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Ian Michael Spurgeon’s history of the First Kansas Colored Infantry, *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom*, is a story of firsts: the first Union regiment during the American Civil War to be composed entirely of African Americans recruited in the North, and the first African American regiment to face and defeat Confederate forces in battle. Citing the regiment’s sterling combat record, which impressed even the most skeptical of contemporary white observers, Spurgeon argues that the First Kansas Colored (as opposed to the cinematically famous Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry) paved the way for African American military service during and after the Civil War.[1]

Spurgeon organizes *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom* chronologically. Chapter 1 provides a short (twelve pages) overview of the causes and consequences of “Bleeding Kansas.” Chapter 2 introduces readers to the enigmatic Free State firebrand, Kansas senator James H. Lane, whose advocacy on behalf of African American military service and liberal interpretation of federal recruitment policies proved critical to the formation of the First Kansas Colored. Chapters 3 and 4 describe initial, halting efforts to recruit and train soldiers for the regiment in the face of local white resistance and the federal government’s hesitance to authorize, pay, or supply the unit. Chapter 5 follows the regiment on its first foray into combat, the victory at Island Mound, Missouri (October 29, 1862), which took place three months before the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry began recruiting. Chapters 6 and 7 tell of the regiment’s struggle to maintain unit cohesion during the winter of 1862-63. Chapters 8 through 14 provide a masterful retelling of the regiment’s exploits in the Trans-Mississippi theater of operations. Chapter 15 sees the unit assigned to a noncombat role during the final year of the war. A short epilogue makes skillful use of federal pension records to offer a glimpse into the soldiers’ postwar lives.

*Soldiers in the Army of Freedom* is very much a military history. Those interested in the regiment’s combat experiences will be pleased by Spurgeon’s (often graphic) narrative of the fighting at Island Mound, Cabin Creek, Honey Creek, Poison Spring, Flat Rock Creek, as well as the counterguerilla operations that took the unit into western Missouri. They will also appreciate his attention to fine details: the evolution of the regiment’s uniforms and equipment; the wounds caused by minie balls and artillery shells; the sights and sounds of the battlefield (compiled using first-person accounts); and the impact that heat, cold, mud, insects, and disease had on the men’s morale and physical well-being. A series of excellent battle and campaign maps provide needed and adequate support.

And yet *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom* offers more than guns and trumpets. Throughout the work, Spurgeon strikes a deft balance between big-picture narrative and bottom-up social analysis. For example, chapter 3 describes the racialized political tensions that brought conservative white Kansans into conflict with Senator James Lane and other proponents of African American military service. But the chapter also recounts the harrowing personal stories of fugitive slaves who fled to Kansas and enlisted (by choice or by force) in the First Kansas Colored. Likewise, chapter 7 begins by noting that President
Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation authorized the organization of African American military units. It then shifts focus to Kansas, revealing that the proclamation did little, at least in the short run, to silence white critics or to guarantee equal treatment for the soldiers of the First Kansas Colored.

The book does suffer from a series of curious factual omissions. For example, Spurgeon’s otherwise excellent summary of the sack of Osceola, Missouri (September 23, 1861), says nothing about General James Lane’s decision to order the summary execution of nine men suspected of aiding secessionist guerillas. He also fails to mention Confederate guerilla William Clarke Quantrill’s murderous 1863 raid on Lawrence, Kansas, which resulted in the deaths of 150 pro-Union men and boys, or Union general Thomas Ewing Jr.’s retaliatory General Orders No. 11, which forced the residents of four western Missouri counties to evacuate their homes during the winter of 1863-64. To be fair, the First Kansas Colored took no part in either action. Yet both events contributed to the spirit of malevolence that Spurgeon rightly identifies as central to the Trans-Mississippi conflict and deserve at least a mention.[2]

This is much ado about nothing. Spurgeon’s goal is to recover the story of the Second Kansas Colored Infantry from undeserved obscurity. This he more than accomplishes. Soldiers in the Army of Freedom is well researched and elegantly written. It is a timely addition to the growing body of literature that focuses on African Americans’ Civil War experiences.

Notes

[2]. For more on Quantrill’s Raid and Ewing’s General Orders No. 11, see Jay Monaghan, Civil War on the Western Border, 1854-1865 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 274-289.

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