

BIOLOGICAL WARFARE ON TURTLE ISLAND

Indigenous Strength

- With the exception of the Haudenosaunee, the majority of Indigenous communities supported the French in their fight against the British in the Seven Year War from 1756-1763. Although the French lost, Indigenous peoples continued to assert their rights to their sovereignty and territory
- Exemplifying this belief, Minavavana, an Ojibwa chief stated: "Englishman, although you have conquered the French, you have not yet conquered us! We are not your slaves. These lakes, these woods, and mountains were left to us by our ancestors. They are our inheritance, and we will part with them to none."¹

What is Smallpox?

- Smallpox is caused by the Variola virus and is spread quickly through body matter/fluids
- Once infected, it circulates in the body for 12 days before symptoms appear
- Characterized by oozing pustules covering the skin
- Had a very high mortality rate
- Eradicated on May 8th, 1980

Disease and Defiance

- Smallpox broke out among the Delaware, Shawnee, and Mingo surrounding Fort Pitt in the Summer of 1763
- The epidemic that followed coincided with the negotiations at Fort Pitt
- Stories and warnings of purposeful infection began circulating among Indigenous tribes
- Although weakened by disease, Indigenous peoples continued to assert their rights to their land

The British Attack

- After leaving the failed negotiations, the Delaware dignitaries ask for provisions to help them return home
- According to the diary of trader William Trent, "we gave them two blankets and handkerchief out of the smallpox hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect."² (June 25th, 1763)
- Accounting books from Fort Pitt prove the British military sanctioned this attack and paid to replace the infected items

Pontiac's Resistance

- In the months following the Seven Year War, and after repeated lack of respect and recognition by the British, Indigenous nations fought back and asserted their right to their territory in a war named after Odawa leader Chief Pontiac
- Between May & June 1763, 9 British forts fell leaving only Fort Pitt and Fort Detroit remaining
- On June 25th Delaware dignitaries, Turtle's Heart and Mamaltee visited Fort Pitt in what they believed were good-faith negotiation for peace, asking British officials to abandon the fort
- The British refused

Jeffery Amherst

- Was a British Commander in Chief at New York
- After hearing smallpox had infected Fort Pitt, Amherst wrote letters in July 1763 to Col. Henry Bouquet suggesting and approving the use of biological warfare
- July 7th: "could it not be contrived to send the smallpox among those disaffected tribes of Indians?"³
- July 16th: "you will do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets as well as to try every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable race."⁴

Widespread Warfare

- Following the infection at Fort Pitt, accusations of willful contagion rose
- Likely in an effort to maintain deniability, there are few existing records proving the source of infection
- During this time officials in Britain also distanced themselves, possibly to avoid backlash
- Allegations of intentional transmission were not solely between the British and Indigenous nations but were included in the Revolutionary War between the British and Americans
- Accusations decreased at the end of this war but resurfaced in the 1830s when a smallpox epidemic occurred in multiple Indigenous communities in the American West

¹ John Borrows, "Wampum at Niagara: The Royal Proclamation, Canadian Legal History, and Self-Government." In *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equality and Respect for Difference*, ed. Michael Asch, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997) 157. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/lib/uvic/reader.action?docID=3412139&ppg=172>.

² Elizabeth A Fenn, "Biological warfare in eighteenth-century North America: beyond Jeffery Amherst," *The Journal of American History* 86, no.4 (March 2000): 1554, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.2307/2567577>.

³ *Ibid.*, 1555.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1556-7.

A CONTINUED RESISTANCE

The Ethics of War

- European Rules of Warfare forbid the use of poisoned weapons
- The British justified their acts by stating the rules did not apply in wars against unjust rebellions, enemies who had violated the laws of war, and slaves or heathens (their classification of Indigenous peoples)
- 1992 United Nations Commission of Experts defined ethnic cleansing as: "purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violence and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas".⁵
- Drawing these points together, one can conclude that the use of smallpox as biological warfare mirrors this definition of ethnic cleansing

The Two Faces of the British

- Only three months after Jeffery Amherst wrote the letters endorsing the biological warfare at Fort Pitt that devastated local Indigenous communities, the Crown created the Royal Proclamation (October 7th, 1763)
- The Proclamation was developed to decrease tension between Indigenous nations and the settlers, by guaranteeing the right to self-govern and defining boundaries
- The Royal Proclamation shifted the power to the Crown under the guise of peace
- This was in direct contradiction to the ongoing willful smallpox contamination occurring

The Royal Proclamation

- The Proclamation stated that Britain asserted dominion and sovereignty over the land, which actively opposed Indigenous perspectives
- It claimed to recognize Indigenous rights to the land but also created a policy for public purchase of land, extinguishing Indigenous land title
- According to the Proclamation, Indigenous land could not be occupied by settlers, however, all sale and settlement of Indigenous land had to be done through the Crown
- Indigenous people would use copies of the Proclamation to support their rights during interactions with settlers
- It became clear that the Crown and Indigenous people had different interpretations of the Proclamation
- As a result of a consistent lack of diplomacy from the British, in 1764 Pontiac and many other Indigenous communities resumed war with the British

The Treaty of Niagara

- In July of 1764, approximately 2000 representatives from 24 nations gathered in Niagara to conference with representatives of the Crown and come to an agreement on rights, land, and sovereignty
- During this negotiation, some agreements were not written down, allowing Britain to later deny certain promises
- Indigenous representatives expressed their understanding of the treaty by presenting the Gus-Wen-Tah or "Two-Row Wampum" which consisted of two rows of purple beads separated by white beads
- This design represented the new alliance of friendship and peace, where neither nation would interfere in the affairs of the other, as they were separate but equal
- Although the Treaty of Niagara and the negotiations that took place incorporated Indigenous peoples perspectives, settlers neglected this shared understanding and relied on the written document to expropriate land and deny Indigenous peoples their rights

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⁵ John Mack Faragher, "A Great and Noble Scheme: Thoughts on the Expulsion of the Acadians," *Acadiensis* 36, no.1 (Fall 2006): 83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30303272>.