

**The Genesis of American Independence: The Events and Ideas that Sparked the American
Revolution**

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I. Introduction

The American Revolution is often seen as the moment that established the United States as a nation and signaled the decline of colonial dominance in North America. This paper aims to cover the events and factors that set the stage for the Revolution shedding light on the web of influences behind the movement. Through an analysis of historians viewpoints and scholarly interpretations this paper's ultimate goal is to offer an insight into the reasons and beginnings of the American Revolution showcasing perspectives and debates prevalent in this significant era of American and British history.

II. Background

The years prior the Revolution saw a gradual distancing of the American British colonies. The relations between the American colonies and Britain were complicated with disputes over taxation, representation and governance. In order to control colonists who had no money, the British government introduced a series of legislations including ‘the Stamp Act’ as well as “the Townshend Acts” that faced resistance from most quarters. At the same time, colonists were becoming increasingly conscious of their American identity and political standing; this had been fueled by republicanism, natural rights as well as overall Enlightenment philosophy. Notably, Samuel Adams and Thomas Paine also played instrumental roles in rallying public opinion and organizing opposition to British policies. On the other hand, we can see throughout the colonies’ leaders used the First and Second Continental Congresses to plan their actions together and explain why they are opposing British rule.

Tensions further increased with events such as the Boston Tea Party and Coercive Acts that put more strains on relationships between Great Britain and its colonies, making them even closer to full open war. Meanwhile, when violence erupted in Battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, it marked the start of an armed conflict which would eventually lead to The Declaration of Independence that declared America's independence from Great Britain thus marking the birthplace for the United States.

III. Historiography of the Start of the American Revolution

A. Interpretations of the Boston Tea Party

The Boston Tea Party which occurred on December 16, 1773, is often seen as a pivotal moment in the lead-up to the American Revolution. Historians as well as scholars have given many varying interpretations of the significance and distinct impact of the Tea Party, reflecting also on broader debates about the nature of colonial resistance to the standing British authority.

A very important historian we can look to is Bernard Bailyn. In his very influential work *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, he argues that the Boston Tea Party should be understood as a symbolic act of defiance against British tyranny. According to Bailyn, the Tea Party represented a decisive assertion of colonial independence and a rejection of British attempts to impose unjust laws on the colonies. Unconstitutional taxing, the weakening of the judiciary, plural officeholding, Wives, and standing armies were also all factors that Bailey believes ultimately led to the occurrence of the Boston Tea Party.¹

¹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 117.

Another notable work we can use for reference is Gordon S. Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic*, which offers a more minute look into the Boston Tea Party. Wood emphasizes the monetary side peeking into the economic motivations behind the Tea Party. Within this monetary examination he suggests that it could've been driven in part by colonial merchants' concerns about British trade policies. He then continues to argue that the Tea Party should be seen as part of a broader pattern of colonial resistance to British economic regulations, rather than solely as a symbolic protest against British authority.²

In contrast to these views, some other historians have in a way downplayed the significance of the Boston Tea Party seen as a causal factor in the outbreak of the American Revolution. The consensus on this contrast is the argument that while the Tea Party was a dramatic event that captured public attention, it did not fundamentally alter the relationship between the colonies and Great Britain. Instead, their contrast falls more along the lines of pointing to other factors, such as the Coercive Acts as well as the growing radicalization of colonial politics, as more important in pushing the colonies towards independence.

B. Debates over the Coercive Acts (Intolerable Acts)

The Coercive Acts, also known as the Intolerable Acts, were a set of measures enforced by the British government following the Boston Tea Party. These actions included shutting down Boston's port until compensation was provided for the tea destroyed, changing the charter and limiting town meetings through the Massachusetts Government Act permitting accused officials to be tried in Britain or other colonies, under the Administration of Justice Act and mandating colonists to accommodate British troops under the Quartering Act.

² Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969)

Historians for a long time have debated the impact of the Coercive Acts on the colonies and their role in escalating tensions towards the American Revolution. Robert Middlekauff, for example, argues that the Coercive Acts were actually an important turning point during the colonial perspective towards Great Britain. He suggests that these acts not only stirred up colonial resentment but also motivated colonial resistance, leading to increased support for independence. He initially states that during these months leading up to these Acts the British had made many mistakes, continuing to say the solution for the time “was realistic in that it satisfied prevailing opinion within Massachusetts and maintained a traditional basis of authority.”³

However, T.H. Breen, a colonial history writer, suggested that while the Coercive Acts were deeply unpopular in the colonies, they did not necessarily lead directly to the outbreak of war. He says “ It did not require a miracle to persuade other Americans to pledge their support to Boston.”⁴ Breen continues on to state that many colonists still genuinely hoped for a peaceful resolution to their own grievances and were fully reluctant to resort to armed conflict of any kind. He then attempts to emphasize the role of local and regional factors in shaping colonial responses to the Coercive Acts, highlighting the diversity of opinions and the different strategies among the colonies.

C. Continental Congresses

³Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 316-317.

⁴ T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 303.

Both the First and Second Continental Congresses in their own right, played a crucial role in attempts to organize colonial pushback to British rule and eventually laying the groundwork for the coming Revolution. Bailyn, argues that the Continental Congresses were very instrumental in fostering a sense of unity among the colonies and coordinating their efforts against British policies. Looking at Bailyn again we see he emphasizes the role of the Congresses in articulating and legitimizing colonial grievances, more specifically through the Declaration of Rights and Grievances explaining the Enlightenment influence displayed by James Madison.⁵ According to Bailyn, the Continental Congresses from his perspective served as a crucial meeting for colonial leaders to come together, and discuss various matters including the British.

Wood in contrast offers a simpler, more straightforward view of the Continental Congresses. Wood claims that Congresses were more than simply vehicles for colonial resistance; they were organizations that helped form American identity and provide the groundwork for a new nation.⁶ Wood stresses the political and intellectual variety of the Congresses, pointing out that representatives from various colonies frequently had competing interests and agendas. Despite these disagreements, Wood contends that the Congresses were able to unite the colonies in their resistance to British policy and lay the groundwork for the ultimate transition to independence. He contends that Congresses played an important role in legitimizing the revolutionary cause and setting the framework for the development of a republican system of government in the newly independent USA.

D. Views on the Impact of British Policies and Actions

⁵ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 260.

⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 355-357.

Historians in general have disagreed greatly on how British acts and policies affected the start of the American Revolution. The British government's military occupation and taxing practices, among other things, contributed significantly to the escalation of tensions with the American colonies and the eventual start of the war.

According to Robert Middlekauff, British policies indeed had a significant role in encouraging the colonies' move toward independence. Middlekauff states many colonies viewed laws like the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, and the Coercive Acts as proof of British domination and tyranny.⁷ Middlekauff also claims that because of these measures, the colonists felt animosity and grievances, which prompted them to want to be free of British domination.

Looking back at Wood he offers a different perspective on the impact of British policies. Wood states that while British policies certainly played a role in shaping colonial attitudes towards Great Britain, they were not the sole cause of the Revolution. Instead, Wood suggests the “British policy and the Whig ideology worked in tandem to blur America's internal jealousies, jealousies between North and South, between city and country.” This does point to the fact that these policies led to a joint effort explained by Wood where in this context he states, “For a moment in 1774-76 the imperial contest absorbed and polarized the various differing groups as never before in the eighteenth century and made the Americans a remarkably united people.”

Moving on, in regards to the general consensus of historians, the idea of how British actions—like using military force against the colonies—agree they were a major factor in raising tensions and driving the colonies ambition for complete independence. They also in general

⁷Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 179-185.

contend that the revolutionary movement was fueled by and colonial sentiments against Great Britain were shaped by incidents like the Boston Massacre and the Battles of Lexington and Concord. Overall, historians and scholars seem to agree that British policies alienated the colonies and led many of them to believe that independence was their only realistic alternative, leading to a joint coalition effort.

E. The Shot Heard Around the World

The first gunshot of the American Revolution during the Battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, is famously known as the "Shot Heard Around the World". Others have highlighted the event's symbolic and practical significance in igniting colonial sentiment and resulting in full-scale conflict, while some historians have minimized the event's significance, claiming that the revolution was already under way and the skirmish was just a small-scale conflict.

David Hackett Fischer, in *Paul Revere's Ride*, argues otherwise in that the Battles of Lexington and Concord were pivotal moments that transformed the conflict from a local dispute into a full-blown war for independence. After Fischer gives context to the King's orders to arrest rebels Fisher says, "The snow had melted in New England. The ground was still soft, but the season for campaigning would soon begin. It was time to prepare. if shots had to be fired, it was urgently important that a British soldier must be the one to fire first. Only then would America Stand united."⁸ Fischer maintains that the actions of the British troops in attempting to seize colonial arms and arrest rebel leaders not only sparked immediate resistance but also rallied support from colonies that had previously been hesitant to join the cause in the first place. He

⁸ David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 78-79

also suggests that the events of April 19, 1775, were instrumental in solidifying colonial unity and commitment to the revolutionary struggle.⁹

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, despite historians' varying views of these events, there is universal agreement that the American Revolution was a complex, multifaceted event driven by a variety of distinct circumstances. The Revolution was the outcome of a protracted process of political, social, and economic transformation inside colonial society rather than only the outcome of British oppression or colonial resistance. A fundamentally intellectual conflict, the Revolution was sparked by the colonists' adherence to republican ideals, natural rights, and self-governance.

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⁹ David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

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