

# Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict

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## Review

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**Ural, Susannah J. (ed.)** *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. New York University Press, \$23.00 ISBN 978-0-8147-8570-6

### Exploring Civil War Society

*Civil War Citizens* is a collection of seven essays examining the wartime experiences of groups who lived outside the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant mainstream of mid-nineteenth century America. German and Irish immigrants, Jews, Native Americans, and African Americans are treated by seven different scholars who attempt to describe and interpret the unique perspectives these groups had on the Civil War. Part of the modern effort to illuminate the lives of those at the bottom or on the periphery of past societies, this collection will demonstrate that the Civil War had different meanings for and elicited different hopes in the diverse groups of people who became caught up in it.

In her introduction to the work, Susannah J. Ural (who both edited the collection and contributed one of the essays) identifies two main themes that run through the essays. The first theme concerns the attempt by these outgroups to gain full citizenship rights in return for their contributions to the war effort. The second theme concerns the dual loyalties each group felt to the Union or the Confederacy and their homelands. Like all such collections, the contributions to this one are uneven in their approach, their significance, and their quality, but taken together, they constitute the best collection of essays on this subject available.

The Germans and Irish rightfully receive most of the attention, since they were the largest ethnic groups in Civil War America and they provided more troops than any other similar groups. Stephen D. Engle's "Yankee Dutchman" provides a fine overview of the German experience in the North, but Andrea Mehrlander's piece on Confederate Germans is far less satisfying. The reason

this is so is admitted freely by Ms. Mehrlander: Germans made up only slightly more than one percent of the free population of the Confederate states and because of that they were “all but insignificant politically, militarily, and economically during the American Civil War” (59). Engle argues that the war-time German experience in the North was aimed less at assimilation and more at creating a German identity among diverse immigrants who were bound together only by speaking a common language. Their desire to fight in German units led by German commanders created a German solidarity that spread from the battlefield to the homefront. According to Engle, “The German ethnic consciousness and growth of a German identity grew out of the fear that Germans might lose their ethnic identity during the war” (42).

The Irish are the best represented group in the collection. Professor Ural contributes a rich discussion of the dual loyalties of the Irish in the Union States that draws on her excellent book on the subject, *The Harp and the Eagle*. She demonstrates that the Irish commitment to the Union war effort was affected by their democratic political faith, nativist fears, Irish revolutionary hopes, competition with black labor, gratitude toward the United States, and the lack of appreciation for Irish sacrifices in the war. While some of these influences pulled one way and some the other, as the war went on, the Irish increasingly lost their commitment to the Union war effort. David T. Gleeson, the author of the best book on the Irish in the nineteenth-century South, offers a brief overview of the very different experience of the Confederate Irish. He argues that the Irish in the South believed that the Confederate cause mirrored that of their native land against Britain. Thus, neither their democratic politics nor their Irish interests seem to work against their full commitment to the Confederacy. Their war-time service as well as their later help in formulating the “Lost Cause,” Gleeson maintains, “sealed Irish integration into the post-Civil War South” (148).

Jews had long been integrated into some of the South’s major cities, and Robert N. Rosen’s essay on “The Jewish Confederates” argues that they accepted fully the region’s defense of slavery and its code of honor. As he puts it, “Because Jews accepted Southern customs and mores, Southerners accepted Jews” (159). But since they were far less numerous than even the Germans in the Confederacy, Rosen cannot claim any great impact on the war apart from the actions of a few prominent individuals, such as Judah P. Benjamin, who served in Jefferson Davis’s cabinet.

William McKee Evans does not attempt an overview of "Native Americans in the Civil War" but focuses on the experience of only three groups: The Western Cherokees, the Eastern Cherokees, and the Lumbees of southeastern North Carolina. He attempts to demonstrate how these groups fared as they adopted varying strategies of accommodation or resistance to the dominant culture during the war. He concludes that resistance was the more effective way to cut their losses, largely on the basis of the "empowering legacy" of the Lowry Band of Lumbees who fought the Confederacy and maintained their opposition to southern society during reconstruction and after (207).

Joseph P. Reidy's "The African American Struggle for Citizenship in the Northern United States During the Civil War" may seem less original than some of the other essays because so much has already been written on this subject. His essay focuses on how blacks assumed that "military service would clear a path through discriminatory laws and practices to black male suffrage and civic equality for all African Americans" (231). Though Reidy only discusses a small part of the African-American experience during the war, it is a central part. Unlike most of the other subjects in this collection, however, there is a huge and growing literature available elsewhere that will diminish the reader's interest in this piece.

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