

Title:

The American Revolution

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Summary:

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Article Body:

The American Revolution was a civil war between Loyalists to the British crown (aka Tories, about one fifth of the population), supported by British expeditionary forces, and Patriots (or Whigs) in the 13 colonies that constituted British North America.

About 20-25% of the populace in the colonies - c. 600,000 - were blacks. About one third of the white denizens were non-British. Local patriotism ran high. All adult, white, property-owning, men (about two thirds of the male numbers) were eligible to vote in elections to the lower house of the legislative assembly of the colony they resided in. Each colony also had its governor.

Some colonies (e.g., Rhode Island and Connecticut) were, in effect, incorporated under royal charter as semi-commercial ventures. Others belonged to the descendants of their founders (proprietary colonies such as Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware). Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire were royal provinces, under direct British rule.

Some of the colonists - for instance, the New Englanders - were among the

wealthiest and best educated people in the world, better off than the British themselves. But, per capita, they paid only 3% of the taxes levied on a typical Briton. The colonies supplied the West Indies with most of their foodstuffs and consumed British finished products - but they were not economically crucial to the British Empire.

In the years leading to the War of Independence (1765-1776), the British actually repealed all the taxes on products imported into the colonies - with the single exception of tea (and even this tax was drastically reduced). The colonists' slogan "no taxation without representation" was, therefore, more about local representation than about foreign taxation. And even this bit ringed hollow. The Encyclopedia Britannica: "The assemblies had the right to tax; to appropriate money for public works and public officials, and to regulate internal trade, religion, and social behavior". The role of British government was confined to foreign affairs and trade.

But both parties to the conflict breached this modus vivendi. During the Seven Years (French and Indian) War (1754-1763), the colonies refused to relinquish control over their militias to the British command and smuggled French goods into British North America (France being Britain's enemy). The British, on the other hand, began interfering in the colonies' internal affairs, notably (but not only) by imposing taxes and customs duties in order to ameliorate Britain's growing national debt and by rendering tax officials financially independent of the local colonial assemblies.

Add to this a severe recession in the colonies brought on by unbridled spending financed with unsustainable personal indebtedness and, not surprisingly, acts of resistance to British taxation - such as the Boston Tea Party - were organized mainly by smugglers, artisans, and shopkeepers. Secret groupings, such as the Sons of Liberty resorted to violence and intimidation to achieve their (mostly economic but disguised as "patriotic") goals. Even women got involved in a "buy American" campaign of boycotting British goods.

Many British merchants, bankers, politicians, intellectuals, and journalists supported the colonies against the crown - each group for its own reasons. The

merchants and bankers, for instance, were terrified of a mooted unilateral debt moratorium to be declared by the colonies if and when militarily attacked. Others found it distasteful to kill and maim white British subjects (as the insurgents were). Yet others resisted imperialism, the monarchy, taxes, or all three. Even within the British Army there was strong dissent and the campaign against the rebellious colonies was carried out half-heartedly and lackadaisically. On the other hand, British die-hards, such as Samuel Johnson, demanded blood ("I am willing to love all Mankind, except an American").

The denizens of the colonies tried, till the last moment, to avert a constitutional (and, consequently, military) crisis. They suggested a model of two semi-autonomous nations (the United Kingdom and the colonies), united by the figurehead of the King. But it was too little and way too late. Violent clashes between the citizenry and British units started as early as October 1765 with the First Nonimportation Movement, directed against the Stamp Act. They continued with the Boston Massacre (five dead) in 1770; the attack on the British customs ship, the *Gaspée*, in Rhode Island, in 1772; and the Boston Tea Party in 1773.

In April 1775, General Gage, governor and military commander of Massachusetts, suffered a humiliating defeat in a skirmish in Concord and Lexington. The Patriots were alerted to his movements by Paul Revere who rode all night to inform them that the "regulars (not the British, as the legend has it) are coming." He was one of many such scouts.

The Loyalists fielded 50-55,000 armed men and the Patriots countered by organizing "militias" - irregular units of ill-trained and undisciplined volunteers. The Continental Army was established only in June 1775, under the command of George Washington, a veteran of the French and Indian War. At their peak, the rebels mastered less than 100,000 men in arms - only 25-30,000 of which were on active duty at any given time.

The Continental Army was, in the words of General Philip Schuyler of New York "weak in numbers, dispirited, naked, destitute of provisions, without camp equipage, with little ammunition, and not a single piece of cannon." Late pay

caused frequent mutinies and desertions. In 1783, Washington had to personally intervene to prevent a military coup. Only repeated promises of cash bonuses and land grants kept this mob of youngsters, foreigners, and indentured servants intermittently cohesive.

Still, they outnumbered the British and the "Hessians" - the 30,000 German mercenaries who participated in the 8 years of fighting. In all of North America, the British had 60,000 soldiers as late as 1779. They had to face a growing presence of hostile French, Spanish, and Dutch armies, supplies, and navies. The Native-Americans (Indians) supported mostly the British, especially west of the Appalachians. This provoked numerous massacres by the Patriots.

The War spread to other parts of the world: the Gulf Coast, the Caribbean, India, the Netherlands, the Mediterranean. The US Navy even invaded the British port of Whitehaven in 1778.

The conflict affected the civilian population as well with both sides committing war crimes and atrocities aplenty. With many men gone, women took over traditionally male roles and vocations, such as farming. Hyperinflation - brought on by \$500 million in newly minted and printed money - led to mob scenes as storekeepers were attacked and warehouses looted.

The blacks largely sided with the British - but many joined the Patriots and, thus, won their freedom after the war. Virginia planters alone manumitted 10,000 slaves. By 1800, slavery was abolished in all the states north of Delaware.

All told, less than 7000 Patriots died in battle (and 8500 wounded). About 1200 Germans perished, too. No one knows how many British troops, Indians, and other combatants paid with their lives in this protracted conflict. About 100,000 Loyalists emigrated to Canada and thousands others (mainly of African ancestry) went to Sierra Leone and the Bahamas. They were all fully compensated for the property they left behind in what came to be known as the United States of America (USA).

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