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The Comanche Empire (The Lamar Series In Western History)



Synopsis

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a Native American empire rose to dominate the fiercely contested lands of the American Southwest, the southern Great Plains, and northern Mexico. This powerful empire, built by the Comanche Indians, eclipsed its various European rivals in military prowess, political prestige, economic power, commercial reach, and cultural influence. Yet, until now, the Comanche empire has gone unrecognized in American history.Â This compelling and original book uncovers the lost story of the Comanches. It is a story that challenges the idea of indigenous peoples as victims of European expansion and offers a new model for the history of colonial expansion, colonial frontiers, and Native-European relations in North America and elsewhere. Pekka HÃ¤mÃ¤lÃ¤inen shows in vivid detail how the Comanches built their unique empire and resisted European colonization, and why they fell to defeat in 1875. With extensive knowledge and deep insight, the author brings into clear relief the Comanchesâ™ remarkable impact on the trajectory of history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an outstanding scholarly work well deserving of five stars. In some respects I wonder if it could have been written by an American (the author is Finnish) since it sharply contrasts with the politically correct myth of the American Indians, always fighting in defense of their homeland and way of life against the overwhelming encroachments of evil Europeans. Some will use the term "revisionist" to describe this work, but more accurately it should be described simply as Comanche

history for two centuries from the Comanche viewpoint. To put the contrast in more familiar terms, until recently almost all books on the World War II Eastern Front between Germany and the Soviet Union have been told from the German side. Now David Glantz and others are writing books that tell the Soviet side. Are they "revisionist?" The author traces the Comanches from origins among the Shoshones, moving through Colorado and becoming allied with the Utes (other authors describe the Comanches as being forced out into the Great Plains by the Utes), acquiring horses and guns from Mexican traders, then spreading into Northern Texas and surrounding country. There they established a virtual "empire", or more accurately, a sphere of hegemony and influence, that extended into six US states and several states in Northern Mexico by 1840. This can be considered as a region controlled loosely by semi-nomads who would eventually face the problem of maintaining their "empire" through population growth in permanent settlements. (The reader should look for parallels to the Golden Horde on the plains of Southern Russia.) The Comanches did not always exterminate all other people in their sphere of influence, but rather used them for trade, a source of slaves, and goods acquired through war and negotiation.

First, I would draw your attention to two excellent reviews of this book, one in the May 29, 2008 /NYRB/ by Larry McMurtry and the other in the Dec. 2008 /American Historical Review/ by Gerald Betty. I think McMurtry's review sums it up best: This book contains many valuable insights into Comanche history, particularly during the 18th century, but fails to sustain its central argument that the Comanches were an empire. Hamalainen does not adequately define "empire," which is problematic if one is asserting that the Comanches were one. Some suggest the assertion that American Indians had power in colonial America is a novel and significant revision. I'm not so sure. Haven't scholars already constructed and dismantled the "imperial" Iroquois? Didn't George Hyde demonstrate half a century ago that the horse prompted a whole new set of power relations on the Plains between not only Indians and Europeans but also initially between different Indian groups? One is left to wonder where to draw the distinction between revision and "reinvention." The question isn't whether Indians had power; it's identifying in what instances they did or did not, and then accounting for the dynamism in power relations. In the end, the enduring persuasiveness I've found in Richard White's /Middle Ground/ and James Brooks' /Captives and Cousins/ is their ability to illustrate a multivalent world in which power is variable across time and space and its various forms (political, economic, and cultural) aren't always congruent. White and Brooks capture this dynamism and complexity in a manner that recent revisionists such as Hamalainen don't. If power (who has it and who doesn't, etc.

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