

French and Indian War

Rivalry for the West, particularly for the valley of the upper Ohio, prepared the way for another war. In 1748 a group of Virginians interested in Western lands formed the Ohio Company, and at the same time the French were investigating possibilities of occupying the upper Ohio region. The French were first to act, moving S from Canada and founding two forts. Robert Dinwiddie, governor of Virginia, sent an emissary, young George Washington, to protest.

The contest between the Ohio Company and the French was now joined and hinged on possession of the spot where the Monongahela and the Allegheny join to form the Ohio (the site of Pittsburgh). The English started a fort there but were expelled by the French, who built Fort Duquesne in 1754. Dinwiddie, after attempting to get aid from the other colonies, sent out an expedition under Washington. He defeated a small force of French and Native Americans but had to withdraw and, building Fort Necessity, held his ground until forced to surrender (July, 1754). The British colonies, alarmed by French activities at their back door, attempted to correlate their activities in the Albany Congress. War had thus broken out before fighting began in Europe in the Seven Years War.

The American conflict, the last and by far the most important of the series, is usually called simply the French and Indian War. The British undertook to capture the French forts in the West—not only Duquesne, but also Fort Frontenac, Fort Niagara, and the posts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point. They also set out to take Louisburg and the French cities on the St. Lawrence, Quebec and Montreal. They at first failed in their attempts. The expedition led by Edward Braddock against Duquesne in 1755 was a costly fiasco, and the attempt by Admiral Boscawen to blockade Canada and the first expeditions against Niagara and Crown Point were fruitless.

After 1757, when the British ministry of the elder William Pitt was reconstituted, Pitt was able to supervise the war in America. Affairs then took a better turn for the British. Lord Amherst in 1758 took Louisburg, where James Wolfe distinguished himself. That same year Gen. John Forbes took Fort Duquesne (which became Fort Pitt).

The French Louis Joseph de Montcalm, one of the great commanders of his time, distinguished himself (1758) by repulsing the attack of James Abercromby on Ticonderoga. The next year that fort fell to Amherst. In the West, the hold of Sir William Johnson over the Iroquois and the activities of border troops under his general command—most spectacular, perhaps, were the exploits of the rangers under Robert Rogers—reduced French holdings and influence.

The war became a fight for the St. Lawrence, with Montcalm pitted against the brilliant Wolfe. The climax came in 1759 in the open battle on the Plains of Abraham. Both Wolfe and Montcalm were killed, but Quebec fell to the British. In 1760, Montreal also fell, and the war was over. The Treaty of Paris in 1763 ended French control of Canada, which went to Great Britain.

French and Indian War Aftermath

What really won the French and Indian War? On the surface, it seems that the British won out bulk rather than skill. It is certainly true that the French were more clever strategists and better at recruiting the Indians to their cause. But the British outnumbered them, and the British had greater material resources to devote to the war. In the end, what won the war was not the guerrilla warfare that dominated as the chief strategy of battle. It was the large battles--Louisbourg, Fort Duquesne, Quebec--that made all the difference. Even when the British lost major battles to the French, as they did at Ticonderoga and the first battle at Fort Duquesne, they killed French soldiers that were not easy to replace. By overwhelming the French with sheer numbers, the British weakened their overall fitness for war and managed to eventually exhaust French resources.

The Treaty of Paris ended the French and Indian War but not the issues that caused it: specifically, land encroachment. The only difference was the enemy that remained after the war ended. After the French had been removed from the North American continent, the British turned their attention to fighting the Indians for their lands. Like the French, the Indians fought back, but faced almost certain defeat because of their limited supplies, manpower, and the general lack of cohesion between Indian tribes.

The French and Indian War failed to solve another important problem: the growing estrangement between England and its colonies on the Atlantic. It was the hope of many that fighting a common enemy would pull England and its colonies together. But it did just the opposite. Living in close quarters with the British, subjected to constant humiliation and orders from British authorities, the colonials became even more aggravated at British arrogance and flagrant greed. After the war, the heavy taxes Britain levied on the colonies to pay for the war only made the colonials angrier.

And so the French and Indian War led to more wars, one with the Indians and one with the colonials. But it brought an imperialist conflict between France and Britain to an end and decided which country would have control over the North American continent, both in history and in cultural impact.