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The War of Jenkins' Ear Jingoistic mercantilism, pacifistic diplomacy, and securing of the Georgia border.

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In *The Diplomatic History of Georgia*, John Tate Lanning wrote that “the mention of the War of Jenkins’ Ear evokes from the average individual either frank laughter or courteous blankness,” a statement that can still be considered valid today.¹ There is more to the War of Jenkins’ Ear than a declaration of war over the injustices suffered by Robert Jenkins in 1731 that caused him to lose that vital appendage. Rather, it was a combination of ambitious colonial expansion on behalf of England in Spanish Florida, and the inability to solve a decade of conflict over trade rights in the West Indies that gave birth to a jingoistic and proto-nationalist sentiment which forced conservative Member of Parliament (M.P.) Robert Walpole to declare war on Spain in 1739. Robert Jenkins’s ear merely played a role, albeit a large one, in the rise of anti-Spanish sentiment in England and the subsequent decade of war that followed. The War of Jenkins’ Ear also marked the first time that English colonists in America were involved in warfare in other areas of the English empire, and the conflict between ‘English’ and ‘American’ forces spawned lasting resentments on both sides that contributed to the formation of these separate identities during the colonial period. In this analysis, the light will be cast unevenly on the English, due to the privations committed against the Englishman Robert Jenkins, and

the role of both James Oglethorpe and the South Sea Company in their agitations for war against Spain.

The creation and settlement of the English colony of Georgia caused a significant amount of tension between the English and Spanish in the 1720’s and 1730’s. The first English settlements in Georgia date back to 1720, with King George’s order to South Carolina governor, Francis Nicholson, to send a contingent of troops to secure and build a fort at the head of the Altamaha River in Spanish Florida.² The text of the resolution, which stated that Nicholson was “not to suffer any other nation to take possession of any Part of the said River, or of the Sea Coasts from Port Royal to St. Augustine,” virtually ensured immediate conflict.³ In 1670, England and Spain signed the American Treaty adopting the principle of actual possession, meaning that the two countries could only claim territory where they had a physical presence in 1670. The English claim to Georgia was in direct violation of the American Treaty, but the English pressed on with claims to the disputed territory. Spain immediately protested to the English, who chose to remain silent on the American Treaty and instead held up the Carolina grant of 1665, in which Charles II granted land as far south as St. Augustine.⁴ The Spanish protestations that the English destroy the fort inadvertently came to pass when the fort burnt down in 1725 and was not rebuilt, although the English did not give up their designs for the territory that would come to be known as Georgia. The destruction of the fort pleased many in the English government, especially those who wanted peace, security of trade, and the limited budgetary expenditures it entailed. This pacifistic part of the English government is known as the Walpole ministry, named after M.P. Robert Walpole, who would play a large role in the events leading up to the War of Jenkins’ Ear.

The opposition to Walpole looked

abroad and saw the need for England to expand its holdings in the Americas at Spanish expense. These 'imperialists' were prevalent in both South Carolina and the House of Commons, and as far as the disputed territory was concerned were personified by one man, James Oglethorpe. The opposition, led by Oglethorpe, petitioned and was granted a charter on June 9, 1732 to settle the territory named Georgia in honor of King George.⁵ Georgia was ostensibly promoted by its trustees as a "colonial workhouse to redeem England's idle poor"⁶ but "[Under] Oglethorpe's leadership Georgia as a religious and philanthropic undertaking took second place to Georgia, the imperialistic colony."⁷ From the beginning, the colony was threatened with Spanish attack, a perilous situation due to the skeleton force possessed by Oglethorpe in the Savannah area and the reports that the Spanish were stockpiling arms and troops in St. Augustine in preparation for an invasion. It was common knowledge that Walpole did not approve of the Georgia colony and the developing situation therein, but his options were limited as all of the Georgia trustees were members of the House of Commons and Walpole needed their support for his trade policies.⁸ By 1737 Oglethorpe was back in England, unsuccessfully arguing for more protection for the colony in the form of British troops. Word soon came that Spain had attacked with six hundred soldiers, and they had been repulsed by the threadbare Georgia defense. Oglethorpe could not have asked for a timelier boon. Walpole reluctantly approved a regiment of troops, with Oglethorpe at its command, to be transferred to the colony.

Walpole's negative position regarding the Georgia colony had more to do with its interference in peaceful trade relations with Spain than it being in the interests of his enemies in the House of Commons. Walpole saw little advantage to the Georgia colony; it brought little to no revenue, and it caused his ministry a great deal of worry and ink with the constant diplomatic tension with Spain.

In August of 1737, the Spanish Minister Don Tomàs Geraldino sent Walpole a memorial detailing all the English depredations to the time of writing, and stating that if Oglethorpe was to return to Georgia it would be considered an act of war.⁹ Oglethorpe returned later that year as the "General and Commander in Chief of all...his Majesty's Forces...in his Majesty's Provinces of South Carolina and Georgia in America."¹⁰ The Spanish did not make good on their threat at this time. Tensions in Europe between England and Spain continued to rise, with both Georgia and Spanish Florida fearing an attack by the other. In December of 1737, in response to a letter concerning claims to the disputed area by the English Minister in Madrid, Benjamin Keene, Oglethorpe replied that he believed since the English "were in actual and quiet possession of Georgia, it was incumbent upon the Spanish to make out and prove their rights."¹¹ In the words of Lanning, "The onus of proof was the lot of the plaintiff."¹²

Reports of attack from Spanish Florida, which was a constant worry in the disputed Georgia territory, steadily increased in the early months of 1738. Adding to the tension were two reports that Oglethorpe sent to officials in London: the Spanish had landed five thousand men in Georgia, and that two Spanish men-of-war seized an English ship off the coast of Carolina—both of which proved to be false and infuriated both the Spanish and Walpole.¹³ To reduce tensions the English drafted numerous treaties of goodwill but the Spanish refused to sign—by signing any treaty of peace they would be giving up any future claim to Georgia, thereby ceding that vast territory to the English. Further contributing to the tensions were the South Sea Company merchants and their allies in Parliament, who were chaffing over the Spanish tightening of trade restrictions in the West Indies and the seizing of English ships beginning in the early 1730's—the source of the offense against Captain Robert Jenkins.

During the eighteenth century the

Spanish were slowly losing the ability to supply their colonies in the West Indies and relied on contracts with other merchant companies, which were usually state controlled monopolies. One of these was the British owned South Sea Company (SSC), which was formed under the 1729 Treaty of Seville with Spain to carry out the *asiento* contract.¹⁴ The *asiento* was an especially lucrative contract, allowing the SSC to supply an unlimited number of slaves and five hundred tons of goods per year to the Spanish territories in the West Indies. This trade was extremely important to the Spanish and profitable to the SSC, however, tensions started to arise as early as 1732 over unpaid duties on Negroes, and accusations that the SSC was carrying on an illegal trade with Spanish colonies.¹⁵ English piracy based out of Jamaica was active before this date and Spanish *guarda costas* (coast guard) spent much time patrolling the West Indies and indiscriminately seizing British and Colonial ships. The SSC were the only English merchants allowed to conduct business with the Spanish in the West Indies, and thus they were blamed for these pirate activities.¹⁶ However, this indiscriminate seizing by Spanish ships also reeked of piracy and was interpreted as such by English colonial officials and merchants. The two home governments devoted a good deal of time trying to soothe tensions in the West Indies, doing their best to control restive colonial officials to the point of exasperation, which can be seen in a letter by Rear Admiral Charles Stewart to the Duke of Newcastle dated 12 October 1731

It is, I think, a little unreasonable for us to do injuries and not know how to bear them. But villainy is inherent to this climate, and I should be partial if I was to judge whether the trading part of the island or those we complain of among the Spaniards are the most exquisite in the trade...

I was a little surprised to hear of the usage Captain Jenkins met with off the Havana, as I know the governor there has the character of being an honest good man, and I don't find anybody thinks he would connive or countenance such villainies.

I can't help observing that I believe that I am the first military person who has stood up in [defense] of peace and quietness, and for delivering up vessels, against a parcel of men who call themselves merchants, but except two or three of them that have signed the letter, they are no better than [peddlers], and one of them formerly in jail for piracy.¹⁷

By 1735, the constant piracy and disagreement over unpaid duties led the Spanish to suspend the importation of Negroes.¹⁸ In early 1736, with no resolution, the Spanish king suspended all trade between the crown and the SSC until the duties were paid and the accounts of the annual shipments were given to the Spanish court.¹⁹ Both countries now filed claims against each other: Spain claimed the unpaid duties and loss of revenue from English pirating at £65,000, and the English claimed the money lost from the Spanish cancellation of the *asiento* and damages from Spanish pirating at £140,000.²⁰ After negotiations between English and Spanish officials in 1739, Spain was left with a net debt of £95,000, which the king refused to pay based on SSC refusal to pay the Spanish estimate of an additional £68,000 in assorted damages by the company.²¹ Combined with the perilous situation in the Georgia colony this disagreement gave an opportunity to the enemies of Walpole to push for a war that would, they thought, humiliate the Spanish and gain territory and wealth for England.

The English opponents of Walpole now took the offensive in 1738 by accusing his ministry of pro-Spanish pacifism regarding both the Georgia and West Indies issues

and attempting to root out any pro-Spanish sentiment in English society. Even the former darling in the “Opera of the Nobility,” the famous Italian castrato Farinelli, was criticized in the English press for singing to the King of Spain, claiming his “detainment” in Madrid was almost identical to Spanish seizures of English ships.²² The rhetoric was even stronger in Parliament, as can be seen when Lord John Carteret rose to speak in mid-1738: “‘No search,’ my Lords, is a cry that runs from the sailor to the merchant, and from the merchant to Parliament, my Lords, it ought to reach the throne.”²³ The rallying point came in March 1738 with the appearance of Captain Robert Jenkins of the *Rebecca* before parliament. Having studied for his role, Jenkins played his audience with a Farinelli-like aplomb; displaying his now pickled ear, which he had lost seven years previously at the hands of the Spanish captain Juan de León Fandino, in a jar of spirits.²⁴ The account is best narrated by John Tate Lanning:

After the Spaniard had torn his ear off, Jenkins related, he handed it back with the well-phrased insult: “carry it to your king and tell his majesty that if he were present I would serve him in the same manner.” Asked what he expected from his enemies Jenkins replied in seemingly well-coached language: “Gentlemen, after mangling me in this manner, they threatened to put me to death. I expected it, and recommended my soul to God, but the revenge of my cause to my country.”²⁵

This story was told and retold throughout the English press, working public opinion into a raucous state of anti-Spanish fervor.

The Walpole ministry moved into maximum damage control mode while trying to preserve the peace at almost any cost. Spanish and English ministries worked in early 1739 to hammer out the Convention of Pardo, which set to preserve the status quo and establish a future meeting where the trade

agreements could be settled. This fell apart when both the Spanish King and Parliament refused to ratify the convention, and it now appeared to both sides that war was imminent. Walpole immediately tried to align himself behind the pro-war faction, stating that “the Spanish shall not have Georgia” and pledging both troops and money to defend the colony.²⁶ This was to be too little too late, as a vociferous William Pitt stole the attention for the next few months in Parliament and emerged at the head of the anti-Walpole faction. King George then threw his support behind the war faction and formally declared war on June 15, 1739, followed by ratification in Parliament on October 23, 1739.

Oglethorpe, who received news in late September that diplomatic relations with Spain had broken down, had himself preemptively declared war on October 3, 1739 in the Savannah, Georgia courthouse.²⁷ The nearby Creek Indians, unhappy with Spanish relations with their neighboring tribes and traditional enemies, had been receptive to English offers of friendship and now pledged their support to Oglethorpe. The Spanish were first to strike, using their Indian allies to make raids on the English fort on Amelia Island and other English traders working in the area.²⁸ Sensing that the Creeks were eager for retribution and to gain trophies and captives, Oglethorpe sent out a war party to scout the area, an essential job that the Creeks fulfilled during the hostilities in Georgia. Creeks, larger in number than other neighboring tribes and better supplied by the English, harassed both the Spanish and their Indian allies so effectively that for the most part the Spaniards were afraid to leave their forts, biding Oglethorpe precious time to assemble an expeditionary force. Marching on St. Augustine in May 1740, Oglethorpe’s force took several forts along the way but ended up waging an unsuccessful siege and had to returning to Fort Frederica several months later. While Oglethorpe did not have the number of men that he requested from South Carolina and the Creek, he was not undermanned

compared to the Spanish. Rather, his loss was a result of misunderstanding his Indian allies. Oglethorpe forbid the Creek to practice the type of guerilla warfare that they were used to, instead molding them into a British model by integrating them with the rest of the army and forcing them to adopt European war tactics. Rather than producing the harmonious effect he desired, this move caused disagreements and delays in the entire army.

Safely back in Fort Frederica, Oglethorpe now feared a Spanish reprisal and fortified his defenses to the best of his limited ability. Adding to Oglethorpe's worries were strained relations with his Indian allies who had not been allowed to collect trophies or slaves on the march to St. Augustine. To solve both of these problems Oglethorpe consented to allow the Creeks to fight in their traditional way, again causing panic amongst the Spanish and their allies, and biding the English valuable time. The Spanish counterattacked in May 1742 but the English won the battle: the English charged the Spanish force head on and the latter, cut down by Creek guerrilla warfare, eventually fled back to St. Augustine.²⁹ Oglethorpe feared that the Spanish, cowed but not defeated, would strike again and so the next year he set out for St. Augustine. This time he allowed his Creek allies greater autonomy, and although the second siege of St. Augustine was again ineffective, the Creek engaged in massive raiding of the countryside on such a scale that the Spanish abandoned any hope of attacking Georgia. By compromising on tactics Oglethorpe was able to please his Creek allies and secure the defense of the Georgia colony during the War of Jenkins' Ear.

Outside of Georgia, the English wasted no time in launching an attack on Spanish possessions in the West Indies. A fleet of six ships, under Admiral Vernon, sailed to Porto Bello on the west coast of Panama. The final resupply point for Spanish treasure ships heading east, Porto Bello was inadequately prepared for the attack and the English were able to take the fort with minimal casualties.

The reality that "forts had been undermanned and the booty small were facts unknown and inconsequential" to the English public, who erupted in a frenzy of patriotism and joy.³⁰ Vernon now sailed for Jamaica to await the mass of forces being sent from England and the Colonies. Joining a 9,000 man force of British regulars was a diverse group of 3,000 motley Colonials. The War of Jenkins' Ear marked the first time that men who could be considered 'American' were called to defend another part of the British Empire, i.e. "an area not in or adjacent to their homes."³¹ Considered by Albert Harkness Jr. to be the "first Veterans of Foreign Wars," these men were an all volunteer force raised under different conditions and terms of pay in the colonies.³² One thing they did all have in common was the distrustful and disparaging treatment they received by their British superiors. The Americans were characterized as "poor soldiers, Irish Papists, and fit only for cutting fascines with the Negros"³³ by the British, and it is no surprise then that a deep distrust and animosity began to develop between the men serving on the ships and in the integrated units. Much of the correspondence from the British features the term "Americans" to negatively describe the colonial troops, and while this usage is not the first by any means, it does appear quite frequently.³⁴ There are only a few instances of the 'American' troops terming their English counterparts as "Europeans" or "English," but this is probably due to the limited amount of correspondence made by the 'American' troops. Their treatment of each other is indicative of separate identities forming over thirty years before the American Revolution and no doubt contributed to emerging tensions back in the colonies when the survivors of the West Indies battles arrived home in 1743.

The colonial troops arrived in Jamaica several months before the British army and suffered high numbers of casualties from tropical diseases, forcing Vernon to break-up and reform many of the colonial

companies, further causing frustration and resentment among the Americans. Finally setting off in early February 1741 the fleet sailed to Cartagena, the capital of modern day Columbia, to attack the Spanish fort there. Better defended than Porto Bello and forewarned of English attack, the English assault on Cartagena also suffered from miscommunication between Admiral Vernon and Commander of the Army, General Wentworth. This is not to say that the colonials did not contribute to the assault, on March 18-19 Lawrence Washington, the elder half-brother of the future Commander of the Continental Army George Washington, led two colonial companies on daring raid of a Spanish battery.³⁵ The colonials were treated poorly by their English superiors who considered them worth no more than Negro slaves. The colonial troops were kept below decks for most of the voyage and the attack on Cartagena thus suffering disproportionately high rates of sickness and death. After the disastrous defeat at Cartagena, Admiral Vernon sailed first to Jamaica to resupply, where more colonial troops fell to disease during the month-long layover, and then set sail to Hispaniola (Cuba). Landing in Guantanamo Bay on June 30, 1741, the English force fought off the small Spanish garrison and set up camp and crude fortifications, waiting for Spanish reprisal.³⁶ However, the continued bickering between Vernon and Wentworth, loss of men due to disease, and a general lack of interest by the Spanish forced the English force to depart several months later. The battered and reduced fleet then sailed for Panama, but decided not to land after sighting hostile natives, and later made its way to Roatán, a small island off of Honduras and a haven for Spanish pirates. Finding no pirates, Vernon and Wentworth decided to claim the territory for England, establish a fort with a small volunteer garrison, and then return to Jamaica and later to Britain. The American companies were then dispersed; many sought treatment in the naval hospitals in Jamaica but the majority of them were free to go back to

the colonies, although they had to find their own transportation. The men that perished in the West Indies were not the only losses suffered for the colonies: between 1739 and 1741 an estimated fifty Spanish privateers seized three hundred sixteen merchant vessels, each valued at around £3,500—more than the colonials lost to Spanish privateering in the decade leading up to war.³⁷ Back in England, tensions between the English and the new Spanish-French alliance over The War of Jenkins' Ear and the troubled Austrian succession resulted in several years of conflict, known appropriately as The War of Austrian Succession, which formally ended in 1748.

The War of Jenkins' Ear is often misunderstood, or worse, underestimated as a minor footnote in history, relegated to a passing in histories regarding the American colonies or British foreign policy. While much of the history that makes up this event is diplomatic, it is lively, full of excitement, and not to be, in the words of Jeremy Black, "condemned... as desiccated."³⁸ Rather, it can be seen as the result of two separate, yet connected by way of merchant commerce and Parliament, situations developing almost simultaneously in the English Colonies. The War of Jenkins' Ear was the outgrowth of tensions with the Spanish in the contested Georgia territory, as well as those resulting from privateering in the West Indies. These tensions were seized upon by expansionists in England and used to force Robert Walpole to abandon a trade-first pacifistic policy in regard to the frequent conflicts of the time in both the Old and New World. It is doubtful that Juan de León Fandino would have imagined that his impromptu removal of Robert Jenkins's ear in the West Indies would have resulted in a general war over the succession to the Austrian throne, but perhaps not, if he understood European diplomacy in the eighteenth century.

Footnotes

- ¹ John Tate Lanning, *The Diplomatic History of Georgia: A Study of the Epoch of Jenkins' Ear*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 174. Alan Taylor, a Pulitzer Prize winning author and not an average individual, in his book *American Colonies* devotes only a paragraph to The War of Jenkins' Ear.
- ² Lanning, 11.
- ³ *Ibid*,10.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, 20. This claim was based on the sacking of St. Augustine by Sir Francis Drake, thereby temporarily claiming the territory for England, until the Spanish rebuilt.
- ⁵ Lanning, 34.
- ⁶ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 241.
- ⁷ Lanning, 33.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 69.
- ⁹ Lanning, 102.
- ¹⁰ Julie Anne Sweet, *Negotiating for Georgia, British-Creek Relations in the Trustee Era 1733-1752*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 141.
- ¹¹ Lanning, 136.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 137.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 140.
- ¹⁴ Ernest G. Hildner Jr., "The Role of the South Sea Company in the Diplomacy Leading to the War of Jenkins' Ear, 1729-1739," *The Hispanic Historical Review*, Vol. 18 No. 3 (August 1938): 323.
- ¹⁵ Hildner, 326.
- ¹⁶ How much of these activities the SSC knew of, or even sanctioned, is still debated by scholars.
- ¹⁷ J. K. Laughton, "Jenkins's Ear" *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 4 No. 6 (October 1889): 742-743.
- ¹⁸ Hildner, 329
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, 331.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, 334.
- ²¹ Jeremy Black, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of Walpole*, (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers LTD, 1985), 111.
- ²² Thomas McGreary, "Farinelli in Madrid: Opera, Politics, and the War of Jenkins' Ear" *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 82 No. 2 (Summer 1998): 396.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 138.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 176.
- ²⁵ Lanning, 152. Believed to be a falsehood, a letter dated early 1731 (quoted above) confirms that Jenkins did in fact, lose his ear.
- ²⁶ Lanning, 154.
- ²⁷ Sweet, 141.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 143.
- ²⁹ Sweet, 150-151.
- ³⁰ Francis L. Berkely, Jr., "The War of Jenkins' Ear," in *The Old Dominion, Essays for Thomas Perkins Abernethy*, ed. Darret B. Rutman, (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1964), 52-53.

³¹ Albert Harkness Jr., "Americanism and Jenkins' Ear," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* Vol. 37 No. 1 (June 1950), 61.

³² Harkness, 61.

³³ *Ibid*, 89.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 88. "As early as 1648 Thomas Gage called himself an "English-American." In 1691 Cotton Mather had referred to himself deprecatingly as a "rude American," and in 1701 the author of *An Essay upon the Government of the English Plantation* signed himself as "An American."

³⁵ Harkness, 76.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 79.

³⁷ Lanning, 188.

³⁸ Black, v.

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