

The French and Indian War – The Seven Years War (1754-1763)

The conflict known as the Seven Years' War in Europe and the French and Indian War in America developed over a long period. It had roots in a struggle between Britain and France that had been going on for nearly two hundred years. The struggle stemmed from each nation's pursuit of mercantilism, global expansion, and its position in European power politics. The Anglo-French rivalry often erupted into military conflicts because of France's desire to dominate Europe and Britain's goal of keeping French ambitions at bay while maintaining its own power.

The French and Indian War took place during a time of great upheaval. The war was truly global, with fighting in Europe, North America, India, and on the high seas. Primarily, it was a conflict between the British Empire and its allies and the French Empire and its allies. When William Pitt the Elder became British Prime Minister, he perceived that Britain's interest lay in the overseas colonies, not on the European continent. He took troops from the European theater and sent them to North America. He financed the Prussian Army to fight the French in Europe and concentrated the British Army's focus on Canada and the Ohio Valley. From that time on, the French began to suffer their first defeats during the war in America. Consequently, Pitt's foresight helped Britain create the largest and most powerful empire in history.

While the struggle between Britain and France and their European allies can explain much of the Seven Years War, the fact remains that a large part of the fighting actually took place in North America. The war even started about two years earlier in North America than it did in Europe. The fighting started in the Ohio River Valley in 1754. It spread to Europe by 1756.

Perhaps equally important to the understanding of this war is an adequate knowledge of the interactions between the English and French colonists and the indigenous tribes in America. The English, in particular, had a long, bloody relationship with many tribes, marked by the particularly brutal practices endemic to the inter-tribal warfare that had taken place on the American continents for centuries and the harsh tactics the British employed in response. After a short period of friendship following initial British settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia, tensions soon became strained between the tribes and the British colonists, usually due to conflicts over land. British colonists were numerous; they established permanent settlements, cleared the land, and built larger farms, towns, and cities. This tended to come into conflict with tribal land-use patterns, and the tribes soon realized the British settlers' plans involved eventually moving them out, one way or another.

Most of the tribes on the borders between the French and English colonies, however, had a long commercial relationship with the French settlers. The French settlers were much fewer in number than the British. There were about 60,000 French settlers in North America in 1754. By contrast, there were more than a million British colonists in North America by 1750. Therefore, the French left a much smaller footprint on the land than their British counterparts. The French were more interested in doing business with the Indians than pushing them out of the area. They built far fewer towns and farms. They especially were interested in the fur trade, with American Indians providing the raw materials. French Catholic missionaries, particularly Jesuits, had also gone to live among the Algonquin and Huron tribes and converted many people to Catholicism.

The exception to this pattern was the Iroquois Confederation, a group of tribes that were collectively the most powerful American Indian group in eastern North America. The Iroquois were formidable warriors but were also politically sophisticated and utilized innovative farming techniques permitting them to produce three different crops on the same field simultaneously. Smaller tribes had perceived the Iroquois as a threat long before the British and French arrived. Sporadic fighting and warfare among the Iroquois and other tribes were common occurrences. Clashes with early French explorers and the French willingness to defend their trading partners in the smaller tribes earned the French the enmity of the Iroquois Confederation. The Iroquois tribes also had commercial relations with the British and sided with the British during the war.

In the colonies, the conflict began as a result of French and British colonists competing for their share of the beaver fur trade in the Ohio River Valley. At the time, a person could make a huge sum of money trading beaver furs, which were all the rage back in Europe. While the French had claimed this territory since Robert La Salle claimed the Mississippi River Valley for France in 1682, British colonists were determined to claim their share of the fur trade.

In 1749, a group of land speculators and London merchants were given a royal grant of 200,000 acres of land in the Ohio River Valley. With support from Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie, the group formed the Ohio Company. The goal of the company was to attract Virginian settlers and establish trade with local Indian tribes. The Iroquois were enraged. One Iroquois spokesman lamented, "We don't know what you Christians, English and French together, intend; we are so hemmed-in by both, that we have hardly a hunting place left."

Eager to smooth the situation over, delegates from the colonies met with leaders of the Iroquois Confederacy at Albany New York in June, 1754. The goal of the meeting, known as the Albany Congress, was to assure the Iroquois that the colonies had no intention of encroaching on their land and to convince Iroquois leaders to join the colonies in an effort to curb France's domination of the fur trade west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Since the Ohio River Valley was a contested region, the French had long supplied their local American Indian allies with weapons to deter British settlement. Like the Iroquois, the French were on high alert when they learned about the

200,000 acre land grant. They began attacking British forts and constructed a string of military outposts along the border of present-day western Pennsylvania.

The French and Indian War began over rival British and French claims to land in the Ohio River Valley. In 1754, Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie sent the young officer George Washington with a small force to establish a fort at a strategic point where the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers met. But upon reaching the location, Washington found that the French had already established fortifications, Fort Duquesne, at the site.

On May 28, 1754, Washington, his men, and some Native American allies led by Chief Tanacharison surprised a small French force. Washington defeated the French in a small skirmish, and among those killed was the French commander Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville. Jumonville's death was controversial. According to some accounts, Tanacharison and his men brutally killed the French leader after he tried to surrender.

Expecting the French to counterattack, Washington ordered his men to build protective fortifications, which they named Fort Necessity. Sure enough, in the first few days of July a much larger French and Native American force surrounded Fort Necessity. After fighting that caused casualties on both sides, Washington agreed to surrender terms on July 3. According to the terms, Washington accepted responsibility for the "assassination" of Jumonville, though he later claimed that this was a misunderstanding in translation. Nevertheless, with these skirmishes, the French and Indian War was underway.

In the spring of 1755, British General Edward Braddock responded to the action at Fort Necessity by leading a combined force of more than two thousand British troops and American militia against Fort Duquesne. But on July 9, Braddock's troops were surprised and overwhelmed by French and Native American forces. The ambushing troops demonstrated the effectiveness of Native American battle tactics in rugged and wooden terrain. Despite taking fire for several hours, the insufficiently trained British and American forces broke lines and retreated. General Braddock, mortally wounded in the battle, died four days later. One of his aides, Lieutenant Colonel George Washington, led the retreat of the remaining British and American troops. Victory at the Battle of the Monongahela allowed the French to maintain a stronghold at Fort Duquesne and a presence in the Ohio River Valley.



In May 1756, the British officially declared war on France, although fighting had been going on in North America for three years. The violence now expanded across the world; at land and at sea, the French and British fought in North America, Europe, the West Indies, and even India.

The war started badly for the British. In addition to early defeats, the French in the Ohio River Valley had been encouraging Native American raids on British colonial settlements on the frontier. But in 1757, the tide began to turn when British secretary of state William Pitt took control of the war. Recognizing the potential of creating a British empire through colonies, Pitt made victory in North America a priority. In addition to appointing new military leaders and developing new strategies, Pitt revived support for the war in the American colonies, primarily through promises to reimburse the colonists for raising troops and supplies. He also increased British troop strength in North America.



Pitt's efforts paid off, as soon after the British began to overpower the French in North America. In 1758 they captured French strong points at Fort Frontenac and Louisbourg. These victories cut the French positions in the Ohio River Valley from their main base of support in Canada. As a result, French forces, fearing an approaching British expedition, abandoned and burned Fort Duquesne. On November 24, 1758, a British expedition seized control of the site and rebuilt the fort, which they renamed Fort Pitt (the site of modern-day Pittsburgh).

Perhaps the most crucial battle of the war in North America came the following year when General James Wolfe attacked the French capital at Quebec. British forces closed in on the fortified position, located on cliffs overlooking the St. Lawrence River. On September 13, 1759, General Wolfe led a daring expedition across the river and up the cliffs. When the French forces commanded by Marquis Louis-Joseph de Montcalm came out to meet the enemy, the British won a decisive victory on the Plains of Abraham. Wolfe and Montcalm were both mortally wounded in the battle. The French surrendered the city to the British a few days later.

In 1760, one year after their victory at Quebec, British forces under General Jeffrey Amherst captured Montreal, the final French stronghold in Canada. This victory brought an end to the French and Indian War in North America.

Fighting between the European powers, which included Britain and France as well as their allies, continued after British victory in North America. During this time the British won victories in India and also captured French sugar islands in the West Indies. They also captured Cuba from the Spanish, who had entered the war on the side of the French. Finally, by the



end of 1762 both sides sought to negotiate peace. The desire for peace was spurred in large part by the rising costs of the war for everyone involved.

Representatives from Britain, France, and Spain met in Paris and signed the Treaty of Paris, which went into effect on February 10, 1763. According to the terms of the treaty, Britain gained possession of all French territory in North America east of the Mississippi River. France ceded the Louisiana territory to the Spanish. Britain returned Cuba to Spain in return for control of Florida. France regained control of their Caribbean islands, in exchange for more concessions to the British around the world.

The British now dominated North America. But some of their post-war decisions soon created tensions with the American colonists. The Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains, upset settlers seeking new opportunities on the frontier. Perhaps most important were the new economic policies Parliament instituted to pay for the costly war. New taxes levied on the colonies infuriated the colonists who had no direct representation in Parliament. The colonists, who had for the first time united against a common enemy during the French and Indian War, soon began to cooperate against a new enemy: the British.

Although many people today have little knowledge of this conflict, it has affected the modern world in many crucial ways. In many respects, the global aspects of mercantilism made the Seven Years War the first world war. Fighting took place in Europe, North America, India, and on the high seas. The war brought about changes that directly led to both the American Revolution and the French Revolution. The enormous costs of this war sparked the unrest that led to revolution in both these cases. During the Revolutionary War, most of the military leaders received their experience fighting for the British during the French and Indian War. It established a balance of power in the western world that would remain largely unchanged until the start of World War I in 1914. It set the tone for relationships between European-Americans and American Indian tribes for generations to come. It also determined that English culture and common law would dominate the portion of North America that would become the United States and Canada rather than French culture and the Justinian legal code of the late Roman Empire. Our history might have been quite different had this conflict not occurred and ended as it did.

Though it took a few more years of fighting, the French were forced to cede their land on the continent in exchange for peace. The Treaty of Paris was signed on February 10, 1763. The treaty gave the French territory of Canada to the British, and Spain ceded its territory of Florida to the British as well. In exchange, the Spanish took control of New Orleans and the Louisiana Territory (the Louisiana Territory had already been promised to Spain under an earlier treaty). The Ohio Country, which had been the cause of the war in North America, also fell under British control. However, after Indians who had allied with the French learned they were to lose their territory, they began launching attacks against the British and their American colonists. This became known as Pontiac's Rebellion.

The Seven Years' War produced consequences that directly led to the American Revolution. The war nearly bankrupted the British treasury. While the war was fought in Europe and India as well as in North America, many in the British government believed that the time had come for the American colonists to pay their fair share for their own protection. In the coming years, Parliament would levy new taxes, such as the Stamp Act, that would raise the ire of the colonists, who were accustomed to decades of salutary neglect. In addition, Parliament tried to ensure that the colonists did not trigger another costly war by expanding too far into the interior of the country and thus passed the Proclamation of 1763, which restricted colonial settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. Americans, seeing these measures as intrusive and tyrannical, greeted each successive act with increased resistance and eventually armed revolt.