

The Mighty Pen

Starting in the 17th century and continuing throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, western society faced massive social changes. The rise of a middle class, the legacy of religious warfare, and the birth of Science converged, calling into question the political status quo and beginning the tumultuous shift towards democracy. After America's success with our own revolution against the British crown, countless other European nations would unsuccessfully try to emulate it. Consider the violent bloodbath and paranoid dictatorship of France or the century of oppression brought about by the Russian revolution. The philosophical and political roots of the Mensheviks and Robespierre who conducted the Russian and French revolutions, respectively, mirror the same tradition of revolutionary thought as America's Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. However, the central difference that caused Russia and France to fail but America to succeed was not political prowess – it was literacy.

The American colonies were the most literate societies in the late 1700s. In fact, on the eve of the American Revolution, 85% of New Englanders, 70% of New Yorkers and Pennsylvanians, and 55% of Virginians could both read and write (Gade). The United States' high literacy rates, particularly in New England, were due to the Puritanical custom of ensuring that everyone could comprehend the Bible. Even after Puritanism had lost its following, the culture of learning remained. The result was a burgeoning population who embraced revolutionary ideas in written form. Not to mention, a well-read, educated population with a tradition of self government was less susceptible to manipulation and tyranny, which was absolutely vital to the future success of our young nation.

Serving as mouthpieces for the American Revolution, the colonists frequently read

published pamphlets such as Thomas Paine's Common Sense

which explained the key objectives of the revolution and also supported the philosophy of Enlightenment. *Common Sense*, and other similar Revolutionary Era pamphlets, like John Dickinson's *A New Essay by the Pennsylvania Farmer*, conveyed the exemplary notion that every man is equal – a radical statement at the time. To this point, Paine denounces the British “monarchy...[as having] laid...the world in blood and ashes” (Paine). Similarly, Dickinson urges colonial men and women not “to leave wealth to [their] children; but...to leave [them] liberty” (Dickinson). Consequently, the colonists became more unified in their support of the war with Britain. And, more importantly, they became more knowledgeable about the ideology underpinning the formation of their new government—becoming active, thoughtful participants in the war effort.

Ultimately, our newly founded government was held accountable to its people because they understood the reasons for the revolution—“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” (Jefferson). In France and Russia, on the other hand, the poor, illiterate masses were powerless to oppose a cycle of dictatorships. As Thomas Jefferson rightly observed, “Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights” (Jefferson). Indeed, a literate society is a powerful society. Thankfully, our country's forefathers were a community of readers and writers who had genuine concern for political and social affairs, which was necessary to secure liberty and prosperity for our nation today. The Revolutionary pen was truly mightier than any sword.

Works Cited

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