

Native Americans in the United States Civil War

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Abstract

Native Americans played a vital role in the history of the United States of America. During the upheaval of the Civil War (1861-1865), many American Indians expressed their commitment to the Union or Confederacy. They assembled armies and participated in battles. Their alliance was important for both sides of the war (the Union and the Confederacy) as they recognized that American Indians' involvement in this conflict could influence the outcome of the bloody conflict. At the same time, Native Americans were affected by the Civil War, because during this period they faced division among their tribes, and after the war they struggled to exist without slavery and to cope with broken treaties and territorial growth despite promises by the United States government.

This article examines the role of American Indians during the Civil War and their condition after the war. The research explains how slavery affected the American Indians' commitment and how their decision shaped the American experience in the Civil War.

Keywords: Civil War, Native Americans, American Indians, the Cherokees, the Union, the Confederacy, Indian Territory

Introduction

The history of Native Americans is very appealing and exciting to general readers. Since the 1960s many historians, authors and scholars have studied American Indians and written thousands of books and articles chronicling the lives of different tribes in North America.

One of the concerns are made on Native Americans' participation in the Civil War which occupies the central role in America's historical consciousness. During the period of 1861 to 1865, American Indians all over the continent were struggling for autonomy, as peoples with their own organization, culture, and life-style.

When we examine the story of American Indians' experience during the Civil War, emphasis are made on the "Five Civilized Tribes" of the Southeast. These tribes were: the Cherokees, the Creeks, the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, and the Seminoles (Dunbar, 2013). Most of the research focuses on the Cherokee nation, due to its direct and active involvement in the American Civil War.

The importance of this war lies on two fundamental questions: whether the U.S. could be considered as a dissolvable confederation of sovereign states or the Americans could prove that their nation was not divisible and the country was a sovereign national government. The Unionists

fought a bloody war to prove that all men were created with an equal right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I. The Civil War and the Cherokee Nation

Andrew Jackson, the seventh U.S. president, created a crucial turning point by forcing Indians from their territories in the southern U.S. during the 1830s. During this period of time many American Indians were relocated into the Midwest, due to the promises by the government to give them some part of the territory, this piece of land was labeled as "Indian Territory" (Dunbar, 2013, p. 2). The U.S. Congress declared, "their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent, and in their property rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed; laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them" (Alvin M. Josephy, 1989, p. 130).

By the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, both opposing forces – the Union and the Confederacy-realized that an alliance with the Five Civilized Tribes would provide a strong support for either side, including by furnishing fighting men.

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When the Confederacy broke from the Union, both sides needed help from anyone who would fight for them.

Two prominent leaders within the Cherokee Indian Territory, John Ross and Stand Watie, were considered mixed-blood by tribal standards. Ross was one-eighth Cherokee and Watie was two-thirds. They spoke English and had some European traits, however, they were raised in Cherokee society with Cherokee traditions (Dunbar, 2013). This dual heritage status could affect their relations within their tribe; due to the fact that they were partly white Americans, they shared sentiments from both sides.

The Confederacy delegated Arkansas Governor Henry M. Rector to speak with the Five Tribes. Because of the 1830s removal and broken promises regarding the land, Native Americans were extremely frustrated. In comparison to the North which was constantly growing in industry, the South was based on an agricultural economy of small landowners who used slaves to produce cotton or tobacco. Regarding the economy Indian nations were associated with and tied to the Confederacy; we can freely say that during the Civil War, sympathies, institutions and attitudes were one-sided.

Confederate leaders guaranteed Indian tribes the protection and independence of their nations, and provided expansive treaties with them. American Indians were promised that their tribal land rights would be protected against states and private individuals, Indian headman would be ensured with grants, educational and technical support; agricultural assistance would be provided for all members of Indian nations. In a countermove, the U.S. government guaranteed Indians justice in federal courts when they were offended by Whites (Alvin M. Josephy, 1989). These factors caused divisions among the Five Civilized Tribes. The Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Choctaws supported the Confederacy, while the remaining two (the Creeks and the Seminoles) wanted to remain neutral. In a few months, this division had become more sharply defined and in August 1861 near Springfield, Missouri, Confederate Indians launched an attack on the neutrals' camp. This experience resulted in the agreement from neutral Indians to assist the United States (Dunbar, 2013).

While the Confederacy was winning, Native Americans were in a favorable and advantageous position. However, taking into consideration the fury of the Civil War, not only Native Americans but white Americans as well learned that no matter the situation or side, the overall picture remained the same - the United States was at war itself, and no one was at an advantage.

One of the reasons Native Americans were affected during the Civil War was due to the fact that Five Civilized Tribes were considered as slaveholders. For example, The Choctaw nation held blacks as captives from warfare, The Creeks made black people to work primarily as agricultural laborers, they were cultivating cotton for their master's profit and food for consumption (Jackson, 2014).

Before the Civil War, Christian missionaries from many denominations had been sent from the North to preach against slavery and to purchase slaves with the intent of releasing them. This was seen as abolitionism by the Cherokees and also as a sign of picking sides if they went along with what the missionaries were preaching. One of the leaders of the Cherokee nation, John Ross, strongly supported neutrality and promoted his people not to participate in this

conflict, however, he could not realize that the rest of the nation, whether torn or united strongly required Cherokees support (Dunbar, 2013). Despite Ross's desire to preserve neutrality, there were some other opposing forces within the tribe itself which in comparison to Ross's political party consisted of half-blooded Native Americans and were holding slaves. The Confederacy recognized this advantage and acted accordingly. Albert Pike, an attorney from Little Rock, Arkansas, was sent to negotiate with the Cherokee nation, he knew the things that Cherokees had been trying to obtain since 1846 and promised them to provide with money, power and protection (Dunbar, 2013).

The Cherokee alliance was considerable for several reasons. First, their nation was the largest among other civilized tribes, it controlled an estimated forty thousand square miles of land in the southeastern United States. By the eighteenth century, Cherokees lived in sixty-four mountain towns and villages and spoke three different dialects (Wilkins, 2007). Their decision which side to choose could heavily influence the other tribes. As Josephy states, the economic value of Native American lands and natural resources were widely known (Alvin M. Josephy, 1989). Accordingly, Cherokees had a strong influence; due to the profitability of the Indian Territory as a grain and livestock producing area with important access routes to Kansas and Texas, the Cherokees were the most desirable ally during the war. Wealth, location, and large population of this nation was considerable.

II. The Native Americans Fight to hold on their Land Base

Despite the war, it was impossible to avoid the tide of westward expansion. Not only American Indians but white Americans as well experienced upheaval because of the movement west during the Civil War. With the Indian removal and relocation in years prior to the Civil War, old ways of life had to be organized into the new places Indians were located. Despite the move from familiar to unfamiliar, Native Americans were still looking to reestablish their tobacco-cotton based economy. With Native American sympathies being divided like the land they were living on, feelings from white settlers in the West were changing. Here we should emphasize the Sioux Uprising which occurred in 1862, it was triggered because of the United States' failure to fulfill the treaties about promised food, money, and land along the Minnesota River. This promised money was given to fur traders in the areas who claimed that the Sioux owed them money. Moreover, the government kept the food promised to the Sioux in warehouses as a blackmail tool until they assimilated to farming their land. These broken treaties proved to be fatal to the Sioux due to the harsh Minnesota winters and the decreasing numbers of buffalo herds (because of an increase of settlers) (Dunbar, 2013).

Furthermore, President Lincoln made a harsh decision when he identified 38 out of 300 Indian participants of the Sioux Uprising as the guilty and influential of the culprits, and hung them the day after Christmas in 1862. This was the largest mass execution the country had ever staged (Dunbar, 2013).

During the Civil War there had occurred two of the first important battles with the active involvement of Native Americans: battle at Wilson's Creek in August 1861 and Pea Ridge in March 1862. Wilson's Creek was the second major battle of the war and the first was near the Mississippi River.

Wilson's Creek ended with the victory of Confederate forces, however the Battle of Pea Ridge resulted in the Union victory. Exactly this result caused Union army's entrance into the Indian Territory. The Union army decided to pursue the Indians into their neutral territory because of their alliance with the CSA. John Ross was put in prison and shipped up to Philadelphia.

Due to these broken promises American Indians stopped relying on any kind of treaties signed with the U.S. government and decided to take their nation's fate into their own hand, which in 1864 resulted in a harsh battles between Union forces and Native Americans in today's Minnesota, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico. One example was in Sand Creek which occurred on November 29, 1864 in southeastern Colorado Territory. Seven hundred militiamen stormed into the Indian camp and by the end of the day had killed more than seventy of the villagers, mostly women and children. This brutal event became known as "The Sand Creek Massacre" (Nichols, 2003, p. 136). This incident stands as one of the white actions against Indians to be called a massacre.

Many Indians saw Sand Creek and similar violence as the face of the U.S. government to the majority of Indians who were trying to gain for what they were fighting for: their own lands, for their own nations (Dunbar, 2013).

Furthermore, this massacre was a backward for American Indians who had been promised good relations by both the U.S. government and the Confederacy. Their faith towards the government (both sides: Union and Confederacy) was changed into a general suspiciousness. By the end of the Civil War American Indians were completely empty, misled, and dissatisfied.

III. The Aftermath of the Civil War: the Breaking of Treaties

After the end of the Civil War, the United States government passed the Black Codes according to which only white men had the authority to occupy prominent positions of power. In Louisiana, this discriminating legislation acted as a new kind of slavery, it targeted free blacks who were unemployed. Southerners were told that hiring free blacks would take them away from their previous employers or their plantation owners. The treaties made by the U.S. government explicitly allowed white Americans to enter Indian Territory and to demand the land. This procedure could be done easily if they had served as missionaries for three or five years, or if they had been appointed officials in those territories. It was becoming clear that the nation was uniting under one government, and those who had rebelled were beginning to feel the result (Dunbar, 2013).

Eventually the American Indians had to assimilate into white traditions. As Banner stated, "the people during a colonial period claimed that the Indians were a wild people that had no laws to govern themselves, a people lacking any conception of property" (Banner, 2005, p. 18).

Accordingly, in 1887, the U.S. government passed the Dawes Act which aimed to reform the perceived weaknesses of American Indian life, more specifically, the absence of private property and the nomadic tradition, Indian tribes were forced to become farmers and landowners.

The legislation which provided the end of tribal relationships, emphasized the treatment of Indian people as individuals and not tribes. Reservations were to be divided into family-sized farms which would be allotted to each Indian, each adult Indian would receive 160 acres, each minor child 80 acres. This policy remained in force until 1934. The government failed to implement it on every reservation, but even where it was carried out, it failed to break up the tribes, convert large numbers of Indians into independent farmers, or hasten assimilation. Due to the lack of financial credit, or any kind of assistance, many of the Indians sold their allotments to Whites at bargain prices. This condition resulted in the increase of poverty rate, reservation life became associated with disease and hopelessness (Josephy, 1989).

The end of American Civil War resulted in the uproar for Indian nations all over the world. The United States encountered a precocious and steady growth away from pre-Civil War patterns. Slavery had been abolished, and Indian nations broke up. Populations moved west to expand the United States, and the road to reconstruction began (Dunbar, 2013).

By 1865 as a result of the war, more than ten thousand people in Indian Territory were living in refugee camps, and all of the major tribal groups had seen their governments and economies destroyed (Nichols, 2003).

IV. Conclusion

The importance of Native Americans' involvement in the Civil War shows that issues extend beyond the stereotypes of an oppressed people who were pushed out of their homelands.

Through the uproar of the Civil War there were the struggles of picking sides, and both White Americans and Indians were caught in a place of fighting against those similar to themselves. Two well-known figures from the Cherokee Indian Territory John Ross and Stand Watie had dilemma which side to support. Watie was a strong supporter of the Confederacy, while Ross preferred to remain neutral (none of them supported the Union).

As it turned out, American Indians were among the many losers in this devastating conflict. The promises and treaties by the U.S. government were roughly broken. The promises by the Union and Confederate forces regarding the land, independence, freedom and representation within their houses of leadership were pushed aside. American Indians were removed from their homelands and their identity was deprived (Alvin M. Josephy, 1989).

The involvement of American Indians in the Civil War clearly reflects the struggles of an oppressed people, more than 600,000 people died during this war, women lost their husbands, and faced the trouble of gaining support from the government for their families.

Through the eyes of the Native American experience in the Civil War, we see the experience of all Americans in one of the most devastating times in the United States history.

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