

Duc de Choiseul

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(1719-1785)

Duc de (duke of) Choiseul, + tienne-Fran ois de Choiseul, also called (until 1758) Comte (count) de Stainville, French foreign minister who dominated the government of King Louis XV from 1758 to 1770.

Choiseul, the son of Fran ois-Joseph de Choiseul, Marquis de Stainville, adopted the title Count de Stainville, entered the French army, and served with distinction against the British and Austrians in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48). At the end of the conflict, he joined the circle of nobles around Louis XV, and in 1752 he earned the undying favour of the king's mistress, Mme de Pompadour, by preventing her from falling victim to a court intrigue. The following year Mme de Pompadour had Stainville appointed ambassador to the Vatican, where he persuaded Pope Benedict XIV to help reduce the tensions within the French church between the Gallicans (who favoured independence from the papacy) and the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). As a result of his successful mission, Stainville was made ambassador to the Austrian court (March 1757) and was instructed to develop the newly formed Austrian alliance. By that time France and Austria had entered the Seven Years' War.

In November 1758 Stainville was made Duke de Choiseul. The following month Louis XV recalled him to Versailles and designated him secretary of state for foreign affairs. The appointment came at a critical moment when French forces were being defeated by the Prussians on the European continent and by the British in North America and India. In August 1761 he concluded with Spain a military alliance that was known as the Pacte de Famille (Family Compact) because both countries were under Bourbon rule. The subsequent entry of Spain into the war (1762) gave Choiseul leverage in his negotiations with the British. By the Treaty of Paris (1763) France surrendered most of its North American and Indian colonies to Great Britain, but Choiseul's diplomatic maneuvers had enabled France to avoid even more humiliating terms.

Choiseul immediately began to rebuild French military power with the intent of striking back at the British. While serving as naval minister (1761-66) he dramatically increased the number of French warships, and as minister of war (1766-70) he initiated a period of army reforms that continued until the outbreak of the Revolution.

Choiseul did not, however, display the same boldness in domestic affairs. He was unwilling to challenge the authority of the Parlements (high courts of justice), which rejected all proposals for urgently needed financial reforms. He even stood by as the Parlement of Paris, against the will of the king, dissolved the Society of Jesus in 1762. In 1768-69 Louis XV brought into the ministry two men who were eager to take the offensive against Choiseul and the Parlements. When Choiseul called for war against Great Britain (1770), these ministers convinced the King that the government was too heavily in debt to finance such a venture. Louis dismissed Choiseul from office on Dec. 24, 1770, and exiled him to his estates at Chanteloup. Allowed to return to Paris in 1774 after the death of Louis XV, Choiseul never recovered political power.

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Last update: **2014/03/20 21:42**

