

Fleeting Fortunes, Deserted Ranks: What Factors Influenced Georgian Troop Desertion?

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Review

FLEETING FORTUNES, DESERTED RANKS What factors influenced Georgian troop desertion?

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Weitz, Mark A. *A Higher Duty: Desertion Among Georgia Troops During the Civil War*. University of Nebraska Press, ISBN 803247915

Desertion is one of the least understood topics in Civil War studies, though an adequate account of it has implications for several areas of historical research, including life on the home front, morale, and nationalism. The current volume is an important first step in addressing the evolution of desertion and its effects on Georgia and the Confederacy as a whole.

In **A Higher Duty**, Mark A. Weitz explores three questions: who deserted? why? and when? The answers are addressed largely by analyzing the relation between the location of the deserter's home and the location of the Union army.

In addressing the first question, Weitz maintains that there was a "clear correlation between desertion and county location." Georgia can be divided into three distinct geographical regions: the plantation belt, the Upcountry and upper Piedmont, and the Wiregrass and Pine Barrens. Though the socio-economic and cultural differences between these areas were not strong enough to keep Georgia out of the Confederacy, these differences help explain why, as the War dragged on, the majority of Georgia's deserters were from the Upcountry. Few Upcountry residents owned slaves and, because of the mountainous conditions, many found it difficult to identify with issues beyond their immediate community.

A Higher Duty pursues the second and third questions by carefully examining letters from the home front and the location of Sherman's Union army. The advance of Sherman's army through northern Georgia -- before and during his advance on Atlanta -- made it feasible for soldiers to answer the calls of their loved ones. The majority of Georgians who deserted did so between late 1863 and the end of 1864. In considering the more analytical aspects, Weitz

provides a clear picture of the motives, emotions, and beliefs of these Confederate soldiers.

Weitz rarely moves to larger historiographical questions. He briefly addresses the debate surrounding the proper causal analysis of the Confederate surrender. Did the Confederacy crumble as a result of internal pressures and lack of will, or did it succumb, as James McPherson and Gary Gallagher maintain, to an external pressure of defeat on the battlefield that brought about a reduction in devotion to the cause? Weitz without hesitation embraces the interpretation that internal economic and social conditions, rather than poor battlefield performance of Confederate armies, caused a sharp decrease in devotion. Though this conclusion is borne out by data on northern counties, the author does not explain how his position handles the low numbers of deserters in the plantation belt who were more strongly committed to the Confederate cause.

A Higher Duty has given us the first detailed account of desertion in one Confederate state. More general conclusions about desertion in the Confederacy as a whole will come after similar studies of other states.

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