The Civil War as Total War
Madison, WI and the Creation of a Homefront

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Abstract

This project studies Madison, Wisconsin during the Civil War and analyses how it served as a "homefront" during the conflict. It examines how the media, government, soldier interaction, and involvement of women created an atmosphere that led to the mobilization of people in Madison. In a limited war, civilian involvement is limited to those whose relatives enlist in the military. In contrast, the mobilization of the entire citizenry of Madison supports the contention by some recent historical studies that the American Civil War was in fact a "total war." This study supports this argument through the use of a variety of empirical evidence, including newspapers, archival sources, political proclamations and memoirs of the war. Madison, Wisconsin was on the U.S. frontier in the 1860s and thus completely separated from the battlefront. The conclusions of this project suggest that communities throughout the Union — whether near the theatre of war or on the periphery — served similar functions in the Civil War. It thus contributes a new perspective to the historical debate on the status of the Civil War as a total war.

Objective

To show that the American Civil War was an example of total war by proving Madison, WI, which is geographically removed from the battlefront, served as a "homefront" in the Civil War, this provides strong evidence that cities throughout the United States behaved as "homefronts." This study contributes to the field of history by adding a new perspective to historians' study of the Civil War. The Governor of Wisconsin in 1861, Alexander Randall, also served as a "commuter" a "homefront". This project provides empirical evidence to support this new historical perspective on the Civil War.

Contribution to the Field of History

During the Civil War, there were thousands of cities across the United States. Each of these experienced a profound personal war and developed different symbols and reactions to the fighting that took apart the country. Madison, Wisconsin is one example out of many.

If Madison, WI, which is geographically removed from the battlefront, served as a "homefront" in the Civil War, this provides strong evidence that cities throughout the United States behaved as "homefronts."

Further Study

✓ Local histories of cities on the frontier such as Minneapolis, Detroit, or Chicago.
✓ To study the economic impact of Madison.
✓ To study the rural areas surrounding Madison and see how the war affected small town life.

With such a large topic to cover, it is no surprise that scholars have been studying the Civil War since its end in 1865. Historians have a duty to study city histories to gain a more complete understanding of the Civil War and of the people who lived through it.

Involvement of Women

The war majority of people left in Madison during the war were women. They made up the homefront. Gov. Randall called on women proclaiming that they “can give strength and courage and warm sympathetic and cheering words to those who go to do all that is due to us here.”

Photography

A relatively new form of media, photography brought a transparency to war to the United States. Photographers like Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner captured images of soldiers dead on the battlefields. Civilians could buy books with photographs displayed or attend Gallery that showed the “gritty images.”

Homefront

A homefront is a place where the citizenry is motivated and focused on supporting the war through spending their time, energy, and resources on the war effort. Components of a homefront inform, equip, and encourage civilians to support the battlefront.

Why Madison, WI?

• City far from the battlefront should be studied
• They are more independent
• The people are the ones who make the city a homefront.
• No outside forces are making the city a homefront. If a frontier city like Madison can be classified as a homefront, other cities in the North can be assumed to have similar characteristics.

Four Components of Homefront

1. Media—Newspapers and photographs give civilians knowledge about events on the battlefront.
2. Involvement of Women—The actions and interests of women were a major force in how the war was fought.
3. Soldier-Civilian Interaction—Citizens aided the soldiers in ways that strengthened the bonds between the two groups.
4. Government

Conclusion

The components in this project show that Madison during the Civil War was a homefront. Since Madison was completely separated from the battlefront during the war, the city had to become a homefront out of the will of its people. With Madison considered a "homefront", it can be assumed that other cities like it around the North and South become homefronts as well. These many homefronts across the United States interacted with each other and worked toward the common goal of fighting the war at home. This created a larger United States homefront during the Civil War. A homefront across the North and South, this component of total war is satisfied.

Works Cited


Acknowledgments

I would like to first thank my God who has enabled, empowered, and equipped me in all aspects of my life. I offer my work up to Him in thanksgiving and gratitude. This study could not have been possible without the foundation and active work in my life. I am very grateful for the love and support I have received from my family and friends throughout the research and writing of this paper. The advice, remarks, and encouragement have all been part of my very best. I would also like to thank my capstone advisor, Dr. Patricia Turner. Her experience has given me the guidance and direction that led me to the completion of this project. Also, the assistance (received from archivists, Colleen McFarland (UWEC) and Ruth Wachter Nelson (UWSP)) was indispensable in my research process.

Funded by UWEC ORSP and Differential Tuition