

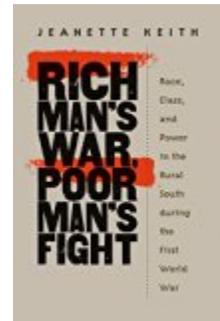
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeanette Keith. *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. viii + 260 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5562-1; \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2897-7.

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The Not-So-Militaristic South in World War I

The subtitle of Jeanette Keith's *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* is somewhat misleading. This is a story of dissent in the southern countryside during World War I, but it is much more than that. In seven chapters and an epilogue, Keith deals with southern anti-militarists before the war, the debate over the declaration of war and the draft, southerners (fathers, farmers, and Christians) who sought exemptions, agrarian protest, draft dodging, the surveillance state in the South, resistance to the war, and postwar conditions.

To understand the rural opposition to a war that urban residents generally supported, it is necessary to develop an extensive context, which Keith provides at length. This background includes the splits between poor and rich as well as urban and rural during the Civil War, and the differing interpretations of that war that developed over the subsequent half century. The context described by Keith also involves considerable anti-government activity, including the little-noted attempt to create a Mexican state in south Texas, in the years between the wars.

On the national political front, the prologue to the war included the Congressional debates, the anti-preparedness movement that attracted a significant portion of the American population, and the differences between progressive agrarians and urban progressives. Even when dissenters found common ground in opposition to the military state and the war, they differed on the

bases for their opposition. Black Americans and pacifists had differing reasons for opposing preparedness, conscription, and war itself.

The United States in 1917 was on the verge of a shift to the predominant urbanism that would be reflected in the 1920 census. Yet the South remained decades removed from that shift and was still predominantly rural. In the second decade of the twentieth century, much in the rural South was virtually unchanged from the 1860s. The poor and independent yeomen still struggled, and they avoided government as much as possible.

Ineffective federal, state, and local government entities lacked the inclination or capability to provide services we now take for granted. Keith notes that the typical rural Southerner in 1917 may well have gotten his first official identification document with his draft card. Families kept records of births in the family Bible, if at all. There were no licenses for driving or hunting, no income tax, and certainly no government handouts. It was easy for a man to disappear, even become someone else. In a social setting where age depended on the memories of neighbors and kin or on a man's physical appearance, a man could easily become too young or too old for the draft.

As Keith demonstrates, the draft was biased against the rural poor. Legislators designed the draft to protect the interests of the dominant white classes, and local officials administered the draft with the same goal in mind. The exemption categories revealed no understand-

ing of the rural economy. Men who would be making more as privates than civilians were drafted. This did not recognize the reality that a poor dirt farmer had little cash income but survived through his crop, home garden, and the occasional slaughtered pig. Further, the \$60.00 a month he earned as a soldier would not provide his wife with the means to maintain the farm in his absence. Poor whites felt the draft more than their poor black counterparts because racism delayed the black draft, and once it was implemented local officials often made sure to protect the black laborers of prominent landowners.

As Keith makes clear, many rural southerners did not identify with the national government. Draft-age men were more concerned about the injustices of the local political structure and the need to remain home and take care of their families. Not surprisingly, the efforts by government and neighbors to motivate rural southerners to wave the flag met little success. The bond drives and propaganda swayed few reluctant farmers. Coercion was more effective but did not create flag-waving patriots.

Keith finds that women responded to the war based on class rather than gender. An effort by the government to survey the war labor skills of Tennessee women met with 90 percent refusal to cooperate. At the same time, upper-class southern women participated in the bond drives and other propaganda efforts, causing resentment among poor men who believed that women should be home and silent.

Keith builds on Theodore Kornweibel's *"Investigate Everything": Federal Efforts to Compel Black Loyalty During World War I* (2002), a book on black loyalty during World War I that broke new ground by examining federal

draft records, and other recent scholarship on the governmental effort to coerce patriotism during the war. By examining the records of local draft boards, Keith takes her research deeper into the draft records than any previous scholar. In addition to local records, she uses Congressional constituent files and the records of the Selective Service and the Bureau of Investigation. She also builds on the standard secondary sources; Keith's bibliography is impressive and complete.

The story Keith tells is remarkably similar to that told by historians of the South during the Civil War. Her arguments are comparable to those of Mark A. Weitz in *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (2005), the excellent study of southern deserters during the Civil War. The two wars were different, but southern rural reaction to each was quite similar: rich man's war, poor man's fight—and the poor man did not particularly like the idea.

The traditional view of the South as a land of gun-toting, flag-waving patriots always in the lead during America's overseas adventures has pretty much gone by the wayside. While this stereotype has some elements of truth to it, the South's reality is much more complex than the stand-and-salute school would indicate. While not the first to point out that the South had its share of dissenters, objectors, and flat-out deserters, Keith, in a surprisingly small volume, provides a good, comprehensive overview of the political and social aspects of dissent. She brings to life another case in the long history of southern dissent against the mainstream southern narrative. In this case, the dissent was against the master American narrative as well.

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