
Native Americans in the Era of the American Revolution

Part II: The War in the Indian America Native People and the new Republic

1. The Revolution and Indian Communities

In Massachusetts and Connecticut, for example, Natives were originally exempt from wartime drafts—along with Africans, mulattos, schoolteachers, ministers, students at Harvard and Yale, etc. Natives from central and southern New England will eventually be called upon to serve. Whether Wampanoags from Mashpee on Cape Cod, Nipmucs from the interior of Massachusetts, Pequots and Mohegans from Connecticut or Rhode Island Indians who comprised a separate unit, Native men from these areas were soldiers in the Continental Army. As they had during the earlier wars of the 18th century, they suffered high casualties: more than half of the Pequots soldiers failed to come home and from Mashpee of 26 volunteers, all but one “fell martyrs to liberty.” [Michael Johnson or Crispus Attucks from Framingham, Massachusetts, victim of the Boston Massacre: in original documents a “mulatto” or person of mixed ancestry, name shorted “Perattuckus,” Nipmuc of “white deer” surname of an established Indian family from the Framingham area.]

To the north, the Abenakis were ambivalent about the conflict, some serving with the colonists, others joining the British army.

The Natives of the St. Lawrence region—at this time in history known as the Seven Nations of Canada, were equally ambivalent about fighting. Most of them had been involved in earlier wars against “the Bostonians,” but tried to maintain neutrality, steering a middle course between both the redcoats and the Bostonians. At Kahanawake near Montreal, where the council fire of the Seven Nations of Canada was kept, there was a reluctance to fight the “Bostonians” because of kinship ties the result of captive taking during the French & Indian wars. They had relatives in southern New England and additionally, several of their young people were at Dartmouth College.

In Maine and Nova Scotia there were comparable divisions among the Micmacs, Maliseets and Passamaquoddies, in part a result of their dependence on British trade goods. Some of their number enlisted in the Continental Army, others joined British forces.

In the Ohio, Indians and whites were killing each other from the outbreak of the war, the Indians in this region a prize fought over by the British and the

colonists. The Delawares, for example, tried to remain neutral. One of their towns [Coshocton] became a place of refuge for Indian people trying to escape the war and Americans waged an infamous “squaw campaign” attacking camps of Delaware women, children and old people. A detachment of Delawares would serve the Americans through the final years of the war.

Delawares would be victims of one of the more infamous events of the war: in 1782, a group of Delaware Christians, converted by Moravian missionaries, at Gnadenhütten in Pennsylvania, were attacked by American militia, some 96 men, women and children rounded up and all bludgeoned to death. Other converted Delawares living near Pittsburgh were also massacred.

The Shawnees, on the other hand, traveled to Cherokee country early in the war trying form a confederacy against the Americans. One of their more famous chiefs—Cornstalk, and a contingent of Shawnees trying to negotiate a truce under the protection of a white flag, were all killed in 1777, after which the Shawnees became committed allies of the British for the duration of the war.

Other Ohio nations like the Wyandots hesitated about which side to join, the Wyandots, for example, concerned about removing all of their women and children to safe hiding places before making any declaration. After violence against their Delaware kinsmen, the Shawnees became American allies. Farther west both the British and the colonists attempted to involve Indians from the Wabash, Illinois and Mississippi rivers—tribes whose territories were not yet encroached upon by American settlements. Some of them like the Wabash, Chippewas, Miamis, Ottawas and Menominees became British allies and assisted in defense against the American invasion of Canada. They were more concerned about protecting their homelands from settlement and for much of the conflict, the British claimed they “frame Excuses for not going to War.”

Other Ohio tribes like the Pottawatomi were split in their loyalty; their people from the Detroit area sided with the British, while the Illinois and Wisconsin bands allied themselves with the Americans. But as American settlers began streaming into their territories during the war, they switched allegiance to the British.

The Santee Sioux, Sauk and Fox and Winnebagos also sided with the British. Together, these tribes of the Lake region constituted a northwest Indian confederacy, hundreds of them, with British troops, for example, were involved in an unsuccessful attack on Saint Louis in 1780. The attack’s failure significantly undermined British prestige among Indian allies, after which these Natives vacillated for the rest of the war.

In the backcountry of the southeast, the conflict was very much an Indian war. The Catawbas in South Carolina, for example, knew they were surrounded by Americans who, they said, “intend to seize their women and children the moment they hear attempted violence,” so they sided, reluctantly, with the colonists. Likewise the Cherokees claimed they were:

very uneasie about their Women and Children saying that if any rupture should happen between them and the white people the Women &c would run to the Wood[s] and Starve

The Cherokee community, however, split. Younger warriors attacked American frontier settlements; colonial expeditions responded invading Cherokee homelands destroying towns and crops. Older chiefs sued for peace. A civil war followed among the Cherokees, one group of 500 families forming a separate pro-British or anti-American branch, other Cherokees remaining reluctant American allies.

Choctaws supported the British crown. The Chickasaws –some 30,000 strong in 1775, who held a strategy position in the lower Mississippi became British allies.

The Creeks tried to maintain a neutrality but felt Britain loved them like children while the Americans they said “would kill & destroy them” after the conflict. They eventually weighed as British allies. Anti-American Creeks who had migrated to Florida were already in the process of becoming the Seminoles.

In a crucial decision of 1778 the Continental Congress found many of the western nations allied against the American cause and followed the advice of Thomas Jefferson and others that friendly Native tribes should be used against other pro-British Indians. This was a decision that amounted to waging a total war in Indian country.

2. The War In Indian Homelands

Based at Detroit and Niagara, the British command in the west called upon their Indian allies and directed them in terror attacks to demoralize frontier settlements, but “Indian country suffered more than its share of killing, ravaging, and destruction,” [Calloway]. Indian leadership appealed to the Congress for help. As one scholar explains it, “Murder gradually and inexorably became the dominant Indian policy” in the region as settlers took the law into their own hands, killing Indian moderates as well as noncombatants and undermining the policies of Congress of distinguishing between friend Indians and enemy Indians.

Early in the conflict, the former strategy of France, England and Spain, of carrying war to Indian country destroying villages and cornfield, became an organized systematic tactic of the colonists. The significance:

[a] cornfields were attacked and destroyed usually late in the season, not allowing Indians time for growing other crops to sustain their communities through the winter months, so that frequently famine and starvation followed;

[b] corn was like the buffalo for the Plains cultures; corn, beans and squash were the sacred "three sisters." Corn was a major food source but corn and rituals and ceremonies surrounding its planting, growing and harvesting were central to the spiritual well being of many Indian communities, so that cornfields were "a target that could be hit time and again with devastating effect," [Calloway]. The effect of was practical in depriving Indians of food but also important in preventing the communal rites and ceremonies sustaining the spiritual foundation of Native peoples; and,

[c] marching armies into Indian country was a more effective means of safeguarding the frontier than employing large numbers of soldiers in garrisons and forts; it appeared both an efficient and economical solution to the Indian problem of the time.

Calculatedly, American commanders argued that carrying war into Indian country – Indians' homes and families the defined targets, had an adverse effect on their ability and will to resist: Indians would not only flee their towns, but as was written at the time, "their huts and cornfields must remain, the destruction whereof greatly affects their old men, their women and their children."

Therefore, American troops made their way through the Ohio, Susquehanna, Allegheny, Miami and Tennessee river valleys "leaving smoking ruins and burned cornfields behind them." These forces were less concerned with protecting frontier settlements than they were in exacting retribution and retaliation on Indian noncombatants: elderly people, women and children. As one commander [George Rogers Clark] instructed: "the Absolute orders of Congress to the Army now in Indian Country is to Shew no mercy to those that have been at war against the States." He added that "to excel them in barbarity was and is the only way to make war upon Indians and gain a name among them."

And, although Congress ordered that captured Natives be sold as slaves to defray some of costs of expeditions in Indian country, Indian scalps brought huge rewards in the colonies, one colonial commander reporting that among his

troops, "the Greater Part swore Bloodily that if they were not Sold for Slaves upon the Spot, they would kill and Scalp them Immediately."

In execution, these policies were felt in various parts of Indian country, for example, typified by organized assaults on Cherokee, Iroquois and Shawnee communities:

[a] *Devastation In Cherokee Homelands:*

Instructions were to "Cut up every Indian cornfield, burn every Indian town." In 1776, an invasion destroyed 36 towns with cornfields and livestock, a period document, for example, describing the destruction of "curious buildings, great apple trees and whiteman-like improvements...vast quantities of corn, and houses beyond numbering."

In 1779, an invasion destroyed 11 more Cherokee communities. A 1780 expedition destroyed over 1000 houses. In 1781, some 15 towns were burned and in 1782 more of the Cherokee homeland was ravaged. British reports from the period depicted Cherokee women and children butchered and sometimes burned alive. Whether this was British propaganda, it is established that in 1781 South Carolina militiamen, with short swords, hatched to death defenseless occupants of a surrendering Cherokee village.

[b] *Destruction In Iroquoia.*

In 1779, George Washington's written directions were "to carry the war into the Heart of the Country of the six nations; to cut off their settlements, destroy their next Year's crops and do them every other mischief...it will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent them planting more."

The campaign launched [Gen. John Sullivan] on Onondaga settlements leveled 40 towns, destroying an estimated 160,000 bushels of corn, plundering and burning its way across Iroquoia to the western homelands of the Seneca and south into the Allegheny. American eyewitnesses "marveled at the well-built towns, extensive crops of corn, beans, squash, and beautiful orchards of apple and peace trees," [Calloway]. At town after town whole days were spent destroying and looting; at the Seneca capital at Genesee, over 128 large structures were demolished. Graves were looted for burial items; sacred false face masks were plundered. Bodies of corpses were skinned from the hips down for making bootlegs.

By the end of the campaign, Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca and Cayuga homelands were laid waste; of the Iroquois towns, all but two larger Seneca

communities had been destroyed. The Iroquois sustained small numbers of casualties in this violence; they would abandon sites and retreat since as one chief later claimed, the Americans “put to death all the Women and Children, excepting some of the Young Women, whom they carried away for the use of their Soldiers & were afterwards put to death in a more shameful manner.”

[c] *Attacks In Shawnee Homelands*

Beginning in 1774, the Shawnees experienced a series of comparable “scorched earth” invasions lasting until 1794. Details of destruction and looting were the same as for Cherokee homelands and Iroquoia.

Although the Shawnees refused to be drawn into battles, on several occasions their villages were attacked, atrocities documented. From a Native perspective, the Americans arriving “like Thieves in the Night, when the Shawanese Warriors were out at their hunting Grounds, surrounded one of Their Towns and murdered all the Women and Children.” Here, again, Americans of the time wrote they “were impressed by the cornucopia they destroyed in Indian fields and villages...by eighteenth-century frontier standards, Indian communities were rich in agricultural foodstuffs,” and colonials often joined these campaigns anxious to seize Indian goods as well as their land.

For these reasons, one scholar explains:

In Indian country the war of the Revolution remained a communitywide effort producing common suffering. In some societies it was not unusual for Indian women to accompany their men on expeditions but in this war whole communities turned out on occasion to resist American assaults on their villages.

As a Delaware chief phrased it in 1782, “We Indians are the only Sufferers this War, as we day by day loose our people while you are quietly in your Fort.”

3. Impact of the War on Indian America

The War of Independence had several effects on Indian communities.

[a] *Indian men were often absent from Indian villages*

Whether fighting on home ground or in distant campaigns, Indian males were absent and communities suffered from their absence. Europeans military conflicts or campaigns were now being fought by professional soldiers part of trained standing armies and led by generals who formulated elaborate strategies.

On the other hand, the aboriginal peoples of America did not maintain standing armies; Indian warriors were not professional soldiers. They were husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, artisans, healers and leaders who participated fully in a community's social and ceremonial life. They and Indian women were also a community's providers.

Warriors traditionally did not fight during growing or harvesting times. Now off fighting year round they could not hunt, clear fields, maintain tools or do any of the heavy work part of community life; and, women, left unprotected by warriors, forced to flee for their lives or go into hiding with their children were unable to plant, harvest or store important food supplies.

Whether in the Indian communities of Massachusetts, or in Iroquoia or in the Ohio, Native men were absent from their villages in this period.

[b] Cornfields and garden areas were not maintained, famines a result

War dominating the activities of Indian communities in 12-month cycles placed enormous demands on Indian energies. The failure of many Indian settlements to maintain even those cornfields not destroyed by invaders often resulted in famine or widespread hunger. The 1770s was a time of poor harvests throughout the southeast, for example, Creek crops failed in 1776—while Cherokee refugees were flooding into their communities. Choctaw crops would also later fail. In the 1780s there was famine in the Ohio.

During this period food obtained through hunting became essential for Indian settlements, however, there were fewer of the men to do the hunting, fighting scared off many of the game animals and smaller hunting parties in forests were often victims of random violence.

[c] Trades routes were severed cutting off access to goods

The war severed trading patterns among Indian communities and also cut them off from European goods on which they had become dependent, repercussions felt as away inland as among the peoples of the southern Great Plains. Centuries-old patterns of Indian to Indian trade networks were obliterated during the war. Their routine subsistence and commercial exchanges disrupted, Indians became alarmingly dependent upon Europeans for food, clothing and trade. A Virginia general who had brought devastation to the Cherokees [William Christian] described the situation of many a Native community at this time:

The miseries of those people from what I can see and hear seem to exceed description; here are men, women & children almost naked; I see very little to cover either sex but some old bear skins, and we are told that the bulk of the nation are in the same naked situation. But this is not the greatest of their evils; their crops this year have been worse than ever was known, so that their corn & potatoes, it is supposed will be all done before April; and many are already out, particularly widows and fatherless children, who have no men nearly connected to them.

[d] Diseases spread through Indian country producing new epidemics

Diseases exacted an enormous toll on Native communities in this period. For example, in 1775 the Mohawks were hit with smallpox. From 1776 to 1783 epidemics raged among the Shawnees, Onondagas, Ottawas, Creeks, Oneidas, Senecas, Wyandots, Winnebagos and Cherokees. Contagions also struck refugee camps, some 300 Indians dead from cold and disease at Fort Niagara in single winter, [1779-80].

At the same time, a huge smallpox pandemic originating in central Mexico killed thousands of Natives in western America; traveling north across the Rocky Mountains, it was particularly virulent on the Great Plains and claimed Indian victims as far north as Hudson's Bay in Canada.

[e] Natives communities were disrupted, whole populations migrating

Former seasonal movement for social or subsistence purposes was replaced by dramatic migrations of Indian people fleeing the horrors of war, seeking food for themselves and their families or hoping for physical safety in places of refuge. As historian Colin Calloway has demonstrated, communities splintered and reassembled, sometime amalgamating with other communities beyond the reach of American armies.

Fort Niagara, at Lake Ontario, a former trading outpost and headquarters for British and Indian operations against the American frontier, was one of the places for refuge. During the war, Niagara became a military garrison, trading post, supply depot, diplomatic hub and temporary home to Indian people who had lost everything in the conflict, many of whom were refugees or children of refugees. Escaping American depredations in Iroquoia and elsewhere, they flocked to Niagara.

In the winter of 1778-1779 Niagara tallied 7,365 Indians—over 4,700 of them women and children, huddled in the area of the fort for provisions and clothing; in the single month of January 1779, over 2600 Natives from 22 different

tribes had arrived there. Before the cessation of hostilities between colonists and the British, the number of refugees fleeing to Niagara would increase; it was, however, only one of several places of refuge sought by Indian people during the war. Other sites included Schenectady, New York; Detroit, Saint Louis, and Saint Augustine and Pensacola, in Florida.

Additionally, hundreds of Native people drifted west across the Mississippi River for safety. These migrations produced what historians document as chain relocations. For example, displaced Native people from the eastern woodlands migrated to the homelands of the Osages and Pawnees of the Great Plains; the Osages and Pawnees pressured the Comanches; in turn, the Comanches encroached upon territories of the Apaches; and, finally, the Apaches pushed against Spanish settlements of the Southwest.

Loyalists also pressured Native communities. For example, Americans continuing allegiance to the British crown who had fled to eastern Canada encroached upon Micmac homelands in Nova Scotia and southern Loyalists poured into Indian territory in West Florida.

[f] Moderate political leadership was swept away

The era intensified political changes in Indian communities, as well as in colonial societies – drowning out voices of moderation and peaceful coexistence. Warfare and outside influences elevated war chiefs to community leaders; previously war chiefs only exercised temporary authority. Now they became tribal leaders. As one scholar explains it, “older chiefs complained increasingly that they could not control their young men—or as was often the case in the polyglot communities created by the Revolution, control somebody else’s young men.”

[g] Missionary activity and educational programs were abandoned

Religious practices suffered, missionary work among Indian populations was disrupted or abandoned during the war. Christian males were obviously away at war, with little time for religious observances or study. During destruction of Indian towns, the Natives’ prayerbooks and Bibles went up in flames; sharing the Christian faith counted for little in the conflict. Missionaries were detained by opposing British and American armies, eventually separated from their flocks. A translation of the Bible into the Mohawk language was aborted. Model communities of converted Indians were abandoned. Work of the London-based Society for the Propagation of the Gospel – which financed teachers in Native communities and underwrote various missionary activities in America, came to an end. Additionally, converted Indians like the defenseless

and pacifist Moravians at Gnaddenhütten in Pennsylvania were slaughtered by Americans.

[h] Loss of ritual and ceremonial well-being of communities

Warfare and economic disruption greatly effected the ritual and ceremonial life of Indian tribes, throwing many religious practices and sacred obligations reinforcing community into disarray. As example, the ancient unity of the Iroquois League disintegrated with a disappearance of ritual and ceremonies, much as a Cayuga leader claimed in 1789 that a “Great Part of our ancient Customs & Ceremonies have, thro’ the Loss of Many of our principal men during the War, been neglected & forgotten, so that we cannot go through the whole with our ancient Propriety.” What resulted was a loss of sacred power threatening Indians’ struggle for independence and undermining the social fabric of communities held together through ritual.

All of these factors produced “the largest, most unified Native American effort the continent would ever see,” [Gregory Dowd], as more and more Indians joined the British war effort assembling as an impressive array of Natives opposed to the American colonists. One British commander [Lord Germain] wrote to London, “all the Indians upon the Continent are united in a solemn League to oppose any encroachments upon their hunting Grounds, and in support of His Majesty’s Government.” This formidable combination of Indian allies would, in fact, win several victories over colonists.

However, to conclude, as Colin Calloway explains it:

By the end of the Revolution, Indian country was pockmarked with ruined villages from the Mohawk Valley to the Tennessee. Indian people who survived the war faced an uncertain future as they set about rebuilding war-torn lives. Many of them also had bitter scores to settle with fellow Indians as well as with white adversaries.

3. The Treaty of Paris and Peace in Indian Country

The Treaty of Paris ending the war recognized the independence of the 13 coastal colonies and transferred to the new United States all land east of the Mississippi, south of the Great Lakes, and north of Florida. During negotiations a Wyandot chief had told a British commander “we hope your children will be remembered in the Treaty.” But Indians were not mentioned in the Treaty of Paris, and, as a Cherokee chief concluded, “The peacemakers and our Enemies have talked away our Lands at a Rum Drinking.”

In the peace, the federal government had to persuade the coastal states to renounce claims of their former colonial charters to all lands "from sea to sea" in North America, usually by giving them portions of Indian territories. The Treaty of Paris, for this reason, ended hostilities between the Europeans but brought no peace of Indian country. One scholar has commented, "Rather, by ending open conflict between on-Indian power, it deprived Indians of allies and diplomatic opportunities as they continued their struggle for independence against Americans who claimed their lands as the fruits of victory," [Calloway.]

In the Ohio region, historians have written that the end of the Revolution produced a new phase of conflict between Indians and Americans. Murders, thefts, raids and counter raids continued. [Richard White] "While empires and states went about making peace, the villages continued to act on their own." Revolutionary violence gave way to peace in other areas, but in the Ohio vengeance and strife remained characteristics of Indian and white relations.

During the war American expeditions into the region returned with stories of rich lands awaiting them. Between 1783 and 1790 the population of the three westernmost counties of Pennsylvania grew by 87 percent. American veterans of the conflict were demanding Ohio lands as "spoils of war," Indian atonement and compensation for the expenses of waging war on them. The Iroquois would loose claims to lands in the area in 1784; the Delawares, Wyandots and neighbors would loose lands in 1785 [Fort McIntosh]; and, Shawnees in 1786 [Fort Finney].

In 1785 at Fort Stanwix, the Iroquois tried to argue for the Ohio River as the boundary to Indian lands. U.S. commissioners dictated terms, demanded signatures from unqualified or unauthorized Indians and seized hostages. Mohawks and Senecas unsuccessfully attempted to speak for the interests of western tribes; the commissioners refused to recognize them in that capacity. One scholar who has written extensively [Francis Jennings] on the Iroquois says of this treaty, "The great Iroquois 'empire,' which had always been the imaginary creature of diplomacy, now died as it had been born. The commissioners dictated bounds for the individual Iroquois nations, and Congress turned its attention westward."

As another example, at Fort McIntosh in 1785, Wyandots, Chippewas, Delawares and Ottawas argued that they considered lands transferred to the United States by England still to be their homelands; they were reminded by Americans they were a defeated people, their so-called "pretensions" brushed aside.

In the southeast, it's been argued, that the end of the Revolution created an arena of competing national, state, and tribal interests, international intrigues, and land speculation, during which control of a vast frontier controlled by the British and their Indian allies passed to the United States. Here, boundaries were established by various treaties but not respected. As a Cherokee wrote to Virginian Patrick Henry in 1789, "We are so Distrest by the No. Carolina People that it seems Like we shol'd soon become no People. They have got all our Land from us. We have hardly as much as we can stand on, and they seem to want that little worse than the Rest."

Of all the southern tribes, the Catawbas – who had been American allies, were unique in retaining traditional homelands, all other so-called "Civilized Tribes" were losers.

In the North, the Penobscots and Passaquoddies of Maine found their homelands encroached upon and they were stripped of most of their land in a series of unfavorable treaties; also, waves of American settlers inundated Abenaki homelands in Vermont and New Hampshire.

Thousands of Indian refugees migrated to the northwest part of the Ohio Valley, where many tribes continued an armed opposition to the United States. In 1786, delegates from the Six Nations, Hurons, Delawares, Shawnees, Ottawas, Chippewas, Miami, Potawatomis, Cherokees and Wabash sent a communication from the "United Indian Nations" to Congress declaring invalid all treaties made without the unanimous consent of the tribes. Their opposition continued through the 1790s.

In 1787 the Northwest Ordinance stated, "Their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent...they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress." Simply, Indian lands so described would be available for conversion to statehood, Congress thought, when the tribes there should give their consent; as Native people in the region withheld consent they were invaded in a "just and lawful" war authorized by the Congress.

Armies sent by the Congress in 1790 and 1791 were defeated, the first army routed in a battle known as Harmar's Humiliation, the second at what was called St. Clair's Shame. In 1794, President George Washington and his Secretary of War Henry Knox sent a third army [under General Anthony Wayne] which succeeded in defeating of the northwestern confederacy at the Battle of Fallen Timbers.

With the Battle of Fallen Timbers, the American Revolution in Indian country ended. The era had been a disaster for Native people. In the words of one scholar [Calloway]:

Burned villages and crops, murdered chiefs, divided councils and civil wars, migrations, towns and forts choked with refugees, economic disruption, breaking of ancient traditions, losses in battle and to disease and hunger, betrayal to their enemies, all made the American Revolution one of the darkest periods in American Indian history. The emergence of the independent United States as the ultimate victor from a long contest of imperial powers reduced Indians to further dependence and pushed them into further dark ages.

Many communities became virtual “slums in the wilderness,” haunted by alcoholism, poverty, social pathology, fear, disease, disunity and loss of traditional certainties. Reeling from the consequences of their defeat and dispossession numerous communities seemed to have lost their place in the world, as the fabric of Indian society appeared to be crumbling around them.