

Soldiering for Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops

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Review

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Luke, Bob and Smith, John David. *Soldiering For Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops.* John Hopkins University Press, \$19.95 ISBN 9781421413600

How the Creation and Implementation of the US Colored Troops Worked

This book is the third in John Hopkins University Press's *How Things Worked* series and, as the series title suggests, *Soldiering for Freedom* approaches its subject of black Civil War military service as a mechanistic question answered in procedural terms. How did the United States government recruit black troops? How were they trained? How were they equipped and organized? How were they deployed? How did the United States military train officers to command black troops? And yet the bigger and more important question this book asks is that of how black enlistment and mobilization intersected with the "why" of black service (an expression of freedom, political agency, and masculinity) to confront issues of racism and begin the professionalization of military service.

Bob Luke is the author of several books on the history of the Negro League Baseball. His co-author, John David Smith, is the Charles H. Stone Distinguished Professor of American History at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, and author or editor of numerous books on African-Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The authors explain that abolitionists and pro-abolitionist military commanders ignored official United States policy to accept pre-existing black Northern state militia units as well as "contraband" Southern blacks (escaped slaves) into their ranks. Increased pressure from Massachusetts and other states, coupled with the prospect of denying the Confederacy important black labor, led to Congressional passage of the First Confiscation Act (which defined slaves as enemy property to be seized) and President Lincoln's eventual acceptance of black troops as *de jure* soldiers in the Union army.

And yet acceptance *in* the ranks did not guarantee acceptance *by* the ranks. The United States government recruited blacks under the Bureau of Colored Troops, a separate office within the Adjutant General's Office, and mustered black soldiers as federal US Colored Troops (USCT), a separate unit of the US Army. Stereotyped as lazy, unorganized, and ineffectual, black troops received lower pay, poorer quality food and uniforms, and defective weapons and equipment relative to their white counterparts. At the same time, they trained under more rigorous conditions and with higher expectations. Government officials hoped such training would correct alleged racial deficiencies; abolitionist commanders hoped it would disprove prevailing racial stereotype.

This segregation of black troops from white was a double edged sword. The isolation of allegedly inferior black troops within their own military organization made it easier for field commanders to view the role of black troops differently than that of whites, usually relegating the USCT to fatigue duty and suicide missions into enemy lines. And yet the definition of the USCT as a distinctly federal organization allowed the Lincoln administration to provide a level of professionalization lacking in the traditional military as whites applying to a command position in the USCT underwent rigorous screening and even more rigorous training at the nation's first officer's candidate school.

This book is a perfect introduction to its subject for undergraduate students. Interwoven as it is with larger questions of race and masculinity, military organization and professionalism, and nationalism and citizenship students will be introduced to the complexities that surrounded emancipation and the meanings of freedom and the war. For those already familiar with the subject, however, *Soldiering for Freedom* feels half a book. The intersections of race and service that thread the narrative seem underdeveloped while the final chapter detailing major battles involving black troops feels positively rushed. One could surmise that the missing half is Smith's recently published *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2013). This second book discusses the creation of the USCT within the context of presidential and congressional politics but covers much of the same argumentative ground as *Soldiering for Freedom*. The differences between the two works are of degree rather than kind and one wonders why the two were separated as the combined work might have provided a more complete, complex, and satisfying introduction to the topic. Regardless, within the confines of its present series, *Soldiering for Freedom* provides a satisfactory introductory volume on black recruitment and military service in the Civil War.

David Carlson is an assistant professor of history at Troy University. He is the co-author of Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War (with David and Teresa Williams) and is current working on a study of Confederate conscription in Georgia.