

No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864

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Review

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Slotkin, Richard *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864*. Random House, \$28.00 ISBN 9781400066759

Race and the Battle of the Crater

With the publication of three books on the battle of the Crater in the past two years, one might reasonably ask if there is a need for yet another. These previous treatments (written mainly by non-academic historians) have collectively addressed the tactical complexity of the battle, including the early morning explosion of 8,000 pounds of black powder under a Confederate salient and they have provided an exhaustive account of the close-quarter combat and blood-letting that ensued for close to eight hours on a battlefield that was ripped open by the initial blast. Such a focus is a staple of traditional military history. But as much as we have learned about the nature of combat in the trenches around Petersburg in the summer of 1864 there are key aspects of this battle that have not been sufficiently addressed by the previous literature.

Richard Slotkin's, *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864* picks up where these previous studies fall short. Slotkin is concerned primarily with the racial aspect of this particular battle, as it is one of the few where there were a significant number of black Union soldiers present during the July 30 battle. Understanding how they were used in the attack as well as their own unique experience in battle tells us a great deal about how the war had evolved following the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation and the challenges that would bedevil the nation during Reconstruction and beyond.

Slotkin does an excellent job of uncovering and explaining the challenges that the war unleashed on slavery in the Confederacy as well as deep-seated racism present in both sections. With the recruitment of black soldiers into the United States Army after 1863, northerners were forced to confront questions of what, if anything African Americans might gain as a result of their help in the

preservation of the Union. White Union soldiers were confronted directly by these questions by the summer of 1864. The black soldiers [United States Colored Troops] in the Union Ninth Corp's Fourth Division understood these questions all too well as they prepared for what would be their first major combat experience on July 30. Slotkin's commitment to explaining northern racism in all of its forms is invaluable given our tendency to see the Civil War as a moral contest between freedom and slavery. As Slotkin demonstrates, the free blacks and fugitive slaves who fought with the Fourth Division were not only threatened by a Confederate government that promised to execute them in the event of their capture; they also faced innumerable challenges stemming from very strong feelings of racism among their fellow soldiers and high command.

While there was a great deal of ambivalence in the North over the use of black soldiers, their presence on the battlefields – beginning in 1863 – only served to unify white Southerners and clarify just what was at stake in the war, which was nothing less than the overturning of a slave society based on white supremacy. Slotkin is particularly strong when it comes to understanding the racial dimensions of this battle for the Confederacy. Not only does he analyze the role of slavery in shaping the Confederate war effort, he also explores the racial outlook of the men who would face off against black Union soldiers at the Crater. The reader learns that Brigadier General William Mahone and many of the regiments in his Virginia brigade were raised in areas where the memory of Nat Turner's 1831 slave rebellion were still fresh. Slotkin also points to previous encounters between black Union soldiers and elements of Tar Heel General Robert Hoke's division in the spring of 1864. Slotkin's attention to such encounters is essential to understanding the massacre of large numbers of black Union soldiers in the aftermath of the battle.

While this book is best described as a social history of the battle, Slotkin does not disappoint those looking for a gripping account of the actual battle. He has a solid grasp of the tactical ebb and flow and this is one of the few studies of the battle where the reader is able to make sense of how both sides became engaged over the course of the morning and into the early afternoon. Contrary to popular belief, the Union attack managed to break out of the crater and advance a few hundred yards beyond the Confederate line toward Cemetery Hill around the Blandford Cemetery. Slotkin joins a growing chorus of historians who now believe that the Union assault was sufficiently bogged down by 9:00AM just as the Fourth Division was ordered into battle and right before Mahone's well-known counterattack that pushed many Union attackers back into the area

along the perimeter of the crater. Doing so has resulted in increased attention to the initial defense made by the remnants of South Carolinians under the command of Brigadier General Stephen Elliott, which survived the initial explosion, as well as scattered units from North Carolina who were positioned north of the bombed out area.

No one has gone further than Slotkin in explaining the scale of the massacre of black soldiers. First, Slotkin correctly references the proportion of dead to wounded in the battle in comparison with other Civil War battles. On average, the ratio of wounded to dead was 4.8 to 1. At the Crater, the overall ratio for Union troops was 3.7 to 1, though for black soldiers it was 1.8 to 1. Slotkin's analysis of the tactical ebb and flow of the battle reveals a number of moments where black soldiers were executed both during and following the battle. The first massacre occurred in the trenches north of the Crater by Brigadier General David A. Weisiger's men as part of the counterattack by Mahone's division followed shortly by three Confederate brigades in the area along the northern lobe of the crater. Later in the morning an Alabama brigade massacred an unknown number along the southern lobe of the crater. Once the fighting ceased black prisoners were executed randomly as they proceeded behind Confederate lines.

Understanding why Confederates slaughtered large numbers of Confederates is essential to coming to terms with this battle's significance. Racial hatred and a defense of a slave system are only part of the explanation according to Slotkin. It must also be remembered that Confederates were defending a civilian population in Petersburg, which would have collapsed the distinction between battlefield and home front for the men in the trenches. In addition, Confederates were also carrying out policies enacted by the Confederate government, which reduced the presence of black Union soldiers to one of servile insurrection.

The scale and ferocity of the massacre reflects, in part, the fact that black units constituted part of the furthest Union advance that day. Unfortunately, the Fourth Division's actions, as well as the rest of the contributions of United States Colored Troops during the war, were all but ignored by the turn of the twentieth century – the result of sectional reconciliation and reunion. Not only is Slotkin's study the best overall account of the battle; more importantly, it joins a growing body of literature that addresses some of the most sensitive topics related to our Civil War without which our understanding would be incomplete.

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