

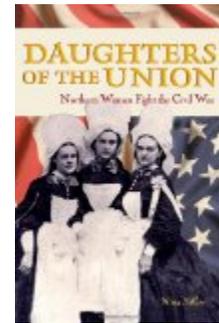
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nina Silber. *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. 284 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01677-4.

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“Beyond the Home and into the Nation”

Those seven words, the last words of *Daughters of the Union*, sum up the thesis of Nina Silber’s work. This book engaged me from the beginning. I was anticipating a recitation of the many noble sacrifices displayed by Northern women during the war. There would have been nothing wrong with another book chronicling the contributions of the many women who suddenly found themselves in the position of breadwinners, entrepreneurs, and heads of households as they gave their men to the gods of war. However, Nina Silber has used the changes in women’s roles during the war to illustrate the changing relationship between women and their emerging public lives, and subsequently their relationship with the federal government. These relationships would become symbiotic and consequently affect all aspects of life in the post-Civil War United States.

At the beginning of the war, Northern women were admonished because they did not appear as patriotic as their Confederate counterparts. Southern women endured the horrors associated with having the war on their doorsteps and in their fields due to the invasion by Union troops. Their continued willingness to sacrifice and contribute to the Confederate war effort somehow spoke of a higher degree of patriotic fervor than Northern women were physically able to offer. Outside of the Gettysburg Campaign in 1863 and the burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania in 1864, there was no widespread devastation of the North, therefore making it difficult to compare the experiences of Northern and Southern women. It is ironic that there was such a sense of competition regard-

ing this issue. (Those of us familiar with the experiences of Germany and England during World War II admire the tenacity of the residents of London and Dusseldorf, but are hardly jealous of their experiences.) Yet when one examines the role of women during the nineteenth century and the emphasis on their established sphere of influence within the home, sacrifice does become an important point of comparison.

Northern soldiers wrote letters from the front describing their experiences and voicing their concerns about fighting the war to preserve the Union. As women read these letters, they began to look beyond the fight to subdue the rebellious states and instead began the process of identifying with the cause of preserving the Union. They began openly to take an interest in newspaper reports of the war and formed opinions regarding the conflict, while early in the war they had been concerned with supplying handmade items to their loved ones. Women soon realized they needed to concern themselves with *all* soldiers who were fighting to preserve the Union. They began to believe that their effort on the home front in support of the soldiers was just as important as the military actions of any regiment in the Union Army. This was, in fact, very true as the war would prove to be a turning point in military administration and the bureaucracy of supply delivery.

As their own husbands and other male relatives were unavailable to advise and provide for them, women turned to the government on both a local and national

level to help them through the war. Women's sphere of influence overflowed in the economic world as they found themselves in the workplace and the marketplace. They became responsible for taking goods to market and becoming a part of the business world. As in all wars when men are taken from their jobs, women fill those positions. The Federal government became the largest employer of women during the war. This was another opportunity for women to involve themselves in the home-front efforts. If women were uncomfortable working outside the acceptable parameters of Victorian America, they involved themselves in organizing sanitary fairs to raise money for the U.S. Sanitary Commission. Women immersed themselves in nursing the wounded and sick soldiers, both in the local hospitals and on the battlefield as well.

All of these activities led many women to ask the government to account for its role in the war. "Haven't we sent our Fathers; our Brothers; our dear Husbands to support you?" (p. 133). Women on the home front believed that "if women lent their support to the government ... did it not then mean that the government must be accountable to its women?" (p. 133). They petitioned elected officials for pensions, financial relief for their families and for the release of their loved ones from military service so they might return home. Yet this

was a government that did not give women the ability to actively participate in the federal machine through the vote. As the government began to review and grant some of these requests, Silber states that it became a crucial moment in the relationship between women and the federal bureaucracy. "The march into civic life also brought a redefinition of women's subordination. Many shifted their dependency from male breadwinners at home to the nation-state and in the process submitted to public officials' scrutiny of their private lives" (p. 281). Women allowed the government to investigate their claims for pensions in order to support themselves and their families. Although the war might seem to have been a great stride for the women's movement, it was, in fact, also another measure of subordination to the male-dominated agencies of the Federal government.

Daughters of the Union is an important tome in the canon of Civil War women's studies. One is able to see the foundation of today's centralized government and its bureaucracy. Dr. Silber brings a fresh perspective to the active participation of Northern women during the war. Her thesis is well documented and should be required reading in Civil War history programs and political science curriculum, in addition to women's studies programs.

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