Hello, this is Diana Drushel and today we will be looking at how songs from the American Revolution not only promoted unity and a sense of a national identity amongst the colonists of the newly budding United States of America but also contradicted the values that these songs were based on.

Songs during the Revolution were vital to the colonists in the sense that they felt united and were singing in the hopes of accomplishing the same purpose: to break away from the tyrannical rule of the British Crown. They would sing of liberty and breaking away from the slavery of taxes and lack of representation that the British held them to. These songs would also be used to celebrate martial victories and created the standard that “to be an American, one had to be loyal to the revolutionary cause” and thus ideas of liberty, unity, and loyalty became part of the forming American identity.¹

The first of the two songs that contributed to the theme of unity was “Chester” by the father of American choral music, William Billings. It was written in 1770 and became known as the anthem of the Continental Army due to the soldiers singing it as means to boost their moral after defeats to the British but also after victories as a means to legitimize their cause. The song emphasized the unity of the troops and the fear that they instilled on the British as they rose

against the oppression of the “tyrans…iron rod” and “slav’ry[‘s]…galling chains.”

“Chester” is important to consider when determining the American identity because it follows the mindset of the common soldier who experiences the war first-hand and in a sense were the reason that the United States was able to successfully divide themselves from British rule. If these soldiers were not united with similar goals and a sense of what the war was being fought for, their efforts would have been for naught. Songs like “Chester” promoted ideas of liberty, unity, and fighting against the oppression of the British taxation without legal representation.

The second song to consider is a parody of John Bull’s “God Save the King” in the sense that instead of promoting the greatness and safety of Britain and its monarchy, the American Patriots instead used the song as a template to promote the forming government and country of the United States and the liberty and independence they had found while George Washington and the Continental Army “inincreas[ed] in strength…now [that there is] no more king of this fertile shore.”

There is an emphasis of freedom from the British crown not only for the Commonwealth as a whole but specifically for the “free states” or colonies that had individually faced hardships due to the British.

But while “Chester” and “God Save the King” emphasized unity and breaking from the tyrannical bonds of the British, these songs also had contradictions in the sense that this idea of a national identity was not applied to all citizens and that the common man and the impact that they made is forgotten.

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The idea of slavery and the colonists being enslaved by the British through taxation and then being liberated from these chains through the Revolutionary War is a paradox in the sense that while the white man was able to find his own freedom and sense of independence, this was not applied to the African slaves in the south. The songs hold no mention of the slaves who are the driving force of the colonial American economy and do not apply freedom to them. America, in the process of breaking away from tyranny becomes a tyrant by not applying the ideals of the American identity to African slaves.

Another paradox in these songs is that the voice and importance of the common man is forgotten. In these songs as in the mainstream ideas of the American Revolution, the heroes we think of are the Founding Fathers, especially George Washington. We think of the bravery, intellect, and push for liberty that these historical figures promoted and based the country’s ideals on. And when we do hear of the common man’s part in the Revolution, it focuses mostly on the army and how they would have been unsuccessful without the moral and encouragement from George Washington.

These songs, despite their contradictions and paradoxes, still established the ideals of liberty, loyalty, and independence and helped to created a collective American identity. Though the common man and Africans were not necessarily the focus of the Revolution in terms of its remembrance, they still held these values as part of their identity and saw themselves as American, even if others did not see them in the same manner.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


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