



**Simon P. Newman, ed.** *Europe's American Revolution*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. xvii + 201 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-8997-0.



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## Revolutionary Reverberations

The volume entitled *Europe's American Revolution* puts together the proceedings of a workshop at the conference of the European Association for American Studies held in Prague in April 2004. Scholars from European countries confronted their views and discussed the impact of the American Revolution on Europe's political thought and experience. The object was both ambitious and promising, since the participants refused to stick to old received values and questioned and measured the influence of the events of 1776 and 1787 on European soil. As recalled by Simon P. Newman in his introduction, Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first to celebrate the American experiment and extol the model of exceptionalism set by the newborn nation. At the outset is the apparent paradox of a groundbreaking event fought by people of European descent who chose to break with European traditions. Hence, a widely endorsed view of the Revolution is that it was a supranational event paving the way to other similar uprisings that took place on the European continent. It is precisely this construction of the Revolutionary War and its subsequent developments that this book challenges.

The Glaswegians, for instance, unexpectedly turned their backs on the social and economic turmoil in the New World, because it jeopardized their interests within a then powerful and affluent empire. Brad Jones provides a detailed and well-documented account of their reaction, against the backdrop of a thriving Atlantic trade badly hurt by the insurgents' misdemeanor. To combat this trend, the Scots developed a "patriotic imperial nationalism," fully and aptly analyzed by Jones, as a way to secure vested interests in the status quo (p. 2). This economic motive is further related to a religious concern following the French decision to enter the war alongside the Continentals. At that point, the Scots chose the side of British Protestantism against French Catholicism, thereby taking a distance with the values of the American Revolution that definitely failed to attract the sympathy of Glaswegians.

Similarly, Spaniards did not turn out to be first-hour admirers of the Revolutionary War. Spain had its own interests to defend in America that were specific to the old Catholic empire, and Anthony McFarlane's essay opens with a comparative study of New Spain and the British

colonies, giving the latter a clear advantage in terms of economic and social development. Spain, under the circumstances, had several options, and it might have saved its own empire overseas had it secured an alliance with the French to capitalize on the difficulties of the British crown. Despite solid reasons to side with the American rebels, first to protect its own possessions and then to emulate the superior model set by the British colonists, Spain missed the opportunity offered to her. This failure to seal an alliance with the French was, according to McFarlane, fatal to the Spanish presence and influence in the New World, while the values of the Enlightenment carried by the Revolution never seeped into Spanish society, so that the impact of the Revolution was virtually nonexistent.

The case of France is examined by Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, who deliberately chooses to analyze the issue from a historiographical angle. A longstanding tradition among French historians has been to analyze the French and American revolutions as two intimately connected events (e.g., Jacques Godechot, Andre Kaspi, and Claude Fohlen). Rossignol, particularly, emphasizes the originality of Elise Marienstras's approach, which integrated the contribution of radical historians, while "the French academic world remained impervious to these new interpretations of the American Revolution" (p. 53). Rossignol, then, examines with great accuracy the historiographical trend leading from the instrumentalization of the American Revolution to its virtual exclusion. She embarks on a bold, but risky, survey of "the complex history of the French Revolution in French historiography" from 1800 until 1989, to conclude that a new perspective might be offered to researchers, within the concept of the Atlantic world lately defined by American and British historians, to renew the analysis (p. 60).

The way the British saw the American Revolution was deeply influenced by Sir Denis Brogan (1900-74), whose views are fully analyzed by Newman, who stresses the contribution of Brogan to the development of American studies in post-World War II years. The universal value of the American Revolution was then celebrated as the study of American history became "an act of faith among British academics" (p. 82). Newman depicts the

disenchantment of British historians before the Bush administration's assault on American liberties, embodied by the Patriot Act and the systematic betrayal of the founding documents. His conclusion may sound overly pessimistic, but it certainly opens a fruitful debate about whether the "American Century" is over.

Csaba Levai gives a refreshing and original comparative study of Hungary within the Habsburg Empire and the colonies within the British Empire, with striking similarities between the two experiences, like the necessity of self-government or the issue of taxation. Levai convincingly demonstrates how much Hungarian patriots were influenced by American revolutionaries and how their common goals culminated with the drafting of the Hungarian declaration of independence of 1848 in a process that emulated the events of 1776. The rest of the essay is devoted to the changing perceptions of the American Revolution both in Hungary and Poland, from the nineteenth century to the fall of the Communist regimes, and it concludes that its star is now waning among the younger generations accustomed to democracy and pluralism.

In Germany, the impact of the American Revolution was also very limited, according to Thomas Clark, who develops his argument on solid evidence provided by a thorough knowledge of German constitutional thought. He argues that the events of 1776 and 1787 had little influence on German constitutionalism as the monarchical principle remained central to German liberalism. The most relevant concept, and one that deserves further analysis, is probably the distrust of the people shared by American federalists and German constitutionalists. The volume closes with Joseph Mullin's careful study of John Taylor of Caroline's "radical" options placed in the perspective of the modern debate on the European construction, followed by an essay by Andrew Pepper about the lack of interest of Hollywood for the American Revolution.

In conclusion, this is a rich volume teeming with rejuvenated views of the American Revolution and new insights into the concept of "American exceptionalism" that, by and large, seems to have lost most of its past luster.

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