



**Christopher M. Rein.** *Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State.* Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019. 312 pp. \$47.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-7066-3.

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**Published on** H-CivWar (September, 2019)

**Commissioned by** G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

### **Untitled [Clayton Butler on *Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State*]**

Christopher M. Rein has written a well-researched book on the Civil War in Alabama in which he inverts the traditional narrative perspective away from the state's Confederates and toward its African American and white Unionist combatants. It succeeds in shedding light on long-neglected aspects of the conflict in the heart of the rebellion and presents a compelling case that the Union soldiers that Alabama mustered between 1862 and 1865, both white and black, hastened the collapse of the Confederacy and made a material contribution to Union victory. Rein's work advocates understanding the Civil War as a "struggle for resources," an analytic framework that yields numerous valuable insights but at times becomes strained and loses its explanatory power (p. 7). An environmental and military history in line with such recent works as Kathryn Shively Meier's *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* (2013), *Alabamians in Blue* is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature, but readers interested in intensive political or cultural analysis may be left wanting more.

The book proceeds chronologically, beginning millions of years ago with a thorough geological

history of the state that serves as a foundation for Rein's subsequent examination of how environmental factors influenced settlement and development. The geography of Alabama had a marked effect on the evolution of the state's culture in the nineteenth century, as distinct regions characterized by different economic interests and demographic conditions crystallized in ways that shaped the course of its political history. By the time of the secession crisis, which begins the second chapter, Rein describes Alabama as deeply divided. In general, voters in the Black Belt region—named for its rich soil and home to the vast majority of both the state's wealthy planters and its enslaved people—favored immediate secession, while those in the whiter and poorer upcountry areas, who were generally less attached to slavery, did not. The state's eventual white Unionists clustered in the northern part of the state, and thus, previous studies on the subject have tended to focus almost exclusively on those areas, something Rein commendably avoids throughout his book. He gives space to Unionists in the Wiregrass and Panhandle regions, for example, many of whom eventually enlisted in Florida units. In spite of strong disagreement between the sections over the

appropriate course of action, Alabama voted to leave the Union in January 1862. At that point, life for the state's anti-Confederate residents quickly became dire.

Rein's use of the struggle over resources as an analytical lens for understanding Alabamians' behavior and loyalty achieves its greatest success in his descriptions of the experiences of ordinary Unionists early in the war. For most of his subjects, the onset of the conflict thrust them into a hand-to-mouth sort of existence. How they would survive on a daily basis was never far from the forefront of their thinking, and Rein does well to remind his readers of this. He argues convincingly that elemental physical factors initially drove Alabama Unionists into federal lines for support. The occurrence of drought and poor crop yields, for example, which Rein treats as central in his narrative, undoubtedly affected the course of the war and shaped the experiences and decision-making of those Alabamians who lived through it in ways previous scholars have ignored.

In other respects, however, the author's use of "resources"—which becomes a constant refrain throughout the book—as a method of conceptualization has some drawbacks. Rein uses it as a sort of all-encompassing explanation for behavior, but it does not neatly map on to all cases. Regarding African Americans, for example, he argues that "control of this resource [their own labor] ... motivated slaves to escape," which risks reducing black Alabamians' struggle for freedom to a sort of mechanical desire to retain the profits generated by their work and withhold them from the Confederacy (p. 28). Rein writes with a clear sympathy for his African American subjects, but the complex springs of Unionism occasionally require a more abstract, and not strictly economic or utilitarian, explanation.

The rest of *Alabamians in Blue* covers each of the successive years of the war in a dedicated chapter. Rein's expert handling of military matters represents a particular strength. Cavalry opera-

tions, such as Abel D. Streight's Raid of 1863, Lovell H. Rousseau's Raid of 1864, and James H. Wilson's Raid of 1865, receive comprehensive treatment, and Rein highlights Alabama Unionists' role in the Atlanta Campaign and Sherman's March to the Sea and through the Carolinas. He also impressively tracks the service of United States Colored Troops (USCT) units in which black Alabamians served over the course of the conflict, including the 1865 campaign against Mobile and the infamous Fort Pillow Massacre. His descriptions of army strategy, logistics, and mobilization are meticulous and thorough. Rein also devotes considerable space to Alabama Unionists' scouting, recruiting, and auxiliary duties, arguing that knowledge of their home state contributed substantially to Union success.

Much of the book's political and cultural analysis, however, raises more questions than it answers. Rein's attempts to draw connections between the Civil War era and twentieth-century politics toward the end of his study are jarring because they rely on a possible misdiagnosis of the nature of the cooperation between white and black Alabamians during the conflict. When Rein writes that during the Civil War, white and black Alabamians' "common cause trumped any racial divide," for example, he may be overstating his case (p. 52). Considerable evidence does exist that enslaved people in Alabama, recognizing by 1862 that the enemy of their enemy was their friend, aided white Unionist refugees over the course of the conflict. Evidence for the inverse situation, however—Unionists going out of their way to aid African Americans—seems conspicuously scarce. White Alabama Unionists of the sort profiled by Rein did not derive their motivation principally from sympathy for enslaved people but instead from an abiding antipathy toward secessionist slaveholders. Their efforts in the cause of the Union tolerated, rather than championed, the recruitment and enlistment of African American soldiers. This disposition helps explain why the tenuous alliance of scalawags and freedmen eventual-

ly collapsed during Reconstruction.[1] Though black and white Unionists fought on the same side during the Civil War, their concurrent service did little to alter the prevailing racism of white Alabamians toward black Alabamians or build any lasting bridges between them.

*Alabamians in Blue* breaks new ground in treating the Union military service of white and black Alabamians in a holistic way, and it represents a step forward in scholarly understandings of the Civil War in both the state and the region. Rein traces the experiences and exploits of Alabamians who donned the Union blue—particularly African Americans—in a way that has few, if any, scholarly precedents. For readers interested in environmental and military history, this book counts as a solid and original addition to previous scholarship and represents a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

#### Note

[1]. For more on Union soldiers' ambivalence regarding the recruitment and deployment of African American soldiers, see Kristopher A. Teters, *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). For more on the interactions between African Americans and white Alabama Unionists, see Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); and Michael W. Fitzgerald, "Radical Republicanism White Yeomanry during Alabama Reconstruction, 1865-1868," *The Journal of Southern History* 54, no. 4 (November 1988): 565-96.

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**Citation:** Clayton J. Butler. Review of Rein, Christopher M. *Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2019.

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