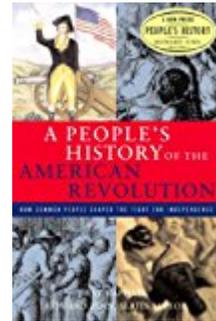


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ray Raphael. *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence*. New Press People's History Series. Reprint edition. New York: New Press, 2016. viii + 386 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-62097-183-3.



Reviewed by Robert T. Jones (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Gordon Campus)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Ray Raphael's *A People's History of the American Revolution* is a superb example of the "history from the bottom up" approach to historical writing. Originally published in 2001 and reprinted many times since then, this book remains an important scholarly work that broadens our understanding of the American Revolution. As the title suggests, Raphael examines the revolutionary experience as seen through the eyes of the common people who fought and won our nation's independence. Aimed at a broad audience, this book offers a more complete picture of the struggle that supplements the most common perspective of "great people, great events." For historians, the work offers much to consider that may drive a reinterpretation of our traditional understanding of the revolutionary years.

The scope and content of Raphael's work is apparent from the outset. The author makes it clear in the introduction that his context is "the people," vice the privileged classes around which most revolutionary narratives revolve. As his intent is to present the common experience, Raphael is careful to define exactly who the common people were. During our nation's formative period, "the body of the people" (a phrase that he uses) were usually considered to be white, male, and property owners: in essence, those who held the vote, and therefore

political power. To get at the root of the common experience, Raphael's focus is on those with no little or no societal privileges and no political standing. While he acknowledges some overlap (for example, white male property owners who fought in the Revolution), he devotes the majority of his attention to those with no political influence: women, slaves, indigenous peoples, and even loyalists. With this in mind, the author's true purpose is revealed. He takes on the popular imagery (and by extension popular memory) that remains prevalent today by taking into account the human costs of the American Revolution.

The author organizes the work into topical chapters. Chapters 1 through 6 address rank-and-file rebels, fighting men, women, loyalists and pacifists, Native Americans, and African Americans respectively. In the final chapter (chapter 7), Raphael ties together his discussion of the previous social groupings into what he describes as "the body of the people." This concluding chapter could serve equally well as an introduction to the book. Throughout each chapter, the author weaves a sometimes fascinating, but always enlightening first-person narrative of the "everyday" experience. He draws on a wide array of extant primary sources, including letters, diaries, memoirs, journals, newspapers, and pension records. His

choice of subject matter ranges from the well-known account of soldier Joseph Plumb Martin to the completely obscure. Raphael supplements these narratives with a good selection of scholarly secondary sources, especially in the areas of women, loyalists, slaves, and Native Americans.

In sum, Raphael's *A People's History of the American Revolution* is a valuable and essential addition to the historiography of the American Revolution. Its strengths are many and weaknesses comparatively few. The book is carefully researched and richly documented, offering a treasure trove of both common and rarely seen sources. Raphael presents a compelling narrative to synthesize

his source material, even with relatively sparse material, such as that concerning the Native Americans. His presentation of sometimes long passages may be tedious at times for some readers, but also a delight for those who enjoy reading original materials. The book does not offer much in the way of analysis nor is it an all-encompassing history of the Revolution, but that is not the author's purpose. Raphael's assessment of the impact of the war in particular and the Revolution in general on the common person is the real value of his work. The book goes a long way toward enabling a more comprehensive understanding of many unexplored facets of our nation's struggle for independence.

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