

### Gender and the Sectional Conflict

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## Review

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**Silber, Nina** *Gender and the Sectional Conflict*. University of North Carolina Press, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807832448

### Women and the Coming of the Civil War

It is somewhat ironic that scholarly works about the Civil War often divide along sectional lines. Yet, as Nina Silber contends, there is much insight to be gained by examining the war from a broader comparative perspective. *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* is a slim yet compelling volume, comprising three essays based upon Silber's lectures from the Steven and Janice Brose Distinguished Lecture Series. The resulting book brings together North and South to examine how gender ideologies shaped the ways in which each section understood, participated in, and remembered the Civil War.

Silber opens her study with a fascinating analysis of the sectional foundation of nationalism, arguing that the Confederacy's patriarchal, agrarian based economy leant itself to the creation of an identity based upon a commitment to home and family. "While the nation may have been a cause worth fighting for," she explains, "it meant nothing [to southerners] in the absence of homes and families" (xiv). Placing the home at the heart of the Confederate nationalist imagination served to reinforce existing gender ideologies. In an extension of their role in the plantation economy, Confederate women became sacrificial patriots who prepared their men for war, then managed homes and plantations in their absence, endured physical deprivations borne by the blockade, and suffered through Union occupation, the loss of homes, slaves, and kin—all the while acting as moral guardians of the cause. This intimate connection between home, family and nation, Silber argues, meant that southern women found it difficult to separate out their allegiance to the Confederacy from support for their menfolk. And while southerners fought for "home," northerners fought for "country." The market economy and separation of spheres in the North generated a brand of nationalism that placed the country's survival ahead of the needs of home and

family. "While white southern men identified themselves as the masters of a broadly conceived home, northern men separated the home from the 'outside world'," Silber explains, "and viewed the so-called woman's sphere of home and family as a subordinate sphere" (23).

While northern and southern women may have identified with the cause in different ways, Silber notes that their expressions of patriotism initially fell along traditional lines: sewing for the soldiers, presenting battle flags, and hosting fundraising events for the benefit of the troops. Yet as blockades, battlefields and Union occupation transformed the southern landscape, sacrifice became a hallmark of Confederate patriotism. Southern women did without food and provisions, patched and remodelled their clothes, and dealt with the repercussions of Federal occupation. Silber argues that while northern women were no less dedicated to their cause, their relative degree of material comfort was regarded by many as a sign of nationalist apathy. Fighting against the charge that they had become subsumed in an unpatriotic culture of excess, northern women were compelled to use ideological principles to justify their expressions of allegiance to the nation. With political autonomy came personal responsibility. By connecting their patriotic commitment to country instead of home, northerners began to hold their southern counterparts to the same level of political accountability. Policies—such as General Benjamin Butler's infamous Order Number 28 in occupied New Orleans—suggested that "women would have to take responsibility for those beliefs and that usual assumptions about women's patriotism could not be used as a pretext to let southern women off the hook" (61).

In her final essay, Silber looks at the ways in which the ideology of home and country influenced the memorial movement. Not surprisingly, northern women placed emphasis on celebrating the Union and those who had saved it, and as such, their own contribution to the war effort was often maligned. Removed from the battlefields, the privations, or encounters with enemy soldiers, northern women's wartime stories held none of the drama of the southern narrative. Commitment to nation, moreover, meant that organizations such as the Women's Relief Corps (WAC) concentrated their efforts on assisting veterans and war widows in preference to celebrating their domestic contribution to the war. Acknowledging that northern women had made an ideological commitment to the nation, such organizations opened their doors to all "loyal" Unionists, irrespective of their family's military service record. In the South, the absence of pensions or other forms of governmental assistance allowed southern

women to position themselves at the forefront of the memorial movement. Building monuments, decorating graves, providing veteran assistance, and preserving accounts about their own contribution to the war, southern women reconfigured the conflict into one not about slavery or states rights, but about the importance of fighting for home and family. In doing so, they became “the public face of the Confederacy and its cause in a period when federal occupation made it more difficult for southern white men to preach anything that smacked of sectionalism” (73). Silber concludes that the southern domestic-centred narrative provided both sections with a “moving and inspiring” story of war and reunion, which was “eventually adopted [by northerners] as their version of Civil War history” (78).

*Gender and the Sectional Conflict* is a beautifully conceived book. Silber’s ability to provide a comparative analysis of gender and nationalism—in what constitutes nothing more than an evening’s read—demonstrates her exceptional skill as a historian and her mastery over her material. By allowing northerners and southerners the rare opportunity to meet within the pages of a scholarly work, Silber has enriched our understanding of both sections and refocused the debate about nationalism, war and reunion.

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