

Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War

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Review

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Whites, LeeAnn (ed.) and Long, Alecia P. (ed.). *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War.* Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780807134405

The Relationship Between Women and the Civil War

The eleven essays in this collection examine an under-explored but fascinating aspect of the American Civil War: military occupation and its impact on women on the home front. LeeAnn Whites, a professor of history at the University of Missouri, and Alecia P. Long, an assistant professor of history at Louisiana State University, have gathered pieces that reflect a consistently high level of scholarship, much of which breaks new ground. Fittingly, the editors employ "multiple meanings of occupation" to reveal numerous meanings of resistance to military domination (5). They classify these essays under three general headings: gender and the development of military policy; women and the war at home; and the impact of race, class, and culture on occupied women. The articles cover such topics as New Orleans women who resisted Union occupation; impoverished women who dealt with Confederate soldiers attempting to quell Union support in the South; and embattled northern women who faced the brief but tumultuous occupation by Union and Confederate soldiers during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Without revealing all that is found in this collection, let me share a few examples of this stimulating scholarship. Exploring gender relations under military occupation, Susan Barber and Charles Ritter examine the physical abuse experienced by Confederate women, a subject often ignored in military studies of the war. The assumption has been that rape rarely occurred during the Civil War. Using records from the Office of the Judge Advocate General, Barber and Ritter challenge that supposition. A number of black and white southern women were victims of rape and physical abuse. Several hundred of them filed complaints with the JAG's office, and it sought to uphold the rule of law, handle

their complaints, and see that justice was served. Evidence suggests that the Union did not use rape as an instrument of war. More likely, men who committed such deeds were bored and frustrated soldiers.

Lisa Tendich Frank approaches women and occupation by examining a sacred space: a woman's bedroom. She shows that these rooms became open territory as Union soldiers cut their swath through the South and invaded southern homes. Women had always considered the bedroom off-limits to anyone but intimate acquaintances, but soldiers realized that this was one place where women might hide valuables—under mattresses, in pillows, and beneath undergarments. War unlocked the privacy of this domain. The ransacking of bedrooms in the eyes of Confederate women was an unforgiveable violation of their femininity and heightened their disdain and hatred of the enemy.

For women who experienced occupation first-hand, Cita Cook takes a close look at elite Natchez women. By 1863, Union soldiers occupied the town, which served as regional military headquarters. Calling these Natchez women "pragmatists," Cook shows how they switched allegiances when it served their purpose, swearing loyalty to the Union in order to win favors, at other times smuggling goods to Confederate soldiers. Some sought northern patrons to help protect their property or flirted with soldiers in order to get them to assist with household chores. A few women found Union officers attractive because of their fine manners and honorable behavior.

Another fascinating essay by Leslie Schwalm explores the multiple meanings of how occupation affected slave women. With the outbreak of war, slave owners became even more concerned about their human property. They carefully monitored slaves' activities, concerned that they might rebel or flee. Civilian militias kept a close watch out for potential uprisings. More slave women endured the hardship of family separations as their men were impressed into Confederate service and their own labor became more essential to plantation productivity. When slave women and their children were able to flee to Union lines, they were deemed contraband and now "occupied" by Union soldiers who were often as disdainful toward them as southerners had been. Schwalm shows how the Union tried to find roles for these escaped slave women. The military relocated hundreds of them to the North to address that region's labor shortages and to help meet northern women's cries for domestic help. Eventually the Union used slave women to work on southern plantations that they had seized. Schwalm uncovers the multiple layers of occupation and what that meant to

slave women who had always faced racial and gender discrimination.

Any scholar or general reader who enjoys women's history or the Civil War will find this collection enlightening. One hopes that these authors' essays are merely a precursor to larger studies that will help further elucidate and expand our understanding of Civil War on the home front.

Sally G. McMillen is the Mary Reynolds Babcock Professor and Chair of the History Department at Davidson College. Her most recent book is Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement (Oxford, 2008).