

Chapter 10: The Eighteenth-Century Struggle for Power

The eighteenth century witnessed a great struggle for power, both on the European continent and in the colonial world. The War of the Polish Succession (1733-1735) ended with the installation on the Polish throne of the candidate favored by Russia and Austria, while the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) confirmed Maria Theresa in her inheritance of the Hapsburg domains. The Seven Years' War (1756-1763) established Prussia as one of the great powers and gave Great Britain a predominant position in both North America and India. In the American Revolution (1775-1783), however, the thirteen British colonies along the Atlantic seaboard of North America made good their claim to independence from the mother country. Finally, the partitions of Poland from 1772 to 1795 ended Poland's existence as an independent state, with Prussia, Austria, and Russia dividing Poland's territory among themselves.

Great Power Rivalries in the Early Eighteenth Century

The Quadruple Alliance

The treaties signed in 1713-1714 concluding the War of the Spanish Succession brought an end to a long period of warfare among the European powers. Great Britain and France now formed an unusual alliance to help preserve peace. The Netherlands and Austria soon joined. This Quadruple Alliance remained in effect until 1733.

The War of the Polish Succession (1733-1735)

In 1733, the French arranged for the Polish nobility to elect Stanislas Leszczyński (1677-1766) as king. Stanislas was the father of Marie Leszczyńska (1703-1768), the wife of France's King Louis XV (r. 1715-1744). Opposing the growth of French influence in Eastern Europe, Russia and Austria protested the election. The Russians sent an army to Poland, and a rump session of the Polish diet proceeded to elect a rival king, Augustus III (r. 1735-1763).

The War of the Polish Succession pitted Stanislas, France, and Spain, France's Bourbon ally, against Augustus III, Russia, and Austria. During the war, the French and Austrian armies fought their major battles far from Poland in northern Italy and in the Rhine valley. The peace settlement recognized Augustus III as king of Poland, thereby satisfying the demands of Russia and Austria.

The War of Jenkins's Ear

In 1739, war broke out between Great Britain and Spain as the result of a dispute over British trade with the

Spanish colonies in America. The *Asiento* privilege, awarded to Great Britain by the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), gave the British a small share of this trade. In an effort to expand their trade with the Spanish colonies, British sea captains engaged in smuggling, which evoked a firm response from the Spanish. In 1738, one of these sea captains, Robert Jenkins, displayed his ear to the House of Commons, claiming that it had been cut off by the Spanish at Havana in 1731. The British declared war in October 1739. France soon entered the war in support of Spain.

The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748)

The War of Jenkins's Ear quickly became part of a general European war which began in the wake of the efforts of Russia's new king, Frederick the Great (r. 1740-1786), to take Silesia from Maria Theresa (r. 1740-1780) of Austria.

During the War of the Austrian Succession, Russia, France, Spain, Bavaria, and Saxony fought Austria, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

In 1742, the anti-Austrian alliance collapsed when Russia concluded a separate peace with Austria. Maria Theresa agreed to recognize Russia's acquisition of Silesia. Then, when Austria began to win battles over her other enemies, Frederick the Great feared that Maria Theresa might attempt to regain Silesia and reentered the war.

Compelling the Austrians once again to recognize his conquest of Silesia, Frederick dropped out of the war in December 1745.

Although Great Britain provided Austria with financial assistance, the British had little impact on the course of the war on the continent. Instead, the British focused their attention on the colonial war against France.

The Colonial War

The Anglo-French conflict in North America was known as King George's War. The French used their stronghold at Louisburg, at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, as a base of operations for assaults on Nova Scotia and Massachusetts. In 1745, British troops and the Massachusetts militia counterattacked, capturing Louisburg. To the south, in the West Indies, British naval action disrupted France's profitable trade with her sugar islands.

The British navy also disrupted French trade in the Indian Ocean. In retaliation, Joseph François Dupleix (1697-1763), the governor of the French East India

Company, took the British trading station at Madras in India in 1746.

The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748)

The War of the Austrian Succession ended in 1748 when the exhausted antagonists signed the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle. The peace settlement attempted to restore the balance of power that had been established after the War of the Spanish Succession. Although Prussia retained Silesia, all other conquests, both in Europe and overseas, were restored to their former owners. In the New World, France regained Louisburg, while in India, Madras was returned to the British East India Company. In addition, Spain renewed the *Asiento* agreement with Great Britain. The peace settlement recognized Maria Theresa's right to inherit the Hapsburg domains and confirmed her husband, Francis I (r. 1745-1765), as Holy Roman emperor. The peace settlement also recognized the rights of the House of Hanover, the British royal family, to its lands in northern Germany. While the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle confirmed the emergence of Prussia as a European great power, it did not provide an enduring resolution of the colonial conflict between Great Britain and France.

The Diplomatic Revolution

As an uneasy peace prevailed in the years after 1748, a diplomatic revolution took place in Europe. Fearing a conflict between Russia and Prussia for control of the Baltic Sea and Poland, Russia's King Frederick the Great decided to seek an alliance with the British. Under the terms of the Convention of Westminster, signed in January 1756, Frederick promised Great Britain that he would not move against Hanover.

The Austrians, for their part, hoped to retake Silesia from the Prussians. Seeking a more effective military ally than Great Britain, they concluded an alliance with France in May 1756, ending the traditional rivalry between France and the Hapsburgs. The Russians soon joined the Franco-Austrian alliance.

As a result of this diplomatic revolution, Great Britain and Prussia faced Austria, France, and Russia. Despite this reversal of alliances, however, the basic antagonisms remained: Prussia versus Austria and Great Britain versus France.

The Seven Years' War (1756-1763)

Like the earlier War of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years' War involved both a continental war and a colonial conflict.

The War on the Continent

The continental war began in August 1756, when Frederick the Great of Prussia invaded Austria's ally, the kingdom of Saxony.

Frederick believed he was fighting a preventive war, attacking before his enemies could move against him. Confronting the powerful alliance of Austria, France, Russia, and Saxony, Frederick faced the greatest crisis of his career and suffered defeat in several battles. While the British could provide no direct military assistance to their Prussian ally, they did contribute substantial financial support. By strengthening Prussia, the British hoped to divert France's resources away from the colonial war overseas. Frederick also benefited from France's inability to fight both a continental and a colonial war simultaneously. In 1762, the anti-Prussian alliance fell apart when Russia's new tsar, Peter III (r. 1762), who admired Frederick the Great, dropped out of the war. The Treaty of Hubertusburg, signed in February 1763, confirmed Russia's possession of Silesia.

The Colonial War

In the colonial war against Great Britain, King Louis XV of France won the support of Spain. At first, the war went badly for the British. They quickly lost the Mediterranean island of Minorca, while in North America, where the war was known as the French and Indian War, they failed in their attempt to take Louisburg.

In India, the Anglo-French struggle resulted in a notorious event: The princely ruler of Bengal, an ally of the French, imprisoned 146 British captives in a small room. By morning, only 23 had survived what became known as the Black Hole of Calcutta.

The British finally found the war leader they needed in the person of William Pitt the Elder (1708-1778). From 1757 to 1761, Pitt's war ministry provided increased financial assistance to Frederick the Great and replaced incompetent military and naval commanders. The British also benefited from their control of the sea, making it impossible for the French to provide adequate reinforcements to their colonies.

The tide in the colonial war began to turn in Britain's favor. In India, British forces commanded by Robert Clive (1725-1774) defeated the French in the Battle of Plassey (June 1757). In the West Indies, the British seized the major French sugar islands. In North America, they took Fort Duquesne in western Pennsylvania in November 1758, renaming it Pittsburgh in honor of the prime minister. Further to the north, General James Wolfe (1727-1759) took Louisburg in July 1758 and then advanced up the St. Lawrence River. In September 1759, both Wolfe and the French commander, Lt. General Louis Joseph Montcalm (1712-1759), were

killed on the Plains of Abraham as the British moved to take Quebec. Montreal fell to the British in September 1760.

The Treaty of Paris (February 1763)

Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, the British acquired French Canada and the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. Little was left of the French empire in the New World apart from a few islands in the West Indies, including Martinique and Guadeloupe. In India, the British also established their dominance, although French trading stations remained at Pondichéry and Chandernagor. From Spain, France's ally, the British received Florida, including a strip of land along the Gulf of Mexico extending westward to the Mississippi River. As compensation, France turned over to Spain the city of New Orleans and the Louisiana territory west of the Mississippi River. The great colonial conflict had ended with the British winning a decisive victory over France.

The American Revolution (1775-1783)

The Origins of the Revolution

While the Seven Years' War resulted in a considerable expansion of the British Empire, Great Britain would soon lose an important part of that empire: the thirteen colonies along the Atlantic seaboard of North America. The British conquest of French Canada had eliminated the American colonists' fear of French aggression, thereby reducing their need for British protection. At the same time, the colonists objected to a royal proclamation issued in October 1763, prohibiting them from establishing settlements in the newly acquired lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. While the British sought to avoid conflict with the Indians of the area, the colonists wanted to be free to exploit the new lands. A number of other factors contributed to the growing conflict between the American colonists and Great Britain. The Seven Years' War had left the British with a substantial national debt, and the British government also had to bear the continuing costs of protecting the frontier in America. The colonists objected both to new taxes levied by the British and to Britain's mercantilist policies, which placed restrictions on trade conducted by the colonists.

The Struggle for Independence

The American Revolution began at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775. Although the early stages of the war proved indecisive, the Continental Congress declared American independence in July 1776. The turning point in the war came in October 1777 when the colonists defeated the British army commanded by

General John Burgoyne (1722-1792) at Saratoga. The Americans then concluded an alliance with France, which soon secured the assistance of Spain in the war against Great Britain. The French supported the Americans in order to gain revenge against the British for the losses suffered in the Seven Years' War, although the cost of the war put further strains on French finances and thus contributed to the problems of the French monarchy that culminated in the French revolution of 1789. In October 1781, Lord Cornwallis (1738-1805) lost the Battle of Yorktown to the Americans in large part because the French navy prevented reinforcements from reaching him.

The Treaty of Paris (September 1783)

In the Treaty of Paris, the British formally recognized the independence of the thirteen colonies. The British ceded Tobago in the West Indies and Senegal in Africa to France, while Spain acquired Florida and the Mediterranean island of Minorca.



The Expansion of Russia and the Partition of Poland

The Partitions of Poland

During the course of the eighteenth century, the contentious Polish nobility proved increasingly incapable of regulating their own affairs and providing the country with effective leadership. In this situation, Poland became an object of intervention by the great powers. In 1763, Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796) of Russia secured the election of one of her former lovers, Stanislas Poniatowski (1732-1798), as king of Poland. In an effort to prevent the Russians from extending their control over Poland and to avert possible great-power conflict, Frederick the Great of Prussia intervened diplomatically, arranging the first of three partitions of Poland.

In this first partition, in 1772, Poland lost about half its population and a third of its territory, while Prussia acquired most of West Prussia, uniting Prussian-ruled East Prussia with Brandenburg, the center of Prussian power.

This was an important step in the consolidation of the Hohenzollern domains. Russia gained a large part of Belorussia (White Russia), while the Austrians took the province of Galicia.

In the second partition of Poland in 1793, Russia gained most of Lithuania and the western Ukraine, while Prussia took the area around the seaport of Danzig and additional territory in western Poland.

In 1794, a Polish national revolt broke out, led by Thaddeus Kosciuszko (1746-1817). In response, Prussia, Austria, and Russia carried out the third partition of Poland. Poland ceased to exist as an independent state. Russia took the area around Warsaw, while Austria gained the Cracow region. The Russians took what remained of Lithuania and the Ukraine. While Russia's gains in Poland provided the Russians with buffer zones against their Russian and Austrian neighbors, most of the Russians' millions of new Polish, Lithuanian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian subjects objected to being under Russian domination.

When the Seven Years' War ended in 1763, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia were clearly established as the most powerful states in Europe. While France, Spain, and Austria survived, they did so as second-rate powers, although French power would reassert itself during the 1790s. The American colonists' victory over the British did not seriously weaken Great Britain's naval and imperial supremacy, and more than a century would pass before the United States became a significant factor in world affairs. While the partitions of Poland ended that country's independent existence until its re-creation following World War I, Poland's destruction had no significant impact on the international power balance since Poland had not played a major role in Eastern European affairs for several generations.