



THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The reign of George III. George II was succeeded by his grandson George III (1760-1820: the second longest reign in British history); the new king, unlike his predecessors, was interested in English affairs and well intentioned not to represent a mere symbol any longer.

The Tories, having lost all hopes in a Stuart Restoration, were by now disposed to support the Hanoverian king. As a result a new Tory Party was formed and it was known as «The King's Friends»; it was firstly led by Lord Bute (1713-1792) and Lord Grenville (1712-1770), later by Lord North (1732-1792).

The Seven Years' War had broadened the colonial empire, but had exhausted the finances of the country; so the Government decided to impose heavy taxes on the colonists. But the Stamp Act of 1765 (a way to finance the quartering of ten thousand troops in North America) met the strong opposition of the American colonies, that appealed to the principle of «No Taxation Without Representation». The attempt to tax the colonists was followed by the tightening of the Navigation Laws, which in order to secure the largest profits to the English ruling class, prohibited the colonists to trade with other countries. The dispute between England and her American colonies went on for about ten years and culminated in an American ban on English goods, including the Boston Tea Party of 1773 (a direct action protest by the American colonists against Great

Britain in which they destroyed many crates of tea bricks on ships in Boston Harbor) and the closing of the port of Boston. In 1775 an open war broke out (Battle of Lexington and Concord) and George Washington (1732-1799), appointed the «Commander of the Continental Army», at the head of the Thirteen American Colonies, attacked the English at Bunker Hill and forced them to withdraw from Boston. In the following year, in a Congress of the American colonies, the Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies was issued and the American nation was officially born. After a series of unsuccessful campaigns, in October 1777 the Americans won their first great battle at Saratoga. This resounding victory brought France and Spain, and later Holland, to join with America, in the hope of recovering their lost possessions. The English suffered another heavy defeat at Yorktown in 1781 (General Charles Cornwallis surrendered to the Americans, virtually ending the War for Independence) and, only on account of the great naval leader George Rodney's (1719-1792) military successes at Cape St. Vincent in 1780 (also known as the Moonlight Battle), near Portugal, and in the West Indies, they could end the war on favourable terms by the Treaty of Paris of 1783 (commonly referred to as the «Second Treaty of Paris»). The end of the American Revolution is usually marked by this treaty, with the recognition of the United States as an independent nation. In the same year Great Britain signed ancillary treaties with France and Spain as the Treaties of Versailles.

The American Revolution was the cause of dissensions and divisions in England and a series of troubles abroad. When England was involved in the war, it was confronted at home with movements of the working class, coinciding with the birth of Radicalism and the spreading of new conceptions about the rights of man and nations.

In 1780 the so called Gordon Riots broke out in London, on account of a Bill in favour of the Catholics (the Catholic Relief Act, which had restored a number of civil rights to Roman Catholics): the London masses, led by Lord George Gordon (1751-1793), revolted and kept the city in their power for several days, until the rebellion was crushed. It caused much destruction and left between three hundred and five hundred dead.

During the American War other conflicts arose in Ireland and India oppressed by English misgovernment and exploitation. The Irish people, encouraged by the American Revolution and under the leadership of Henry Grattan (1746-1820), reacted against the Poynings' Act, which prevented them from direct trade with foreign countries. Irish politicians demanded reform and formed a Patriot Party for an Irish Parliament independent of Westminster. Countrywide over one hundred thousand Irishmen pledged their support. The English government responded by removing restrictions on Irish trade and allowing Catholics to buy land freely for the first time in nearly a century. Finally, in 1782 Westminster renounced its claim to legislate for Ireland directly and Grattan claimed his greatest political victory: «Ireland is now a nation. In that new character I hail her!» he proclaimed.

After the American Revolution the English Parliament had much more control over affairs and policy, and for a short time the Whigs regained power. In 1783 William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806) reorganized the Tory Party, in such a way that it was not any longer the servile instrument of the king's will, and became Prime Minister at the tender age of twenty-four (the youngest Prime Minister on record). Son of William Pitt the Elder, he remained in office from 1783 to 1801, and again from 1804 until his death. His prime ministerial tenure was dominated by major events in Europe, including the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Pitt, although often referred to as a Tory, always considered himself to be an «independent Whig» and was generally opposed to the development of a strict partisan political system. He is remembered for his tough policies against corruption, fiscal reform (Pitt had a talent for finance), shifting power toward the House of Commons and the union with Ireland (the Act of Union of 1800). Under his leadership the basic principles of the English modern democracy were definitely established.





FOCUS ON

The «Declaration of Independence»

The Declaration of Independence is the document in which the Thirteen Colonies in North America declared themselves independent of the Kingdom of Great Britain. It asserted, in part, that «these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved». The text, which explained why the Colonies (now States) declared their independence, was ratified by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. This anniversary is celebrated as «Independence Day» in the United States. The leading draftsman was Thomas Jefferson (of Virginia), assisted by John Adams (of Massachusetts), Benjamin Franklin (of Pennsylvania), Robert R. Livingston (of New York) and Roger Sherman (of Connecticut): they formed the «Committee of Five». The Declaration can be divided into five sections: the Introduction, the Preamble, the Indictment of George III, the Denunciation of the British people and the Conclusion. The handwritten copy signed by the delegates to the Congress is still on display in the National Archives in Washington, DC.

Having served its original purpose in announcing independence, the text of the Declaration was initially ignored after the American Revolution. Its stature grew over the years, particularly the «second sentence», a sweeping statement of individual human rights:

«We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness».

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1760-1820 Reign of George III: 1763 → End of the Seven Years' War; 1765 → Stamp Act; 1773 → Boston Tea Party; 1775 → Beginning of the American Revolution (Battle of Lexington and Concord, Battle of Bunker Hill); 1776 → Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen American Colonies; 1777 → Battle of Saratoga; 1780 → Battle of Cape St. Vincent and Gordon Riots in London; 1781 → Battle of Yorktown (virtual end of the American War for Independence); 1782 → Repeal of the Poynings' Act; 1783 → Treaty of Paris and Treaties of Versailles: end of the American Revolution; William Pitt the Younger becomes Prime Minister; 1800 → Act of Union between Ireland and Great Britain; 1806 → Pitt's death.

