

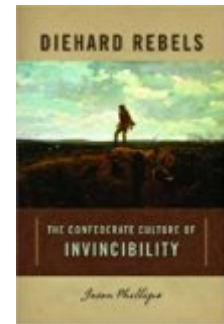
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jason Phillips. *Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. ix + 257 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2836-2.

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A Worm's-Eye View of the Civil War

Diehard Rebels has what every good book should have: a compelling problem. Why on earth did Confederate soldiers fight on until the spring of 1865, in the face of mounting evidence that their cause was doomed? It is all too easy to assume that they were either “insane, delusional, or bombastic,” but Jason Phillips provides a much more persuasive and richly documented answer (p. 4). Soldiers “submitted to unending carnage and squalor,” he says, “because they expected to win” (p. 2). As Phillips observes, we will never properly understand soldiers’ motivations if we view them through the lens of hindsight, with the outcome of the war in mind. It is impossible, of course, for historians completely to disregard such a towering and inescapable fact as the Confederacy’s defeat, but Phillips succeeds to an admirable degree in his effort to approach the second half of the Civil War through the eyes of the soldiers themselves, who saw things from a “worm’s-eye” rather than a “bird’s-eye view” (p. 90). Even at ground level there were signs that the Confederacy was in trouble. But committed Confederate soldiers—“diehard rebels”—simply refused to see them. Instead, as Phillips puts it, they “focused on the thinnest silver linings and chased rainbows until the war’s end” (p. 34).

This overall argument of a “culture of invincibility” contains several major strands, some of which are less novel than others. For example, most readers will be little surprised to hear that Confederate soldiers coped with the travails of war by looking to religion. The first chapter thoroughly and stylishly documents how sol-

diers drew on antebellum evangelicalism to make sense of wartime events. There was a delightful win-win logic to this mindset: if the Confederates won a battle, it must mean they were God’s chosen people deserving of rewards; if they lost, it must mean they were God’s chosen people in need of chastisement. This is a familiar story, but it is well told and is of clear importance to Phillips’ larger project. The same is true of other factors Phillips discusses, such as camaraderie and loyalty to popular leaders and their armies.

Other aspects of *Diehard Rebels* are, however, highly original and constitute important new contributions to the study of Civil War soldiers. This is particularly true of the chapter on rumors and the chapter on perceptions of the enemy. Yankees had not, of course, enjoyed a very positive reputation in the prewar South, but in wartime, and especially the more brutal war of 1863-1865, Confederate soldiers were even more likely to view their enemy as “vandals,” “barbarians,” and “miscegenators.” Such stereotypes took two major forms—ineptitude and barbarity—although the balance shifted towards the latter as the war went on. In addition to providing extensive examples from the writings of Confederate soldiers, Phillips makes good use of cartoons of Abraham Lincoln to show how negative images of the enemy helped steel soldiers’ resolve. Furthermore, here as elsewhere Phillips invokes helpful comparisons—the trench warfare of the twentieth century, for instance, and especially John Dower’s work on the Pacific theater of World War Two—to develop fresh insights into the Confederate experience.[1]

The chapter on rumors (much of which will already be familiar to readers of the *Journal of Southern History*) is equally insightful.[2] Here too, Phillips uses comparisons and theoretical references to provide a framework for his own research. (The absence of Steven Hahn's analysis of rumor as "a field and form of political struggle" in the Civil War-era South is surprising, however.)[3] As Phillips observes, Civil War historians have often acknowledged the pervasiveness of rumors, but have been reluctant to use them as historical evidence. After all, as a profession we prefer to deal with fact rather than fiction—and beyond the occasional wry chuckle at Confederates' gullibility in believing that Grant had died in 1864, say, or that France was about to intervene and save the South, historians have been uncertain as to what to do with Civil War rumors. As Phillips shows, taking rumors seriously offers considerable dividends. Rumors have much to reveal about the way soldiers made sense of the war, about their hopes and strategies for victory, and, most pertinently of all, about this book's animating question of why Confederate soldiers fought as long as they did.

This analysis of rumors represents, as Phillips observes, a valuable addition to a body of scholarship on motivation that has stressed "ideology, camaraderie, masculinity, vengeance, faith in General Lee, and the generational values of the last slave owners" (p. 127). *Diehard Rebels'* attention to rumors moves us beyond existing explanations by revealing the "tangible evidence" that, in the minds of the soldiers themselves, "made continued resistance seem reasonable" (p. 127). To be sure, Phillips does not entirely reject existing interpretations, accepting for instance the importance of comradeship. But he does steer the conversation about motivation in particular directions: first, by correcting an overemphasis on the first waves of volunteers ("Instead of asking what they fought for," he points out, "we must explain why they fought on"[p. 3]); second, by focusing on loyalty and resilience rather than dissent and desertion (the latter is easier to explain, he says, since from our perspective desertion seems to be "a more rational act" [p. 77]); and finally by downplaying factors such as ideology and patriotism (highlighted by James McPherson) and slavery (emphasized by Chandra Manning in a book published too recently for Phillips to have responded to).[4] Some precedent for the approach of *Diehard Rebels* can be found in Gary Gallagher's *The Confederate War*.^[5] Phillips follows Gallagher in rejecting the tendency to view wartime events through the hindsight of Appomattox and in replacing questions about why the Confederacy lost with questions about why Confederates fought

for so long. He has succeeded admirably in building on previous scholarship while forging ahead on a number of fronts.

While *Diehard Rebels* provides a persuasive answer to the problem of why Confederates fought on, it leaves readers to wonder about several corollary questions. Who, exactly, were the "diehard rebels"? It seems clear that for Phillips this term is not only a catchy book title; it also connotes a specific group of people with shared values and behavior. But other than the observation that diehard rebels were disproportionately privileged, there is little indication of their shared characteristics. We can assume that the term refers to those who supported the Confederacy to the end, but loyalties in wartime can be nebulous and shifting, and the boundaries of any such group are rarely fixed or self-evident. It would have been helpful to know something about what the group's members were like. This may have helped answer another remaining question: Why did some Confederate soldiers lose hope while others fought on? Phillips notes that "the trials that broke the will of some soldiers strengthened the spirit of others" (p. 77). This is true. And it seems important to think about the reasons for such differing reactions. Finally, the success with which Phillips demonstrates the strength of diehards' dedication to the Confederate cause begs the question of why they did not fight on, guerilla-style, after the formal surrenders. If they were so committed—if they were diehards in the literal meaning of the word—why did they accept defeat rather than death? Some moved abroad rather than accept Union rule, but they were only a tiny minority. Phillips does argue in his conclusion that diehards never really surrendered at all—that in symbolic and cultural terms they fought on—which at least begins to answer the question, but the problem of how the so-called diehards assimilated themselves to defeat requires more extensive consideration. Of course, the primary focus of this book is the wartime period, and in any case the connections Phillips sketches out between the diehard mentality and postwar Lost Cause thinking are certainly very suggestive.

Diehard Rebels forces a rethinking of existing interpretations of Confederate soldiers' motivations, making very careful use of an impressive range of soldiers' writings to probe the important but often overlooked question of why Confederates continued their fight. Phillips is to be commended for taking these soldiers seriously and for genuinely trying to understand—not to glorify, not to mock, but to understand—their view of the war and the world. The stakes involved are far from trivial; the in-

tensity of these diehards' commitment extended the war and in so doing sealed the fate of hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides who might otherwise have survived.

Notes

[1]. John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

[2]. Jason Phillips, "The Grapevine Telegraph: Rumors and Confederate Persistence," *Journal of Southern History* 72 (2006): 753-788.

[3]. Steven Hahn, "'Extravagant Expectations' of Freedom: Rumour, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865 in the American South," *Past*

and Present 157 (November 1997): 124. See also Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

[4]. James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

[5]. Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

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