

II.E.7

People's revolutions

The American Revolution – From the Seven Years' War to the Declaration of Independence

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Emanuel Leutze (1851): „Washington überquert den Delaware“, Wikimedia, gemeinfrei

2026 jährt sich die Unabhängigkeitserklärung der USA zum 250. Mal. Mit diesem Beitrag analysieren Ihre Lernenden die Ereignisse rund um das Jahr 1776. Sie erarbeiten die Bedeutung des Unabhängigkeitskrieges und dessen Rezeption in Europa. Vorschläge zur Projektarbeit bieten einen Gegenwartsbezug zu aktuellen gesellschaftlichen und politischen Entwicklungen in den USA.

KOMPETENZPROFIL

Klassenstufe: 11. und Sek II

Dauer: 12 Unterrichtsstunden

Kompetenzen: Politische und gesellschaftliche Veränderungen im Nordamerika des 18. Jahrhunderts analysieren; den Begriff der Revolution anwenden; die Bedeutung der Amerikanischen Revolution bewerten

Thematische Bereiche: Siebenjähriger Krieg, Amerikanischer Unabhängigkeitskrieg, Unabhängigkeitserklärung, Verfassung der USA, aktuelle Entwicklungen

Methoden: Texte, Bilder, Schaubilder, Internetrecherche

The founding of the USA in 1776 – Tea, taxes and freedom for slaves?

M 2

The debate about when U.S. history begins is also about the causes of the North American colonies' desire for independence from Great Britain. What role did the slavery issue play in this context?

Tasks

1. Work in pairs on the following tasks using the materials.
 - a) Describe the “Somerset Case” of 1772 and make assumptions about how the judgement was received in the American colonies.
 - b) Describe the content of Lord Dunmore’s “Proclamation” of 1775, explain its origin and its impact during the American War of Independence.
2. Present your findings to other pairs. Discuss the significance of the slavery issue in 1776 using these two examples.

The “Somerset case” of 1772

In 1772, a sensational judgement was made. James Somerset, an enslaved African, had been bought by Charles Stewart, a Scottish merchant and customs officer, in 1769 when he was in Boston. Stewart brought Somerset to England in 1769, where he was baptised. Somerset fled in October 1771. Stewart offered a reward, whereupon Somerset was recaptured. Stewart put Somerset in chains and wanted to take him on a ship to Jamaica to sell him as a slave. Somerset's friends and supporters of the abolitionist movement prevented this. They invoked the British law that any imprisonment or detention must be examined by a court (“Habeas Corpus Act” of 1679) and took the case to court. They hoped that Somerset would be released. Lord Mansfield, the chief justice of Great Britain, ruled that slaves brought to the soil of the British mother country should be released, as slavery was neither morally nor politically justifiable.

In 1807, Great Britain banned the trade in slaves. Slavery in the colonies of the British Empire was not abolished until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. In order to compensate British slave owners, the British government took out loans, which at the time was equal to 40 per cent of the British national budget and could only be finally repaid in 2015. In the United States of America, which declared its independence in 1776, the slavery issue was not resolved until the American Civil War between the northern and southern states in 1861. After the end of the war, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution came into force on 18 December 1865, in which slavery was abolished throughout the entire territory of the USA.

1. Abolitionist (from Latin *abolitio* - abolition): The British abolitionist movement called for the abolition of slavery. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the increasingly developing legal understanding in the British mother country tended to assume that slavery was a relationship of service. A slave was therefore not property under property law as in the colonies, but a person who was involuntarily in a service relationship for the rest of their life. The abolitionist movement therefore argued in the “Somerset case” that James Somerset was entitled to a trial.

The history of the USA – Dates and events

M 3

What do you know about the history of the USA? Recall key dates and events.

Tasks

1. Match at least one event card to each of the date cards. Please note that there are several events for some dates.
2. Use the cards to create a timeline: take a DIN A3 sheet of paper and stick the dates on the top edge and the events in the line below.

1607	1755–1763	1773
1776	1783	1789
1823	1845	1917
1861–1865	1812–1814/1815	
A In the American colonies, protests against the tariff policy escalate into the Boston Tea Party.	B After the War of Independence, the independence of the 13 colonies is recognised in the Peace of Paris.	C The British and Americans fight over settlement areas in the Mississippi.
D President James Monroe formulates “non-interference” as a principle of U.S. foreign policy. The Monroe Doctrine states that the USA does not interfere in Europe.	E The journalist John O’Sullivan speaks of “Manifest Destiny”: the USA is destined to take possession of the “continent which Providence has reserved to us for the development of our great experiment of freedom...].”	F Under President Woodrow Wilson, the USA enters the First World War. Woodrow’s aim is to make the world safer for democracy.
G English emigrants establish the first permanent settlement in Jamestown.	H Conflicts between Great Britain and the USA, especially the naval blockades by the British, culminate into a war.	I The British colonies in North America declare their independence from the mother country.
J Founding of the Order of the Illuminati, a secret society that aims to improve society in the spirit of the Enlightenment.	K In this year, Adam Smith’s work “The Wealth of Nations” is published, which establishes economic liberalism.	L Slavery is abolished throughout the United States after a civil war between the northern and southern states.
M Start of the French Revolution	N George Washington becomes the first President of the USA.	O The U.S. Constitution comes into force.

M 7

Before the American Revolution – The Boston Massacre

The increase in taxes and customs duties turned the colonists against British policy. British regiments were moved to avoid unrest. The situation in Boston escalated on 5 March 1770. The event became known as the “Boston Massacre” and was immediately publicised in the media.

Tasks

1. Compare the two illustrations from 1770 and 1856.
2. Interpret the similarities and differences in terms of addressees, intended effect and historical context of origin.

The Boston Massacre

The tax and customs dispute outraged many colonists. The outbreak of riots was inevitable. On 5 March 1770, a Boston barber clashed with a simple British soldier over an allegedly unpaid bill. A crowd of interested Bostonians quickly gathered and a soldier hired for help: Seven comrades, including a non-commissioned officer, rushed to his aid. However, the crowd of Bostonians continued to grow, and the soldiers were pelted with stones and snowballs filled with dung. The soldiers felt harassed and began firing wildly into the crowd without orders. Three Bostonians died immediately, two more died a few days later. The first victim was the harbour worker Crispus Attucks, the offspring of one white and one black parent.



© “The Boston Massacre”, Yale University Library, Wikimedia, public domain

Paul Revere, copperplate engraving, 1770



© “The Boston Massacre”, Wikimedia, public domain

John Bufford, colour lithograph, 1856

The War for Independence (III) – Literature

M 10

Washington Irving (1783–1859) is considered the first world-class American writer. His short stories also deal with events of the War of Independence.

Tasks

Rip Van Winkle awakens in Washington Irving's eponymous story after 20 years. He has slept through the War of Independence. Another one of his novels, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" tells the story of a headless horseman. Interpret both short stories with regard to the historical context.

Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819)

[...] He now hurried forth, and hastened to his old resort, the village inn – but it too was gone. A large rickety wooden building stood in its place, with great gaping windows, some of them broken and mended with old hats and patchcoats, and over the door was painted, "The Union Hotel, by Jonathan Woollyhead." Instead of the great tree that used to shelter the quiet little Dutch inn of yore, there now was reared a tall, naked pole, with something on the top that looked like a red night-cap, and from it was fluttering a flag, on which was a singular assemblage of stars and stripes – all this was strange and incomprehensible. He recognized on the sign, however, the ruby face of King George, under which he had smoked so many a peaceful pipe; but even this was singularly metamorphosed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a sceptre, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, GENERAL WASHINGTON. [...]

© Washington Irving: Rip van Winkle, https://ibiblio.org/ebooks/Irving/Winkle/Irving_Winkle.pdf, p. 19.

Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820)

"Sleeping Hollow" is set in a valley around 1790, where, according to the inhabitants, there are ghosts: *"The dominant spirit, however, that haunts this enchanted region, and seems to be commander-in-chief of all the powers of the air, is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon-ball, in some nameless battle during the revolutionary war, and who is ever and anon seen by the country folk, hurrying along in the gloom of night, as if on the wings of the wind."* Into this valley comes a teacher named Ichabod Crane. The first name comes from the Old Testament and means "He is the glory from Israel". He is very interested in success and wealth and endeavours to win the daughter of the richest farmer. But she wants Brom Bones, a young farmer from the valley. One evening, as the teacher is riding back from a rendezvous, he encounters a horseman who takes off his head and throws it at the teacher. The next day, the teacher has disappeared. All that is found is his horse and a pumpkin lying smashed on the ground. Bones goes on to marry the rich farmer's daughter and puts on a mischievous face when people talk about Crane and the headless horseman. Some interpret the story as an expression of tension between two archetypal lifestyles – Crane, a materialist, and Bones, the agricultural producer – or in terms of tensions between the victorious New England colonists and former Dutch settlers that arose after independence.

Text excerpt quoted from © https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Irving/Sleepy/Irving_Sleepy.pdf, p. 7.

America 1776 vs. 2026 – Ideas on U.S. history (IV)

M 19

U.S. foreign policy has been marked by the concepts of isolationism and interventionism. Isolationism was already expressed by George Washington's farewell address in 1796. The principles contained therein shaped U.S. foreign policy into the 20th century. But the World Wars and the image of the USA as global peacemaker in 20th century expressed the era of interventionism. What about U.S. foreign policy today?

Tasks

1. Read Washington's quotation and the definition of interventionism. Then explain the difference between interventionism and isolationism.
2. Inform yourself about current developments of U.S. foreign policy and explain how it aligns with the two concepts (isolationism and interventionism).
3. 2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Develop ideas on how you could use what you have learnt to shape a culture of remembrance.

George Washington in his farewell address in 1796

"Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. [...] Hence therefore it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations & collisions of her friendships, or enmities."

© <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-20-02-0440-06>

Definition of interventionism

"Interventionism represents active participation in other countries' affairs to influence outcomes that align with American interests, values or security objectives. Fiveable defines it as a strategy where 'a nation actively engages in the affairs of other countries, often with the intent of influencing outcomes in a way that aligns with its own interests.'"

© <https://govfacts.org/explainer/interventionism-vs-interventionism-americas-forever-foreign-policy-debate/>

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