

War's Desolating Scourge: The Union's Occupation of North Alabama

Andrew F. Lang

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Lang, Andrew F. (2012) "War's Desolating Scourge: The Union's Occupation of North Alabama," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.4.24

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss4/23>

Review

Lang, Andrew F.

Fall 2012

Danielson, Joseph W. *War's Desolating Scourge: The Union's Occupation of North Alabama*. University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1844-6

Understanding the Experience of union Occupation

Writing within the shadow of the recent occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, scholars are once again turning their attention to the United States's formative military occupations during the nineteenth century. Conflicts were not waged only on the grand battlefields of Shiloh, Antietam, and Gettysburg. They were also contested on the Confederate home front, where white southern civilians were governed by, and resisted blue-clad occupying United States armies; where enslaved African Americans escaped bondage and carved out new spaces of freedom behind Union lines; and where arenas of irregular warfare magnified the period's scope of violence and destruction. And the occupations required by war forced Americans on both sides of the conflict to expand their conception of the citizen-soldier and the extent to which civilian combatants could be engaged. These collective themes, among others, are the central focus of Joseph W. Danielson's *War's Desolating Scourge: The Union's Occupation of North Alabama*. Successfully building on the works of Stephen V. Ash, Mark Grimsley, and Clay Mountcastle, and complementing a host of recent regional studies, Danielson's work reveals the complexities of military occupation, the depths of civilian resistance, and the Union army's impact on emancipation.

Danielson's effective study concentrates on North Alabama, a relatively small, but significant region of the Confederacy, to investigate the Union's wartime policy transition from conciliation to ultimate hard war. Although he does not deviate from this long-accepted historiographical trajectory, Danielson adds previously unconsidered elements and texture to the scholarly conversation. In the process, he demonstrates the profound utility of case-studies. By focusing on a limited regional space to ask broad questions, Danielson ably unpacks the effect of federal occupation policy at the grassroots, while integrating the many

voices brought together during wartime: common Union soldiers, white southerners, enslaved African Americans, military authorities, and politicians. Danielson understands that the story of occupied North Alabama might not be completely representative of the entire occupied South. But therein lays the promise of his work. He lets the specific actors in the region dictate the narrative, based on *their* particular views and biases, which reveals unique insights into the wider questions of loyalty, resistance, nationalism, and changing federal strategy.

Danielson did not select his North Alabama setting arbitrarily. Rather, he made a deliberate decision, and a wise one at that. This region was peculiarly situated in the antebellum South, governed neither by firebrand secessionists nor dedicated Unionists. Instead, “cooperationists” dominated the area politically, culturally, and socially. On the one hand, this group was deeply committed to the South’s racial hierarchy and preservation of slavery, duly fearing encroachment by the federal government. On the other, they believed that secession, if not performed in concert with other southern states—especially Tennessee, to which they were tied commercially—would render the region vulnerable to invasion and economic hardship. Thus, cooperationists attempted to secure constitutional amendments protecting slavery, while also advocating unified southern action if secession proved necessary. Once their state ultimately withdrew from the Union, northern Alabamians stood with the secessionists and became dedicated Confederate nationalists, which quickly bred a stubborn defiance against invading United States armies.

Danielson recognizes that the experience of occupation did not affect one group of people more than another. Indeed, military occupation was a fragmented experience, exposing a host of unforeseen challenges to all involved. Once Union forces swept into the region in April 1862, both United States soldiers and the civilians under their control were compelled to negotiate unfamiliar patterns of behavior necessitated by the realities of occupation. For example, Danielson perceptively distinguishes how Union troops “transitioned from an invasion army to an occupation force,” implicitly challenging some scholarly assumptions underlying the monolithic “Billy Yank” (33). The common soldier was required to play diverse roles, many of which challenged his expectations for wartime service. Union occupiers interacted with civilians, initially careful not to breach the policy of conciliation. Danielson suggests that United States soldiers took seriously the notion that white southerners, if treated with mollified respect and accord, would voluntarily throw off the yoke of

secessionist ideology and willingly rejoin the Union. Along the way, troops had to learn new elements of the occupation soldiering experience, including defending the rights of civilians, enforcing martial law, and regulating the bureaucratic affairs of occupied zones.

The environment of conciliation, though, changed greatly. Danielson demonstrates that each participant within North Alabama's culture of occupation possessed the ability to make calculated decisions, based on their particular loyalties and perceptions of the "other." White southerners were given the choice either to accept or resist conciliation. They chose the latter course, initiating both violent and nonviolent tactics in defying Union policies. Thus, the occupiers themselves now had a choice. Rather than skulking in fear of the defiant Alabamians, soldiers and occupation authorities abandoned conciliation in favor of fierce "punitive civil-military polices designed to overwhelm Confederate civilians' commitment to independence" (45-46). The result was a new kind of war free from the constraints of civilized and reserved engagement.

Danielson offers a profound treatment of the Union's punitive war measures, suggesting that they began much earlier (in the spring of 1862) than historians previously thought. Adding carefully to an already robust literature, he describes how the occupiers employed a two-fold strategy to combat civilian defiance. The first, "weak punitive polices," sought to coerce Alabama Confederates into submitting to loyalty oaths through arrests, censorship, and confiscation of cotton and other sources of private property. Danielson effectively expands the definition of "punitive" to establish how Union policies did not always change to civilian violence or destruction. Rather, he shows how *any* form of civilian resistance, regardless of its severity, was met with an equal response from the occupiers.

Such tactics, though, had only a limited effect; civilians became even more strident in their resolve. Occupation authorities, therefore, were forced to implement a second system of procedures, "strong punitive policies." White southerners engaged in violent tactics, sometimes leaving Union soldiers seriously injured or dead. The occupiers responded in kind, occasioning a mindset and attitude that continually turned to hard war measures, such as looting, burning property, and violently engaging civilians—in essence, anything intended to exact physical and emotional damage to civilian will and ideology. Northerners, including soldiers, private citizens, and politicians, wholly endorsed the hard war program, believing that it would ultimately succeed. They were

right. As Union armies gained a tighter stranglehold on the western Confederacy, North Alabama became subject to repeated raids, increasingly severe hard war policies, and indefinite occupation. Incessant punitive policies, brought on directly as a result of white southerners' refusal to accept conciliation, resulted in confiscated property, destroyed landscapes, emancipation, and violent encounters with Union occupiers. Danielson points to the spring of 1864 as the point at which these collective trials finally cracked civilian morale.

War's Desolating Scourge is a model study of occupation during the American Civil War. It not only buttresses the current literature, but also adds important texture and insight that is sometimes difficult to glean from broader studies. Danielson makes an effective case for a regional and local approach to understand the complicated, disjointed, and contested world of nineteenth-century military occupation. In the process, he demonstrates how the central elements of the Civil War experience, including nationalism, loyalty, resistance, changing roles of soldiers, the process of emancipation, and the switch from conciliatory to hard war measures, were intimately tangled within the web of wartime occupation. One can only hope that Danielson's study will be emulated for other regions of the occupied Confederacy.

Andrew F. Lang is a doctoral candidate at Rice University, where he is finishing his dissertation titled, "Challenging the Citizen-Soldier Ideal: Culture, Race, and the Problem of Military Occupation during the American Civil War Era." His work has appeared in Civil War History and Southwestern Historical Quarterly.