The Seven Years’ War

The Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) is considered to be the first substantial global war in history. The outcome of the war affected places in Europe, North America, Central America, Africa, the Caribbean, the Philippines, and India. The majority of the great European powers of the time—England, France, Prussia, Austria, Spain, Russia, Saxony, and Portugal—participated in the war, which resulted in staggering death tolls for the period—it is estimated that 900,000 to 1,400,000 people died over the course of the war.

The Seven Years’ War was fought primarily on two major fronts: one in Europe and one in North America. Tensions in North America between France and England had already been ongoing for a half-century, and conflict began as early as 1754 over control of the Ohio River Valley. Competition between England and the Bourbon kingdoms of Spain and France over colonial and commercial power in North America finally erupted into armed conflict, making North America one of the major theaters during the war.

The fighting on the European continent stemmed from lingering tensions following the War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748). Unresolved conflict between the House of Hohenzollerns (the royal dynasty of Prussia) and Austria’s Habsburg dynasty over control of the Holy Roman Empire and disputed territory led to war. These hostilities spread throughout Europe after Prussia and Austria became involved in alliances with other European powers. The diplomatic proceedings that took place leading up to the Seven Years’ War were (and are still) referred to by scholars as a “diplomatic revolution.” The alliances that had been securely in place between European states were completely overturned and reversed. In 1756 England and Prussia formed an official alliance, which was followed by an alliance between France and Austria, two states that had traditionally been adversaries.

Combat took place in several different locations and, as a result, the war is referred to by different names based on geography. The fighting between Sweden and Prussia is sometimes referred to as the Pomeranian War, and that between Prussia and Austria the Third Silesian War. Fighting between France and England that took place on the Indian subcontinent is referred to as the Third Carnatic War, while the fighting in North America is more commonly known as the French and Indian War (1754–1763). The French and English had fought each other in several wars prior to the French and Indian War, but this was the first that began on colonial soil as a result of colonial conflicts. Although the French were heavily outnumbered in North America (approximately two million British American colonists versus 65,000 French Canadian colonists), they were able to put up a strong fight against the British in the early stages of the war.

North American conflict between the French and the British began with the desire of both states to have access to trade with Native Americans throughout the Ohio River Valley. The British colonists had established the Ohio Company, and investors from Virginia and London sought to reap the benefits of a strong British presence in the area. In 1749 the Ohio Company successfully obtained a royal land grant in the Ohio River Valley. In response, the French created a series of strategic forts along the Allegheny
River to prevent British advancement in the region. British colonial governors were commanded by the British Crown to fight off any French movement.

The colony of Virginia sent troops, including a young George Washington, to the French forts, and demanded that they abandon their position. The following year, in 1754, after the French refused to leave their forts, fighting broke out at Fort Necessity between the French and the Virginia militiamen. The French succeeded in defeating the British in what is traditionally considered to be the first battle of the war. The British made another attempt to attack the French at Fort Duquesne, but before the British reached the fort, French and Indian forces ambushed British troops and killed or wounded two-thirds of their men.

Following the defeats at Fort Necessity and Fort Duquesne, the British decided to modify their military strategy. In 1756, William Pitt was appointed as the king’s chief minister and successfully united the colonies in the war effort by promising that the Crown would pay for all military services and supplies. The British were able to redirect nearly all of their resources toward fighting the French in North America, while Prussia carried the load on the continent. This in many ways established England’s naval dominance in the Atlantic. The fighting in North America continued through 1760, as the British seized and defeated French forces in Québec, Montreal, and Louisbourg.

The Seven Years’ War formally concluded in 1763 with the Treaty of Paris and the Treaty of Hubertusberg. The Treaty of Hubertusberg, signed by Prussia, Austria, and Saxony, restored peace on the continent. As a result of the Seven Years’ War, King Frederick II of Prussia, also known as Frederick the Great, emerged as one of the strongest monarchs in Europe. Furthermore, Prussia became one of the strongest powers on the continent and successfully diminished the power of the Austrian Habsburgs and the entire Holy Roman Empire.

The Treaty of Paris awarded England nearly all of France’s territories in New France, including most of Canada and all French holdings east of the Mississippi River. The British also gained the Spanish colony of Florida, a few Caribbean islands, Senegal, and control over French posts on the Indian subcontinent. The British returned the colonies of Guadeloupe and Martinique to the French and gave Cuba and the Philippines back to Spain. As a result of the Seven Years’ War, England emerged as the strongest European colonial power, particularly in North America and India.