Entry #33002

# The War of the Austrian Succession

Daniel Clark

Senior Division

Paper

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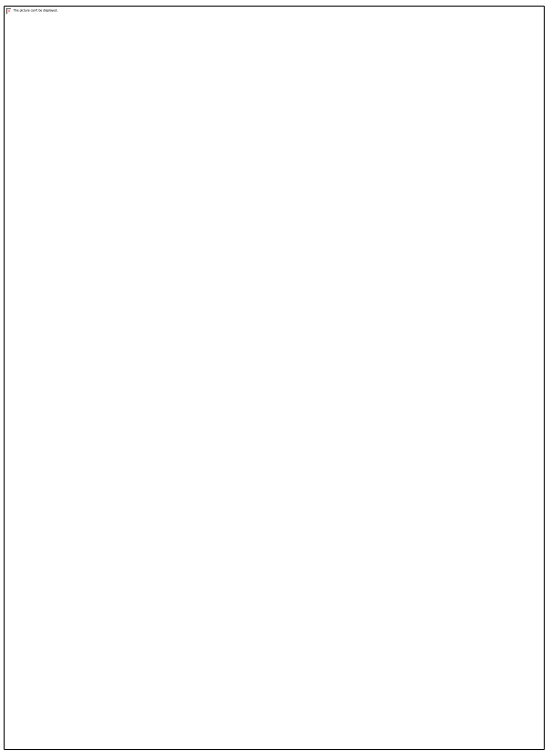
Over the course of European history, few events can be said to have been as transformative in their impact as the War of the Austrian Succession (1740—48). The war, which was fought in at least three distinct theaters[1], marked a turning point for European diplomacy in that it established a basic mechanism by which military conflicts would be resolved. Additionally, the circumstances of the war and its resolution were profoundly influential on the political history of Europe: the war shaped the Prussian state's status as a great power, furthered the Habsburg dynasty's claim to power in Europe, and, most importantly, established a framework for diplomatic resolution of conflict that arguably persists into the modern era.[2]



*Battle of Dettingen, fought on 16 June 1743 in the War of the Austrian Succession* by Harry Payne

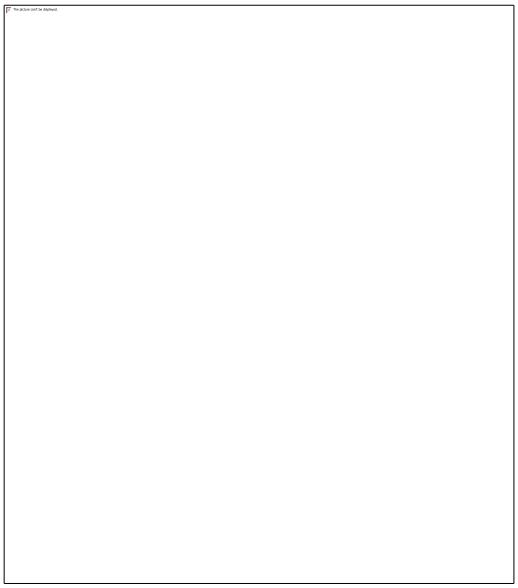
While the war began in earnest in 1740 with the accession of Maria Theresa to the throne of the Austrian Empire, which included Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, and Silesia, upon the death of her father, Charles VI,[3] the roots of the conflict ran much deeper than one political event. The accession of an eldest daughter, unheard of in the history of the Habsburg Empire and in most of European political history, was

[1] See Appendix A for map of theaters.
[2] Lesaffer, Randall. "The Diplomatic Revolution: The First Alliance of Versailles (1756)."
[3] "Austrian Succession, War of the." The Columbia Encyclopedia, Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University, Columbia University Press, 7th edition, 2017.

ensured by Charles in 1713 via a document known as the Pragmatic Sanction.[4] Enacted in the aftermath of

the War of the Spanish Succession (1701—1714), the document was an amendment of a previous pact (dated 1703) between Charles and his elder brother Joseph which gave the rights of succession to the daughters of Joseph. The Pragmatic Sanction, the result of two years' worth of rushed secret council meetings, concerned at the time of its signing children of Charles who were not yet born. By the time of Charles' death, the daughters of Joseph and their husbands stood poised to challenge Charles' children's claims.

The official granting of the right of succession to heirs "both male and female" was unprecedented in European political history, which had for more than a millennium been dictated by Salic law, a Frankish code of civil law that, in addition to other provisions, established a strict system of primogeniture called agnatic succession that precluded females from inheriting a throne or other fief.[5] Charles' sanction violated this stipulation by declaring the indivisibility of all Habsburg lands under an heir of either gender. Most courts of Europe accepted the mandate, including eventually Prussia, the military rival of Austria. Notably, France, Spain, and Prussia, the most important military powers in Europe at the time, accepted the sanction reluctantly and only after some twenty years of



*Portrait of Empress Maria-Theresa, Queen of Hungary* by Andreas Møller, date unknown

[4] "Déduction Concernant Les Droits De Succession Et De Substitution De La Sérénissime Maison Électorale De Bavière..." Gallica, National Library of France, 27 Mar. 2017.
Image: "Battle of Dettingen." British Battles. Harry Payne.
[5] Rowlands, Guy. "Austrian Succession, War of the (1740–1748)." Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World, edited by Jonathan Dewald, vol. 1, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004, pp. 174-76.

campaigning on the part of Charles, while trade giants Great Britain and the independent Netherlands accepted only in return for economic concessions.

To reduce the source of the conflict to ideological disputes over a single document, though, would be an oversimplification. Of primary concern to all parties in the war in terms of territory was the Habsburg-controlled province of Bohemia, spanning about 20,000 square miles of the modern-day Czech Republic and including the territories of Silesia and Moravia, the former of which was of great economic value to the Austrian empire. Though the Habsburgs had held Bohemia since 1526, the dynasty's political hold on the province had never been completely steady, at least in part due to a history of religious conflict between the predominantly Protestant Bohemians and their Roman Catholic overlords.[6] Additionally, the province's wealth lent itself to a particularly high tax burden for Bohemian citizens of the empire, and together these factors contributed to disloyalty on the part of the Bohemian nobility towards Maria Theresa's claim.[7]

The reluctance of the European powers to accept the concession in full turned out to be more than a nuisance for the government of the Habsburg territories, as it provided an eventual impetus for the war. Charles VI passed away from an illness on 20 October 1740, resulting in the immediate accession of Maria Theresa to the throne of the Habsburg Empire (though not to the elected and explicitly male position of Holy Roman Emperor[8]), who was nearly immediately challenged by European militaries.[9] Throughout the month of December, troops ordered by the newly minted Emperor of Brandenburg-Prussia, Frederick II, filed into the Habsburg territory of

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[6] Louthan, Howard. "Bohemia." Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World, edited by Jonathan Dewald, vol. 1, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004, pp. 275-80.

[7] Krueger, Rita A. "Mediating Progress in the Provinces: Central Authority, Local Elites, and Agrarian Societies in Bohemia and Moravia." Austrian History Yearbook, vol. 35, 2004, p. 49+.

[8] The position of Holy Roman Emperor was an elected office whose holder, typically a Habsburg, ruled over a loose coalition of German-speaking states as the informal ruler of most of German-speaking Europe.

[9] See Appendix B for map of campaigns.

Silesia without a declaration of war on the grounds that the other princes of Europe would use the succession as a pretext for the division of the Holy Roman Empire amongst themselves. The inability of the Austrians to defend Silesia can be explained by a general weakness of military might resulting from other existing conflicts: at the time of the war's commencement, Austria's resources were exhausted by territorial conflicts with Spain and the Ottoman Empire that constrained the empire's budget. The most significant military event in the Silesian theater of the war occurred at Mollwitz (modern-day Małujowice, Poland)[10], where Frederick's troops defeated Austrian forces led by Wilhelm Reinhard von Neipperg in April of 1741. The effect of this victory was a more serious consideration of the military capabilities of the Prussian state by the other European powers, most notably France and Bavaria, whose leader Karl Albert was a claimant to the position of Holy Roman Emperor. Prussia, France, Bavaria, Spain, and Saxony formed a coalition whose explicit intent was to seize the Habsburg lands and divide them amongst themselves. The first act of this new coalition was to occupy Bohemia in November 1742; the second was to elect Karl Albert Holy Roman Emperor (as Charles VII) and crown him Archduke of Austria and King of Bohemia.[6] Meanwhile, the Austrian army was making gains under the leadership of such skilled generals as Neipperg and Ludwig Andreas von Khevenhüller commanding tens of thousands of loyal ethnic Hungarians, and in early 1742, the Bavarian capital of Munich was captured and returned to the Austrians. 1742 also saw the signing of a precarious peace treaty between Maria Theresa and Frederick at Breslau. This first example of compromise in the war saw Maria Theresa cede most of Silesia to the Prussians, who additionally gained control of the Bohemian county of Glatz.[6] In 1743, Maria Theresa was crowned Queen of Bohemia.

[10] Rowlands, "Austrian Succession, War of the."

Thus the first Silesian theater of the war concluded, but the conflict continued to rage on elsewhere in Europe and globally. One particularly influential view of the War of the Austrian Succession explains it in terms of the ancient Franco-British rivalry, yet another playing field on which Great Britain and France could wrestle for territorial and economic dominance in Europe and the world.[11,12] In 1744, Louis XV, king of France (previously a member of Frederick's coalition), declared war on England, the ally of Austria, accusing the king of acting in the interest of the English nation rather than in Europe as a whole. Two months later, Frederick signed a full alliance with France and retained his alliance with Spain, reviving the coalition formed against Maria Theresa in Silesia. Spain had interests at opposition with those of Great Britain and with the king of Sardinia, whose territory became a playing field for the broader theater of the war. This theater saw less success for Frederick's armies, who were ultimately unable to capture the Low Countries.

1744 saw the recommencement of the Silesian theater of war as part of a new strategy on the part of Frederick to close in Maria Theresa via a two-front war. In August, Prussia invaded Bohemia, though the Austrians continued to hold Bavaria. The jurisdiction of this territory by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VII was called into question with the monarch's death in exile. Charles VII's successor, his son Maximilian III Joseph, troubled by the opposing advisorial urges to continue pursuing Austrian territories and to make peace, ultimately chose the latter route, signing the Treaty of Fussen on 22 April.[13] In this document, Maria Theresa recognized the legitimacy of Charles VII's election as Holy Roman Emperor. In return, Maximilian pledged

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[11] Black, Jeremy. "British Foreign Policy and the War of the Austrian Succession, 1740-48: A Research Priority." Canadian Journal of History, vol. 21, no. 3, Dec. 1986, p. 313.
[12] de Missy, Jean Rousset. "Exposition Des Motifs Apparens Et Réels Qui Ont Causé & Perpétué La Guerre Présente . Par Mr. R. G. D. M. R. D. M." Gallica, National Library of France, 16 Sept. 2013.
[13] The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Maximilian III Joseph." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1 Aug. 2011.

his support for the claim of Francis Stephen of Lorraine, Maria Theresa's husband, to that position, winning over the votes of the key electorates of Cologne and the Palatinate.[7]

Meanwhile, in northern Europe, French armies under Louis XV and Maurice de Saxe defeated an army of English, Dutch, and Austrian soldiers at Fontenoy, present-day Belgium, taking advantage of the absence from the field of the Duke of Cumberland, the crown prince of Great Britain, currently occupied with an uprising in Scotland. French armies continued to make inroads in the Netherlands, capturing Brussels in February of 1746. In response, British soldiers captured the fortress of Louisbourg in French Canada; in retaliation, the French attacked the British fortress in Madras, India, the geographically broadest extent of the war. Seven months after Fontenoy, Silesia was permanently ceded to Prussia in return for Prussia's recognition of Francis Stephen as Holy Roman Emperor, a revised version of the compromise in the peace at Breslau.[6]

This model of compromise involving territorial concession in return for recognition of political authority was the dominant framework for the multiple peace treaties of the war, including those already mentioned and the treaty that formally ended hostilities. After fighting petered out in 1747 and 1748, the heads of state of Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands convened at Aix-la-Chapelle, situated on the border between France and the Holy Roman Empire, to carve up Europe for the most part in terms of recent territorial winnings and concessions: Frederick maintained his new control of Silesia, the king of Sardinia now controlled formerly Austrian territory in the duchy of Milan, and the Austrians turned over territory in northern Italy to the Spanish Bourbons.[14] The French wing of that family went home nearly

[14] Secrétariat d'Etat aux affaires étrangères (1589-1791), France. "Traité De Paix Entre Le Roi, Le Roi De La Grande Bretagne…" Gallica, National Library of France, 26 Dec. 2011.

empty-handed, being forced by the terms of the treaty to concede all the Dutch land taken by de Saxe and Louis XV. Later, reconciliation between France and Austria would be sealed with the betrothal of Louis XV's grandson to Maria Theresa's daughter Maria Antonia; Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette ruled France from 1774 to 1792.

Despite the loss of some key territory, the end result of the treaty was the preservation of much of Maria Theresa's inheritance as laid out in the Pragmatic Sanction: she now firmly held the title of head of the Austrian state and indirectly that of Holy Roman Emperor. Maria Theresa would go on to rule for thirty more years until her death in 1780, unquestionably one of the most powerful women of her time and among the most powerful political figures in all of European history, regularly described by her subjects as "exalted" and "the most learned woman" of all of Europe.[15] Her remarkable success in achieving her political aims during the war to secure her accession is a testament to her personal power and political influence.[16]

The ultimate consequence of the War of the Austrian Succession transcends the redrawing of political boundaries, the introduction of new military strategies, and the legacies of great men and women. The manifestation of the conflict in multiple theaters across Europe and the world makes it a persuasive case to argue for as the first truly global war, as would later be argued of the Seven Years' War and the world wars of the twentieth century. The resolution of the war at Aix-la-Chapelle, which as aforementioned drew upon the treaties of Breslau and Dresden signed during the war, provided a model for later adjournments to major military conflicts.[17] Building upon the model of national sovereignty established in the Peace of

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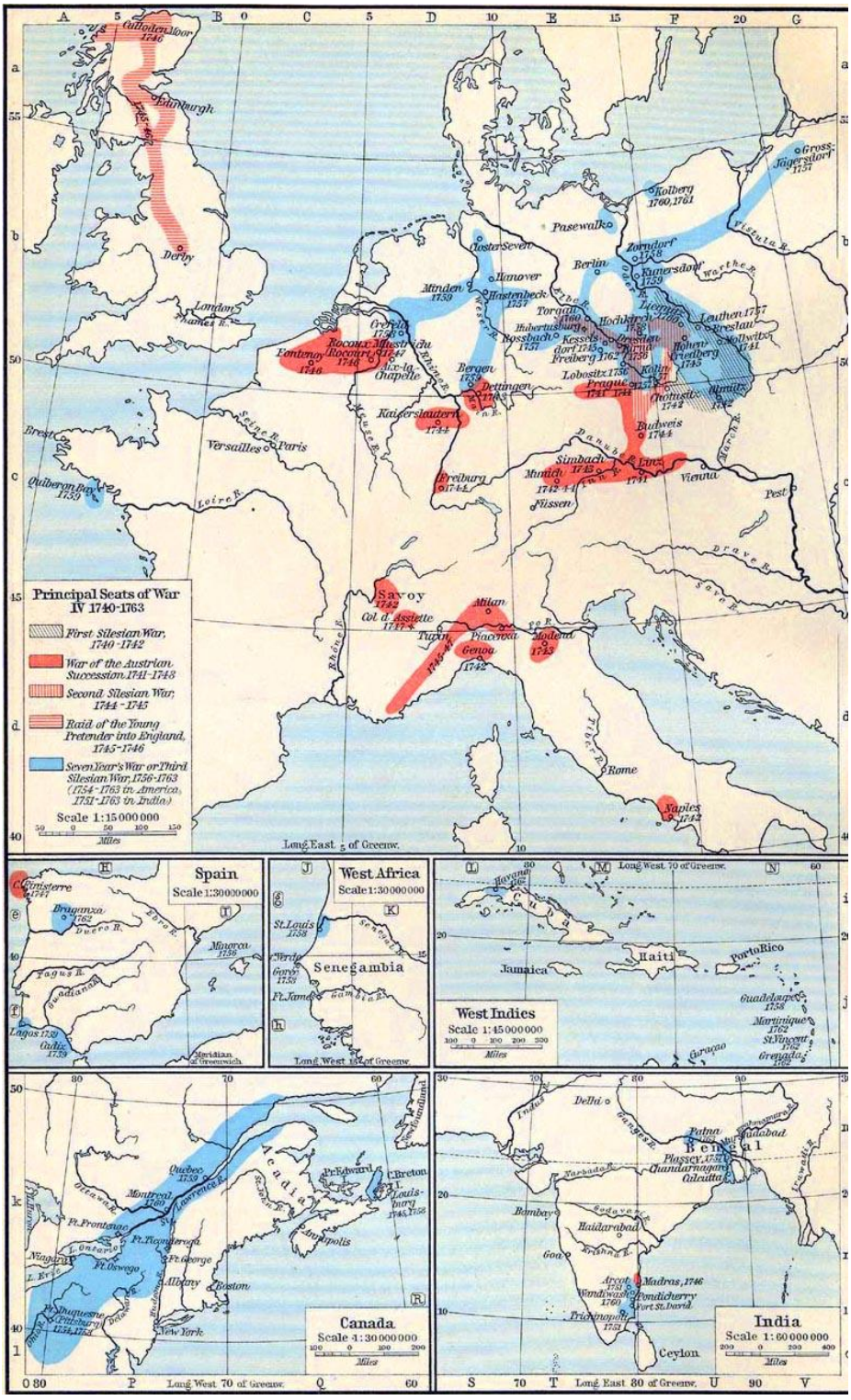
[15] Gottsched, Luise. "Description of the Empress Maria Theresa, 1749." Internet History Sourcebooks, Fordham University, Jan. 1999.
[16] Mutschlechner, Martin. "The War of Austrian Succession." Die Welt Der Habsburger, The World of the Habsburgs.
[17] "Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Britannica.com, Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 July 1998

Westphalia in 1648, the treaty codified the practice of territorial concessions in response for recognition of another party's political authority. Additionally, the alliance system that pitted France, Spain, and Prussia against Austria, Britain, and the Netherlands persisted, albeit with some modifications: during the Seven Years' War, Great Britain, realizing the threat of Austrian hegemony, formally allied itself with Prussia. The effect of the war on that state was as a great military success. By gaining access to the wealth of Silesia and demonstrating military might under the bold leadership of Frederick II[18], the kingdom of Prussia began to consolidate its reputation as "an army with a country", ushering in a new era of geopolitical history in which the Prussian state dominated the political and diplomatic landscape of Europe. Indeed, Prussian involvement in the War of the Austrian Succession sowed the seeds for later military conflicts with France (the Franco-Prussian War and the Napoleonic Wars) and for the eventual unification of Germany.

[18] "Frederick, II." Encyclopedia of World Biography, Gale, 1998. World History in Context.

# Appendix A


Principal Seats of War
IV 1740-1763
First Silesian War, 1740-1742
War of the Austrian Succession, 1741-1748
Second Silesian War, 1744-1745
Raid of the Young Pretender into England, 1745-1746
Seven Year's War or Third Silesian War, 1756-1763 (1754-1763 in America, 1751-1763 in India)
Scale 1:15 000 000
Miles
Long. East 5 of Greenw.
Spain
Scale 1:30 000 000
West Africa
Scale 1:30 000 000
Senegambia
West Indies
Scale 1:45 000 000
Canada
Scale 1:30 000 000
India
Scale 1:60 000 000
Long. West 70 of Greenw.
Long. East 80 of Greenw.

Appendix B

Annotated Bibliography

**Primary Sources**

"Déduction Concernant Les Droits De Succession Et De Substitution De La Sérénissime Maison Électorale De Bavière Aux Royaumes De Hongrie Et De Bohême, Ainsi Qu'à L'archiduché D'Autriche Et Autres Etats En Dépendants." *Gallica*, National Library of France, 27 Mar. 2017.

This is a treatise on the specific terms of the succession to the Austrian throne, specifically the Pragmatic Sanction of Charles VI, and the conflict that was currently brewing in provinces of the Austrian empire in relation to them. In other words, it established a pretext for the conflict, and was key to the content of my paper because it provided insight into the views and opinions that people living contemporary to the War of the Austrian Succession had on its context.

de Missy, Jean Rousset. "Exposition Des Motifs Apparens Et Réels Qui Ont Causé & Perpétué La Guerre Présente . Par Mr. R. G. D. M. R. D. M." *Gallica*, National Library of France, 16 Sept. 2013.

This essay, published in 1744, is an opinion piece by its author on the motivations of the war between France and Prussia on one side and England and Austria on the other. It thus serves as an exposition on the ideological origins of the war, explaining the origins of the conflict in terms of the geopolitical situation at the time of its beginning.

Gottsched, Luise. "Description of the Empress Maria Theresa, 1749." *Internet History Sourcebooks*, Fordham University, Jan. 1999.

This is a rare primary source document: a letter from a contemporary of Maria Theresa describing her physically and emotionally. This portrait of arguably the most important figure in the conflict provides insight into its causes specifically relevant to the empress's character and composure. I used it to defend my assertion that Maria Theresa's personal power was one of the driving forces behind the conflict of my topic.

"Friedenspräliminarien von Füssen." *Europäische Friedensverträge der Vormoderne,* Leibniz Institute of European History, 1745.

These are the exact terms of the treaty of Füssen, signed between Bavaria and Austria in order to quell the rebellion in the Holy Roman Empire after Charles VII's election as Holy Roman Emperor. In it, Maria Theresa recognized the late Charles VII's authority in exchange for his son's pledged support for Maria Theresa's husband. Its mutual concessions laid the foundation for the terms of the eventual Treaty of Aix-la-Chappelle, and as such it was influential on the ultimate resolution of the conflict.

Secrétariat d'Etat aux affaires étrangères (1589-1791), France. "Traité De Paix Entre Le Roi, Le Roi De La Grande Bretagne, Et Les Etats Généraux Des Provinces-Unies Des Pays-Bas, Conclu à Aix-La-Chapelle Le 18 Octobre 1748." *Gallica,* National Library of France, 26 Dec. 2011.

This is the text of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, the document that formally concluded the War of the Austrian Succession; it is thus the most comprehensive source of the terms under which the compromise occurred. I used it to cite the official terms of the compromise and later to analyze the effects of these terms.

"Vereinbarungen von Nizza zum Friedensvertrages von Aachen." *Europäische Friedensverträge der Vormoderne,* Leibniz Institute of European History, 1748.

This Italian-language document lays out the terms of the agreement at Aix-la-Chappelle, specifically those concerning the city-state of Nice. I cited these concessions as one of the many negotiated at Aix-la-Chappelle during the compromise.

**Secondary Sources**

"Austrian Succession, War of the." *The Columbia Encyclopedia,* Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University, Columbia University Press, 7th edition, 2017. *Credo Reference*. Accessed 08 Sep 2017.

A brief encyclopedic entry covering the beginning and end of the war; it provides information on the nature of the conflict's beginning, course, and end with the compromise. I used its structure as a model for the structure of my own paper.

Black, Jeremy. "British Foreign Policy and the War of the Austrian Succession, 1740-48: A Research Priority." Canadian Journal of History, vol. 21, no. 3, Dec. 1986, p. 313. EBSCOhost.

This journal entry details the conflict from a British point of view by explaining it in terms of British military interests, which dominated the United Kingdom's foreign policy during the eighteenth century and which were threatened by Prussian claims to Habsburg territories. I used this to show the motivations that the British had for entering the conflict.

Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, editor. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Britannica.com, 27 Mar. 2014. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.

This is an overview of the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713, considered the primary impetus of the war. As the driving "cause" of the war, this document played the largest role of any in the beginning of the conflict. I cited this document as a driver for the conflict multiple times in my paper.

The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Maximilian III Joseph." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1 Aug. 2011. Accessed 21 Oct. 2017.

General biography of Maximilian III Joseph, elector of Bavaria, whose internal conflict over whether to continue war in Silesia influenced the ultimate victory of the Austrians. This was cited to clarify the mention of the conflict within the states of the Holy Roman Emperor.

"Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Britannica.com, Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 July 1998. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.

This is a summary of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, the document that formally ended the war. Unlike the aforementioned primary source, which contains only the text of the treaty, this is an analysis that peers into the nature of the compromise in terms of the origins of the conflict. Additionally, it puts the treaty in a broader historical context as the progenitor of a fundamental change in how European foreign affairs were conducted.

"Frederick, II." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, Gale, 1998. *World History in Context*. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.

This article is a general biography of Frederick the Great, a key political figure in the war as the primary opponent of Maria Theresa's claim. It explains, as part of its summarization of Frederick's life, the role that his life circumstances played in his political actions, including declaring war on Austria in 1740. These political actions ultimately informed the course of the conflict discussed in the paper.

Krueger, Rita A. "Mediating Progress in the Provinces: Central Authority, Local Elites, and Agrarian Societies in Bohemia and Moravia." *Austrian History Yearbook*, vol. 35, 2004, p. 49+. *World History in Context*. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.

A lengthy analysis of some contextual factors that may have contributed to political tensions in 18th-century Habsburg lands. While not mentioning the topic directly, it formulates a setting against which the conflict unraveled and a picture of the impact of the war on central government in postwar Austria. It strengthened my explanation of the conflict and my description of the ramifications of the compromise.

Lesaffer, Randall. "The Diplomatic Revolution: The First Alliance of Versailles (1756)." Oxford Public International Law, Oxford University Press, 2017. Accessed 24 Oct. 2017.

This is an explanation of the alliance system that developed in European diplomacy beginning with and as a result of the war. I used it to explain the effect of the event on later conflicts and compromises.

Louthan, Howard. “Bohemia.” *Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, edited by Jonathan Dewald, vol. 1, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004, pp. 275-80. *World History in Context*. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.

An overview of the geography and history of Bohemia, one of the territories concerned in the war. In its explanation of the role Bohemia played in the War of the Austrian Succession, the article uses the territory as an underlying factor in the tension between Austria and Prussia that sparked the conflict.

“Maria Theresa.” *Historic World Leaders*, edited by Anne Commire, Gale, 1994. *Biography in Context*. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.

This is a detailed political and personal biography of Maria Theresa. Like the examples above, this contextualizes the events of the conflict in terms of the life story of one of its defining figures, Maria Theresa.

“Maria Theresa Succeeds to the Austrian Throne (War of Austrian Succession Begins), October 20, 1740.” *Historic World Events*, Detroit, Gale, 2014. *World History in Context*. Accessed 7 Sept. 2017.

This is a general description of the event which sparked the conflict: the accession of Maria

Theresa. I referred to this as the definitive start date for the war, which shaped the structure of the

remainder of my paper.

Mutschlechner, Martin. “The War of Austrian Succession.” Die Welt Der Habsburger, The World of the Habsburgs. Accessed 23 Oct. 2017.

This excerpt from a biography of Maria Theresa explains the military sequence of events in the conflict and specifically the role of Maria Theresa's diplomacy. I cited it in my discussion of Maria Theresa’s role in establishing the compromise. Its general structure and view of the war also shaped the structure, flow, and sequence of my paper.

Rowlands, Guy. “Austrian Succession, War of the (1740–1748).” *Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, edited by Jonathan Dewald, vol. 1, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004, pp. 174-76. *World History in Context*. Accessed 7 Sept. 2017.

This is a summary of the origins and course of the war. Such an analysis provides great insight into the manner in which the circumstances (including origins, course, and conclusion) altered the geopolitical landscape of Europe for the next 300 years, and so it was the main source of information for the section of the paper concerning the compromise.

“Silesian Wars.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, edited by Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. *Britannica.com*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 7 Oct. 2015. Accessed 7 Sept. 2017.

Description of the events of the Silesian theater of war. It was in terms of the conflict in Silesia that many of the terms of the Treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle were decided upon, something that is mentioned in my section on the compromise.

Zollner, Erich, and Reinhold F. Wagnleitner. “Austria - Social, economic, and cultural trends in the Baroque period.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. *Britannica.com*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 24 Aug. 2017. Accessed 7 Sept. 2017.

General analysis of political and cultural context of Austria in the 18th century. This analysis includes the War of the Austrian Succession both in terms of the circumstances under which it transpired and the way the politics of Austria and Europe as a whole were affected by it.

**Images**

“Battle of Dettingen.” Harry Payne. British Battles.

This image depicts sparring between Austrian and French soldiers at the Battle of Dettingen in 1743. It is a fine illustration of the realities of warfare in Europe at the time, which involved swordplay and which was often idealized and glorified. Thus a single illustration can convey the ideology behind the conflict.