

The Northern Home Front during the Civil War

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Review

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Cimbala, Paul A. and Randall M. Miller. *The Northern Home Front during the Civil War*. Praeger, 2017 \$48.00 ISBN 9780313352904

The Northern home front officially has become its own subfield of the Civil War. We know this because Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller have synthesized much of the work on the topic that has come out over the past twenty-five years or so. *The Northern Home Front during the Civil War* breaks no new ground – it relies almost entirely on secondary sources – but it presents a fine once-over-lightly on many of the issues that confronted the Union during the war.

Most of the topics that the two historians cover reflect the general historiographical trends of the past generation: arguments over the constitutionality of Abraham Lincoln's/the Republicans' decisions; how Americans coped with death on a vast scale; the antiwar Democrats and resistance in general; enlistment and the draft; the mobilization of civilians in terms of female and child labor, taxes, and bond campaigns; and even entertainment. One area where the book offers more information than is often on current historians' radar is the economy, to which the authors devote two of their twelve chapters. This was a wise and welcome editorial decision. As they move through these topics, Cimbala and Miller do a good job of representing various parts of the country, which is not an easy feat.

What comes through clearly, though Cimbala and Miller do not explicitly point this out, are the great responsibilities that women assumed during the war. They worked in factories and the fields that their husbands had left behind. They ran family businesses, mostly successfully, at a time of great economic turmoil and change. They supported relief organizations such as the Christian Commission and Sanitary Commission, and when they chafed too much at the male domination in those national groups, they broke off and ran their own local welfare associations. They sent their husbands and sons off to war with considerable worry but supported the soldiers

anyway because they thought it was their patriotic duty. Patriotism also spurred many women to volunteer as nurses, even though this raised eyebrows among some of their fellow Unionists.

Given that slavery was the fundamental cause of the war, it is curious that African Americans receive such little attention in this volume. They appear, briefly, where one would expect: in discussions about military service, the New York draft riots, and contrabands, but not much elsewhere. Even emancipation shares just a fraction of a chapter along with conscription and dissent – an odd combination, to be sure. The understated presence of blacks in this book may be an oversight on the part of the authors, but one can argue that the problem is with the literature itself. One cannot make the same argument about the Irish or the Radical Republicans, who amounted to a special kind of dissident. The former group receives little attention while the latter gets none at all. On the other hand, Germans are represented well throughout the volume, an indication of the slowly growing interest in their experience.

Readers expecting Cimbala and Miller to detect large patterns from all they have read and construct a meta-argument will be disappointed. The authors are more inclined to present brief summaries of the various aspects of the Northern experience – each of which has its own subhead -- and then move on to the next topic. There is no argument to be found. The result is that *The Northern Home Front* reads more like a textbook aimed at novices to the subject than it is for scholars working in the field. I say this not as an indictment but as an observation. Because it is both fairly thorough and quite brief at 160 pages (without notes, bibliographical essay, or introduction), *The Northern Home Front* would be an excellent book to assign to undergrads in a class on the Northern experience of the war and possibly a Civil War survey.

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