

The Seven Years War

Introduction

The Seven Years War is one of those forgotten wars in American history. Not literally forgotten...but pretty much. There are the big, heroic wars that get all the attention. Then there's the lesser known ones. Maybe we've heard of them but don't know much about them. The Spanish American War, the Mexican American War. The Philippine American War. Did you know we fought a war against the Philippines for three and a half years? I didn't know until I started studying history. But often these lesser discussed wars had significant impact on American history.

But instead, as a nation, generally speaking, we focus on World War Two - the war against fascism. The Civil War - the war to preserve the union and free the slaves. And the Revolutionary war - the thirteen colonies who rebelled against and won their independence from one of the largest empires in the history of the world.

But you know what's weird about the American Revolution? Nothing about it makes any sense if we don't understand the Seven Years War. How did a few Atlantic colonies defeat the mighty British Empire? How did the colonies go from being loyal subjects to the Crown to rebelling against it? What was the reason behind all those taxes which outraged the Founding Fathers? The answers to these questions lie in the Seven Years War. So, today, we're going to step back and look at the war before the Revolution.

--Intro Music--

[Welcome to American History Remix, the podcast about the overlooked and underexplored aspects of American history. We're glad you're here!]

Background

The Seven Years War, or the French and Indian War as the colonists called it, lasted from 1756 until 1763. It was a massive and global conflict. Virtually every major European power took part. Great Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Spain all joined in. They fought in Europe, North America, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, off the coast of Africa, in India, and in the south Pacific.

Winston Churchill said the Seven Years War was the *first* world war. It's hard to argue with him. Though, for clarity, we'll still call it the Seven Years War, not world war...zero.

And the seed that sparked all of this—was Ohio. Weird, right?

So, why was Ohio so important?

One reason is that in the 1700s the French had their sights on Ohio. They had already established trading posts along the St. Lawrence River in Canada and into the modern Midwest. They also colonized Louisiana and were reaching up the Mississippi River. If the French could gain control of the Ohio River Valley, then they could bridge their two North American territories and create a network of trade through the continent. Furthermore, they would create a boundary for British colonial expansion, which at the time was primarily based near the Atlantic coast.¹

This brings us to something we've covered before, but bears repeating. French colonialism in North America looked very different from British colonialism. Rather than establishing large permanent settlements, the French established trading forts and cooperated much more with Natives. They were content to allow Native Americans to directly control the Ohio River Valley, as long as the French had access to the region and the British did not.²

The British naturally feared French control of the area and they claimed that the Ohio River Valley actually fell within the territory of Pennsylvania and Virginia. When these colonies were founded, knowledge of the interior of the continent was very limited. So, the western boundaries of the Atlantic colonies were often vague. The second Virginia Charter actually claimed that Virginia extended from "sea to sea."³ In practice, this wasn't anywhere near reality. But you can see why this would create some problems.

So tensions between the empires were definitely high. In fact, the British and the French went to war three times in the century prior and the balance of power in Europe leaned heavily towards the French.⁴

For a time, the Six Nations of the Iroquois had held the two empires at bay in North America. The Six Nations were a league of aligned Native American groups who held nominal control of the Ohio River Valley. In truth, Iroquois control over Ohio was pretty tenuous. It depended a lot on other Native groups such as the Delaware and Shawnees recognizing Iroquois authority. Nevertheless, they were able to convince the British and the French that their control of the region was secure.⁵ And they served as intermediaries between Europeans and native groups in the interior of the continent.⁶

The Iroquois used the competition between the French and British to their advantage. The Iroquois would threaten to align themselves with the French, and the English would respond by offering them gifts to secure their future friendship. Then, they would threaten to align themselves with the English and the French would likewise offer them gifts.

¹ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 17.

² Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 11.

³ "The Second Virginia Charter; May 23, 1609," The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, accessed August 1, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/va02.asp.

⁴ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 11.

⁵ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 18.

⁶ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 16.

So, the Iroquois league held nominal control of a region, convinced two European empires their control was much more secure than it was, then played the empires off each other to gain goods such as tools, firearms, ammunition, and liquor. Then, they sold these goods to other Native Americans not in direct contact with Europeans. It was a sweet gig and a brilliant political maneuver. But it didn't last.⁷

In 1744, the Six Nations agreed to the Treaty of Lancaster in which they sold land that had belonged to the Delaware tribe to the Penn family. This event had catastrophic consequences. The Six Nations had long negotiated on behalf of other tribes *but* selling land the Delaware had possessed since the Pre-Columbian era caused the Six Nations to lose support from their fellow Native Americans. Furthermore, the British colonists refrained from informing the Natives exactly how far the boundary of their charter extended. The Iroquois gave up much more land than they realized.⁸

The British now had the justification they needed to expand into Ohio.

Start to War

It was into this environment that George Washington first stepped onto the scene. In 1754, a young Washington with no prior military experience led a group of men to take a French camp along the Ohio River in what is called the Battle of Jumonville Glen.

There are a lot of competing versions of what happened in this battle. Washington's own account is contradicted by other witnesses. We could probably spend a whole episode discussing this encounter alone. If you are interested in learning more, check out the references on our website. But the simplest version of the story is this—Washington and his men attacked the French camp and killed a diplomat sent to the region to negotiate with the British. The man was literally killed while clutching his official papers and trying to stop the fighting so the two sides could negotiate.⁹

That's the simple version. From here on out, we have a better idea.

Washington and his men then retreated to a fort aptly named Fort Necessity while French reinforcements pursued them. The fort, however, was in a valley. And as the French arrived, it began to rain. Washington and his men sat in their rainy fort as their muskets became soaked and unusable. The French on the other hand, stayed dry under the cover of the trees and simply fired shots down into the fort from the surrounding hills.¹⁰

Eventually, the French offered terms and allowed Washington to surrender. He signed a poorly translated document and unknowingly accepted responsibility for the assassination of the French diplomat.¹¹

⁷ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 19-20

⁸ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 22-24.

⁹ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 58-59.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 62-63.

¹¹ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 64.

This is the *Father of our Nation*.

But, in 1754, he was twenty-two years old and inexperienced. By the war's end he emerged as a mature and competent military commander.¹² Still, his actions in Jumonville Glen caused a crisis for the British. They were backed into a corner. The French, they feared, would retaliate because of Washington's actions. The British began an overly aggressive military approach which caused the French to do the same.¹³

Then France and Britain formally declared war on each other in early 1756 and other nations joined in. Austria, Russia, and Sweden join France. Prussia and several minor German states joined Britain.¹⁴

The Seven Years War had begun.

Social Developments

We'll consider the global nature of the war in a moment. But I want to begin by talking about some of the social aspects of this war.

Shortly after Washington's surrender at Fort Necessity, several colonial governments sent delegates to Albany, NY to discuss relations with Native Americans. And it was there that Benjamin Franklin proposed his Albany Plan.¹⁵

The plan would have established a council with delegates from each colony to help with their common defense. It would have authority to deal with Native American relations and would have the power to levy taxes.¹⁶

The Albany Congress wasn't very impressive. Only three colonies bothered to send delegates to the meeting. And when they put forward the unification plan, the colonies did one of two things. They either voted it down or ignored it and never voted at all. And even if it had been ratified, it would not have mattered. Parliament had already decided to appoint General Edward Braddock as commander and chief over the colonies and to lead the fight against the French. He would oversee their common defense.¹⁷

So, if this proposal was so quickly rejected and would have been invalidated anyway, why am I talking about it? Because the Albany Plan was the first time anyone even proposed colonial unity. In 1754, the colonies weren't willing to unite yet. But we can see a hint of what was coming.

¹² Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 289-93.

¹³ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 70-72.

¹⁴ Timothy J. Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014), 14.

¹⁵ Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 12.

¹⁶ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 173.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 84-85.

And there is another social aspect to discuss. The British colonists understood the war not just as a conflict between empires, but as a struggle between religions, between Protestant England and Catholic France. At the outbreak of the war, one Anglican minister claimed that Catholicism was a “corrupt branch of Christianity.” When he described the war from the pulpit, he warned his audience saying, “Behold the slaves of France, and the inquisitors of Rome approaching to crush us.” He used religious and political language to attack France and rally the colonists. “These dogs of hell, popish superstitions and French Tyranny dare...triumph within our borders?”¹⁸

No. The colonists, he urged, must fight. This is just one example from one minister. There were plenty more. We Americans usually overlook this war, but, it’s safe to say, people at the time took this war very seriously.

War in America

So, what did the war itself actually look like?

The first few years of the Seven Years War in North America were marked by British loses. We’re not going to cover every battle in this war because there are simply too many. It’d be like trying to cover every battle in WWII. Here we’ll focus on the battles of Monongahela and Oswego because they capture the situation well.

First, Monongahela. On July 9th, 1755 General Braddock attempted an attack against the French at Fort Duquesne in modern day Pittsburg. Braddock’s first mistake came well before the battle when he alienated himself from the Native Americans in the region. He failed to understand the important role Native Americans would play in the war and went so far as to openly tell the Ohio Natives that he wanted Englishmen to settle on their lands. Naturally, they didn’t take this well and aligned themselves with the French. Prior to this, Native Americans in the region hesitated to join either side—Braddock ended that.¹⁹

Another fatal mistake was the reliance on traditional European warfare. While on the road to Fort Duquesne, French and Native American forces hid among the trees and fired into the column of British soldiers. This sort of tactic was unfamiliar to the British who were trained to stand side by side and fire on command. Caught off guard and huddled together on the road, they made easy targets, and they had no idea how to fight an enemy they could not see.²⁰

They tried to fight...and then they fled.²¹ Some of the wounded were carried away by their fellow soldiers, the rest were abandoned in the woods. In total, about two-thirds of all Braddock’s men were killed or wounded in this battle. Braddock himself was shot, and he died a few days later. It was a humiliating defeat for the British.²²

¹⁸ Shannon, *The Seven Years’ War in North America*, 46-48.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 95-96.

²⁰ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 102.

²¹ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 102-03.

²² Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 104-05.

They suffered another loss at the Battle of Oswego. This battle wasn't as important as the battle of Monongahela, but it is funnier.

The British had built Fort Oswego on the shores of Lake Ontario at the mouth of the Oswego river, near modern day Syracuse. But the fort was poorly constructed and was vulnerable. French and Native American forces attacked Oswego in August of 1756.

This is where it gets interesting. The fort, though poorly constructed, did have cannons but they were mounted to a single wall facing the lake. The French and Natives, however, approached on land. The British then, unable to actually move their cannons, turned them around and began firing over their own fort, towards the attackers. The commander who gave this brilliant order was Colonel James Mercer—he died in the battle. He was beheaded...by a cannonball.²³

Awesome, right?

In our research we were unable to find out if he was beheaded by his own cannonball or by one fired by the French. If there are any Battle of Oswego experts out there and you know, then please write in. We would love to find out.

Anyway, the British surrendered the fort to the French general Louis-Joseph de Montcalm.

Things were not going their way.

Global War

Our focus in this episode is on the Atlantic colonies but the global nature of this war bears mentioning.

As we saw, the initial spark that started the war was Ohio. But in Europe the conflict between the French and British reignited old rivalries. From 1740-1748 the major European powers had all been wrapped up in the War of Austrian Succession. Like many European wars at the time, the results were mostly inconclusive. The French had defeated the British in India, Prussia seized parts of Austria, and the British captured French territory in North America. By the end of the war, however, all parties involved were exhausted and everyone agreed to return the territories to the original owners. All except the region of Silesia, in central Europe, which had belonged to Austria but was given to Prussia. Austria was left bitter about this defeat and felt betrayed that their British allies agreed to these terms. So, when the Seven Years War broke out fifteen years later, Austria joined France in their fight against the British.²⁴

Meanwhile, Russia briefly aligned with Britain before joining Austria and France.²⁵ Sweden aligned with France and invaded Prussia.²⁶ In the last year of the War, Spain refused to declare

²³ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 150-53

²⁴ Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization: Volume B: 1300-1815* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 554-55; Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 35.

²⁵ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 171-72.

²⁶ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 176.

that it would not aid British enemies. Britain took the silence as a declaration of war, and then declared war on Spain. Then, Spain did the same to Britain and then invaded their ally, Portugal.²⁷

If you're confused by all of this—good. There were a lot of moving pieces. This is like middle school drama...but with nation states. And I am aware that I am being brief. The point is this was an exhaustive war.

It went well beyond North America. At the outbreak, France immediately began building its forces in Europe as well as its Navy. The French and the British fought over naval bases in the Mediterranean.²⁸ They also fought over territory in India.²⁹ While everyone else was busy invading everyone else.

For Britain to be victorious, it would come at a great price. More on that in a moment. First, how did Britain win the Seven Years War?

Victory

There are a few reasons. One reason is British statesman William Pitt. During the war, Pitt was the leader of the House of Commons and he later served as Prime Minister. Pitt was briefly mentioned in the season three episode of *The Simpsons*, "Homer at the Bat." And, Pittsburgh is named after him. He's also regarded as one of best Prime Ministers in British history. But, mostly he's famous for being mentioned on *The Simpsons*.³⁰

Pitt was single-minded in his view that the French must be expelled from North America. He channeled massive resources into the conflict, largely ignoring the European theater of the war by paying subsidies to Prussia to fight that front for the British.³¹

Another reason for British success was that they were able to gain a few key victories that interrupted French supply lines. By controlling the supply lines, the British prohibited the French from providing reinforcements or aid to their soldiers on the continent.³²

Furthermore, the British captured Fort Frontenac in 1758. This fort was key to French and Native trade, and without it the French empire could no longer provide goods to Native Americans and ensure their support. Remember that system of reciprocity we talked about in the episode about the colonial environment? This ended that.

After the fort fell, the British and Native Americans agreed to the Treaty of Easton. In which, the Ohioan Natives and the Iroquois agreed to switch sides and fight the French along with the

²⁷ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 490, 497.

²⁸ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 169-71.

²⁹ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 417-18.

³⁰ *The Simpsons*, "Homer at the Bat," Fox, originally aired February 20, 1992, written by John Swartzwelder, directed by Jim Reardon.

³¹ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 556-57; Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 17.

³² Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 453-56.

British. In return, Pennsylvania rescinded its claim on land west of the Appalachian Mountains.³³ This is an important point—Native American allies were key to the early success of the French and the later success of the British.

They were also victorious in the Siege of Louisbourg in 1758, which gave them access to the St. Lawrence River and Quebec, the French capital in Canada.³⁴ In 1759, in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, British forces captured Quebec. This was a stunning loss for the French. And a year later the British took Montreal, the last stronghold of the French in North America.³⁵

So, even after all those early losses, a few important victories won them the war in North America.

Let's revisit some of the social features we mentioned before.

Just as the colonists interpreted the war with France as a threat against their Protestant religion, they also interpreted their victory spiritually, believing God had delivered them from the French and bestowed on them His divine favor. Some even believed that the fall of Quebec signaled a new era in history where the major Catholic nations of France, Spain, and Portugal would all abandon Catholicism in a great Protestant revival. As one minister imagined a Protestant America he said, "Methinks I see religion professed and practiced in this spacious kingdom, in far greater purity and perfection, than since the times of the apostles."³⁶

His view was...a bit optimistic but it reveals the way some of the people at the time interpreted this war. We mention religion here to highlight the diversity of opinions and perspectives on this conflict. The war was primarily about imperial expansion and European rivalries. But it also involved racial tension between Natives and Europeans. And, as we see here, it touched upon people's religious beliefs.

There were numerous ways people understood these events.

Now, let's take another look at George Washington. By the end of 1760, when the fighting in North America was over, Washington had served under enough generals and seen enough battles that he was no longer the rash and inexperienced young man he had been at Fort Necessity. But I also want to avoid putting Washington on a pedestal. After his early failures, he had no real impact on the war. He survived the battle of Monongahela we discussed earlier, and that was impressive since two-thirds of the soldiers were killed or wounded. So, he had that going for him. But, if not for his later importance to the Revolution and the early Republic, I probably would not be talking about him.

With that said, and with some hindsight, we can see that Washington was learning to lead during this time. He emulated the discipline of the British military officers and studied their methods.

³³ Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 185-88.

³⁴ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 250-59.

³⁵ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 362-63; Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 18-19.

³⁶ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 374-75.

He voraciously read manuals on military tactics. He also learned caution. At the start of the war, he attacked a diplomat, retreated to a terrible fort in an awful location, and surrendered. A few years later, he urged the British officers he served under to use caution when they considered attacking Natives on their own ground. It looks like he was learning from his prior loses.³⁷ Cool.

But, religious optimism and a bit more mature George Washington were not the only outcomes of this war. No, we're just getting started because it's the outcome of this war that's really important.

Consequences

Even though the fighting in North America concluded in 1760, the fighting in Europe continued until the Treaty of Paris in 1763. What followed was a complex exchange of territory.

The French gave up all their claims in North America, ceding all the land east of the Mississippi to the British. Their ally, Spain ceded Florida to the British as well. And Spain received the Louisiana Territory from France.³⁸

It was a bit like a three or four-team NBA trade—you have to look at it a while to make sense of who came out ahead. The French lost. They gave up all their territory. The Spanish lost some land but were also given different land.

The British won a ton of territory, but at a costly price. They amassed one of the largest empires the world had ever seen, but now they were tasked with managing that empire. This is like when a team trades for a good player, but they have an expensive contract and it creates salary cap issues.

But there was another group involved—Native Americans—who were again crucial to the story. They held the French and British empires at bay before the war. They aided the French in their early victories. They aided the British in their later victories. After the war too, as we're about to see, they were major actors.

But this is where the chronology gets messy. As we just mentioned the North American theater of the war concluded in 1760, three years before the empires reached a peace in Europe. This meant that they were dealing with postwar consequences in America before the war was officially over. Because why should anything be simple?

So, at the end of the war, Native Americas were allied with the British. But soon afterwards, the relationships deteriorated.

Native American diplomacy was based on a system of gift-giving. During the war, the British were willing to pay for these expenses in order to keep the Natives on their side. But with France defeated, the British suddenly stopped this system and decided to halt the trade of European

³⁷ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 289-93.

³⁸ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 557.

goods, especially guns and gunpowder, to Natives.³⁹ And, despite the Treaty of Easton, signed in 1758, colonists moved into the Trans-Appalachian region and settled on land that was promised to Native Americans.⁴⁰ Natives grew bitter about the sudden change in policy.

And, despite their recent alliance with the British, there traditionally had been more cooperation among Native Americans and the French. Furthermore, without the French, Native Americans were unable to play the Europeans off each other as they had done before the war.

The tensions quickly escalated into violence. In 1759, the colonies of South Carolina and Virginia fought a war with the Cherokee. The fighting lasted until 1761.

And, these events overlap with another conflict. In 1761, Neolin, a Delaware prophet, began preaching and calling for renewed Native American spirituality. He called his followers to live independently of Europeans, to reject their goods and to return to traditional Native ways. Neolin's preaching inspired another important figure named Pontiac, a leader of the Ottawa. So in 1763, Pontiac laid siege to the British-controlled Fort Detroit.⁴¹

Other Natives soon joined in. Chippewas captured Fort Michilimackinac in present day Michigan. Then, fighting spread to groups such as the Senecas, Shawnees, and Pawnees who captured Fort Pitt and Fort Niagara.⁴² Native Americans soon began attacking the settlers who had squatted on their land across western Virginia and Pennsylvania. They slaughtered some and took as many as 200 captives.⁴³

Pontiac hoped that the French would return to the region, but then news of the Treaty of Paris reached him, and he realized the French were not coming back. He then withdrew from Fort Detroit.⁴⁴

Historians refer to these events collectively as Pontiac's Rebellion. But the sheer scope of these attacks suggests that, rather than being led by a single person or one spiritual vision, it grew out of a shared frustration among several Native Americans groups.⁴⁵

Pontiac's Rebellion inspired a group of vigilantes in Pennsylvania called the Paxton Boys who wanted revenge for Native American raids on white settlers. In December 1763, a group of about fifty men attacked a village of peaceful Natives who had not been part of any violence. They killed about 20 people, including women and children, and burned their village to the ground.⁴⁶

All this chaos and violence was one problem facing the British Empire after the Seven Years War. But it wasn't the only challenge they faced.

³⁹ Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 192; Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 20.

⁴⁰ Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 200.

⁴¹ Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 20-21, 159.

⁴² Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 193-99.

⁴³ Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 200.

⁴⁴ Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 201.

⁴⁵ Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 21.

⁴⁶ Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 203-204; Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 21.

British postwar debt was also a problem. The Crown channeled immense resources into the war. The peacetime budget of the empire was 8 million pounds. But in 1763, it was 137 million pounds in debt. The annual interest alone was 5 million pounds.⁴⁷ And that's in 1760s' money.

Here we should also mention that in 1760, as these problems were beginning, King George III ascended to the throne of England – the same King George who is going to anger the colonists in the coming years. He's not super relevant to the story here, but it bears mentioning that he came to power during the Seven Years War.

Solution?

So, how did Britain's Parliament deal with these challenges? By reorganizing the administration of their empire.

They began by issuing the Proclamation of 1763 which outlawed the purchase of Native land west of the Appalachians. The British hoped to end the fighting on the frontier and encourage colonists seeking new land to move into the newly acquired territories of Florida and Quebec. The boundary, however, was poorly drawn and many white settlers were suddenly living in designated "Indian Territory" and were ordered to remove themselves from their homes. The Proclamation also angered many colonists who argued that they had just fought a war for control of Ohio and now were barred from settling it.⁴⁸ Many colonists simply ignored the line and bought land illegally. Our old friend George Washington secretly purchased land west of the line in the Ohio River Valley.⁴⁹

To further ensure peace on the border, Britain decided to maintain a standing army in the colonies.⁵⁰ But standing armies aren't cheap. And the Crown was already in debt. So, Parliament decided to install new taxes on the colonies. The first of these was the 1764 Sugar Act which, in addition to sugar, imposed duties on indigo, coffee, wine, and cloth imported to the colonies.⁵¹

The following year, they implemented the Stamp Act which taxed nearly every form of paper used in the colonies. Then, the Townshend Duties of 1767 forced colonists to pay levies on imported glass, paint, paper, and tea.⁵²

Though taxes like these had existed in England for half a century, it dramatically reshaped the relationship between the colonies and Parliament.⁵³ These policies were a reversal of the norm prior to the Seven Years War. The Atlantic colonies had grown haphazardly with little direct control from Britain. Now, it was exerting itself into the affairs of the colonists.⁵⁴ And the

⁴⁷ Gordon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 17-18.

⁴⁸ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 21-22; Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 565-66.

⁴⁹ Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 169; Fred Anderson, *The War that Made America: A Short History of the French and Indian War* (New York: Viking Press, 2005), 252.

⁵⁰ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 18.

⁵¹ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 23; Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 574.

⁵² Wood, *The American Revolution*, 31.

⁵³ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 24.

⁵⁴ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 5.

colonists were having none of it. Every proceeding attempt to tax, regulate, and manage the North American colonies only angered Americans. And the situation continued to escalate.

For example, colonists responded to the 1773 Tea Act by destroying tea in the now famous Boston Tea Party.⁵⁵

The Crown responded to that by passing the Coercive Acts in 1774 which closed the port of Boston until the destroyed tea was paid for. The Acts also strengthened the power of the royal governor by allowing him to claim private property for the quartering of British troops. The Massachusetts legislature was also stripped of its ability to elect members of its own house.⁵⁶ And, this only angered the colonists more.

American Revolution

With all this in mind, let's now look at the American Revolution itself.

The American Colonies, angered by their treatment from the British Crown regarding western settlements, the presence of a standing army, and especially taxation, declared their independence in 1776. The Continental Army was led by General George Washington. France supplied money and arms to the colonies from the start of the war and agreed to a formal military alliance in 1778, sending both soldiers and its navy. The following year, Spain, still allied with France, also declared war on Great Britain.⁵⁷

And in 1783, the British formally recognized American independence.

With a grasp of the Seven Years War, suddenly, the Revolution makes sense.

Why did the Crown prohibit the colonists from expanding westward? Because the empire was exhausted after a costly victory.

Why did Pontiac's War occur? Because the Native Americans were left without their French allies and the British didn't maintain friendly relations.

Why did the Crown enforce new taxes on the colonies? Because it was in debt after the Seven Years War.

Where did Washington gain experience as a military commander? Fighting alongside the British against the French.

Why did France and Spain support the colonies in their struggle for independence? To get revenge on Britain after its victory in the Seven Years War.

There's a pattern here.

⁵⁵ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 37.

⁵⁶ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 38.

⁵⁷ Wood, *The American Revolution*, 81-82, 86.

Conclusion

Now, we want to avoid the sense that all this was inevitable. The Seven Years War did not guarantee the Revolution. The irony is that, immediately after the Seven Years War, the colonists never felt more British. They had just fought alongside the British.⁵⁸ When the war ended it was not fated that the colonies would rebel against the Crown. But, the Seven Years War and the post war consequences do help explain the Revolution.

Now, none of this should be seen to downplay the importance of the American Revolution. But understanding the historical context should enrich our understanding of American independence.

This leads us to an important question: why do we in America tend to overlook the Seven Years War?

There are probably a few reasons. First, it is a difficult subject to cover. There are so many pieces to consider. We had to leave out a lot to bring this episode down to a manageable size. So, it makes sense that in most classrooms this war is covered only briefly.

That brings us to the second reason—the problem of having limited space. No one history can include everything. We argued here that, to understand the Revolution, we have to understand the Seven Years War. But...earlier we mentioned that the alliances in Europe were shaped by the War of Austrian Succession. Someone can reasonably claim that, to understand the Seven Years War, we must begin with the War of Austrian Succession. And someone else could say that, to understand Austrian Succession, we have to consider whatever the hell came before that. I don't know. I'm an American historian.

Someone else could reasonably claim that to understand the Seven Years War, we should not consider the American Revolution, because no one at the time expected the Revolution. Thus, our hindsight can obscure the real experiences of the people at the time.⁵⁹ And you know what, that argument is valid.

But this is the fun of history. The stories we tell can take on new shapes depending on the questions we ask, the era, and the material we choose to examine. And this is awesome. Because there are always new connections to make, new questions to ask, new voices to uncover. There is always more to learn.

Today, I hope you learned how the Seven Years War shaped the struggle between the colonies and the British Empire. How the war caused the British to reorganize their massive territory. How it destabilized Native American and European diplomacy. How it motivated other European powers to aid the American colonies.

In short, how it put the colonies on the path towards independence.

Thanks for Listening.

⁵⁸ Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, 23.

⁵⁹ Shannon, *The Seven Years' War in North America*, viii.

[American History Remix is written and produced by Will Schneider and Lyndsay Smith. Shout out to the Living Room Coffeehouse in Portland, Oregon, where we have spent hours and hours meeting, researching, and writing these episodes. They have great coffee and food, friendly staff, comfy couches, and basketball is always on the TV.]

References

Anderson, Fred. *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

Anderson, Fred. *The War that Made America: A Short History of the French and Indian War*. New York: Viking Press, 2005.

Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011.

Richter, Daniel K. *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Shannon, Timothy J. *The Seven Years' War in North America: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014.

Spielvogel, Jackson J. *Western Civilization: Volume B: 1300-1815*. Boston: Wadsworth, 2012.

“The Second Virginia Charter; May 23, 1609.” The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library. Accessed August 1, 2020. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/va02.asp.

Wood, Gordon. *The American Revolution: A History*. New York: Modern Library, 2003.