

Chloe Noller
Decadal Summary
Dr. Westblade
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1760-1780: The Underpinnings of the Revolutionary Period

The 1760s began with the end of one of the most destructive conflicts of the eighteenth century: the Seven Years' War. Also known as the Great War for Empire, "it engaged all of the European powers, and it is estimated to have cost over a million lives."¹ It had both metropolitan and colonial fronts, even engaging West Africa and the Caribbean. Characterized as "the most dramatically successful war the British had ever fought...the war established the contours of the vast British Empire and brought the rival French presence in North America and India to an end."² With the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Britain had finally taken control over all of India and had extremely limited the French colonies in the New World. "By 1763, France retained only two trading posts in India and the island group of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon off the Newfoundland coast."³ Britain emerged the preeminent world power, establishing its dominance through their empire, upon which the sun never set.

A portion of their empire resided in the thirteen American colonies. Britain, after defeating the French incursions, returned its attention to the colonists; attention that had been waning ever since the Glorious Revolution in 1688. Previously, the thirteen colonies experienced what has been referred to as "salutary neglect" by the British government. England's time and resources were engaged by the wars being fought not only across the water but on European soil very near their

¹ *The Enlightenment at War*, ed. Madeleine Dobie, (PMLA, Modern Language Association, 2009) 1852.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

own. The colonies, left to their own devices, began to create their own forms of government unimpeded by the remnants of feudalism and serfdom. They developed a disparate ideology that championed republicanism, democracy, and representative government. These ideas stemmed from both the enlightenment ideals of rational and natural law, as well as the pervasive Protestantism of the Puritans, which sought to purify the Anglican church from Rome and the Catholic Church. As the population began to grow within the United States, so too did their independence as colonies. Spurred on by the welcome inattention from the Crown, the American colonists created their own way of life, based upon the individual ideals of virtue, self-government, and representation.

Due to the Great War for Empire, Britain had incurred a vast amount of debt; war was expensive, and they began to use the colonies to help repay some of those debts by increasing taxes. The Americans, used to independence and freedom as well as representation, began to squirm under the Crown's policies. Taxes should not be established, they believed, if there was no representation of the colonies in Parliament, and thus no consent. With the parliamentary passage of The Navigation Act, the Stamp Act, and the Quartering Act, the colonists began to speak openly about liberty, independence, and freedom from tyranny. Tensions increased following the Boston Massacre in 1770, The Boston Tea Party in December of 1773, and the first shots of the Revolutionary War in 1775. On July 4th, 1776, the Continental Congress of the 13 colonies of the United States of America declared their independence from Britain, claiming their right to be a free and independent nation. Several years later, after an intense and bloody conflict, the colonists "turned the world upside down" as the British Commander in Chief surrendered to General George Washington at the battle of Yorktown. America had won its independence. This globally historic event imprinted itself on minds all around the world. Revolutions all over the globe began to gain

traction, taking their cues from the success of the Americans. “America’s nationhood also had a universal importance. Its form of government constituted ‘a standing monument and example for the aim and imitation of the people of other countries.’”⁴

Following the cessation of the Seven Years’ War, European philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Voltaire called for the reshaping of European governmental power. They advanced the ideals of “Modern Liberalism,” strengthening the concept of “perpetual peace,” which proposed a peace-achieving liberal constitution. This constitution called for a league of free states in an attempt to guarantee a pacific federation; it required that a mandatory vote by the citizens of a nation-state must occur in order for that nation to go to war, and it also asked that in the “universal community, citizen’s rights should be respected everywhere, hence the idea of a ‘cosmopolitan right’—the precursor to human rights.”⁵ Many great thinkers and philosophers around the world began to write on these ideas of human rights and natural law, perpetuated by Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke.

In 1764, Beccaria published a book entitled *On Crimes and Punishments*, writing about justice. Reminding his readers that human justice is not the same thing as God’s justice, he wrote that “the worst crime is high treason, followed by crimes attempted on citizens’ life or liberty.”⁶ Catherine the Great, tsarina of Russia, published a treatise, *Instruction*, responding to the issues that Russia faced as it began to participate in European politics. It attempted “to embody a philosophical statement of basic principles of law under which Russia could regularize the service

⁴ *Nations and Nationalism*, ed. Guntram H. Herb, David H. Kaplan, (Santa Barbara. California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 22.

⁵ *ibid*, 14.

⁶ *Great Events from History: Modern European Series*, ed. Frank N. Magil, (Englewood Cliffs, J.J: Salem Press, 1973), 456.

of its nobility and develop a middle class while holding its own politically, economically, and militarily with the more advanced western countries.”⁷ While Catherine wanted to protect autocracy within her nation, she wanted one that was “tempered with the principle of civilized government...a division of authority...checks and balances...everyone, without exception, had to be subject to the same laws.” The tsarina wanted the Russian people to be “citizens, not ‘subjects,’ and as citizens, subject to the rule of law. It corresponded with her idea of the religious duty of both sovereign and citizen to act for mutual good under the aegis of objective laws.”⁸ Adam Smith’s publishing of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* began to promote a comprehensive theory of political economy, based on free market capitalism rather than the previously relied upon mercantilism of the British Empire.

Many other changes, both significant and subtle, began to occur following the years of 1760-1780, with people beginning to view humans as free creatures, created with unalienable rights, “that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” While not all nations agreed or implemented these ideas, they nonetheless began to spread, catching like wildfire in nations under oppressive and tyrannical governments. The conclusion of the Seven Years’ War, ending with consequences that not only impacted the near future as seen in the American Revolution, also sowed the seeds of the tensions in Europe that would eventually arise into World War I. However, the American Revolution was a global landmark, exemplifying the first nation be a constitutional republic, testing the resolve of a people to live with virtue and religion. Only time would tell if the American experiment would last out of the late eighteenth century.

⁷ Magil, 464.

⁸ *ibid*, 466.