

THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

The conflict known in the United States as the French and Indian War (1754-1763) was only one front of a worldwide war waged between the French and British Empires called the Seven Years War. Labeled “the first world war” by Winston Churchill, this conflict pitted French and British allies against each other on five different continents. In America the British occupied the colonies of New England while the French held many territories in Canada. When French troops moved into territory already claimed by the British, the war ignited. Since the French colonists were outnumbered by the British 20 to 1, the French army made alliances with various American Indian tribes, who were at this time still a powerful and influential force. Although it was the French who relied on the Indians most heavily, Indians were vital to both sides—as both warriors and guides.

Beyond the colonies, North America was still very much a wilderness, and Indian runners led soldiers along hidden woodland paths to engage one another in battle. Many times before a battle could be fought, workers had to widen these paths into roads to allow the passage of large numbers of troops. The British and French also erected forts to provide their armies a stronghold in the wilderness.

A YOUNG SOLDIER NAMED GEORGE

In 1732 George Washington was born in the British colony of Virginia. Since he was not his father’s oldest son, Washington had no hopes of inheriting any property, so he instead made plans to earn his success through the military. Becoming a major at a young age, Washington displayed an aptitude for military skill. In 1754 when French troops encroached on British territory, the governor of Virginia sent 22-year-old Major Washington to deliver an ultimatum—leave or else. The French chose the latter option, and a battle ensued—effectively beginning the French and Indian War. Although he suffered many early defeats, Washington’s exploits and bravery in the war helped elevate his rank in the British army and earned him renown among the colonists.

ROGERS’ RANGERS

The British troops who came overseas to defend the colonies were used to fighting battles in Europe, where opposing armies could line up in military formations and engage one another upon the field of battle. The untamed, heavily-wooded, and mountainous terrain of North America made this style of fighting ineffective and almost impossible. Decked out in their bright red uniforms, the British soldiers made easy targets for their French and Indian enemies, who could ambush them quickly and then disappear into the forest. Although the British regulars (or enlisted soldiers) frequently looked down on the militiamen (conscripted colonist



soldiers) for their lack of military training, it was one of colonists, Robert Rogers, who had the sense to adapt the traditional method of warfare for the French and Indian War.

Finally recognizing that the war could not be fought in the traditional manner, the British appointed a man named Robert Rogers from New Hampshire to form a group of rangers. The region in which Rogers grew up had been the victim of frequent Indian attacks, and he combined Indian fighting tactics with his own innovative combat techniques. Needless to say, Roger's tactics were totally different from those of the British Army. Rogers' Rangers wore green outfits and practiced guerilla tactics called "Rogers' Rules of Ranging," which the British considered unconventional. These rules of ranging are still used today. Rogers hired men solely on merit, made decisions democratically, and shocked regular commanders with his use of Indians and freed slaves. His rangers received training in military arts and had frequent musket target practice, which the regular British soldiers considered a waste of ammunition. His military tactics were so bold and effective that his unit became Britain's chief scouting unit.

THE WAR THAT MADE AMERICA

Outmanned and outgunned, the French finally surrendered to the British in 1763. France relinquished its Canadian territory, and Spain, France's ally, gave up Florida. From this point forward, the British were the dominating force in North America.

As for the colonists, the French and Indian War brought several changes. Although not all Indian tribes had allied themselves with the French, many had, and the bitterness of the conflict lingered. Historians believe it was instrumental in turning white colonists against the Indians. After the war, many colonists no longer hoped for a society where the two groups of people could live harmoniously.

It was also during this time that the colonies formed a more united identity. The war caused them to militarize and work toward a common goal. They had transformed into something more than separate entities by the spirit of pride that arose from their successful repulse of the French. In a little over ten years the colonies would fight against another enemy—the empire itself.

The aftermath of the French and Indian War also fueled the Revolutionary War. The British Empire, having gone deeply in debt fighting the Seven Years War across the globe, began to heavily tax the American colonies to regain their money. After all, the empire had fought to protect the colonies from the French, so it should be the colonies who paid the price. The colonists resented this, however, believing that they had been the key factor in winning the war—not the regular British army. As one war ended, the seeds of a greater conflict, the American Revolution, were sown.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How was the French and Indian War different from previous European wars?
2. Look up three of Rogers's Rules of Ranging and write why they would be effective.
3. How did the war affect relations between the white colonists and the Indians?
4. Do you think the colonists had a right to resent the British Empire's treatment of them after the French and Indian War? Explain.