

Jennifer Guiliano's Review of *Fort Pillow, A Civil War Massacre and Public Memory*

John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow, A Civil War Massacre and Public Memory*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. 208pp. Bibliographic references, preface, index. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN: 0-8071-3110-5

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Querying the social and cultural stakes of warfare in his examination of the April 12, 1864 battle between Nathaniel Bedford Forrest's Confederate troops and the Union garrison at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, *Fort Pillow, A Civil War Massacre and Public Memory* attempts to reveal the events and underlying socio-cultural forces that led to the unmitigated slaughter of black and white Union troops by Confederate soldiers. The vast amount of primary-source research, derived from government records, newspapers, memoirs, diaries, and letters, to name a few, adds to the continually expanding source base for scholars of the Civil War and race relations in nineteenth-century America. Begun in 1989 with the publication of "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Statistical Note" in which John Cimprich, along with Robert C. Mainfort Jr., corrected erroneous assumptions about casualty rates, the promise of the extended analysis of the socio-cultural origins of this massacre remains largely unfulfilled. While Cimprich convincingly asserts that Confederate troops did, in fact, kill Black troops at a much higher rate than average, he leaves this reader reliant on other scholarly works to contextualize the shape and scope of the socio-cultural relations between and among these troops and the larger United States society.

Cimprich's strongest narrative develops around the construction of Fort Pillow, the initial Federal attack, military life at the Fort, and the assumption of control by Federal troops. He presents clearly the factual evidence of the Fort and its uses. Situated as a way station between Cairo, Illinois and Memphis, Tennessee along the eastern side of the Mississippi River, Fort Pillow was designed initially as a military battery to alleviate overcrowding at nearby Confederate Fort Randolph and to prohibit false alarms of surprise Northern attacks (p.4). Built primarily by slaves conscripted from their owners and overseen by Irish engineers, the Fort allowed a stretch of the Mississippi River to be closed to commercial and military traffic through the use of physical obstructions and gunfire. Held from June 1861 to June 4, 1862, the fort accommodated an estimated 2,000 men by the time bombardment began by Federal troops who hoped to decimate Confederate supplies by controlling the Mississippi and dividing the eastern supplies from the western theatre.

"The Federals arrival," writes Cimprich, "created multi-layered social conflicts, challenges for their military rule in the future" (p.37). He tells us of the isolated nature of the Fort, poor health, malnutrition, and inadequate clothing and supplies that contributed to widespread disease and frustration on the part of both Southern and Northern troops. Despite the successful seizure and two year use of Fort Pillow to control river traffic, as a site to conscript men into the Federal war effort, and to prevent guerilla warfare, in January 1864 under order of General William T. Sherman, Federal troops closed Fort

Pillow in order to devote resources to other military campaigns. The “hard policy” that relied on the confiscation of Confederate goods and property had strained relations between Fort Pillow’s commanders and troops and the local community. As the war dragged onwards, the troop morale and the scarcity of resources took its toll on the Fort and the surrounding areas.

Cimprich teases the reader with several intriguing threads in the early days of Fort Pillow’s history: Irish immigrants who worked as skilled laborers repeatedly threatened to strike during the building of Fort Pillow and often captained slaves who constructed the forts. Were there conflicts between these groups? How did the Confederate government handle strike threats? Did Irish laborers and/or slaves have thoughts about Fort Pillow and its construction? In fomenting a local economy, how did local entrepreneurs contribute to the maintenance of the Fort and its men? Did subsidiary institutions crop up to support families and camp followers who flocked to the Fort? How was courtship and marriage between troops and local women treated in the community? In each of these unanswered questions, Cimprich could have only enlivened his discussion of the Fort and its environs.

Labeling the Fort Pillow massacre in April, 1864, after its reopening an “atrocious,” Cimprich grounds his analysis of the massacre itself by gesturing at a larger body of scholarship about military history and the killing of noncombatants and surrendering soldiers in particular. Positioning the work within the frame of Horseshoe Bend (1814), Mexico City (1848), Washita River (1868), Normandy (1944), and My Lai (1968) allows Cimprich to assert a political statement concerning United States governmental and military culpability. More directly, while it matters if Nathaniel Bedford Forrest and his lieutenants ordered the continual assault and killing of Union troops at Fort Pillow, Cimprich argues it is more important that the social forces at play created a society that violated military courtesy. He points to four major factors that contributed to this disjuncture: anger about Federal military occupation of Tennessee and the Mississippi River area in particular; racial hostility fostered between Blacks and whites in the United States; “political enmity against Southerners for joining the Federal army;” and the concomitant antagonism toward white Northerners who officered Black units (p.85).

Cimprich’s reading of the racial conflict rests firmly on the work of military historians, like Joseph T. Glatthaar, Mark Grimsley, and James McPherson, who concentrate on military structures, troop movements, and daily life. In drawing the attention of the field of Civil War history to the massacre at Fort Pillow, Cimprich has done a great service. Few scholars have considered the ramifications of this event and the ways in which it may have shaped further battles during the war. Given this addition, though, the limitations of his strict allegiance to boundaries of military structures become very apparent when considering his methodological approach to the framework of racial hierarchies and racial violence. Cimprich’s failure to delve into the worlds of soldiers outside of Fort Pillow render an incomplete consideration of the racial and class motivations that could have been at play. The writings of Tomás Almaguer in *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (1994), Mia Bay in *The White Image in the Black Mind* (2001), George Fredrickson in *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971), and Reginald Horsman in *Race and Manifest Destiny* (1981)

have each deployed critical race theory to examine racial formation in nineteenth-century America. Collectively, they offer Cimprich a vital conclusion about the Civil War era: it is not just the enforcement of racial hierarchy but the confluence of ideas about race and class that create systems of oppression and violence. For example, Cimprich reads the debate over officer involvement in the massacre as a disagreement over the personal character of Nathaniel Bedford Forrest. Instead, Cimprich could ask about the class motivations of the massacre: "Why was it important that officers did not participate in the slaughter? How did laying the blame on regular soldiers defuse possible class tensions within the newly united military and congressional bodies that were investigating the matter? Paul Foos, whose *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (2001) Cimprich cites in the preface offers a model of analysis that could lend a more nuanced reading of soldierly and societal motivations. Further, applying critical race theory that centers questions of class and racial hierarchies could unite disparate portions of the text. The last chapter on memory could function to illuminate the differences in the way certain classes and races memorialized the massacre and could allow for a further theoretical intervention into the concept of racial hierarchy beyond white-Black binary elucidated by previous authors. Instead, "Public Memory and Fort Pillow" reads largely as a historiographical afterthought, a condition of early 1990s excitement over scholarship of memory and public commemoration, instead of a careful intervention into how changes in American society have challenged and affirmed the circumstances surrounding the Fort Pillow massacre.

"I intend for this series to foster some daring departures," said T. Michael Parrish, editor of the "Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War" series, "in probing, defining, and arguing about every conceivable aspect of the most aspiring yet disturbing period in United States history—that gigantic, and in many ways unending, trauma of democracy we call the Civil War." Unfortunately, *Fort Pillow* fails to depart from the narrative structure to offer innovative interpretations that could challenge contemporary understandings of the Civil War and the violent massacre at Fort Pillow in particular.

#### References Cited

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### Biography

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