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John A. Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks: Mutinies of the American Revolution*. Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2008. Pp. xix, 386. ISBN 978-1-59416-055-4.

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In *Rebellion in the Ranks*, John A. Nagy, documents specialist and consultant for the University of Michigan's Clements Library,¹ provides new insights into the great difficulties of keeping state militias in continental service and of keeping the Continental Army and Navy in being. Military leaders had to forge an army from volunteer farmers, frontiersmen, shopkeepers, and tradesmen—mostly young men unaccustomed to taking orders from strangers trying to impose on them an unfamiliar discipline. Nagy stresses the incredible hardships that American forces faced both during and just after the conflict, hardships that pushed troops to the limits of human endurance. Irregular pay and a chronic lack of adequate clothing and food led to discipline problems that ranged from “mumbling” to insubordination and even organized uprisings. While Revolutionary War officers referred to practically all of these offenses as mutinies, Nagy narrows his focus to direct threats of revolt and actual armed rebellions. The book contributes valuable information to the study of the American Revolution, but it also includes some surprising errors.

Nagy has mined manuscript collections in the United States and Great Britain as well as some scholarly monographs to craft a vivid narrative. Particularly rewarding is the story of the Pennsylvania Line mutiny, the highlight of the book. Nagy brings this familiar tale alive with well-chosen, subtle detail.

January 1, 1781, was a quiet day of seasonable temperature. No one foresaw the eruption that would take place among the troops that night. A reorganization of the Continental Army had taken effect on New Year's Day. Everyone knew it meant some of the officers would be leaving as their jobs had been eliminated. Since it was the last time the officers of the regiment expected to be all together, they had an elegant regimental dinner and entertainment. All the officers were present partaking in the festivities.... The noncommissioned soldiers of the Pennsylvanians believed that this was going to be their last day together, and that was the main topic of conversation. The terms of their enlistments were up and they had not received any reenlistment bounty money or clothing. Adding to the unrest and discontent were copies of Sir Henry Clinton's proclamation offering free pardons to those who would return to the royal standard. These pardons would have been sneaked into the American camp over the weekend by British spies (77).

Nagy also includes chapters on mutinies in the Continental Navy, discussing the difficulty of maintaining shipboard discipline and order. Since many able-bodied seamen preferred to serve on privateers in hopes of capturing a ship and sharing in the prize money, the regular navy had problems locating recruits with the necessary maritime skills. One solution was to offer naval enlistments to captured British sailors or simply to impress them into the newly created U.S. Navy. Unsurprisingly, these reluctant sailors were often disrespectful and disloyal. Some even mutinied, took control of American vessels, and then sailed back to safe harbors in the British Isles where the ships and their cargos became prizes and their former shipmates became prisoners of war.

In an effort to make his work truly comprehensive, Nagy includes a chapter on armed uprisings among the British and their allies on land and sea. We learn that the sources of irritation and unrest among these men included insufficient supervision by officers, irregular pay, and poor equipment—some of the very same problems that beset American troops. Scottish Highlander regiments proved to be the most unruly in the British army, and American loyalist militiamen were frequent troublemakers. Although the German mercenaries in Britain's service were well-known for their military discipline, they too occasionally mutinied, but less often than soldiers from the British Isles and not in the colonial combat zone. Nagy also notes

1. He is also the founder and president of the American Revolution Round Table of Philadelphia.

that most British mutinies took place in the United Kingdom, Europe, or in Atlantic or Caribbean waters, not North America. Like the U.S. Navy, the British also impressed captured enemy sailors, who at times staged shipboard rebellions. And, too, the “British Navy had a major desertion problem...”(286).

Nagy adds valuable appendixes that supply: dates, locations, causes of uprisings, and names of rebellious regiments or ships; additional information on the Pennsylvania Line mutiny; names of the rebels of the U.S. brig *Cabot*; the letter that circulated among Continental officers at Newburgh, New York, sparking the famous Newburgh Conspiracy; General Washington’s address to those officers; and the 1783 proclamation by Elias Boudinot (then the President of Congress) regarding rebellious troops in Philadelphia and the relocation of the seat of government to Princeton, New Jersey. According to the data presented here, during the Revolution, fifty-six major mutinies occurred in the Continental Army, twenty-nine in the Continental Navy, and the same number among his majesty’s troops.

Unfortunately, *Rebellion in the Ranks* contains many flaws. The bibliography omits significant works relevant to the subject. For example, Nagy makes no reference to Carl Van Doren’s *Mutiny in January*,² the seminal work on the mutinies of the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Line troops. Nor does he cite either significant articles in scholarly journals or any pertinent dissertations. These might have furnished useful information about soldiers’ lives and behavior. Nagy offers little explanation for why there were fewer rebellions in the ranks of British troops than in those of their American counterparts. Might some English malcontents (and would-be mutiny leaders) have been distracted by rich pickings in America and thus too busy scrambling for booty to plot rebellions? Perhaps not, but a better knowledge of the existing scholarship could only have strengthened Nagy’s thesis and the history he presents.³

The book also suffers from inadequate editing. The same information is repeated in different places. There is no indication of the relevance of (consequently) gratuitous and distracting information about ages, birthdays, birthplaces, civilian occupations, former residences, hair and eye color, promotions in rank, and property ownership. Thick description, as David Hackett Fischer⁴ and David McCullough⁵ have so ably demonstrated, can bring history to life, but the mere inclusion of factoids and trivia does not make for good historical writing. Why, for example, describe the handsome décor of Princeton University’s Nassau Hall before the war (87–88) or devote paragraphs to the Dutch settlement of Staten Island and the English conquest and early administration of New York or to the origins of the village name “New Dorp” (121)? The surfeit of unnecessary detail only impairs clarity. Meanwhile, things that should be explained often are not: few readers will know that a “snow” is a small sailing vessel like a brig, normally used by merchants but sometimes serving as a warship (242).

Editorial defects are also conspicuous in pervasive grammatical and spelling errors, miscapitalizations, possessives in place of plurals, and an excess of the passive voice. Dates and times appear in a variety of formats, often on the same page.

Despite its slipshod scholarship and overabundant tangential material, *Rebellion in the Ranks* does present new information on naval mutinies and British and Hessian rebellions. Of value as well is the data assembled in the appendixes. But, sadly, a little attentive editing for both style and substance would have made this a much better book.

2. NY: Viking, 1943.

3. Stephen Conway, “The Great Mischief Complain’d of’: Reflections on the Misconduct of British Soldiers in the Revolutionary War,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (1990) 370–90, would have been helpful here. Conway argues that British troops in the colonies posed discipline problems of another sort—they were fond of plundering.

4. *Paul Revere’s Ride* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1994) and *Washington’s Crossing* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2004).

5. *1776* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005).