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Stephen V. Ash. *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xi + 309 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2223-4.

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When the Yankees Came

Many historians have written about southern civilians during the Civil War, but their work has been limited by several factors. First, they have written from a narrow geographic perspective, generally telling the story of the war in a single state, county, or even smaller community. In a few instances, their perspective has also been limited by a concentration on either race or gender. Also, the vast majority of their studies have failed to concentrate on the war. Because these writers have wished to present their communities in the broadest possible chronological setting, they have allowed the war to be swallowed up by the antebellum and postbellum years. All of these approaches have value, and Stephen Ash has himself previously published a fine monograph about central Tennessee during the decade of the 1860s, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (1988).

But now Ash has gone beyond a single state or community to describe how the civilians of the entire occupied Confederacy reacted to the war and interacted with the occupying Federal forces. More than that, he has described the impressions of the invaders, and shown how and why occupation policy evolved to become more repressive as the war progressed. He correctly maintains that the story of the occupied South is an important one for understanding the war. “[W]hat happened in the invaded sections of the South profoundly influenced Union war policy and thus the war’s outcome,” he submits: “civilian resistance, the failure of political reconstruction, the self-emancipation of slaves, and other events in the occupied districts played a decisive role in turning the conflict from a limited war into a revolution” (p. ix).

All of this is accomplished in a remarkably even-handed manner. Ash is meticulous as he develops his arguments and explores his three stated themes. First, he shows the evolution of northern war aims and policy. Second, he identifies three distinct occupied regions of the South, defined according to the rigor of Federal occupation. Third, he explores an array of internal conflicts that divided southerners as a result of occupation. In all this, Ash is careful not to exceed the boundaries of his evidence, or to over-generalize about motives or reactions. The result is a model of thorough research and clear writing. It is one of the year’s most important books about the war.

Ash’s first theme is unambiguous: Federal occupation policy evolved from conciliation toward punishment, from a conservative posture to a radical policy that “brought destruction, disruption, and suffering to the occupied South” (p. x). The dividing line was the summer of 1862. Before that time, maintains Ash, northern troops angrily entered the South, determined to rejoin the Union and holding a rather harsh (if generally false) impression of the typical rebel. Yet these early invaders inflicted only minor damage on people and property. An important reason for their restraint was the relatively peaceful reception accorded them by southerners. People in occupied communities grumbled, but they generally seemed willing to cooperate with the army. And Ash makes a very important point about the relationship between occupier and occupied: the Federals applied “a sliding scale” in their treatment of civilians. The less threatening an individual or community proved to be, the more leniently were they treated by the Federal army.

The situation did not get heated until the second sum-

mer of the war, when rebel civilians finally generated a resistance movement. Only then did a noticeable segment of occupied communities become spies, smugglers, and guerrillas. Confederate military defeats and a dawning realization of the enormity of occupation explain this belated response, says Ash, which produced a “crisis of faith” (p. 39) for many southerners. Union soldiers, reacting almost as though their trust had been betrayed, struck back with a policy of “hard war” that permitted wanton destruction of property, unbridled confiscation, and arbitrary arrests. However, warns Ash, the Federal reaction never became the sort of “war of extermination” later waged against the Plains Indians. “[T]he conquest of the Confederacy did not degenerate into such wanton massacre,” Ash judges. “Even at their fiercest, the Northern invaders maintained a clear distinction between humane and inhumane war making” (p. 61).

Ash is absolutely correct in his chronological division of Federal policy [stressed also in Mark Grimsley’s recent book, *The Hard Hand of War*, to be reviewed soon on H-Civwar], but a few questions arise. It seems clear that that Federal military setbacks as much as Federal victories required a more vigorous war policy. Abraham Lincoln was also under immense political pressure to make the war more punitive and to expand northern war aims to embrace black emancipation. So perhaps Ash attributes too much influence to Confederate guerrillas and saboteurs (although they definitely played a role) as shapers of Federal policy. He might have cited, for instance, the nearly instantaneous Federal response to the guerrilla threat in Missouri, where measures such as those proposed for the East in the summer of 1862 had been established by local commanders (if not by national policy) many months earlier. Oddly, too, most of Ash’s examples of the harsher policy come from 1863 and 1864, rather than from the initial moment of impact.

Some readers may also question Ash’s hesitancy to join the camp of those historians (and there is an admitted division here) who see the war as a precursor of “total war.” If total war is to be defined only by civilian body count, then the Civil War fails to qualify, for the Union army did not engage in wholesale slaughter. But if the expression is linked to a broadly implemented strategy of exhaustion, designed to crumple civilians’ morale and to deny the Confederate armies material, supplies, and support, then the post-1862 policy seems to fit.

Ash next proceeds to define three types of occupation zones in the South, each with its own characteristics. The “garrisoned towns” experienced the best and

worst aspects of occupation. Their economies suffered, and the people lived amid constant reminders of their subservient status. On the other hand, they enjoyed relative peace and benefited from whatever largess (rations, shelter, medical attention) the occupiers could muster. The “Confederate frontier,” lying just beyond the grasp of advancing Union armies, slipped in and out of Union control. Thus inhabitants lived an anxious existence, never knowing from week to week who might control their future. Here Confederate governments—even organized militia bands—remained more or less intact. A sense of community survived (very important in Ash’s view), and life proceeded very much as it always had.

“No-man’s-land,” lying between the garrisoned towns and the frontier, was rarely occupied by the Federal army, but it was patrolled regularly. It was the least pacified of the three zones, “seething with hostility and guerrilla violence” (p. 99). Physical devastation and material confiscation were nearly complete in no-man’s-land, and physical mobility of the population became virtually impossible. The tricky part in this neat pattern, as Ash readily admits, is that zones frequently shifted, especially between the frontier and no-man’s-land. Still, the divisions provide a useful means by which to analyze and evaluate occupation.

Ash spends most of the rest of the book—roughly 40 percent of the whole—examining the many internal conflicts and fissures generated by the war and occupation. Specifically, he devotes entire chapters to the plights of unionists and blacks and to the impact of war on social classes and families.

Unionists, as one might expect, had a rough time whenever the Union army was not around. In fact, as Ash shows in one of his frequent insights, by 1863, unionists sometimes suffered even when the Union army was nearby. The explanation is that the Federal government gradually lost confidence in southern unionists. Lincoln had hoped that unionists across the South would rise up as they had in western Virginia. It never happened, and Ash suggests reasons. First, Lincoln and other northerners had over-estimated the unionists’ numbers and influence. Second, the Federal army’s presence was rarely large enough to provide enough security for meaningful political activity. Third, and most important, unionist sentiment was conditional, and as Federal policy became more harsh and as the abolition of slavery became a war aim, that sentiment weakened. It is a good analysis, although one wishes that Ash (or anyone) would more thoroughly analyze the “wellsprings of Unionism,”

or why southerners became unionists (Ash does so only briefly on pp. 109-110).

The subject of class conflict within the Confederacy has drawn increased attention over the past decade, as some historians have suggested that class divisions played an important role in undermining the Confederate war effort. Ash contributes to this discussion, although, like most authors who have commented on the subject, he does not conclude that class differences contributed significantly to the ultimate collapse of the Confederacy. Ash believes that Federal occupiers recognized the existence of class divisions in the South (although he also notes that they were pre-disposed to find such divisions), and sought, along with southern unionists, to exploit them by trying to turn “poor whites” against the elites.

Many plain folk suffered during the war, sometimes as a result of actions (conscription, confiscation) taken by the Confederate government. Many fled their homes, and some 80,000 people, estimates Ash, fled not away from the Federals but into Union lines. Ash documents several efforts by southern rabble rousers to incite a social revolution, the equivalent of black emancipation. But nothing happened. “Of all the struggles that convulsed

the occupied South,” Ash concludes, “–including those of Rebels versus Yankees, secessionists versus Unionists, and whites versus blacks–the struggle of the propertied versus the propertyless was the most restrained” (p. 193). Far more important for understanding the collapse of the Confederacy is the war-weariness of the South, the “apparent endlessness of the war” (p. 215).

When the Yankees Came deserves to be widely read. Indeed, Ash’s wonderful book has made it impossible for historians to comment on large portions of the Confederate home front without reference to his insights, evaluations, and conclusions. He has changed the way in which we view the Confederacy. If he has not answered all of our questions about civilian reaction to the war, he has certainly responded to a good many of them, and his work is sprinkled with intriguing suggestions about where to find many other answers.

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