

Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-Rietberg, Austrian Chancellor (1755)

Abstract

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Holy Roman Empire and its Habsburg ruler, Leopold I (r. 1658-1705), faced the twin foreign threats of Louis XIV's (r. 1661-1715) expansionism and the Ottoman Turks' advance toward central Europe. France's expansionist wars ended after Louis's death in 1715, and the Turkish threat was contained by 1718. For much of the rest of the eighteenth century, the foreign policy of the Holy Roman Empire and Habsburg Austria focused largely on defending the imperial crown and Austrian territory from Prussia's Frederick II ("the Great") (r. 1740-86). In 1753, the two Habsburg monarchs, Maria Theresa (r. 1740-80) and her son Joseph II (r. 1765-90), entrusted newly-appointed Austrian chancellor Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-Rietberg with the future of their lands. (Kaunitz would remain in office for nearly four decades, resigning only in 1792.) One of his first major objectives was to win back Austrian Silesia, which Frederick II had annexed in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48). Kaunitz's approach was to maintain an alliance with Russia, shift away from Austria's traditional allies – the Netherlands and Britain – and seek a defensive partnership with its erstwhile archenemy, France. At the outbreak of the Seven Years War (1756-63), he transformed this defensive partnership into an offensive alliance. The result was a momentous “reversal of alliances.” Kaunitz's plan to win back Silesia ultimately failed, and the Silesian Wars marked the beginning of a conflict of interest between Austria and Prussia (German dualism) that would lead, a few years later, to new military confrontations, namely the War of the Bavarian Succession. Under his chancellorship, Austria pursued an aggressive policy of territorial annexation, seizing Polish Galicia (1772), Turkish-ruled Bukovina (1775), and the so-called Bavarian Inn Quarter (1779). Kaunitz's “enlightened absolutist” political thought proved a major influence on Maria Theresa's and Joseph II's reform policies.

Source



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