One hundred years ago, amid armed conflict around the world, Randolph Bourne, a contributing editor at the New Republic, proclaimed that “war is essentially the health of the State.” The moment a government declares war, Bourne wrote, the vast majority of its citizens identify with its purposes. The state, now “an august presence, walks through their imaginations” and becomes “the inexorable arbiter and determinant” of attitudes and opinions. As the masses allow themselves “to be regimented, coerced, deranged in all the environments of their lives, and turned into a solid manufactory of destruction,” the state maintains and augments “the prerogatives of power.”

In “Empire of Guns,” Priya Satia, a professor of history at Stanford University, provides a perspective that complements Bourne’s. Focusing primarily on 18th century England, Satia claims that war, and, more specifically, the gun industry, helped usher in the Industrial Revolution, redefined the roles of public and private sectors and the functions and contours of the state, and facilitated imperial expansion.

“Empire of Guns” covers a lot of ground. Extraordinarily (and, at times, excessively) detailed chapters address the evolving state of the gun trade in Birmingham; the “myth” of pacific British industrialism and the reality of continuous war; the “social life” of guns in England, Africa, India and North America; the relationship between guns, money and private property; changes in the firearms industry after 1815; and opposition to the gun trade over the past 200 years.

Satia makes clear where she stands. “Deeply bound up with the rise of the very principle of property,” she writes, guns (along with the law) protected its impersonal, bourgeois qualities. “The sheer insanity of mass production of arms and the uses to which they were put,” she indicates, pervaded 18th century England.

“Industrial-capitalist society survives,” Satia asserts, “by focusing critical energy on elimination of particular evils and abuses rather than on the perniciousness of that entire mode of existence.”

These days as well, recognition of “wide areas of complicity” in arms manufacturing and sales is accompanied by a failure to indict “the mode of industrial-capitalist imperialism in which these iniquities have flourished — at least since the collapse of Marxism.”

Satia illuminates many of her key themes in an account of the controversy between the Birmingham Chapter of the Society of Friends, which in 1795 censured Samuel Galton Jr., one of the most prominent gun manufacturers in England, for violating the pacifist principles of the Quakers. In his defense, Galton pointed out that his family had been engaged “in this Manufactory” for 70 years before receiving “any animadversions” from the society. The assets of the gun business, he pointed out, were not easily convertible to other purposes.

Galton emphasized as well that arms manufacturing did not in and of itself cause or promote offensive war. Scripture, he added, sanctioned war. In any event, he was no more responsible for the uses to which guns were put than were distillers for the abuse of alcohol. Most important, by paying taxes and engaging in many, many other activities, all Quakers “furnished the means of war” in some incremental way.

His logical exercise, Galton concluded, demonstrated that “the Practice of your principles is not compatible with the situation in which Providence has placed us.” Echoing an emerging tenet of capitalism, that consumers, not producers, should exercise moral principles in the economy, Galton suggested that the answer was to respect the “Right and Duty of Private Judgment.”

Although she takes Galton to task for failing to recognize differences in degrees of complicity, Satia notes that his defense helps us understand “how what appears hypocritical might have felt ethically consistent in a different imagining of the world.” She reveals as well that although the Birmingham Meeting did not find his arguments persuasive and “disowned” him, Galton did not accept the verdict. He continued to attend worship, engaged in charitable work, and emerged with little damage to his reputation.

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By focusing on a single toxic activity, Satia concludes, rather harshly, both sides avoided “the truth that modern life is founded, intrinsically, on militarism and that industrial life has historically depended on it.”

Satia appears to believe that things have not gotten better in the 21st century. To be sure, four “developed” countries (Japan, Great Britain, Australia and Canada) have enacted legislation to reduce gun violence. In the United States, however, in District of Columbia v. Heller in 2008, the Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment protected the right of individuals to possess firearms unconnected with militia service. And,
Satia emphasizes, small arms “remain the most abundant and most destructive category of weapons and the only category that continues to proliferate virtually unregulated.”

Six hundred and forty million small arms, concentrated in “the unhappiest parts of the world,” most of them in private hands, increasing each year by 8 million, with the war of terror accelerating their spread, cause the death of one human being every minute. A $72 billion industry, with England as the second-biggest supplier, augmenting the political power and economic prowess of governments and “private” contractors, arms exports are not likely to decline anytime soon.

Like Samuel Galton Jr., Satia reminds us, gun manufacturers these days suffer no pangs of conscience. During a liability lawsuit before 2005, when Congress shielded them from litigation, she reports, Paul Jannuzzo, an executive at Glock, justified his company’s refusal to police sales, insisting that “there’s nothing intrinsically evil about these things.”

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Empire of Guns

The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution

By Priya Satia

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