Modern European History

Unit 6 – The Age of Revolutions

The American Revolution

***Read and annotate this handout.***

*The ideas of the Enlightenment clearly made an impact on the colonies in North America. In response to unfair taxation and other issues, the colonists revolted against British rule, formed their own army, and declared their independence. Many Europeans saw the American Revolution as the embodiment of the Enlightenment*'*s political dreams.*

**Britain and the American Revolution**

The United Kingdom of Great Britain came into existence in 1707, when the governments of England and Scotland were united. The term British came to refer to both the English and the Scots.

In 1688 the Glorious Revolution resulted in a Bill of Rights that affirmed Parliament's right to make laws. As a result, the monarch and Parliament shared power. The monarch chose ministers, who were responsible to the Crown. These ministers set policy and guided Parliament. Parliament's power to make laws, levy taxes, and pass the budget indirectly influenced the monarch's ministers.

In 1714 a new dynasty was established when the last Stuart ruler, Queen Anne, died without an heir. The crown was offered to her nearest relatives, Protestant rulers of the German state of Hannover. The first Hanoverian king, George I, did not speak English. Neither the first nor the second George knew the British system well, so their chief ministers were allowed to deal with Parliament.

In the meantime, growing trade and industry led to an everincreasing middle class that favored the expansion of trade and of Britain's world empire. They found a spokesman in William Pitt the Elder, who became head of cabinet in 1757. He expanded the British Empire by acquiring Canada and India in the Seven Years' War.

In North America, then, Britain controlled Canada as well as the thirteen colonies on the eastern coast of what is now the United States. The British colonies were well populated, containing more than 1 million people by 1750. They were also prosperous.

In theory, the British Board of Trade, the Royal Council, and Parliament controlled the colonies. In actuality, the colonies had legislatures that often acted independently. Merchants in port cities such as Charleston, New York, and Boston did not want the British government to run their affairs.

**The American Revolution Begins**

After the Seven Years' War, British leaders wanted to get new colonial revenues from the colonies. These revenues would then be used to cover war costs. These would also pay for the expenses of maintaining an army to defend the colonies.

In 1765 Parliament imposed the Stamp Act on the colonies. The act required certain printed materials, such as legal documents and newspapers, to carry a stamp showing that a tax had been paid to Britain. Opposition was widespread and often violent. The act was repealed in 1766, ending the immediate crisis, but the cause of the dispute was not resolved.

Crisis followed crisis in the 1770s. To counteract British actions, the colonies organized the First Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in September 1774. Members urged colonists to take up arms and organize militias.

Fighting finally erupted between colonists and the British army in April 1775 in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. Meeting soon afterward, the Second Continental Congress set up an army, called the Continental Army. George Washington served as its commander in chief.

More than a year passed before the colonies declared independence from the British Empire. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson. With this stirring political document, the American Revolution had formally begun.

**British Defeat**

Support from foreign countries was important to the colonies' cause. These nations were eager to gain revenge for earlier defeats at the hands of the British. The French supplied arms and money to the rebels. French officers and soldiers also served in Washington's army. In February 1778, following a British defeat, the French granted diplomatic recognition to the new United States. When Spain and the Dutch Republic entered the war, the British faced war with the Europeans as well as the Americans.

When General Cornwallis was forced to surrender to the American and French forces under Washington at Yorktown in 1781, the British decided to end the war. In 1783 the Treaty of Paris recognized the independence of the American colonies. The treaty also granted the Americans control of the western territory from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River.

**The Birth of a New Nation**

After overthrowing British rule, the former colonies feared the power of a strong central government. The states' first constitution, the Articles of Confederation (1781), created a weak central government that lacked the power to deal with the nation's problems. In 1787 delegates met in Philadelphia at the Constitutional Convention to revise the Articles of Confederation. The delegates decided to plan for an entirely new government.

**The Constitution**

The proposed Constitution created a federal system in which the national government and the state governments shared power. Based on Montesquieu's ideas, the national, or federal, government was separated into three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch had power to check, or restrain, acts of the other branches.

A president served as the head of the executive branch, which is why it may be referred to as a presidential democracy. The legislative branch consisted of elected representatives in two houses—the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Supreme Court and other courts formed the judicial branch. After ratification by 9 of the 13 states, the Constitution took effect.

**The Bill of Rights**

As promised during negotiations over ratification, the new Congress proposed 12 amendments to the Constitution. The states approved 10 of the amendments. Together, these amendments became known as the Bill of Rights. As we have seen, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England had also resulted in a Bill of Rights.

These 10 amendments guaranteed freedom of religion, speech, press, petition, and assembly. They gave Americans the right to bear arms and to be protected against unreasonable searches and arrests. They guaranteed trial by jury, due process of law, and the protection of property rights.

Many of the rights in the Bill of Rights were derived from the natural rights proposed by the eighteenth-century philosophes and John Locke. European intellectuals saw the American Revolution as the confirmation of the premises of the Enlightenment. A new age and a better world could be achieved.