

# How 'indigenism' killed the Cherokees

by Anton Chaitkin

The British and allied oligarchy imposes backwardness, isolation, and poverty upon various of the world's peoples, under the cynical pretense of "protecting the indigenous way of life." The reality may be clearly seen in the confrontation between the American republic and its enemies in the case of the Cherokee Indians.

The new government of the United States made a treaty with the Cherokees in 1791, placing them under U.S. protection and pledging that the Cherokees would have sovereignty within their own land. As a project of President George Washington, the treaty stipulated: "That the Cherokee nation may be led to a greater degree of civilization, and to become herdsmen and cultivators instead of remaining in a state of hunters, the United States will . . . furnish gratuitously, the said nation with useful implements of husbandry; and further to assist the said nation in so desirable a pursuit, and at the same time to establish a certain mode of communication, the United States will send such . . . persons to reside in said nation, as [the U.S.] may judge proper . . . who shall qualify themselves to act as interpreters."

Among the means used to pursue this project, the U.S. government paid a subsidy to Christian missionaries who lived among the Cherokees. Around 1820, a Cherokee named George Guess, or Sequoya, invented an 86-character alphabet for his native language. Missionary Samuel Worcester translated the Bible from Greek into Cherokee. The missionaries helped establish a newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, whose name acknowledged that these Americans were advancing in agriculture (an ancestral art which had been largely lost), manufacturing, and the education of their children in astronomy and mathematics.

But trouble began in the mid-1820s. A political grouping led by Scottish Rite Freemasons and the pro-British free trade party, began agitating within Georgia for the nullification of the U.S. treaty with the Cherokees—they were thought to be a dangerous cultural example to the black slaves. In 1830-31, the state of Georgia arrested and imprisoned the missionaries to the Cherokees, forbade any white people from entering Cherokee territory without permission from the state government, and "legalized" the theft of Cherokee land, which was said to be gold-bearing. The same political movement simultaneously launched a revolt in South Carolina, threatening secession unless the United States gave up its nationalistic economic policy.

## An appeal to Christians

On Sept. 11, 1830, the *Cherokee Phoenix* called for help, citing the ideals of western civilization: "People of America, where shall we look? Republicans, we appeal to you. Christians, we appeal to you. . . . In times past, your compassions yearned over our moral desolations, and the misery which was spreading amongst us, through the failure of game, our ancient resource. The cry of our wretchedness reached your hearts; you supplied us with the implements of husbandry and domestic industry, which enabled us to provide food and clothing for ourselves. You sent us instruction in letters and the true religion, which has chased away much of our mental and moral darkness.

"Your wise President Jefferson took much pains to instruct us in the science of civilized government. . . . He urged us to industry and the acquisition of property. . . . But [we were not told] that whenever we should arrive at a certain point in the science of government, and the knowledge of the civilized arts, then our rights should be forfeited . . . [and] our property confiscated to lawless banditti, and our necks placed under the foot of Georgia."

The Cherokees hired as their lawyer former U.S. Attorney General and anti-masonic leader William Wirt, who appealed to the public: "We have been laboring . . . ever since the adoption of our Constitution, to civilize these people. All the states . . . have pushed this subject of civilization, with all their power and at great expense. We have sought to civilize and to christianize them, on the avowed motives of *humanity to them*, and *safety to the neighboring whites*. With the Cherokees, we have so far succeeded that they have adopted our manners, our dress, our agricultural and mechanical pursuits; they have imitated our form of government and our laws, and Christianity . . . has made considerable progress among them. And the result now is, that we have . . . fallen out with this people for yielding to our solicitations. . . .

"Would it not be most perfidious, and an offence on our part that would 'smell to Heaven,' to have sought and labored at the civilization of these people for the last 40 years . . . under the fair guise of *humanity* and *religion*, and the moment we have accomplished this purpose, to make that very civilization, which is our own work, a ground of offence in these people, and an excuse for driving them from their possessions, or enslaving them on their own territory."

U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall ruled in favor of Wirt's appeal against the state of Georgia, and ordered the release of the missionaries. But President Andrew Jackson, blackmailed by South Carolina's secession threat, placated that party in Georgia by refusing to enforce the court's decision. Amidst growing outrages of mob rule, the Cherokees were forced to flee Georgia en masse. Thousands of them died on a forced march—the infamous "Trail of Tears"—to the western frontier wilderness, 1,000 miles from their ancestral home.