

UNH Professor's Debut Book Uncovers New Angle on America's Independence

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Stars and stripes, parades and picnics -- as America prepares to celebrate its independence with traditional party favorites this Fourth of July, a University of New Hampshire historian has written a new book that takes a non-traditional look at the American Revolution.

In "Persistence of Empire" (University of North Carolina Press), Associate Professor of History Eliga Gould recounts a surprisingly under-studied aspect of the longest colonial war in modern British history: a majority of British citizens supported its leaders' actions in North America.

"I wanted to understand what people's perceptions were," he explains about his debut book, written for historians, students and anyone with an interest in the American Revolution. "I wanted to see what it was like to be British during the American Revolution. Who suffered and who didn't? How did they get along?"

Given that British battles took place on foreign territory, Gould first discovered that British common people had no direct experience of war. "Their wars were remote," he explains. "What they knew, they learned from newspapers, pamphlets and people like themselves. The war effort became a fascinating source of entertainment."

For part of his research, which included two years of study in London, Gould dissected nearly 1,000 political pamphlets -- each a roughly 60-page commentary on the war effort written by politicians and ordinary people alike. Printed in batches of 500 to 1,000 copies, the pamphlets circulated in British coffeehouses and taverns and served as the basis for much political discussion and debate. Gould compares the forum to today's call-in talk shows on radio and television. Some of the more controversial pamphlets would elicit another 200 or so written responses in the form of additional pamphlets. Some pamphlets spawned political cartoons, newspaper stories, or religious sermons -- all additional sources, which supported the UNH professor's research.

The question that piqued his interest, Gould says, stems from the fact that the revolution was the worst defeat in British history, yet it did not destroy the imperial nation. "So what was it that carried the British into this blunder in the first place?" he wondered.

Many reasons pre-date the beginning of the revolution in 1775 and stem from the Seven Years' War in Europe (1754-63), during which the British believed they made great sacrifices for the colonies. Throughout the revolution, many Brits saw their country's relationship with the colonies as one of parent and child experiencing a family crisis, says Gould.

"Colonists were considered brothers and sisters whose duty to the mother country would last a lifetime," he continues. "The wider international opinion of the American Revolution was that the colonies could not survive on their own without resorting to bickering."

But survive, and thrive, they did -- on both sides of the Atlantic. Happy 224th birthday, America!

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