

“Invisible Scourge”

How Smallpox Helped Britain Win the French and Indian War

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Abstract

The French and Indian War (1754-1760) was a critical part of the conflict between Britain and France for control of North America. Traditional studies emphasize military strategies and the shift of alliances, whereas this study argues that smallpox was the deciding factor in Britain's victory. Smallpox affected various Native American tribes as many of them had created alliances with the French. The French had significant success in the Ohio River Valley, with a heavy reliance on Native American military support, as well as their experience with the land. Despite this support, the repercussions of the Battle of Fort William Henry (1757), where smallpox made its way back to Native tribes, marked the beginning of the end of diplomatic relations between the Natives and the French. The Treaty of Easton (1758) was a shift for the war, as Native tribes believed that smallpox came from the French, and shifted their allegiance to the British. Fueled by the collapse of the Native and French alliances, the British army excelled militarily in the latter years of the war. By examining the works of historians and primary sources from the time, this paper argues that smallpox was the critical factor in Britain's victory in the French and Indian War.

At the forefront of a movement to conquer land during the 1750s, particularly in North America, were Britain and France. Both began on the present-day east coast of the United States and spread their influence inland. Here they encountered resources, indigenous people, and, most contentious of all, each other. This meeting and ensuing conflict led to the Seven Years War, a battle between Britain and France, as well as their indigenous allies, from 1754-1760, over who should control trade, resources, and the settling of territory in North America. [While tensions had been building for years between the two powers in Europe, the breaking point would come far from home in North America.] The Native Americans did not sit idly by as the conflict raged. The French and Indian war was a military campaign characterized by the importance of alliances and the advantages they provided. Historian John Booss, has claimed that these alliances, as well as military strategy¹, and disease, shaped the outcome of the war. However, contrary to this claim, it was smallpox which directly caused a shift in alliances and strategy and was the ultimate catalyst for British victory in the war. Smallpox was the key decisive factor in the British victory in the French and Indian War, not only because it devastated France's alliance with Native Americans, weakening its knowledge of the land and military aid, but also because it disrupted Native-French diplomacy. Additionally, smallpox created opportunities for British advances that would not have been possible only through brute military force.

A necessary part of understanding how Britain won the French and Indian war comes from understanding how the war itself functioned. Spanning seven years hence the name Seven Years War it was a war of ups and downs for all parties involved. The first four years of the war, 1754-57, can be categorized primarily as an era of French success. The French army began

¹ The use of smallpox as a bioweapon and spread of infected blankets by British General Jeffery Amherst to Native Americans in 1763 will not be discussed in this paper due to a lack of evidence supporting that it happened.

expanding into the Ohio River Valley in 1754 and established forts throughout to protect trade and transportation along the Ohio River. This control put the French in contact with the Iroquois and other Native American tribes residing in the territory. These early French successes throughout the Ohio River Valley helped build an early trust with Native Americans.

Negotiations ensued and alliances were formed giving the French an early edge over British forces. On May 28, 1754, British Lieutenant Colonel George Washington led an attack on a French fort in Pennsylvania which began the war. In 1758, after four years of French victory, a shift occurred at the signing of the Treaty of Easton. Following this shift, 1758-60, was a period of British success culminating in the gain of land east of the Mississippi River and in Canada which came with winning the war. The Treaty of Easton, was a document signed by the British and the Native Americans of the Ohio River Valley, ending the French and Indian alliances and allowing the British to access this territory without Native American interference. By removing Native American support from the French, the British ensured their eventual victory. However, when examining the broader scope of the war, disease must be considered as a major contributor. As historian Francis Jennings writes, “a question may be raised about the smallpox epidemics that took great toll of Indians during the war, naturally without discriminating warriors from noncombatants. It cannot be disputed that epidemics often accompany war as the natural consequence of demographic turmoil.”² As is the case in many other wars³, disease, here the smallpox epidemic, wove its way throughout the course of battle, and had a significant influence on the outcomes.

² Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York: Norton, 1988), 200.

³ For example the Spanish Flu in World War 1 and malaria in World War 2.

Native American tribes played a large role in the military strategies and success of both the French and British armies. Tribe's extensive knowledge of the land helped to navigate Europeans toward opposing forts and troops. In the Ohio River Valley specifically, Native American tribes such as the Delaware, Seneca, and the members of the Iroquois Confederacy served the French as guides and soldiers. Many Native American strategies were effective as they were never seen before by Europeans. Ambushes and raids, especially in heavily wooded areas of the Ohio River Valley, would give the French an advantage over the British in the early years of the war. Thomas Pownall, a writer at the time of the war, wrote in 1759 that "there is not so hellish, so unfair an engine of war as the service of the Indian savage."⁴ These harsh words accurately give the Native Americans credit for their contributions to the French and British military success. In 1754 at the Battle of Fort Necessity, the French army, with the help of Native American tribes, surrounded and defeated the British army and George Washington. Native American soldiers applied both their advanced knowledge of the land with European weaponry to decimate these British forts. Again, at the Battle of Fort William Henry (1757), Native American forces ransacked the British fort and massacred the surrendered British army. Alliances with Native Americans thus shaped the war and can be linked to victories for both the British and the French.

Due to a lack of prior exposure, smallpox ravaged Native American villages and greatly weakened their ability to support the French. Historian Elizabeth Fenn noted, "the most important single determinant of vulnerability to smallpox was prior exposure."⁵ Native American tribes at home had even less exposure than those in direct contact with Europeans.. Following the

⁴ Thomas Pownall, quoted in William Nester, *The First Global War: Britain, France, and the Fate of North America, 1756-1775* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000), 39.

⁵ Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775–82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 32.

initial battle at Fort William Henry (1757), Native American forces massacred British forces as they surrendered and retreated. As was custom for Native American culture, following the conflict trophies and scalps were taken back to their homes and tribes. One such trophy was brought to the tribes; smallpox. Historian William Nester in writings about the Battle of Fort William Henry notes,

That same day, after pillaging the camp, over 1,300 Indians disappeared into the wilderness to journey home. Ironically, among the plunder the Indians carried back to their distant villages was smallpox. The epidemic would devastate most of the score of tribes whose men had participated in the massacre. In subsequent years, the number of warriors available and willing to serve alongside the French dropped considerably.⁶

The aftermath of the smallpox epidemic from Fort William Henry was the beginning of the collapse of alliances between Native Americans and the French. The Iroquois and Delaware specifically were nearly wiped out of the Ohio River valley following the epidemic. Smallpox struck fear into the hearts of Native Americans, its victims experiencing red and swollen lips and eyes, sores and rashes across the body, and other dehumanizing characteristics.⁷ Spread primarily through respiratory droplets, the disease moved fast particularly amongst non-inoculated members of North American Indian tribes. The 1757 outbreak would cause Native Americans to suspend daily activities including hunting, due to the losses assumed.⁸ Even after the war had ended and the British had won, Native Americans in Canada would refer to the 1755-57 outbreak

⁶ William Nester, *The First Global War: Britain, France, and the Fate of North America, 1756-1775* (Westport, Connecticut Praeger, 2000), 61.

⁷ Sam Forman, *Dr. Joseph Warren the Boston tea party, Bunker Hill, and the Birth of the American Liberty* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Co. 2012).

While Exact numbers of Native American deaths due to smallpox are unknown, amongst inoculated Europeans, 18% who contracted the disease would perish. We can only assume the numbers were far more devastating for previously unexposed Native Americans.

⁸ Peter MacLeod, "Microbes and Muskets: Smallpox and the Participation of the Amerindian Allies of New France in the Seven Years' War," *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 49.

as the “year[s] of the Great Smallpox Epidemic.”⁹ Many Native American tribes blamed the French for the outbreaks and claimed they had been provided bad medicine.¹⁰ The French were quick to realize this anger from Native Americans and the effect it would have on their relationship. French officer Louis Joseph de Montcalm would write later that, “this is a real loss to us and will cost the King considerable in consequence.”¹¹ Many Native American tribes retaliated by lashing out and attacking French forts and traders. In all, the smallpox epidemic, particularly that stemming from the Fort William Henry massacre, polarized Native Americans and began to cause tribes to turn on the French and search for outlets of revenge.

The battle at Fort William Henry not only accelerated the spread of smallpox amongst Native Americans, it also began the diplomatic divide between Natives and the French. Claimed by some as a massacre, the events that occurred following the British surrender at Fort William Henry certainly aided the growing split between the Native Americans and the French. Native American soldiers were accustomed to loot conquered people and land and as per culture, many searched for “booty” in conquered British forts. The absence of loot from Fort William Henry disappointed Native Americans, and began to cause Natives to rethink their sacrifices made for the French. Receiving nothing in return for their service made Native Americans frustrated and made the French appear dishonorable and weak. In the case of Fort William Henry, when no spoils were found, the Native Americans decided to attack and kill many of the surrendered and imprisoned British soldiers. The French disapproved of this decision and Montcalm reportedly attempted to restrain the Native Americans, putting his own life in danger to do so.¹² The cultural

⁹ Donald Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer: Smallpox in History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), 245.

¹⁰ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 236.

¹¹ J.J. Heagerty, *Four Centuries of Medical History in Canada* (Bristol: John Wright and Sons, 1928), 41.

¹² Nester, *The First Global War*, 62.

divide between how the French versus the Native Americans wanted to treat prisoners and those who surrendered, would become a common point of contention that drove the two apart. The French, realizing diplomatic blame would be placed on them, attempted to restrain Native Americans to prevent these “massacres.” Native Americans became further upset, wanting to remain free from ultimate French control.

The year 1758 was one of disease outbreaks and shifting alliances. The British unintentionally benefitted strategically from the timing and devastating nature of smallpox. The defeat at Fort William Henry and subsequent spread of the smallpox disease swayed the outcome of the war from French to British victory. By October 1758, smallpox had ravaged its way through and devastated the Native American tribes of the Ohio River Valley; these tribes decided they were done with the French. A meeting took place in the town of Easton, Pennsylvania, and a treaty was signed forming an alliance between the British and many Native American tribes of the Ohio River Valley. This Treaty of Easton marked the turning point of the war. With this new alliance, the British army surged, benefitting from the aid of Native Americans and the weakened French who were without their previous friends. The tribes agreed not to interfere with the British or give aid to the French in exchange for as swift an end to the war as possible. Tribes choosing to continue their support for the French were soon swayed by the British promise to keep to the east of the Allegheny mountains.¹³ A treaty, driven to creation by the smallpox epidemic and the savage nature for those previously unexposed to it, put into motion the events which ultimately ended the war. The role of smallpox in the outcome of the war and creation of the Treaty of Easton has been studied by historian and doctor John Booss. In his research on the effects of smallpox on the French and Indian war, Booss provides the contemplations of a

¹³ Nestor, *The First Global War*, 110.

Frenchman during the war: “Finally [the relations of] all these nations [with us] are on the decline. What is the cause of it? The great loss they have suffered from the smallpox, the bad medicine the French have thrown to them.”¹⁴ Animosity toward the French spread alongside smallpox as it appeared evident to Native American tribes that the disease originated from France. The British capitalized on this collapse of the French and Indian alliance to form a new bond that would lead the British to victory. As the French and Native American alliances disappeared, so did the French victories in battle. Slowly from 1758-1760, the British began winning more and more, assisted by Native Americans such as the Iroquois who were driven to help by the effects of the smallpox epidemic which they perceived as having come from the French.

While British military tactics and strategies may have been superior in the later half of the war (1758-60), these military advantages were amplified by the Native American desecration caused by smallpox. Booss claimed that smallpox, in conjunction with harsh French terms for Native American alliances and a superior military and strategy for Britain, helped the British to win the French and Indian war.¹⁵ While factors such as cultural customs and military strategy differed, it was ultimately smallpox that was the tipping point. Examining the claim that British military strategy was superior, in 1757 William Pitt became the British Secretary of State and began a more aggressive campaign in North America. Pitt was focused on driving the French out of North America, and to do so increased the number of troops and the amount being given to the war in North America.¹⁶ While Pitt’s leadership and support undeniably led the British to victory,

¹⁴ Louise Antoine de Bougainville, quoted by John Booss, *Fear and Betrayal: Smallpox and the Turning Point of the French and Indian War* (New York History), 262.

¹⁵ Booss, *Fear and Betrayal*, 258.

¹⁶ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 477.

they were made effective by the damage smallpox caused to the Native Americans allied with the French. In the case of the Ohio River Valley and its surrounding area, the weakening of Native Americans by smallpox and the advantage it gave the British can be seen at Fort Duquesne. As part of the Treaty of Easton, Native Americans agreed not to interfere with European affairs west of the Allegheny Mountains, preventing any interference at Fort Duquesne.¹⁷ The Treaty of Easton was agreed upon by Native American troops following such large losses of life to smallpox. Native Americans sought the most rapid ending of the war which removed them from European contact and prevented further spread and devastation of smallpox.

Smallpox was an undeniable aspect of the French and Indian War, in fact it was the deciding factor in the outcome of the conflict. The disease wove its way through all participants, both Native American and European, and shaped alliances that would decide a victor. Given their early proximity to the French during the war, Native Americans blamed the smallpox epidemic on them, and when the time came chose to back the British in hopes of eradicating Europeans from their land. Smallpox's indiscriminate nature became the downfall of France's network of strength and alliance. Smallpox provoked fear and this terror was utilized by the British to promote themselves as a safer option, a front which they used to conquer much of North America. In the end, smallpox drove French and Native Americans apart and led the British to win the Seven Years war. While the French and Indian War, like any other conflict, was on paper decided by weapons and men, it was the unseen foe of smallpox that decided the outcome of the war.

¹⁷ *The Minutes of a Treaty Held at Easton, in Pennsylvania*, October, 1758, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, p.25.

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. Declan Forrer