

18th Century Wars

The major nation-states of Europe fought wars regularly in order to gain new territory and protect existing trade routes or monopolies. The five major powers of Europe included: Great Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The concern to maintain a “**balance of power**” was still influential, but the major powers of Europe did not seek to maintain peace. War was considered a rational means to achieve specific goals, and leaders justified war on the basis of national self-interest.

In 1739, British merchants and plantation-owners in the West Indies lobbied the British Parliament and Prime Minister Walpole to declare war on Spain. The “**War of Jenkins’ Ear**” was fought over trade monopolies and disputed trade routes between England and Spain.

In 1740, **Frederick II of Prussia** invaded the Austrian province of Silesia when **Maria Theresa** took power. The French invaded Austrian territory in the Netherlands. Maria Theresa preserved the Austrian Habsburg Empire by forming an alliance with Great Britain. Cardinal Fleury and Louis XV abandoned plans to attack British trade routes and instead supported Prussia against Austria. The French also supported Spain against Britain in the New World. The “**War of the Austrian Succession**” lasted until 1748 when the **Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle** ended the fighting in Europe. France and Britain continued to fight in North America and the conflict evolved into the **Seven Years’ War** (French and Indian War) in 1755.

In 1756 a “**Diplomatic Revolution**” occurred when **George II** formed a defensive alliance with Prussia. Great Britain had been Austria’s ally since the wars of Louis XIV, and in response, an alliance was formed between Austria and France. **Frederick II** invaded Saxony and an alliance between Austria, France, Sweden, and Russia aimed to defeat Prussia. Britain provided financial aid to Prussia and the war in Europe ended with no territorial or political changes after Russia withdrew from the war once Peter III, an admirer of Frederick II, became tsar in 1762.

Will Pitt the Elder led the British effort against France in North America by sending the largest colonial army to aid the colonists. Meanwhile, he gave enormous funds to Prussia, which diverted French attention away from North America. The British, with the help of the colonists, defeated the French. In the **Treaty of Paris (1763)** Britain received all of Canada, the Ohio River Valley, and the land east of the Mississippi River Valley from France. Great Britain became a world power and would remain one until WWII. Pitt claimed to have “won America on the plains of Germany.”

After the **Seven Years’ War**, both Britain and France were heavily in debt and sought new revenue. The American colonies sought independence from Britain when **George III** tried to impose new taxes. The conflict between Britain and France continued as the French supported the American colonies both financially and militarily. Ultimately, Spain aided the American colonies, as well. The French support for the American colonists worsened its own financial situation.

Great Britain decided that additional revenue should be gained from the American colonies to pay for the war debt since they had been the beneficiaries of the French defeat. Great Britain also needed additional revenue to fund the administrative costs of its new North American territories. Beginning in 1764, new taxes such as the **Sugar Act** and **Stamp Act** were approved by the British Parliament and the money being raised would have been spent mostly in the colonies. However, the American colonists insisted that

“taxation without representation” in parliament was tyranny. Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in response to colonial opposition from the **Sons of Liberty**. Tensions between the colonies and Britain rose steadily over whether or not the colonies should control their own finances and the **Intolerable Acts** were passed in 1774, which led to war in 1775. George III declared the colonies in rebellion and Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* significantly influenced public opinion in favor of separation. Paine was a product of the Enlightenment, a cosmopolitan who participated in both the American Revolution and the French Revolution. The *Declaration of Independence*, in which Thomas Jefferson appealed to natural rights, was proclaimed in 1776. The military conflict continued until 1781 and the **Treaty of Paris (1783)** ended the war and established the **United States of America** as an independent nation. The American colonists established a **republic based on popular sovereignty** rather than on divine law. The new nation explicitly rejected the aristocratic social hierarchy of Britain. The United States of America was a nation freer than any the world had ever seen.

In the 1780s, Great Britain was in debt, but remained a world power. The political ideals of the American colonies impacted Great Britain as many began to question the corrupt, aristocracy-dominated Parliament. Calls for parliamentary reform followed the American Revolution in the form of the **Association Movement**. In 1784, seeking public support, George III allied himself with **William Pitt the Younger** who was a supporter of reform.

The creation of state constitutions, the Articles of Confederation, and U.S. Constitution demonstrated to Europe that government without monarchy and aristocracy was possible. The Americans had embraced **classical liberalism** and elements of **republicanism**. They had written constitutions that guaranteed individual rights, limited the power of government, and justified political authority on popular sovereignty rather than divine law or tradition.

In 1789, France would experience a bloody revolution pursuing many of the political ideals brought to life in the United States. Prussia became a major European power, while Austria and Russia maintained their political power and planned for the future. The United States of America would successfully complete its “revolution” in 1800 when political power transitioned peacefully to the opposition Democratic-Republican Party led by Thomas Jefferson.