

WIKIPEDIA [Intolerable Acts aka Coercive Acts. (Accessed Apr. 27, 2022). Overview. Wikipedia.]

Intolerable Acts

The **Intolerable Acts** (passed/Royal assent March 31–June 22, 1774) were punitive laws passed by the British Parliament in 1774 after the Boston Tea Party. The laws were meant to punish the Massachusetts colonists for their defiance in the Tea Party protest in reaction to changes in taxation by the British Government. In Great Britain, these laws were referred to as the **Coercive Acts**.

The acts took away self-governance and rights that Massachusetts had enjoyed since its founding, triggering outrage and indignation in the Thirteen Colonies. They were key developments in the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in April 1775.

Four of the acts were issued in direct response to the Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773. The British Parliament hoped these punitive measures would, by making an example of Massachusetts, reverse the trend of colonial resistance to parliamentary authority that had begun with the 1764 Sugar Act. A fifth act, the Quebec Act, enlarged the boundaries of what was then the Province of Quebec notably Southwest into the Ohio Country and other future mid-western states, and instituted reforms generally favorable to the French Catholic inhabitants of the region. Although unrelated to the other four Acts, it was passed in the same legislative session and seen by the colonists as one of the Intolerable Acts. The Patriots viewed the acts as an arbitrary violation of the rights of Massachusetts, and in September 1774 they organized the First Continental Congress to coordinate a protest. As tensions escalated, the American Revolutionary War broke out in April 1775, leading in July 1776 to the declaration of an independent United States of America.

Contents

Background

Passage

The Acts

Effects

References

Notes

Bibliography

Further reading

External links

Background

Relations between the Thirteen Colonies and the British Parliament slowly but steadily worsened after the end of the Seven Years' War (French and Indian War) in 1763. The war had plunged the British government deep into debt, and so the British Parliament enacted a series of measures to increase tax revenue from the colonies. Parliament believed that these acts, such as the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend Acts of 1767, were legitimate means of having the colonies pay their fair share of the costs

of maintaining the British Empire. Although protests led to the repeal of the Stamp and Townshend Acts, Parliament adhered to the position that it had the right to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever" in the Declaratory Act of 1766.

Many colonists argued that under the unwritten British constitution, a British subject's property could not be taken from him (in the form of taxes) without his consent (in the form of representation in government). Therefore, because the colonies were not directly represented in Parliament, it followed that Parliament had no right to levy taxes upon them, a view expressed by the slogan "No taxation without representation". After the Townshend Acts, some colonial essayists took this line of thinking even further, and began to question whether Parliament had any legitimate jurisdiction in the colonies at all.^[1] This question of the extent of Parliament's sovereignty in the colonies was the issue underlying what became the American Revolution.



This Patriot cartoon depicting the Coercive Acts as the forcing of tea on a Native American woman (a symbol of the American colonies) was copied and distributed in the Thirteen Colonies.

Passage

On December 16, 1773, a group of Patriot colonists associated with the Sons of Liberty destroyed 342 chests of tea in Boston, Massachusetts, an act that came to be known as the Boston Tea Party. The colonists partook in this action because Parliament had passed the Tea Act, which granted the British East India Company a monopoly on tea sales in the colonies, thereby saving the company from bankruptcy. This made British tea less expensive. In addition, there was added a small tax. This angered the colonists. News of the Boston Tea Party reached England in January 1774. Parliament responded by passing four laws. Three of the laws were intended to directly punish Massachusetts. This was for the destruction of private property, to restore British authority in Massachusetts, and to otherwise reform colonial government in America.

On April 22, 1774, Prime Minister Lord North defended the programme in the House of Commons, saying:

The Americans have tarred and feathered your subjects, plundered your merchants, burnt your ships, denied all obedience to your laws and authority; yet so clement and so long forbearing has our conduct been that it is incumbent on us now to take a different course. Whatever may be the consequences, we must risk something; if we do not, all is over.^[2]

The Acts

The Boston Port Act was the first of the laws passed in 1774 in response to the Boston Tea Party. It closed the port of Boston until the colonists paid for the destroyed tea and the king was satisfied that order had been restored. Colonists objected that the Port Act punished all of Boston rather than just

the individuals who had destroyed the tea, and that they were being punished without having been given an opportunity to testify in their own defense.^[3]

The Massachusetts Government Act provoked even more outrage than the Port Act because it unilaterally took away Massachusetts' charter and brought it under control of the British government. Under the terms of the Government Act, almost all positions in the colonial government were to be appointed by the governor, Parliament, or king. The act also severely limited town meetings in Massachusetts to one per year, unless the Governor called for one. Colonists outside Massachusetts feared that their governments could now also be changed by the legislative fiat of Parliament.

The Administration of Justice Act allowed the Royal governor to order trials of accused royal officials to take place in Great Britain or elsewhere within the Empire if he decided that the defendant could not get a fair trial in Massachusetts. Although the act stipulated for witnesses to be reimbursed after having traveled at their own expense across the Atlantic, it was not stipulated that this would include reimbursement for lost earnings during the period for which they would be unable to work, leaving few with the ability to testify. George Washington called this the "Murder Act" because he believed that it allowed British officials to harass Americans and then escape justice.^[4] Many colonists believed the act was unnecessary because British soldiers had been given a fair trial following the Boston Massacre in 1770.

The Quartering Act, which applied to all British colonies in North America, sought to create a more effective method of housing British troops. In a previous act, the colonies had been required to provide housing for soldiers, but colonial legislatures had been uncooperative in doing so. The new Quartering Act allowed a governor to house soldiers in other buildings if suitable quarters were not provided. While many sources claim that the Quartering Act allowed troops to be billeted in occupied private homes, historian David Ammerman's 1974 study claimed that this is a myth, and that the act only permitted troops to be quartered in unoccupied buildings.^[5]

Although unrelated to the aforementioned Acts, the Quebec Act, passed in the same Parliamentary session, was considered by the colonists to be one of the Intolerable Acts. The Act expanded the territory of the Province of Quebec into much of what is now the American Midwest, which appeared to void the land claims of the Ohio Company on the region. The guarantee of free practice of Catholicism, the majority religion in Canada, was seen by colonists as an "establishment" of the faith in the colonies which were overwhelmingly Protestant. Furthermore, colonists resented the lenient provisions granted to their erstwhile enemies whom they had fought hard against during the French and Indian War.^[6]

Effects

Many colonists saw the Coercive Acts (Intolerable Acts) as a violation of their constitutional rights, their natural rights, and their colonial charters. They, therefore, viewed the acts as a threat to the liberties of all of British America, not just Massachusetts. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, for example, described the acts as "a most wicked System for destroying the liberty of America".^[7]

The citizens of Boston not only viewed this as an act of unnecessary and cruel punishment, but the Coercive Acts drew hatred toward Britain even further. As a result of the Intolerable Acts, even more colonists turned against British rule.^[8]

Great Britain hoped that the Intolerable Acts would isolate radicals in Massachusetts and cause American colonists to concede the authority of Parliament over their elected assemblies. It was a calculated risk that backfired, due to the harshness of some of the acts having made it difficult for

moderates in the colonies to speak in favor of Parliament.^[9] The acts promoted sympathy for Massachusetts and encouraged colonists from the otherwise diverse colonies to form committees of correspondence which sent delegates to the First Continental Congress. The Continental Congress created the Continental Association, an agreement to boycott British goods. Additionally, it was decided that if the Coercive Acts were not reversed after a year, goods were to stop being exported to Great Britain as well. The Congress also pledged to support Massachusetts in case of attack, which meant that all of the colonies would become involved when the American Revolutionary War began at Lexington and Concord.^[10]

References

Notes

1. Middlekauff, *Glorious Cause*, 241.
2. Reid, *Constitutional History*, 13. For the complete quote in context, see William Cobbett et al., eds., *The Parliamentary History of England: From the Earliest Period to the Year 1803* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=-14TAAAYAAJ&printsec=titlepage#PPT649,M1>) (London, 1813) 17:1280–1281.
3. "1774: Parliament passes the Boston Port Act" (<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/parliament-passes-the-boston-port-act>). *History Channel*. A&E Television Networks. 13 November 2009. Retrieved 20 December 2017.
4. Ammerman 1974, p. 9.
5. Ammerman 1974, p. 10.
6. Drake, Richard B. (2004). *A History of Appalachia* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=Q9m6Zw0QY-YC&pg=PT61>). University Press of Kentucky. p. 61. ISBN 0813137934.
7. Ammerman 1974, p. 15.
8. Gary B. Nash; Carter Smith (2007). *Atlas Of American History* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=tyzmAJfLKs8C&pg=PA64>). Infobase Publishing. p. 64. ISBN 9781438130132.
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10. Harlow G. Unger (2011). *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution* (https://archive.org/details/isbn_9780306819629). Da Capo Press. pp. 188 (https://archive.org/details/isbn_9780306819629/page/188)–93. ISBN 978-0306819766.

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Further reading

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- Breen, T. H. (2010). *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (<https://archive.org/details/americaninsurgen0000bree>). New York: Hill and Wang. ISBN 9780809075881.
- Norton, Mary Beth. *1774: The Long Year of Revolution* (2020) online review (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/1774-review-the-year-that-changed-the-world-11582303285?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>) by Gordon S. Wood

External links

- Primary documents (http://colet.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/amarch/documentidx.pl?vol_id=S4-V1) (British and American) relating to the Intolerable Acts, originally published in the *American Archives* and presented online by the Northern Illinois University Libraries, also Camden.
- Text of the Boston Port Act (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/boston_port_act.asp)
- Text of the Massachusetts Government Act (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/mass_gov_act.asp)
- Text of the Administration of Justice Act (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/admin_of_justice_act.asp)
- Text of the Quartering Act (<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/q74.htm>)

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John Trumbull's Declaration of Independence, showing The Committee of Five presents the draft of the Declaration of Independence to the Second Continental Congress

Timeline **Military leaders** **Battles**

[hide](#)

American Enlightenment

Sugar Act

Currency Act

Quartering Acts

Stamp Act 1765

Sons of Liberty

Stamp Act Congress

Declaratory Act

No taxation without representation

Townshend Acts

Tea Act

Boston Massacre

Boston Tea Party

Intolerable Acts

Committees of Correspondence

First Continental Congress

[hide](#)

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Minutemen

British Army

British Royal Navy

France

Spain

Battles

Intelligence

Treaty of Paris

Costs

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Second Continental Congress

27 colonial grievances

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(Thomas Jefferson)

Signing

Articles of Confederation



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