

Duke of Orléans, Philippe II

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(1674-1723)

Duc d'Orléans, Philippe II, also called (until 1701) Duc de Chartres, regent of France for the young King Louis XV from 1715 to 1723.

The son of Philippe I, duc d'Orléans, and Elizabeth Charlotte of the Palatinate, Philippe d'Orléans was known as the duc de Chartres during his father's lifetime. Although he served with the French army against the English and Dutch in the War of the Grand Alliance (1689-97), his uncle, Louis XIV, excluded him from the high military commands to which he considered himself entitled. The Duc de Chartres retaliated by studiously neglecting his wife, Françoise-Marie de Bourbon, the King's favourite legitimized daughter. His irreverence, habitual drunkenness, and licentious behaviour had earned him an unsavoury reputation by the time he succeeded to his father's title in 1701. Nevertheless, he was given military commands in Italy (1706) and Spain (1707-08) during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14).

As premier prince of the blood royal, Orléans became regent for the five-year-old Louis XV upon the death of Louis XIV (Sept. 1, 1715). Through the provisions of his will, however, Louis XIV had left the effective power in the hands of his own two legitimized bastard sons in order to prevent Orléans from dismantling the system of absolute royal despotism. If the sickly Louis XV had died, the legitimized princes would have rejected Orléans's claim to the throne in favour of the claim of Louis XIV's grandson, King Philip V of Spain. Hence, in order to assert his authority as regent and advance his dynastic ambitions, Orléans induced the Parlement (high court of justice) of Paris to annul Louis XIV's will (Sept. 12, 1715). He then proceeded to institute an experimental system of conciliar government-known as la polysynodie-designed to destroy the authority of the secretaries of state and restore political power to the high nobility. The new system proved so cumbersome and inefficient that the Regent dissolved it in September 1718 and reinstated the secretaries of state.

Orléans's foreign policy was also tied to his dynastic interests. In 1716 he had his minister, the abbé (later Cardinal) Guillaume Dubois, concluded with Great Britain, France's traditional enemy, an alliance that secured British support against Philip V's claim to the succession to the French throne. France and Great Britain went to war with Spain in 1719, and in the following year Philip V was forced to renounce his French claims and recognize Orléans as Louis XV's heir.

Meanwhile, Orléans had to grapple with the acute fiscal problems that had resulted from the costly wars of Louis XIV. In 1717 he entrusted the reform of French finances to a Scottish banker, John Law, whose innovations led to a financial disaster three years later that severely discredited Orléans's regime. Orléans's regency ended when Louis XV came of age in February 1723. The following August, the Duc himself became first minister, but he died only four months later. Philippe Erlanger's biography of Orléans, *Le Régent*, was published in 1938.

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