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Lecture Six: The American Revolution (1775): A Struggle for Independence and Nationhood

1.1. Introduction

The American Revolution, also referred to as the War of Independence or the Revolutionary War, commenced in 1775, embodying the principles of the Age of Enlightenment and emphasizing the rights of life, liberty, and property. The conflict ignited with the first shots fired in Concord and Lexington, Massachusetts. This pivotal event marked the beginning of a revolutionary struggle that enabled America to break free from Great Britain and establish itself as a new nation. Spanning eight years, the war finally concluded in 1783 (Agha, 2).

1.2. Causes of Tension: The French and Indian War and Taxation Grievances

- The French and Indian War: The Clash for Control

The French and Indian War emerged from the British and French contest for dominance in North America. While some colonists supported the British in their fight against the French and their Native American allies, the colonists viewed it primarily as an opportunity to eliminate the French threat and expand their own territories. However, the British perceived the conflict as part of their global war against the French and the Spaniards, encompassing Europe, Asia, the West Indies, and North America. As British subjects, the colonists were expected to contribute financially and militarily to the British Empire like their counterparts (Jansen, 2013: 25).

- Taxation Grievances: Unfair Burdens and Lack of Representation

The Sugar Act of 1763: Encouraging British Trade and Regulating Smuggling. In an effort to raise revenue for the stationed soldiers, the British government implemented

the Sugar Act of 1763, which imposed a tax on all non-British imports to incentivize colonists to buy British goods. The act also aimed to regulate smuggling. It levied taxes on molasses, wine, and various other goods, with strict enforcement measures. The colonists considered these taxes unfair, as they lacked elected representatives in the British government.

- The Stamp Act of 1765: Taxation Without Representation

The Stamp Act mandated that colonists purchase stamps or seals to be placed on paper goods such as legal documents, licenses, newspapers, and playing cards. Non-compliance resulted in penalties and fines for the colonists. The absence of elected representatives in the British government further fueled resentment toward these taxes (Daggett, 1849: 12).

- The Townshend Acts of 1767: Taxation and Limited Representation

The Townshend Acts utilized tax revenue to pay royal governors in Britain, denying the colonists official representation within the government. These acts, imposing further taxes and restrictions, heightened tensions and contributed to incidents like the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party, which were seen as direct responses to British policies (Puls, 145-46).

- The First Continental Congress: Seeking Redress

The colonists organized the First Continental Congress in 1774 as a response to the Intolerable Acts, aiming to address the escalating grievances. Leaders like George Washington convened and agreed upon various measures, including boycotting British goods, arming themselves, forming militias, and making direct appeals to King George III. Unfortunately, these appeals were rejected, further deepening the divide and setting the stage for the next phase of the conflict.

1.3. The Outbreak of Conflict: Battles and Declarations

The American colonies, after stockpiling weapons in Concord, Massachusetts, witnessed the outbreak of conflict with the first shots fired in the battles of Lexington and Concord. As tensions escalated, the Second Continental Congress was convened in Philadelphia in May 1775, leading to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson. The document enumerated the reasons for separation from Britain and voiced the colonists' grievances against the King. This marked the division between Patriots who supported the revolution and Loyalists who remained loyal to the King. Notably, the American forces, led by George Washington, relied on their knowledge of the land and strategic tactics, while the British army, commanded by General Cornwallis, possessed superior weapons and training.

1.3.1. Foreign Support and Turning Points

The American cause garnered support from France and Spain, driven by commercial interests, revenge for past conflicts, and territorial aspirations. French aid, including the supply of gunpowder, proved crucial to the American war effort. Additionally, Polish and German leaders offered assistance to the colonies. The war witnessed numerous battles, with notable engagements such as the American victory at Fort Ticonderoga and the symbolic success of the Battle of Bunker Hill, despite the ultimate loss. The turning point came with the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, the largest American victory, leading to France openly aligning itself with the colonies.

1.3.2. Challenges and Victory: Valley Forge and Yorktown

Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, became a significant test for the American forces as they faced harsh winter conditions and limited supplies. However, the period allowed for regrouping and training. Meanwhile, the Battle of Yorktown in 1781 marked a decisive moment. General Washington's strategic positioning, combined with French naval blockade, trapped British General Cornwallis and his forces. Outnumbered and with no escape route, Cornwallis surrendered, resulting in a major victory for the Americans.

1.3.3. The Treaty of Paris: End of the War and Its Consequences

The official end to the war came with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, where representatives from France, Britain, Spain, and America negotiated peace. The treaty defined geographical borders, with Canada remaining under British control, and parts of the country later being won by the French. Florida was returned to Spain. While the war officially concluded in September 1783, there were isolated conflicts and penalties imposed on loyalists. The need for a new government prompted the drafting and ratification of the Articles of Confederation in 1781, followed by the creation of the United States Constitution, shaping the political and social landscape of America (Wood, 1991: 2).