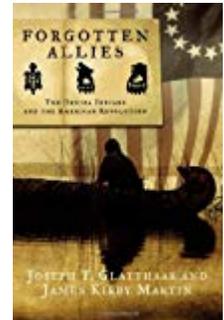


Joseph T. Glatthaar, James Kirby Martin. *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2006. 434 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8090-4600-3.



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Forgotten Allies is a history of the American War of Independence from the perspective of the Oneida Nation of Indians. Unlike most other members of the confederation, known as the Six Nations of Iroquois, the Oneidas took the side of the rebellious American colonists early in the conflict and remained allied with them throughout the war. For the most part, their Iroquois brethren, the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga, were allies of the British Crown. Although a number of recent books have detailed the participation of the Iroquois in the Revolutionary War, far more ink has been used in describing the experience of those who allied with the British. Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin's book breaks that trend in concentrating on America's first allies, the Oneida.

Glatthaar and Martin begin their narrative by describing Oneida history within the context of the Iroquois Confederacy, also known originally as the Five Nations. When the confederacy admitted the Tuscarora, as wards of the Oneida in 1722, the league became known as the Six Nations of Iroquois. The authors clarify some popular mis-

perceptions about the league's political structure. It was not truly a federated government as contemporary Americans understand. Instead, they point out that it was more a means for coordinating joint civil or economic action when mutually beneficial; peacefully resolving disputes among the member nations; and creating a military and diplomatic alliance for dealing with non-confederation Iroquoian peoples, other Indian nations, and Europeans. Representative sachems, who were selected from a hereditary ruling class, met around the central council fire at the principal Onondaga town to discuss matters of collective interest. The Oneidas and Cayugas, as the "younger brothers" or "nephews," sat across from their "elder brothers" or "uncles," the Mohawks, Senecas, and Onondagas. As their sponsors, the Oneidas also represented and spoke for the Tuscaroras. Joint decisions required consensus. When consensus could not be reached, the council fire was ritually extinguished, allowing member nations to pursue their own courses of action.

Throughout their history, the Six Nations often had exerted united military power to achieve

their national and common objectives, and became the most powerful Indian polity in eastern North America. As a result, they annihilated the nations of a number of their Iroquoian cousins in a series of conflicts. Besides killing enemy warriors in battle or through execution, confederation forces either dispersed the survivors or took captives who were later adopted and absorbed into the victorious tribes. Through these "mourning" or "condolence" wars and "requickening" rituals, the Six Nations managed to replace their own losses from war or disease and expanded their control over larger areas, while the Huron, Neutral, Erie, and Susquehannock nations ceased to exist. Military aggressiveness also enabled them to extend Six Nations influence, such as in the Beaver Wars of the seventeenth century, in which they scattered or made into "dependants" numerous Algonquian nations, such as the Delaware, Munsey, and Shawnee. By right of conquest, they, therefore, claimed the ability to dictate to and speak for these dependants in councils with European powers. Such strength in united action made the Six Nations attractive allies, sought after by the British and French throughout the colonial period, and by both sides in the American War of Independence.

From the beginning, officers of the British Indian Department attempted to bring the Six Nations into the war on the side of the Crown. Continental Indian commissioners also tried to solicit Iroquois allies, but if that failed, they were satisfied to encourage the Six Nations to remain neutral. The confederacy was divided into parties favoring neutrality or alliance to one side or the other. Likewise, the Oneidas had their pro-British, neutralist, and pro-American factions as well. At first, the Six Nations collectively pursued neutrality, albeit with the Oneidas indicating a preference for supporting the rebellious colonies. In the past, when member nations chose different allies in the wars between their European neighbors, the Iroquois agreed that their warriors would not fight each other in the ensuing conflict. This tradition

was shattered in August 1777 at the battle of Oriskany when Oneida warriors fought on the side of the American patriots against their pro-British Seneca, Cayuga, Mohawk, and Onondaga brethren.

Although Glatthaar and Martin spend a great deal of the book writing about Oneida attempts to repair the fractured confederacy, I was surprised that they did not include the failure of one of these efforts that is most telling. Shortly after the battle of Oriskany, Continental Indian Commissioner and Army Major General Phillip Schuyler attempted to convene a council to discuss the Six Nations' returning to neutrality. He sent Oneida runners to the other nations with the invitation and belts of wampum. The pro-British Iroquois rejected the invitation and Oneida overtures saying that "the blood of their people was still reeking" from Oriskany.[1] Had the authors availed themselves of this correspondence from the British side, it may have been useful in placing the efforts with which the Oneida "hoped to avoid offering pro-British Iroquois any reason to assault Oneida communities" into a more meaningful context (p. 223).

Unfortunately, the book seems to be more a history of Oneida diplomatic efforts to ease tensions between the Six Nations who took different sides in the conflict than a military history. The authors further undermine the efforts toward the latter by emphasizing Oneida attempts to reconcile the rest of the Six Nations while the war swirled about them. Although they recount Oneida military involvement, they relegate it to second place in much of the narrative. While the Oneida provided needed and important support to the American cause, the authors cannot mask the fact that Oneida military involvement was limited to an auxiliary role by mutual consent. Their most valuable contribution was acting as scouts for Continental forces on the frontier, and providing early warning of pending attacks by pro-British warriors and loyalist irregulars to their white Mo-

hawk Valley neighbors living in predominantly patriot settlements.

In describing Oneida participation in the larger engagements, however, a different story emerges. For the Saratoga campaign, for example, the authors do not cite the exact number of Oneida warriors who joined the American Northern Department's army, which eventually numbered over eighteen thousand men. It is unlikely there were many more than fifty warriors. The analysis that "a portion of the credit for the defeat of [John] Burgoyne's army belonged to the Oneidas," because "they and other pro-rebel natives killed about a half dozen British troops and captured between thirty and forty more" is misleading when not placed in context (p. 183). If one considers that British forces suffered approximately 700 casualties in the September 19, 1777, engagement at Freeman's Farm alone, and that 5,756 British, German, and loyalist soldiers became prisoners on October 17, the day Burgoyne surrendered, the authors' description of the Oneida contribution seems more hyperbole than significant. The same is true for the description of the Oneida force that joined the main Continental army at Valley Forge. The Oneida did not arrive until May 14, 1778, and there were only about fifty warriors. Furthermore, the authors quote a "Hessian officer" who "mistakenly referred to these ... as Stockbridge Indians" (pp. 214-215). Since a unit of Stockbridge Indians was enlisted in the Continental army throughout the war and fought in numerous engagements, it may be the authors who are "mistaken." While the description of the skirmish, in which the Oneida suffered casualties, is quite good, the fact that warriors returned home shortly afterward only emphasizes that their contribution was limited.

Glatthaar and Martin's description of the September 1779 engagement now known as the "Groveland Ambuscade" is also not supported by the primary sources. Major General John Sullivan, while nearing the ultimate objective of his puni-

tive campaign against the British-allied Iroquois, sent Lieutenant Thomas Boyd on a scout ahead of the army to reconnoiter the principal western Seneca town of "Chenussio," or Genessee. The authors wrote that Boyd "disregarded the advice of his more experienced fighter" and Oneida scout Han Yost Thahoswagwat, who "urged him to retreat rapidly to the main body" and "warned him of a trap" (p. 253). As a result, they "stumbled into an ambush from which they could not extricate themselves" (p. 253). In reality, the patrol was returning from its reconnaissance to rejoin the main force at the time of the engagement. The force of enemy irregulars and Iroquois warriors were waiting to ambush Sullivan's advance guard, coming from the opposite direction. The resulting contact surprised both sides. The commander of the loyalist rangers, Major John Butler, later reported to his superiors that he and his men thought the main American force had attacked and surrounded them![2]

Glatthaar and Martin offer several reasons for the Oneida alliance with the Americans. The Oneidas shared with the patriots a natural love of liberty, many Oneidas were also Christian, and because they lived in close proximity to whites in the Mohawk Valley, they had developed personal and commercial ties with their patriot neighbors. These explanations, however, are unconvincing. They imply that their Iroquois brothers supported the Crown with equal vigor and resolve because they were opposed to liberty. In addition, pro-British Mohawks also had a close relationship with the colonists living in the Mohawk Valley, and many of them converted to Christianity. The answer as to why the Oneidas chose their alliance may be more complex than the nobility of their people and love of the European Enlightenment notion of liberty.

Finally, the thesis that the Oneida were forgotten allies stands on a weak argument. After the end of the Revolutionary War, the new and victorious United States, and individual Americans,

dealt with the Oneidas in a much different way than they did with the king's Indian allies. True, there were questionable or unethical land deals with some Oneidas by some private citizens or agents of the state of New York. Perhaps the explanation may also be found, in part, within an Oneida desire to assimilate. That the Oneida contribution has been overlooked for generations is also without grounds. The authors themselves mention that the monument erected at the site of the Barren Hill engagement bears an inscription commemorating "Six Indian Scouts who died in battle" (p. 215). Another monument, erected early in the twentieth century at the site of the Groveland Ambuscade, memorializes the names of all the patriots who fell, including Thahoswagwat, the Oneida scout who held a commission as an officer in the Continental army. But aside from serious students of the American War of Independence, how many Americans have heard of the battle of Barren Hill and the Groveland Ambuscade? Perhaps it is the battles in which they and other American soldiers fought, rather than the warriors who fought them, that have been forgotten.

Overall, *Forgotten Allies* is a good read. Despite some flaws, it conveys a mix of well-known and little known information presented in a compelling narrative. While not an extensive "military history," if the book enables the casual student of the Revolutionary War to better appreciate the role and contributions of the Oneida nation, it will have served its purpose.

Notes

[1]. Colonel Daniel Claus to Colonel Guy Johnson, November 12, 1777, Montreal, Sir Henry Clinton Papers, vol. 26, item 32, British Army Headquarters Papers 1747-1783, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

[2]. Major John Butler to Lieutenant Colonel Mason Bolton, September 14, 1779, Canawaugas, Canadian State Papers, Q, 16-2, 607, British Army

Headquarters Papers 1747-1783, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

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