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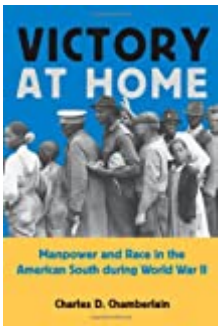

Charles D. Chamberlain. *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South during World War II.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003. 288 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2429-6; $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2443-2.

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Minorities Used World War II Federal Manpower Agency and Local Institutions in Struggle for Equal Rights

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World War II brought the United States out of the depression of the 1930s. Unemployment disappeared as millions of men (and women) headed for the military. The war mobilization also brought prosperity as American industries converted to war production. Returning prosperity reduced unemployment so well that many industries endured chronic shortages of manpower during the war. The shortages were widespread but not universal because war industrialization varied from region to region. Some areas of the United States had too many workers while others had too few. The federal government's solution was the establishment of the War Manpower Commission (WMC) to balance the regional disparities. As *Victory at Home* makes clear, the WMC was more than just another of the alphabet agencies. It was a major factor in beginning what would be a decades-long process that transformed the South from an agricultural to an industrial region, from a region characterized by localism in social and economic relations, and from a region dominated by a racial structure incompatible with the war aims of the United States.

Despite the significant improvements from New Deal programs, the South on the eve of war remained, in Franklin D. Roosevelt's words, "America's number one economic problem." Unemployment was high because New Deal agricultural programs and farm mechanization made agricultural workers superfluous while New Deal relief and resettlement programs failed to deal with the foreclosed or tractored-out or otherwise displaced farm workers. Racism was a major liability. Southerners expressed their desire to industrialize by supporting the Balance Agriculture With Industry program, but they defined industrial jobs as white labor only, especially the higher-paying jobs. New Deal labor laws that mandated upgraded factory standards and wages encouraged Southern owners to reserve even more jobs for whites. The war boom came to a South that was still backward in race relations.

Chamberlain describes the chaos arising from the in-

dustrial boom that occurred in the South as the United States shifted to a war footing in early 1941. Conscious policy decisions to build in the South went along with the natural advantages in climate and cheap/abundant labor to infuse the region with massive amounts of federal money. Federal projects such as new bases not only displaced residents but they also attracted migrant laborers to areas without the necessary services or housing. Shortages and shanties proliferated as workers overwhelmed the new job sites. Some workers began to realize that they had a bargaining chip for a change, especially when unionism became possible.

Local employers realized that the new job opportunities put their seasonal labor requirements at risk. African Americans and Latinos were over-represented in agriculture before the New Deal. Agricultural workers suffered high seasonal unemployment. But the locals had control over the state employment and unemployment compensation agencies, and they used this control to keep the farm workers at harvest time. Undereducated laborers weren't suited for the skilled trades the wartime boom demanded, so workers with those skills moved into the South. The Southern leaders accepted, albeit reluctantly, that northern labor brought unionism. Southern officials accepted the American Federation of Labor's closed shops as a price of modernization and federal money. Blacks found some relief as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organized the new industries because the CIO was more receptive to minority membership than was the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL).

The potential of the national labor situation to become chaotic led inevitably to the creation of the War Manpower Commission in 1942 as a national replacement for state employment offices. Broader jurisdiction was necessary to reduce parochial labor decisions, which in the South tended to promote surpluses to keep wages low. The WMC's mandate was to relocate and adjust as necessary to move surpluses from one region, usually the South, to regions of shortage, especially the West Coast, and to do so without disrupting local practice or local productivity. Still, the demand exceeded the supply.

The study follows Southerners migrating to other regions, especially the Pacific coast states, for better jobs. The 1930s helped to create a surplus labor force in the South of nearly a million families, most of whom were African American or Hispanic. World War II generated a massive demand for manpower to replace the mobilized troops, to staff the new war industries building aircraft and the other material needed by those millions of mobilized men. Common sense would seem to say that the jobs vacated and newly created would have gone readily to the million unused workers. Common sense would be wrong.

The minorities were generally not received all that well, being shunted to the low end of the scale, segregated in the workplace. But they had alternatives to seasonal farm labor and custodial work in the new defense plant. Two chapters discuss the movement out of the Cotton South and the reception of those workers in the defense industry West during the war years. And *Victory at Home* covers the attempts of Southern leaders to hold their laborers for their own war industries.

An important chapter deals with the second half of the war, when the decisions of the first half bore fruit. Interestingly but not surprisingly, the predominant attitude of the black workers was that economic security came before civil rights. Aptly, the chapter title is "We're Not here to Start a Social Revolution." The old debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois came down in favor of Washington. The final chapter deals with the early postwar demobilization and retreat of the African Americans from the war-driven workplace. It discusses the antecedents of the civil rights revolution that would explode a decade later. There was talk of keeping black labor in the South by industrializing the region. That was talk. Actions that encouraged an outflow of returned veterans and former defense workers included the failure to provide training for blacks, the end of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, the reversion to segregated unionism once the unions came under attack from conservatives, and a general reversion to the prewar discrimination without the option of returning to agriculture now that the mechanical cotton picker was becoming widespread.

Throughout the period, whether in forming the new military-industrial South or trying to get a handle on geographic variation in supply and demand, there was continuing jockeying among the various governments, the labor and civil rights organizations, the agricultural and industry leaders–and the workers, including minority workers. The situation was unstable to fluid throughout, and much remained unresolved when the war ended the boom times. Women returned to domestic life, but Hispanics and especially African Americans proved less willing to revert to prewar working and living conditions. Their organizations and individuals had helped in the victory overseas; they at least set the preconditions for what

they intended eventually to be their victory at home.

Chamberlain uses this study of the WMC as a springboard for an examination of how wartime manpower policies, state and federal, influenced race relations, and how racial considerations influenced manpower decisions. He discusses the local countercurrent to the effort to rationalize the allocation of labor. And he describes the way in which the various affected constituencies–governments, civil rights organizations, labor unions, owners, local elites, and workers–attempted to use the new labor situation to realign labor relations and to bring fairness to or prevent mobility in employment. This book deals with the relationship between federal and local authorities and between governments and citizens, Hispanic and African-American, during the years from 1941 into 1948. It addresses the civil rights element of the Double V–Victory at Home (against racism), Victory Abroad (against fascism)–campaign in a context of minority labor, a perspective not commonly found in the literature.

The book describes the manpower situation as a local and individual problem rather than tackling the problem with yet another institutional history, as was long the fashion in the history of this period. It supports the now-standard interpretations that the war brought the country out of the depression and also set the foundation for the Second Reconstruction after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The bibliography lists federal and state archives and all of the standard works on the region during the period, so the research is solid. Chamberlain has produced a well-researched book that explores a federal agency from the perspective of those who manipulated it. *Victory at Home* definitely belongs on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the transformation of America's number-one economic problem into the sunbelt/gunbelt and anyone interested in the prelude to the Civil Rights Revolution.

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