides were acting in self-defense

Fort Mystic:
-one of the major battles occurred when 70 Connecticut and 90 Massachusetts colonists, with 60 Mohegans, and some Narragansett and Eastern Niantic Indians attacked Pequot Fort at Mystic
-almost all of the Indians (between 400 and 700 including women and children were killed), while only two English solders were killed, twenty wounded, along with about half of their Indian allies
-some argue that Capt. John Mason proposed to massacre the enemy, so that it could destroy the Indians, with less risk
-however, we have barely any evidence that proves this, and we do not know if the massacre was premeditated or not
-it is also argued that it was mostly innocent Indians in the village, but they were burned on Mason’s orders
however, Mason stated that a day before the attack, there were 150 reinforcement Pequots defending the fort. Original accounts of the battle suggest that Mason was not planning on a massacre, but when the attack had started, he realized it would not be as successful as planned, and the battle became too intense, so the English burned the fort.

The end of the war:
Following the battle of Mystic Fort, the surviving Pequots were found by the colonists and their allies.

* First, about 200 Indians were captured, and 22 to 24 adult males were executed, the rest of the women and children were divided among the Indian allies, which is a common Indian practice.

* Next, on July 14, hundreds of Indians were surrounded near modern-day Southport, Connecticut. About 80 Pequot men fought and died, and the rest of the tribe was divided among the Indian allies, as before.

- The Treaty of Hartford was signed on September 21, 1638, ending the war and dividing the Pequot among the tribes of the Indian allies.

- This is further evidence to argue that it was not genocide, but a measure to prevent the threat of the Pequot tribe.

In conclusion...
If the English not acted as they did, many more colonists would have been killed by the Pequot, and the situation would have gotten worse:

* In April 1644, 500 whites were killed in the Virginia Indian uprisings.

* 300 more were killed in 1675.

- The author argues that this violence should be stopped at all costs.

- The number of Pequots that were killed was probably less than half the tribe.

- After the war ended, the Pequots started to regroup and become a tribe again.

- Four special towns were created for them by 1650, and each town was ruled by a Pequot governor.

- In 1667, permanent reservations were established for the tribe.

- The tribe had a population of 1500 to 2000 members in 1675, which suggests that it was not genocide.

Key Terms/People

Pequot – A Native American group that lived in Eastern Connecticut. The tribe had several conflicts with the English, and its people were eventually killed or distributed among Indian allies after the Pequot War of 1637.

Narragansetts – A Native American group that lived on Rhode Island (west of Narragansett Bay) and were allies of the English during the Pequot War. They were almost exterminated from 1975 to 1976 during King Philip's War.

Mohegans – Native American people from eastern Connecticut. In the early 1600’s, they broke away from the Pequot. The Mohegans were allies of the English.

Eastern Niantic Indians – an Indian tribe southwest of Rhode Island. They were Narragansett allies during the Pequot War.

Mohawks – A Native American tribe that joined the English and allied tribes at a later date than the rest of the tribes.

John Stone – a man that had committed crimes against the Pequot tribe, he was murdered by them in 1634.

John Oldham – A respected friend and trader of the Narragansetts, who was murdered by the Pequot in his boat off Block Island in 1636.
John Endecott – He was one of the first founders of Massachusetts Bay colony, leading colonists to the area in 1628. In 1636, he led the Block Island raid, which started the Pequot War of 1636.

Capt. John Mason – the leader of the expedition and attack on Fort Mystic

Treaty of Hartford – the treaty that ended the Pequot War of 1636. It suggested that the English wanted to eliminate the threat of the Pequot tribe. Therefore, of the Indians captured, all of the adult males were killed, and the rest of them were distributed to the victorious Indian allies.

Discussion Questions

1) In your opinion, which side bears more responsibility for starting the war?

2) We are not told very much about the negotiation before the war in this argument. Do you think the two parties could have negotiated to avoid war?

3) Do you think the English were justified in raiding Block Island?

4) Do you think the English were defending themselves by starting a war?

5) Why do you think a massacre occurred at Fort Mystic? Was it premeditated? Do you think we have enough evidence to come to a conclusion?

6) Was the Treaty of Hartford fair? Could it be considered cultural genocide?

7) Should violence and threats to the survival of the English be stopped at all costs? Do you think the actions of the English solved the problem? Would it have gotten worse if the war had not happened?