

BOOK REVIEWS

A Dark New Look at the Costs of the Civil War

Sommerville, Diane Miller. *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 448 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-4330-4.

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Historians have long analyzed the ways in which the Civil War transformed Southerners' lives, but few have studied the effects of war trauma, and particularly suicide, as Diane Miller Sommerville does in *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War South*. Sommerville argues that after the Civil War, Southerners recreated their identities based on their shared misery and a “community of suffering” (13). The Civil War contributed to the rise of suicides in the post-Civil War South as well as the number of men and women who were sent to asylums. The war increased tensions for residents in the South, including a loss of social and familial support networks. Sommerville draws on recent psychological research into depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and suicide to analyze the sources. Recent studies, combined with a detailed look at the primary sources, prompts Sommerville to conclude that one of the main reasons that suicide and mental illness rose in the postwar South was because support networks were severed. A lack of support from family and friends, combined with the horrors of the war itself, prompted an increase in suicidal thoughts and actions.

While suicide was stigmatized as a moral weakness before the Civil War, Southerners developed a new empathy for those suffering from what they understood to be insanity during and after the war. Some former Confederates who died by suicide, such as Edmund Ruffin, were even lauded for their acts as martyrs of the Lost Cause, albeit years later. Sommerville points out that these new understandings of suicide were not universal but varied by gender and, especially, race. For white Southerners, the act became an indicator of white supremacy, while they viewed African Americans who died by suicide as hysterical—that is, if they considered suicide to be possible for them at all. African Americans, however, were simply responding to emotional suffering, just as their white counterparts were, Sommerville contends. Gender also shaped suicide: men were more likely to die by suicide than were women, but women often contemplated the act or attempted suicide.

The book is organized chronologically and thematically into three parts, with each chapter organized by the most common causes of suicide, such as a perceived loss of masculinity, loss of property, and deaths of loved ones. Part One examines

Confederate men and women who contemplated or committed suicide during the Civil War. Part Two examines African Americans' suffering and suicide "in slavery and freedom," analyzing the few sources that exist for the topic (83). Sommerville devotes a chapter to the suicides of freedpeople, a phenomenon that has been studied far less than slave suicide. Part Three returns to Confederate men and women, examining their responses to postwar devastation. The final chapter changes focus and examines how attitudes toward suicide changed during the Civil War era. Throughout each chapter, Sommerville emphasizes that wartime distress was the common factor that these people shared. Even when caregivers did not connect the war to suicidal ideation or actions, historical examination reveals that financial strain, war trauma, or a loss of social support were contributors.

Sommerville makes some claims that are sure to be controversial. The first is that recent studies of mental illness, particularly PTSD, can be used to understand suicide historically. Many Southerners showed symptoms of what mental health experts today would diagnose as PTSD, such as brain injuries, drug and alcohol abuse, and anxiety. She notes that much of her analysis is, by necessity, speculative, but is still useful in gaining historical understanding of mental illness and suicide. She does so effectively, by interrogating asylum records, coroner's inquests, and letters to identify patterns and common symptoms. Historians must always speculate to understand the motivations of our subjects and must also carefully analyze primary sources, rather than taking the statements of people in the past at face value. Sommerville simply takes this a step further than many historians analyzing mental illness have done, while being careful to point out that these acts and experiences were not universal.

A second claim that is part of a historical debate is that African Americans did not commit suicide as an act of resistance, but to relieve suffering. Eschewing the popular resistance model of suicide, Sommerville favors a neo-abolitionist model. She claims that the resistance argument is an ideological view that lacks complexity. In contrast, a neo-abolitionist view takes seriously the suffering of enslaved people, but Sommerville notes that one must scrutinize individual acts to understand the motives. While enslaved men and women died by suicide for many reasons related to slavery, they were seldom acts of rebellion, meaning they were not intended to attack the system of slavery. While causing harm to slaveholders may have been an added consequence, it was not the primary intention of enslaved people. However, Sommerville cautions, deciphering the causes of slave suicide "is at best informed, reasoned speculation" (117).

Sommerville's work is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the Civil War, Southern history, and the history of death or mental illness. She supports her arguments with numerous stories, allowing readers a glimpse into the lives of ordinary men and women. She even includes a few stories of children who suffered from war trauma and calls for other historians to complete a book-length study on the topic, which would be a welcome addition to the field. While at times she raises more questions than she answers and speculates a bit more than the evidence allows, overall, she presents novel, complex, and well-supported arguments. Her compelling monograph has stories of "the men and women for whom war truly was hell" (15).