The War of the Spanish Succession

After the death of the Spanish Habsburg King Charles II on 1 November 1700, his last will designated Louis XIV's second grandson Philip Duc d'Anjou as his successor. In spite of the protests of other powers the transition seemed to go smoothly at first. In September 1701 the grand alliance of the Hague was formed between the United Provinces, England and Emperor Leopold I, who had declared war in spring and thus started the War of the Spanish Succession.

In terms of numbers the Grand Alliance and the Two Crowns were about evenly matched. On the Bourbon side the French Army was Europe's largest and the Spanish Army was rapidly expanding. On the alliance side the Dutch Army was the largest, closely followed by the English Army and the Austrian Habsburg army. Given these forces and the recent achievements of the French army a lot of Europeans probably counted on a French victory.

The war started with a surprising Austrian offensive by Prince Eugen in Italy in 1701 and an Anglo Dutch offensive on the lower Rhine and Meuse under Marlborough in 1702. Bavaria then joined France in September 1702 and Savoy and Portugal joined the Alliance. In 1704 France seemed well on its way to victory, but the Franco Bavarians were crushed in the Battle of Blenheim and the alliance took Gibraltar. In 1706 Marlborough was victorious again, this time in the Battle of Ramillies. This led to the allied conquest of the Spanish Netherlands and positively influenced Eugen's victory at the siege of Turin. In 1708 the Grand Alliance was victorious at Oudenaarde and in the siege of Lille. In the next year French could claim a strategic victory at Malplaquet and the war started to bog down in the French lines of defense. The war ended with England deserting its allies and making a peace that was very profitable for itself. Reading about the details of any of these battles could make one believe that the genius of Eugen, Marlborough and Villars decided the war.

Politics during the Spanish Succession War

The general policy of the participants and the actual decisions made by the people in power did however have just as big an influence of the outcome of the war as events on the battlefield. In the political arena we see the winter of the reign of Louis XIV; the brilliant reign of Queen Anne, the statesmanship of Anthonie Heinsius and the clever reign of Joseph I. These sovereigns and politicians were however constrained by the constitutions of the countries they ruled. While the constitution of France did not hinder Louis XIV, Felipe V had to cope with the backward Spanish constitution. On the side of the alliance Queen Anne had to cope with the English constitution that guarded English interests, just like Heinsius had to cope with the Dutch constitution that primarily guarded provincial interests. The Austrian emperors were least lucky because they had to deal with a bunch of renaissance institutions that could not be called an Austrian constitution.

The peace of Utrecht

From 1706 onwards the question of how and when to make peace and on what terms would dominate politics. To most of the contemporary observers Louis XIV scored a final victory at the negotiation table when peace was made in Utrecht in 1713. This was however only true relative to how the situation had looked in 1708. Overall the settlement nearly fitted the objectives the Alliance had originally set out to achieve. The only real difference was that England now gained most of advantages in stead of sharing them with her allies.

Prediction Time: From what you have read and your prior knowledge, please predict what effect that the Spanish Succession War will have on Europe. In your response, pay special attention to England and France.