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

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

Cover Page Footnote
All views expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Archives and Records Administration or any other agency of the United States Government.

In War on Record: The Archive and the Afterlife of the Civil War, historian Yael A. Sternhell explores the creation, compilation, and publication of official records of the American Civil War. This book is a logical outgrowth of Sternhell’s previous examinations of Confederate records and Civil War historiography, and it reflects the “archival turn” that she and other humanities scholars have embraced in recent decades, which seeks to understand the contexts in which archives are created, maintained, and used to identify gaps, silences, and biases in the historical record. Drawing primarily on War Department records now located at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Sternhell demonstrates how various historical actors, from federal recordkeepers to Confederate sympathizers, influenced which Union and Confederate records the federal government preserved in its archive and which were published in the War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (OR), a critical source for Civil War scholarship. The federal Civil War archive and the OR, she argues, are not “simply the neutral work of a professional military bureaucracy” but rather the result of specific decisions by individuals with a range of political motivations and personal interests—decisions that impact the availability of Civil War records and thus the stories we tell about the war today (123).

Sternhell’s argument about archival neutrality is hardly new; archivists’ role in shaping the historical record has been a central theme in the archival literature for years. Sternhell is also not the first scholar to study the formation of the federal Civil War archive, the publication of the OR, or major War Department officials involved in these processes, as her extensive endnotes indicate. But War on Record is notable for how Sternhell traces the many ways the federal Civil War archive was repurposed over time and how she centers archival processes and labor throughout her

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Here I describe merely one focus of the “archival turn.” Sternhell defines the archival turn as humanities and social sciences scholars’ shift in recent decades toward “contemplating the problems of archives and in archives” rather than operating in “blissful ignorance of the complex mechanisms that generated the collections they sift through” (2). She cites works by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other scholars whose thinking influenced the archival turn (224–25n3), while also citing examples of scholarship from multiple disciplines that have resulted from the archival turn (225n4). For a useful overview of the archival turn—or rather, (re)turn—from a leading archives scholar, see Jeannette A. Bastian, “Moving the Margins to the Middle: Reconciling ‘the Archive’ with the Archives,” in Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories, ed. Fiorella Foscari, et al. (London: Facet, 2016), 3–19.


3 Page 227n14, for example, is particularly useful for citing prior studies of the OR’s compilation and publication.
narrative. The book will therefore be of interest to a range of audiences, including academic historians, archivists, public historians, and memory scholars.

*War on Record* can be loosely divided into two main sections, which are bookended by an introduction, a coda, and backmatter (i.e., endnotes, acknowledgments, and an index). The introduction lays out Sternhell’s research topics and summarizes the key tenets of archival theory that informed her analysis—namely, the ideas that archives are constructed and reflect the biases of the individuals and societies in which they are created and maintained; that archives consist of records whose meanings change as they are used; and that archival processes impact what we know about the past, and thus the information we have to make present and future decisions. Sternhell acknowledges Terry Cook, Joan Schwartz, Eric Ketelaar, and other well-known archival scholars who influenced her thinking about archives in the introduction. Thereafter, she largely foregrounds stories of the individuals who collected, published, and used the federal Civil War archive rather than dwelling at length on the theoretical implications of her topic. Archival scholars may see this as a missed opportunity to incorporate more of the archival literature into her analysis. However, Sternhell’s choice allows her to present a straightforward historical narrative—“the story of an archive,” as she puts it—that is relatively free of academic jargon and thus more accessible to nonspecialist audiences.

The book’s first section, consisting of chapters 1–4, focuses on the formation of the federal Civil War archive and its early use. Chapter 1, “An Archive Made and Unmade,” begins in 1861 with the outbreak of the war and describes the recordkeeping challenges the Union and Confederate Armies faced. Both armies had regulations for creating and maintaining records, but the chaos of combat meant that many military actions were never documented, or were documented after the fact. Accordingly, before federal officials even began to compile a Civil War archive, the documentary record of military actions and experiences during the war was already inconsistent and incomplete. This likely comes as no surprise to archivists; we are intimately aware of gaps in historical records and the challenges they pose for research. But scholarship on archives and war has tended to focus on threats to existing records during armed conflicts and the explosion of bureaucratic records that conflicts tend to produce.\(^4\) Understandably, given the challenges of

researching what does not exist, less is typically said about records that are never created due to the havoc of war. Sternhell’s discussion is therefore an important reminder that “the U.S. war machine generated a vast written record, but that record was disjointed and imperfect, defined by what was missing as much as by what was written down” (21).

The well-known loss and destruction of Confederate records toward the war’s end certainly shaped federal officials’ efforts to track down surviving Confederate records, as Sternhell describes in chapter 2, “Revenge in the Archive.” Seeking initially to find evidence of the Confederate government’s collusion in President Abraham Lincoln’s assassination, which never materialized, federal officials’ attention shifted in the late 1860s and early 1870s to how Confederate records could be used to prove southerners’ disloyalty to the Union and thus deny their postwar claims for military pensions or compensation for property allegedly lost to federal troops. The claims era, Sternhell argues, marked the first reconfiguration of the federal Civil War archive as Confederate records documenting ordinary southerners, not just political leaders, took on new significance. Although Sternhell does not cite Ketelaar in this chapter, only in the introduction, his influence on her scholarship—particularly his assertion that records are “activated again and again for different purposes”—can be seen in the way she traces how records’ meanings were “cast and recast” during the claims era (68).

Chapter 3, “Archiving without an Archive,” and chapter 4, “Official Records and the Search for Truth,” trace another reconfiguration of the federal Civil War archive as officials begin to recognize it as a “historical repository rather than simply a legal tool” (69). With this recognition came concerns over records’ preservation. In the absence of a central repository for federal records, federal agencies stored inactive records in a myriad of attics, basements, and warehouses in and outside of Washington, D.C., where they were constantly at risk from fires, floods, leaks, pests, and neglect. To address these threats, many officials in the postwar era called for a solution that archivists will recognize: preservation through publication. After nearly a decade of debate, mainly about cost, Congress finally authorized the publication of official records of the Union and Confederate Armies in 1874.


7 The U.S. National Archives was not established until 1934. See “National Archives History and Mission,” National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.archives.gov/about/history/about/history-and-mission. When National Archives employees initially canvassed federal agencies in search of records, they found records stored in similarly terrible conditions; the condition of War Department files was “particularly egregious.” See Tom Ryan, “Survey of Federal Archives,” *Pieces of History*, October 6, 2014, https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2014/10/06/survey-of-federal-records/.
It is ironic that the potential loss of federal Civil War records helped spur Congress to action. As Harold T. Pinkett described, federal agencies in the nineteenth century could not legally dispose of their records without congressional approval, leading to buildings that were “literally jammed with records” and thus even more susceptible to damage and loss.8 “Vigilance of bureaucrats and dumb luck,” Sternhell writes, were often “the only safeguard against the destruction of records” in this era (76). However, publication of surviving government records served the dual purpose of satisfying the public’s voracious appetite for information about the war. Using correspondence between War Department officials and members of the public, Sternhell identifies veterans as the group most interested in using the federal Civil War archive, specifically as a source of historical facts to support their debates, commemorations, and accounts of the war. In turn, veterans’ interests heavily influenced the records that government employees—many of whom were veterans themselves—selected for publication.

Sternhell dives deeper into this point in the second half of the book, which spans chapters 5–7. Whereas the first half demonstrated how the federal Civil War archive was constructed and how its meanings were reconfigured over time, the second half explores how specific individuals and groups shaped the corpus of documents that ultimately formed the 128-volume OR, which was completed in 1901.9 In chapter 5, “Simply the Facts,” Sternhell describes how the OR’s compilers—who were all white males and, with one exception, either army officers or civilian employees of the War Department—defined “official records” and interpreted the historical value of records to publish (152). Influenced by veterans’ requests and their own ideas of records’ significance, these officials chose to publish records documenting Union and Confederate military engagements and high-ranking decision-makers on both sides, generally excluding records that documented day-to-day tasks, the armies’ interactions with civilians, African Americans and other minority groups, and lower-ranking soldiers. Yet, as Sternhell outlines in chapter 6, “Missing Links,” and chapter 7, “The Archive and Sectional Reconciliation,” officials took great pains, from their perspective, to present an impartial compilation of records that represented both sides of the conflict. They involved Union and Confederate veterans as well as groups like the Southern Historical Society, which pushed the Lost Cause narrative but had important Confederate documents in its archives, in verifying, copying, and editing documents for publication. This collaboration, in turn, became part of the broader postwar reconciliation process among white Americans as federal officials, Union veterans, and ex-Confederates worked together “in a shared commitment to reassembling the written record of the rebellion” (213).

The accessibility of the published Civil War records over nonpublished ones, Sternhell argues, has played a large role in the “uniquely intensive preoccupation with the Civil War as a military event” ever since and in the challenges that scholars have faced in researching other aspects of, and people involved in, the conflict (153). To some readers, Sternhell’s analysis of these topics may seem underdeveloped, as it is largely confined to a few pages at the end of chapter 5 (150–155). For example, I wished to know more about how the OR’s online availability has impacted historians’

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9 For readers unfamiliar with the OR, the first pages of chapter 5 (120–124) provide a helpful overview of the compilation. War on Record’s index is also useful for tracking references to the plethora of military officers and federal bureaucrats—some of whom, like George B. Davis and George W. Davis, have nearly identical names—that Sternhell introduces.
research, given the implications for archivists looking to make their collections more accessible through digitization. Sternhell merely mentions that the “wealth of results” generated by searching the digitized OR reinforces its “aura of reassuring authority” and contributes to the impression among historians that additional research into NARA’s textual records is unnecessary (122). Her statement warrants further investigation, given studies showing that academic historians are generally aware of the limitations of digitized archival collections.10

But Sternhell is upfront that the book is not meant to be “a study of the entire documentary output of the Civil War nor a complete narrative of how historians have used these records.” The first, she writes, is “impossible,” while the second “is a topic for another book” (10). Even so, her understanding of the OR’s influence on Civil War research speaks to the ongoing need for archivists to consider how our choices, from appraisal through digitization, impact access to records and thus whose stories are represented in historical narratives that the records inform. Her conclusion that “archival labor—assembling, organizing, storing, and publishing records—is deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts” also applies as much to archivists today as it does to OR compilers in the nineteenth century, and it connects to ongoing calls for archivists to critically examine our identity, ethics, and values as a profession (222).11

It would have been easy for Sternhell to have ended the book with the OR’s role in postwar reconciliation. But in the coda, aptly titled “An Imperfect Story,” Sternhell admits that the history she has told is incomplete, as records documenting the federal Civil War archive’s creation through the OR’s publication are incomplete: “Nineteenth-century archivists, as it turns out, were no better than other historical actors in preserving a written record of their work” (220). While this may be true, Sternhell’s statement would benefit from additional context. Pinkett reported that many records documenting the OR’s compilation, including proofs, preliminary prints, and transcriptions of original manuscripts, were specifically identified as having no permanent or historical value in an 1888 report on federal agencies’ recordkeeping practices.12 Perusing reports on the disposition of so-called valueless or useless papers in the War Department, which are published in the U.S. Congressional Serial Set, reveals that records relating to the OR’s compilation were indeed described as “useless” and proposed for destruction.13 Thus, gaps in documentation about the OR’s compilation may be the result of deliberate choices by federal

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11 In her introduction to the spring/summer 2023 issue of American Archivist, editor Amy Cooper Cary notes how the archives community is increasingly “turning our collective gaze inward and asking ourselves who we are as a group and how we are contributing to the preservation of the historic record, social memory, and cultural heritage” (5). She highlights the reflective focus not only of the articles presented in that issue of the journal but also of the archival literature overall in recent years. See Cary, “Mirror, Mirror,” American Archivist 86, no. 1 (2023): 5–6, https://doi.org/10.17723/2327-9702-86.1.5. The special issue “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice” of the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies 3, no. 2 (2021), https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis-issue/view/10, includes additional examples.


13 See “Letter from the Secretary of War, Transmitting a Report Touching the Disposition of Useless Papers in the Department,” February 27, 1889, Senate Executive Document No. 133, 50th Congress, 2nd session, U.S. Congressional Serial Set, volume 2613 (1889).
officials about which records had permanent and historical value—much like the choices officials made, and that Sternhell traces, about which records to publish.

As this example indicates, Sternhell occasionally misses opportunities to connect the story of the federal Civil War archive and the OR to the broader context of federal recordkeeping in the nineteenth century. She also at times perpetuates the well-worn stereotype of records “hiding” in the archives. She writes in the coda, for instance, that additional records documenting the creation of the federal Civil War archive might one day be found “hiding somewhere in the bowels of the National Archives” (221). The idea that records are “hiding” in archives undercuts the significant work that archivists past and present have done to preserve records and make them more accessible through finding aids, articles, and alternate formats. Given that archival labor and its impact on records access is a key theme of War on Record, I was surprised, and a bit disappointed, to see Sternhell perpetuate this stereotype.

Overall, however, War on Record is an engaging, detailed look at the people and forces that shaped the federal Civil War archive and the production of the OR. The book is an excellent example of post-archival-turn historical scholarship and will be of particular interest to federal archivists and Civil War scholars. Yet readers will not need a background in Civil War history or in archival theory to appreciate the story Sternhell tells. Her work is a reminder to anyone with an interest in history that understanding “how we know what we know, or think we know, about the past” involves understanding the archival processes that impact the historical record (10).