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"An Exceedingly Dirty and Nasty People": Exploring the Patriot Forces of 1775

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Department or Program

American Cultural Studies

Abstract

In popular revolutionary iconography, New England colonists are praised for their dramatic rush to arms during the first few months of the American Revolution. While this enthusiasm led thousands of colonists to take up arms, it faded by 1776 resulting in a dramatically diminished force. What happened? Why did the forces of 1776 differ so much from those of 1775? My research focuses on how the changing military organization of New England forces in 1775, from a collection of local militias to an army, impacted colonists' enlistment and enthusiasm. To understand the development of New England forces, this thesis explores the connections between the local militia system, the creation of the Continental Army, the appointment of George Washington, and the changes in revolutionary rhetoric during 1775.

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Washington was determined to impose the discipline of a true army on these "exceedingly dirty and nasty people." He also sought to protect them from themselves, putting in place hygiene practices to ward against the diseases that plagued military camps. The American victory there was small but profound, reinvigorating Washington, his forces, and the patriotic cause—at least for a few months. The Philadelphia patriot Benjamin Rush once declared that Washington had "so much martial dignity in his deportment that you would distinguish him to be a general and a soldier from among 10,000 people. There is not a king in Europe that would not look like a valet de chambre by his side." Peace at Last. Things got worse and worse and people in Boston started cheating—the British overreacted, people were massacred and all the colonies raised militia and began to think of life without the British rule.

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