

Larrie D. Ferreiro. *Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2016. xxv + 429 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-101-91030-6.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Stanley

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2018)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Larrie D. Ferreiro's *Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It* is a deeply researched study of the foreign contributions to the American War of Independence. His purpose is to demonstrate that the American Revolution did not occur in a vacuum and that its outcome was contingent upon an intricate web of transatlantic and even global events. Ferreiro's study contributes to a recent historiographical tradition aimed at undermining the classic American exceptionalist narrative about the American Revolution that suggests "America bootstrapped itself from colony to nation" and won its independence largely on its own (p. 335). Ferreiro makes a convincing argument that the upstart colonial militias and Continental army would not have been able to defeat the British without help from France and Spain. Furthermore, Ferreiro's work builds on a historiographical tradition that began several decades ago with the work of Jack Greene and continues in the more recent work of David Armitage, Trevor Burnard, Johnathan Dull, Wim Klooster, and others that takes an Atlantic perspective on American history. Specifically, Ferreiro places the American Revolution within an Atlantic world context by showing the ways in which political and diplomatic dynamics in Europe shaped the course and outcome of the American quest for independence.

Finally, Ferreiro dramatically reverses commonplace interpretations of the Declaration of Independence by suggesting that the founding document of the United States was addressed primarily not to the American public nor to George III of Great Britain, but to Louis XVI of France and Carlos III of Spain in order to gain their support for the American cause.

One of the greatest strengths of *Brothers at Arms* is the author's command of primary and secondary sources. Ferreiro's study is grounded in extensive archival research in the United States, Great Britain, France, and Spain, and it uses a variety of sources, including official government documents, correspondence, personal papers of major figures, and newspapers. Ferreiro also relies heavily on secondary sources to construct major parts of the basic narrative. Able to discuss British, French, Spanish, and American political, diplomatic, and military goals with extraordinary fluency, Ferreiro convincingly explains why France and Spain made the decision to aid the American cause, the method and manner of support they gave, and the value of their contribution to the American war effort. One of the highlights of Ferreiro's study is its ability to trace a contingent series of events around the world in intricate detail to show how all of the pieces connected. Whether tracing the flow of aid, troops, and

sailors from Europe to America, showing the impact of military engagements on land and sea in the Caribbean and other parts of the world on the war between Britain and its rebellious colonies, or even highlighting how a particularly devastating hurricane season in 1780 hamstrung the British navy providing Spain with a window of opportunity in the Caribbean, Ferreiro successfully places the American Revolution in a global context.

Brothers at Arms consists of an introduction and nine chapters. The organization is clear and effective. The first part of the book focuses more on the political and diplomatic history of the French and Spanish decisions to aid the American cause, while the latter part takes a military history approach to explain the impact of the French and Spanish contributions on the battlefield. The introduction establishes the central claim of the book, which is that the American Revolution needs to be understood as part of a larger world war in which France and Spain sought revenge against Great Britain for their defeat during the Seven Years' War. Ferreiro also uses the introduction to make the case for a reinterpretation of the purpose of the Declaration of Independence. According to Ferreiro's interpretation, the Declaration of Independence served primarily as "an engraved invitation to France and Spain asking them to go to war alongside the Americans" (p. xvi). Ferreiro supports his interpretation with convincing evidence in the form of quotes from correspondence among leading Founding Fathers to show that gaining the support of France and Spain in their fight against Britain was at the forefront of their minds when discussing the need for a Declaration of Independence. Chapter 1 explains the factors that led to war between Great Britain and its thirteen North American colonies, with emphasis on the aftermath of the Seven Years' War and France and Spain's lingering desire for revenge after incurring territorial losses under the Treaty of Paris. Ferreiro analyzes the geopolitical goals of France and Spain following

the Seven Years' War, and he shows how those governments kept their fingers on the pulse of events in British North America through official and unofficial spies and observers with the hope of eventually using a conflict there to secure their European political and diplomatic objectives—namely, undermining British supremacy and readjusting the balance of power on the continent.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the early stages of the conflict brewing between Great Britain and its American colonies, paying special attention to efforts by private foreign merchants to supply the American war effort and the debates within the French and Spanish governments about whether or not to formally support the American cause. Chapter 2 goes into great depth about the shortages of military equipment and supplies that the Americans faced and their efforts to tap into pre-existing foreign smuggling and trade contacts to meet their demands for weapons and ammunition. Ferreiro traces the flow of weapons and gunpowder from Dutch, French, and Spanish merchants into American hands in meticulous detail. In some cases, he even connects specific shipments of munitions to the battles in which they were used. This chapter contributes to the overall purpose of the book in a couple of ways. In keeping with the Atlantic world perspective, Ferreiro illustrates how the transatlantic trade networks that American merchants and smugglers relied on were mobilized to supply the war effort, which supports his effort to characterize the American Revolution as a global event. In support of his contention that the Americans would not have defeated the British without foreign support, Ferreiro points out how the shortage of gunpowder had cost the Americans on the battlefield and how vital shipments of foreign supplies had helped the Americans win major engagements, such as Saratoga. Chapter 3 discusses the aftermath of Saratoga and its impact on the French and Spanish decision to more fully support the American war effort. Although Saratoga is often seen as the

pivotal victory that convinced the French and Spanish to take a larger gamble on the upstart American cause, Ferreiro suggests that interpretation is oversimplified. He argues instead that the decision by France to entertain a Treaty of Alliance with the Americans was the result of a complex international situation in which France wanted to head off the possibility of a Spanish-Portuguese war in Europe by joining the American war effort, thereby keeping Great Britain's attention in North America. While failing to negotiate a formal treaty with American representatives, the next year Spain essentially declared war on Great Britain by authorizing Spanish attacks on British shipping. Ferreiro notes that "in the space of just one year, Britain had gone from fighting what it thought was a minor civil war in a distant colony, to waging a full-scale world war against its two mightiest adversaries" (p. 115).

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the impact of foreign soldiers and sailors that France and Spain contributed to the American cause. In chapter 4, Ferreiro makes an argument for the importance of foreign soldiers to the American war effort despite the early numerical advantage of the Continental army and colonial militias. In 1776, the British had twenty-seven thousand troops stationed in the thirteen colonies and Canada, while there were forty-seven thousand soldiers in the Continental army and an additional twenty-six thousand in colonial militias. As Ferreiro points out, though, the British held an advantage despite being outnumbered due to several factors. Most important, British troops were experienced and highly trained, while George Washington "had to build up, equip, and train his army and militia even as the war raged" (p. 118). Foreign soldiers would prove indispensable in helping to make up the training and skills gap. France in particular provided the services of engineers and artillerymen with knowledge of how to build fortifications, to conduct sieges, and to forge artillery. At Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-78, the Prussian drillmaster, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von

Steuben, played a key role in training and professionalizing the Continental army. Ferreiro does an excellent job in this chapter of highlighting the Atlantic world connections of the American Revolution by analyzing the role played in the drama by foreign soldiers and specialists from Europe, Saint-Domingue, Cuba, and Spanish Louisiana. Chapter 5 further contributes to Ferreiro's greater purpose of demonstrating the ways in which American victory was contingent upon foreign support by looking at the contributions of French and Spanish sailors. In this chapter, Ferreiro posits that "against the most powerful navy and merchant fleet on earth, the Continental Navy and its supporting privateers would prove to be little more than annoyances" (p. 170). French naval support "would change the fundamental nature of the war" by undermining British naval supremacy along the North American coast (p. 171).

Chapters 6-9 cover the end of the war and the legacy of the foreign contributions to the American victory. Chapters 6 and 7 explore the vital role of France and Spain in securing an American victory. Ferreiro's detailed analysis demonstrates how Spain's victory over the British in Florida and its subsequent control of the Gulf of Mexico in 1781 "gave America's French allies the liberty to array all of their naval forces against the British at the most critical moment of the war, the battles of the Chesapeake and Yorktown" (p. 256). Ferreiro then covers in painstaking detail the French contribution to the surrender of British General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, citing the contributions on land of French troops under the command of Comte Jean-Baptiste de Rochambeau and Marquis de Lafayette and on sea of the French navy commanded by Vice Admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse. In keeping with the book's global perspective on the American Revolution, chapter 8 discusses the end of the war not only in America but also in the Caribbean, Asia, and Europe. Finally, chapter 9 analyzes the legacy of the foreign contributions to the American Revolution. Ferreiro reminds us of the role that some French

and Spanish volunteers to the American Revolution would later play in such events as the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the independence movements in Latin America.

Overall, *Brothers at Arms* is an impressive work that will serve as the definitive account of the role of France and Spain in the American Revolution for many years to come. With magisterial command of diplomatic and military history on both sides of the Atlantic, Ferreiro elucidates the webs that connected American revolutionaries to major and minor figures within the French and Spanish empires with remarkable clarity and detail. His work definitively places the American Revolution in a broader transatlantic context, explaining how the diplomatic situation in Europe and the rivalry of European empires in the Caribbean and North America determined the outcome of the United States' quest for independence. For a work of such impressive scope, any errors or omissions are few and far between and do not detract substantially from the richness and depth of the book. While not the first study to take a transatlantic perspective on the American Revolution, Ferreiro's work nevertheless makes a valuable contribution to the field, and readers will appreciate the author's ability to weave so many threads into the narrative to show just how deep the American Revolution's global connections were.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Jeffrey Stanley. Review of Ferreiro, Larrie D. *Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51946>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.