War at the Margins

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Empires, Nation-States, and Global War at the Margins

As Matsuko Soram and I walked along an overgrown trail edged with concrete ruins on the island of Toloas in Chuuk (Truk) Lagoon, she pointed to a set of crumbling walls and steps, all that remained of her childhood home. I had come to Chuuk to record the memories of Micronesians who lived through World War II on the islands. Matsuko’s father had been a policeman for the Japanese civil government in the early 1940s, when Toloas was an Imperial Japanese Navy base. A shipping fleet had filled the now-empty harbor, and houses, offices, workshops, and an airbase crowded the island when, on February 17–18, 1944, Allied bombers targeted it. Matsuko recalled that day:

In the morning at 3:00 a.m., that’s when the group of airplanes came. The planes that came first didn’t drop bombs; they just strafed. My house was on top of a hill, so when I looked down, I saw a lot of the Japanese soldiers in the sea, they were floating, they were dead.

After that, we started to run to the caves (bomb shelters). But you know what? Some people wanted to watch, but the Japanese soldiers came and chased them away. It was the first time we had seen guns and those things, that’s why we wanted to watch, but (the soldiers) chased them away.

When the war got more difficult, they brought us together, the people from Toloas. We stayed in one place. The days went on and on, and the war got even worse. They said we were going to be moved away from Toloas. . . . They took away our farms, our food, our trees, and our land. They really made us suffer.

Toloas is no longer an urban center. Devastated by eighteen months of bombing, never rebuilt when US occupying forces chose a different island for their headquarters, it is now a quiet rural hamlet, still littered with the detritus of war. Like the island, the people of Chuuk, too, found their lives reshaped by global conflict.
My work for the past two decades has dealt with Micronesians’ memories of the Pacific War. Historians have produced libraries of books on that war’s military strategy, on air, naval, and land battles, on the experiences of leaders and ordinary soldiers and sailors—even, more recently, on the meaning of battle sites to Japanese and Americans today. But historians had little to say about the people who lived on those strategically vital islands: how they survived, whether they took sides, what they thought and suffered, and how war changed them and their children and grandchildren. To address this, I collaborated with Suzanne Falgout and Laurence M. Carucci on two volumes combining oral and documentary history, *The Typhoon of War* (2001) and *Memories of War* (2008).1 Our work paralleled that of researchers in Southwest Pacific islands, describing the profound transformations generated by global war: the devastation of invasion and bombing, of course, but also food shortages, forced labor, relocation, martial law, and shifts in colonial power, gender roles, religion, and family structure.

The islands of the Pacific are not the only Indigenous lands on which the Second World War was fought. In the hills of Southeast Asia, British and Japanese wooed village elders to recruit guerrillas for jungle warfare. Sámi reindeer herders in Finland and Norway guided refugees across frozen landscapes, and Sámi men served in the armies of four nations. Aboriginal Australians patrolled the north coast and rescued downed pilots in the deserts only they knew well. The Imperial Japanese Army recruited Aboriginal Taiwanese to serve in New Guinea, where their survival skills kept their comrades alive in a retreat across unfamiliar territory. Even in South America, the inhabited continent least directly touched by the war, Allied demands for rubber pushed development into the Amazon rainforest. Most Americans know the story of how Navajos gave the US Marines an unbreakable code, but this is not an isolated case: Native languages, knowledge of landscape, and bushcraft were all deployed by warring armies. The combatant powers found images of Indigenous peoples useful as well, as propaganda and as proof of the rightness of their cause and the reach of their flags.

*War at the Margins* offers a broad comparative view of the impact of World War II on Indigenous communities. The aim is not a comprehensive survey of their experiences, which would require an encyclopedic effort. Rather, I use selected cases to trace how these groups emerged from the trauma of war to lay foundations for their twenty-first century role as new players on the political stage. Today, insights from indigeneity contribute to international discourse in politics, law, human rights, spirituality, and sustainable development.
Studying Indigenous Wartime Histories

Telling the story of World War II began before hostilities ended and has never ceased. Libraries bulge with volumes of military, diplomatic, and political histories, with memoirs and biographies of soldiers and statesmen. By the end of the century, awareness of the passing of the wartime generation propelled the collection of oral histories from survivors worldwide. World War II histories continue to flow, but those written today differ from the top-brass-heavy military and archival approach of the first postwar decades. A modern comprehensive history integrates personal diaries, letters, and oral accounts. Even military histories often include such broader topics as ethnic, gender, race, and class analysis, sexuality, and the environmental consequences of war. Given the vast expansion in research, one might wonder . . . is there anything left to say about World War II? But of course there is, partly because we have not yet heard everyone’s story of this shared global experience, and partly because such a transformative era holds lessons for the modern world.

In this book I describe military activity at the “edges” of states, the sparsely inhabited areas where self-governing mostly tribal communities lived under loose
engagement with central authorities. Using examples from different regions, I show how military activity altered their relationship with national and colonial governments and majority populations, and how it opened paths eventually taken by Indigenous Rights activists in following generations. These small communities—which sometimes played outsized roles—have unique stories that deserve to be on library shelves.

While my argument is partially informed by my own research in Micronesia, this book relies on secondary sources for its comparative reach. This is made possible by the expansion of Indigenous Studies, growing ranks of Indigenous scholars, and new approaches to global history. One of the pleasures of my task has been discovering a wealth of new publications on Canada’s First Nations, Native Americans, Aboriginal Australians, Pacific Islanders, Sámi, Nenets, Taiwanese Aborigines, Ainu, Nagas, Kukis, and many others. Research has matured from the early phase of salvaging these “lost” or “forgotten” histories in the 1960s and 1970s, to integrating Indigenous experiences into broader narratives of World War II and exploring specific topics in detail.

The most important change has been the addition of Indigenous people’s own voices. I have relied on the work of such scholars throughout this book. Where documentary sources are scarce, as in war-destroyed zones or largely non-literate communities, only the fragile web of personal and family tales holds memories. Educational projects, films, and online sites, many initiated by Indigenous communities, have increased the number and accessibility of oral histories and unpublished information.

Another addition has been imperial, colonial, and transnational histories—three related but not identical approaches—supplementing nation-focused studies. Empires, by definition, encompass peoples differing in language, culture, and appearance. In World War II, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Soviet Union, and the United States (among the Allies), and Germany, Italy, and Japan (as the Axis) drew on populations throughout their domains for troops and labor. The response to wartime demands revealed both the strength and weaknesses of colonial control. Support for the British Empire was immediate in many regions, but even enthusiastic responses included a sense of local goals. Japan’s empire conscripted militias and labor battalions as it occupied new territory in East and Southeast Asia; Germany did the same in Europe. The French Empire split, between the Vichy government (established in June 1942 after Germany occupied northern France) and the Free French movement, which based itself in colonies as a claim to legitimacy and a source of troops and income. The lives of Africa’s and Asia’s colonial soldiers and civilian laborers
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have finally received much-needed scholarly attention and overlap in some ways those of Indigenous communities discussed here.7 With the foundations laid by Indigenous Studies and imperial/colonial history, the time is ripe to look at what is distinctive about Indigenous wartime experiences. A worldwide overview risks being superficial or can seem to deny the uniqueness of each community. But one reason Indigenous Studies can make broad comparisons is that historically, the theory and operation of colonial regimes was global, producing striking parallels. In World War II, both Allied and Axis empires dealt with those at their “edges” in response to similar demands of politics and strategy. Ken Coates’s Global History of Indigenous Peoples (2004) offers a brief but insightful treatment of World War II, admirably combining generalizations with specific examples. With a tighter focus, R. Scott Sheffield and Noah Riseman’s Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War (2019) compares Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia to reveal patterns in military service, home front life, and postwar policy changes, while respecting the particularities of each group.8 To understand the histories of Indigenous peoples in World War II, we must begin by examining the modern meaning of the category.

About Indigenous Peoples

Using the term “indigenous peoples” to talk about World War II is anachronistic to some degree—not because the term was unfamiliar at that time, but because it has since come to have a more specific meaning in contemporary scholarly, political, and legal discourse. We no longer use “Indigenous” (especially if capitalized) in its general sense of a population native to a region. Not all who consider themselves natives of a place are “Indigenous” in this relatively new sense, which emerged most visibly on the international scene in the 1980s.

Historians of the Indigenous Rights movement trace its emergence from broader human rights efforts at the start of the twentieth century. Efforts to improve the status of particular groups go back further, with advocacy groups often led by non-Natives, but these were scattered efforts—and many focused as much on assimilation as on protection. After World War I, the League of Nations took an interest in monitoring the status of these special minorities. A specific political/legal category emerged in Latin America, where concepts of indigenismo have long formed an important element of political action.

World War II released a flood of human rights activity, from the 1941 Atlantic Charter’s promise of self-determination to the United Nations’ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This laid the groundwork for numerous
postwar conventions and treaties. Civil rights activism and attention from international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization’s 1957 Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations, set the stage for the emergence in the 1980s of a global Indigenous movement claiming distinctive rights in the national and international arena and bringing the term into wide use. In 1982, the UN established a Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which grew rapidly as an extra-national forum; the outcome was UN General Assembly approval of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. Later came UN declarations of a Year, two Decades, and an annual Day of the World’s Indigenous People. Today, many organizations are involved with Indigenous rights locally, regionally, and globally.\textsuperscript{9}

At this point, the category of “Indigenous peoples” has become a familiar part of international life. But a glance at any listing of Indigenous peoples will show that it includes a wide variety of groups, living in quite different circumstances. As Ronald Niezen noted in 2003, it is odd to have a global movement that is all about cultural difference!\textsuperscript{10} How can the concerns of Sámi of northern Europe, Ainu of Hokkaido, Navajo of the US Southwest, Igorot of Luzon, San Bushmen, and hundreds of others be addressed through a uniform process? And that is even before considering the national politics of Norway, Finland, Japan, the United States, the Republic of the Philippines, and Botswana. The intersection of cultural diversity with national and international politics makes the category problematic. Since the start of the Indigenous Rights movement, legal scholars and political scientists have parsed how these communities differ from ethnic minorities or historical colonial majority populations.

Defining Indigenous communities is not only difficult; it is, at this point, highly charged politically. The United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia were among those who protested UNDRIP, fearing a threat to national sovereignty. Once a group has official Indigenous status, either within the nation-state context or in international law, new expectations and sanctions may apply. For that reason, a government may prefer to avoid classifying a group as “indigenous,” or may reject the category completely, arguing for example that all its citizens are equally native to the land. Activists, on the other hand, might see Indigenous status as a way to promote human rights and protect land, languages, and culture by drawing on a transnational legal framework. Defining who is Indigenous is so contentious, in fact, that UNDRIP did not attempt a definition.\textsuperscript{11}

As a result, defining indigeneity has largely developed through dialogue among self-identifying groups, national governments, international agencies, and NGOs. While no single definition exists for all situations, common
elements include: a strong affiliation with a home territory; a history of colonial settlement or occupation; distinct political, economic, and social institutions; and a desire to maintain community cultural identity, which might include language, ceremonial activities, subsistence activities, and other customs. Briefly, we can think of Indigenous communities as those historically “at the margins” of nation-state power, either as internal colonies in settler states (like Native North Americans or Aboriginal Australians) or as small-scale self-governing communities at the edges of large peasant-agricultural societies (like the “hill tribes” of upland Southeast Asia). Most have been subsistence horticulturalists, pastoralists, or foragers in the past and, in many cases, into the present. These communities seek to maintain their territory, culture, language, and lifeways, despite attacks and pressure from outside authorities or nearby majority populations. This does not necessarily mean they want to separate from surrounding nation-states (though some do), but that they limit or resist assimilation, seeking to be themselves in the context of modern global politics.

For our purposes, we can shortcut debates over definitions, as we focus on how these groups related to the contending powers before, during, and immediately after World War II. While Indigenous peoples did not form a legal category then, they of course did exist, both within the national boundaries of major powers and at the frontiers of colonial authority. By the mid-twentieth century, they had been largely pushed to the margins of arable land, living in relatively inaccessible or economically undesirable areas. They were often stigmatized as “uncivilized,” “backward,” or “primitive” to imply their inferiority to the majority of citizens or colonial subjects. But during World War II, it was often those very qualities of marginality that made them valuable allies or dangerous enemies.

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Indigenous homelands of mountains, tundras, jungles, and deserts might have been at the margins of state control, but during the war some became centers of conflict. This is nothing new. The wide swath of history shows that frontier communities have always had a role to play in ancient and modern empires. Roman or Zulu, Inca or French, expanding empires swallowed bordering chiefdoms and tribes; communities were absorbed or destroyed by conquest or fled to less accessible lands. In the modern era, the colonial wars of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, spurred by competition for political and commercial hegemony, marked the final stages of exploring “to the ends of the earth” as the victors portioned out the inhabited continents. The wars of the
mid-twentieth century, in another orgy of international rivalry, brought the most remote borderlands into the emerging global order. Even if a tribal community had managed to avoid or survive the devastation of enslavement, epidemics, massacres, loss of land, and forced assimilation—even if they managed to maintain some protective isolation—the last century’s conflicts ended that forever. In particular, as historian Ken Coates (2004) points out, the Second World War transformed remote Indigenous homelands that had previously been largely ignored by the industrial nations. In a way, that war was the final stage of globalization: the point at which even the most isolated or marginalized groups became engaged with the most powerful imperial states in a global event.\(^\text{13}\)

Many minority groups and impoverished or disenfranchised populations suffered during World War II. Wartime burdens on minorities or colonial subjects were magnified by discrimination, political powerlessness, or deliberate genocide. Focusing on Indigenous communities does not mean that I think they suffered more than others. Rather, I wish to investigate how their experiences were distinctive, and how that distinctiveness affected their postwar position and laid the foundation for modern developments. A clear causal chain cannot always be forged between the war years and the emergence of the Indigenous Rights movement decades later. However, a case can be made for how the circumstances of war shifted governments’ stances on Indigenous legal status, altered longstanding racist views, and changed Indigenous peoples’ own perceptions of their identity and potential futures.

**Bigger Questions: Beyond the War**

What is the value of looking at Indigenous experiences during World War II? Military historians would note the importance of a few key encounters: global war is about the clash of empires, yet small-scale tribes and villages played crucial roles at times. Along the Kokoda Trail of Papua New Guinea, at the Battle of Kohima in northeast India, during the US invasion of the Solomon Islands—at these turning points, among others, Indigenous action was pivotal.

But there is a wider significance to studying communities that have not been fully absorbed into the social and cultural hegemony of states. Anthropologists have traditionally studied such groups to learn about humanity—not because they are “closer to nature,” but because of the benefits of examining social organization and cultural ideas at a manageable scale. In the first half of the twentieth century, as anthropology began to learn how societies worked and what culture was, we benefited greatly by being able to study small communities, even
to pretend, intellectually, that they were isolated or self-contained. They weren’t, of course, and with global war even the possibility of isolation disappeared.

If anthropology’s first century was spent learning from small-scale societies how all human societies function, the lessons are different in the twenty-first century. Today, we look at tribal societies because they demonstrate alternative ways of life to the dominant economic and political order. This is especially important now, when nation-states hold every inch of six continents, yet the problems they generate are coming to seem equal to or worse than the advantages they confer, and when national borders are no barrier to economic and environmental crises. During World War II, national and imperial governments and armies crossed paths with tribal communities in the pursuit of war aims. They had to accommodate Indigenous difference to achieve their military goals.

It is that difference that interests us here. How can we use the study of Indigenous experiences in World War II to teach us about future choices? What can we learn about how patriotism intersects with cultural identity; about how citizenship can be understood in a complex, migrating, global polity; about the meaning of borders and of loyalty and of war itself? By telling stories of Indigenous wartime life, I hope to show that we can understand these concepts in new and potentially useful ways. No one (yet) questions the persistence of states—indeed, the postwar world embraced the global hegemony of the nation-state system—yet tribes and chiefdoms, too, survived and even flourished after the war. To understand this, and to see how this resilient persistence might turn out to have lasting value for humanity’s political future, we need to understand the transformative war years from this different perspective—to look at the conflict from the point of view of a Sámi reindeer-herder, a Naga porter, a Xingu rubber-tapper, as well as from the point of view of the powerful warring nations.

Overall of Book

A global overview reveals the enormous range of World War II activities and its impacts on these communities. But, while the range of their involvement is clear, what do we know about their motives and goals? Chapter 2, “Military Service, Citizenship, and Loyalties” examines how Indigenous groups and the nations employing them in war understood their respective positions. Were Indigenous people citizens? Did colonial subjects have a duty of loyalty? Who was obliged, or allowed, to fight?

Chapters 3–10 are the descriptive heart of the book, exploring Indigenous lives during the war years, in military roles when war came to their homelands
(chapter 3), or when they served in faraway battles or when foreign soldiers flooded into their territory (chapters 4 and 5). Whether deployed at home or abroad, Indigenous distinctiveness persisted in military service. Combatant powers used their skills on the battlefield and also used images of “primitive” peoples in propaganda (chapters 6 and 7). Chapters 8 and 9 explore non-combat effects of war. Indigenous peoples, like others across the globe, suffered from relocation, forced labor, militarization, and disrupted economies. Those near front lines endured invasion, bombing, and occupation, as foreign armies advanced and retreated around and over them. The war both built and destroyed Indigenous homelands, and logistics affected even areas far from combat (chapter 10).

When the war ended, it often seemed that these groups had gained few benefits from their suffering and service. States continued to discriminate against, dispossess, and disempower them, but decolonization and other postwar changes eventually increased their political role (chapters 11 and 12). Chapter 13 looks at how the war is remembered by Indigenous groups, and how the combatant nations commemorate (or fail to remember) their involvement. The final chapter considers how Indigenous citizenship, military service, and political autonomy appear now on the world stage, as the demands of World War II fade, replaced by new questions about how to organize global political life.

A final caution: This is not a history of World War II by any means, nor can I attempt to include all Indigenous communities affected. I focus on places and times that particularly illuminate the Indigenous experience, especially those that resonate into postwar circumstances. As a result, campaigns or battles or situations that are well-described in general histories of World War II may get short shrift. The goals of Indigenous actors were often not those of the major combatants. For many Indigenous communities, this was a fight between foreigners, and local war memories are not necessarily valued or preserved. There are many gaps in our knowledge, and paths still to be explored by new generations of scholars.

In order to understand the context of Indigenous wartime experiences, we need to understand how combatant nations employed them and to recognize their own motives and decisions about participating. My focus throughout this book is on Indigenous agency—how people responded to conditions of war in accordance with their own values. Small in numbers and politically separate from majority populations, the goal of Indigenous communities has always been to retain their autonomy. We begin, then, by asking why Indigenous peoples fought and why armies recruited them. What motivated engagement in national or imperial war, for those at the margins?