

[X-POSTED REVIEW: Ferdinando on Bialuschewski, 'Raiders and Natives: Cross-Cultural Relations in the Age of Buccaneers'](#)

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Ferdinando on Bialuschewski, 'Raiders and Natives: Cross-Cultural Relations in the Age of Buccaneers'

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Natives of the Caribbean: The Plundered and the Plunderers

Raiders and Natives is a rollicking tale primarily centered in the seventeenth-century Caribbean. In it, Arne Bialuschewski uses an impressive breadth of primary sources to demonstrate that the indigenous peoples of the Yucatán Peninsula, Central America, and the South American Pacific Coast provided key support to French, English, and Dutch crews raiding the Spaniards, and some of those same indigenous peoples also supported the Spaniards defending against such raiders. As Bialuschewski states succinctly, “both intruders and defenders relied on local support” (p. 4). The titular raiders were illegal pirates to the Spaniards and legal privateers to their own people, but Bialuschewski sticks with raiders and terms like “freebooters, marauders, or buccaneers” to indicate they were something in between pirates and privateers (p. 7). The Natives included the Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula, the Mosquito of the Caribbean Sea coast of Nicaragua and Honduras, the Cuna of Panamá, and various Native American groups of the Pacific Coast of Central and South America; Bialuschewski’s brief reflection on terminology explains why he used the “common spelling in the period under consideration” rather than Miskito, Guna, or other more modern renderings (p. xi). Bialuschewski has a clear familiarity with the historiography of privateers, buccaneers, and pirates, including key English-language works by Peter Earle, Mark G. Hanna, Kris E. Lane, Jon Latimer, David F. Marley, Jenifer Marx, and Carla Gardina Pestana, along with French- and Spanish-language texts by Carlos Sáiz Cidoncha, Manuel Lucena Salmoral, Gérard A. Jaeger, and Gilles Lapouge. In

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fact, one of the strengths of this book is his notable command of secondary sources from across multiple languages on these Caribbean raiders. Bialuschewski uses this command to criticize the existing historiography for its “Eurocentric focus,” noting that the Native American role “has received virtually no sustained scholarly attention” (p. 4). From this historiographic gap he declares that “most successful buccaneering expeditions were at least facilitated, if not entirely dependent on, indigenous assistance” (p. 117). His argument, however, does more than merely point to this gap, because he analyzes such raider-Native relations to demonstrate they varied based on “specific contexts,” with the Maya occasionally—and often under duress—aligning with the raiders, the Mosquitos and Cuna aligning with them freely, and the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Coast often not (p. 11). He posits further that these relations changed indigenous society as leading Mosquito and Cuna men “capitalized on their connections ... to accumulate wealth and influence” (p. 119).

Bialuschewski largely divides his work geographically, starting with the Yucatán Peninsula, then the Mosquito Coast, the Darién region of Panamá, and finally crossing the isthmus with the buccaneers to the Pacific Coast of Central and South America, albeit with a chronological thread running mainly through the seventeenth century. After a brief, dozen-page introduction to the text, chapter 1 covers the origins of the French, English, and Dutch Caribbean raiders from the likes of Jean Fleury, Francis Drake, and Piet Hein sailing from their home nations in the sixteenth century to the emergence of Caribbean-based raiders following the establishment of non-Spanish European colonies the next century, including famous buccaneer haunts like Tortuga and Jamaica. In chapter 2, Bialuschewski turns to his first context for raider-Native interactions, the various Maya groups of the Yucatán Peninsula from the 1630s through 1660s. Bialuschewski portrays the Maya as both under extraordinary pressure from Spanish colonial rule and targeted by the raiders for little more than supplies, local knowledge, and labor. The Maya viewed both European groups negatively, with Bialuschewski noting that in their “collective memory” the Maya recalled “a century after the incursions” that “the English” were “a menace akin to Spanish priests” (p. 38). Captured Maya, in fact, reappear several times later in the text on raiders’ ships or in Tortuga. Like several other chapters in this text, however, this chapter is quite short at eleven pages, with Bialuschewski evidently pushing against often near-silent primary sources to recover the indigenous story.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 move to Central America and delve into the fascinating context of the raiders and Mosquito people. One key difference in the contexts between the Maya and Mosquito is that the latter “lived in an unpromising backwater far beyond the colonial frontier” (p. 119). In chapter 3, Bialuschewski focuses on the 1665 Granada, Nicaragua, raid, because it connected the earlier Yucatán raids to what was to come in Central America. With Granada deep in the interior of Nicaragua and far closer to the Pacific Coast than the Caribbean Sea, the raiders would need help reaching it. Bialuschewski argues that the Mosquito people did far more than provide mere directions, but rather they accompanied the raiders and provided knowledge about canoes and pirogues, as well as the resultant “amphibious hit-and-run warfare” coming from how “the buccaneers fused Native American with European military strategies” (p. 42). The raiders also found willing local allies as they approached Granada, with the Chorotega people participating in looting as reprisal against an oppressive Spanish colonial rule that included material tribute and *encomienda* labor. While some of these local indigenous people fled after the raid to avoid Spanish retribution for these reprisals, the Spaniards moved others to a *reducción* and brought in still others to help build up Granada’s defenses; the indigenous price for such raids often include disruption and more forced labor. The raiders making it back to Jamaica, however, showed off their plundered riches and told

stories about Central America and the willing indigenous allies on the Mosquito Coast. Chapter 4 picks up from the Granada raid and examines the height of Caribbean raiding in the second half of the 1660s, including François L'Olonnais's 1666 raids around Lake Maracaibo and Henry Morgan's assaults on Portobelo in 1668 and Panamá in 1670. Bialuschewski demonstrates clearly in this chapter how both the non-Spanish raiders and the Spaniards alike relied on indigenous support. With a pause in raiding in the 1670s, Bialuschewski also pauses his chronological story to return focus to the Mosquito people. Chapter 5's interlude starts in 1629 with the arrival of the English Puritans on Providence Island and goes through the rest of seventeenth century to end with the Mosquito themselves now accomplished raiders. In it, Bialuschewski posits that the raiders-Mosquito alliance both "transformed indigenous society" and "was part of a long history of cross-cultural relations" for the Mosquito (p. 69). These relations included trade for supplies, food, knowledge, labor, and manufactured goods. The Mosquitos, in particular leading men, used iron tools and flintlock guns to unify their people via raids on the indigenous peoples of the interior and the Spaniards. According to Bialuschewski, what developed were "headmen with limited authority" (p. 119). This chapter also again shows Bialuschewski depth in the associated historiography through multiple languages, for example, Craig L. Dozier, Geneviève Lemercinier, Eleonore von Oertzen, Jorge Jenkins Molieri, and Jean Preston on the Mosquito Coast, along with Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Alison Games, and Karl H. Offen on Puritans of Providence Island.

Bialuschewski moves south in chapter 6 to the Darién region of Panamá. He examines various non-Spanish European-local people interactions, starting with brief remarks on Drake, John Oxenham, and the maroons in the 1570s, along with unnamed Dutch and English raiders relations with the Cuna in the middle decades of the 1600s. Bialuschewski suggests that these earlier incidents "set the stage for cross-cultural exchange" for the rest of the seventeenth century, with a variable context wherein the local peoples sometimes assisted the raiders for "material or strategic advantage" and other times reported the raiders to the Spaniards "to secure perks for themselves" (p. 83). Here Bialuschewski returns to his chronological thread, picking up the story of the Caribbean raiders after the 1670s pause with a restart by John Coxon and others targeting Portobelo in 1680. They and other raiders over the next few years decided that the Spaniards' Pacific Coast might offer easier targets and with the help of Cuna guides crossed the isthmus to stalk the South Sea. The Cuna received various materials in exchange, including prized iron tools. According to Bialuschewski, leading Cuna controlled metal tools distribution and "the power structure shifted toward chiefdoms with a degree of social hierarchy and stratification" (p. 119). Leading Cuna also traveled with the raiders to boost their status; for example, Bialuschewski tells of one Cuna, possibly called Francisco de Peralta, who went with the English to the Mosquito Coast, lived there some time, and then returned to Darién. He speculates that Peralta "was impressed by the way the Mosquitos, with the help of Europeans, developed their autonomous polity" (p. 85). The Spaniards tried various methods to stop the Cuna-raiders relations, including missionaries and various punitive approaches, but eventually the Spaniards agreed to concessions to the Cuna, including removing gold miners from the region and providing material goods including the desired iron tools. Indeed, Bialuschewski suggests that by later in the 1680s "at least some chiefs came to realize that they could profit more from ties to the imperial power than from the sporadic visits of itinerant buccaneers" (p. 95). Consequently, the Cuna kept the Spaniards out, received the material goods they desired, and, as with the Mosquito, retained much autonomy.

Finally, chapter 7 crosses the isthmus with the buccaneers to Bialuschewski's last context, the Pacific

Ocean and the coasts of Central and South America. Bialuschewski again prefigures the tale with earlier raiders like Drake, Oxenham, and Thomas Cavendish of the last few decades of the 1500s and a variety of Dutch raiders in the first few decades of the 1600s before he moves to the 1680s and the likes of Bartholomew Sharpe. What follows is a geographically scattered tale of various raiders up and down the Pacific Coast, often targeting indigenous villages for supplies, knowledge, and labor. As the raiders increasingly relied on violence to extract such things, the indigenous peoples more frequently aligned with the Spaniards, despite the Spaniards use of *reducciones*, *repartimiento* labor, and other forms of colonial oppression. Bialuschewski points to the raiders “senseless, wanton destruction of indigenous settlements along the South Sea coast in the mid-1680s” as “a low point in cross-cultural relations” that “contributed to the decline of raiding” (p. 120). Subsequently, some raiders returned to the Caribbean, others targeted the west coast of Africa or the Indian Ocean, and the remainder turned to other pursuits like smuggling, the illegal slave trade, wrecking, or profiting from plantations.

While Bialuschewski convinces with his argument of significant Native American involvement in what historians previously portrayed as European versus European conflict, *Raiders and Natives* lacks in a couple of areas. One missed opportunity is to connect the historiographical context to that of the broader Atlantic world and Native Americans. Indeed, while he cited Atlantic-framed works by the likes of W. Jeffrey Bolster and Alden T. Vaughan, along with Andrew Lipman’s *The Saltwater Frontier* (2017) on Algonquian-speaking Native Americans between the English and Dutch North American empires, he largely ignores the Red Atlantic. Missing is Jace Weaver’s *The Red Atlantic* (2014) and, more significantly, the Wabanaki raiders of Matthew R. Bahar’s *Storm of the Sea* (2018). A comparison of the Mosquito with the Wabanaki would have been interesting and might have helped address the book’s short length at 122 pages from introduction to conclusion. Bialuschewski is aware of this shortcoming, however, noting that “research on the relations between indigenous groups and non-Iberian freebooters poses a serious challenge,” with few primary sources focused on Native Americans and others often “biased or misleading” (p. 12). He rises to this challenge with an impressively varied source base using, as he puts it, “every scattered piece of information” (p. 12). His statement is not hyperbole; the book includes the standard published accounts like Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin and William Dampier and vast archival material from the Spanish Archivo General de Indias, the Mexican Archivo General de la Nación, the Guatemalan Archivo General de Centro América, the Costa Rican Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, the British National Archives, the British Library, the French Archives nationales, Archives nationales d’outre-mer, and Bibliothèque nationale de France, along with a few things from the Dutch Nationaal Archief. Indeed, *Raiders and Natives* is engaging and a remarkable feat spanning more archives in one text than many historians likely will visit in their entire academic career. The combination of an often exciting narrative and the admittedly short length suggests clear potential for the book to be used in an undergraduate class on Native American, Caribbean, or buccaneer history. A graduate seminar also would find much to analyze in the text, including Bialuschewski’s extensive and cross-checked use of primary sources and historiographical depth on the European raiders and Mosquito peoples. Altogether, the book is a romp through the seventeenth-century Caribbean, highlighting the indigenous roles in many famous, well-told raids.

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