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Review of American Indians and World War II

John R. Wunder

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jwunder1@unl.edu

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American Indians and World War II. By Alison R. Bernstein. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, xiv + 247 pp. \$21.95.

World War II left thousands of lives over much of the world fundamentally changed. Thus, it is not too surprising to find that Native Americans were also profoundly touched by the war and its aftermath. Alison R. Bernstein develops and proves this theme in her well-written book that fills the void between the several studies of the Indian New Deal and recent works considering the termination movement of the 1950s.

American Indians and World War II covers the period of World War II from the 1930s to the 1950s in eight compact chapters. The first introduces the Indian New Deal era. The next three, the true body of the study, consider Indians and the draft, Indians at war abroad, and the Indian home front. Chapters 5 and 6 document the failures of the BIA to adjust to the war and the initial attempts of Indians to form a political movement through the founding of the National Council of American Indians. The last two chapters assess the impact of the war on Native Americans, both within their political institutions and their homes in the cities and on the reservations. Bernstein draws numerous examples from Indian nations throughout the United States, including many Great Plains tribes.

This is a provocative book because it posits a number of questions and some rather enlightening answers. Perhaps what it does best is provide a setting for understanding why certain things happen. For example, the immediate post-war period finds federal Indian policy suddenly

lurching toward termination and relocation. Bernstein identifies the seeds for those policies in the consequences of World War II. When John Collier and the BIA encouraged Indians to leave reservations for employment in urban war industries, they in effect put into operation a relocation policy. When the Roosevelt and Truman administrations embraced the formation of the Indian Claims Commission, they did so in order to attempt to provide a basis for the ending of any federal-tribal relationships, the immediate genesis of the termination movement.

There are some criticisms to note. The introductory chapter, always a difficult business, is an adequate treatment, but it certainly does not match the quality of the truly outstanding three chapters to follow. Bernstein allows some overgeneralizations and incomplete summaries of how tribes could approve of the Indian New Deal (p. 7), the system of justice adopted on reservations (p. 9), and the struggle to obtain hearings through the Court of Claims by tribes (p. 19).

The above is not too serious a shortcoming, but the antiseptic descriptions of the tragedies of the war and its aftermath are. The trauma of dislocation, the overwhelming sense of loss upon return to the reservation, and the suffering of the war are treated with a detachment that suggests the limitations of sterile government reports as source material. The author does not appear to have conducted on-site observations or oral interviews, a weakness in the methodology that is especially noticeable in the last two chapters. This is surprising given the author's acknowledgment of the graphic fictional contributions of Leslie Silko and N. Scott Momaday. Once the war is over, the spirit, verve, and creativity of the narrative seem to ebb as well.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent contribution to the historical literature, must reading for scholars and the public interested in twentieth-century Native American history.

JOHN R. WUNDER
Department of History
University of Nebraska-Lincoln