



Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State by Christopher M. Rein.

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Alabamians in Blue incorporates battlefield history with the wider scholarly literature on Civil War-era Alabama. Military historian Christopher Rein (US Army Combat Studies Inst.) is well read in the relevant literature and has found an underexplored niche subject: the broader implications of whites and blacks fighting together in the Union army. His work is based on careful research in manuscript repositories across the nation, including the excellent Grenville Dodge collection.¹ He has gone far beyond such exhaustively mined standard sources as the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*.

Rein concentrates on eight Union black regiments, one white cavalry regiment, and smaller units raised in Alabama or composed of refugees from the state. All together, Alabama contributed 7,500 troops to the Federal army, enough to help “fatally undermine Confederate efforts” (1) by enhancing Federal control and intelligence and undermining the institution of slavery itself. The book’s purview extends to the recruitment of black and white escapees in Mississippi, Tennessee, and elsewhere, as well as their military service throughout the South. Rein’s story mostly unfolds in the northern part of Alabama, but he also examines the often overlooked southeastern corner of the state, where refugees fleeing to the Florida coast joined Union regiments in considerable numbers.

Though the author touches on irregular warfare, he focuses on the history of conventional battles and argues “for the continuing relevance and importance of military operations in warfare” (5). But this is problematic, since the war’s big battles and campaigns mostly bypassed Alabama. Hence, the political history of the state within the Confederacy assumes greater relative importance, as should guerrilla conflict. The state long remained understudied because seemingly little of decisive consequence happened there. For that reason, Rein’s battlefield study and unique investigation of black and southern white Union soldiers are welcome contributions.

Rein sees his topic as anticipating the biracial alliance that transformed the South during the civil rights era. This alliance of African Americans and smaller numbers of native whites today “holds promise for sparking continued social progress and progressive change in Alabama” (4).

The book is not, of course, an exercise in Lost Cause mythology; instead, it puts forward a counternarrative that might inspire hopes for a different Alabama now. This presentist tone of his narrative should not be allowed to obscure how meticulous a work of Civil War history Rein has produced. The military story moves along briskly and features discerning and lucid explanations of broad strategic moves. Rein also clears up (in a valuable appendix) the confusion caused by endless redesignations and renumberings of black units. Almost nothing has been written about Alabama’s black regiments raised mostly from escaped slaves, so his attention to the dissolution of slavery and its consequences is welcome. The author cautions his readers that the surviving

1. At the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines.

source material “unfortunately skews coverage toward the white troops” (4), even though much larger numbers of black Alabamians served the Union.

Rein does not altogether elide the occasional racial tensions between blacks and whites in the army, but overall he portrays them as consciously engaged in a common enterprise. He points out that a straw poll showed that 94 percent of the white First Alabama Cavalry backed Lincoln’s reelection, which indicates an openness to emancipation at least (175). Rein could have done more to buttress this insight. The evidence shows that the white Alabama Union troops were mostly refugees from overwhelmingly white enclaves in the poorest mountain areas of northern Alabama, where there was strong opposition to immediate secession. Draft evasion was common and the process of escape further impoverished future volunteers. The animosity toward the Confederacy of these alienated and antagonized refugees undercut established racial views in favor of a complete transformation of southern society. After the war, many white Union veterans endorsed confiscation proposals and kept voting Union and then Republican well into the Reconstruction era.

The author relies heavily on Margaret Storey’s excellent study² of the cooperative interaction between the Tennessee Valley’s dissident Unionist masters and their enslaved people. But most of the Alabamian troops he describes were unlike the Alabamians Storey has studied, that is, planter dissenters resentful of the secessionist destruction of slavery. Given the pattern of enlistment from beyond the mountains, the First Alabama’s record is more a straightforward tale of lower-class and mountain-region resentments intensified by secession and war. Their grievances outweighed their previous proslavery views and indeed made them antislavery. That story of the broad issue of conflicting racial attitudes should have been front and center, and not scattered as the episodes of racial conflict and coexistence that appear throughout the text. This would have better fit the book’s insightful discussions of future Reconstruction political figures who fought over civil rights, like the quarreling future Republican Governor William H. Smith and US Senator George Spencer

Rein makes some unorthodox narrative choices. His book starts a long way back (ca. 10,000 BC!) with human migrations across the Bering Strait. Describing the geography of Alabama makes sense, because it pertains to what occurred during the war. The same cannot be said for the inclusion of a ten-page discussion of the Mound-Builder cultures, Hernando de Soto, and New France before getting to the start of the nineteenth-century flood of white settlement (15–25). Rein’s account of the territorial controversy does not explain its bearing on the themes he will develop later.

This is a problem, because political alignments more germane to Rein’s story get short shrift. Although the author is well aware of the longstanding north Alabama Jacksonian Democratic preferences, since future Unionist strongholds shared them, his control of the subject is imperfect (35). For example, he contends that, in 1860, “there ... [was a] strong correlation between a lack of support for Breckinridge ... and the large number of counties that eventually sent large numbers of white soldiers into the Union army” (38). This unattested claim is mistaken.³ The southern Democratic candidate John Breckinridge swept the very mountain regions of north central Alabama that provided the bulk of white Union soldiers. Slow to realize secession was just weeks away, these men stuck with their traditional partisan Democrat alignment. The broader point is

2. *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2004).

3. See the map at *Wikipedia*, s.v. “1860 United States presidential election.”

that prevailing Jacksonian preferences determined voting patterns, until the secession vote turned existing partisan behaviors upside down.

In July 2019, Tennessee's Republican governor, Bill Lee, announced a "Nathan Bedford Forrest Day,"⁴ to commemorate the military feats of a figurehead of the Ku Klux Klan and commander of the Confederate troops at Fort Pillow who committed the Civil War's most notorious racial atrocity. Rein points out that the attack on Fort Pillow and surrounding outposts manned by substantially black Alabama troops did nothing to stop Sherman's campaign against Atlanta (146–47). He credits these Union troops, among others, with having "exposed" Forrest's "shortcomings as a military commander" (2). That is, attacking small detachments of black garrison troops distracted Forrest from more pressing duties in the aftermath of the Atlanta campaign. Thus, the garrison duty and smaller battles fought by Rein's subjects had real military significance. This is of particular interest at this moment in time. I am not sure Rein makes his case for Forrest's drawbacks as battlefield commander, but he certainly has evidence to point to.

Alabamians in Blue is a well researched, reasonable study of a forgotten aspect of the Civil War. It should command the attention of students and scholars of the conflict alike.

4. See Nora Eckart, "Tennessee Governor Faces Backlash for Honoring Confederate General and KKK Leader," *NPR* (14 July 2019) – available online.