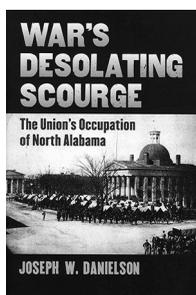


THE CIVIL WAR

War's Desolating Scourge: The Union's Occupation of North Alabama

By Joseph W. Danielson

Reviewed by Robert H. Larson, Ph.D., Professor of History, Lycoming College



Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012

234 pages

\$34.95

The origins of the Civil War as a total war has long been identified solely with William T. Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas in 1864-65. Recently, however, some historians have challenged this view, arguing instead that the shift towards total war began far earlier. In his book *The Hard Hand of War*, Mark Grimsley argues that McClellan's defeat in the Peninsula Campaign in the summer of 1862 marked the turning point when Northern opinion became convinced that only a harsh policy toward Southern civilians would restore the Union. Charles Royster's *The Destructive War* goes back even further, claiming that calls for the absolute destruction of the enemy appeared in both the North and South from the very beginning of the conflict. In this latest contribution to the subject, *War's Desolating Scourge*, Joseph W. Danielson examines the experience of the sixteen counties of northern Alabama occupied by Union forces for much of the war and concludes that, at least for this area, local resistance by pro-Confederate civilians led Union forces to adopt a "hard war" approach to the conflict.

Union forces first entered northern Alabama in April 1862 when 7,000 troops of General Ormsby Mitchell's 3rd Division of the Army of the Ohio entered Huntsville, Alabama, and proceeded to extend their authority over the entire region. They were under explicit orders from the commanding general of the Army of the Ohio, Don Carlos Buell, to avoid any action against Southern property or civilians in the hope of winning over the local population with a policy of conciliation. The policy lasted less than a month. The people of northern Alabama were overwhelmingly devoted to the cause of secession and not at all interested in reconciling with the North. Almost immediately, they began to engage in acts of resistance, ranging from snubs and insults to outright attacks on Union soldiers and supply trains. The Union troops responded with arrests of community leaders, censorship, the destruction of private homes in the vicinity of the attacks, and even the confiscation of food and cotton. The struggle only ended when Braxton Bragg invaded Kentucky in the summer of 1862, and Buell was forced to evacuate Alabama and follow him. According to Danielson, this five-month occupation neither dampened the support of northern Alabamans for the Confederate cause nor led them to doubt that it would be victorious.

For the next seven months, the region remained peaceful, but in April 1863 Union cavalry began to launch raids into northern Alabama from bases in Tennessee and the following fall occupied the region once again. This time their actions were guided by a new War Department directive commonly known as the Lieberman Code which allowed for direct action against civilians if military necessity warranted it. It was, in fact, much like Ormsby Mitchell's policy the previous year. This second occupation was far harsher than the first and slowly but steadily—just

as “a continued dropping of water will wear away a rock”—wore down the Alabamans’ enthusiasm for independence. By 1865, the region was reduced to a wasteland, many civilians were forced to rely on the Union occupiers for food or else starve, and acts of resistance to the Union occupation “dramatically decreased.” The strength of the rebellion had been broken, but its spirit had not. Alabamans recognized that secession had failed and that slavery was over, but they remained fiercely determined to protect white supremacy and willingly used violence and terror to achieve it.

Detailed regional studies can perform a valuable function in illuminating and giving depth to broader trends. Danielson has combed numerous archives to uncover letters and diaries to document the changing attitudes of both Union soldiers and Southern civilians in northern Alabama. He convincingly demonstrates the depth of the Alabamans’ determination to achieve independence as well as the shallowness of the Union soldiers’ initial support for the policy of conciliation. He also makes an effective case that, in the example of northern Alabama, the breakdown of the policy of conciliation was a response to local resistance and not to changes in national attitudes or policy. This contention directly challenges Grimsley who dismisses the role of guerilla resistance in the hardening of Union attitudes. Finally, he makes a strong argument—whether he intended to or not—that only a policy of hard war directed against Southern civilians would have sufficed to bring them back into the Union, and even then it would not change their core beliefs or unwillingness to embrace racial equality.

Unfortunately, Danielson’s presentation is marred by repetition and at times a curious vagueness. One has to read—and perhaps reread—carefully to understand exactly when the two periods of Union occupation occurred. The information is there, but its presentation is anything but clear. More seriously, he provides little concrete information on that second occupation in contrast to the first. We do not know when it began beyond “the fall of 1863,” nor how many troops or which units were involved, nor who commanded them. Most curiously, he notes that Sherman made his headquarters here periodically in the spring of 1864, but outside of a letter the following October expressing pleasure to his wife that his soldiers “take to it [foraging] like Ducks to water,” he provides no indication of anything else he did during these months.

In short, Danielson provides some useful information and insights into the evolution of the Civil War into a total war on a regional level, but his work lacks the perspective to be of wide interest.