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PREFACE

The second half of the seventeenth century witnessed a fundamental shift in the balance of power in Europe. Whereas Spain, Denmark, and the Holy Roman Empire had been the dominant powers on the Continent in the early part of the century, by the end of the Thirty Years' War Sweden, the Dutch Republic, and France had joined their ranks, but the new balance also did not last long. The main factor working against general peace on the Continent was the long-standing French fear of encirclement by the Habsburgs. While other countries either through a lack of will or insufficient resources failed to maintain their position as key players on the European stage after 1650, France continued to grow militarily, and when it had exhausted its diplomatic options it chose to act unilaterally to achieve its goals. The War of Devolution in the late 1660s – though short-lived and limited in scope – left little doubt about French motives, and it turned out to be but a prelude to the French aggres-

sion of the 1670s. As France set about pushing its borders as far north and east as possible, Europe became embroiled once again in a general military conflict, and this is reflected clearly in the output of German broadsheets, many of which are accounts of the numerous battles and sieges in the Spanish Netherlands and along the Rhine.

This conflict came at an especially difficult time for the Austrian Habsburgs, for at the same time that they were concerned about the continuance of their family line, they were embroiled in a civil war in Hungary. Although they tried not to become engaged on two fronts, French successes in the Spanish Netherlands left them little choice. The treaties finally signed by the various countries at the end of the 1670s reestablished peace on the Continent, but because they did not satisfy all French demands for territorial expansion, it was only a question of time until hostilities would be renewed.

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