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"Americans at War in Foreign Forces: A History, 1914-1945 (Book Review)" by Chris Dickon

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Overall, *Canada's Bastions of Empire* makes the case for maritime and defence history as a means to transcend the usual stories of battles and leaders to further our understanding of not just war but politics, lived experience, and the connections between specific places and the wider world.

GREG ROGERS, *UNIVERSITY OF MAINE*

Americans at War in Foreign Forces: A History, 1914-1945. Chris Dickon. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2014. Pp. 234.

American citizens have served in foreign militaries almost as long as there have been American citizens. Dickon's book tells the story of these individuals in the Canadian, British, and French militaries in the First and Second World Wars, with some mention of other militaries in other conflicts. Drawing largely on contemporary newspaper accounts, Dickon focuses on the soldiers, their stories, and the various systems and organizations that got them to and from the front. The book is not a treatise on the broader phenomenon of foreign enlistment or what it tells us about military service, citizenship or international relations, nor does the book provide much comparison among the different incidents. Readers looking for such analysis will be left with more questions than answers.

Dickon begins by briefly recounting the tale of the Marquis de Lafayette, the French soldier who played such a key role in American victory in the Revolutionary War. This forms the bridge to the service of many Americans in the French military in the First World War while the United States was still neutral. Young Americans flocked to France and Belgium as ambulance drivers, airmen in the French *Escadrille Lafayette*, and soldiers in the French Foreign Legion. In the English-speaking world, large numbers of Americans headed north, joining the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), in both the ranks of the "ordinary" battalions as well as the purpose built American Legion.

All provide for good stories, but the service of Americans in the CEF is especially interesting for Canadian readers. Dickon's section on the American Legion, a battalion of Americans recruited for service in the CEF in spite of American neutrality, is especially thorough and interesting. However, his description of Americans serving in

the remainder of the CEF is less compelling due to the diversity of experiences and the lack of hard statistics. Dickon draws conclusions from samples of attestation papers from which he makes educated guesses to determine citizenship (such as birthplace or the address of their next of kin).

Dickon's description of American volunteers in the Second World War is similarly diverse. In Great Britain, Americans were recruited into the American Eagle Squadron within the Royal Air Force. Americans living in London formed their own unit within the British Home Guard. Meanwhile, in China, American military personnel were recruited into the 1st American Volunteer Group, better known as the Flying Tigers, to fly for the Chinese Air Force against the Japanese. The most thorough treatment (and interesting, for the Canadian reader) is afforded the Clayton Knight Committee (Air Marshall Billy Bishop's efforts to recruit Americans into the Royal Canadian Air Force). As with the American Legion experiment, this provides a fascinating case of Canada attempting to evade and benefit from American neutrality in the early years of the war.

Not surprisingly, Dickon's study focuses heavily on the First and Second World War. Of the seventeen chapters, nine deal with the First World War and seven deal with the Second. Only Chapter 10 addresses Americans in both the Spanish and Chinese Civil Wars; they do not even get their own chapters in spite of significant differences. Along the way, Dickon mentions Americans in the Polish and Jewish Legion (still in the First World War, but not on the Western Front), the Rif War (1921–1927), the various conflicts in Central and South America, and the Finnish Winter War (1939–1940). But these mentions are just a tease; the conflicts only get a handful of paragraphs.

The limited treatment of these other conflicts seems to be a missed opportunity. For one, they are interesting stories. More importantly, these other cases would have helped the author better explore some key themes. Throughout the book, Dickon addresses the motivations of the soldiers. In the First and Second World War, it is a relatively easy question to explain away: Americans fought for all the same reasons soldiers ordinarily fight, except the United States was still neutral and did not afford them the opportunity. Dickon shows that at the local level, there was at least some community support for volunteering, and assisting the war effort—whether the United States was involved or not—was generally viewed as a positive act.

But was this the case in the other conflicts? In Spain, for example, Communist involvement in recruiting made the act of enlisting much more contentious. This difference seems important, and exploring it would be critical to a full and proper treatment of the subject matter.

Another important theme in Dickon's book is the treatment and commemoration of Americans after the conflict. For both the First and Second World War, Dickon provides a first rate discussion of the burial and commemoration of the Americans who served and died in Commonwealth forces. This comes as no surprise; Dickon is also the author of the excellent *The Foreign Burial of American War Dead: A History*.³ But this analysis is far from complete; Dickon does not go into the same detail regarding Americans in French forces in these wars, those who fought in Spain or China, or the treatment of those who returned alive, with or without injuries. The book would have strongly benefited from such an analysis and comparison.

These criticisms aside, Dickon's work is a valuable step forward for scholarship on the phenomenon of foreign enlistment. While specific instances have received book length treatment, the broader phenomenon has not received much scholarly attention. Fred Gaffen's *Cross-Border Warriors: Canadians in American Forces, Americans in Canadian Forces, From the Civil War to the Gulf*, now twenty years old, is one of the only other examples.⁴ There remains a great deal of opportunity for comparative analysis on this subject.

Canadian readers will find plenty of interest in Dickon's book. Most of his examples feature Americans serving in Canadian units. The information is clearly and succinctly presented, especially in the case of the American Legion and the Clayton Knight Committee. Occasional foibles (misspelling Mackenzie King's name as "Mckenzie" or "MacKenzie," references to the "Royal Canadian Regiment/Rifles," the Hundred Days beginning in 1919, etc.) are a little jarring, but the substance is there. This book is as much an addition to Canadian writing on the subject as it is to American.

Americans at War in Foreign Forces is interesting and the prose is very readable. The subject matter is presented in an approachable way, and the author tells the story well, skilfully blending the stories

³ Chris Dickon, *The Foreign Burial of American War Dead: A History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).

⁴ Fred Gaffen, *Cross-Border Warriors: Canadians in American Forces, Americans in Canadian Forces, From the Civil War to the Gulf* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1996).

of individuals to describe a broader movement. Many of these stories will be unfamiliar and intriguing to the general reader. For the academic reader, however, the book poses and touches upon many questions but leaves them unanswered. There is little comparison and analysis among the cases explored, and the titular promise of “1914–1945” is a little misleading, when “in the First and Second World Wars” may have been closer to the mark.

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