Civil strife

Notes from the struggle to find new narratives of the War Between the States

STEPHANIE McCURRY

Richard Slotkin
THE LONG ROAD TO ANTIETAM
How the Civil War became a revolution
478pp. Norton. £24.99 (US $32.95).
978 0 87140 411 4

Louis P. Masur
LINCOLN'S HUNDRED DAYS
The Emancipation Proclamation and the war for the Union
358pp. Harvard University Press.
£22.95 (US $29.95).
978 0 674 06690 8

John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, editors
THE TRIBUNAL
Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid
570pp. Harvard University Press.
£29.95 (US $39.95).
978 0 674 04885 0

Last December, thousands of Americans filed into cinemas to watch Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*. While Congress was stuck in its usual deadlock, a disgusted public was momentarily delivered by the large-screen image of a heroic figure and a heroic America. As the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed and slavery abolished, people cried. They applauded. Abraham Lincoln's claims about that war – that on it was staked "the last best hope of earth" – gain strength into the twenty-first century. Nowhere is the exceptionalism of Americans' national history more unquestioned. Americans love their Civil War as no other people do. It makes it hard to write good history.

Over the past generation, a new narrative of the American Civil War has emerged, one focused centrally on slave emancipation and on the role of the slaves themselves in that protracted process. It was, to say the least, a vast improvement over the older, top-down version which, among other things, cast Lincoln himself as the Great Emancipator. In 1994 that interpretative conflict memorably flared up in a short but sharp debate on the matter of "Who Freed the Slaves". In its time, the new Civil War history generated innovative work built on monumental archival excavation and creative new methods. But as the American public now enters the third year of celebrating (yes, that is how we put it) the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the difference of interpretation seems to have faded in a blur of commemorative events, re-enactments, websites, blogs, articles, television shows, movies and books. The Lincoln star has never been higher but the radical history version shines comfortably alongside it, each phenomenon now exhibiting something of the quality of a catechism – a list of pieties recited to remind us of our glory days and higher selves.

It has become increasingly difficult to say anything new about the American Civil War or even just to tell a different tale. The three books under review encapsulate the dilemma: of a marketplace with seemingly inexhaustible demand for another version of the familiar story and the understandable desire of experts to shape public history. Just a few among a multitude of books published in the past year on the subject of the Civil War, the new publications speak to the difficulties of original interpretation and the temptation to claim singular importance for one event in a complex history as "the turning point in the war".

Richard Slotkin is no newcomer to Civil War history. One of the leading literary critics in the United States, he made his reputation with his brilliant first book, *Regeneration Through Violence: The mythology of the American frontier, 1600–1860* (1973). A now canonical treatment of the centrality of violence in American history and literature, it is still very much part of the conversation, cited most recently and to excellent effect in A. O. Scott's *New York Times* review of the new Quentin Tarantino film, *Django Unchained*. Slotkin would go on to complete a trilogy on that subject. His turn to Civil War topics came first in fiction with *The Crater* (1980) and, more recently, in history with a book entitled *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater* (2009).

The Long Road to Antietam: How the Civil War became a revolution focuses on the four months between the summer and autumn of 1862 that, Slotkin says, "transformed the policies, principles, and purposes" of the war. Before the battle in Antietam, Maryland, on September 17, compromise was still possible; after Antietam and the Emancipation Proclamation that came on the heels of Union victory, it was not, and the war turned in a revolutionary direction, with "class and race consequences far more like those of, say, the French or Russian Revolutions than the Napoleonic Wars". His book is distinguished from its precursors, Slotkin insists, in "seeing the Civil War as a genuinely revolutionary crisis in American history".

The problem is immediately obvious to readers of Civil War history. Slotkin's book is historiographically wedged between James McPherson's book, *Antietam, Crossroads of Freedom: The battle that changed the course of the war* (2002), which likewise identifies Antietam as the turning point in the war because it allowed Lincoln to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and Eric Foner's monumental *Reconstruction: America's unfinished revolution* (1988), which makes an explicit case for the Civil War as causing a revolution in social and political life. It is a cramped situation that naturally makes for overreaching.

In staking the claim for Antietam as the turning point in the war Slotkin makes the implausible case that the Antietam campaign and Lincoln's plan to issue the Emancipation Proclamation "would give Jefferson Davis and Robert F. Lee their best opportunity to win the war in a single campaign". To that end, the book offers a long detailed history of the military campaign – a text that runs to 126 pages – sandwiched between chapters on the political history of the Union and Confederate governments. Whether one needs that much detail on the battle to grasp the political significance of it is questionable. In the end what matters, for Slotkin as for McPherson, is that the battle, though a tactical draw, became (with Lee's retreat) a strategic victory for the Union which allowed President Lincoln to meet the conditions he had previously set for issuing the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

Far more interesting is the focus on the Union General George B. McClellan, on his constant intriguing in the channels of political power that, Slotkin insists, threatened a military coup throughout the summer and autumn of 1862. During the Antietam campaign, Lincoln faced "the most severe challenges of military to civilian authority in American history". Slotkin thus reminds us that the social violence of civil wars always create the potential for the overthrow of civil authority by a military dictatorship. A Democrat with deep political ties to his party's leadership, an opponent of abolition and advocate of a peace favourable to Southern independence, a man who encouraged a cult of personality among his soldiers and the American public – he was the Democratic Presidential candidate in the elections of 1864 – McClellan threatened to become the Caesar, Cromwell or Bonaparte of the American Civil War.

The "McClellan problem" is a staple of Civil War history, but in Slotkin's telling it provides an arresting account of a particular moment in the war: of a Washington atmosphere "thick with treason", as Charles Frances Adams put it. Slotkin makes a lot out of the McClellan threat but, as Louis P. Masur's *Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the war for the Union* makes clear, its significance in the revolutionary turn the war took shrinks in the broader perspective of Lincoln, Washington

13.02.2013
London W1

"Girl in Yellow", 2012, is an oil painting by Claerwen James, an artist who trained as a molecular biologist, a painter of the human form who took an undergraduate degree in zoology and a doctorate in the programmed death of cells. Since graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art in 2003 she has become known for vivid portraits, particularly of children, painted from photographs rather than live sittings. She does not make being young seem a pleasure. "I am a long way away from my childhood now", she has said, "but a lot of children are not that happy and I didn't like being a child much either."

She sees the early years of life as "an uncomfortable state, not knowing who you are yet, and not being able to articulate things or have any power". The latest show of her work opens in London on February 13 at the Flowers Gallery, Cork Street, and runs till March 16. www.flowersgalleries.com/artists/claerwen-james

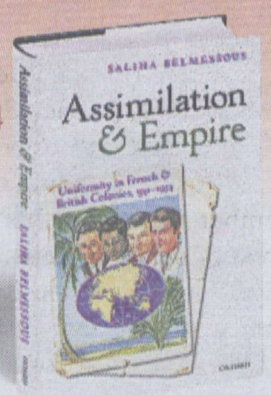
Assimilation and Empire

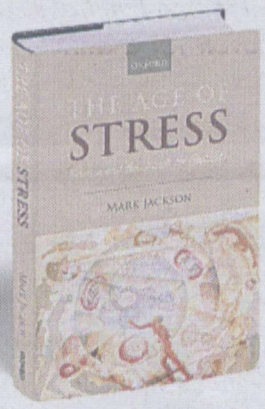
Uniformity in French and British Colonies, 1541-1954

SALIHA BELMESSOUS

An original, engaging, and innovative contribution to a fast growing area of scholarship, this book provides the first examination of a major imperial and post-imperial ideology: the resilience of assimilative ideology across centuries, continents, and empires.

248 pages, Hardback, 978-0-19-957916-7, £35.00





The Age of Stress

Science and the Search for Stability

MARK JACKSON

Provides both a history of changing understandings of stress and an outline of its ever-widening application in the diagnosis of problems of individual pathology, work organisation, social change, and international relations.

320 pages, Hardback, 978-0-19-958862-6, £35.00

HISTORY FROM OXFORD

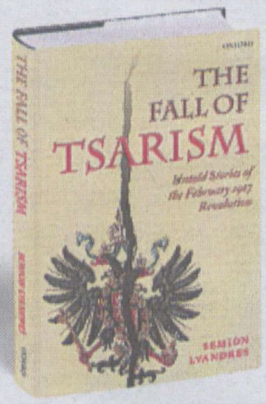
The Fall of Tsarism

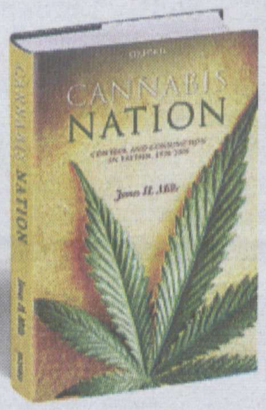
Untold Stories of the February 1917 Revolution

SEMION LYANDRES

Reveals to the world for the first time a unique and hitherto undiscovered selection of interviews with leading participants in the February Revolution of 1917, representing the most significant contemporary testimony on the overthrow of Europe's last old regime.

352 pages, Hardback, 978-0-19-923575-9, £35.00





Cannabis Nation

Control and Consumption in Britain, 1928-2008

JAMES H. MILLS

The first comprehensive history of the consumption and control of cannabis in the UK after 1928. Based on extensive archival research and interviews with key figures, it shows that both the market for the drug and government approaches to it have been intimately shaped by the wider currents of social and political transition in the UK.

304 pages, Hardback, 978-0-19-928342-2, £35.00

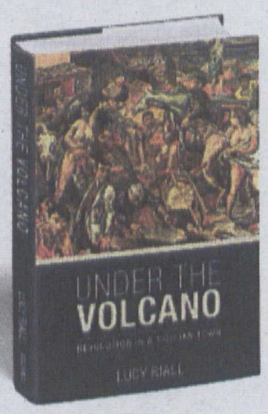
Under the Volcano

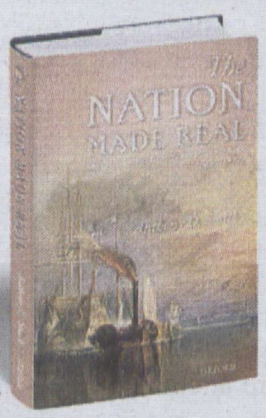
Empire and Revolution in a Sicilian Town

LUCY RIALL

A peasant revolt in Sicily is the starting point for a detailed, intimate account of the people who lived in the community: a fiercely proud local gentry and a British family, the largest landowners in the area. The story is used to examine Britain's policy towards Europe in the nineteenth century and colonial rule overseas in the age of Empire.

296 pages, Hardback, 978-0-19-964649-4, £35.00





The Nation Made Real

Art and National Identity in Western Europe, 1600-1850

ANTHONY D. SMITH

Focusing on national identity in the Netherlands, France, and Britian, *The Nation Made Real* offers an original interpretation of the role of visual art in the making of nations in Western Europe.

232 pages, Hardback, 978-0-19-966297-5, £30.00

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Tel: 01536 452640 | Visit: www.oup.com/uk/history
Available from all good bookshops, or from OUP direct

and the complex of forces bearing down on the Union war effort in the autumn of 1862.

The year 2013, as far as books and movies go, is the year of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation. For Professor Masur, the pivotal period is not the four months surrounding the Antietam campaign, or the battle itself, which he deals with in two paragraphs, but the 100 days between the issuing of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862 and the promulgation of the formal Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. *Lincoln's Hundred Days* is about "the unfolding drama" of the 100 days, Lincoln's progression from the belief that he had no constitutional right to emancipate by proclamation and fear of turning the war into a revolution, to his growing conviction of the necessity of emancipation and of his war powers. As Masur tells it, the burning question is whether once having taken the step of issuing the preliminary proclamation, Lincoln would hold firm as the January deadline arrived.

Masur is a professor of American Studies and History, and he has written books on a broad array of topics including baseball, popular music, capital punishment, photography and the Civil War. He is a practitioner of microhistory, what he calls "history in a grain of sand". But as it turns out, the 100-days device is something of a conceit. After all Lincoln read the draft to his Cabinet on July 22, 1862 and it was the sixty-six days between that moment and the issuing of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation which turned the war in a revolutionary direction (as Slotkin points out). There is also the problem of the Thirteenth Amendment, now in the forefront of Americans' minds, which was required to ensure the permanence and constitutionality of the Emancipation Act. And in fact, in Masur's account, the 100 days is actually the centre of a longer drama and forms the middle 100 pages of a 300-page book that offers a general account of Lincoln and the process of emancipation.

In offering an account of the President's actions, Masur aspires above all to redeem Lincoln's reputation and that of the Emancipation Proclamation itself. "Deeply contested in its time", he writes, the decree "has become devalued in ours". One might not think Lincoln's reputation much in need of redemption. In the aftermath of Spielberg's movie, it seems redundant to say the least. Still, while it is hard to remember now, Masur is right that the proclamation was controversial in time and place. It was attacked as a complete abrogation of the rights of private property (about $4 billion in enslaved persons), stirred up charges that Lincoln sought to incite slave insurrection, raised cries of military despotism, and provoked a profound series of questions about the locus of war powers and the limits of executive authority that persist into our own time. It certainly hardened Confederates' views about the stakes in the war, although to be fair, those views could not be much hardened. And, in the light of the complicated list of places exempted from the workings of the Proclamation, it was derided as an empty threat: "It is Slavery where we can emancipate and freedom where we cannot", as Richard Henry Dana put it. Lincoln himself so worried about the power, reach and constitutionality of the Proclamation that he immediately set about building the political coalition he would need to get a constitutional amendment securing freedom, permanently, to the slaves. If the President's belated holding on to outdated ideas of gradualism and colonization was unworthy of him, it doesn't much trouble Masur's account.

Abraham Lincoln with Allan Pinkerton and Major General John A. McClernand at Antietam, 1862

Masur's portrait gives the American public the man of principle and conviction it still wants, and redeems national pride in the process. But if Lincoln's reputation is safe, we might worry, rather, about a history-writing and -making industry that seems unable to find any worthy subjects other than Founding Fathers and famous presidents. Radical historians' attempt to shift the discussion about the Civil War and emancipation continually loses ground in the face of Lincolnmania or is just swallowed up by it. As national myths go the Lincoln one is a force for good in everything – except, perhaps, the discipline of history.

In the current climate, 500 pages on John Brown is a shock and a tonic. Few men in American history (other than Lincoln) are so subject to myth-making as the militant abolitionist who attacked Harpers Ferry, Virginia in October 1859 in an attempt, he said, to free the slaves. In *The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid*, John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd assess the matter of Brown's historical significance by way of a short introductory essay and a vast collection of documents written by and about Brown. Posing the question of what difference it would have made "if John Brown had never lived", the editors play the time-honoured Civil War game of what-ifs, spinning out increasingly large claims about Brown's role in the Civil War and world history: "The Democratic Party would not have split along sectional lines and Stephen Douglas . . . would have been elected president in 1860, deferring secession, civil war and emancipation for at least another four years . . . which may have delayed or disrupted emancipation movements in Brazil, Cuba, and even Russia". Harpers Ferry was, they claim, "both a microcosm [of] and the beginning of the war".

Stauffer and Trodd's expertise lies in the history of abolitionism and protest movements respectively, and this foray into political history takes them on to dense and unfa-

miliar terrain. The root of their error is a failure to grasp the seriousness of radical secessionism as a movement in the Deep South. To the architects of secession and Southern independence, Harpers Ferry was merely one event in a long list of Northern treacheries and threats to slaveholders' property, just more grist for their propaganda mill. Secessionists seized on it as a virtual gift from the gods.

Just what the imagined audience is for a book of this sort, the editors do not say. At more than 500 pages it is too long for classroom use, too specialized for general readers, and in the print form, less use to scholars than a digital, searchable version. Yet the documents reward reading, none more so than those written by Brown himself. If you want to know if he was insane, read his "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States" (he was not), for his philosophy, read "A Declaration of Liberty", for his belief in armed resistance and the rights of slaves to self-defence, read "League of Gileadites". For his capacity for self-exoneration, read his account of the murders at Pottawattomie, "Dear Wife and Children Everyone", of June 1856, and to grasp his ready embrace of martyrdom, read his "Address to the Virginia Court" and letter of November 8, 1859 to his wife and children. The rest of the documents enlarge and extend the significance of John Brown as a myth and symbol variously of justice and terrorism across the world and forward into the twenty-first century.

Civil War history is a growth industry. For authors, the opportunities are great, but so are the temptations – to repetition, over-reaching and jockeying for market share. There are valuable new interpretations emerging in the field, including a focus on the Civil War as a humanitarian crisis, and there are important voices cautioning against an embrace of war stories as the romanticization of war itself. But in the fever of sesquicentennial commemoration nothing sells quite like President Lincoln and the war for emancipation. It takes the fantasy of *Django Unchained* to make the public focus even for a minute on the other America, the one that for so long had no problem with holding people as slaves.

Balancing acts

JANE CAPLAN

Mary Fulbrook

A SMALL TOWN NEAR AUSCHWITZ

Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust

421pp. Oxford University Press. £20 (US $34.95).

978 0 19 960330 5

A Small Town Near Auschwitz dovetails the wartime biography of Udo Klausa, a young German *Landrat* (district administrator) in Nazi-occupied Poland, with the contemporaneous history of the Jews of Będzin, the town from which his district took its name. Klausa's civil service appointment made him the local representative of the German interior ministry in this county-sized rural district with a population of almost a quarter of a million in 1939. The *Landrat*'s task, dating back to the nineteenth century, was to coordinate and exercise oversight over most of the activities of local government, from roads to public health to the constabulary. In Klausa's time, the district was situated in the so-called *Oststreifen*, a strip of Silesian territory in what had been western Poland before 1939, and was inhabited almost exclusively by Poles and Jews. This put Będzin at the leading edge of the Nazis' murderous policies of racial engineering. These were intended to "germanize" as much of Poland as possible, and were premissed on getting rid of the *indigènes*, by one means or the other: that is, by mass deportation or wholesale extermination. Auschwitz was a mere twenty-five miles south of Będzin.

Mary Fulbrook's absorbing new book is primarily a study of how a civil servant like Klausa became a party to this genocidal project. On Klausa's watch between 1939 and 1942 – indeed, virtually under the windows of his family's official residence – the Jews of Będzin and its surrounding region were progressively stripped of their livelihoods and rights, subjected to every kind of assault and humiliation, forced into slave labour, and crammed into ghettos from which they were ultimately deported to be murdered in Auschwitz. Integral to Fulbrook's project is to build up a precise and moving account of these Jewish lives and fates. Of the Będzin district's Jews, 85,000 perished in Auschwitz and no more than a few hundred survived the war.

Klausa may have been a member of the SA and the NSDAP, but he was not a policeman or SS guard; far from being a murderer or a torturer, he probably never raised a hand against any Jew or Pole; he never arrested or sentenced anyone to death; he never saw Auschwitz. Yet his job underpinned and facilitated the activities of the men who did all these things. Across his desk passed all the paperwork required to draft forced labour, to police and ghettoize the Jewish population, to sort out the legal and property issues thrown up by deportation and expropriation; he attended meetings and social occasions with colleagues directly involved in terror and murder; he was certainly present at more than one "action" to select Jews for deportation; he never refused instructions or protested, and was clearly valued by his superiors. What then was Klausa's responsibility?

Klausa's own answer, delivered in his testimony to post-war investigations and in an extended memoir written in 1980, was unequivocal. He was not personally guilty of any criminal act; he witnessed little and was not present during the grimmest episodes of selection and deportation; he knew nothing of the wider picture of genocide. At the same time, his claims betray an undercurrent of rather more guilty knowledge. He is hazy and self-contradictory about dates and places and potentially incriminating information; he says he made repeated (and ultimately successful) efforts to return to the army in order to extract himself from a psychologically burdensome situation that appears to have affected his health. In a strikingly ambiguous phrase, he insists that he had procured his transfer into active military service because he had not wanted "to become innocently guilty" (*unschuldig schuldig werden*).

Plenty of grist for the historian's mill here, and Fulbrook draws on the repertoire of interpretation and explanation that she used in her study of violence and memory in twentieth-century Germany, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and violence through the German dictatorships*, 2011 – a book in which Klausa makes episodic appearances. In both books, Fulbrook juxtaposes two types of documentation: evidence showing how Germans living under violent regimes understood and represented themselves – their subjective "history from within" at the time and in memory; and then what can be objectively verified about their persons and acts. She argues that we should understand twentieth-century Germans as "performing" their conformity and acquiescence. It was not so much that they professed or refused an ideology, but rather they juggled their "inner belief" and "outer behaviour" in a more complicated balancing act between private and public expectations. This balancing act outlived the regimes that had required it, reappearing after their demise in the struggle to come to terms with memory. But as Fulbrook confesses, this close focus on individuals' multiple and complex motivations and psychological states stretches the historian's task almost beyond the explanatory limits of the discipline.

So why has Fulbrook revisited such frustrating ground so soon? The answer – unexpected and highly personal – is gripping: Udo Klausa's wife, Alexandra, was Fulbrook's godmother, connected to Fulbrook's German (and socialist and Jewish) mother through their schoolgirl friendship in pre-war Berlin. Despite everything, this friendship was resumed after the war. When Fulbrook belatedly discovered the suppressed wartime history of a man she had known and liked, she was "utterly amazed; shocked", and shocked too at the evidence that her godmother had barely registered the horrors going on around her in Będzin. The book is doubly powered by this absolutely personal outrage and Fulbrook's expertise as an academic historian; at times it reads almost as if her professional honour is at stake. She is by no means the first to write of this kind of betrayal – Germans of her generation have repeatedly ventured similarly soul-searching confrontations with family complicity in Nazism – but few bring the professional and the personal into such compelling conjunction.

Fulbrook admits that her personal link with Klausa makes her more tenacious in trying to understand his behaviour and prevarications than he probably deserves. The line between explanation and exculpation is a very delicate one, and Fulbrook is painfully conscious of the risk that the historian will simply echo the self-serving excuses proffered by men like him. Klausa repeatedly invoked the idea of "decency" to distinguish honourable Nazis like himself from the criminal followers of Hitler. Fulbrook searches for the "tipping point" beyond which no "decent" person could have continued to support Nazism; she sees a glimmer of this in 1942 when Klausa engineered his return to military service. This was the one moment of "courage" in a life otherwise characterized by "careerism . . . cowardice, and callousness". But in the end she argues that the Nazi regime was always marked by "systemic violence", which one either recognized early on or ignored by habituation.

The book portrays with great pathos the utter incommensurability between Klausa's banal official and family life and the sufferings of Będzin's Jewish population; between the power Klausa seems barely to have admitted he possessed, and the powerlessness of the Jews. As a penetrating study of one of "Hitler's willing functionaries", it deserves as wide a readership as the more familiar stories of "willing executioners", and precisely because it is less gruesome, more ordinary. Yet Fulbrook sometimes seems like a dog worrying at a deep-seated tree-root that it can neither yank free nor let go. There is a good deal of repetition as she wrestles repeatedly with her two masters: her responsibilities to the truth of the historian and the truth of an individual's life and memory, where not every discrepancy can simply be labelled a lie. (One is put in mind here of Gitta Sereny's classic biographical study in 1995 of Albert Speer, subtitled *His battle with truth*.) Fulbrook's frustration suggests the inability of any individual story to excavate satisfactory explanations without some additional heavy machinery. Her book's focus on the relationship between the experiential and "objective" history of the Holocaust risks underplaying structural aspects to Klausa's situation that also need to be explored.

Klausa was quintessentially a professional civil servant, or *Berufsbeamte*, a fact that Fulbrook acknowledges but could have given more weight to. We are not short of literature on how bureaucrats functioned under National Socialism, not just the committed ideologues and *Schreibtischtäter* (desk murderers) like Adolf Eichmann but the mid-ranking municipal and ministerial civil servants studied by Uwe Lohalm, Hans Döscher, Alfons Kenkmann or Christiane Kuller, with their self-serving invocations of public service, professionalism and that all-purpose "decency". Klausa – who, crucially, was both a paper-pusher and a man on the spot – embodied the authority of this Prusso-German tradition, which functioned as a veritable engine of exoneration in post-war West Germany: the argument was that National Socialism had been a bitter antagonist of the honourable principles of the *Berufsbeamtentum*, that the two systems were simply mutually irreconcilable. This claim exerted enormous public authority and supported a shameful refusal to confront structures of complicity that entangled the civil service institutionally as well as individually. Conceding this claim (as Ulrich Herbert has argued) was integral to the legitimation of West Germany as a system antithetical to National Socialism – a perspective that deserves more attention here. Klausa's reluctance to confront his wartime career would have been impossible without this profoundly entrenched myth, a myth that, for him and thousands of his colleagues, safeguarded their wartime history and their post-war careers, their pensions and their reputations.

McCurry, Stephanie. "Civil strife." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5733, 15 Feb. 2013, p. 3+. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, 1902-2014, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200568397/TLSH?u=upenn_main&sid=TLSH&xid=f0ee2312. Accessed 12 June 2020.