

Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907

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Review

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Johnston, Carolyn Ross *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907*. University of Alabama Press, \$29.95 ISBN 081735056X

Threats to culture

Transformation of gender roles of the 19th century

Three cataclysmic events rocked Cherokee society in the 19th century, transforming the tribe's society, politics, culture, and, as Carolyn Ross Johnston so amply demonstrates in **Cherokee Women in Crisis**, its gender roles and relations. Of the three crises' effects on Cherokee women, the Civil War has received the least attention from scholars, a condition that Johnston remedies in this comprehensive, thoroughly researched volume.

Long before the 19th century, women were integral to Cherokee society and politics. In addition to the tribe's matrilineal and matrilocal traditions, Cherokee women controlled their own property and, with other women, communally owned agricultural lands. Women could weigh in on political affairs and, in this as in all other aspects of Cherokee society, enjoyed equality with men.

In the early 19th century, women's status began to change as white Christian missionaries and the U.S. government pressured Cherokee men and women to assume white American gender roles and values. With the rise of an affluent Cherokee middle class that frequently intermarried with whites, a conflict developed between elite members of the tribe (who were often slaveholders) and full-blooded Cherokees, who maintained a traditional way of life. This clash dominated the tribe's 19th-century history.

During the crisis of removal in 1838-1839, prosperous Cherokee families as well as those of modest and impoverished circumstances were evicted from their homes in the East. In general, the elite migrated with greater comfort and settled

with the least distress, soon resuming their middle-class lifestyle in Indian Territory. Other Cherokee families fared less well, suffering from malnutrition, disease, and exposure on the 800 to 1,000 mile trek. For most women, the period of removal strengthened their traditional roles, and thereby their power in the community, as food gathering and other traditionally female survival activities came to the fore.

Intratribal factionalism dominated the dynamics of the Cherokee nation's experience of the Civil War, and, in turn, women's war experiences. Cherokees in most regions of Indian Territory ended up backing the Confederacy, but enough were loyal to the Union that the Cherokee nation remained divided during the war. Although Johnston uses this division as the backdrop for her discussion of women's gender roles during the war, little background information about the intratribal conflict is provided, which may confuse readers seeking to understand the nature of the war as it was fought in Indian Territory.

Johnston claims that Cherokee women were apolitical during the war. If so, it is unusual considering their history, an aberration that Johnston neither explores nor fully questions. Nor does she provide the history underlying the guerrilla war being fought in this region. Like women of all races in guerrilla-torn areas during the Civil War, Cherokee women struggled to survive the unpredictable, unprecedented violence—the raids, robberies, and rapes that became a fixture of their lives—occurring at a time when Kansas Jayhawkers and other bands of bushwhackers roamed Cherokee lands. As Johnston points out, even among their neighbors, Cherokee women found it difficult to distinguish friends from enemies, another fact of life in areas marked by deeply divided loyalties.

Johnston's copious research has yielded numerous anecdotes and stories about the experiences of individual Cherokee women during the war, adding vital new information to the literature of American women during the Civil War. A number of Cherokee women were spies, some were bushwhackers, and other women resisted the incursions of the enemy on their doorsteps. Many women and their children became refugees, fleeing to Texas or to the north, where hunger, starvation, inadequate shelter, and exposure to the cold took many lives. By the end of the war, one-third of all Cherokee women had lost their husbands. Women lost their lives in large numbers as well, as evidenced by the statistic that one-fourth of Cherokee children were orphaned by the war.

Cherokee women lost power during the crisis of allotment when the tribe lost communal ownership of its land as well as most of its tribal sovereignty. The provisions of the 1898 Curtis Act allotted 160 acres to each male head of household. Eventually married women were given only 80 acres, in a system of land ownership that not only impoverished Cherokee society, but also dealt a devastating blow to women's status and their traditional powers.

A professor of history and American studies at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, Johnston is also the author of *Sexual Power: Feminism and the Family in America*. **Cherokee Women in Crisis** is a monumentally significant work in the literature of the history of American women and deserves widespread attention for its illumination of the experiences of Native American women in the nineteenth century.

Judith E. Harper is the author of Women During the Civil War: An Encyclopedia (Routledge, 2003) and Susan B. Anthony: A Biographical Companion (ABC-CLIO, 1998). She may be reached at jeharper@ziplink.net.