

War on Record: The Archive and the Afterlife of the Civil War

By Yael A. Sternhell. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023. 306 pp.

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Yael A. Sternhell's well-written new book *War on Record: The Archive and the Afterlife of the Civil War* clearly demonstrates her appreciation of the complexity, contingency, and humanity of archives and archivists, as much as that of historical works and historians. Sternhell argues that a close inspection of the archival history of the American Civil War's largest trove of records—those created by the opposing armies during the war—allows for a better understanding of the war itself and postwar reconstruction. In doing so, Sternhell offers both specialist and general readers a sense of how archiving and history-writing with federal US records operated between 1860 and 1900.

Recent work by historians, cultural theorists, and critics has grappled with or contributed to the “archival turn”—the reversal of concern away from archives as mere sources of evidence or facts toward an understanding that archives help cocreate evidence or facts through archival processes such as appraisal, arrangement, description, and preservation. Unlike some of these scholars, however, Sternhell is less interested in dwelling “on archival gaps and absences, on the archive as an obstacle” and more focused on telling captivating, personal stories of “the people who managed the records,” “archival users,” and “archival practices” (p. 4). This choice means that archival historians and historians of the federal government are in for a real treat with this publication. Indeed, *War on Record* fills a void in the literature of American archival history. No previous book-length works exist on recordkeeping, archiving, or documentary editing during the American Civil War.

Building upon her excellent award-winning article “The Afterlives of a Confederate Archive: Civil War Documents and the Making of Sectional Reconciliation,” Sternhell, a professor of history and American studies at Tel Aviv University, thoughtfully chooses to read forward from the Civil War until the end of the nineteenth century, rather than trying to look backward from the Civil War records housed since the 1930s at the US National Archives.¹ In fact, this forward reading is so thorough that it leads to the rather strange statement that “the United States never built a brick-and-mortar archive to house its Civil War records” (p. 4). This is true enough for the period narrowly under discussion, but clearly the National Archives building (Archives 1) at 700 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC, did later become that very repository for Civil War records. Still, Sternhell's narrative choice to refrain from reading history backward shows how, at various stages along the way, the military and civil records created by the Civil War were preserved,

destroyed, combined, rearranged, and used for myriad purposes, all within the first forty years after the war officially ended in 1866. Embedding this narrative within the archival writings of Ann Laura Stoler, Terry Cook, Joan Schwartz, Eric Ketelaar, Francis X. Blouin, and William Rosenberg means that Sternhell speaks the language and knows the literature of practicing archivists.

Uncovering these tales of recordkeeping and archival use in nineteenth-century America paints a fairly vivid picture of the individuals and groups responsible for creating, preserving, organizing, and using the original records of the Civil War, as well as those involved in the massive two-decade effort to publish a selection of those records as a series of thick volumes known as *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (published 1880–1901), or merely the “OR” for short. The main players back then were not professional archivists or professional historians, but rather government clerks, War Department bureaucrats, elected politicians, and regular soldiers from both sides of the war.

Wartime clerks, commissioned officers, and appointed heads of government bureaus figure prominently as record-creators in the first half of the book, as Sternhell describes how the “raw records” of war were created to serve a variety of original purposes (p. 89). Any successes in recordkeeping that occurred within the Union and Confederate governments can be attributed to army regulations, which were intended to ensure operational control and efficiency in decision-making both on and off the battlefield (p. 12). Success in archival preservation of some military records may be attributed to the fact that the US War Department “concentrated many of its records under the aegis of the adjutant general” (p. 75). Although Sternhell does not address whether the quality of recordkeeping during the war mattered to the outcome of military engagements, it would have been useful to connect an assessment of how well records were kept with arguments that Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh and Williamson Murray make about the mid-nineteenth century and the building of the modern military-industrial administrative state.² Sternhell’s focus on the records of the armies (with occasional discussion of the records created by legislative bodies and executive offices) is justified by the argument that those were the agencies of national government that developed the most complete and fully regulated records during the nineteenth century.

In addition to giving in full the well-known story of the creation of the United States’ Archive Office—a repository within the War Department that collected and arranged the confiscated and abandoned records of the Confederacy originally with the unrealized hope of finding evidence of the plot to assassinate President Lincoln—Sternhell relates two less familiar tales. One involves the sad demise of many of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s records³ and the other, how the congressional act of 1871, which created the Southern Claims Commission, fueled a new era in the reuse of a trove of Civil War records preserved by the War Department. In both cases, the

lack of a shared legal understanding of what constituted an “official record” worthy of permanent preservation by the federal government meant that private citizens, veteran soldiers, and government bureaucrats of differing political bents battled over the preservation of and access to records created during the war era.

The American Civil War did not lead to either a central or national archives, nor to the even more ambitious “General American War Archives,” which the first chief of the Archive Office, Francis Lieber, proposed in 1865. Instead, as the second half of *War on Record* (starting with chapter 4) shows, the US government was more comfortable paying lavishly for the editing and publication of the aforementioned OR. Through the most sustained and historiographically consequential part of the book, Sternhell suggests that the Civil War records that were definitively deemed “official” were simply those chosen to be published and indexed in these 128 volumes. By the mid-1870s, Southerners and former Confederates were brought into the federal government to assist with the effort, just as scattered Confederate war documents (intact or in transcription) were mailed or carried to the War Records Office in Washington, DC. Both during the process of collating and editing the thousands of manuscripts, and through the process of reading and reacting to the printed volumes, the OR aided many Americans in political reunification.

As Sternhell acknowledges, the “compilers of the OR were all white, male, and, with [one exception] . . . members of the military establishment” (p. 152). Precisely because of these reasons, perhaps, the print publication of a selection of the original manuscripts became a source that white American war veterans and their widows could trust in as they searched for truths about battlefields, missing persons, war dead, and other thorny topics related to the war. Once printed, both Southerners and Northerners gushed with pride at this production of the US federal government, lauding its skillful compilation and impartial incorporation of documents that were originally produced by Union and Confederate men. Usually though, not much written by or about privates and noncommissioned officers was included.

In the coda, Sternhell delves briefly into the twentieth century to cover the story of the senior specialist for military archives at the National Archives, Dallas D. Irvine, who understood how troubled the production of the OR had been, as he himself worked on a series of projects to improve access to the same Civil War records. Yet, the story could definitely be brought further into the twentieth century. After all, African American archivist and later PhD in history Harold T. Pinkett arrived at the National Archives in 1942, just after what he later called the “Era of the Confederate Archives,” by which he alluded to Southern whites’ domination of the National Archives in its first decade.⁴ It would be interesting to assess in detail what effects the professionalization of archivists and the creation of the National Archives may have had on the ways that the Civil War’s most concentrated corpus of materials was remade by government agencies, historians, and the general public during the era of the Cold War and on to the present. How did microfilmed

or, more recently, digitized, versions of original Civil War manuscripts and records complement or supplant the OR? Encouraging desire for a sequel, *War on Record* is one of the few monographs ever published to engage deeply and successfully with American archival history during the nineteenth century.

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- ¹ “The Afterlives of a Confederate Archive: Civil War Documents and the Making of Sectional Reconciliation,” *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 4 (2016): 1025–50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44287210>, was awarded in 2017 the Binkley-Stephenson Award, given annually by the Organization of American Historians. See Organization of American Historians, “Binkley-Stephenson Award,” <https://www.oah.org/awards/article-and-essay-awards/binkley-stephenson-award>.
- ² Sternhell does cite sources suggesting that “by the final stages of the war most Confederate commanders no longer bothered with making regular returns, rolls, and reports and limited their notes to the number of men actually present for duty,” though she does not probe what effect this deterioration of recordkeeping had on military readiness of Confederate units. For the argument about administrative capacity, see Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), a work surprisingly not cited. However, Sternhell points to Shauna Devine’s 2014 work, *Learning from the Wounded: The Civil War and the Rise of American Medical Science* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), for evidence that the detailed doctors’ reports of Union surgeons contributed to progressive improvements in medical treatments of soldiers during the Civil War (p. 85).
- ³ Was the politicization of both the Freedmen’s Bureau as an institution and the loss of many of its records due in part to racism? Sternhell’s assumption that “the importance of the bureau’s documentation was never in doubt, both as evidence of its unique work and as a record of the millions of dollars paid in bounties to African American soldiers,” seems to miss the power of the revanchist political forces that were determined to end the bureau. The “dangers that lurked in Washington,” which resulted in the loss of the Freedmen’s Bureau, may not have just included the usual cluster of reasons, such as confusion, neglect, mismanagement, or inadequate transitioning of records from a government agency that was closing (pp. 80–81).
- ⁴ Alex H. Poole, “Harold T. Pinkett and the Lonely Crusade of African American Archivists in the Twentieth Century,” *American Archivist* 80, no. 2 (2017): 296–335, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-80.2.296>.