

TREATY OF AIX-LA-CHAPELLE

TREATY AT A GLANCE

Completed

October 18, 1748, at Aix-la-Chapelle, France
(present-day Aachen, Germany)

Signatories

Great Britain, Hapsburg Empire (Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, etc.), Sardinia, the United Provinces of the Low Countries (Netherlands), and Prussia, France, Spain, Modena, and Genoa

Overview

The TREATY OF UTRECHT, concluded in 1713, ended the War of the Spanish Succession and was intended to bring about a permanent peace in Europe through a stable balance of power there. In fact, relative peace and stability endured until 1740. In that year, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles VI of Austria, died without a male heir. By virtue of the Pragmatic Sanction (1713), Charles's daughter Maria Theresa had been guaranteed possession of the Hapsburg lands, but nevertheless, Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia seized the Austrian province of Silesia, touching off the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48). The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, which concluded the war, brought little territorial change to Europe, except for the Prussian possession of Silesia; however, it did mark the emergence of Prussia as a major military power in Europe.

Historical Background

Following the death of her father, Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, in 1740, Maria Theresa found herself assailed by several claimants challenging the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713, which guaranteed her possession of Austria and the other Hapsburg domains. Some European powers were poised to carve up the loose empire, and Frederick II of Prussia actually invaded one province, Silesia, in 1740, starting the First Silesian War. France, Spain, Bavaria, and Saxony rallied to Frederick's cause. Great Britain, which had come to blows with Spain over colonial and trade issues in North and Central America, igniting the War of Jenkins's Ear in 1739, sided with Maria Theresa.

For eight years, from 1740 to 1748, central Europe was engulfed in war, which extended to North America (as King George's War) and colonial India (as the Carnatic Wars). Thus, the War of the Austrian Succession might be considered a world war and was a drawn-out prelude to the Seven Years' War of 1756–63 (called in America the French and Indian War), the first truly global conflict.

After Maria Theresa's forces lost their first large-scale encounter with Frederick in 1741 and Prague fell to the French and Bavarians that same year, the empress ceded Silesia to Prussia in 1742, hoping thereby to secure Frederick's neutrality as she moved to retake Prague and to invade Bavaria. Her victories in Prague and Bavaria persuaded Saxony to re-ally itself with her, and Sardinia worked against the forces of Spain and Naples. Thus bolstered, Maria Theresa's forces were able to push the French army toward the Rhine, where it was met in battle by British forces under the direction of George II, who scored a decisive victory at Dettingen, Bavaria, on June 27, 1743. Following this the French retreated west across the Rhine and turned their attention to Austria's territories in the Netherlands. In the meantime, Frederick II reentered the conflict in 1744, prosecuting what has been called the Second Silesian War.

The French, defeated in Bavaria, achieved brilliant success in the Austrian Netherlands, defeating a combined British, Dutch, and Hanoverian army under the duke of Cumberland at Fontenoy on May 11, 1745.

The town of Tournai surrendered to the French, who also took Brussels. While these military actions were taking place, Bavaria's claimant to the Austrian throne died, prompting Bavaria to make a separate peace with Maria Theresa, securing the return of lands Austria had taken and pledging its support of Maria Theresa's husband, Francis I, as Holy Roman Emperor. With Prussian forces now isolated in Silesia, Maria Theresa moved against Frederick II, who, however, struck preemptively at Hohenfriedberg on June 4, 1745, routing her army. Frederick defeated two more of Maria Theresa's armies advancing against Berlin (at Hennersdorf on November 24, 1745, and at Kesseldorf, near Dresden, on December 14, 1745), prompting the empress to sign the Treaty of Dresden, affirming Prussia's control of Silesia in return for Frederick's support of her husband's accession to the Holy Roman throne.

Although the original cause of the war—the question of the Austrian succession—had been resolved, bitter, ruinous, and non-decisive combat continued in India and especially in North America, where the War of Jenkins's Ear had dissolved into King George's War, fought mainly by the British against colonial Spain and France. As in the earlier Queen Anne's War (1702–13), the American phase of the War of the Spanish Succession-combat in North America was largely a campaign of wilderness guerrilla action heavily involving France's Indian allies, who harried and terrorized English settlers.

The War of the Austrian Succession and its associated conflicts in America and India were ended less on account of the powers involved having achieved their political and military objectives than from a general state of exhaustion on all sides.

Terms

The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was far less eloquent than the TREATY OF UTRECHT, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession with vivid evocations of the devastation of war and almost poetic aspirations to universal amity. In contrast, the language of Aix-la-Chapelle was straightforward and dispassionate, yet it also recognized the necessity of a European community of interest superior to destructive nationalist ambitions: "Europe sees the day, which Divine Providence had pointed out for the reestablishment of its repose. A general peace succeeds to the long and bloody war . . ."

There shall be a Christian, universal and perpetual peace, as well by sea as land, and a sincere and lasting friendship between the eight powers above-mentioned, and between their heirs and successors, kingdoms, states, provinces, countries, subjects and vassals, of what rank and condition soever they may

be, without exception of places or persons. So that the high contracting powers may have the greatest attention to maintain between them and their said states and subjects, this reciprocal friendship and correspondence, not permitting any sort of hostilities to be committed, on one side or the other, on any cause, or under any pretence whatsoever; and avoiding everything that may, for the future, disturb the union happily reestablished between them; and, on the contrary, endeavouring to procure, on all occasions, whatever may contribute to their mutual glory, interest and advantage, without giving any assistance or protection, directly or indirectly, to those who would injure or prejudice any of the contracting parties.

Aside from the cession of Silesia to Prussia, the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was an example of a document restoring the status quo antebellum, reestablishing conditions as they were prior to war. The construction and language of Aix-la-Chapelle were strikingly modern, taking special pains to reiterate and reaffirm existing treaties and agreements:

The treaties of Westphalia of 1648; those of Madrid, between the crowns of England and Spain, of 1667, and 1670; the treaties of peace of Nimegen of 1678, and 1679; of Ryswick of 1697; of Utrecht of 1713; of Baden of 1714; the treaty of the Triple Alliance of the Hague of 1717; that of the Quadruple Alliance of London of 1718; and the treaty of peace of Vienna of 1738, serve as a basis and foundation to the general peace, and to the present treaty; and, for this purpose, they are renewed and confirmed in the best form, and as if they were herein inserted, word for word; so that they shall be punctually observed for the future in all their tenour, and religiously executed on the one side and the other; such points however, as have been derogated from in the present treaty, excepted.

The treaty also carefully spelled out the disposition of prisoners of war, the removal of occupation forces (within six weeks), and the dismantling of fortifications.

Consequences

The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was a "modern"-sounding legal and diplomatic document that (in contrast to the Treaty of Utrecht) makes scant mention of aspiration toward universal or lasting peace. It was the product of exhaustion rather than genuine resolution, a mere truce, really. Although it restored the status quo in America too, giving Louisburg back to France, its very focus on that fort caught the attention of both countries and made them aware of the increasing strength, and thus increasing importance, of Britain's American subjects. That awareness itself would spark the even more destructive Seven Years' War to come.