
Reviewed by Christine E. Sears

As Jesse Lemisch revealed in the 1960s, Jack Tar was not a “rebel without a cause.”1 Since then, scholars have struggled to identify who Jack Tar was and what cause or causes he embraced. Nathan Perl-Rosenthal contextualizes sailors’ early American republic world. He does not see sailors as united by material conditions, labor arrangements, or class conflict as have Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh. Neither were seamen primarily motivated by revolutionary ideology. Like the sailors in Paul Gilje’s work, Perl-Rosenthal’s Jack Tars are motivated by the need to make a living in a complex and war-torn Atlantic world, which put seafarers in the “midst of a struggle for national citizenship” (270). In his ambitious and compellingly written first monograph, Perl-Rosenthal argues that American merchant seamen “not only became attached to the state earlier and more strongly” than others, but also played a unique role in defining American citizenship (5).

U.S., British, and French documents led Nathan Perl-Rosenthal “to see merchant seamen not as outriders,” but as “crucial” actors in “defining the borders of American citizenship” (4–5). Using admiralty court papers, custom house documents, and consular papers, he tracks how states struggled to identify their citizens to other world powers between 1760 and 1815. During the 1760s, sailors more or less freely chose national affiliation based on preference and expediency. By 1815, citizenship was less fungible: Nationality now consisted of a “status conferred by the state” and legitimized with government-issued documents (12).

In the 1760s and 1770s, state officials applied a “common-sense nationality,” which consisted of using language, customs, manners, and “ways of living” to discern an individual’s nationality (32). The American Revolution disrupted common-sense nationality by politically splintering Americans and Britons. Because they remained culturally similar,

American seamen cloaked “themselves in the garb of British or French subjects,” a practice France and England, seeking to curtail U.S. trade especially in the West Indies, abhorred (83). Both states insisted that citizenship originated in birth, but proving where a sailor had been born often proved elusive. Thus, both states relied on ships’ papers and a sailors’ language to determine the “nationality of vessels and seamen” (82). However, language and papers were easily faked, and thus, as Perl-Rosenthal explains, this attempt “failed” (82).

Until the 1780s, seamen crossed national borders for better wages, treatment, or evasion of impressment somewhat easily because states lacked a way to document citizenship. Continental war ended seafarers’ “control over [their] national identity” as states demanded sailors verify their nationality to prevent impressment or permit neutral trade (100). Seafarers, contends Perl-Rosenthal, themselves seized “the power both to decide who was an American and to determine how citizenship ought to be proven” (174). Because seamen bequeathed us few sources on this topic, Perl-Rosenthal turns to Congressional debates surrounding the 1795 Naturalization Act and 1796 Act for the Relief and Protection of Seamen. Sailors’ agency seems to reside in the 1796 Relief Act, which permitted seamen to request, prove, and pay for a custom house certificate of citizenship. Yet even these documents were not foolproof and might be rejected by British and French officials.

Perl-Rosenthal deftly outlines and analyzes how the government tried to protect maritime workers. The state, state officials, and state negotiations largely drive his work. He covers negotiations between France, England, and the United States as they verify prizes, identify neutral trade, and determine legitimate targets of impressment. In many cases, other states force American developments related to seamen. For example, France required that American vessels carry *rôles d'équipage*, a list of crewmen and their nationalities. French officials routinely condemned crews lacking these documents as valid prizes. In response, Americans adapted informal *rôles*, though the French often declined them. In 1799, the French government again “demanded” that the U.S. “federal government take on the role of deciding who was an American citizen abroad” (210). Congress passed an 1803 act requiring captains to have *rôles* certified by a U.S. custom house. Armed with these forms, Americans escaped French detention, but the British Admiralty regarded the forms with “stony indifference” (221). The British preferred custom house
protection certificates later provided by the United States. These certificates could be voluntarily purchased by the sailor once he marshalled sufficient evidence to prove his American citizenship.

Perl-Rosenthal argues that between 1796 and 1803 sailors and the federal government created an “unprecedented system for documenting and defending American citizenship” (12). His case for government’s role is well supported. Like others doing bottom-up history, he is constrained by state-centric sources and dearth of sailors’ voices. In the sense that sailors required proof of citizenship at sea, they—and Americans involved in maritime trade—pushed the paperwork of citizenship. As Perl-Rosenthal shows, mariners relied on these documents; many frequently “bought [the certificates], marked them, and requested copies” (211).

Perl-Rosenthal demonstrates the importance of early republic maritime trade and how sailors in the transatlantic revolutionary world were the first “for whom national identity was essential” (272). He convincingly points toward sailors and maritime trade as catalysts in “invention of national citizenship controlled by the state” (270). International diplomacy motivated sailors’ requests for citizenship papers, and we see hints that sailors preferred to slip between states, to choose when to self-define as French, British, or American, depending on momentary exigencies, rather than be permanently identified as one nationality or the other. That is, sailors appear to be acted upon more than actors in this work. Perl-Rosenthal acknowledges this when noting that in “creating and valorizing the national citizenship documents themselves,” sailors inadvertently gave a “decisive victory of nationality conferred by sovereign states overall competing forms of political belonging” (6, 211).

Perl-Rosenthal’s monograph extends our understanding of the early American nation-state, its definition of citizenship, and use of bureaucracy and paperwork, and its place in the revolutionary Atlantic world.

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