



A Short History of the War of the Spanish Succession - The Struggle between the House of Bourbon and the House of Habsburg (Illustrated)

Carlton Hayes

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One of the main reasons that prompted Louis XIV to sue for peace and to abandon his claims on Lorraine and the Palatinate was the rapid physical decline of the inglorious Spanish monarch, Charles II, of whose enormous possessions the French king hoped by diplomacy and intrigue to secure valuable portions. Spain was still a great power. Under its crown were gathered not only the ancient kingdoms of Castile, Aragon, and Navarre in the Spanish peninsula, but the greater part of the Belgian Netherlands, and in Italy the kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the duchy of Milan, and the control of Tuscany, as well as the huge colonial empire in America and the Philippines. At the time when kings were absolute rulers and reckoned their territories as personal possessions, much depended upon the royal succession.

Now it happened that the Spanish Habsburgs were dying out in the male line. Charles II was himself without children or brothers. Of his sisters, the elder was the wife of Louis XIV and the younger was married to the Emperor Leopold, the heir of the Austrian Habsburgs. Louis XIV had renounced by the peace of the Pyrenees (1659) all claims to the Spanish throne on condition that a large dowry be paid him, but the impoverished state of the Spanish exchequer had prevented the payment of the dowry. Louis, therefore, might lay claim to the whole inheritance of Charles II and entertain the hope of seeing the Bourbons supplant the Habsburgs in some of the fairest lands of Christendom. In opposition to the French contention, the emperor was properly moved by family pride to put forth the claim of his wife and that of himself as the nearest male relative of the Spanish king. If the contention of Leopold were sustained, a single Habsburg ruler might once more unite an empire as vast as that which the Emperor Charles V had once ruled. On the other side, if the ambition of Louis XIV were realized, a new and formidable Bourbon empire would be erected. In either case the European "balance of power" would be destroyed...

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