

Blue & Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations

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Review

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Jones, Howard *Blue & Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations*. University of North Carolina Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3349-0

A New Approach to Civil War Foreign Diplomacy

Anyone perusing the tables of contents of leading historical journals or a list of recent recipients of historical awards will find the whole-scale embrace of transnational history by the American historical profession impossible to miss. Scholars of Europe, Latin America, and Asia have long recognized the limitations of considering events with international causes and ramifications from the perspective of a single nation. Although it has taken Americanists (who still struggle with a historiography that insists the nation is “exceptional”) longer to recognize the advantages of internationalizing their historical writing, most general histories of the United States now provide at least some acknowledgement of external or subaltern perspectives. Among the once moribund fields revitalized by the desire to consider the role of the “United States in the World” are immigration history, now flourishing within “migration studies”, and the diplomatic history of the United States.

This trend has become evident in the study of the Civil War, traditionally one of the most insular of historical topics. The foreign relations of the Union and Confederacy have never been central to the main currents of historiography of the war, have never merited a significant place in college syllabi, and have never been of more than marginal interest to the general readership of works of Civil War history. This is somewhat surprising given that there is general unanimity that Confederate recognition from England and France (one would have followed the other) early in the war might have tipped the scales in the favor of the Confederacy. As conferences and essay collections devoted to a “transnational” history of the war have proliferated, the history of its diplomacy, the most clearly international aspect of the war, has clearly benefited.

Several recent works on Civil War foreign relations suggest that the time has come to give the diplomatic context of the Civil War its due. Howard Jones' *Blue & Gray Diplomacy*, a volume in the University of North Carolina Press's "Littlefield History of the Civil War" series, is one notable addition, a book distinguished by its international focus, comprehensive coverage of the North and South, and highly readable narrative form. Based on extensive primary research into both American and British archives, this compelling study will appeal to both scholars and a general readership.

Jones, a prolific historian at the University of Alabama, has published on the Civil War before, most notably his 1992 monograph, *Union in Peril: the Crisis over Intervention in the Civil War*. But he is best known for his extensive publications on the foreign relations of the twentieth century, as well as a study of the Amistad that became the basis of Steven Spielberg's movie of the same name. Here he tackles a very complicated subject, the relations of the Union and Confederacy with England, France, and to a lesser extent Russia, in a straightforward way. He narrates events chronologically, more or less "as its participants saw it play out around them" albeit with a retrospective knowledge of the outcome (7).

His argument is two-fold: that Europeans were both engaged and repulsed by America's bloody war, and that European neutrality was far from preordained. Recognition was a real possibility at two points during the war, in August of 1862, when the British seriously considered intervening after Second Bull Run, and in early 1863, when Napoleon hoped to recognize the Confederacy while establishing a foothold in Mexico.

In both cases battlefield victories and astute diplomacy by the Union maintained European neutrality. Jones does justice to the roles played by slavery, international law, European self-interest, and the inability of Europeans to understand Lincoln's devotion to Union within the conflict, and does a nice job separating out the diverse roles played by England, France, and Russia, although of the three England is vastly overrepresented in terms of sources.

The author uses quotations to excellent effect and has a good sense of narrative drama. Readers unfamiliar with key British and American diplomats of the period will be forgiven for being confused at times by the vast number of consuls, commentators, and other characters who populate this work. But this is

an author with a great deal of respect for the work of diplomacy, and he is assiduous about giving individual diplomats their due. Jones strongly critiques Jefferson Davis for showing a lack of judgment when choosing his diplomats, and praises Lincoln for his strengths in this area.

The author deserves credit for adopting a fully international perspective. Readers will learn as much about Britain as the United States. But this is also rather traditional diplomatic history, written from the top down. Virtually everyone quoted here is a politically-powerful white man. Mary Chesnut makes a few brief appearances, offering scathing indictments of the Confederacy's diplomats, and a British trade-union leader expresses his dismay over the war at one point, but readers interested in the experiences of common men or women will want to look elsewhere.

Jones makes some general comments about the effect of the war on Northern England's mill workers, but these only serve to whet the reader's appetite for the words of those out-of-work British textile laborers, as well as the views of Russian serfs and working Parisians. The book would also have been strengthened had the author drawn on recent studies of gender, race, honor, and violence in Europe and America to provide context to European reactions to the violence of America's Civil War. These critiques aside, *Blue & Gray Diplomacy* is the most comprehensive study of the foreign relations of the Civil War published in memory, and amply deserving a place on the reading list of anyone interested in the world context of America's Civil War.

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