Book points out how we romanticize the War for Independence

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By Glenn Altschuler

In November 1775, Adm. Samuel Graves, the commander of Great Britain’s American squadron, recommended that since leniency had yielded “farther Violences,” the ungrateful Colonists should be “severely dealt with.” The result was “desolation warfare” that lasted until preliminary articles of peace were signed in Paris on Nov. 30, 1782.

In “Scars of Independence: America’s Violent Birth,” Holger Hoock, a professor of British history at the University of Pittsburgh, points out that Americans “cling to a romanticized image” of the conflict as a noble struggle over fundamental political principles. And they downplay or completely ignore the pervasive acts of violence committed by both sides.

The product of prodigious research, “Scars of Independence” brings the persecution, torture and death of thousands of people back into the narrative of the American Revolution. Mr. Holger reads into the record incidents involving plundering of property; physical assaults, including rape, of civilians; treatment of prisoners that violated the existing code of war, resulting in disease, starvation, untended wounds and death; massacres of soldiers who had surrendered; appalling acts of cruelty against Indians and African-Americans. With an eye on the present as well as the past, he sees the story of our “not-so-immaculate conception” as a cautionary tale for a 21st-century American empire, afflicted with “a persistent impulse to intervene in other countries’ revolutions and civil conflicts.”

War, of course, is inherently violent. Conflicts, like the American Revolution, which are at once about home rule (for Colonists forging a nation of their own) and civil wars about who should rule at home, are likely to be especially savage.

And so it is disappointing that Mr. Hoock does not put the American Revolution in a comparative context. He acknowledges, for example, that “most modern historians” have concluded that the Revolutionary War was “less violent” than its counterparts elsewhere but does not interrogate, let alone
refute, their claims. We “will never be able to quantify the violence,” he adds, maintaining that it was “as much about states of mind as it was about its physical characteristics.”

At times, moreover, the evidence presented in “Scars of Independence” raises doubts about the nature and extent of wartime atrocities. The sinister reputation of Hessians, Mr. Hoock implies, was fed as much by “rumors, exaggerations or even false reputations” as by their battlefield behavior. Mr. Hoock concedes that historians deem American troops guilty mostly of “petty theft and careless destruction.” “Whether true, half-true or purely fabricated,” he indicates, reports of the mistreatment of prisoners “had the power to instill fear in American soldiers.” Mr. Hoock also seems to agree that George Washington’s commitment to prevent and punish breaches in the laws of war was genuine.

That said, “Scars of Independence” does enhance our understanding of the American Revolution and, to some extent, of its legacy. The British, he demonstrates, did, in all likelihood, commit more atrocities than the Patriots, making more credible and convincing the “forensic” initiatives of the latter, which used mutilated bodies (rendered “in vivid anatomical detail” and emotionally powerful rhetoric) to establish a broad pattern of excessive violence by soldiers of the Empire. This public relations campaign, it seems clear, helped the rebels “unify their new nation, win the battle for the support of the American population while-shaming Britain in the eyes of the world.”

Mr. Hoock is surely right as well that by “whitewashing” trauma, terror and violence from the history of the Revolutionary War, Americans helped foster a myth of national “exceptionalism” that has not always been a good guide about how “to engage a world riven by wars, civil conflicts and insurgencies” or understand how violence is represented, remembered and related to nation building.”

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