



The Seven Years War 1756 - 63

By [Robert Wilde](#)

Summary

In Europe, the Seven Years war was fought between an alliance of France, Russia, Sweden, Austria and Saxony against Prussia, Hanover and Great Britain from 1756 - 63. However, the war had an international element, particularly as Britain and France fought for domination of North America and India. As such, it has been called the first 'world war'.

The theatre in North America is called the 'French Indian' war, and in Germany the Seven Years War has been known as the 'Third Silesian War'.

Origins: The Diplomatic Revolution

The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle ended the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748, but to many it was only an armistice, a temporary halt to the war. Austria had lost Silesia to Prussia, and was angry at both Prussia – for taking the wealthy land – and her own allies for not making sure it was returned. She started weighing up her alliances and seeking out alternatives. Russia grew worried about the growing power of Prussia, and wondered about waging a 'preventative' war to stop them. Prussia, pleased at having gained Silesia, believed it would take another war to keep it, and hoped to gain more territory during it.

In the 1750s, as tensions rose in North America between British and French colonists competing for the same land, Britain acted to try and prevent the ensuing war destabilising Europe by altering its alliances. These actions, and a change of heart by Frederick II of Prussia - known by his many later admirers as 'the Great' - triggered what has been called the 'Diplomatic Revolution', as the previous system of alliances broke down and a new one replaced it, with Austria, France and Russia allied against Britain, Prussia and Hanover.

Europe: Frederick gets his Retaliation in First

In May 1756, Britain and France officially went to war, triggered by French attacks on Minorca; the recent treaties stopped other nations being sucked in to help. But with the new alliances in place, Austria was poised to strike and take Silesia back, and Russia was planning a similar initiative, so Frederick II of Prussia – aware of the plotting - initiated conflict in an attempt to gain an advantage. He wanted to defeat Austria before France and Russia could mobilise; he also wanted to seize more land. Frederick thus attacked Saxony in August 1756 to try and break its alliance with Austria, seize its resources and set up his planned 1757 campaign. He took the capital, accepting their surrender, incorporating their troops and sucking huge funds out of the state.

Prussian forces then advanced into Bohemia, but were unable to win the victory that would keep them there and they retreated to Saxony. They advanced back again in early 1757, winning the battle of Prague on May 6 1757, thanks in no small part to Frederick's subordinates. However, the Austrian army had retreated into Prague, which Prussia besieged. Luckily for the Austrians, Frederick was defeated on June 18th by a relief force at the Battle of Kolin and forced to retreat out of Bohemia.

Europe: Prussia under Attack

Prussia now appeared to be attacked from all sides, as a French force defeated the Hanoverians under an English general – the King of England was also the King of Hanover – occupied Hanover and marched to Prussia, while Russia came in from the East and defeated other Prussians, although they followed this up

by retreating and only occupied East Prussia the next January. Austria moved on Silesia and Sweden, new to the Franco-Russo-Austrian alliance, also attacked. For a while Frederick sank into self pity, but responded with a display of arguably brilliant generalship, defeating a Franco-German army at Rossbach on November 5th, and an Austrian one at Leuthen on December 5th,; both had outnumbered him greatly. Neither victory was enough to force an Austrian (or French) surrender.

From now on the French would target a resurgent Hanover, and never fought Frederick again, while he moved quickly, defeating one enemy army and then another before they could effectively team up, using his advantage of shorter, internal lines of movement. Austria soon learnt not to fight Prussia in the large, open areas which favoured Prussia's superior movement, although this was constantly reduced by casualties. Britain began to harass the French coast to try and draw troops away, while Prussia pushed the Swedes out.

Europe: Victories and Defeats

The British ignored the surrender of their previous Hanoverian army and returned to the region, intent on keeping France at bay. This new army was commanded by a close ally of Frederick's (his brother in law) and kept French forces busy in the west and away from both Prussia and the French colonies. They won the battle of Minden in 1759, and made a series of strategic manoeuvres to tie up the enemy armies, although were constrained by having to send reinforcements to Frederick.

Frederick attacked Austria, but was outmanoeuvred during a siege and forced to retreat into Silesia. He then fought a draw with the Russians at Zorndorf, but took heavy casualties (a third of his army); he was then beaten by Austria at Hochkirch, losing a third again. By the end of the year he had cleared Prussia and Silesia of enemy armies, but was greatly weakened, unable to pursue anymore grand offensives; Austria was cautiously pleased. By now, all belligerents had spent huge sums. Frederick was bought to battle again at Battle of Kunersdorf in August 1759, but was heavily defeated by an Austro-Russian army. He lost 40% of the troops present, although he managed to keep the remainder of his army in operation. Thanks to Austrian and Russian caution, delays and disagreements, their advantage was not pressed and Frederick avoided being forced to surrender.

In 1760 Frederick failed in another siege, but won minor victories against the Austrians, although at Torgau he won because of his subordinates rather than anything he did. France, with some Austrian support, tried to push for peace. By the end of 1761, with enemies wintering on Prussian land, things were going badly for Frederick, whose once highly trained army was now bulked out with hastily gathered recruits, and whose numbers were well below those of the enemy armies. Frederick was increasingly unable to perform the marches and outflankings which had bought him success, and was on the defensive. Had Frederick's enemies overcome their seeming inability to co-ordinate – thanks to xenophobia, dislike, confusion, class differences and more – Frederick might already have been beaten. In control of only a part of Prussia, Frederick's efforts looked doomed, despite Austria being in a desperate financial position.

Europe: Death as Prussian Saviour

Frederick hoped for a miracle; he got one. The implacably anti-Prussian Tsarina of Russia died, to be succeeded by Tsar Peter III. He was favourable to Prussia and made immediate peace, sending troops to help Frederick. Although Peter was assassinated quickly afterwards – not before trying to invade Denmark – the new Tsar – Peter's wife, Catherine the Great – kept the peace agreements, although she withdrew Russian troops which had been helping Frederick. This freed Frederick to win more engagements against Austria. Britain took the chance to end their alliance with Prussia – thanks partly to mutual antipathy between Frederick and Britain's new Prime Minister- declaring war on Spain and attacking their Empire instead. Spain invaded Portugal, but were halted with British aid.

The Global War

Although British troops did fight on the continent, slowly increasing in numbers, the Britain had preferred to send financial support to Frederick and Hanover – subsidies larger than any before in British history – rather than fight in Europe. This was in order to send troops and ships elsewhere in the world. The British had been involved in fighting in North America since 1754, and the government under William Pitt decided to further prioritise the war in America, and hit the rest of France's imperial possessions, using their powerful navy to harass France where she was weakest. In contrast, France focused on Europe first, planning an invasion of Britain, but this possibility was ended by the Battle of Quiberon Bay in 1759, shattering France's remaining Atlantic naval power and their ability to reinforce America. England had effectively won the 'French-Indian' war in North America by 1760, but peace there had to wait until the other theatres were settled.

In 1759 a small, opportunistic British force had seized Fort Louis on the Senegal River in Africa, acquiring plenty of valuables and suffering no casualties. Consequently, by the end of the year all French trading posts in Africa were British. Britain then attacked France in the West Indies, taking the rich island of Guadeloupe and moving on to other wealth producing targets. The British East India Company retaliated against a local leader and attacked French interests in India and, aided greatly by the British Royal Navy dominating the Indian Ocean as it had the Atlantic, ejected France from the area. By war's end, Britain had a vastly increased Empire, France a much reduced one. Britain and Spain also went to war, and Britain shocked their new enemy by seizing the hub of their Caribbean operations, Havana, and a quarter of the Spanish Navy.

Peace

None of Prussia, Austria, Russia or France had been able to win the decisive victories needed to force their enemies to surrender, but by 1763 the war in Europe had drained the belligerents and they sought peace, Austria, facing bankruptcy and feeling unable to proceed without Russia, France defeated abroad and unwilling to fight on to support Austria, and England keen to cement global success and end the drain on their resources. Prussia was intent on forcing a return to the state of affairs before the war, but as peace negotiations dragged on Frederick sucked as much as he could out of Saxony, including kidnapping girls and relocating them in depopulated areas of Prussia.

The Treaty of Paris was signed on February 10th 1763, settling issues between Britain, Spain and France, humiliating the latter, former greatest power in Europe. Britain gave Havana back to Spain, but received Florida in return. France compensated Spain by giving her Louisiana, while England got all French lands in North America east of the Mississippi except New Orleans. Britain also gained much of the West Indies, Senegal, Minorca and land in India. Other possessions changed hands, and Hanover was secured for the British. On February 10th 1763 the Treaty of Hubertusburg between Prussia and Austria confirmed the status quo: Prussia kept Silesia, and secured its claim to 'great power' status, while Austria kept Saxony. As historian Fred Anderson pointed out, millions had been spent and tens of thousands had died, but nothing had changed.

Consequences

Britain was left as the dominant world power, albeit deeply in debt, and the cost had introduced new problems in the relationship with its colonists. France was on the road to economic disaster and revolution. Prussia had lost 10% of its population but, crucially for Frederick's reputation, had survived the alliance of Austria, Russia and France which had wanted to reduce or destroy it, although historians like Szabo claim Frederick is given too much credit for this as outside factors allowed it.

Reforms followed in many of the belligerent's government and military, with Austrian fears that Europe would be on the road to a disastrous militarism were well founded. The failure of Austria to reduce Prussia to second rate power doomed it to a competition between the two for the future of Germany, benefitting Russia and France, and leading to a Prussian centred Germany empire. The war also saw a shift in the balance of diplomacy, with Spain and Holland reduced in importance, replaced by two new Great Powers: Prussia and Russia. Saxony was ruined.