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King author examines campaign of 1779 in new book

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Military historians tend to focus on the great wars of the 20th century.

But some colonial conflicts have had much more far-reaching ramifications on the evolution of North American society.

King historian and author Gavin Watt has combed through the intricacies of a monumental 18th century conflict. In his new book, ?No Despicable Enemy, 1779: The Continental Army destroys Indian Territory,? Watt delves into the ?incredibly complex,? worldwide conflict of 1779, which had sprung from America's four-year revolt. In the 440-page book, Watt explains the inability of the Crown's commanders in New York City and Quebec to keep pace with their ever-expanding challenges.

This was the year that the American Congress and General Washington decided to invade and destroy the Six Nations' Indian Territory.

?There is the general view that this invasion was intended to eliminate a particularly noxious foe that had been destroying their army's sources of provisions. While that was certainly the case, investigation also indicates that Washington, who was himself a major land developer, had a view to the war's end and the opening up of Indian Territory to white expansion,??Watt notes.

By this stage of the conflict, the French had openly entered the war on the side of the American rebels and were not only supplying vast supplies of military stores, but were also sending volumes of troops to the Continent and setting their sizeable navy to oppose Britain's Royal Navy.

Now that the French had entered the war, they deployed substantial numbers of large warships that threatened British interests not only in North America, but also in the West Indies, the Mediterranean and across the world.

In 1779, Spain allied with France and the threat became even greater. Britain was only a middling land power and had been compelled to turn the seven German principalities to field troops against the American rebellion. Its navy had formerly been dominant ?round the world, but with the French/Spanish combination, they no longer ruled the waves. Not only were the West Indies threatened (which many Britons saw as much more important than the American colonies), but even Britain itself.

?In short, the rebellion had now turned into a World War and there was much to occupy the British government and its army commanders than simply what the American rebels were up to,? he said.

?Of course, the entry of France into the war had a strong effect on Quebec and Governor Frederick Haldimand had worries about what might happen if the French and rebels combined to invade his province. He had so very few troops to defend lower Quebec and the upper posts, which reached out west to Detroit and Michilimackinac. The American rebels clearly understood his concerns and cleverly threatened invasions, which he could not ignore.?

Watt answers the question of why mount a major effort against the Six Nations in particular?

In the northeast, the Six Nations (Iroquois/Haudenosaune) Confederacy was the most powerful, and most influential, of the native groupings. The Confederacy's towns stretched from just west of Schenectady on the Mohawk River to through modern New York State and southwest into Pennsylvania.

For many decades, the Mohawks' towns along the river of that name had been surrounded by white settlement. By 1779, the majority of the Fort Hunter, Schoharie and Canajoharie townspeople had been forced away from their homes by the rebels. The Fort Hunters ultimately went to Quebec and set up a temporary settlement at Lachine, whereas the other two townsfolk went west and southwest

into Indian Territory.

All the other Iroquois towns were on the far side of the line demarking Indian Territory, however, the Oneidas' towns were close to a rebel fortress at the western terminus of the Mohawk River and came under the rebel influence, bringing with them the Tuscaroras.

Those who remained allied to the British Crown, including the exiled Mohawks, waged a relentless guerilla war along the settled frontiers, destroying mills, farms, houses, running off horses and cattle, and killing rebel farm folk and soldiers.

The primary result of the Continental Armies' destruction of so many towns, emerged three years later when Britain had lost the war. Then, a great many of those Indians sought permanent refuge in Quebec Province, which at that time included Ontario.

This campaign of wholesale destruction had considerable racist overtones.

Watt, who's written extensively on prominent early military campaigns, has dealt with every campaign year of the war, and traced the history of every Loyalist military unit that served in Canada and later settled therein.

Watt has studied Canada's role in the American Revolution for 40 years and has 11 books published on the subject. He pursues a life-long interest in military history and has re-enacted in four historical eras.