

Judith Ann Giesberg. *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000. xiv + 239 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55553-434-9.



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"The Missing Link": Women and Civil War Benevolence

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In her study of the Civil War-era U.S. Sanitary Commission (USSC), Judith Giesberg argues that women's work with the expansive philanthropic organization not only cultivated a profound sense of politicization for its laborers, but was also the precursor to reform movements of the Progressive Age and the twentieth century. In her preface, Giesberg immediately departs from traditional portrayals of women's Civil War work by repudiating the image of women as somehow either archetypally angelic or biologically predisposed to nursing the sick and wounded. (xi) These traditional historiographic images, while at times offering an accurate portrayal of women who did persevere in medical scenarios, obscures a more complete portrait of women who worked in myriad other service areas during the Civil War. Giesberg promises (and delivers) a gendered examination of wartime volunteering, and she does so without reducing her

nineteenth-century characters (both men and women) to mere caricatures.

Giesberg's thesis is rooted in her scrutiny of other scholarly examinations of the USSC and its workers. Although she credits George Frederickson's *The Inner Civil War* [1] as the most comprehensive inquiry into the commission, Giesberg uses Frederickson's accusations of postwar classism on the part of middle-class men and women volunteers as her jumping off point for her own claim that USSC workers must be necessarily not be lumped together according to their class only. Instead, Giesberg posits, a gendered analysis is more appropriate, since elite and middle-class men and women who had participated in the USSC had widely varying agendas following the war. Aligning her hypotheses more closely to that of historians Rejean Attie [2] and Lori Ginzberg [3], Giesberg insists that women's wartime commitment to the USSC was actually a crucial period in developing a tradition of reform work that began with local activism in the first part of the century and would culminate in the establishment of organiza-

tions like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) as the twentieth century approached. Thus, Giesberg contends, women workers were "part of a transitional political culture" (12) which resulted in the roots of suffrage, labor, and moral reform movements.

Giesberg offers seven well-written, highly engaging chapters as she moves through the source material for her argument. In addition to the massive collection of USSC papers (located at the New York Public Library) and the papers detailing the work of the Woman's Central Association of Relief (the largest precursor to the commission), Giesberg relies heavily upon the personal papers of her main cast of characters, including Louisa Lee Schuyler, Abigail Williams May, Dorothea Dix, Henry Bellows, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Katharine Wormeley. Less "notable" figures are present throughout the work, but Giesberg utilizes the diaries and letters of USSC leaders to gain insight into the gendered workings of the main branch offices and the day-to-day lives of their workers.

If there is one criticism of this work, it is that the "story" is told primarily through the eyes of an elite squad of men and women managers, and this seems to have the effect of silencing the voices of working class and African-American women (and men) who also participated in local aid relief societies in their towns across the war-torn country. It is important to note, however, that Giesberg was limited by both the scarcity of sources written by African-Americans as well as her own thesis, which only promises to provide evidence garnered from the most talented and celebrated of these women leaders. On the other hand, one must wonder about the role of racial prejudice in particular, especially at a time in the nation's history when skin color was one of the most important dividers of Americans - although black women were routinely turned away from volunteer work at many USSC branches, yet Giesberg does not explore this discrimination.

Despite the absence of any substantive race analysis, Giesberg's carefully researched work is a welcome addition for scholars of women, the Civil War, philanthropy, and gender. Perhaps more importantly, Giesberg provides those interested in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Progressivism and reform movements with a long-awaited "prologue" for the seemingly sudden activism of women in these crusades. USSC volunteers emerged from their wartime work with a broader sense of the ways in which their manipulation of gender and class might best suit the outcomes of their chosen battles, including suffrage and temperance. As Giesberg demonstrates, women's USSC wartime work cannot be understood within the limiting confines of the Civil War period, but as a stepping stone to the aphasic emergence of women's political culture in American history.

Notes:

[1]. George Frederickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

[2]. Jeanie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[3]. Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

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