

Wars for Empire: Apaches, the United States, and the Southwest Borderlands

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Review

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Lahti, Janne. *Wars for Empire: Apaches, the United States, and the Southwest Borderlands*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$35.95 ISBN 9780806157429

Wars for Empire employs the framework of settler colonialism to argue that war and violence in the American Southwest unfolded as expressions of culture and convention. For the Apache people, existing in numerous bands dispersed over a wide area from western Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora, Chihuahua, to West Texas, raiding and warfare met the needs of subsistence and provided a mechanism to obtain power and status in competition with other borderland peoples. For the United States, the war functioned as an expression of white, Anglo-Saxon dominance far out of proportion to the benefits accruing from the conquest of this remote, foreboding region. Even so, and despite possessing vast industrial resources, American forces needed forty years to prevail over the inventive and yet dwindling and increasingly desperate Apache raiders.

The book is divided into two sections. The first examines the motives, methods, and operations of both American and Apache fighting units. Lahti's focus is on military history, with little or no ethnographic diversions. He eschews essentialist notions of Apache martial prowess. Apache warriors prevailed on the battlefield because they employed a lifetime of arduous and exacting training combined with accumulated combat experience. Deft on horseback or on foot, they could scramble over mountainous terrain, run vast distances, and disappear into desert environs without leaving a trace. Apache leaders won and held their positions through combinations of charisma and effectiveness. The US Army, on the other hand, was made up of widely dispersed units of poorly conditioned, ill-clad, and under-provisioned recruits who sometimes struggled to mount their horses competently. The officer corps functioned in a hierarchical system that rewarded seniority above competence.

The second section of the book examines in chronological progression the major events of the war. The narrative is structured in four phases: Containment, Extermination, Internment, and Insurgency. Beginning with Stephen Watts Kearny's conquest of New Mexico, Lahti describes early American attempts to impose treaties and boundaries across the region north of the US – Mexican border and recounts the farcical US military campaigns that attempted to enforce these arrangements. The tide turned against the Apaches during the 1860s, however, when US and Confederate forces sought to extend control over the region in accordance with the shifting alliances of the Civil War. Indian fighting devolved to extermination campaigns carried out by local Hispanic and Anglo mercenary and volunteer units operating independently or in concert with regular army troops. Newly arriving Americans eagerly embraced these campaigns, particularly in central Arizona, where they “believed and talked of nothing else than killing

Apaches”. Lahti argues that in the aftermath of the Civil War, the federal government offered the Apaches few alternatives to armed resistance and provided almost nothing in terms of diplomacy, provisions, or homelands for those inclined to surrender their sovereignty to U.S. control. The absence of alternatives drove the violence to extremes.

In the 1870s and 1880s, the national government reasserted authority in the Southwest and sought to establish reservations as alternatives to extermination. The U.S. Army adopted the goal of ending Apache autonomy, while continuing to hunt Apaches off of the reservations. Soldiers and settlers justified the killing of “hostiles” with doctrines of self-defense and the prevailing notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Meanwhile, the steady influx of new American settlement increased pressure on the government to concentrate Apaches on fewer reservations. The 1878 silver rush began a transformation that made Tombstone the largest boomtown in Arizona. The transcontinental railroads arrived a few years later and Tucson and other communities expanded rapidly. Government officials, bowing to the popular will, forced the Apaches bands onto squalid and unhealthy reservations, which increasingly resembled prisoner-of-war camps with roll calls, surveillance, and trained Apache police. Officials closed reservations in more desirable locations, including the important Chokonen reservation. Forced onto the San Carlos Reservation, the Chokonens and Chiricahuas suffered from disease and starvation, compelling dissidents to flee to renegade bands led by Victorio, Nana, Juh, Geronimo, and other leaders. Years of warfare resulted before Generals Crook and Miles managed to subdue the insurgency. In the aftermath, the army shipped Geronimo’s band, along with 400 reservation Chiricahuas, to Ft. Marion, Florida, and then to Mount Vernon Barracks in Alabama, before finally settling them at Fort Sill, in Oklahoma.

Lahti recounts these events in gripping fashion, in careful if not always fluid prose. The emphasis always is on the military side of the story, with a clinical, almost antiseptic description of the warfare. Despite the sheer volume raids, retaliations, and extermination campaigns, the author avoids depictions of violent encounters and omits lurid details. In similar fashion he offers only a limited description of the civil administrations of the Office of Indian Affairs. Reservation agents receive mention when they are being removed from positions or accused of gross corruption or incompetence. The U.S. Army hardly comes off any better. Most army officers, such as Carleton during the Civil War, and Crook during the subsequent campaigns, are portrayed as merciless practitioners of warfare and depicted as somewhat fanatical (in Carleton’s case) or ineffectual (in Crook’s) in carrying out their objectives.

Lahti contends that the defeat of the Apaches was a “victory of attrition . . . grinding down Apache freedom and, together with the influx of settler society and extractive industries, taking away Apaches’ space.” He sees few if any military triumphs. Thousands of white soldiers failed to destroy or capture Geronimo’s tiny force. In the end, they were persuaded to surrender by their own kinsmen, having run out of options. The prevailing message is that American fighting forces, federal, territorial, and mercenary, operated as expressions of American racial superiority. The long campaign became, more than anything else, a race war. Although the author never raises that genocide debate, and indeed, never uses the term genocide until the very last page of the book, the inescapable conclusion is that the U.S. war against the Apache people constitutes one of the most concrete and demonstrable examples of the genocidal effects of the

settler colonial process -- proof, if you will, of what Patrick Wolfe termed the “logic of elimination.”

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