

British Army

Frederick North (Lord North) entered the House of Commons at the first general election after he came of age; he spent almost the whole of his political life there; and was its leader for nearly fifteen years.

He became First Minister at the age of 37 and served as First Lord of the Treasury from 1770 to 1782 (North was an exceptionally conscientious first minister and was generally referred to as the Prime Minister, however, he never referred to himself as such). (gov-uk and Institute of Historical Research)

Lord North and the British cabinet, made up of nearly 20 ministers, first considered resorting to military might against the Americans as early as January 1774, when word of the Boston Tea Party reached London. (Recall that on December 16, 1773, protesters had boarded British vessels in Boston Harbor and destroyed cargoes of tea, rather than pay a tax imposed by Parliament.)

Contrary to popular belief both then and now, Lord North's government did not respond impulsively to the news. Throughout early 1774, the prime minister and his cabinet engaged in lengthy debate on whether coercive actions would lead to war. A second question was considered as well: Could Britain win such a war?

By March 1774, North's government had opted for punitive measures that fell short of declaring war. Parliament enacted the Coercive Act - or Intolerable Acts, as Americans called them - and applied the legislation to Massachusetts alone, to punish the colony for its provocative act.

Britain's principal action was to close Boston Harbor until the tea had been paid for. England also installed Gen. Thomas Gage, commander of the British Army in America, as governor of the colony. Politicians in London chose to heed the counsel of Gage, who opined that the colonists would "be lions whilst we are lambs but if we take the resolute part they will be very meek." (Smithsonian)



Lord North

Britain miscalculated. In September 1774, colonists convened the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia; the members voted to embargo British commerce until all British taxes and the Coercive Acts were repealed. News of that vote reached London in December. A second round of deliberations within North's ministry ensued for nearly six weeks.

Throughout its deliberations, North's government agreed on one point: the Americans would pose little challenge in the event of war. The Americans had neither a standing army nor a navy; few among them were experienced officers.

Britain possessed a professional army and the world's greatest navy.

Furthermore, the colonists had virtually no history of cooperating with one another, even in the face of danger.

In addition, many in the cabinet were swayed by disparaging assessments of American soldiers leveled by British officers in earlier wars. For instance, during the French and Indian War (1754-63), Brig. Gen. James Wolfe had described America's soldiers as "cowardly dogs." Henry Ellis, the royal governor of Georgia, nearly simultaneously asserted that the colonists were a "poor species of fighting men" given to "a want of bravery."

Still, as debate continued, skeptics - especially within Britain's army and navy - raised troubling questions.

- Could the Royal Navy blockade the 1,000-mile-long American coast?
- Couldn't two million free colonists muster a force of 100,000 or so citizen-soldiers, nearly four times the size of Britain's army in 1775?
- Might not an American army of this size replace its losses more easily than Britain?
- Was it possible to supply an army operating 3,000 miles from home?
- Could Britain subdue a rebellion across 13 colonies in an area some six times the size of England?
- Could the British Army operate deep in America's interior, far from coastal supply bases?
- Would a protracted war bankrupt Britain?
- Would France and Spain, England's age-old enemies, aid American rebels?
- Was Britain risking starting a broader war?

After the Americans convened the Continental Congress, King George III told his ministers that "blows must decide" whether the Americans "submit or triumph."

After King George III declared that the colonies were in a rebellion, in 1775, and vowed to suppress it with force, the British government began to increase the size of the British army by creating larger infantry regiments and companies. The number of soldiers per regiment was increased to 200 and the number of soldiers per company was increased to 18.

At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775, the total size of the British army, excluding militia, consisted of 48,647 soldiers. Of these soldiers about 39,294 were infantry, 6,869 were cavalry and 2,484 were artillery. (History of Massachusetts)

The army that opposed American independence has its roots in the 17th century, with the formation of the "New Model Army" as a permanent standing army during the English Civil War.

In the century that followed the size of the army grew and shrank depending on the circumstances, and by 1775 it numbered around 48,000 men. By European standards the British Army was extremely small - the French maintained a force nearly four times larger - but many in Britain did not see the need for a large army.

For one, there was political resistance to maintaining a large army. Many British subjects looked back to the time of the New Model Army and saw how a professional force could be used to oppress the people.

In addition to the dangers it posed to liberty, a standing army was also extremely expensive to maintain during peacetime. As an island nation at the heart of a colonial empire, the navy was vastly more important to maintaining British trade and projecting British power. The main role of the peacetime army was to guard the colonial frontiers and to maintain control over Ireland.

The British Army of the late 18th century was a volunteer force. Unlike the navy, there was no impressment or conscription into the army, a point of pride for most British subjects. The majority of men who volunteered for service were farm laborers or tradesmen who were out of work.

Life in the army promised steady pay, regular meals, and a way to escape grinding poverty.



British redcoat infantry during the American War of Independence

Before the war, enlistment in the army was a lifelong commitment, but during the war, shorter term enlistments of several years were introduced to encourage recruitment. Recruits were generally young, averaging in their early 20s, and were drawn from all over Britain and Ireland.

By the eve of the American Revolution, the majority of the men in the ranks had never seen active military service and were not battle hardened veterans. The exception were many of the army's non-commissioned officers. These men formed the backbone of the regiment and were often veterans of many years or even decades of service. (Battlefields)

As the war in America dragged on the British Army expanded rapidly. At least 50,000 soldiers fought in America, with many more serving in the West Indies, Europe, and India. Britain struggled to meet these manpower needs with volunteer enlistments and soon turned to other means.

Two short periods of impressment were tried during the war, in which unemployed men could be taken into the army, but these acts proved to be very unpopular. By 1780 the measures had been rescinded after only bringing in a few thousand men.

The men leading the army were drawn from a drastically different social class. The majority of army officers came from the upper classes of British society, and were often the younger, non-inheriting sons of well to do families.

With the exception of Colonels, who were appointed by the king, officer's commissions were purchased. A retiring officer would offer to sell his commission to the next most senior officer, and if he refused then it would be offered to the next officer and so on in order of seniority. (Battlefields)

British Commanders in the Revolutionary War:

Commander in Chief, North America: Thomas Gage (1763 – October 1775)

Commander in Chief, America: William Howe (October 1775 – 1778)

Commander in Chief, America: Henry Clinton (February 1778 – 1782)

Commander in Chief, America: Guy Carleton (1782 – 1783)

Commander in Chief, America: John Campbell (1783 – 1787) (Battlefields)

The basic building block of the British Army was the battalion or regiment. The two terms were used somewhat interchangeably in the 18th century, as most regiments consisted of a single battalion (although there was a handful made up of 2 or more battalions).

Each battalion consisted of ten companies for a total strength (on paper at least) of 642 officers and men. Eight of the companies were known as "battalion" or "hat" companies and were made up of standard infantry troops. (Battlefields) As the war continued, the size of companies was increased to 70 soldiers before being reduced to 58 soldiers by the end of the war. (History of Massachusetts)

The remaining companies were the "flank" companies made up of specialized soldiers. On the right of the battalion was the grenadier company. Grenadiers were chosen from the largest and most physically strong and imposing men of the battalion and were used as shock troops for assaulting enemy positions.

On the left flank was a company of light infantry. Unlike the grenadiers, light troops were chosen for their speed, agility, marksmanship, and ability to operate independently. Their role on the battlefield was to skirmish with the enemy from behind cover, provide reconnaissance, and protect the flanks of the army.

During the Revolutionary War, most grenadier and light companies were stripped from their battalion and amalgamated into separate battalions made up entirely of other grenadier or light companies. (Battlefields)

One of the major advantages of the British army was that it was one of the most powerful and experienced armies in the world. During the previous 100 years, the British army had defeated many powerful countries in war, such as France and Spain, and seemed almost unbeatable. The British army was also funded by the British government and the Crown, which was very wealthy.



British Grenadiers – Battle of Bunker Hill (LOC)

One major disadvantage or weakness of the British army was that it was fighting in a distant land. Great Britain had to ship soldiers and supplies across the Atlantic, which was very costly, in order to fight the Revolutionary War.

The British army didn't know the local terrain as well as the Continental Army did and weren't trained to fight guerrilla-style warfare in the wilderness. Up until the Revolutionary War, the British army had only fought European-style warfare on an open battlefield.

Until early-1778 the conflict was a civil war within the British Empire, but afterward it became an international war as France (in 1778) and Spain (in 1779) joined the colonies against Britain. The British government, following a traditional policy, purchased about 30,000 Hessian troops from various German princes to assist them in America.

From the beginning, sea power was vital in determining the course of the war, lending to British strategy a flexibility that helped compensate for the comparatively small numbers of troops sent to America and ultimately enabling the French to help bring about the final British surrender at Yorktown. (Britannica)

Americans fought the war on land with essentially two types of organization: the Continental (national) Army and the state militias. The total number of the former provided by quotas from the states throughout the conflict was 231,771 men, and the militias totaled 164,087. At any given time, however, the American forces seldom numbered over 20,000; in 1781 there were only about 29,000 insurgents under arms throughout the country.

By contrast, the British army was a reliable steady force of professionals. Many of the enlisted men were farm boys, as were most of the Americans. Others were unemployed persons from the urban slums. Still others joined the army to escape fines or imprisonment. The great majority became efficient soldiers as a result of training and discipline.

Preliminary articles of peace were signed on November 30, 1782, and the Peace of Paris (September 3, 1783) ended the US War of Independence. Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States (with western boundaries to the Mississippi River) and ceded Florida to Spain. Other provisions called for payment of US private debts to British citizens, American use of the Newfoundland fisheries, and fair treatment for American colonials loyal to Britain. (Britannica)

An estimated 6,800 Americans were killed in action, 6,100 wounded, and upwards of 20,000 were taken prisoner. Historians believe that at least an additional 17,000 deaths were the result of disease, including about 8,000–12,000 who died while prisoners of war.

Unreliable data places the total casualties for British regulars fighting in the Revolutionary War around 24,000 men. This total number includes battlefield deaths and injuries, deaths from disease, men taken prisoner, and those who remained missing. Approximately 1,200 Hessian soldiers were killed, 6,354 died of disease and another 5,500 deserted and settled in America afterward. (Battlefield)

Information here is primarily from History of Massachusetts; American Battlefield Trust; Smithsonian Magazine, John Ferling; Gov-UK; Institute of Historical Research; Britannica

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young