

War at the Margins: Indigenous Experiences in World War II

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War at the Margins: Indigenous Experiences in World War II, by Lin Poyer. University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780824891824, 319 pages, (paperback).

Scholars of World War II have increasingly emphasized the everyday experiences of people trying to live their lives with a semblance of normality amid war. In *War at the Margins: Indigenous Experiences in World War II*, Lin Poyer reminds us of the need to search out and listen to previously unheard voices among indigenous communities in whose homelands belligerent powers fought. An accomplished scholar and teacher, Lin Poyer provides readers with a well-written and researched study on indigenous experiences during the conflict and its continued impact on their communities afterward.

The topic is a logical extension of Poyer's previous studies. After receiving a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1983, Dr. Poyer conducted field research in Micronesia, as well as in Madagascar and Navajo tribal lands. Currently an Emeritus Professor in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Wyoming, Poyer's major works include *The Ngatik Massacre: History and Identity on a Micronesian Atoll* (1993), *The Typhoon of War: Micronesian Experiences of the Pacific War* (2001) and *Memories of War: Micronesians in the Pacific War* (2008), which she coauthored with Suzanne Falgout and Laurence M. Carucci. As an anthropologist, her body of work primarily focuses on Micronesian culture and identity. *War at the Margins* draws on the extensive work that she has done on Pacific Islanders in World War II and extends it to indigenous cultures around the world.

Poyer's carefully constructed thesis allows her to examine a large topic with surgical precision without overwhelming the reader or generalizing lived indigenous experiences. She writes that her objective is to "describe military activity at the 'edges' of states, the sparsely inhabited areas where self-governing mostly tribal communities lived under loose

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engagement with central authorities. Using different examples from different regions, I show how military activity altered their relationships with national and colonial governments and majority populations and how it opened the paths eventually taken by Indigenous Rights activists in following generations.”¹ Undertaking a study of the global indigenous experience in World War II raises challenging questions. Which Native groups should the study include? Does one include only those that witnessed the fighting directly or those that contributed to the war effort in other ways? More importantly, how does one engage the subject without resorting to generalizations? Poyer’s thesis takes a pragmatic approach to these difficult questions.

Readers will no doubt approach the book with a list of indigenous communities that they consider essential to a study on Native peoples in World War II. Given the number of potential communities that she could include, there are some that may walk away disappointed; however, one cannot reasonably expect the author to cover every possibility. Poyer also does not seek to exhaustively cover every group, nuance, or event in World War II. Rather, she selects campaigns and other events salient to the two primary goals of understanding changes in relationships between the indigenous community and the colonizer and of identifying paths to greater self-determination following the war. She selects different communities as case studies, including the Karen, Chin, Sámi, Māori, Aboriginal Australians, Ainu, Naga, Kachin, and Taiwanese Aborigines. There is one observation to be made in reference to her approach to First Nations in the United States and Canada. It is not uncommon in the book to encounter discussions of these groups under the subsections “Canada” and “United States.”. This opens the work to criticisms of overgeneralization. Given the scope of the territory covered by these two countries, the number of different nations, and the size of the indigenous populations, she faced an almost impossible task. Her inadequate response is to select the Inuit and Navajo as representative. This is the only weakness of the text, and it is one of style than substance. Much has been written on the various experiences of Native Americans in North America in World War II that can provide readers with additional information

¹ Lin Poyer, *War at the Margins: Indigenous Experiences in World War II* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2022), 2.

regarding the World War II Era. Her focus is on the margins of the larger conflict.

Poyer begins with a local focus on indigenous groups and their homelands and ends with broad post-World War II global issues. Chapter 2 covers indigenous relationships with belligerent states. She examines the recruitment and exclusion of Native peoples into military and support roles. Racist recruitment policies also receive attention, as well as the drive for Native peoples to enlist in the war effort. Poyer follows this in Chapter 3 with an examination of the conflict in indigenous lands, its impact on communities, and their importance in the fighting. Here, the author does a great job explaining the contributions and value of Native peoples in World War II. Monuments usually celebrate frontline soldiers' sacrifices, but support services were essential to the effectiveness of armies. The author describes the contributions of Nagas, Sámi herders, New Guinean porters, and others to the Allied and Axis armies. Later, she illustrates how these peoples continue to provide a vital support role to the historical memories of these states by caring for monuments, relics, and cemeteries in Chapter 13.

Next, Poyer shifts to the battlefield, public perceptions, and stereotypes. She explores Native service members' contributions before moving into a balanced analysis between indigenous communities and foreign soldiers. Here, the reader discovers relationships that are at times exploitative and violent, and at others cooperative and intimate. Stereotypes and public perceptions also shaped indigenous and non-indigenous encounters. Military planners readily evoked haunting images of headhunters to intimidate the enemy, while journalists and politicians simultaneously offered images of the patriotic soldier to rally support and to attract recruits.

Poyer next explores the lasting physical and economic impacts on Native communities and homelands. As warring states fought in indigenous lands, they wrought devastation not only to each other but to the inhabitants. Indigenous economies also changed. Wartime industries attracted workers from Native communities, and army bases opened new opportunities to trade and earn money. New trade goods flowed into Native homelands changing tastes. Young men working for the military risked their lives as their jobs brought them to the front lines. Finally,

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warring armies constructed infrastructure as front lines shifted. The Imperial Japanese Navy and U.S. Navy built bases that were abandoned after the conflict leaving them for Micronesians and Melanesians to reuse. In the case of the United States, bases that started small, like those in Guam and American Samoa gained greater importance following the war. Today, the U.S. Navy, Army and Airforce continues occupying areas throughout the Pacific, enlarging military installations at the expense of the environment, local communities, and property rights.

Poyer finishes by looking at how World War II continued impacting indigenous communities around the world. She does not neglect this important aspect of indigenous experiences in the war. European losses, indigenous experience, imperial defeats, and the Japanese surrender shook the Pacific Rim political system to its core. For example, Ainu communities in the Sakhalin Islands either relocated to Hokkaido or became Soviet citizens, while Japanese holdings in the Northern Mariana Islands became Trust Territories of the United States. Chapter 13 offers an interesting look at the conflicting and varied meanings of World War II for indigenous communities, especially when acting as hosts for war memorials and cemeteries. For Palauans, there exists the feeling that the conflict had nothing to do with their interests, yet it was a transformative event that happened in their homelands. Solomon Islanders valued their services to the Allied armies, yet their sacrifices went largely unnoticed by the British and Americans until recently. Even then, construction of war memorials was not always given proper consideration, such as the American statue of Sir Jacob Souza that cast him in the light of the “loyal native.”²

Regarding research, the book is a solid resource on indigenous communities during and after World War II. Poyer develops a study that builds on a well-constructed central thesis using her extensive scholarship in Micronesia as well as reliable secondary sources in indigenous studies and World War II scholarship. She does not seek to introduce new sources to the field, so much as to utilize her previous research and existing work outside of her field to address a topic that has received limited attention comparative to the body of literature on events like D-Day, Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, and Hiroshima.

² Poyer, 185.

There are some areas where the author leaves the reader wanting more. For example, Poyer addresses nuclear testing in the Pacific but does not go into much detail. Elaboration on the contemporary status and struggles of people like the Marshall Islanders would add to the work. Given renewed tensions in the Pacific Rim, military matériel contamination, growing North Korean nuclear capabilities, and challenges related to climate change, it is an issue with potential consequences for the region and the indigenous communities living there. It is also one that feeds into some Pacific communities' struggle for self-determination. Readers would benefit from the author's expertise. It must be stressed that this is not a failing on Poyer's part or intended to suggest that she neglects topics. It is a thought-provoking work that touches on salient issues created by World War II. As she noted at the beginning, an exhaustive examination of indigenous communities during and after World War II would be encyclopedic in scope.

War on the Margins is a solid work that covers an often-overlooked subject. The thesis is well-constructed, backed by good evidence, and validated with a well-written narrative. She selects indigenous communities that experienced the conflict within their homelands in Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Ocean, as well as those that provided workers, guides, and soldiers. She does not overextend her work by trying to cover every community. Instead, she keeps the work focused by using groups that were representative of the shared experiences during the conflict and for which there exists ample research material. The author achieves her goal, validates her thesis, and-perhaps most importantly-provokes thought that leaves the reader wanting to know more on the topic.