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Abstract

In the modern United States, the military is respected and honored by the public and military leaders alike. However, during the American Revolution, society was not yet convinced that having a standing army was necessary or beneficial to the Republic. The Continental Army was heavily contested during the war and conflicted with the civilians and its commanders alike. This paper follows the trend of other social histories by investigating just how these conflicts played out and how the common soldier navigated them.

Keywords

Revolutionary War, Continental Army, George Washington

Disciplines

Military History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Written for HIST 342: Revolutionary America

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The American Soldier:
The Contested Existence of the Continental Army

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Dr. Shannon

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When one thinks of the Revolutionary War and the soldiers who won it, images of brave patriot minutemen grabbing their powder horns and muskets as they rush out the door probably appear. Or perhaps George Washington posing heroically as he leads his men across the Delaware River come to mind. These images inspire patriotism and present the forces of the revolution as unified and uncomplaining mass of brave patriots, but this conception is flawed. Instead, the Continental Army which formed the core of the military power of the burgeoning nation¹, was a controversial organization. The Continental Army's relationships with the public and the military authorities in charge of it were fraught with disagreements on every level, with many questioning the very existence of the Army.

This paper seeks to address the question: How did the Continental Army, the public, and its commanders perceive each other and in which ways did they clash? In order to answer this question, the Continental Army as an organization will be discussed before the investigation into its relationships. This paper will use primary accounts of the war to highlight these relationships and provide concrete evidence for them. The American public and the command of the Continental Army saw the Continental Army as a potential threat to the republic and a band of dangerous ruffians. On the other hand, the soldiers who made up the army felt equally negative feelings towards American civilians they interacted with and their commanders. The common soldiers expressed feelings of neglect and alienation which they acted on by stealing from the public, staging mutinies, or deserting.

It is necessary to define exactly what is meant by "Continental Army". When this essay refers to the Continental Army, it refers to the regular troops that were under the overall

¹ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed : Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, Rev. ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 171.

command of George Washington during the war. It excludes militiamen, irregulars, native allies, and regular French soldiers who fought alongside Americans because their experiences of the war were impacted by other factors and likely would have been very different. In essence, this essay is designed to examine exactly how the Continental Army as an organization was viewed by their fellow Americans and visa versa.

The Continental Army has been the subject of scholarship for a very long time and has been studied extensively. Charles Royster, author of: *A Revolutionary People at War: the Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783*, used an interdisciplinary approach when examining the army. Reflecting on the New Social History that emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century, Royster approached the Continental Army as an embodiment of the ideology of the Revolution and he examined the lives of the common soldiers who filled its ranks. Royster also filled an important gap in the narrative of the Continental Army by pulling together a history of the Revolution, the Army, and the American character.² Similar themes are present in Johnathan Chandler and John Ruddiman's works on the Army.³ Chandler's in-depth focus on desertion examined the personal side of desertion and asked why and how soldiers would leave the Army. Ruddiman's work is centered around the experiences of young men in the Army and also dedicated a significant

² Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: the Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

³ Jonathan Chandler, "'To Become Again Our Brethren': Desertion and Community During the American Revolutionary War, 1775–83," *Historical Research : the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 90, no. 248 (2017): 363–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12183>. And John A. Ruddiman, *Becoming Men of Some Consequence : Youth and Military Service in the Revolutionary War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

portion of his work to investigating how the public and the Army interacted, arguing that their relationship was tenuous at best.⁴ John Shy also focused on social history, citing specific examples like the case of “Long Bill” Scott to show how the army was viewed and who served in it. Shy also looked into how the high command of the Continental Army was fractured over the best way to utilize it, exemplified by the feud between Charles Lee and George Washington.⁵

While social history has taken centerstage in the discussion of the Continental Army in the last few decades, some authors continued to focus on military history, whether that be “new” military history⁶ or “old” military history⁷. The new military history, exemplified by Martin and Lender’s book, *“A Respectable Army” The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* focuses on a bottom-up perspective that emphasizes the experiences of the common soldier, combining social and military history. Old military history, like Robert Wright’s *The Continental Army*, tends to reduce soldiers to regiments and brigades and dedicates more attention to the exploits of the commanders and officers of the military, essentially presenting a top-down perspective. Both approaches have merit, and the arguments of new military historians like James Martin and Mark Lender have added greatly to the discussion and are invaluable for determining what life in the Army was like.

⁴ John A. Ruddiman, *Becoming Men of Some Consequence*, 90-116.

⁵ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed : Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, Rev. ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

⁶ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *“A Respectable Army” The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789*, 3rd ed. (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2015)

⁷ Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1983)

Utilizing the heavy focus on social history found in these sources, this project will expand upon the experience of the everyday soldier in the army while also taking a comprehensive look at how the Army was perceived and how it interacted within society.

Born in Fire: The Birth of the Continental Army

In May 1775, the militia force that had gathered in Massachusetts after the Battle of Lexington and Concord was reorganized into the Continental Army and placed under the overall command of the venerable General George Washington.⁸ The army was undisciplined, unorganized, and comprised of volunteer citizen-soldiers who had signed up for very short, one-year enlistments. In his diary of the war, Joseph Plumb Martin recalled, “Soldiers were at this time [1776] enlisting for a year’s service. I did not like that; it was too long a time for me at the first trial. I wished only to take a priming before I took upon me the whole coat of paint for a soldier.”⁹ Martin’s patriotic yet noncommittal attitude towards the war reflects the so-called *rage militaire* present at the beginning of the war. Despite the excitement for the war and the early successes of American forces, fewer men than expected were willing to dedicate themselves fully to the war. Americans wanted to experience the glory of military service without having to deal with the harsh realities of army life.

While some men joined the army out of patriotic fervor or idealism, many joined for purely selfish reasons. In an interview after being captured at the Battle of Bunker Hill, Lieutenant William “Long Bill” Scott of the Continental Army declared, “When the Rebellion came on, I saw some of my Neighbors get into Commission, who were not better

⁸ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, “*A Respectable Army*”, 39.

⁹ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, ed. James Kirby Martin (Newark: John Wiley and Sons, Incorporated, 2012), 12.

than myself. I was very ambitious, & did not like to see those Men above me... These Sir! were the only Motives of my entering into the Service.”¹⁰ It is rather surprising that, despite Scott’s self-proclaimed ambivalence towards the ideology of the Revolution, Scott returned to the Army after his imprisonment and continued to participate for the rest of the war. John Shy characterizes Scott as, “not a typical participant, but one of a small ‘hard core’ of revolutionary fighters – the men who stayed in the army for more than a few months of a single campaign.... Most of the hard core remained privates, and they were an unusually poor, obscure group of men.”¹¹ Shy argues that the “hard core” of the Continental Army was not made of average, middle-class militiamen, but rather was drawn from the lower fringes of society. Martin and Lender note, “Very few propertied, middle-class citizens, after feeling the reverberations of the 1776 campaign, wanted anything to do with service in the Continental Army.”¹² While many men fought in or with the Continental Army during the war, it was men like Scott who stayed in uniform for the long-haul and who made up the committed core that kept the Continental Army fighting. Without a dedicated core, the Army would have probably withered away into nothing, leaving the fighting to the militia.

Another large, yet unsurprising, demographic that made up the Continental Army was young men. Ruddiman writes, “Soldiering was an obligation of manhood – and yet it was a rule that largely fell to young men before they achieved full adult independence.”¹³ Young men were not too different from the poor and obscure men that Shy describes, many lived with their families and had not had yet married or settled down. They were essentially an expendable group in society that had few obligations or reasons not to fight. Joseph Plumb

¹⁰ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 168.

¹¹ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 171-172.

¹² James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, “*A Respectable Army*”, 69.

¹³ John A. Ruddiman, *Becoming Men of Some Consequence*, 17.

Martin, a mere teenager at the time of his first enlistment, serves as example of a young man who joined the Army. Unlike Scott, he came from some money and had lived with his wealthy grandfather before joining the Army. Martin describes his family as “wealthy, and I had everything that was necessary for life, and as many superfluities as was consistent with my age and station.”¹⁴ Similarly to Scott, Martin’s decision to reenlist with the army for the duration of the war was not motivated by patriotism, but rather he was coerced by recruiters and money. Martin, who joined the Army as a replacement for others in his town, recalled, “I thought, as I must go, I might as well endeavor to get as much for my skin as I could; I told them that I would go for them and fixed upon a day when I would meet them and clinch the bargain.”¹⁵ Martin’s reluctance to join the Army displays the considerations that every American had to face when confronted with the choice to enlist. He knew exactly what enlisting in the Continental Army would mean and he based his choice on the belief that he would eventually find his way into the Army, and he could at least make some money if he went as a replacement. Martin’s experience joining the Army appears to have been, if not the norm, far more common than one would expect. Clearly, the image of patriots enlisting to fight for freedom and liberty does not quite reflect the far more complex and nuanced reality of the Continental Army.

The New Model Army: Public Perceptions and Fears

During the early days of the war, the creation of a Continental Army was highly controversial. Two major camps formed on the issue, one, led by George Washington

¹⁴ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, 4.

¹⁵ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, 41.

advocated for a permanent, long term, and professional army while the other camp, headed primarily by Samuel Adams, wanted to rely on irregular militia to fight the war. The argument utilized by those who opposed the creation of the Continental Army was centered around the fear of a standing army. Martin and Lender explain, “Adams, Wilson, and others worried openly about the risks of “new modeling” the Continentals. They recalled Oliver Cromwell’s highly efficient, thoroughly disciplined Puritan Army which had, in time, become an agent of oppression.”¹⁶ The fear of a “new model Continental Army” reveals an interesting dimension to the revolution, as it illustrates how the civilian government viewed the army as a necessary evil and something that could, if left unchecked, become a force of oppression. The connection with Cromwell is also important because it implies that the leaders of the Continental Congress were looking forward in time and predicting that a professional force raised in the name of liberty might be used by the commanders of the Army to take those very liberties away. In short, many American leaders feared that they would be replacing a British tyrant with an American one of their own creation.

The early successes of the militia-filled Continental Army of 1776 bolstered the argument that militia could win the war. Robert Wright, in his book *The Continental Army*, states:

The rhetoric of protest against British policy had strongly denied the need for a large ‘standing army’ of regular soldiers in America on the grounds that the colonial militia forces, composed of virtuous citizen-soldiers, were perfectly adequate for local defense. The outbreak of hostilities in Massachusetts did not change this attitude. Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill only seemed to confirm the validity of that assumption.¹⁷

¹⁶ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, “*A Respectable Army*”, 75.

¹⁷ Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army*, 43.

Eventually the defeats during the ill-fated New York Campaign later that year would force civilian authorities to recognize that unprofessional militia alone could not win the war. Washington argued that, “Patriots could not have it both ways; winning the war against British regulars required discipline and, in Washington’s mind, a core of malleable, long-term enlistees.”¹⁸ Congress caved to Washington’s suggestions and authorized a much larger force with longer enlistments of three years or the war’s duration.¹⁹ This allowed Washington to finally develop the professional, standing army that he needed to win the war, but it did not completely assuage the public’s fears.

At the time of the Revolutionary War, the general public was also skeptical and fearful of the Continental Army. Ruddiman notes that the public also viewed the Army as a threat to American society, writing, “This language of difference between soldier and civilian readily mixed with elite political fears that hired, professional soldiers would endanger the cause of liberty.”²⁰ Once again, the engrained fear of a standing army appears, demonstrating just how pervasive and powerful this sentiment was. The Army was also viewed as a foreign body that was made up of the fringes of society. Ruddiman points out that, “soldiers hired for longer and distant deployments were younger, poorer, and more marginal – and the social quality of such recruits only declined as the war persisted... they were also not seen as the most trustworthy element of the people.”²¹ Americans were wary of the Continental Army partially because they did not trust the people who filled its ranks, viewing their lack of status and wealth as a sign of their lack of moral standing. Joseph Plumb Martin describes in his diary an encounter he had with a Pennsylvanian woman and her daughter during a foraging

¹⁸ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, “*A Respectable Army*”, 74.

¹⁹ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, “*A Respectable Army*”, 76.

²⁰ John A. Ruddiman, *Becoming Men of Some Consequence*, 93.

²¹ John A. Ruddiman, *Becoming Men of Some Consequence*, 93.

mission: “The teamster was praising the child, extolling its gentleness and quietness, when the mother observed that it had been quite cross and crying all day. ‘I have been threatening,’ said she, ‘to give her to the Yankees.’” The teamster jokingly replies that he has a Yankee with him, and the woman remarks how she could not tell the difference between Martin and a Pennsylvanian.²² This encounter demonstrates that some civilians viewed the Continentals as boogymen, scary and evil creatures to threaten their misbehaving children with. This further echoes the idea that the Army was feared and seen as an alienated part of society. Had the woman known that Martin was a Continental soldier, she probably would not have been so friendly.

In addition to viewing the Continental Army as morally questionable and a potential threat to liberty, it was also seen as a burden upon society. Civilians were expected to help supply the Army, but they were reluctant to give away their food to the desperate soldiers. Ruddiman states, “Military necessity required Washington’s army to collect needed supplies through foraging. Ostensibly, soldiers bought these supplies from farmers and paid for them with certificates. Civilians saw little difference between outright theft and these paper promises.”²³ The feeling of neglect and abuse appears to have been mutual between the Army and the public. Because the army felt neglected by their countrymen, the soldiers of the Continental Army often resorted to theft and plundering in order to obtain the supplies they felt were being withheld from them. Royster remarks, “Despite sporadic voluntary efforts, like the temporary relief of shortages at Valley Forge or the women’s charity drive in 1780, Continentals knew that the public’s negligence lay at the heart of the army’s hardship.”²⁴

²² Joseph Plumb Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, 74.

²³ John A. Ruddiman, *Becoming Men of Some Consequence*, 95.

²⁴ Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 295.

While ambivalence to the suffering of the soldiers may have been widespread, not everyone displayed such hatred towards the Army as illustrated by Joseph Plumb Martin's testimony in his diary. During the winter at Valley Forge in 1778, Martin remarked on his duties to procure supplies for the army:

I had to travel far and near, in cold and storms, by day and by night, and at all times to run the *risk* of abuse, if not injury, from the inhabitants when *plundering* them of their property (for I could not, while in the act of taking their cattle, hay, corn, and grain from them against their wills, consider it a whit better than plundering – sheer privateering). But I will give them the credit of never receiving the least abuse of injury from an individual during the whole time I was employed in this business. [Italics are original to the text]²⁵

Martin's experience reveals that, while he managed to avoid any abuse or injury from the inhabitants, he was keenly aware of the potential for violence or hatred. He also lamented that he had to “plunder” the homes of the local farmers, illustrating that the Army was just as unhappy to have to resort to thievery as the public was to bear the burden.

Subordination and Disobedience: The Commanders' View

In addition to clashes with civilians, the Continental Army also suffered much internal strife between the soldiers and the overall command headed by General George Washington. There were constant problems with supply, pay, and living conditions that often manifested in protests, mutinies, or outright desertions. There were also disagreements within the high command of the army about what it would look like and how it should operate.

George Washington famously once said, “To place any dependence upon militia is assuredly resting upon a broken staff.”²⁶ As previously noted, the Continental Army at the

²⁵ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, 74.

²⁶ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, “*A Respectable Army*”, 45.

beginning of the war was mostly made up of untrained militiamen. Washington was skeptical of the usefulness of the militia and in 1776 he wanted to institute a greater degree of commitment into the army. Wright writes:

Washington's first concern was the weakness of so many of the Massachusetts regiments. Calling out militia to supplement the Main Army did not appear to be a viable policy. The generals unanimously agreed "that no Dependence can be put on the Militia for a continuance in Camp, or Regularity and Discipline during the short time they may stay."²⁷

The dependence upon unreliable militia troops to fill out the army was immediately identified as a problem and Washington intended to turn his army of militia into an army of regulars. However, the controversial and cantankerous General Charles Lee argued otherwise, advocating against a large European style standing army and in favor of bands of guerilla militia units. Lee thought that Americans were ideally suited for irregular combat because, "The military virtues of a free people were different in kind from those in a peasant army, he observed, and military organization and tactics had to take account of the differences."²⁸ Lee's convictions only strengthened after the disastrous New York campaign of 1776 and, rejecting Washington's professionalization of the Army, he called for more resources to be dedicated to supporting the militia. Shy summarizes Lee's stance, writing that he believed, "Militiamen had to be encouraged, they had to be organized, and they had to be supported by Continental troops until there were enough active militia units to support one another."²⁹ In Lee's mind, the Continental Army would not be the main fighting force that opposed the British, rather it would be small scale actions by militia that would wear the British down and lead to victory.

²⁷ Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army*, 45.

²⁸ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 147.

²⁹ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 151.

Lee also thought that Americans had great potential to be good soldiers and focused on winning over his men. Shy writes, “He was obsessed with the idea of maintaining the morale of his men and creating the proper attitude among the civilian population.”³⁰ This type of care and patriotism was not seen in the actions of Washington and highlights that Lee appeared to make his men a top priority. Despite his dedication, Lee’s plan to rally the militia failed and he, like many soldiers in the Continental Army, chafed under Washington’s command. Lee was also captured for a significant portion of the war, preventing him from implementing his strategy in any meaningful way.

Another source of contention and conflict between common soldiers and their commanders was the aforementioned poor conditions suffered by the Army. The conditions were so bad during the infamous winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge that Washington reported in a letter to Patrick Henry, “I fear I shall wound your feelings by telling you that a Feild [sic] Return on the 23d Inst. Had in Camp not less than 2898 Men unfit for duty by reason of their being bare foot & otherwise naked.”³¹ Washington clearly worried about the conditions of his men, though it is unclear if this concern came from genuine empathy for their situation, or if it was motivated by the pragmatic desire to keep the Army in fighting shape. While the Continental Army did expect the public to assist in supporting them, the soldiers also expected their commanders to pay, feed, and supply them. “The winter of 1780 was brutal and brought to the fore the grievances of the Army by way of mutinies. The command of the Army brutally repressed many of these mutinies without much consideration towards the plight of soldiers. Joseph Plumb Martin, who participated in one of these

³⁰ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 147.

³¹ George Washington to Patrick Henry, December 27, 1777, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series 13*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985, 17.

mutinies explained their reasoning for protest as such, “The men were now exasperated beyond endurance; they could not stand it any longer; they saw no other alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up, and go home.”³² Martin claimed that the soldiers had endured all that they could and only as a last resort to stave off starvation did they mutiny. However, despite their justified reasons to refuse to fight, their mutiny won little. Royster writes, “Using promises and force, Continental or state authorities ended all of these mutinies without remedying the soldiers’ main grievances.”³³ The repression of Continentals without actually addressing their concerns reveals a distinct lack of empathy for the common soldiers but also the dire shortages that plagued the Army. It also reflects Washington’s attitude towards the soldiers he commanded, Shy writes, “Washington... was far more in tune with the mid-eighteenth-century concept of warfare – an era in which war and society were carefully separated and the soldier fought primarily because he was more afraid to disobey than to die.”³⁴ Like other military leaders of the era, Washington envisioned the Continental Army as one held together by fear and threats of violence rather than patriotism. In short, Washington had a low opinion of his men, seeing them as blank slates to be molded into obedient and uncomplaining soldiers, thought he was not completely unmoved by his soldier’s conditions.

General George Washington was placed in the unfavorable position of constantly trying to appease Congress, the troops, and the public. In one letter to Johnathan Trumbull Sr. during the winter of 1780 Washington denounces his men, writing, “The Soldiery have in several instances plundered the neighboring Inhabitants even of their necessary subsistence.

³² Joseph Plumb Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, 118.

³³ Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 295.

³⁴ John W. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 147.

Without an immediate remedy this evil would soon become intolerable.”³⁵ Washington acknowledged that his men have no other choice but to requisition food, but he objected to them denying civilians of their subsistence. Washington was faced with letting his army starve or civilians and he surprisingly sided with the civilians, implying that the Continental Army’s survival comes second.

Besides mutinies, where soldiers refused to fight until their demands were met, many soldiers chose to simply desert the Army when times got tough. The reasons for desertion were usually simple, “These men submitted to military law with the expectation that they would be treated fairly, would fight within pre-agreed geographical boundaries and for a limited period of time, and would be provided with regular food and pay. If any of these terms were breached men were prone to protest.”³⁶ While the reasons for protest were usually justified, punishments for desertion and disobedience were harsh. In a set of general orders issued by Washington in 1780, he approves a number of punishments for deserters that range from being “confined in the Dungeon for the space of one month on bread and water,” to hundreds of lashes, and even death.³⁷ These punishments are clearly designed to act as a deterrent for any soldiers who may have been planning desertion, but they also reflect the draconian methods that the Army unleashed upon its soldiers.

³⁵George Washington to Johnathan Trumbull Sr., January 8, 1780, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series 24*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985, 63.

³⁶ Jonathan Chandler, ““To Become Again Our Brethren””, 364.

³⁷General Orders, January 3, 1780, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series 24*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985, 12.

Conclusion

In the public imagination the Revolution was an era of cooperation, patriotism, and unity. However, this was not always the case, especially not when it came to the Continental Army which was a highly contested organization that was criticized by the public and its commanders alike. It was made up of men on the margins of society and maintained a poor reputation as a threat to liberty and morals. Unlike today, the Continental Army was not venerated or respected by Americans of its time, showing the immense shift in opinion of the United States Military over the last 250 years. Though the Continental Army deserves the credit for conducting the war and ultimately winning it, its creation and existence was highly contested. It is a miracle that the rugged band of men who dedicated their lives to achieving independence managed to not only survive the internal struggles of the Army and society, but also succeed and defeat the British Army.

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