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The Jewish Confederates

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The Jewish Confederates. By Robert Rosen. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2000. xxv + 517 pp.

More than fifty thousand books have reputedly been written about the American Civil War. When it comes to the role of Jews in the Civil War, however, most people know of only one book: Bertram W. Korn's *American Jewry and the Civil War*, first published fifty years ago and frequently reprinted. While more narrowly-focused books subsequently appeared, including useful volumes by Harry Simonhoff and Mel Young, nobody, until now, has attempted a full-scale narrative designed to stand alongside Korn's carefully-researched and admirably-balanced classic.

The Jewish Confederates takes up this challenge. Robert Rosen, a Charleston attorney and published historian, brings together in this well-produced volume a wealth of scattered information from published and unpublished sources concerning the Jews of the South during the Civil War. Where Korn deliberately ignored "individuals who happened to be Jews" and focused on the Jewish community "qua community," Rosen is far more inclusive. Anything related to the Jews of the Confederacy falls within his purview.

Rosen divides his story into four major parts entitled: "Freedom and Equality in the Old South," "The Soldiers," "The Jewish Confederate Home Front," and "The End of an Era." In extraordinary and occasionally repetitive detail, he recounts among many other things the military exploits of soldiers (including a few cowardly and unpatriotic ones), the supportive activities of women, the prayers and sermons of rabbis, the contributions of well-known Confederate leaders, like Judah P. Benjamin, David Yulee, and Phoebe Pember, and the activities of the lesser-known figures, like Benjamin Franklin Jonas and Henry M. Hyams. Even those well-versed in Civil War trivia should find new facts here. Who knew, for example, that Manassas, the site of two highly significant Civil War battles, was named for a Jewish innkeeper, named Manasseh, "who for a long time had his house of entertainment there" (p.20)? Readers will find Rosen's quotes well-chosen, his illustrations excellent, and his annotations ample. Anyone seeking information on the Jews of the Confederacy will henceforward want to begin with this volume.

Rosen, however, is not Korn. Where the latter strove for balance and analytical rigor, Rosen informs us in his preface that he has an ax to grind:

As a Southerner...I feel a kinship to the Southern Jews of the 1860s. It is hard to sit at Beth Elohim in Charleston and not feel a connection with the

congregation's past members. And because the South has been so deeply misunderstood, especially in relation to its Jewish citizens, I feel obliged to correct this misperception (p.xiii).

The result, in the eyes of any but Southern diehards, is something of an apologia, a pious bow to the "religion of the lost cause." Instead of analyzing the Jewish Confederacy in the light of recent scholarship, and with an eye toward helping readers better understand the disjunction between partisan memories of the past and the historical complexity that hindsight reveals, Rosen offers a brief for the Confederacy as old Southern Jews remember it – a Confederacy filled with devoted heroes who paid the ultimate price for the honor of the cause that they so lovingly served.

Two examples must suffice. Rosen argues, as others have before him, that the Old South "was remarkably free of prejudice against Jews." Jewish support for the Confederacy, according to this analysis, represented a kind of pay-back for good treatment. "For Southern Jews," he explains, quoting historian Howard M. Sachar, "loyalty to the Confederacy often was a matter of intense personal gratitude" (p.31). Black slavery never factors into this analysis. Yet perceptive observers from the Jewish traveler I. J. Benjamin in the 1860s to Bertram W. Korn a century later understood that there was a direct causal relationship between the hospitable treatment accorded Jews and the abominable treatment meted out to Blacks. Since Whites formed a minority of the population in many of the communities where Jews lived and feared the Black majority, Whites had every incentive to treat Jews well; Jews, in return, had every incentive to support the racial status quo. Very similar situations obtained in colonial Surinam and in twentieth-century South Africa. In all of these places, the tragic irony is that Jews achieved the social status and recognition that they did *because* of Black slavery and racial oppression. Of course, the situation of Blacks in the South would have been identical without the presence of Jews. But any honest analysis of the world of Jewish Confederates needs to begin with the realization, lacking here, that Jews benefited – enormously—from the very same system that kept Blacks in bondage.

Rosen's analysis of General Benjamin G. Butler's imprisonment of Eugenia Levy Phillips is equally simplistic. He argues that Butler (whom he labels throughout "Beast Butler") sought "to humiliate the New Orleans aristocracy" during the city's occupation, and he cites with evident approval a whole list of Confederates who described the incarcerated Mrs. Phillips as a heroine and a martyr. In fact, Phillips openly mocked the funeral procession of a Union officer and displayed public contempt for the city's ranking official during wartime. Any Black

slave, White male, or, one suspects, any non-aristocratic woman who showed similar contempt under those circumstances would most likely have been shot. She merely suffered confinement with soldier's rations and the company of "one female servant." The issue here is not that the Southern reading of this incident is wrong and the Northern reading correct. The problem, instead, is that the historian only provides one reading—and seems deaf to alternative interpretations less flattering to his subject.

There are other interpretive weaknesses in *The Jewish Confederates*, particularly in its final section dealing with Reconstruction. Here Rosen's sources are meager and his one-sidedness embarrassing. The subject is overdue for a full-scale study based on untapped primary sources.

Reading *The Jewish Confederates*, and then rereading Korn, one is impressed anew by the qualities that made *American Jewry and the Civil War* a classic. Rosen's book, for all of its many virtues, does justice to one side of the conflict alone.

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Fiddler on the Move: Exploring the Klezmer World. By Mark Slobin. In the American Musicospheres series, edited by Mark Slobin. Includes CD. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 154 pp.

Mark Slobin's *Fiddler on the Move* explores the klezmer revival of the last two decades as a protean Jewish, American, and international phenomenon. Chair of the Department of Music at Wesleyan University, Slobin has authored and edited many ethnomusicological studies.

Slobin asks how might we "study a constantly morphing and expanding musical system with no surviving homeland, as played by insiders with outsider mentalities and outsiders with uncanny intuitions about how the music works." In four central chapters he maps out working methodological territories, readily conceding that his "sources, examples, and insights intersect, jumping the temporary fences" he has erected (p. 5). As per Slobin's goal of the American Musicospheres series, he aims to "avoid defining musical 'villages,' to move away from neat periodization, and to give terms like 'folk,' 'traditional,' 'ethnic,' and 'popular' a well-deserved rest" (Forward). This larger series goal turns out to be an interesting part of his specific klezmer story.