

Why Texans Fought in the Civil War

Adrien Ivan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Ivan, Adrien (2010) "Why Texans Fought in the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss2/9>

Review

Ivan, Adrien

Spring 2010

Grear, David Charles *Why Texans Fought in the Civil War*. Texas A&M; University Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-1-60344-172-8

Understanding Texans' Motives during the Civil War

Historians have expressed interest in what motivates men to fight in wars. American Civil War scholars from Bell Irvin Wiley to James McPherson have examined the reasons why Confederate and Union soldiers fought, arguing that they did so for a sense of adventure, an opportunity to fight for what they believed in, or for their fellow men in uniform. In *Why Texans Fought in the Civil War*, historian Charles David Grear has produced an important contribution to the historiography of this question. Drawing from a considerable amount of manuscript material from across Texas, Grear argues that Texans were unique in their reasons for donning the blue or gray uniform.

According to Grear, local and sectional attachments were key deciding factors as to where or why a Texan fought in the war. The longer a Texan lived in the Lone Star State, the more likely he would choose to fight in order to protect his family and home in Texas. Those who had more recently moved into the state were more apt to protect their families that lived east of the Mississippi River. Enlisting soldiers often chose their specific units because the recruiters advertised where they desired to serve. Grear argues, therefore, that the longer-established Texans signed up for the units who declared that they would serve on the western side of the Mississippi, thus giving them an opportunity to thwart any Union invasion of Texas.

Those who were relative newcomers, however, typically joined units who stated that they would fight east of the Mississippi, particularly in the states of the Eastern Theater. The Texas Eighth Cavalry, also known as "Terry's Texas Rangers," for example, was originally slated to fight in Virginia because the men of this unit had family members in eastern states. When the unit arrived in New

Orleans in the fall of 1861, however, it learned that it would be assigned to General Albert Sidney Johnston in Kentucky. According to Gear, the men were disappointed with the transfer because it deprived them of the opportunity to fight in the Eastern Theater. For them, being geographically close to their families, even if they were a state away, was paramount. Local attachment, Gear argues, was a key determinant in the unit's transfer to Johnston. Johnston and the unit's name sake, Colonel Benjamin F. Terry, were friends and owned neighboring plantations in Fort Bend County, Texas, just outside of Houston.

Gear's final chapter covers why immigrants and minorities also served. Although focusing on several ethnic groups, such as Germans, Poles, and Swedes, the author pays most of his attention to why Texas Germans and Hispanics fought in both sides' armies. Gear divides the German population into three groups: those who fought for the Confederacy, those who fought for the Union, and those who remained neutral. In general, the longer a German had lived in Texas, the more likely he fought on the side of the Confederacy, serving in units that fought within the Trans-Mississippi Theater. The Germans who served in Federal units, such as the First Texas Cavalry Regiment, were typically new immigrants, arriving in Texas during the late antebellum period and fleeing the revolutions in Europe in the late 1840s. Finally, the German population in the Texas Hill Country north of San Antonio was in relative isolation and attempted to remain neutral. Confederate and state authorities, however, sought to conscript these men. Some of them would voluntarily enlist, with many of them serving in the home guard units. German unionism would make them a suspect group among Confederate Texans and they were subject to harassment, martial law, and murder.

Nearly 10,000 Mexicans served in the Civil War and fought on both sides of the conflict. Like the rest of the Texas population, the longer a Hispanic Texan had lived in the state, the more likely he would serve in the Confederate Army. Tejanos served in all of the theaters, including under General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Gear argues that those Tejanos that served the Confederacy had a strong attachment to both Texas and southern culture. A minority, twenty-five percent, of Texas's Mexican population served in the Union Army. Their motivation, however, was not because of ideology or unionism but for the opportunity to care for their families through the money and supplies that the Union Army would give them.

Grear has produced a first-rate work on the motivations of Texans to fight in the Civil War. His method follows McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades*, using soldiers' letters and diaries to allow their once-silent voices to be heard. It is a well-written and exhaustively researched book. Those interested in Texas's experience in the Civil War or why men fought in that conflict would be remiss to ignore this work. Finally, *Why Texans Fought in the Civil War* will appeal to both scholars and general readers because it balances the comprehensive research of a scholarly work and readability.

Adrien Ivan is a doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas. He is currently researching the effects of abolition on the planter class of six Texas counties near the Houston area.