Microbes and Muskets: Smallpox and the Participation of the Amerindian Allies of New France in the Seven Years’ War

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Abstract. The Amerindian allies of New France accepted annual French invitations to take part in the Seven Years’ War but decided themselves how many warriors would actually appear in the field. These decisions were made in response to two smallpox epidemics that broke out during the war. The numbers of Amerindian warriors fighting alongside the French declined precipitously after outbreaks of smallpox but rose again when they had passed.

The arrival of Europeans created a new world for the native peoples of North America. Postcontact Amerindians had no choice but to confront the challenge of life in a once-familiar habitat that was now infested with new groups of humans and the flora, fauna, and microbes that accompanied them. Two manifestations of the radically changed geopolitical and biological environments created by the newcomers to North America were epidemic disease and intra-European warfare. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Amerindians of the Great Lakes (among others) faced both when a series of epidemics broke out during the Seven Years’ War. Their response, at once pragmatic and informed, reveals something of Amerindian adjustment to the realities of life in postcontact North America, a process that remains in progress as the twentieth century draws to a close.

Following the establishment of European settlements in North America, Amerindians were frequently drawn into warfare between rival colonies. The issues at stake might or might not directly affect their concerns, but belligerent Europeans invariably attempted to involve their Amerindian allies in these conflicts.

Amerindian participation in warfare demanded decisions by groups and individuals regarding whether or not to go to war and the number of

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warriors that would actually fight. These decisions could be based upon factors ranging from cold calculations of geopolitical advantage to the desire for recreation and individual prestige.3

Throughout the Seven Years’ War, the Amerindian allies of New France had to decide how to respond to annual invitations to go to war in the central theater on behalf of the French.4 The details of their deliberations are unrecorded, but the results were manifested in a series of dramatic fluctuations in the numbers of Amerindians serving alongside the French in this theater, as individuals and groups elected to proffer or withhold their services. These variations correspond to smallpox epidemics. Sharp declines in the size of the Amerindian contingent in the central theater occurred immediately after outbreaks of the disease; when the epidemics had passed, their numbers in the field increased once more. Whatever positive factors impelled Amerindians to go to war in the 1750s, the numbers of warriors who actually took part in campaigns in the central theater between 1755 and 1759 were determined by the reactions of the allies to the flourishing and fading of the smallpox virus.5

The first official French contacts with the inhabitants of the New World in the 1530s were characterized by treachery and violence on the part of French adventurers, who quickly alienated the Amerindians. Nevertheless, in the first decades of the seventeenth century, a second wave of French expeditions established amicable and mutually profitable relations with the native people and began to form the concomitant military alliances that would endure until the British conquest. The Seven Years’ War was the last, supreme test of the effectiveness of the Franco-Amerindian alliance system. With New France fighting for its very survival and heavily outnumbered in the field, both by Anglo-American colonials and by British regulars, the French relied to a considerable extent upon the manpower provided by their Amerindian allies to offset the imbalance. “Without them,” conceded one French staff officer who had no particular love for Amerindians, “the odds would be too unequal for us.”6 In the event, the alliance system rose to the challenge and proved capable of delivering a substantial force of Amerindian warriors to fight alongside the French regulars and Canadian militiamen.7

While the war in North America raged from Louisbourg in Acadia to Fort Duquesne on the Ohio, the most important region for the defense of New France was the central theater, which comprised the seigneurial tract of Canada, together with its approaches, and extended from eastern Lake Ontario to Quebec.8 Rather than form raiding parties, like their counterparts in Acadia and the Ohio country, the bulk of the Amerindians serving in this sector were employed as auxiliaries to the French field army,
filling an indispensable role as guides, scouts, skirmishers, and general purveyors of intimidation. They came primarily, but not exclusively, from the Canadian missions and the Pays d’en haut, and their numbers varied considerably from year to year.9

Reliable data on the mid-eighteenth-century Amerindian population of New France do not exist. The Amerindians themselves did not keep statistics, and estimates made by Europeans vary greatly.10 It is possible, however, to find in surviving French records an extensive series of reports on the Amerindians serving with the French. From these documents, one can assemble a fairly accurate account of the strength of the Amerindian element of the armed forces of French North America.

French officers were able to produce reliable records of Amerindian participation in the Seven Years’ War, because the military activities of warriors serving in the central theater brought them into constant contact with the French for months at a time.11 The allied contingents were far from being an undifferentiated mass. They served in tribal units, which were accompanied by commandants of western posts, missionaries, or interpreters, who knew the warriors as individuals and were thus able to make accurate reports on the size of the various groups. The fact that the French were supplying their allies with rations, equipment, clothing, and weapons, at great expense, made it necessary for French logisticians to keep track of Amerindian numbers. Finally, arrivals and departures in areas of operations were generally preceded and accompanied by ceremonies and conferences, which greatly facilitated the observation and recording of fluctuations in the magnitude of the Amerindian component of a French force.

In the central theater, the number of Amerindians serving with the French reached a peak each year with the assembly of a large body of warriors to accompany the French field army.12 If the numbers of Amerindians attached to the French army in each calendar year are assembled, it is possible to produce a year-by-year graph of their participation in the war. One might expect this graph to resemble somewhat a bell curve, reflecting a steady increase in accordance with successive French victories during the early years of the war, followed by a symmetrical decline thereafter. Conventional wisdom holds that Amerindians based their decisions on participation in the Seven Years’ War primarily upon their perception of the likelihood of a French or British victory at a given time. This view is expressed concisely by George F. G. Stanley, who has written that “an Indian force was neither a steady nor reliable source of support as far as Canada was concerned; it rose and fell according to the military success or failure of French and Canadian arms.”13
In fact, a graph of annual Amerindian participation in the central theater during the Seven Years’ War takes the form of a jagged series of peaks and valleys that bear no consistent relation to political or military events (Fig. 1). The number of Amerindians serving with the French in the Laurentian valley twice declined, but each decline was followed by an equally striking increase. Furthermore, the number of warriors serving in the central theater peaked twice. In 1757, when French fortunes were at
their height, this might have been expected, but an equal number of Ameri-
dians fought in the 1759 campaign, when New France was on the brink
of disaster.

If the changes in the number of warriors fighting in the central the-
ater were not caused by Amerindian reactions to military events, neither
were they the result of pressure exerted by the French in response to the
changing demands of the war. For the French appear to have consistently
attempted to recruit as many Amerindians as possible to serve with the
field army, rather than first attempting to determine just how many war-
riors were really needed for a given campaign. As their allies, moreover,
the French could only offer warriors a chance to take part in a campaign.
Whether or not they accepted was up to influential Amerindian leaders and
individual warriors. The French were able neither to compel their allies to
join them nor to turn away volunteers and order them to go home.

There were, however, forces at play in North America beyond the
visible and political. Until the twentieth century, war and pestilence
marched hand in hand, and what is a tragedy for humans is a splendid
opportunity for the microscopic organisms that prey upon them. The con-
ditions created by the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War were particularly
propitious for the flourishing of the tiny, brick-shaped virus known as
variola major—smallpox. During every year of the war, more people than
ever before were on the move in the North American interior. Every spring,
thousands of Amerindians left their homes in the Canadian missions or
the Pays d’en haut and traveled to the frontier zone that separated the
rival colonies. There, they came into close contact for months at a time
with thousands of European colonials or regulars as allies, opponents, or
prisoners. Some of the Europeans, recruited from the disease-experienced
populations of western Europe, where smallpox was endemic, were in-
fected with that disease and unwittingly passed it on to the much more
vulnerable colonials and Amerindians.

An individual who had not acquired immunity through a previous
attack of the disease courted death by simply approaching a smallpox
victim. With every breath, sufferers expelled a cloud of minute water drop-
lets, each alive with the virus, that could be inhaled by luckless passersby.
Under some conditions, moreover, variola major could survive for a con-
siderable length of time outside the human body; when worn or handled,
the clothing and bedding of patients shed deadly, virus-bearing dust par-
ticles, an equally potent, if less common, source of respiratory infection.
Victims suffered from a high fever, chills, nausea, headache, backache, and
sometimes convulsions, delirium, or horrifying nightmares. The body be-
came covered with flat, reddish spots that changed within days to pimples,
then blisters, and finally scabbed pustules. Some victims died within days of the first appearance of the rash; others lingered in great pain for over two weeks. Those who recovered were often scarred for life but henceforth immune to the disease.\textsuperscript{16}

Prior to the introduction of vaccination as a defense against epidemic disease, death by disease was a greater risk for combatants than death on the field of battle. Once the war began and large numbers of reinforcements from the disease-experienced populations of Europe arrived, the question became not if, but when, an epidemic would break out, and how many would die.\textsuperscript{17}

Immediately after the Seven Years’ War began, the French turned to their Amerindian allies for assistance. In August 1755, a Franco-Amerindian army, which included 760 fighters from the Canadian missions, was deployed in the path of a British invasion on the Lake Champlain frontier.\textsuperscript{18} Although the actual battle of Lake George ended in stalemate, this force managed to stop the British drive towards Canada. The French had scored a strategic victory by halting the British, but they were badly shaken by their tactical defeat. The governor general of New France, Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, contemplated making some effort to retrieve the situation, but “at that very instant the colony was afflicted with smallpox.”\textsuperscript{19} During the fall and winter of 1755–56, the disease “made astonishing ravages”\textsuperscript{20} among Canadians, regulars, and the Amerindians who lived in the missions.\textsuperscript{21} According to one French officer, whose account is confirmed by British intelligence reports, of three hundred warriors at the mission of Sault St. Louis, one hundred died in the epidemic.\textsuperscript{22} It is likely that other tribes in the Laurentian valley suffered proportionately.

The outbreak of smallpox was one of the circumstances that compelled Vaudreuil to remain on the defensive in the fall of 1755.\textsuperscript{23} As well, he found that as a result of the epidemic, he had “great difficulty in finding the men needed to crew the bateaux destined for the transport of provisions” and lacked the manpower to form raiding parties to harass the garrison of Fort Oswego,\textsuperscript{24} which was an important part of his plan to reduce that fort in the following campaign.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1756, the French confidently expected to augment the mission Amerindians fighting in the central theater with contingents from the western allies. By June, the French “were expecting momentarily at that post [Fort Niagara] a large number [of Amerindians] from the Pays d’en haut.”\textsuperscript{26} Smallpox, however, struck once more in the Laurentian valley and spread westward along French lines of communication to the interior, appearing first “at Niagara and subsequently at Fort Presqu’île,” the designated rendezvous for western Amerindians en route to the war zone.\textsuperscript{27}
In late June, “almost all of the natives from the Pays d’en Haut had arrived there [at Fort Presqu’île], but as soon as they were told that there was smallpox at Frontenac and Niagara, they did not wish to go further; most of them turned back.” A few days later, a further five hundred warriors arrived at that post, but no sooner had they disembarked than “all [of them] left . . . , having heard that there was smallpox in all of our forts.” Only forty Menominees were willing to risk infection by continuing eastward.

Rather than increasing with reinforcements from the west, the number of Amerindians serving in the central theater declined somewhat in 1756. In August, 260 took part in the successful siege of Fort Oswego on Lake Ontario, one of the two major British outposts on the frontier, while 300 more watched the Lake Champlain front. After numerous arrivals and departures, this number remained at about 600 in mid-September, when all French forces were concentrated in the Lake Champlain area to resist an apprehended British invasion.

By the spring of 1757, it appeared that both the medical and military situations had substantially improved. “Although the winter was very severe in the Pays d’en Haut, as well as at Montreal, there was almost no sickness.” A few cases of smallpox remained, but the epidemic had passed after spreading as far west as Fort Duquesne. The French were alarmed by the possibility that the disease would be communicated to the Ohio Amerindians and produce “a most unfortunate effect,” but it ended there with the deaths of six Canadians. The Ohio valley tribes had been struck by a serious smallpox epidemic in 1752, which may account for their apparent immunity five years later. The capture of Oswego, moreover, “made an astonishing impact on the natives.” With French prestige enormously enhanced and one of Britain’s two major frontier forts in ruins, “a large number of natives appeared full of enthusiasm for striking against the British during the next campaign.”

These predictions proved correct. In 1757, the number of Amerindian warriors in the central theater soared as eighteen hundred fighters from the Canadian missions and the Pays d’en haut flooded into the war zone. The campaign, a complete success, resulted in the capture of Fort William Henry, on Lake George, a major British outpost on the frontier between Canada and New York. Following the victory, allied dispositions towards the French were reported to be uniformly positive. The commandant of Fort Niagara confidently predicted that in the next spring three thousand warriors would be passing through his post to fight for the French.

Participation in the campaign of 1757, however, had brought the
Amerindians from Canada and the west into contact with thousands of British and French regulars (including many recent arrivals from Europe), Canadian and Anglo-American militiamen, and Acadian refugees, some of whom were suffering from smallpox. The Laurentian Amerindians, survivors of the 1755 epidemic, were largely immune to it. Those from the west were not. In the fall of 1757, word reached Canada of the outbreak of smallpox among the western allies, who had paid a terrible price for their support of the French. “All of these peoples, having descended for the siege of the fort [William Henry] . . . carried smallpox back with them to their country, where it made astonishing ravages.” Some of the allies, too ill to travel all the way home, wintered at Fort Niagara. The rest returned to their villages in the interior, carrying the infection with them.

Very little information concerning the demographic impact of this epidemic exists. In the nineteenth century, it was remembered among the Ottawas of Michilimakinac as a catastrophe that virtually destroyed their community: “Every one taken with it [smallpox] was sure to die. Lodge after lodge was totally vacated . . . entire families being swept off with the ravages of this terrible disease. The whole coast of Arbor Croche, . . . where their principal village was situated, . . . was entirely depopulated and laid waste.” Most French accounts, however, confine themselves to laconic observations, for example, “At Michilimakinac many natives have died from smallpox.” A few sources are more specific. The Potawatomis were reported to have “perished almost completely during that epidemic.” Four years later, during a council at Green Bay, representatives of the Menominees informed the new British commandant that “they were very poor having lost Three Hundred warriors lately with the Smallpox.” The exact losses from smallpox thus went largely unrecorded, but the epidemic was certainly disastrous for its victims, their families, and their bands and led to a general suspension of many normal activities. “These natives,” noted a French officer, “almost ceased to hunt because of the malady” during the winter of 1757–58.

Although they knew as little as the French of the existence of viruses, the Amerindians were well aware that they had been infected during their sojourn in the central theater. They had traditionally believed that illness was the result of misconduct towards humans or nonhumans that “offended the Master of Life.” But by the mid-eighteenth century, the link between European contact and epidemics was long established, and outbreaks of epidemic disease were frequently attributed to witchcraft performed by Europeans. With regard to the provenance of the epidemic of 1757, an Ottawa narrative later recalled that
the small-pox which they brought from Montreal during the French war with Great Britain... was sold to them shut up in a tin box... after they reached home they opened the box; but behold there was another tin box inside, smaller. They took it out and opened the second box, and behold, still there was another box inside of the second box, smaller yet. So they kept on this way till they came to a very small box, which was not more than an inch long; and when they opened the last one they found nothing but mouldy particles in this last little box. . . . They wondered very much what it was, and a great many closely inspected [the box and its contents] to try to find out what it meant. . . . pretty soon [there] burst out a terrible sickness among them.”

Since the French had invited their allies to the area where they contracted smallpox, and Amerindian “custom in this situation is to say that the nation that invited them has given them an evil medicine,” the French found themselves in an extremely awkward position. It quickly became apparent that Franco-Amerindian harmony in the Pays d’en haut was going to be one of the casualties of the epidemic.

If the tribes afflicted by the epidemic were peoples whose goodwill the French could ill afford to lose, they were also nations that would not lightly turn against the French. They had been allied to the French since the seventeenth century and had both traded profitably with Canadians and gone to war with them against the Iroquois, British, Fox, and Chickasaw, among others. French officers described the Menominee as “always very attached to French interests,” the Potawatomi as “the wisest and most obedient of all of the natives,” and the Ottawa as having “always been attached to the French.” Their services as auxiliaries might be dispensed with, but their hostility would be fatal for the French presence in the west.

Heavily outnumbered by the Amerindians in the Pays d’en haut, where they occupied only a few scattered outposts, and with their military resources wholly committed to the struggle against the British, the French were in no position to begin a second war against their allies. For although Franco-Amerindian alliances were long-standing and cemented by mutual self-interest, they could be extremely fragile. The western allies contained a significant anti-French faction that had come close to unleashing a general war against the French during the War of the Austrian Succession a decade before, when supplies and trade goods were cut off as the result of wartime shortages. During the winter of 1757 and spring of 1758, it appeared as if general war was once again a serious possibility. As men, women, and children suffered and died “in all of the nations of the Pays d’en Haut”
and the allies reeled under the impact of the epidemic, resentment against the French began to rise and seek expression.\(^5\)

In the winter of 1756, Amerindian war parties from the west had set out “every week” to raid the British. During the following year, with the Pays d’en haut in the grip of an epidemic, during “the entire winter there came only one party of natives, proof of their coolness”\(^6\) towards the French. Formerly amicable allies began to turn against the French. In Detroit, “the Wyandot, always suspect and turbulent, are entertaining malign thoughts.”\(^7\) The Ottawas too “harbour evil intentions, the Potawatomi appear indisposed; in short, all of the nations are of the same inclination.”\(^8\) Worse, there were a number of outbreaks of violence against the French. The Menominees besieged Fort La Baye for three days, killed eleven Canadians, and made off with thirty thousand livres’ worth of trade goods.\(^9\) A party of Canadians wintering on the Wisconsin was attacked. Two men were killed, and one officer was taken prisoner.\(^10\)

With their relationship with the western nations hanging by a thread, the French in desperation launched a major diplomatic offensive in the Pays d’en haut during the spring of 1758. Nearly one million livres’ worth of trade goods was presented to the allies by the commandants of the western posts to “wipe away tears and cover the dead.”\(^11\) “Covering the dead” with gifts could be a gesture of respect and sympathy to the family and band of the deceased or compensation for a death for which the giver was responsible.\(^12\) In the latter case, the presentation of gifts was at once an acknowledgment of culpability, a discharge of the obligations thus incurred, and a means to preserve the alliance by eliminating the necessity for blood revenge.

Furthermore, in a series of what must have been rather tense conferences at Michilimakinac, Detroit, and Toronto, the French attempted to lay the blame for the epidemic on the British. This claim was accepted by the pro-French faction among the allies;\(^13\) over a century later Ottawa tradition continued to speak of the “wholesale murder of the Ottawas by this terrible disease sent by the British.”\(^14\)

In spite of the efforts of the French, the situation in the west remained tense throughout the year. While in August the Menominees handed over seven men who had taken part in the attack on La Baye, in October the commandant of Fort St. Joseph reported that the Potawatomi had been on the verge of killing a Canadian and were only dissuaded by news of the French victory at Carillon.\(^15\) With the Amerindians of the west now “unwilling to go to war at our side,”\(^16\) the men who joined the French in the campaign of 1758 came, for the most part, from the Canadian missions.\(^17\) In July, after the Battle of Carillon, their number peaked at 470, a
sizable reduction from the force mustered on Lake Champlain only a year before.68

Despite the victory at Carillon, the military situation of New France continued to deteriorate. In Acadia, Louisbourg had fallen. Fort Frontenac was destroyed in August, together with large quantities of supplies destined for the Amerindians of the Ohio and the Pays d’en haut.69 In November, the French were forced to abandon Fort Duquesne, which was then occupied by the British.70 With the French in the west suffering from a severe supply shortage, the western allies smoldering with resentment, and British armies preparing to close in on New France, it would not have been surprising to find the French fighting their last battles aided only by the Amerindians of the Canadian missions, or even alone.

While the epidemic of 1757 was a disaster for the afflicted Amerindians, its consequences for the French proved to be alarming but transient. By the end of 1758, the disease had run its course, and no further outbreaks were reported among the French or their allies. At the opening of the campaign of 1759, it was quickly apparent that French fortunes had made a remarkable recovery, at least as far as the adherence of the western allies was concerned.71 In the spring, messages were dispatched to the missions and posts of Canada and the west, inviting Amerindians to come to Quebec to take part in the defense of New France.72 Rather than hold back, the allies rallied to the French cause. From the west came “good news from [Forts] Michilimakinac, St. Joseph, Ouyatanon . . . [and] Detroit, great affection of the natives.”73 Nations that had seemed on the brink of war with New France a year before were once again sending contingents to fight alongside the French in the Laurentian valley in the penultimate campaign of the war.74

The Amerindians at Quebec during the siege of 1759 came from tribes as close as the Hurons of Lorette and as far away as the Dakota, who had fought in the Ohio valley for the French but had never sent warriors as far east as Canada.75 Also making their Canadian debut were 162 Crees, who occupied so remote a place in the French trading network that they were “not armed with muskets (which they do not yet use).”76 Between one thousand and twelve hundred Amerindians participated in the defense of Quebec.77 Another three to four hundred fought on the Lake Champlain frontier,78 while three hundred more awaited the British on the upper St. Lawrence.79

Even in 1760, when it was brutally apparent that all was lost for New France, numerous Amerindians continued to fight alongside the French. In the central theater, 270 fought at the Battle of Ste. Foye in April.80 As late as the first week of September, days before the surrender of New
France, there were still 474 Amerindians in the field. With the remaining upcountry posts cut off from supplies from Canada, the war in the west had ground to a halt. Nevertheless, the commandant of Detroit reported that “all of the nations [of the Pays d’en haut] are willing to rally to the French,” and, despite shortages of supplies, a few small parties of Amerindians continued to carry the war to the enemy. On 28 November 1760, with the war finally lost, the Hurons, Weas, Potawatomis, and Ottawas of Detroit informed the departing French commandant, in the presence of British officers, that the French surrender did not apply to them and that “they would never recognize the King of England as their Father.”

On the surface, the Seven Years’ War was a struggle between groups of humans to control the resources of North America. The British and French fought to dominate the continent, while Amerindians struggled to preserve their ancestral territories as best they could. As the humans fought among themselves, a fourth player appeared. An invisible, mindless, implacable enemy that struck down Briton, Frenchman, and Amerindian alike with impunity, variola major sought to survive and propagate at the expense of its involuntary human hosts. Smallpox imposed a rhythm of its own upon the intensity of Amerindian participation in the war in the central theater, as each outbreak was followed by a sharp drop in the number of Amerindians willing to fight for the French.

The importance of smallpox in determining the military behavior of Amerindians during the Seven Years’ War should not, however, be overestimated. It was a negative, transient factor that affected the extent of their participation in the Seven Years’ War but not their original decisions to form alliances with the French and to declare war on the British. Amerindians had undoubtedly made these commitments in accordance with their considered judgment as to where their best economic, political, and military interests lay. All other things being equal, the Amerindian allies of New France had for over a century generally been willing to respond favorably to French requests to join them in waging war in Acadia, the Laurentian valley, or the Pays d’en haut. During the Seven Years’ War, however, their willingness was intermittently modified by the presence of the smallpox virus in the area of operations.

The impact of the smallpox epidemics manifested itself in different ways after the outbreaks of 1755 and 1757, as different groups of humans responded to the flourishing of the virus, and variously influenced the military behavior of the western allies and those from the Canadian reserves. The Laurentian Amerindians, perhaps reflecting closer ties with the French or propinquity to the war zone, were much more consistent purveyors of fighters to the central theater. Even in 1756, the disruptive effect
of smallpox on their homes and families produced a modest decline in their numbers but did not prevent the mission Amerindians from fielding a fairly substantial contingent during the summer, which played an important role in the siege of Fort Oswego. Their response to the epidemics appears to have been quite similar to that of the Canadians with whom they shared the St. Lawrence valley. Losses from smallpox prevented neither the Canadians nor the Laurentian Amerindians from playing a part in the war, even as the epidemics were under way. Although their numbers varied from year to year, from a low of about 420 to a high of 820, the presence of a large body of fighters from the Canadian missions was a constant feature of the campaigns in the central theater. Whatever their success or failure as instruments of evangelization and acculturation, the Laurentian reserves proved their indispensable value as a reliable source of Amerindian military manpower during the Seven Years’ War.

Although the tribes of the Pays d’en haut were afflicted only in 1757, their collective decisions were of crucial importance in determining the level of Amerindian support for the French, as measured by the number of armed men serving as auxiliaries with the field army. Regardless of French victories or defeats, despite the gradual choking off of supplies and steadily declining prospects for a French victory, it was smallpox that proved to be the key influence in decisions regarding the western allies’ military participation between 1756 and 1759.

If the western allies, like the French, lacked precise knowledge of how diseases were transmitted, they certainly understood the danger of contagion, attempted to minimize the risk of infection by avoiding disease-stricken locations, and reacted with great resentment towards anyone who invited them into these areas. In 1756, their disinclination to risk contracting smallpox by serving in the central theater deprived the French of the services of well over five hundred fighters. On the other hand, it was the outbreak of smallpox in 1757 among the tribes of the west that disrupted their normal life, kindled widespread anger against the French, and induced the surviving western warriors to remain at home once more.

For most of the war, western Amerindian warriors in the central theater were most notable for their absence. Indeed, in only two years did the western allies make a significant contribution to the Franco-Amerindian force there. In 1755, 1756, 1758, and 1760, mission Amerindians constituted the bulk of the warriors fighting in the center. The great variations apparent in Figure 1 came from the infusion of western fighters into the theater, followed by their withdrawal.

Dramatic as they were, the impact of these fluctuations upon the actual course of the war was quite limited. The contribution of Amer-
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indians to the French war effort varied not according to their numbers but according to the need for their particular abilities in a given campaign. So even a drastic decline in the number of Amerindians fighting on behalf of the French would not necessarily reduce the effectiveness of French military operations. In 1756, during the siege of Oswego, the French found the 260 warriors on the scene quite sufficient to perform the various auxiliary functions required of them. Moreover, after the surrender, their number was small enough that they could easily be restrained from harassing the survivors of the garrison. In contrast, in 1757, when the alliance system produced nearly 2,000 warriors to take part in the siege of Fort William Henry, there were far more Amerindians present than needed. When the fort was surrendered, it was impossible for the French to prevent their allies from killing or taking prisoner a number of members of the garrison and their dependents.

A year later, when the number of Amerindians willing to serve in the central theater declined dramatically on account of the smallpox epidemic raging in the Pays d’en haut, a large body of Amerindians was neither present nor needed at the Battle of Carillon, a conventional engagement between armies of French and British regulars. A substantial force of Amerindians did arrive after the battle. But the local commander, the Marquis de Montcalm, failed to employ them in an aggressive campaign of harassment against the defeated British forces, as the governor general desired. Under these conditions, increasing their number would have exacerbated French supply problems rather than harm the enemy. Finally, in 1759, the presence of thousands of Amerindian warriors in the field did not save the French. War in the central theater had come to be dominated by European regulars fighting conventional battles.

Though of limited significance to the outcome of the war, the fluctuations in the numbers of warriors in the central theater between 1755 and 1759 are of interest for what they reveal about the place of Amerindians in the geopolitical and biological context created by European contact and settlement. From the political perspective, that these variations resulted from outbreaks of smallpox is less significant than that they occurred at all. Although the tribes allied to New France were willing to declare war at its request, their actual participation changed considerably from year to year as their own priorities, policies, and inclinations dictated. They respected neither the importunities of the French, who consistently sought to secure the services of as many of them as possible, nor French success or failure in battle. Amerindians retained their political independence and freedom of action; they were willing to assist the French in time of war, but only on their own terms.
Amerindians of the mid-eighteenth century could neither turn back the clock nor alter the environment produced by European contact. But they could and did develop ways and means of exploiting the opportunities afforded, and surviving the dangers posed, by the European presence. Although unaware of the existence of viruses, they knew that smallpox was extremely contagious and dangerous and behaved accordingly; they made considered decisions and took positive action. Their basing military and diplomatic decisions during the Seven Years' War on the incidence of the disease exemplifies the adaption, accommodation, and resistance that enabled Amerindians, and their culture, to endure the crushing impact of European contact and survive in North America.

Notes

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1 This expression is taken from James H. Merrell, “The Indians’ New World: The Catawba Experience,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 41 (October 1984): 537.
4 Allies is used here to refer to those tribes with long-standing political and
commercial relations with the French. They included, in the missions of the Laurentian valley, the Abenaki; Algonquin; Huron of Lorette; Iroquois of Lac des Deux Montagnes, La Présentation, and Sault St. Louis; and Nipissing; and in the west, the Ojibwa, Ottawa, Menominee, Mississauga, Potawatomi, and Wyandot. Other tribes were allied with the French, but these, together with the Micmac and Malecite of Acadia, were the most important. In the most detailed list of the Amerindians serving alongside the French army during the Seven Years' War, warriors from these tribes made up 92.5 percent of the warriors present. The remaining fighters were Delawares, Foxes, Iowas, Miamis, Oneidas, Sauks, and Winnebagos. See “L’armée du roy sur le Lac St. Sacrement,” in Bougainville to d’Argenson, 9 August 1757, National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC]. Manuscript Group [hereafter MG] 4, microfilm reel F-721, France, Ministère de la Guerre [hereafter AG], A1, 3457, no. 121, fol. 3.

5 The descriptions of the epidemics that broke out between 1755 and 1757 are as complete as possible, but this article does not aspire to describe the epidemics themselves or their overall impact. Because of the limited quantity of evidence, it is not possible to describe the epidemic, only its impact upon the number of Amerindian warriors in the field in the central zone of operations, as recorded by French and Canadian officers.


7 In 1757 and 1759, eighteen hundred Amerindian fighters were active in the Laurentian valley. Information from Acadia and the Ohio country is neither as complete nor as reliable as that concerning Amerindian military participation in the central theater. However, it would appear that the number of warriors active in the Ohio peaked at twenty-one hundred in 1756, and that the French estimated that they could count on the services of five to six hundred warriors in Acadia. Thus, in the mid-eighteenth century, the Franco-Amerindian alliance proved to be capable of delivering a maximum of about forty-five hundred warriors willing to fight alongside the French. See “Extrait des nouvelles en Canada, 1756,” NAC, MG 1, microfilm reel C-2244, France, Archives des Colonies [hereafter AC], C11A, 100, fols. 447–48; Vaudreuil to Berryer, 5 October 1759, NAC, MG 1, microfilm reel F-391, AC, F3, 15, fol. 272; Bigot to Berryer, 15 October 1759, ibid., fol. 335; Vaudreuil to Berryer, 8 November 1759, ibid., fol. 360v; Henri-Raymond Casgrain, ed., Journal du marquis de Montcalm durant ses campagnes au Canada de 1756 à 1760 (Quebec, 1895), 264–66, 331; Charles Nicolas Gabriel, Le maréchal de camp Desandrouins, 1729–1792, guerre du Canada, 1756–1759, guerre de l’indépendance américaine, 1780–1782 (Verdun, 1887), 278.

8 This was the French field army’s area of operations during the Seven Years’ War.

9 In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a number of Amerindian communities were founded by the French in the St. Lawrence valley and populated with refugees from war, religious persecution, or Anglo-American expansion. These “reserves” formed a network of Amerindian enclaves on the periphery of the seigneurial tract of New France. See Cornelius J. Jaenen, Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Toronto, 1976), 160–61, 177–83.
One enumeration made in 1736 puts the number of warriors in the allied tribes at 16,323, while a second asserts that in 1764 there were 73,580. See Lawrence Henry Gipson, The British Empire before the American Revolution, vol. 5, Zones of International Friction: The Great Lakes Frontier, Canada, the West Indies, India, 1748–1754 (New York, 1942), 39–40.

11 It would be interesting to compare variations in the numbers of Amerindians fighting in the central theater with those of their counterparts in the Ohio and Acadian areas. Adequate data for the entire 1755–60 period for the latter regions are not, however, available.

Other Amerindians served in war parties that raided deep into British North America, but their numbers on a given date were too small to affect seriously the following estimates. When French fortunes were at their height, during twenty days in May and June 1757, 49 warriors were observed passing through Fort Carillon, an average of about 2 per day. See Anne-Joseph-Hippolyte de Maurés de Malartic, Journal des campagnes au Canada, de 1755 à 1760 (Dijon, 1890), 104–12. In fifty-six days during June, July, and August of that year, 260 warriors visited Fort Niagara en route to targets in the British colonies, an average of about 5 per day. See Anonymous, probably Pierre Pouchot, “Journal de Niagara, du mois de juin au mois d’aout, 1757,” in Guerre du Canada: Relations et journaux de différentes expéditions faites durant les années 1755–56–57–58–59–60, ed. Henri-Raymond Casgrain (Quebec, 1895), 90–114. While these figures may not be representative, they do give some idea of the relatively low intensity of the guerrilla war on the central front and of the limited numbers of Amerindians raiding at any one time.

13 George F. G. Stanley, “The Defence of Canada during the Seven Years’ War: A Military Appreciation,” in Policy by Other Means: Essays in Honour of C. P. Stacey, ed. Michael Cross and Robert Bothwell (Toronto, 1972), 67–68. Stanley has written extensively on Amerindian military affairs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See also Jennings, Empire of Fortune, 392, 401–2. This would have been very realistic behavior, and it is hardly likely that the Amerindian allies of New France, as rational actors, would have overlooked the military conjuncture when making decisions. Their perception of military events, the likely course of the war, and where their best interests lay, however, may very well have differed from that of historians who enjoy the benefit of hindsight and have ascribed this motivation to Amerindians.

14 In the fall of 1755, for example, “Mr. Vaudreuil has ordered all of the officers who command the northern posts to engage the largest possible number of natives to descend in the spring to Fort Presqu’ile from where he intends to have them advance to Oswego [in 1756].” See Jean-Guillaume-Charles de Plantavit de Lapause de Margon, “Mémoire et observations sur mon voyage en Canada,” RAPQ, 1951–32: 23–24. For criticism of this policy, see Bougainville, “Journal,” 238.

Although hard evidence is lacking, smallpox appears to have been significantly more prevalent in Europe in the eighteenth century than in previous centuries. See Donald R. Hopkins, Princes and Peasants: Smallpox in History (Chicago, 1983), 41.

16 Cyril William Dixon, Smallpox (London, 1962), 170–81, 296–312, 325–26; Hopkins, Smallpox in History, 3–9. This is meant to be only the most general
description of how smallpox works. The actual impact of an epidemic varied according to the particular strain of the disease, the length of time since the last epidemic, density of population, and other factors. For the purposes of this article, the actual details of the medical effects of the epidemics are less important than the perceptions of the Amerindians and how these perceptions were reflected in their decisions and actions.

Although the scope of this article is limited to the impact of these epidemics on specific groups of North Americans, it should be noted that outbreaks of smallpox were not confined to the French and their allies. Divided by politics, ethnicity, and religion, the human inhabitants of the continent were united by biology. Political boundaries posed no obstacle to the spread of infectious disease, a continental phenomenon.

17 Dieskau to d’Argenson, 14 September 1755, NAC, MG 4, microfilm reel F-665, AG, A1, 3405, no. 80, fol. 1; “Relation depuis le départ des troupes de Quebec [sic] jusqu’au 30 du mois du 7bre, 1755,” ibid., no. 106, fol. 4.

18 Vaudreuil to Machault, 8 June 1756, NAC, MG 1, microfilm reel F-390, AC, F3, 14, fol. 244.

19 Vaudreuil to Machault, 6 November 1756, NAC, MG 1, microfilm reel C-2400, AC, CIIA, 101, fol. 155.

20 Vaudreuil to Machault, 25 September 1755, AC, F3, 14, fol. 157; Doreil to d’Argenson, 29 October 1755, AG, A1, 3405, no. 145, fol. 10.


22 Vaudreuil to Machault, 8 June 1756, AC, F3, 14, fol. 244. It was not, however, decisive. See Vaudreuil to Machault, 25 September 1755, ibid., fol. 157. During the campaign of 1755, the French had planned to mobilize the Amerindians of Acadia, where the British had captured Forts Beausejour and Gasperaux and were in the process of expelling the Acadians. This proved to be impossible, as “smallpox prevented the natives . . . from striking vigorously against the English.” See Vaudreuil to Machault, 30 October 1755, AC, CIIA, 100, fol. 160.

23 Vaudreuil to Machault, 8 June 1756, AC, F3, 14, fol. 244. Fort Oswego (or Chouaguen), on the southern shore of Lake Ontario, was one of the two major British posts on the Canada–New York frontier.


25 Doreil to d’Argenson, 18 June 1756, AG, A1, 3417, no. 166, fol. 9.

26 Vaudreuil to Machault, 8 August 1756, AC, CIIA, 101, fol. 99; Vaudreuil to Machault, 15 June 1756, ibid., fol. 49.


29 Of the Amerindians who actually took part in the siege, twenty-three were Menominees and four Mississaugas. See Gaspard-Joseph Chausséros de Léry, “Journal du siège du fort de Chouéguen, appartenant aux Anglais, situé dans l’Amérique septentrionale par les 43 degrés, 45 minutes de latitude, pris par les Français le 14 août 1756,” RAPQ, 1926–27: 403; Vaudreuil to Lévis, 18 August


33 Vaudreuil to Minister of Marine, 18 April 1757, *AC*, F3, 15, fol. 22.


37 “L’armée du roy sur le Lac St. Sacrement,” in Bougainville to d’Argenson, 9 August 1757, *AG*, A1, 3457, no. 121, fol. 3.

38 Bougainville, “Journal,” 313.


40 Jean-Nicolas Desandrouins, “Recueil et journal des choses principales qui me sont arrivées, et de celles qui m’ont le plus frappées, depuis mon départ de France,” in Gabriel, *Le maréchal de camp Desandrouins*, 135–36.

41 Bougainville, “Journal,” 315.


45 James Gorrell, “A journal of Leuv t [sic] James Gorrell’s Proceedings from the Day he took Post at Fort Edward Augustus (or La Bay) being the 12th October 1761 To the Present date Herof [14 June 1763],” in *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, ed. Milton W. Hamilton, vol. 10 (Albany, NY, 1951), 702. A British trader recorded that “on the 10th of October [1766] we proceeded down the [Wisconsin] river, and the next day reached the first town of the Ottigaumies [Fox]. This town contained about fifty houses, but we found most of them deserted, on account of an epidemic disorder that had lately raged among them.
The greater part of those who survived had retired into the woods, to avoid the contagion." See Carver, Travels, 48. Some bands may have suffered more than others. Overall, given that the numbers of Amerindians serving with the French forces in 1757 and 1759 were roughly equivalent, it is possible either that the demographic impact of the epidemic was quite limited or that the pool of available warriors was large enough for the Amerindians allied to the French to sustain significant losses and still field a substantial contingent.

46 Daine to Minister of War, 29 May 1758, NAC, MG 4, microfilm reel F-722, AG, A1, 3498, no. 87, fol. 2.


49 Blackbird, The Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan, 9–10. French reports of the actions of the western allies in 1756 and 1757 make it clear that these Amerindians held and acted both on empirical knowledge that to be present in a region where an epidemic was in progress could lead to infection and on the theory that epidemics were products of human sorcery.

50 Bougainville, "Journal," 316. See also Montcalm to Minister of War, 20 April 1758, AG, A1, 3498, no. 63, fol. 7; Bougainville, "Journal," 320; Casgrain, Journal du marquis de Montcalm, 350.

51 Bougainville, "Journal," 208.

52 Ibid., 275.

53 Ibid., 273.

54 Daine to Minister of War, 29 May 1758, AG, A1, 3498, no. 87, fol. 2.

55 Apart from the smallpox epidemic, which French sources identified as the primary cause of the Amerindians’ anger, metropolitan officers alleged that this resentment was exacerbated by sharp trading practices, a failure to give the customary annual presents to Amerindians, and incompetence on the part of the commandants of the western posts. See Bougainville, "Journal," 320; Desandrouins, "Recueil et journal," 136; Casgrain, Journal du marquis de Montcalm, 350.

56 Bougainville, "Journal," 318.

57 Ibid., 322.

58 Ibid., 320. Edward P. Hamilton, ed. and trans., Adventure in the Wilderness: The American Journals of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, 1756–1760 (Norman, OK, 1964), 204, translates the "Ours" from the original as "Ottawa."

59 Malartic, Journal, 171–72; Casgrain, Journal du marquis de Montcalm, 350; "Journal de ce qui s'est passé dans les garnisons ou les camps qu'a occupé le
regiment de Béarn depuis le 20 8bre 1757 jusqu’au 20 du même mois à 1758,”
NAC, MG 4, microfilm reel F-723, AG, A1, 3499, no. 191, fols. 11–12. (In fact the
latter document ends not at 20 October 1758 but at 30 September 1758).

60 Daine to Minister of War, 29 May 1758, AG, A1, 3498, no. 87, fol. 2; Bougain-
ville, “Journal,” 320; Montcalm to Bourlamaque, 15 May 1758, in Casgrain,
_Lettres de Bourlamaque_, 247.

61 Bougainville, “Journal,” 316; Berryer to Bigot, 19 January 1759, NAC, MG 1,
microfilm reel F-313, AC, B, 109, fol. 310. Given the rather creative accounting
prevalent at the time, the amount charged to the Crown may not have been
reflected in the value of the goods that the allies actually received, but the aid
provided to the western nations seems nonetheless to have been substantial.
See Bougainville, “Journal,” 316; Montcalm to Minister of War, 20 April 1758,
AG, A1, 3498, no. 63, fol. 7.

62 “The spirits of the slain are to be satisfied in one of two ways. The first is by
spilling the blood of the nation by whom they fell; the other, by covering the
bodies of the dead, and thus allaying the resentment of their relatives. This is
done by making presents.” Speech by Minweweh at Michilimakinac in 1761,
as recorded by Alexander Henry in _Travels and Adventures in Canada and the
Indian Territories between the Years 1760 and 1776_ (1809; reprint, _Travels and
Adventures in Canada_, Ann Arbor, MI, 1966), 44.

63 Montcalm to Minister of War, 20 April 1758, AG, A1, 3498, no. 63, fol. 7.

64 Blackbird, _The Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan_, 10.

65 Bougainville, “Journal,” 335; Casgrain, _Journal du marquis de Montcalm_, 487.


67 The Amerindians of Canada and the Ohio valley were apparently unaffected
by the epidemic. This is not surprising, given that both areas had been struck
by smallpox within the last five years. See Casgrain, _Journal du marquis de
Montcalm_, 329, 342; “Journal de ce qui s’est passé dans les garnisons ou les
camps qu’a occupé le régiment de Béarn depuis le 20 8bre 1757 jusqu’au 20 du
même mois à 1758,” AG, A1, 3499, no. 191, fols. 2–3, 11.

68 Casgrain, _Journal du marquis de Montcalm_, 408. French sources record the
presence of “a dozen Ottawas” from Michilimakinac and forty-two Mississau-
gas in the central theater in 1758. See Bougainville, “Journal,” 331; Malartic,
_Journal_, 196; Casgrain, _Journal du marquis de Montcalm_, 433.

69 Vaudreuil to Berryer, 2 September 1758, NAC, MG 1, microfilm reel C-2401, AC,

70 Following the signing of the Easton Treaty in October and the withdrawal of
the French from Fort Duquesne in November, many of the Amerindians of the
upper Ohio withdrew from the war. See Jennings, _Empire of Fortune_, 369–414.

71 French sources, although explicit when reporting the refusal of Amerindians to
participate in the war during outbreaks of smallpox, are less informative with
regard to the reasons behind Amerindian willingness to return to the field in
the years following epidemics.


73 Montcalm to Bourlamaque, 15 March 1759, in Casgrain, _Lettres de Bourlamaque_, 291.

74 The news from the west at the outset of the campaign was equally positive.
A delegation of Catawbas—clients of South Carolina—hitherto neutral, came
to Michilimakinac to offer an alliance. See Malartic, _Journal_, 232; Montcalm
to Bourlamaque, 15 March 1759, in Casgrain, *Lettres de Bourlamaque*, 311. A party of Delaware and Shawnee, both Ohio tribes that had signed the Easton Treaty, ambushed and turned back a British patrol on the Allegheny that was believed to be the vanguard of a British column en route to Fort Machault. See Montcalm to Bourlamaque, 12 May 1759, in Casgrain, *Lettres de Bourlamaque*, 311. And a Huron-Ottawa force conducted a major raid on British supply lines east of Fort Duquesne. See Casgrain, *Journal du marquis de Montcalm*, 517. These encouraging incidents were reflected in a renewed willingness on the part of the western allies to fight for the French. Apart from those employed as partisans in the western theater, about nine hundred Amerindians joined in the relief expedition that marched from Fort Machault to attempt to raise the British siege of Fort Niagara. See Vaudreuil to Berryer, 30 October 1759, AC, F3, 15, fol. 348; Montcalm to Bourlamaque, 31 March 1759, in Casgrain, *Lettres de Bourlamaque*, 367. Statistics from the west are fragmentary, but the highest recorded number of Amerindians fighting there was reached in 1756, when a little over two thousand were active in the Ohio country. See “Extraits des nouvelles en Canada, 1756,” AC, C11A, 101, fols. 447–48. Of this body, seven hundred had been from the Ohio tribes, so the number fighting for the French was lower than but comparable to the numbers mustered in the west in previous years. Only thirty of the nine hundred mustered in 1759, however, actually took part in the engagement at La Belle Famille, where the French force was defeated. See Pouchot, *Mémoires* 2: 99. Note that these warriors, who took part in the fighting in the Pays d’en haut, are not included in the total of those active in the central theater.


76 Jean-Félix Récher, *Journal du siège de Québec* (Quebec, 1959), 43.


78 Vaudreuil to Berryer, 8 November 1759, AC, F3, 15, fol. 360v; Gabriel, *Le maréchal de camp Desandrouins*, 278.


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Roquemaure to Lévis, 21 August 1760, in Lettres de divers particuliers au chevalier de Lévis, ed. Henri-Raymond Casgrain (Quebec, 1895), 124. They were not, however, considered entirely reliable. See postscript of 2 September, Bigot to Machault, 29 August 1760, NAC, MG 1, microfilm reel F-392, AC, F3, 16, fol. 115v. Other erstwhile allies hastened to make their peace with the British. Defections also occurred among the Canadians: “As the English armies advanced, the habitants deserted us.” See Bernier to Accaron, 28 September 1760, NAC, microfilm reel C-2402, AC, CIIA, vol. 105, fol. 394.

Bellestre to Berryer, 10 June 1762, AC, CIIA, 105, fols. 606–68; Vaudreuil to Berryer, 24 June 1760, ibid., fols. 185–88; Vaudreuil to Berryer, 24 June 1760, ibid., fols. 189–92.


This did not prevent the French from attempting to enlist the largest possible number of warriors to join them in each campaign. See note 14.

Lapause de Margon, “Mémoire et observations,” 34. Nonetheless, a few incidents occurred immediately after the surrender, before the French could place all of the prisoners under their protection.


Of a French force of 3,526, 15 were Amerindians. See Bougainville, “Journal,” 337. Their role in the battle was marginal enough for Montcalm to describe himself as “without natives.” See Casgrain, Journal du marquis de Montcalm, 401.


The western allies were confronted, between 1755 and 1759, with two important phenomena, the Seven Years’ War and a series of smallpox epidemics. During this period, the French wanted the Amerindians to react to the war in accordance with French priorities, by coming to the central theater to fight against the British whenever they asked them to. The Amerindians, however, acted according to their own agenda. They took part in the war when it suited their purposes. But when they found reasons to remain at home on account of the epidemics, they ignored French entreaties and shunned the central theater.