



Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War

Jeanette Keith

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During World War I, thousands of rural southern men, black and white, refused to serve in the military. Some failed to register for the draft, while others deserted after being inducted. In the countryside, armed bands of deserters defied local authorities; capturing them required the dispatch of federal troops into three southern states.

Jeanette Keith traces southern draft resistance to several sources, including whites' long-term political opposition to militarism, southern blacks' reluctance to serve a nation that refused to respect their rights, the peace witness of southern churches, and, above all, anger at class bias in federal conscription policies. Keith shows how draft dodgers' success in avoiding service resulted from the failure of southern states to create effective mechanisms for identifying and classifying individuals. Lacking local-level data on draft evaders, the federal government used agencies of surveillance both to find reluctant conscripts and to squelch antiwar dissent in rural areas.

Drawing upon rarely used local draft board reports, Selective Service archives, Bureau of Investigation reports, and southern political leaders' constituent files, Keith offers new insights into rural southern politics and society as well as the growing power of the nation-state in early twentieth-century America.

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