



Occupied America: British Military Rule and the Experience of Revolution

by Donald F. Johnson.

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For nearly two and a half centuries, historians have argued over what portion of the American colonial population actually supported the Revolutionary War. Though a definitive answer does not exist, conventional wisdom has it that a third of the population was supportive, a third pro-British, and a third neutral and just trying to live their lives. The same proportions have often been adopted to gauge a given population's commitment in modern-day counterinsurgency conflicts. In *Occupied America*, historian Donald Johnson (North Dakota State Univ.) takes a different position. In his view,

failure of British imperial authority in America did not come with the drafting of the Declaration of Independence or the Continental Army's victory at Yorktown; rather, the failure occurred gradually in the course of the ordinary lives of ordinary people. As occupations wore on, those living under military rule alternately accommodated, collaborated with, took advantage of, and subverted the structures of royal authority during their day-to-day lives. As they did so, royal authority's grip on their allegiance weakened to the point where, by the end of the war, and for a majority of city dwellers, it no longer even existed. (15)

The book's first four chapters discuss life in cities governed by Revolutionary officials, collaborative governance under British military and American loyalist officials, British military governance, and problems common to all three. In so doing, its author uses relevant primary documents like diaries, letters, and public records to give a sense of personal experiences. His narrative concentrates on six occupied port cities: Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Newport, Charleston, and Savannah. Johnson particularly highlights information on (mostly bad) issues faced by runaway slaves and women in these governance situations.

In chapter 5, "Ambiguous Allegiances," Johnson (unsurprisingly) claims that "Men and women living in occupied zones chose sides for a variety of reasons, both personal and ideological, and often changed their loyalties as circumstances shifted" (138). He then devotes ca. twenty pages to specific examples, using material drawn from the loyalist press, British Government proclamations, and petitions to the Crown for reimbursement of losses incurred because of loyalty to the King. He points out the frustration of British administrative officials and military officers over the fact that city dwellers, even as they swore loyalty to the Crown, were ambiguous in their motives and actions. He cites the Yorktown victory as illustrative:

Yorktown did not change hearts and minds on its own. Rather, it triggered a sea change in political identity that had long been simmering under the surface. Absent the prospect of military victory making permanent the social and material benefits that British military rulers promised in exchange for allegiance, the vocabulary of loyalism, already stretched thin by overuse, finally failed. (140)

The volume's sixth and final chapter, "Making Peace," clarifies how various groups and individuals handled either relocation by the British or reintegration back into American society once the peace was made. German mercenaries often deserted into the American countryside where they could own land and live more prosperously than in their home country. Johnson also wonders why some loyalists were permitted to remain, citing the printer James Rivington, apparently unaware that Rivington had cooperated with the Culper Spy Ring during the later years of British occupation and thus gained "official" approval to remain.

An epilogue, "Forgetting Occupation," critiques the nationalist school of Revolutionary War writings for depicting the war in rather black and white terms, the British being the blackest of intentional bad actors throughout the war. This simplistic type of history is well known to serious students of the war.

Johnson does end, however on a positive note: "the survivors of occupation who remained in the new United States did not forget their experiences, nor the relationships they had forged in wartime with people across the Atlantic" (190). This, he believes, was the origin the vaunted "special relationship" between the United States and Great Britain. The truth is more complicated, but his point is taken.

Donald Johnson's well researched and documented study of the governance of six British-occupied cities makes a welcome contribution to Revolutionary history. But, he does not fully prove its thesis. Historical research indicates that the political actions of the Continental Congress and the military actions of the Continental Army had more to do with building support for the American cause than did the experiences of the inhabitants of six occupied cities.