

### War Crimes Against Southern Civilians

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## Review

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**Cisco, Walter Brian** *War Crimes Against Southern Civilians*. Pelican Publishing, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9781589804661

### The Hatred that War Spawns

Walter Brian Cisco's latest book is a thorough catalog of the violence federal troops wreaked on parts of the southern homefront during the Civil War. Cisco is also the author of *States Rights Gist: A South Carolina General of the Civil War*, *Taking a Stand: Portraits from the Southern Secession Movement*, *Henry Timrod: A Biography*, and *Wade Hampton: Confederate Warrior, Conservative Statesman*. Based on inductive research of mainly primary and selective secondary sources, Cisco presents his readers with what would appear to be damning evidence that the southern landscape and population were unjustly brutalized in Lincoln's determination to make the Civil War a hard war and arbitrarily punish innocent Southerners who were simply minding their own business. While one cannot deny the magnitude of the violence Cisco catalogs—and it is only as a catalog of violence on the southern homefront that this book is useful—one must also acknowledge the context in which most such war crimes occurred. In this aspect of historical analysis, Cisco's book is sadly lacking. Each and every one of the war crimes Cisco examines is factual. Cisco's failing is not his lack of evidence for the violent event itself, but in the fact that he ignores the broader context or dismisses it as irrelevant. If you are looking for any kind of historical context, you will need to look elsewhere.

Cisco's departure point is clearly that the southern states had the legal right to secede from the Union. Cisco asserts that in withdrawing from the union, they simply removed themselves from a government they did not want (18). This is nothing new. Confederate apologists have long made this argument, often coupling it with the claim that the Confederates were only following in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers. To the contrary, secessionists subverted the work done by the Founding Fathers because they ignored one of the Republic's

organizing principles, the principle of public virtue—sacrificing your own will for the good of the whole. After the election of 1860, the South found itself in the minority. Deprived of the executive branch and a decided minority in the House of Representatives, they spurned the legacy of the Founding Fathers when it failed to work to their advantage and took their toys and went home. They were not fighting for government of the people, by the people, for the people as Cisco asserts, unless by people, he means only white Southerners rather than Americans (19). Though that is not the main point of his book, it is an important one because it establishes Cisco's premise that the Confederacy was the victim and the Union was the aggressor. It ignores the seceded South's role in starting the war by seizing federal properties and funds. It also ignores the perspective from which the federal government was operating: that the Southern states were in rebellion and that such rebellion had to be crushed. Cisco need only read the titles of many of the primary documents he cites. They were labeled by the U.S. War Department, War of the Rebellion, for a reason.

Cisco begins his discussion of Lincoln's hard war (and he does lay it all at his feet), as if it was the first time in history that civilians had become targets in a war. He ignores the many examples of it throughout history around the world, brushing them off by calling them mere lapses (16). More importantly with regard to the American experience, he ignores that it happened right here in North America when the Americans fought for their independence from Great Britain. Either Cisco has forgotten that during the Revolution many states made it policy to seize their property and arrest, try and execute loyalists for treason to the newly-founded United States, or more dangerously, he chooses to ignore it because it does not serve the purpose of his argument. As for Cisco's condemnation of Lincoln specifically as a villain, he makes broad statements and then fails to back them up with real evidence. For example, he asserts regarding violence against civilians that Abraham Lincoln had a reputation as a micromanager so he well knew what was going on and approved (16). Cisco presents no actual evidence that Lincoln approved of war against civilians who were not aiding the Confederate war effort. He simply asserts that he was a micro-manager. To the contrary, what the evidence indicates is that Lincoln approved of waging a hard war against Southern civilians who **ACTIVELY** abetted the Confederate cause. Presenting only the evidence that supports his view of Lincoln as a war criminal and providing no historical context whatsoever, Cisco broadly concludes that Lincoln's embracing of hard war' may have had consequences more far-reaching even than defeat of the South....The

kind of warfare practiced by the Federal military during 1861-65 turned America û and arguably the whole world û back to a darker age (17). Cisco goes on to assert that not only is Lincoln as culpable as Hitler in the genocide of the Jews during World War II (17, he quotes Richard M. Weaver here), but he is also to blame for the more dangerous world that we live in today (20).

Initially, the book concentrates on violence against southern civilians in the hotly-contested border states of Missouri and Tennessee. The evidence Cisco presents clearly implicates federal troops in a concerted war against civilians. At the same time, Cisco fails to even acknowledge the ample evidence that many of these civilians were actively and violently working for the Confederate cause. When Cisco does make note of pro-Confederate violence, he does so with the blanket argument that the Union did it first, and the pro-Confederate forces were simply responding in kind. The evidence, however, does not support this position. Any examination of Champ Ferguson's activities along the Tennessee-Kentucky border reveals that pro-Confederate civilians were no slouches when it came to violence against Union troops. Not surprisingly, Cisco also fails to discuss the Partisan Ranger Act of April 1862 in which Jefferson Davis authorized the creation of guerilla units to harass federal troops in the occupied South. To have done so would have been to acknowledge that the Confederate government and the civilian South shared some of the blame for the Union's hard war policy.

Another glaring omission of context is that Cisco blames all of the violence against Southerners and southern property that occurred in the border states and during Sherman's march to the sea and through the Carolinas on the Union army. To the contrary, Southerners and their property suffered abuse going and coming. Pro-Confederate guerillas who were rarely paid and were thus forced to live off the land as well as retreating Confederate forces were none too kind to the civilian South as many contemporary newspaper accounts and diaries attest. Again, such evidence does not support his argument, so Cisco simply ignores it.

In addition to Cisco's omission of the ample evidence out there that contradicts his argument, he also presents some misinformation as well. To those who argue that bloodshed was necessary to end slavery, Cisco states a patented falsehoodùthat the rest of the world ended slavery without bloodshed (18). On the contrary, throughout Europe and the Americas, violence was the norm in ending slavery and other servile relations. Take for example the cases of Jamaica, Brazil, Paraguay, Cuba, France, Russia, and Prussia. Additionally,

Cisco fails to note the determination of Southerners to hold onto their institution, so much so that they seceded. In the rest of the world, the least violent ends to slavery occurred where the slaveholders themselves were involved in its end. Such was not the case in the United States.

Cisco dedicates the last chapter of his book exclusively to the abuses African Americans suffered at the hands of Union soldiers; a topic he falsely claims has not been explored by other historians (see any number of works by James McPherson, Ira Berlin, and others). The point Cisco attempts to make is not just that such abuses occurred, however. It is the more insidious implication he makes while cataloging the abuse—that the enslaved African Americans in the South would have preferred to have just gone on being enslaved rather than be freed by an army that treated them with such racism. Never mind that the entire institution of southern slavery was based on that same racism. That is irrelevant to Cisco's argument.

There is a wealth of good information in this book detailing the cruelty of the war on the southern homefront. The problem with the book is that Cisco has not approached his topic fairly. Rather, he has set about to write a polemic with a decidedly pro-Confederate slant. There is no gray in Cisco's portrayal of the war. There is only black and white. The message is clear. The Union army and especially their commander in chief were war criminals, and the South was the abused victim who always turned the other cheek when confronted with the hard war. *War Crimes Against Southern Civilians* fits right in line with the lost Cause histories of the early nineteenth century and is part of a disturbing trend that is emerging. Masquerading as legitimate history, pro-Confederate revisionism aimed at an unreconstructed audience pretends to reveal new truths to the reading public that have supposedly been kept from view by so-called liberal academia. Unfortunately, the audience for such works only seems to be growing.

*Dr. Jennifer L. Gross is a professor of American history at Jacksonville State University. Her research and teaching interests include the Civil War and Reconstruction, the American South, Women's History, and the History of Africa. She is currently working on a book assessing the experience of Confederate widowhood in the postbellum South.*