

Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War

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Review

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Urwin, Gregory J. W., Editor *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 809325462

War crimes

Essays dissect sinister practice

It has become almost trite to note how popular scholarship and interest in the American Civil War remains, yet despite the cascade of works on facets of the war both obscure and renowned, Gregory Urwin has brought together a group of essays that explores a still nearly untouched aspect of this conflict. **Black Flag Over Dixie** is a compilation of twelve essays on the topic of Civil War racial atrocities, and provides a ready source for future explorations of this subject. The book supplements its text with twenty photographs and illustrations.

Urwin, a professor at Temple University and an award-winning author or editor of seven books on military history, has pulled together a fascinating examination of what he refers to as the war's central cause and most convulsive issue. Urwin contends that the Civil War community's collective amnesia is an outgrowth of an intentional effort on the part of Southerners to ensure that their loss on the Civil War's battlefields could be redeemed in the aftermath. He notes that organizations such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) and United Daughters of the Confederacy lobbied to ensure that a pro-Confederate history of the war was taught in Southern schools. In my years teaching military history at the United States Military Academy at West Point, I often was amazed at how successful that effort had been, as cadets from southern states almost uniformly identified simple states' rights as the seminal cause for the war, denying that slavery had any role.

With **Black Flag Over Dixie**, Urwin seeks to open the path to not only a fuller understanding of the war, but also of our nation. His effort makes a good

start, but also highlights the limited scholarship to date. Of the twelve essays (including the introductory and concluding essays), only four represent new scholarship. The oldest essay is the 1958 Albert Castel piece, *The Fort Pillow Massacre*, which is still among the best examinations of the evidence of that massacre, even given its age.

The Confederate treatment of the blacks in Union blue and their white officers is as varied as the different units and individuals who came into contact with the black soldiers. It is clear that there were those on both sides of the conflict who simply could not countenance the idea of blacks as soldiers. It is equally evident that the Lincoln Administration, albeit hesitantly and with fits and starts, came to recognize the benefits of the black presence in the ranks. Even if the United States Colored Troops (USCT) units never fought a single engagement, the fact that nearly two-thirds of their ranks comprised escaped slaves meant an equal loss to slaveholders in the rebel states. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the South, which had gone to war to ensure the right to keep its black population subjugated, would find the thought of those same blacks under arms criminal.

The official Confederate position on the status of the black soldiers was constantly evolving. In December 1862, Jefferson Davis had ordered that any blacks captured under arms (and their officers) were subject to state laws regarding servile insurrection. However, as a practical measure, determining which state each USCT soldier came from proved impossible, especially as many in the ranks were free blacks from northern states. Subsequently, Davis and the Confederate Congress amended the declaration to make the government of the state where the black troops were when captured responsible.

This meant, to some extent, that the Confederate officers were not certain of what to do with their captured blacks. For some, apparently, the simplest answer was to kill them rather than have to answer the question. After the Fort Pillow massacre and its subsequent inquiry by the Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Remember Fort Pillow* and *No Quarter* became rallying cries for many USCT units and the thought that the black troops would be enslaved if captured lent a different tone to their battles.

Whether it was predisposition, reaction to armed blacks, official sanction, or some other reason, Urwin and his colleagues demonstrate that the battles between black troops and Confederates had a significantly different level of

lethality and, in many cases, a demonstrable pattern of irregularity in accounting for the disposition of the USCT soldiers in the battles' aftermath.

Each of the essays included brings something to the table, and those interested in the full story of the Civil War will benefit from this collection. Some of the material will be familiar to even those with a passing interest, such as the essays on Fort Pillow and on the Battle of the Crater at Petersburg. Some of the others examine less heralded conflicts such as Plymouth, North Carolina's massacre in April 1864 and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865. Together, they form a troubling, and for some, perhaps a troublesome view of Confederate behavior in the war and its immediate aftermath. In his introduction, Urwin notes that after he had written an editorial in 1988 advocating the erection of monuments to Southern blacks who fought for the Union, he received a letter from the SCV commander-in-chief Ralph Green. Green charged that Urwin had betrayed his profession as historian.

It is precisely this line of thought that makes **Black Flag Over Dixie** an essential addition to Civil War historiography. The idea of intentionally overlooking uncomfortable or disturbing elements of our history belies the value that history provides. If legend is all that we seek from the past, then there probably is no place for Urwin's work. However, if we truly seek to understand why the nation was compelled to force of arms to settle its sectional dispute, then examinations such as this are critical to that understanding. Mark Grimsley ends his essay with this thought, that until the shadow is accepted and understood, its power to harm everyone *the nation included* is vast. If we would continue as a great nation, we must be willing to undertake a critical self-examination. **Black Flag Over Dixie** is an excellent lens through which to conduct a part of that examination.

Versalle F. Washington is the Professor of Military Science at the University of Dayton and has taught military history at the United States Military Academy and the United States Army Command and General Staff College. He is the author of Eagles on their Buttons: A Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War (University of Missouri Press, 1999).