

The Darkest Period: The Kanza Indians and Their Last Homeland 1846-1873

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Recommended Citation

Joy, Natalie (2016) "The Darkest Period: The Kanza Indians and Their Last Homeland 1846-1873," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.1.20

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss1/19>

Review

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Winter 2016

Parks, Ronald D. *The Darkest Period: The Kanza Indians and Their Last Homeland 1846-1873*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$19.95 ISBN 9780806148458

The American Civil War Overlaps with the Kanzas' Struggle to Retain their Homes

The Darkest Period: The Kanza Indians and Their Last Homeland, 1846-1873, by Ronald Parks, is "the story of the Kanzas' final years in Kansas" (4). It begins in 1846, when the Kanzas negotiated the sale of a significant eastern portion of the Kanza Reservation to the U.S. government, and ends with their removal from Kansas to Indian Territory in 1873. By and large this is a sad story, and not just because of repeated land loss and forced relocation. Throughout this period the Kanzas struggled with unrelenting white encroachment on their land, an unforgiving environment, U.S. government policies, disease, poverty, racism, and violent encounters with both white and Indian enemies. In spite of these and other challenges to their way of life, Parks emphasizes that this is not a story of defeat; rather, it is about how "the Kanzas persisted" (7) culturally and politically throughout the period covered.

Parks has worked as a public historian in Kansas, including at the Kaw (Kanza) Mission State Historic Site. His deep knowledge of Kansas and the Kanza is evident throughout *The Darkest Period*. Each chapter is dense with detail about the Kanzas, their culture, and their interactions—both positive and negative—with whites and other Indians. For readers unfamiliar with the geography of Kansas, Parks has included a number of detailed maps. The book also contains an impressive number of historical photographs and drawings. Parks draws on an abundance of written sources. As he admits, many, but by no means all, of the sources are from whites, as is typical of many topics in Native American history. Nonetheless, in many places Kanza voices do shine through, as exemplified by the proceedings of an 1857 Kanza delegation to Washington.

Historians of the Civil War Era will be disappointed that the author does not elaborate on the connections between Kanza history and "Bleeding Kansas," which is very briefly mentioned in a section on the politics of appointing Indian agents. Nor is there a sustained examination of the Kanza role in and experience of the American Civil War. To be fair, these are not the book's subjects, and, consequently, are treated as relatively minor events in Kanza history. Nonetheless, there are tantalizing details about the Kansas and the war scattered throughout the book. Ishtalasea, a Kanza chief who was part of an 1864 delegation that met with President Lincoln, understood the Kansas' role in the war thus: "Their young men had gone into the army to fight the battles of the white men..." (140). Other sources indicate that Kansas voluntarily joined the Union cause to protect their own interests. One of the most fascinating sources is an 1867 letter written by Sergeant Abram Munroe of Company L, Ninth Kansas Cavalry (a unit in which eighty-seven Kansas served). Though Parks does not analyze Kanza reasons for enlisting in the Union Army, Munroe's letter indicates that he and other Kansas did so because of concerns about what might happen should the Confederacy occupy their lands. A bit more attention to the Civil War might have been warranted given Kanza participation in the conflict.

A brief history of the Kanza would have been useful at the outset in order to better contextualize their mid-nineteenth-century struggles. It would also help to clarify why the book begins in 1846, rather than 1825 with the creation of the first Kanza Reservation, or in 1847 when the Kanza moved south to a much smaller reservation. The book's abrupt end in 1873 when the Kanza were forced to relocate to Indian Territory is consistent with Parks' stated intention of telling the story of their time in Kansas. Nonetheless, it leaves the reader wanting to know more about how the Kanza fared in their new home. Finally, it is surprising that a work of Native American history uses the problematic term "prehistoric" in reference to "the ancestors of the Pawnees and other Caddoan groups" (228). Overall, this is a work of admirable depth and detail about a critical period of Kanza history. Historians of Native America and the U.S. West will find it engaging and illuminating.

Natalie Joy is an assistant professor of history at Northern Illinois University, where she teaches Native American and U.S. history. She is currently at work on a book project that examines the relationship between Indians and the antislavery movement from the 1820s to the 1850s. She may be contacted at njoy@niu.edu.