

# H-Net Reviews

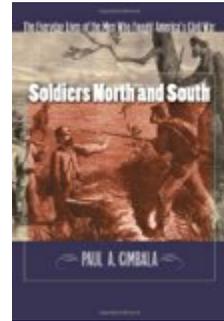
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul A. Cimbala. *Soldiers North and South: The Everyday Experiences of the Men Who Fought America's Civil War*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010. xix + 264 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3392-2.

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Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



## Surveying the Common Soldier of the Civil War

Historian Paul A. Cimbala's book *Soldiers North and South* offers an unbelievable amount of information on the life of the common soldier. Carrying on the legacy of Bell I. Wiley and Reid Mitchell, Cimbala's book examines the experiences of common soldiers in the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War. The book is careful to consider many factors, such as religion, psychology, battle, and physical effects of the war on the soldiers. The book serves as a survey of the subject, and includes many of the important studies completed in the last few decades.

*Soldiers North and South* considers all soldiers and what deeply motivated them throughout the course of the war. In an effort to understand those soldiers, Cimbala explains, "Most Civil War soldiers ... deserve honorable consideration because they put aside their civilian lives and assumed the burdens of their respective causes even if such action meant sacrificing their immediate comfort and security and that of their families" (p. ix). The service and sacrifices were irrational, so this book is an attempt to understand those decisions.

Cimbala begins the book with a chapter that explains the overall events of the Civil War. It is a traditional military and political interpretation of the war to set the stage for the rest of the book, which obviously focuses on the common soldiers. The following chapters focus on a variety of major themes, including enlistment, combat, coping with loss, and ultimately end with lives of the vet-

erans. Taking into consideration the experiences of over a million Americans, Cimbala's book does a remarkable job of generalizing a diverse experience.

The fifth chapter provides a close look at the daily life of Civil War soldiers. The chapter examines the intersection of multiple forces within the soldier's life such as religion, home community, and interactions with other soldiers. Here Cimbala addresses the variety of negative influences on the soldiers, such as pornography and alcohol, as well as the positive, through the connections with those at home. This is a particularly strong chapter because it preserves the humanity of the soldiers. Rather than focusing on them as casualties or numbers, this chapter brings them to life. Cimbala emphasizes the civilizing relationships on the home front that prevented the men from devolving into pure military brutes.

For chapters 6 and 7 on the psychology of the soldier, Cimbala surprisingly does not utilize the work of Gerald Lindermann and Earl Hess, two of the premier historians of Civil War battle psychology. Instead, Cimbala notes several postwar accounts written by veterans. This section of the book is interesting because it highlights the trials of the soldiers beyond the muddy marches and privations of war. The horror of battle ripped at their very being. This emotional section of the book encourages historians to delve into yet a deeper level of the soldiers' experience.

In chapter 8, Cimbala writes about soldiers after the

battle. For many, that experience meant wandering in and out of hospitals. For others, it meant coping with the loss of comrades. It caused many, if not all, to question their reasons for being in the ranks at all. As the war progressed and the racial elements of abolition became more prominent, soldiers expressed opinions on slavery and African Americans. Cimbala writes regarding the soldiers' purpose in the war and their questioning of racial causes for the war, "There remained white Union soldiers who held racist view or felt no kindness toward blacks, but more and more of them understood that the institution of slavery polluted republican government" (p. 191). Viewing the war as an opportunity to save the United States government, Union soldiers fought on regardless of their racial outlook.

The strength of this work is its vast inclusiveness. Quoting from soldiers from the Union and Confederate armies throughout the four years of the war, the book reflects impressive research. The words of the soldiers themselves enrich the text and capture the vibrancy of the people who fought the Civil War. It seems a bit unclear how Cimbala chose some letter collections and diaries over others, as he clearly could not have read them all.

Cimbala's analysis is best when pushing against the traditional interpretations of the Civil War, specifically that of romanticization. For example, he writes regarding the high number of desertions in Union and Confed-

erate armies, "Even when taking into account errors and multiple acts of desertion by individuals, the figures indicate a serious challenge to both governments' efforts to keep up the fighting strengths of their armies" (p. 54). In other words, the war was not as popular and romantic as often assumed. This type of analysis leaves readers with more questions than answers and makes the book much stronger overall.

As one might expect, a study of this magnitude cannot possibly address every aspect of the war. Cimbala's efforts are laudable with respect to the experiences of the major armies of the Union and Confederacy. The book wisely includes African American, immigrant, and unconventional soldiers (engineers and pioneers). However, there is little mention of the thousands of irregular soldiers in the east and the west. The text makes little reference to those on garrison and guard duty, the realities of the war for thousands of soldiers in blue and gray.

This minor point aside, Cimbala's book makes a welcome addition to the literature on the common soldier of the Civil War. Though the research presented here does not go above and beyond that of other soldiers' studies, it serves as a much-needed synthesis. Scholars may utilize this book as a benchmark for further investigation. Historians now may deconstruct Cimbala's major themes and investigate them more deeply. The book is a useful broad overview that will find a fitting place on the shelves of avid Civil War readers among the general public.

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