

GREAT POWER RIVALRIES – Gregory Brown UNLV

The balance-of-power system generally worked quite well. However, there were a few stable and persistent rivalries. As states maneuvered to grab territory and colonies, they kept confronting the same competitors.

In Western Europe, there were four rivals: Spain, Holland, France, and England. Spain had won a colossal empire in the Americas during the age of exploration, and Holland, for a time, held colonies in Brazil and in New York, but these two powers were generally in decline. France and England, however, were on the rise. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, England's financial might and naval power won for it a vast empire in North America and India. France too carved out colonies in these areas. Colonial competition between England and France was a continual source of conflict.

WESTERN EUROPE	
SPAIN	A huge empire in South and Central America up into today's Western U.S. and Florida
HOLLAND	Colonies in today's Indonesia and West Indies, briefly in Brazil and New York
FRANCE	Vast empires in today's Canada and parts of India
ENGLAND	Great swaths of North America, the Caribbean, and India (to include the French portions of both after 1763)

In Eastern Europe, the main rivals were Sweden, Russia, Prussia, Austria, and the Ottoman Turks. Here, Russia, Prussia and Austria emerged at the top of the heap. Prussia gradually conquered Sweden's possessions at the river mouths on the south side of the Baltic in today's Germany and Poland; Russia conquered most of the Swedish possessions to the east beginning with its defeat of Sweden in 1712. In the late-18th century, Russia also seized many of the European territories of the Ottoman Turks. Prussia won territory from its rival ethnic German state Austria, seizing Silesia in 1740. Austria, in turn, re-conquered substantial territories from the Ottoman Turks and secured dominion over Hungary.

These three eastern powers - Russia, Prussia, and Austria - built their strength at the expense of three older political organizations that had previously been dominant in Eastern Europe: the Holy Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Republic of Poland. These latter three failed to develop a strong centralized government with the ability to extend its authority over its entire realm. Moreover, these three entities were comprised of heterogeneous populations. In the case of the Holy Roman Empire, the subject states were more powerful than the main seat of rule (Vienna). In Poland, the landed aristocracy, which comprised perhaps 8% of the population (far more than anywhere else), usurped power, never allowing the state to develop a centralized administration. In the Ottoman Empire, the court around the sultan became

increasingly corrupt, and the sultans themselves became more and more reclusive, leaving power in the hands of distant governors, or pashas, who became more interested in their own enrichment than in effective rule. The building blocks of efficient administration were never mortared into anything of lasting value.

EASTERN AND NORTHERN EUROPE	
SWEDEN	Losses in Baltic
RUSSIA	Gains in Baltic and in southeastern Europe
PRUSSIA	Gains in Silesia
AUSTRIA	Loss of Silesia; secured domination over Hungary
OTTOMAN EMPIRE	Losses in Hungary and southeastern Europe

The power games between the great rivals had drastic implications for the map of Europe. In the late-18th century, for instance, the once powerful state of Poland disappeared from the map, not to return until 1918. The weakening of the Ottoman Turks in central Europe promised territory for expansionist Russia and Austria. When war threatened, Prussia concocted a plan to satisfy all three powers. Russia, Austria, and Prussia ignored the Ottomans and instead carved up the sprawling Polish state, which had once been the largest state in Europe. Weakened by war and plague, it soon ceased to exist. In this way, the new state system ruthlessly achieved a balance of power in Eastern Europe.

Securing the balance of power across Europe required coalitions among the great powers. Locked in colonial rivalry with France, England allied itself for many years with Austria. France feared the power of the Austrian Hapsburg dynasty in the western German states and in Italy; France therefore allied itself with Prussia in the early-18th century, while Britain was allied with Austria. In 1756, these habitual alliances were dramatically reordered. France and England remained rivals, but in the so-called "Diplomatic Revolution," France allied with Austria and Russia against England and Prussia!

The shape of these coalitions determined the course of the great 18th-century wars. The first to occur was also the last great struggle for the aging Louis XIV - the War of the Spanish Succession, 1701-1713. This began, as already noted, in an effort to forestall Louis's grandson from inheriting the throne of Spain from the last Hapsburg ruler. When that could not be achieved, it became a war to prevent too great an accumulation of Bourbon influence, i.e., to compel Spain to give up its possessions in today's Belgium and in Italy (Lombardy and Naples) and certain colonial rights. The Treaty of Utrecht, which concluded the main part of the war, did give Austria the former Spanish Netherlands.

In 1733, the powers embarked on the War of the Polish Succession to determine whether a French candidate or a Saxon candidate would inherit that large but sprawling kingdom. In 1740, another war erupted over the Austrian succession. Charles of Austria wanted to ensure that his daughter Maria Theresa would inherit all the crown lands of the Hapsburgs, and spent years seeking reassurances from the other powers. When he died, Frederick II (later christened "the Great") of Prussia, who had just come to the throne, used the occasion to seize the Hapsburg territory of Silesia, which almost doubled Prussia's population. During the course of the war, he managed to retain Silesia, but ensure Austrian enmity for many years to come.

The next European war was the great Seven Years' War (1756-1763), often considered the first global war (although the earlier War of the Spanish Succession involved major stakes in the Americas as well). The Seven Years' War (known as the "French and Indian War" in North American colonies) began when France and England collided over their colonial ambitions in North America. Soon the war spread to Europe and involved all of the great powers. There was even fighting between France and England in India and the Caribbean. England allied with Prussia, and fought off a devastating assault on Prussia by Austria, France, and Russia.

When the war ended, Prussia had maintained its territory, and there were no major territorial shuffles in Eastern Europe (though, in an important development, Russia emerged as key player in the European balance of power). Also, Italy was uncontested in the Seven Years' War, which allowed the states of that peninsula to advance in relative prosperity. France had lost its American colonial possessions and England emerged as the greatest colonial power in North America. France would later seek revenge by helping the American colonies win independence from England (1778-1783). In the end, France's costly involvement in the American wars would cause its own financial collapse, and would pave the way for the French Revolution.

The 18th-century wars also transformed the role of what would later be called "patriotism" in European warfare. Earlier warfare had been fought largely over religion, or in the interests of particular dynasties. "Interests of state" had justified warfare throughout the 18th century, but the Seven Years' War was perhaps the first time that the interests of state were linked to a patriotic ideal, rather than a narrower dynastic one. In other words, British soldiers fought as "Britons" first and foremost, rather than as subjects of King George II. It was a subtle distinction, but an important one. In England and France particularly, the Seven Years' War saw an outpouring of patriotic propaganda. This emerging sense of national identity would play a much greater role in all future European warfare.

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