



**Rob Harper.** *Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 272 pp. \$47.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4964-4.

**Reviewed by** Daniel Barr (Robert Morris University)

**Published on** H-Pennsylvania (October, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Jeanine Mazak-Kahne (Indiana University of Pennsylvania)

The late colonial/early national Ohio River Valley has provided ample fruit for historians of the American frontier. Here a phalanx of scholars has sought to assess the nature of colonization and settlement, the interactions of natives and newcomers, and the process of constructing state controls over contested ground. The region's history has been (at least in part) the subject of many important studies, including Richard's White's *The Middle Ground* (1991), Michael McConnell's *A Country Between* (1997), Erik Hinderaker's *Elusive Empires* (1999), and Patrick Griffin's *American Leviathan* (2008). Rob Harper, in his concise, superbly written new book, *Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley*, builds upon these earlier studies while also challenging some of their conclusions to offer a revisionist interpretation of the colonization of the first American West.

Like many historians before him, Harper, an associate professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, seeks to understand the roots and nature of violence along the revolutionary Ohio Valley frontier. Contrary to many prevailing interpretations, Harper argues that the violence and warfare that characterized the revolutionary Ohio Valley were not children of chaos arising from an overall lack of institutional controls along the frontier, but, "rather than springing from the state absence, the horrors of the period

stemmed from government's intrusive presence" (p. 1). In so doing, Harper seeks to unravel the somewhat mythical visage of the independent frontiersman "who hungered for land and bristled at government meddling" (p. 1). This "bottom-up" explanation of the violence that plagued the region is popular, but ultimately wrong, Harper contends. While natives and newcomers did at times express a deep-seated dislike or distrust of each other, Harper finds that they mostly coexisted in the absence of larger political machinations. Although misunderstandings and violence "often sprang from everyday interactions," they were sporadic, personal, and largely unorganized, rarely escalating into all-out war (p. 4). This was because in the absence of state agendas and restrictive institutions, "diverse groups of people attempted to attain, content, and manipulate power in a place where competing governments wielded some influence but little actual authority" (p. 21). This produced a fragile and shifting system of coalition building where sustained violence found few natural outlets. Rather it was when imperial, national, and state entities attempted to impose their authority over the Ohio Valley that sporadic, limited violence escalated to horrific levels. "To be sure, colonists and Indians often killed each other on their own initiative," Harper concludes, "but most large-scale violence took place as part of, or

because of, government-funded or government-led operations” (p. 175).

Harper’s argument is nuanced, carefully constructed, and ultimately quite persuasive. He demonstrates that state authority in the Ohio Valley was highly unstable during the Revolutionary era, during which numerous polities and power-brokers engaged in a contest for control of the land, its resources, and its varied peoples for their own ends. Yet these outside forces could not impose their designs upon the region without the consent and cooperation of the colonists and Indians living there. While colonists, in particular, sought state aid and assistance (when it aligned with their own interests), “they rarely submitted meekly to official dictates ... colonists drove off tax collectors, seized land preemptively, and flouted the orders of military superiors” (p. 174). Yet colonists increasingly came to rely on the state to provide resources and protection, which turn expanded and solidified state authority. Governments provided arms, ammunition, and incentive for both colonists and Indians to expand the scope of violence in the region. All too often, the result was horrific.

Harper delineates this central theme consistently and effectively through the book’s six chapters, organized chronologically from the prerevolutionary events of the 1760s through the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. Although he uses “Ohio Valley” in his title, the region under investigation might more specifically be labeled the upper Ohio Valley, as much of his analysis falls on the contested border region that became western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and eastern Ohio. Indeed, many of the seminal events that Harper discusses—including Dunmore’s War in 1774 and the 1782 Gnadenthutten Massacre—fall within this more restrictive geographic area. His source materials, on the other hand, cover a wide and diverse landscape, ranging from a host of colonial and revolutionary archival sources through leading contemporary and secondary works. All are elegantly woven into of a surprisingly brief but engaging narrative. In short,

Harper’s book is a significant new piece of scholarship on the early American frontier. Selected undergraduates, graduate students, and specialists alike will find much to ponder and debate in its pages.

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

**Citation:** Daniel Barr. Review of Harper, Rob. *Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley*. H-Pennsylvania, H-Net Reviews. October, 2019.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53154>



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