

Children for the Union: The War Spirit on the Northern Home Front

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Review

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Marten, James *Children for the Union: The War Spirit on the Northern Home Front*. Ivan R. Dee Publishers, \$26.00 ISBN 1566635632

Child's play

Tots for the stars and stripes

Maris Vinovskis's memorable lament that social historians had lost the Civil War came as a surprise and a call to arms for many scholars of mid-19th century America. In a field that produces hundreds of books and articles each year, it seemed almost inconceivable that a topic as important as the social history of the war remained relatively unexplored. The scores of books to appear in the past 15 years integrating the history of the battlefield with that of the home front by exploring the wartime experiences of women, workers, and common soldiers have served as a vindication of the importance of Vinovskis's oft-cited plea. James Marten, professor of history at Marquette University, contributed to the excitement and freshness of the social history movement within Civil War studies with the publication in 1998 of *The Children's Civil War*, the first book-length treatment of children's lives during the war years. His newest book, **Children for the Union: The War Spirit on the Northern Home Front**, supplements, but does not replace or significantly revise his earlier work.

Unlike the all-inclusive *Children's Civil War*, **Children for the Union** focuses only on the young people of the northern states. Published for Ivan R. Dee's American Childhoods series, **Children for the Union** first and foremost gives the reader, as Marten writes on page 6, a sense of what it was like to be a child or youth at mid-century. As in his earlier work, Marten does a remarkable job of including the war and the concerns of the battlefield in a narrative that highlights themes more familiar to the social and cultural historian. Marten uses an anecdotal style that draws upon memoirs, letters, diaries, and children's publications to drive home the point that the war touched the lives of almost every northern child, and represented the most significant formative event in the

development of the youth of the 1860s. As Marten writes on page 4, his work shows how children were integrated into the war by forces beyond their control, as well as how they chose to integrate the war into their own lives.

Marten begins his exploration of how the war touched and transformed children's lives by placing the changes wrought by war in a wider 19th century context. Chapter 1, *Childhood in Antebellum America*, discusses the nature of childhood at mid-century. Marten describes the increasing commercialization of play, the changes in domestic sensibilities that produced more child-centered families, the political rallies and public amusements that would have brought most 19th century children into contact with a wider community, and the role pious children's publications played in instilling values in the nation's youth. The war, as Marten argues in subsequent chapters, intruded upon all these areas, and speeded changes toward a more secular and commercial society already underway at mid-century.

Northern children, although they rarely came into direct contact with enemy soldiers or combat, participated nonetheless in what Marten terms on page 34 a vibrant war culture. A vague prewar distrust of things military gave way to wartime collections of toy soldiers, guns, and army artifacts. War themes worked their way into everything from stationary, Valentines, rhymes, songs, and jokes to school books. Public dioramas and panoramas thrilled children with images of war while draining parents' pocket-books.

The war also affected northern youth in more serious ways. Marten reminds us in Chapter 3 that the Civil War represented a serious disruption of family life for hundreds of thousands of children. Fathers and brothers went into service, political disagreements broke up families, and wartime casualties left thousands of orphans. Although many soldier-fathers attempted to continue to carry on traditional relationships with their sons and daughters, most children found that their household roles changed as they took on more work and responsibility.

In chapters 4 and 5, Marten discusses the ways in which northern children became more intimately involved in the war effort. Many boys and girls participated in fundraising fairs and helped the army by sewing and collecting lint for bandages. The Militarization of Northern Children, included the organization of mock youth companies and participation in school-sponsored drills. Children close to the front witnessed actual battles and came into contact with enemy soldiers. A small number of children served the army directly as

underage enlistees or as drummer boys. Although child-casualties and Medal of Honor recipients were rare, most young people, at least indirectly, participated in the northern war effort.

Marten concludes by demonstrating the continued importance of the war for American children, especially those who had lived through it. The excitement of the war years left a taste for adventure stories and dime novels that eventually overwhelmed the more religious offerings of prewar children's magazines. Schools continued to function as sites for patriotic instruction and Americanization. Many youth of the war-generation retained a life-long faith in the military and the cult of the strenuous life, exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt.

While Marten effectively integrates the history of the battlefield and the home front in an engaging and well-written social history, **Children for the Union** fails to move beyond the conclusions presented in his previous work. Although Marten asserts in his acknowledgments that his newest offering is not simply the Northern half of the earlier book, readers of the *Children's Civil War* will find familiar many of the sources, anecdotes, and even some of the pictures presented in the new work. Marten improved upon the organization of the *Children's Civil War* by devoting an entire chapter to antebellum childhood, and highlighting more clearly the importance of the war-time militarization of youth culture. Still, even some of the added material on underage soldiers and drummer boys appeared in the first book under different sections.

Children For the Union also falls short in developing new theoretical approaches. It shares with *The Children's Civil War* the tendency of path-breaking works on social history to raise more questions than they answer. Marten's reliance on letters, diaries, and memoirs skews his findings toward upper and middle class youth. Future scholars are left to read against the grain sources such as orphanage records or court documents that have worked so well in adding richness to the field of women's history. Marten's brief section on the New York City draft riots, which included the destruction of an African-American orphanage, suggests that more work could be done on race and childhood during the war years.

Taken together, *The Children's Civil War* and **Children for the Union** represent exciting forays into the social history of the Civil War that introduce new topics and raise new questions. Unless readers are particularly interested in

a work that deals solely with the Northern homefront, however, they need look no further than the earlier book for the most complete interpretation of childhood during the war years.

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