

History Revolutions: America
Teach Yourself Series
Topic 2: Historians views

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Historians views

As you would already be aware, the study of history is a treacherous and confusing pursuit however the results are extremely rewarding. As Historian's we have an important task of digesting the information from the events and working out in as impartially as possible what happened and why. It is through the use of primary and secondary evidence that we need to do this. We always need to be mindful of how people perceive things, in this room alone there would wide range of versions of the events of today, all influenced by our socio-economic, cultural, gender background and this is not even that exciting an event. When people have money, family and in many causes their lives invested in an event (such as a revolution) they will have strong emotions that will not so much cloud events but influence how they see things. In the study of the American Revolution there are a number of schools of history that are prominent, these being; The Whigs, The Progressives, The Imperial School, The Conservatives, The Neo Whigs and The Left to name but a few.

The Whigs

Throughout the 1800s, the the American Revolution was told as a romanticised tale, as a struggle between the forces of liberty and modernity (America) and a regressive, corrupt and morally bankrupt empire (Britain). Among the first 'histories' to be written the texts celebrated the lives of their subject, with little regard for objective analysis or factual analysis. Recent research suggests that these biographies exaggerate and perhaps even falsify critical facts about the revolution and those involved in it. Historian Ray Raphael's book *Founding Myths* explains that many of the commonly accepted – but utterly inaccurate – modern-day myths about the American Revolution were actually invented during the first half of the 1800s, when historical research took a backseat to literary creativity.

The 1850's onwards saw the emergence of Whig histories because their underlying theme was the progress of mankind – and they viewed the role of the American Revolution in achieving this progress to be profound. Historians who advanced this perspective included George Bancroft (*History of the United States of America*) and John Fiske (*The American Revolution*). To these writers, the revolution and its foundations – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights – marked the pinnacle of Anglo-Saxon Western society. That it was all done with little bloodshed, minimal destruction and a popular consensus was testimony to the American people and their desire for freedom and progress. Radicals who had argued for even more change – such as Thomas Paine, with his scepticism about religion – were overlooked or 'written out' of the revolution.

"In America a new people had arisen without king or princes or nobles, knowing nothing of tithes and little of landlords, the plough being for the most part in the hands of freeholders of the soil." George Bancroft

Review Questions

1. The Whigs have been described as interpreting the American Revolution in a romanticized way. What is meant by this?

The Progressives

With the turn of the century, a new breed of historians, the Progressives, challenged the view that the revolution was all about benevolence, consensus and progress. These scholars suggested that the revolution was driven more by economic factors and self-interest than it was by patriotism and conscience. One of the first to this view was Charles Beard, whose *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* argued that the writers of the constitution were motivated by economic self-interest as well as enlightenment principals. Arthur Schlesinger's *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution* suggested that the causes of the revolution were less about tyrannical British policies than profit-driven American traders, keen to throw off the constraints of empire. And Merrill Jensen's *Articles of Confederation* challenged the prevailing belief, perpetuated by Federalists and their sympathisers, that the Articles were fundamentally flawed; Jensen instead argued that America's economic slump in the 1780s was an after-effect of war, and that the move against the Articles was driven by nationalists who favoured stronger controls over trade and finance.

"The point is, that the direct, impelling motive... was the economic advantages which the beneficiaries (that is the rebels) expected would accrue to themselves first, from their action." Charles Beard (Progressive)

"[The American Revolution was] predominately an internal revolution carried on by the masses of the people against the local aristocracy." Merrill Jensen

Review Questions

- 2. According to 'The Progressive' school of historical interpretation, what were the motivations behind the revolution?

The Imperial School

Co-existing with the Progressives was another school of historians, who preferred to view the revolution in a broader context. The Imperial School developed a more subtle understanding of the revolution. They viewed the colonies as an integral part of the British Empire; the taxation disputes and constitutional crises of the 1760s were caused by problems of imperial management and policy. Imperial historians believed the Navigation Acts and mercantilist laws were not oppressive or excessively restrictive; if they had been then the American colonies would not have flourished as they did. Lewis Namier's *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* instead suggested the source of revolution was Britain's political instability; a succession of inexperienced Tory ministries, confronted with pressing economic problems, adopted imperial policies without considering or fully understanding their likely impact. This generated a constitutional crisis and a shift in perceptions on both sides of the Atlantic. Other Imperial School historians include Charles Andrews (*The Colonial Period*) and Lawrence Gipson (*The British Empire before the American Revolution*).

Review Questions

3. How do the Imperial School explain the causes of the revolution?

Solutions to Review Questions

1.
 - Romanticised is looking at the revolution in an idyllic way
 - Patriotism
 - Whigs see the revolution as the height of human progress
2.
 - Economic
 - Self Interest
3.
 - British mismanagement
 - Economics and Politics
4.
 - A new sense of community and society that had developed in the Colony
 - A society based on merit and ability
 - Moved from a society based on birth right
 - Removed from aristocracy
5.
 - They see propaganda as the key to the revolution
 - Propaganda feed discussion and ideas
 - Inturn this led to increase in republican ideals
6.
 - Class discontent, a revolution from the ground up
 - Race, the role of race in society and the revolution
 - Gender the role that women played in the revolution