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**Mid-Eighteenth-Century Wars**

The chattel slavery that characterized the plantation economies of the New World conflicts with early twentieth-century European views about human rights, but before the Enlightenment and the abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth century, such views were irrelevant to the way people thought about labor. Similarly, in the mid-eighteenth century, statesmen had no principled commitment to peace as superior to war, the statesmen of the period generally assumed that warfare could further national interests. No forces or powers saw it in their interest to prevent war or maintain peace. Since all eighteenth-century wars (before the French Revolution) were fought by professional armies and navies, the conflicts rarely affected civilian populations deeply. Wars did not lead to domestic political or social upheaval, and peace did not bring international stability. Consequently, European nations often viewed periods of peace at the conclusion of a war simply as opportunities to recoup their strength so that they could start fighting again to seize another nation's territory or disrupt another empire's trading monopoly.

The two fundamental areas of great power rivalry were the overseas empires and central and eastern Europe. Conflict in one of these regions repeatedly overlapped with conflict in the other, and this interaction influenced strategy and the pattern of alliances among the great powers

**The War of Jenkins's Ear**

By the mid-eighteenth century, the West Indies had become a hotbed of trade rivalry and illegal smuggling. Much to British chagrin, the Spanish government took its own alleged trading monopoly seriously and maintained coastal patrols, which boarded and searched English vessels to look for contraband.

In 173 1, during one such boarding operation, there was a fight, and the Spaniards cut off the ear of an English captain named Robert Jenkins. Thereafter he carried about his severed ear preserved in a jar of brandy. This incident was of little importance until 1738, when Jenkins appeared before the British Parliament, reportedly brandishing his ear as an example of Spanish atrocities to British merchants in the West Indies. British merchants and West Indian planters lobbied Parliament to prevent Spanish intervention in their trade. Sir Robert Walpole 11676- 1745), the British prime minister, could not resist these pressures. In late 1739, Britain went to war with Spain. This war might have been a relatively minor event, but because of developments in continental European politics, it became the opening encounter to a series of European wars fought across the world until 1815.

**The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748)**

In December 1740, only seven months after becoming king of Prussia, Frederick II Ir. 1740- 1786) opportunistically seized the Austrian province of Silesia in eastern Germany. The new Habsburg ruler, Maria Theresa (r. 1740- 1780), had only occupied the throne herself for two months, was only twenty-three, and was a woman whose control of the dynasty's holdings had yet to be established. The invasion shattered the provisions of the Pragmatic Sanction (see Chapter 5) and upset the continental balance of power. The young king of Prussia had treated the House of Habsburg simply as another German state rather than as the leading power in the region. Silesia was a valuable possession, and Frederick was determined to keep his ill-gotten prize.

**Maria Theresa Preserves the Habsburg Empire**

The Prussian seizure of Silesia could have marked the opening of a general hunting season on Habsburg holdings and the beginning of revolts by Habsburg subjects. Instead, it led to new political allegiances. Although Maria Theresa was unable to regain Silesia, her preservation of the Habsburg Empire as a major political power was itself a great achievement. Maria Theresa won loyalty and support from her various subjects by granting new privileges to the nobility. Most significantly, the empress recognized Hungary as the most important of her crowns and promised the

Hungarian nobility local autonomy. Following in her father’s footsteps, she preserved the Habsburg state, but at considerable cost to the power of the central monarchy.

Hungary would continue to be, as it had been in the past, a particularly troublesome area in the Habsburg Empire. When the monarchy was strong and secure, it could ignore guarantees made to Hungary. When the monarchy was threatened, or when the Hungarians could stir up enough opposition, the Habsburgs promised new concessions.

**France Draws Great Britain into the War**

The war over the Austrian succession and the British- Spanish commercial conflict could have remained separate disputes. What united them was the role of France. Just as British merchant interests had pushed Sir Robert

Walpole into war, aggressive court aristocrats compelled the elderly Cardinal Fleury 11653- 17431, first minister of Louis XV I1715- 1774), to abandon France's planned naval attack on British trade and instead to support the Prussian aggression against Austria, the traditional enemy of France. This was among the more fateful decisions in French history.

In the first place, aid to Prussia consolidated a new and powerful state in central Europe. That new power could, and indeed later did, endanger France. Second, the French move against Austria brought Great Britain into the continental war, as Britain sought to make sure the Low Countries remained in the friendly hands of Austria, not France. In 1744, the British- French conflict expanded into the New World where France supported Spain against Britain. As a result, French military and economic resources were badly divided. France could not bring sufficient strength to the colonial struggle. Having chosen to continue the old continental struggle with Austria, France lost the colonial struggle for the future against Great Britain. The war ended in a stalemate in 1748 with the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. Prussia retained Silesia, and Spain renewed the privilege granted Britain in the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) to import slaves into the Spanish colonies.

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**The "Diplomatic Revolution" of 1756**

Although the Treaty of Aix-Ia-Chapelle had brought peace in Europe, France and Great Britain continued to struggle unofficially in the Ohio River valley and in upper New England. These clashes were the prelude to what is known in American history as the French and Indian War, which formally erupted in the summer of 1755. Before war commenced again in Europe, however, a dramatic shift of alliances took place, in part the result of events in North America. The British king, George II (ruled 1727- 1760), who was also the Elector of Hanover, thought the French might attack

Hanover in response to the conflict in America. Frederick II feared an alliance of Russia and Austria. In January 1756, Britain and Prussia signed the Convention of Westminster, a defensive alliance aimed at preventing the entry of foreign troops into the German states. The convention meant that Great Britain, the ally of Austria since the wars of Louis XIV, had now joined forces with Austria's major eighteenth-century enemy.

The new alliance deeply troubled Maria Theresa, but it delighted her foreign minister, Prince Wenzel Anton Kaunitz (1711-1794). He had long thought an alliance with France as Austria's best chance of defeating Prussia. The Convention of Westminster made possible this alliance, which would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. France was agreeable because Frederick had not consulted with French ministers before coming t(this understanding with Britain. So, in May 1756, France and Austria signed a defensive alliance. Kaunitz had succeeded in completely reversing the direction that French foreign policy had followed since the sixteenth century. France would now fight to restore Austrian supremacy in central Europe.

**The Seven Years' War (1756-1763)**

Britain and France had already been engaged in protracted conflict in North America. Now Frederick JJ precipitated a European war that extended that colonial rivalry.

**Frederick the Great Opens Hostilities**

In August 1756, Frederick II opened what would become the Seven Years' War by invading the neighboring German state of Saxony. Frederick considered this to be a preemptive strike against a conspiracy by Saxony, Austria, and France to destroy Prussian power. He regarded the invasion as a continuation of the defensive strategy of the Convention of Westminster. The invasion itself, however, created the very destructive alliance that Frederick feared. In the spring of 1757, France and Austria made a new alliance dedicated to the destruction of Prussia. Sweden, Russia, and many of the smaller German states joined them.

Two factors in addition to Frederick's skilled leadership saved Prussia. First, Britain furnished considerable financial aid. Second, in 1762, Empress Elizabeth of Russia (I. 1741- 1762) died. Her successor, Tsar Peter III, greatly admired Frederick. Although Peter III was murdered the same year, he reigned long enough to make immediate peace with Prussia, thus relieving Frederick of one enemy and allowing him to hold off Austria and France. The Treaty of Hubertusburg of 1763 ended the continental conflict with no significant changes in prewar borders. The prewar balance of power, however, continued to tilt in Prussia's favor. After this war, Frederick II came to be called Frederick the Great. Prussia, formerly a small German state overshadowed by the Habsburgs, now firmly stood among the ranks of the great powers.

**William Pitt's Strategy for Winning North America**

The survival of Prussia was less impressive to the rest of Europe than were the victories of Great Britain in every theater of conflict. The architect of these victories was William Pitt the Elder (1708- 1778), a person of colossal ego and administrative genius. Although he had previously criticized British involvement in Continental disputes, once he became secretary of state in charge of the war in 1757, he pumped huge sums into the coffers of Frederick the Great. He regarded the German conflict as a way to divert French resources and attention from the colonial struggle. He later boasted of having won America on the plains of Germany.

North America was the center of Pitt's real concern. Put simply, he wanted all of North America east of the Mississippi for Great Britain, and he came very close to getting it all. He sent more than 40,000 regular English and colonial troops against the French in Canada. Never had so many soldiers been devoted to colonial warfare. He achieved unprecedented cooperation with the American colonies, whose leaders realized they might finally defeat their French neighbors. Native Americans tried to exploit the dispute between the European powers to gain advantages against their own rival s, although their priorities were rarely allowed to direct military strategy.

The French government was unwilling and unable to direct similar resources against the English in America. Their military administration was corrupt, the military and political commands in Canada were divided, and France could not adequately supply its North American forces. In September 1759, on the Plains of Abraham, overlooking the valley of the Saint Lawrence River at Quebec City, the British army under James Wolfe defeated the French under Louis Joseph de Montcalm. The French Empire in Canada was ending.

Pitt's colonial vision, however, extended beyond the Saint Lawrence valley and the Great Lakes basin. The major islands of the French West Indies fell to British fleets. Income from the sale of captured sugar helped finance the British war effort. British slave interests secured the bulk of the French slave trade for themselves. Between 1755 and 1760, the value of the French colonial trade fell by more than 80 percent. In India, the British forces under the command of Robert Clive defeated France's Indian allies in 1757 at-the Battle of Plassey. This victory opened the way for the eventual conquest of Bengal in northeast India and later of the entire subcontinent by the British East India Company. Never had Great Britain or any other European power experienced such a complete worldwide military victory.

The Treaty of Paris of 1763 reflected somewhat less of a victory than Britain had won on the battlefield. Pitt was no longer in office. The new king, George III Ir. 1760- 18201, and Pitt had quarreled over policy, and the minister had resigned. His replacement was the Earl of Bute (1713- 1792), a favorite of the young monarchy. Bute was responsible for the peace settlement. Britain received all of Canada, the Ohio River valley, and the eastern half of the Mississippi River valley. To Pitt's consternation, Britain returned Pondicherry and Chandernagore in

India and the West Indian sugar islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique to the French. Nevertheless, with the British

East India Company imposing its authority on weakened indigenous governments in India and large territorial holdings in North America, from this time until World War II, Great Britain was a world power, not just a European one.

The Seven Years' War had been a vast worldwide conflict. Tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors had been killed or wounded around the globe. At great internal sacrifice, Prussia had permanently wrested Silesia from Austria and had fundamentally undermined the integrity of Convention of Westminster between England the Holy Roman Empire. Habsburg power now depended largely on the dynasty's own domains- especially Hungary. France found its colonial dominions and influence substantially reduced. The Spanish Empire remained largely intact, but the British were more confident than ever that they could penetrate its markets.

The quarter century of warfare also caused a long series of domestic crises among the European powers. Defeat convinced many in France of the necessity for political and administrative reform. The financial burdens of the wars had astounded all participants. Every power had to increase its revenues to pay its war debt and finance its preparation for the next conflict. Nowhere did this search for revenue lead to more far-ranging consequences than in the British colonies in North America.