George III

King George III was the British monarch from 1760 to 1820. As such, he ended the "Whig oligarchy" in England and allowed Tories back into government, presided over a long and taxing war with France, and saw the colonies in America gain independence. His obstinate resistance to American independence made him a symbol of British tyranny to the American patriots. He eventually went mad, but ended his reign as a popular king within Great Britain.

George was born on June 4, 1738 in London, England. He was the eldest son of Frederick, Prince of Wales, and Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. He became heir to the throne after his father's death in 1751. In 1760, George's grandfather, George II, died, and George ascended the British throne as King George III. A devoted family man, George had 15 children by his wife Charlotte of Mecklenberg-Strelitz. In the early 1770s, he purchased the Queen's House for his wife, a structure that was later enlarged to become Buckingham Palace.

As a ruler, George had a deep sense of moral duty and wanted a direct role in Great Britain's politics. In particular, he hoped to reestablish some of the royal rights and privileges that his predecessors had allowed to pass to the British Parliament. The dominance of the British Whig Party in all aspects of British society ended when George took the throne, and he allowed Tories back into public life.

George also wanted to establish Britain on a more solid financial footing, as frequent wars throughout the first half of the 18th century had drained the country's treasury. The Seven Years' War (known as the French and Indian War in America), which had begun in 1756, lasted three years into George's reign. The Treaty of Paris (1763) ended the costly war in February 1763, but Great Britain's success came at a cost. The national debt nearly doubled, as did Britain's power in the world. George decided to make a concerted effort to bring his growing empire more firmly under his control, especially his colonies in North America.

The British government endeavored to reign in the American colonists by reforming the colonial government and increasing colonial taxes (which were significantly lower than the taxes paid by those who lived in England). The new taxes were aimed at reducing Great Britain's postwar debt and shifting a greater part of the cost of North America's defense to the colonists. George supported and encouraged these changes. He believed the colonies were economic satellites of Britain, and Parliament had unquestioned authority to tax and rule the colonists. Conflict arose when the colonists resisted Britain's attempts to reassert power after more than 50 years of neglect.

Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, the American colonists protested against increased taxes and the British government's attempt to exert more control over them. They believed, however, that these objectionable actions were those of the government and not necessarily sanctioned by the king. By the late 1760s, most colonists maintained that George either did not know about the colonists' objections or had been seriously misled by his ministers as to the situation in the colonies.

When fighting broke out between colonists in Massachusetts and the British Army at the Battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, many leading colonial figures decided that they must appeal directly to the king to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict. In July 1775, the Second Continental Congress sent a letter to George that...
become known as the Olive Branch Petition (1775). In it, the colonists urged the king to redress their grievances and restore order to America. What the colonists did not know, however, was that George had been well informed about the American situation throughout the 1760s and 1770s, and that all of the measures to which the colonists objected had had George's full approval. In response to the petition, George declared the Americans in open rebellion.

After the American Revolution, George bemoaned the loss of the American colonies and seriously considered abdicating the throne. He believed the loss of the colonies signaled the end of Britain's status as great world power. In 1788, he suffered from a severe bout of depression and dementia, a condition that many in England blamed on his devastation at the loss of America. Some even questioned his ability to rule. He eventually recovered, however.

The English public did not know that in fact George had been suffering from periods of depression throughout most of his adult life. Many historians now believe that he was afflicted with porphyria, a metabolic defect that may cause delirium and mental instability, as well as great physical discomfort. The episode in 1788 was merely the worst attack of the disease that he had suffered up to that point. The outbreak of the French Revolution and its resulting wars did nothing to help George's condition. He became a symbol of the old ways so passionately being fought against, and his mental instability made him largely ineffective as a ruler.

In 1811, George suffered a more serious attack of the disease from which he never made a full recovery. His son, the Prince of Wales (later King George IV), acted as regent for the remainder of George's reign, during which his popularity surprisingly blossomed. George III died at Windsor Palace on January 29, 1820.

Further Reading


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