

The Future of Civil War Era Studies:

The Southern Home Front

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Most of us in the academic profession have had the opportunity to roll our eyes at yet another student-authored history paper that inevitably begins with the words “*Webster’s Dictionary* defines [insert subject of paper here] as . . .” While I chide them for doing it, it strikes me that historians really ought to follow their students’ lead and define their terms more precisely before engaging in academic dialogue. Take, for example, the common definitions of “home front” given by most online and printed dictionaries. They boil down to, rather simply, “the civilian population of a country at war.” In light of this connotation, it appears that historians of the Civil War era are beginning to argue that there was no such thing as a southern home front and that any sort of easy distinction between military and civilian Civil War participants may not be useful or even valid anymore. A slew of Civil War historians, including Stephanie McCurry, LeeAnn Whites, Alecia P. Long, and Lesley A. Schwalm contend in very recent publications that groups of people (white and black free women or slaves, for example) historians traditionally considered “civilians” on the southern home front were actually full-fledged combatants.¹

This is not, these historians assert both explicitly and implicitly, simply a matter of redefining combat to include any sort of civilian resistance to military authority. Nor is it a mere trick of postmodern historical interpretation to construe civilian actions as “weapons of the weak” or symbolic confrontation. Rather, these scholars demonstrate that people at the time—both the Federal and Confederate governments and military officials of both armies fighting in southern territory—considered many civilians to be combatants and spelled this out in both

government and military policy. And, they argue, so too should modern historians. Their claims present both provocative opportunities and troubling challenges and seem to question whether there is really a point in distinguishing “home front” from “battlefield” in the South.

This mere redefinition of “civilian” and “home front” seems also to suggest that we scholars need to change the larger questions we ask about the war. Whereas we have previously asked how the war affected civilians, the findings of these historians signal that the bigger questions may be about how civilians affected the war. Take, for example, Stephanie McCurry’s argument in *Confederate Reckoning* that the demands nonelite southern women made of the Confederate state forced it to recognize them as political beings and as a constituency to which it needed to respond. Historians have long considered women part of the pull factor in military desertion, holding them responsible for exerting claims on their husbands’ labor, support, and protection and as a major cause of the “lack of will” Confederate deserters experienced. Until now, however, historians have largely considered this a domestic phenomenon, albeit one with monumental implications for military leaders, who had to compete with Confederate women’s claims over southern manpower. With historians like McCurry illustrating how those women appealed directly to the Confederate government to assure them of a modicum of subsistence and physical safety in the face of oppressive conscription and tax policies, the relationships among citizenry (or, more aptly, as she points out, women who were defined by their lack of citizenship), military, and state grows more complicated. This scholarship is not the first to establish the impact female dissidents had on the Confederate government and military, but the forcefulness with which it argues the point and the manner in which it casts women as central actors in the struggle marks a departure from previous scholarship.²

Likewise, Civil War historians have long recognized that women on the southern home

front affected the military capacity of the Confederacy and provided resistance to the enemy. But the sheer bulk of evidence arriving in works like *Occupied Women*, the recent collection of essays edited by LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, shows that scholars have underestimated the extent to which the federal government recognized women's warfare as pervasive and effective and responded with military policy, such as Lieber's Code and Ambrose Burnside's General Orders No. 36, which directly targeted female insurgency. Both the federal and Confederate governments and military recognized the blurring between home front and battlefield and between the political and the private dimensions of civilian life.³

This new history opens up exciting new possibilities for viewing women's Civil War experience. Only a couple of decades ago, those discrete sections in the Civil War chapter of history textbooks on "Women and the War" and "Women on the Home Front"—you know, the ones almost always accompanied by an image of Clara Barton or a *Harper's* illustration of female munitions workers—were considered an interpretational victory after 130 years of historians failing to acknowledge women's role and experiences in the war. This new scholarship, however, indicates that we can no longer so easily partition women's experiences away from men's. It seems to render these textbook sections—and, by extension, the entire conceptual organization we have grafted onto the war—navely limited if not obsolete. The new scholarship, therefore, poses both an opportunity and a challenge to integrate women, rightfully and more accurately, into a mainstream Civil War experience in both our teaching and writing.⁴

In addition to the new gender-focused history, the recent proliferation of works on irregular warfare has also succeeded in obscuring distinctions between home and battlefield. Scholarship on guerrilla warfare has exploded in the past decade, with works by Daniel E. Sutherland, Victoria Bynum, and Robert R. Mackey, among others, demonstrating its

pervasiveness and its role in shaping overall military strategy. Here, again, is where defining terms can both help and complicate what we know about the war. Since “guerrillas” and “irregulars” are by definition groups of combatants that often included civilians and most often targeted civilians, by its very nature irregular warfare transcended boundaries of home and battlefield. Recent Civil War histories duly emphasize the role of civilians as both the victims and perpetrators of localized combat. Southern women who provisioned and harbored guerrillas, as Union army officials recognized, were crucial to sustaining such conflict. But recent histories such as Mark Geiger’s innovative investigation of financial fraud and irregular warfare in Missouri have revealed the many connections between civilians and irregular military action. Geiger, for example, shows how civilians underwrote the creation of state Confederate military ranks at the outset of the war and then turned to retaliatory guerrilla warfare when unionists maintained control of Missouri, causing their investments to go bust.⁵

While these new interpretational possibilities are exciting, they also challenge scholars to write and teach Civil War history in a way many may find difficult and even a little disconcerting. This may be particularly true for military historians who have situated their own work within the so-called new military history that, in the past thirty or so years has tried to integrate the military aspects of war within society’s larger social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. At its extreme, this approach minimizes (or sometimes even omits altogether) the subject of combat. But the recent scholarship on the southern Civil War experience does quite the opposite. It turns *everyone* into a combatant. Instead of downplaying the military aspect of societies at war and looking away from the battlefield to the home, it reveals that every town, home, and personal interaction was a potential stage for conflict to which both the Union and Confederate military and governments were forced to respond with policy, threats, and even

force. It remains to be seen how “new military history” practitioners will respond to this new conceptualization of the home front.

No matter their perspective or what they choose to make of this new work, scholars of the Civil War South will need to engage with the destabilization of the battlefield / home front boundary. While it may require new ways of organizing our thinking, this new discourse provides a fuller assessment of conflict among and by civilians and unearths even more discord within what is already recognized as the most calamitous chapter of American history. One meaningful solution may be to shift our thinking, writing, and teaching away from the binary battlefield / home front classification—one that, as today’s historians reveal, fails to capture the fluid reality of Civil War combat and civilian experience—and to instead think about southern war experiences more broadly in terms of occupation. At various points in the war, the Union army or its agents occupied and controlled portions of the region to varying degrees of military success. Many times, occupying forces came not in the form of regular armies but rather as community members and neighbors with opposing sympathies. They destabilized communities by both violent force and nonviolent subterfuge. Southern civilians composed insurgencies and counterinsurgencies to such occupation and helped determine the effectiveness of the Union effort to pacify and dominate hundreds of thousands of square miles of renegade territory. In this way, focusing on occupation helps us rightly understand Civil War combat as an uneven, broad-based, and highly localized phenomenon.

The subfield of “occupation studies” that military historians have fashioned in recent years looks increasingly like the fertile ground upon which history of Civil War battlefield and home front will meet and meld in the future. Its broad parameters could provide a new way for scholars to envision how civilians and enlisted southerners experienced, fought, and influenced

the war, while giving them a new framework and language in which to think and write about how and why people became Civil War combatants in various situations, times, and places. It circumvents the implicit problems with a more traditional conception of “home front”—mainly that it was wholly different in nature than the battlefield—but still leaves room for historians to clearly distinguish when southerners (whether soldier, slave, contraband, or civilian) were combatants and when they were not and, furthermore, to distinguish how civilian combat was different from military combat.

Although I have focused much of this essay on the battlefield / home front divisions, there are many other directions in which historians will continue to expand scholarship on the southern home front in coming years. I hope there will be more work along the lines of the fine studies of children in the Civil War South by James Marten and Anya Jabour, which look at this and other under-studied groups of civilians.⁶ And certainly historians will continue to focus on the role African Americans—in their capacities as slaves, newly freed men and women, refugees, or contraband—played in all aspects of the conflict. I think we can also expect to see more probing of the many southern men who chose not to enlist or chose to desert, in the war. Perhaps we need the equivalent of James McPherson’s work about these people, called “Why They *Did Not* Fight.” Furthermore, the new proliferation of border-state studies has underscored that the southern home front is not synonymous with the Confederate home front. With this has come recognition that in places like Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland, among a populace divided in their loyalties, there existed alternate strategies for engaging in and coping with war. In short, whether we still choose to consider it a “home front” or not, there is much here to explore.

Notes

1. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, introduction, and Leslie A. Schwalm, “Between Slavery and Freedom: African American Women and Occupation in the Slave South,” both in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the Civil War*, ed. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 1–13, 137-54.

2. Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 133–77.

3. Whites and Long, introduction, 1-13; E. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter, “‘Physical Abuse . . . and Rough Handling’: Race, Gender, and Sexual Justice in the Occupied South,” and Kristen L. Streater, “‘She-Rebels’ on the Supply Line: Gender Conventions in Civil War Kentucky,” both in Whites and Long, *Occupied Women*, 61, 97.

4. Even some of the finest textbooks feature this organization. See, for example, Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, vol. 1, 3d ed. (New York: Norton, 2011), 565; and George Brown Tindall and David Shi, *America: A Narrative History* vol. 1, 8th ed. (New York: Norton, 2010), 496-97.

5. Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), Victoria E. Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robert R. Mackey, *The UnCivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861–1865* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005); Mark Geiger, *Financial Fraud and Guerilla Warfare in Missouri’s Civil War, 1861–1865* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

6. James Marten, *The Children’s Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and *Children for the Union: The War Spirit on the Northern Home Front* (Chicago:

Ivan R. Dee, 2004); Anya Jabour, *Topsy Turvy: How the Civil War Turned Life Upside Down for Southern Children* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010).