Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence by Carol Berkin

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Carol Berkin's *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* changes the scale of the American Revolution by moving attention away from generals, legislatures, and battlefield strategy toward households, farms, camps, occupations, refugee movements, and the daily labor required to sustain war. Berkin's central contribution is not simply to add women to a familiar national story (Berkin, 2006). She argues that the Revolution looked different when viewed through people whose political power was limited but whose labor, loyalties, survival strategies, and family responsibilities placed them directly inside the conflict. The result is a history in which the boundary between "home front" and "war front" becomes difficult to maintain.

This perspective remains influential because later scholarship has continued to emphasize many of the questions Berkin placed before a general readership. Holly Mayer's 2022 edited collection *Women Waging War in the American Revolution*, for example, examines women as active participants across military, political, economic, racial, and regional contexts. Jacqueline Beatty's 2023 study *In Dependence* similarly shows how women navigated patriarchal legal institutions through petitions and claims for protection. These newer works deepen rather than overturn Berkin's broad argument: the Revolution expanded women's responsibilities and sometimes their practical authority, but it did not erase the legal and political structures that subordinated them.

Berkin's Most Important Intervention: Making War Domestic

Traditional accounts of the Revolution often separate military history from social history. Armies march, governments debate independence, and civilians appear mainly as background. Berkin reverses that perspective by showing that war entered private life. Women managed farms and businesses while male relatives served, supplied clothing and food, cared for children in unstable conditions, endured occupation, moved with armies, and responded to shortages, inflation, disease, and displacement. These activities were not secondary to the war. They made it possible for armies and households to continue functioning.

The book is especially effective when it treats ordinary work as historically significant. Boycotts of British goods, for example, depended on household purchasing decisions and domestic production. Producing homespun cloth could carry political meaning because it reduced dependence on imported textiles, but it also required labor. The rhetoric of patriotic sacrifice therefore rested partly on women's time and skill. Berkin's analysis helps explain how an activity could remain culturally defined as "women's work" while simultaneously becoming politically important.

Camp followers make the same point even more clearly. Popular memory sometimes reduces women near armies to dependents or prostitutes, but Berkin shows that many were soldiers' wives or relatives who cooked, washed, nursed, carried water, repaired clothing, and performed other work that military organizations needed. Mayer's more recent collection reinforces this interpretation by treating women's participation in warfare as a broad field that includes formal and informal labor, civilian vulnerability, and political action as well as occasional combat (Mayer, 2022). Once the war is viewed through this wider lens, the distinction between combatant and civilian becomes less stable than conventional narratives suggest.

Berkin also avoids allowing exceptional figures to replace ordinary women. Abigail Adams, Margaret Corbin, Deborah Sampson, and other recognizable names appear, but the book's larger purpose is to recover the experiences of people whose identities were less likely to enter formal political or military records. This is one reason the book remains accessible: individual stories make structural arguments visible. The reader sees how war changed labor, authority, mobility, and risk without requiring every woman's experience to fit a single model.

Race, Allegiance, and the Limits of a Single "Women's Experience"

One of *Revolutionary Mothers*' strongest features is its refusal to treat women as a unified political category. Patriot women, Loyalist women, enslaved African American women, free Black women, Indigenous women, elite officers' wives, poor camp followers, and civilian refugees did not experience independence in the same way. Their opportunities and dangers were shaped by race, class, legal status, geography, and political allegiance. Berkin's argument is therefore more complex than the claim that "women helped win the Revolution." Some women supported independence, some supported the Crown, and others evaluated the conflict primarily according to whether it could protect family, property, community, or freedom.

This distinction is particularly important for enslaved women. Revolutionary language about liberty existed alongside slavery, and the war created both danger and opportunity. British policies offering freedom under particular conditions encouraged some enslaved people to seek British lines, while other African Americans supported the Patriot cause or were constrained by circumstances that left little meaningful choice. For an enslaved woman, the relevant meaning of "independence" could involve control over her own body, labor, children, and movement rather than allegiance to Congress

or Parliament. Recent scholarship has continued to emphasize this complexity. Karen Cook Bell's 2021 work on enslaved women escaping bondage during the revolutionary era demonstrates how freedom-seeking was shaped by gender as well as slavery and war.

Indigenous women complicate the national narrative in a different way. The creation of the United States did not necessarily represent liberation for Native communities confronting military destruction and expanding settler claims to land. Indigenous political and social systems also varied widely, meaning European assumptions about women's dependence did not describe every Native society. Berkin's decision to include Native women therefore challenges the idea that a single patriotic interpretation can explain the Revolution's meaning for everyone living through it.

Loyalist women are equally necessary to the book's argument. Their political position could expose them to confiscation, displacement, exile, or the loss of family security. By including women who opposed independence, Berkin prevents women's history from becoming a celebratory supplement to nationalist history. Political agency includes choices that later generations may not celebrate. The Revolution was both a struggle against British rule and a civil conflict that divided communities and families.

Did the Revolution Transform Women's Status?

The most difficult question in the book concerns change. Wartime necessity required women to perform tasks that challenged assumptions about female dependence, yet temporary responsibility did not automatically produce permanent rights. Women who managed farms, shops, finances, or family affairs during male absence demonstrated competence in areas often associated with men. Nevertheless, the end of the war did not produce broad female suffrage, equal property rights, or the abolition of coverture. Practical authority expanded more rapidly than formal citizenship.

Berkin's interpretation therefore fits within a longer historiographical debate about "republican motherhood." Linda Kerber's influential work argued that the early republic elevated women's civic importance partly through their responsibility for raising virtuous republican citizens. This ideology could support expanded female education, yet it also preserved an indirect model of citizenship in which women influenced the republic through husbands and children rather than through equal political participation. Berkin treats this postwar development as both a recognition of women's importance and a limitation on the forms that importance could take.

Recent scholarship has added further nuance. Beatty (2023) demonstrates that women sometimes used the very language of dependence embedded in patriarchal institutions to make claims on courts and governments. This complicates a simple story in which women either possessed independence or lacked agency. Women could maneuver within restrictive systems, invoke obligations owed to dependents, and use petitions to pursue practical outcomes. Such findings strengthen Berkin's broader insight that women's power in revolutionary America must be studied through actual

practices as well as formal legal status.

Joan Gundersen's review of *Revolutionary Mothers* also identified an important limitation (Gundersen, 2006): Berkin's topical, biographical approach provides a vivid account of wartime participation but gives less sustained attention to how postwar gender roles changed over time. This criticism is fair. The book is strongest as a synthesis of women's wartime experiences for a broad audience, not as a comprehensive institutional history of gender before and after the Revolution. Its accessibility is therefore both a strength and a boundary.

Assessing *Revolutionary Mothers* as Historical Scholarship

Berkin succeeds because she does not attempt to replace a male-centered heroic narrative with a female-centered heroic narrative. The book repeatedly shows hardship, contradiction, and uneven outcomes. Women could become politically active through boycotts while remaining legally subordinate. Some gained temporary authority while husbands were absent and then returned to narrower roles. Enslaved women encountered revolutionary ideas of liberty while slavery survived. Indigenous women experienced a war whose American victory accelerated pressure on Native land. Loyalist women could lose property and community because of political choices made by themselves or their families.

The book's method also demonstrates why women's history changes interpretation rather than merely adding missing names. When household production, medical care, displacement, food supply, sexual violence, property management, and family survival enter the narrative, the meaning of "war" changes. Mayer's 2022 collection makes a similar argument by examining the many spaces in which women "waged war," while a 2024 *Journal of American History* review of that collection notes how contemporary scholarship has expanded the field beyond conventional battlegrounds (Conger, 2024). Berkin's earlier synthesis helped make that wider frame accessible to non-specialist readers.

At the same time, the book should not be treated as the final word on women in the Revolution. Newer scholarship has provided deeper studies of Black women, Native women, legal dependency, violence, regional differences, and the relationship between gender and state power (Hewitt & Valk, 2021). *Revolutionary Mothers* is best understood as a foundational interpretive gateway: it dismantles the assumption that women were peripheral to the Revolution and gives readers a framework for asking more precise questions about labor, race, allegiance, law, and memory.

The lasting value of Berkin's work lies in this reframing. The American Revolution did not suddenly create equality for women, but it exposed how deeply political life depended on people excluded from formal political power. Women sustained households, participated in resistance, followed armies, managed businesses, survived occupation, pursued freedom, supported competing causes, and negotiated the consequences of war. Their experiences reveal a Revolution that was not one uniform

struggle for liberty but a set of overlapping conflicts in which independence had different meanings for different people.

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