



THE FIRST GENERALISSIMOS OF WESTERN EUROPE

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Annotation. This article examines individuals who received the rank of generalissimo and the title of generalissimo in world history from the 16th century to the 19th century, in chronological order. It analyzes the activities of Western European generalissimos, determining the significance of this title and the achievements for which it was awarded. The purpose of this article is to explore the evolution of the rank of generalissimo in world history, tracing its development through the fates of key figures, and analyzing how it reflected the interaction of military and political power in different eras.

Keywords: Generalissimo, general, commander, Europe, king, ranks, war, army, marshal, soldier.

Introduction. The title of generalissimo, derived from the Latin term "generalissimus"—"most important"—represents a unique phenomenon in the history of military and political leadership. This title, which emerged at the dawn of the modern era in Europe, not only denoted the highest level of military hierarchy but also symbolized the exceptional status of an individual capable of consolidating the command of armies and, often, the fate of entire states. The generalissimo was a figure whose role extended beyond that of a traditional military leader: he became the embodiment of the era, be it a time of great wars, revolutionary upheavals, or the formation of national identities.

The emergence of the title of generalissimo is associated with the 16th and 17th centuries, when European monarchies such as the Holy Roman Empire, France, and Spain were faced with the need to appoint commanders with virtually unlimited powers to wage complex and large-scale wars. For example, during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), this title became a tool for managing huge armies in conditions of political instability.

Main part. As noted in the introduction, the rank of generalissimo, derived from the Latin generalissimus—"most important"—is a unique phenomenon, combining military and political authority. Its origins date back to 16th- and 17th-century Europe, when the need for centralized command became apparent in the context of large-scale wars. The first mentions of the term date back to the late Renaissance, but its official codification occurred in the 17th



century. Generalissimo differed from other high-ranking ranks, such as field marshal or general, in its rarity and the breadth of its authority. While a field marshal operated within an established hierarchy, a generalissimo often enjoyed autonomy, allowing him to make strategic decisions independently. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the rank began to spread beyond Western Europe, adapting to new historical realities. It appeared in the Russian Empire at the end of the 17th century, but was officially awarded to Alexander Suvorov in 1799 for his outstanding victories in the Italian and Swiss campaigns.

Henry of Anjou, the first Generalissimo [1]. The future King of France, Henry III (1551–1589), received the title of Generalissimo in 1569, being the Duke of Anjou [2]. This event occurred during the reign of his brother, King Charles IX of France, at the height of the religious wars in France between Catholics and Huguenots. In the 1560s, France was engulfed in a series of religious conflicts known as the Wars of Religion. The second war (1567–1568) and the third war (1568–1570) between Catholics and Protestants (Huguenots) created a tense situation requiring strong military leadership. Henry, the third son of King Henry II and Catherine de' Medici, was a young, ambitious, and energetic prince. At the age of 18, he was already considered a potential leader despite his lack of significant military experience. In March 1569, during the Third War of Religion, Charles IX awarded Henry of Anjou the title of generalissimo (French: lieutenant général du royaume), effectively making him commander-in-chief of the royal troops. This title was unique at the time, as traditionally the highest military rank in France was the constable, but this position was either unfilled or considered less suitable for the political situation.

Henry, as generalissimo, nominally led the Catholic forces at the Battle of Jarnac, where the royal army defeated the Huguenots. Although actual command was exercised by experienced military leaders such as Tavannes (Gaspard de Saulieu), the victory was attributed to Henry, enhancing his reputation. Another major victory was the Battle of Moncontour (October 3, 1569), which the Catholics achieved under Henry's nominal leadership. These successes, although not solely his own, enhanced his status as a military leader.

Thus, the title of generalissimo emerged in the 16th century as a precedent, responding to the need for centralized military leadership in a complex political environment. It subsequently became common practice in other European countries. As an example, let us consider the famous European generalissimos – Albrecht von Wallenstein, Louis II de Bourbon (the Great Condé) – whose fates illustrate the transformations of this title at different stages of European history.

Albrecht von Wallenstein (Holy Roman Empire). Albrecht von Wallenstein became the second Generalissimo in European history, receiving the title in 1625 from Emperor Ferdinand II during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) [2]. This conflict, which engulfed Central Europe, was fueled by religious and political tensions, and Wallenstein proved capable of uniting the empire's disparate forces. Born in 1583 to a Czech noble family, he rose to prominence thanks



to his military talent and ability to raise funds for the army, which was especially important given the depleted treasury.

Wallenstein's appointment as Generalissimo gave him virtually unlimited powers: he could recruit troops, form alliances, and direct military campaigns. His successes, such as the victory at Dessau in 1626, strengthened the empire's position, but his independence and wealth generated mistrust at court. In 1630, he was relieved of command, but returned to the post of generalissimo in 1632 when the Swedish army led by Gustavus Adolphus threatened the empire's existence. His final campaign culminated in the Battle of Lützen (1632), where he was defeated. In 1634, Wallenstein was assassinated on orders from the emperor, who suspected him of treason. His story illustrates how the rank of generalissimo could elevate a commander but also lead to his downfall due to political intrigue.

Louis II de Bourbon. Louis II de Bourbon, known as the Great Condé, was promoted to Generalissimo of France in 1643 after his victory at the Battle of Rocroi during the Thirty Years' War. Born in 1621 to a noble Bourbon family, Condé distinguished himself as an outstanding military leader from his youth. The victory at Rocroi, where he routed a Spanish army considered invincible, brought him fame and strengthened France's position in Europe. The title of Generalissimo was recognition of his contribution to strengthening royal authority under the young Louis XIV.

However, Condé's career was complicated by the Fronde (1648–1653)—civil unrest against royal authority. Initially, he supported the king, suppressing the rebellions, but then, frustrated by his lack of recognition, he defected to the rebels. This led to his temporary exile and loss of influence. In the 1650s, he returned to France, having regained the court's trust, and continued his service, participating in the wars against Spain. Condé died in 1686, leaving behind a reputation as one of the greatest military leaders of his time. His case demonstrates how the title of generalissimo could be both a reward for military success and a political tool in unstable times.

Conclusion. An analysis of the phenomenon of generalissimos highlights their unique role as symbols of military might and political grandeur. The title, which originated in Europe in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, eventually evolved into a symbol of exceptional leadership, reflecting both military merit and the desire to strengthen national spirit. Western European generalissimos—Henry of Anjou, Albrecht von Wallenstein, and Louis II de Bourbon—represent different eras and approaches to this title. Henry of Anjou and Wallenstein embody its early form, as a tool for governance in times of crisis, while Louis II de Bourbon represents a transitional period where military merit was combined with political struggle.

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