



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

by Janne Lahti.

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Much has been written about Apache warfare,¹ thanks to the abundance of source material, including oral histories, military reports, newspaper accounts, tribal research, personal memoirs, and reports of agent encounters. In short, plenty of witnesses observed and recorded what happened. The Apaches were the last tribe in the continental United States to yield to the military, political, and social forces arrayed against American Indians in the second half of the nineteenth century, because they were very good at what they did. Their name evokes difficult desert and mountain warfare waged by a brave, elusive, and canny foe.

The Apaches' way of life and adaptation to their natural environment bewildered military commanders charged with confining them to a reservation. The Apaches also benefited from the courage and leadership skills of men such as Cochise, Geronimo, Victorio, and Mangas Coloradas, as well as lesser known figures such as Chatto, Loco, Juh, and Eskiminzin, among others. These advantages enabled them to hold out for so long against the numerically far superior forces fielded by the US and Mexican governments, hostile Anglo and Hispanic civilians, and Indian groups, even sometimes members of their own people. *Wars for Empire* by historian Janne Lahti² (Univ. of Helsinki)

describes a multi-centered borderlands regenerated by war into a realm where the monopoly of violence was grasped and jealously guarded by a powerful empire. Connecting the U.S.-Apache wars to recent revisionist borderlands histories, it applies violence and military culture as its interpretive framework. It holds that war and violence ... constitute expressions and modes of military ethos, training, leadership, organization, commitment, adaptation, force projection, rhetoric, and face of battle in order to more deeply understand how Apaches and the United States valued, approached, understood, and engaged in war and violence. Discussing how motives, goals, and methods differed and why, it traces the process of how one society was able to break the power of another and occupy its space. (8)

This is a tall order in a single-volume study, given the cultural diversity and structures of various tribes and bands, from the Jicarilla Apache Plains Indians to the Chiricahuas living in the mountains and deserts of southern Arizona, New Mexico, and Mexico.

The author devotes roughly a quarter of his text to comparing the philosophy, individual and group customs based on cultural teachings, and operational practices of the Apaches with those of the American military. The Indians, raised in a harsh natural environment, underwent exten-

1. See, e.g., Donald E. Worcester, *The Apaches, Eagles of the Southwest* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 1979); James L. Haley, *Apaches: A History and Culture Portrait* (id., 1981); and Grenville Goodwin, *Western Apache Raiding and Warfare* (Tucson: U Arizona Pr, 1971).

2. His earlier work includes *Cultural Constructions of Empire: The U.S. Army in Arizona and New Mexico* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 2012) and *Soldiers in the Southwest Borderlands, 1848-1886* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2017).

sive physical training and emotional toughening and practiced a simple lifestyle, all of which made them far better prepared for war than the Anglo cavalry and infantry sent to subdue them. Lahti uses an approach similar to Robert Utley's in *Frontier Regulars*³ to show how woefully unprepared the US military was to chase Apaches around on their home turf. Small wonder that the war dragged on for so long.

The traditional history of the rounding up of the Apaches is covered in the book's last chapters. Their titles—"Containment," "Extermination," "Internment," and "Insurgency"—are misleading, since their subjects recur and overlap across all four chapters. In fact, there were few clear-cut phases of specific types of warfare and pacification. Lahti is no doubt aware that his inclusion of so many bands of Apaches in a concise narrative entails a certain amount of oversimplification. Beyond this, how else does his book differ from previous studies of Apache warfare in the American Southwest?

Specialist readers will know that its subject area has already been well plowed and that Lahti's handling of it is fairly consistent with other published accounts. But general readers will welcome his succinct and lucid account of how the opposing sides operated, their strategies and advantages, and the reasons why the Apaches lost the war. In regard to the latter, the author stresses the disturbing tactics employed against the Apache by the US government and its willing and able accomplice, Mexico. Their ultimate victory over the Apaches was

an ending achieved partially by lies and deceit. At best, it was a victory by attrition, the American military grinding down Apache freedom and, together with an influx of settler society and extractive industries, taking away the Apaches' space. As for military triumphs—as understood in the tradition of the western way of war—there were few if any, especially during the latter stages of the war....

As a whole, the U.S.-Apache wars enabled and secured profound socio-economic change on the borderlands. It [sic] involved federal, state, and civilian actors, gradations of perpetrators and victims, and diverse shapes of violence and management ... [including] unorganized killing, murder by deception, systematic slaughter, relentless hounding, material destruction, famine, cultural onslaught, and physical segregation and relocation.... The distance from wars of containment to one-sided killing fests to civilizing mission and more limited killing was a short one indeed. (239-41)

Who cannot see the relevance of this assessment to the sorts of conflicts that continue to plague the world in our own day?

3. Subtitle: *The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (NY: Macmillan, 1973).