

Title—Empire by Treaty: Negotiating European Expansion 1600-1900

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Categories: Imperialism, Indigenous, Empire, Politics, Economics

Place: The World

Time: 1600-1900

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection is concerned with European efforts to negotiate with indigenous people the cession of their sovereignty through the use of treaties. Belmessous notes that most histories focused on European appropriation of indigenous territories tend to focus on conquest and occupation, much less attention is paid to the process of treaty making. Belmessous argues that there was more to the practice of treaty making than mere commercial and political opportunism. This collection is the first to place treaty making in a global context and to examine treaties as a global process, or as a process of negotiation between European and non-European actors. Specifically, the collection seeks to examine European motivations that prompted attempts to extinguish indigenous sovereignty through treaties and the reasons why non-European people engaged or did not with Europeans. The authors are also concerned with the way that various colonial contexts influenced the idea and practice of treaty making, and the crucial issue of indigenous consent. The collection explores the history of treaty making from the early seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century, encompassing both stages of European imperialism. Importantly, the collection does not look at the treaty making process in the United States after independence in the late eighteenth century. The authors seek to examine treaties from both sides of imperial relations, in order to reveal indigenous strategies in their negotiations with European powers and to reveal the meanings attached to this form of diplomacy.

Treaties were an important means of regulating the relations between sovereign states. The first essay discusses early modern European debates surrounding the use of treaty making, especially the debate over whether allying with people of a different faith, even within Christianity, was allowed. The following chapter highlights how colonists used native deeds of purchase to challenge royal titles and to secure their rights on the land. Another essay demonstrates that the British crown's assertion of exclusive powers to treat with indigenous people and its extensive use of treaty making were crucial in forging more unified conceptions of imperial or national sovereignty. Trading companies, such as the British East India Company, used treaties to secure their rights both commercially and financially, as well as legalizing their military conquests and legitimating their actions by representing them as benevolent. The authors identify four modalities that characterize the treaties between Indigenous people and empires, being: ceasefires, those aimed at protecting or ensuring commerce, those aimed at establishing access to raw materials, and those that formalized imperial sovereignty. All the essays demonstrate how treaties were used to construct legitimacy from actual power, not only for Europeans but also for indigenous people.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Treaties were used to construct legitimacy from actual power, not only for Europeans but also for indigenous people
- Non-Europeans exploited European rivalries in the same way that Europeans exploited indigenous rivalries
- Four types of treaties: ceasefires, those aimed at protecting or ensuring commerce, those establishing access to raw materials, and those that formalized imperial sovereignty