correspondents at large

The Enlightenment at War

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THOUGH FEW TODAY, EVEN IN ACADEMIC CIRCLES, CAN SAY WITH CERTAINTY WHEN, WHERE, OR OVER WHAT ISSUES THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR was fought, this mid-eighteenth-century conflict can fairly be characterized as the first global war.[1] It was fought on three continents—Europe, North America, and Asia—and there were significant encounters in West Africa and the Caribbean. It engaged all the European powers, and it is estimated to have cost over a million lives. The historian Linda Colley has characterized the Seven Years' War as "[t]he most dramatically successful war the British ever fought" (101). From the standpoint of empire, this assessment is accurate. The war established the contours of the vast British Empire and brought the rival French presence in North America and India to a sudden end.[2] It also had transformative outcomes for the populations caught in the crossfire. Terms such as *global*, *diaspora*, *refugee*, and *cultural minority* are more widely applied in discussions of contemporary transnational warfare, but they helpfully illuminate the upheavals associated with this eighteenth-century conflict. The global warfare of the 1750s–60s relegated the indigenous population of North America to the status of an embattled cultural minority,[3] and it turned thousands of francophone Canadians into refugees.[4] Yet despite its scale and the social and political fallout it occasioned, the Seven Years' War has never occupied a central place in the national narratives of its major contestants or in the historiography of the Enlightenment. The main reason for this low profile, I think, is that the war was a many-sided conflict, fought on both metropolitan and colonial fronts. Because of this multilateralism, the war has had a fragmented historical reception, a fracture reflected in the various names by which it has come to be known. The label Seven Years' War is generally used to refer to the fighting that took place in Europe. The war in North America, on the other hand, goes under the name French and Indian War, though in Quebec it is remembered more acrimoniously as the War of Conquest.[5] Histories of India often inventory the warfare of the 1750s–60s under the academic-sounding title Third Carnatic War; a more meaningful

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1851 Published online by Cambridge University Press

characterization would be that it marked the starting point of British rule in India.

The historiographical lacuna surrounding the Seven Years' War has meant that relatively little attention has been devoted to how the first war fought on a global scale intersected with the epistemological and sociopolitical currents of the Enlightenment. There has been little sustained consideration, for example, of how the transcontinental warfare that engaged Europe's most powerful nation-states marked, and was marked by, the renowned cosmopolitanism of this era. To entertain this neglected question requires us to adopt a historiographical approach that integrates metropolitan social and cultural history with global and colonial history. Robert Darnton and other historians of eighteenth-century Europe have pointed to the growth of print capitalism and the creation of new literacies as key vectors of Enlightenment culture. It could further be said that these processes were tightly interwoven with the period's culture of colonial commerce and investment, and as such were affected by the uncertainties and exigencies associated with transcontinental war. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, maritime commerce in the Atlantic world (the triangle trade in tropical commodities, enslaved Africans, and European manufactured goods) and in the East Indies (the spice and textile trades) underwent an unprecedented expansion. During wartime the new commercial class of merchants and investors turned to broadsheet newspapers for information about events overseas that might adversely affect their ventures. In a recent study of the war's impact on cultural life in England, M. John Cardwell has shown that during the Seven Years' War newspapers proliferated, circulation rose, and London's coffee houses became firmly established as centers of both commerce and news (1–14). This burgeoning culture of information contributed, in turn, to the production of a popular literature of political commentary: pamphlets, ballads, and verse satires that dissected the conduct of the war and the actions of the British government. Though previous wars had inspired critical commentary, the literary responses to the Seven Years' War were more abundant, more pointed, and better informed.

A second major aspect to the question of war and the Enlightenment is the appearance of the first true metadiscourse on the aims and effects of war. Distancing themselves from the codes of patriotism and honor that had imbued most previous writing on war, a number of prominent eighteenth-century thinkers observed that while wars might serve the interests of the aristocratic elite, they inflicted suffering and privation on members of lower social orders. The reframing of war as violence, suffering, and carnage is a defining move of Enlightenment social and political critique and indeed a discourse around which the idea of "enlightenment" crystallized. It is interconnected with many literary and philosophical currents of the period, notably the new centrality of the figure of the individual, and with the rise of affective ethics in moral philosophy and fictional narrative. For war to be perceived as an agent of physical and emotional suffering, it first had to be considered from the perspective of its impact on individuals, particularly noncombatants and the powerless masses who composed the new category of "innocent victims."

It would, however, be an exaggeration to say that eighteenth-century European writers simply set aside the patriotic martial discourses of earlier times. Rather, many literary works of this period approach war with an ambivalent mix of nationalistic sentiment and enlightened critique. This tension is thematized in one of the best-known novels of the period, Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, published between 1759 and 1767 and dedicated to William Pitt.[6] A leading character in the narrative, the eponymous narrator's Uncle Toby, is portrayed both as a pacifist who, quite literally, wouldn't hurt a fly (91) and

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as a military buff whose favorite pastime is reenacting famous sieges and campaigns. While I would hesitate to qualify the body of writing relating to the Seven Years' War as a war literature—as noted earlier, the war did not inspire the kind of sustained examination accorded to some other wars—I think it can be said that the combination of patriotic feeling and critical distance that coalesced in response to this conflict laid the foundations for modern war literature. When we consider the cultural representations associated with the First World War or with the American or Spanish civil wars, we encounter the same potent mix of chivalrous nationalism (or at least ideological engagement) and critical detachment that first appeared in mid-eighteenth-century Europe. The poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon and the war novels of Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and André Malraux all revisit this compelling tension.

The most influential Enlightenment commentator on both the Seven Years' War and the question of war in general was undoubtedly Voltaire. Though today not the most fashionable of the philosophes, Voltaire was the one who wrote most trenchantly and memorably on the subject of war. A former confidant of Frederick the Great, he played an inside role in negotiations between France and Prussia and articulated clear-cut views on France's involvement in the war. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, he opposed France's alliance with Austria against Prussia.) But in addition to this assessment of national interest, Voltaire staked out a philosophical position on war. His political writings of the 1750s–60s illustrate the emergence of two strains of critical thinking about warfare that still compete for legitimacy today, arguments that can be qualified as the legal-political response and the humanitarian-philanthropic response. Voltaire repeatedly dismissed the arguments made by the seventeenth-century jurist Hugo Grotius for an international code that would lay out the principles of a "just war." In the entry devoted to war in *Philosophical Dictionary*, for example, Voltaire argued that war cannot be reconciled with justice because it is waged for reasons of self-interest and guided by the objective of total victory (*Political Writings* 7–12). In another work of the same period, *Dialogues between A, B, C*, he asked pointedly whether Prince Eugene and the Duke of Marlborough had such a code in mind "when they drove off the French miles away from home?" (*Political Writings* 86). In the same dialogue, Voltaire questioned whether war could, as the abbé de Saint-Pierre had proposed in *Project for Perpetual Peace*, be forestalled by the establishment of a union of European states (an idea later explored by Immanuel Kant). He argued that a cosmopolitics of this kind would be unlikely to succeed because competition and conflict among nations is all but inevitable. Rejecting legal and political solutions to endemic European warfare, Voltaire adopted the humanitarian approach. That is, he showed war from the perspective of its victims and invited readers to empathize with their suffering. The most plausible method of discouraging warfare, Voltaire seems to have concluded, was to provide graphic descriptions of its many horrors.

The humanitarian approach to war, and more specifically to the Seven Years' War, is best illustrated by Voltaire's most famous work, the philosophical tale *Candide*. The work's opening chapters evoke the conflict between the *Abares* (French) and the *Bulgares* (Prussians). Satirizing martial patriotism, Voltaire points out that combatants were generally "recruited" through a process of forced conscription. He also describes in detail the suffering experienced by civilians. In what could be called a primal scene of the modern literary description of war, Voltaire portrays the atrocities perpetrated against civilians, including women and children, in vivid detail:

> Climbing over heaps of dead and dying, [Candide] reached a neighboring village that had

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1851 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> been reduced to ashes. This was an Abar village, burned by the Bulgars according to the rules of international law. Here old men beaten black and blue had watched their slaughtered wives die, holding babies to their bloody breasts. There disemboweled girls, having first satisfied the natural needs of numbers of heroes, had shuddered their final breath. . . . (8)

Passages such as this exploit the resources of pathos to contrast the obvious innocence of war's anonymous victims with the brutal indifference of rulers and military leaders.

Earlier I suggested that the dynamics of global warfare in the eighteenth century can be illuminated by ideas drawn from a contemporary conceptual register. Returning to this point, and to the multilayered convergence of warfare, the Enlightenment, and empire, I want to observe that the prescience of *Candide*'s vision of the Seven Years' War lies not only in the emphasis placed on individual suffering but also in the text's acknowledgment of the global reach of warfare in the colonial era. In the narrative economy of the tale, the Seven Years' War serves as the point of departure for a series of transcontinental adventures that take the protagonists from their homes in a German principality across Europe and on to the Americas and Asia Minor. Forced to flee their birthlands, the tale's oddly assorted characters travel the world as refugees before ultimately establishing a new diasporic home in the environs of Constantinople. Their fast-paced travels suggest the interconnectedness of the world in the age of colonial expansion, highlighting ways in which not only institutions and investments but also conflicts and diseases were spread across national borders and beyond continental divides. As the backdrop to this parable for its age, the Seven Years' War is inscribed both as a symptom of expanding global networks and as a catalyst for further contact. Voltaire's sensitivity to the transnational reverberations of modern warfare is, however, bound within certain limits. Despite occasional jabs against the atrocities committed by colonial slave owners and the treatment of indigenous people in the theocratic regimes operated by the Jesuits, the victims of war who are sentimentalized in *Candide* are, essentially, Europeans. It would be some time before the suffering of war's other victims—or of the victims of other, extra-European, wars—would be commemorated in comparable ways.

Notes

1. No less an authority on modern warfare than Winston Churchill proposed that the Seven Years' War should be regarded as the first world war.

2. By 1763 France retained only two trading posts in India and the island group of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon off the Newfoundland coast.

3. Before 1763 Native Americans competed with French and British settlers for land and resources; afterward, they were effectively subject to Anglo-American domination.

4. After traveling back and forth between the Americas and Europe, displaced French-speaking settlers from Acadia (Nova Scotia and northern Maine) regrouped in Louisiana, forming the Cajun linguistic minority.

5. These various names correspond to slightly different chronologies. The war in Europe and India ran from 1756 to 1763. Fighting in North America had broken out two years earlier, in 1754.

6. As secretary of state, William Pitt, the elder, presided over Britain's most resounding victories.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1851 Published online by Cambridge University Press