

During the summer of 1862, war erupted between some Dakota and the United States in Minnesota. The causes of this war were numerous and remain complicated. In part, the roots of the conflict dated back over a generation in terms of treaty agreements not honored by the government that had been promised in exchange for Dakota land cessions. More longstanding offenses began as soon as fur traders ensnared Dakota trading partners in a cycle of credit, which often led to accumulation of dubiously recorded debts that Dakota hunters were unable to ever fully satisfy. Most immediately, starvation, desperation, retribution, and honor contributed to the decision of some Dakota to fight, rather than to die in disgrace. As the war raged in southwestern Minnesota during August and September of 1862, any early advantage Dakota warriors held over the United States' unpreparedness was erased as federal resources were dedicated to the effort to end what Americans saw as a violent Indian uprising. Following the conflict, belligerent parties faced starkly disparate consequences in the name of justice: Dakota Indians, even those innocent or likely innocent, were punished dearly; Whites were not held accountable for their crimes.

At the outset of the offensive, Dakota warriors' "war cry was to kill all the whites", which certainly contributed to the deaths of possibly 1,000 innocent victims, including some with kinship ties like Philander Prescott.<sup>1</sup> In reality, atrocities at the hands of a small proportion of Dakota warriors did occur. However, most Dakota, particularly those of the western bands, did not participate in the fighting or killing.<sup>2</sup> When the fighting was over, distinctions between innocent and belligerent Dakota were generally not made. Sarah Wakefield, a white settler, provides evidence of these injustices endured by the Dakota. Prior to the fighting, Wakefield expressed concern at the desperate state of starvation in which the Dakota were living.

Wakefield was sheltered and protected by Chaska, a Dakota warrior, and his family throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wingerd and Kirsten Delegard, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2010), 305-306.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 307, 311.

the fighting. Other settlers held in protective captivity were treated like family. Entire populations at the Upper Agency were saved by Dakota.<sup>3</sup> Following the end of the fighting, Henry Sibley was privately aware that not only innocent, but friendly Dakota, would be punished with imprisonment, exile, or execution.<sup>4</sup> Officials, up to and including President Lincoln, knew that many of the condemned Dakota were innocent, and that their trials had been shams.<sup>5</sup> Those Dakota imprisoned at Camp McClellan pleaded their innocence to no avail.<sup>6</sup>

Atrocities committed on the side of the white settlers of Minnesota were not prosecuted. While hundreds of innocent Dakota were marched across Minnesota to the internment camp at Fort Snelling, Whites saw an opportunity for revenge. The elderly and children were scalded with water, and an infant was murdered by a woman in Henderson.<sup>7, 8</sup> Interned Dakota died by the hundreds in the camp, without due process.<sup>9</sup> Militias from St. Paul to Mankato to Traverse des Sioux to New Ulm plotted murder of Dakota. In New Ulm, the mobs succeeded in murdering two condemned men.<sup>10</sup> No one was ever brought to trial to be held accountable for these murders. Colonel Stephen Miller was charged with the duty of protecting the condemned Dakota from the bloodthirsty mobs, succeeding only by threatening to kill anyone who attempted to lynch Dakota.<sup>11</sup> Even on the day of the executions, prohibition of alcohol from Mankato and a declaration of martial law were required in order to quell the possibility of white violence.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, Whites were not forced to face justice for the atrocities they committed.

The aftermath of the fighting between the United States and Dakota demonstrated two highly divergent realities. For the Dakota, thousands of innocent people faced exile from their ancestral homelands. Other innocents were imprisoned or executed. Only a small number of

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<sup>3</sup> Wingerd & Delegard, *North*, 302, 306-307.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 318-319.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 316.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Canku and Michael Simon, *The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaškapi Okicize Wowapi*, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press (2013), letters 3, 4, 5, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Wingerd & Delegard, *North*, 320.

<sup>8</sup> *Dakota Conflict*, St. Paul, MN: Public Broadcasting Service, TPT (Air: 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Wingerd & Delegard, *North*, 320.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 320-321.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 322.

<sup>12</sup> Wingerd & Delegard, *North*, 326.

those punished had committed the crimes for which so many others suffered. For Whites, murder, attempted murder, assaults, and conspiracies to commit crimes were never prosecuted. On the contrary, Whites were rewarded with an opportunity to further prosper on the Dakota's traditional lands.

**Works Cited:**

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