

### The Northern Home Front During the Civil War

Antoinette van Zelm

*Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation, antoinette.vanzelm@mtsu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

van Zelm, Antoinette (2023) "The Northern Home Front During the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.1.09

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss1/9>

## Review

**van Zelm, Antoinette G.**

**Winter 2023**

**Cimbala, Paul A., and Randall M. Miller.** *The Northern Home Front During the Civil War*. Fordham University Press, 2023. PAPERBACK. \$30.00 ISBN 9781531501938 pp. 262

*The Northern Home Front During the Civil War*, a survey first published in 2017, is the third book written or edited by Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller about the Northern home front. This edition is a paperback update that features a new preface and revised bibliographical essay. Cimbala, professor emeritus at Fordham University, and Miller, professor emeritus at Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, are masters of their topic and offer a lively account of life in the North during the Civil War.

*The Northern Home Front* is engagingly written and chock full of American voices. Both the diversity and dissension that characterized the Northern populace come through prominently. Cimbala and Miller depict the significant geographical, ethnic, and religious diversity of the North; their attention to the Midwest is particularly noticeable. Similarly, the authors emphasize the tumultuous nature of Northern wartime society. While the Southern home front reeled from battles, displacement, and emancipation, it may be tempting to perceive the North as placid in comparison, but Cimbala and Miller quickly put any such assumptions to rest. They dig into both the obvious, and sometimes violent, disputes between Republicans and Democrats and the well-known draft riots of 1863 but also examine how everyday people struggled to adapt to changes in their family lives, work environments, and social circles.

According to Cimbala and Miller, two antidotes to this upheaval kept people in the North grounded and largely united around the goal of winning the war. One was the powerful influence of community life. Cimbala and Miller argue that the community institutions that Northerners had created before the war provided the touchstones through which they experienced the war. While not invulnerable to change, schools, churches, and voluntary organizations gave people the spaces and opportunities to react and adapt to wartime changes. The other powerful influence (which was not without opposition) was the increasing reach of the federal government into

people's lives. From expansion of the postal service to the production of greenbacks and vigorous support for internal improvements, the policies of Republican leaders at the federal level encouraged nationalism and patriotism among many Northerners. The book's chapters on "Paying for the War" and "Producing for the War" vividly make this point.

Cimbala and Miller describe *The Northern Home Front* as "fundamentally a people's history," and the book's cacophony of voices is its essence (x). Esther Claflin of Wisconsin crystalized Northern patriotism when she wrote to her soldier husband, "if by making this great sacrifice we can help the cause of truth and liberty is it not better than living merely for ourselves?" (p. 41). Philadelphian Sidney George Fisher zeroed in on the significance of President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, describing it as "to the point and marked by his pithy sense, quaintness, & good feeling" (p. 85). The Reverend Henry Highland Garnet of New York extolled the more prosaic Emancipation Proclamation as "the most able, manly and important document ever penned by man" (p. 133). Anna Howard Shaw remembered life in rural Michigan as "an incessant struggle to keep our land, pay our taxes, and to live," as "despairing women whose hearts were with their men" toiled amid severe labor shortages. And, abolitionist Frederick Douglass spoke about the new forms that slavery would take after the war, warning "all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth next" (p. 159).

As these examples make clear, *The Northern Home Front* illustrates the spirited engagement of American citizens with the most severe and deadly threat to their democracy since the nation's founding. Several people, including the aforementioned Fisher, Douglass, and Shaw, are heard from on a regular basis, which provides continuity within the narrative. Taking four or five of these individuals and creating vignettes featuring their biographies and the landscapes within which they operated would have enhanced the book.

As with all surveys, of course, depth has to be sacrificed for breadth. However, the only chapter that seems to be trying to cover too much ground is the thirteen-page final chapter, "The Transition from War to Peace." Demobilization, Lincoln's assassination, the transition from slavery to freedom, the status of women, and changes in the economy during the immediate postwar period would have benefited from a more thorough discussion. Regardless, Cimbala and Miller have created an exemplary history of the home front told through multiple perspectives,

and their in-depth bibliographical essay of books published on the topic provides numerous resources for further exploration.

*Antoinette G. van Zelm, PhD, is the assistant director of the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation. She edited Tennessee Women in the Civil War, and her essay on Tennessee women and the Woman's Relief Corps is forthcoming in The Work of Tennessee Progressive Era Women.*