

Thirty Years War 1618-1648 : "A Contagion of War"

"Almost all of the combatants were actuated by fear rather than by lust of conquest or passion of faith. They wanted peace and they fought for thirty years to be sure of it. They did not learn then, and have not learned since, that war only breeds war...The war was an unmitigated catastrophe...The war solved no problem. Morally subversive, economically destructive, socially degrading, confused in its causes, devious in its course, futile in its result, it is the outstanding example in European history of meaningless conflict."

C. Veronica Wedgwood

Series of wars fought primarily in Germany by the **Habsburg imperial forces** against Protestants within the Empire and a broad coalition of opposing powers from outside the Empire. The war was variously a **religious war, a civil war and a war of invasion**. Ultimately the fate of German central Europe would be decided and destiny of the Austrian Habsburg empire altered.

Complex and layered aspects of the war:

***Civil war in Germany** between princes and the emperor

***International war** often featuring Catholic (Spain, Austria) vs. Protestant powers (Denmark, Sweden)

***Continental power struggle** among states with rulers often paying to support fighting by other countries (ie French pay Swedish to join the fight in 1630)

***Independent military commanders** (Wallenstein, Tilly) were often free of political control

***Undisciplined armies** fed and enriched themselves by rampaging through the empire causing terrible civilian suffering. Murder, rape and spread of epidemic disease characterized much of the behavior of the armies of both sides throughout Germany.

Suffering of civilians documented in a famous book *Simplicissimus* by Jacob von Grimmelshausen (1621-1676) who had been a soldier.

***Renewal of Dutch Revolt** (80 Years War) against the Spanish Habsburgs in 1621 complicated the situation further (Spanish Habsburgs supported Austrian Habsburgs)

Peace of Augsburg (1555) had established the principle that the faith of the prince determined the religion of his subjects. (*Cuius regio eius religio.*)The only two acceptable religions were **Catholicism and Lutheranism**. The spread of Calvinism was ignored and Calvinists within the Empire could eventually be expected to struggle for recognition. Anabaptism was also unacceptable.

Religion was only one aspect of the war: it was also a struggle of German Protestant Princes (Bohemia, Saxony) aided by foreign powers (Denmark, Sweden, France, England and the United Provinces) against the power of the Habsburgs Holy Roman Emperor supported by the Catholic princes (Bavaria) of the Empire.

War is divided into four main phases:

Bohemian Phase 1618-1625. Ferdinand II (ardent Catholic) is in line to become Holy Roman Emperor in 1619. Bohemia has a majority of Lutherans and Calvinists but is controlled by a Catholic minority. On May 23 Czech nobles in Prague revolt by throwing 2 Habsburg governors (named Jaroslav von Martinitz and Wilhelm von Salvata) out of a 70-foot-high castle window into the moat. (They survive.) This became known as the 'Defenestration of Prague.' (The castle still stands and is called Hradcany Castle.)

The Emperor combines with Bavaria to crush the revolt. Bavarians have a good military commander, Baron Tilly (1559-1632) who decisively defeats the rebels decisively on November 7, 1620 at the Battle of White Mountain near Prague. Ferdinand establishes a highly punitive peace. Czech nobles lose property, lives and Protestantism is forbidden in Bohemia.

Danish Phase 1625-1629. Denmark defends Saxon Protestants and is supported by money from England, France and the Dutch. Christian IV (Lutheran) King of Denmark also has other motives as he remarked, "We are here to defend Protestant liberties. If by God's will we should gain some territory, so be it."

Habsburg Emperor hires the Bohemian military mastermind Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583-1634) –a Lutheran turned Catholic for royal favor – to lead his forces against the Danes in combination with Tilly. (Wallenstein had been made rich by estates confiscated from other Czech Protestant nobles in 1625.) Wallenstein and Tilly defeat the Danes and the rebels. Ultimately the Emperor is forced to dismiss Wallenstein because of plundering.

Ferdinand decides to roll back Protestantism in the Empire by requiring that Catholic territory taken by Protestants since Augsburg (1555) be given back in the 1629 Edict of Restitution. This frightens and angers all the Protestant princes of the Empire, whether Calvinist or Lutheran.

Swedish Phase. 1630-1635. Protestant princes are championed by the Lutheran King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden (r. 1611-1632) who wants to make the Baltic Sea a 'Swedish lake.' France helps pay the Swedes even though they are a Catholic power. Gustavus Adolphus proves to be a military genius, adopting new tactics such as the use of light-weight mobile cannon (using 3 pound grapeshot charges, drawn by horses and used at close range), salvo rather than volley fire (all at once) and improved coordination between infantry and cavalry.

1631 May 20. Siege and sack of Magdeburg. Savage destruction of Protestant city by Wallenstein's Imperial armies outrages and alarms Protestant Europe. Some 20,000 citizens are killed in one day and city is destroyed by fire. Treatment of this Protestant city is widely publicized in pamphlets and elicits sympathy and support all over Protestant Europe.

1631 September 17. Battle of Breitenfeld. 40,000 for Empire vs. 42,000 Swedes and Saxons. Gustavus Adolphus soundly defeats Tilly who loses 1/3 of his forces. (Tilly would be mortally wounded in the following spring.) Largest battle of the entire war and the first victory for Protestantism.

1632. November 16. Battle of Lutzen 18,000 on each side. Recalled to command by the Emperor, Wallenstein leads the Imperial army. Gustavus Adolphus is killed in the fighting but the Swedes manage to capture Wallenstein's artillery. Battle is considered a Swedish victory, but Swedes lost 1/3 of their army. Loss of the King was devastating as Swedish soldiers mutinied for their back pay.

1634. February 25 Wallenstein moves his armies independently and is distrusted by emperor. Some of his officers revolt and he is assassinated by a group of mercenaries on February 25, 1634.

1635. Treaty of Prague ends Swedish phase, further strengthening the Empire and weakening the princes. Calvinist princes are excluded.

French Phase. 1635-1648. French **Cardinal Richelieu** (Catholic) minister to King Louis XIII decides to enter the war with troops. France cannot sit by as Habsburgs become more and more powerful. Richelieu comments: "Catholic deaths on the other side of the Rhine are unfortunate, but unavoidable." War is about dynastic power and not about religion at all. Fighting on three fronts: Netherlands, the Rhine river and in Saxony.

1637 Death of Emperor Ferdinand II raises hopes for peace.

Spanish Habsburgs do much of the fighting in their ongoing struggle against the Dutch and against France. Spanish almost capture Paris but, in a reversal, French forces inflict a decisive victory over them at Rocroi on May 19 1643 under the leadership of the Prince de Condé.

1648 October 24 Treaty of Westphalia.

Calvinists are given the same rights as Lutherans and Catholics in the Empire. Pope is outraged, calling the treaty "null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, reprobate, inane and devoid of meaning for all time." The dream of recreating "Latin Christendom" in the Holy Roman Empire is over.

- **Habsburg power is limited** to Austria, Hungary and Bohemia
- German princes gain sovereign authority in their own territories – **Holy Roman Empire is no longer viable**
- **France gains province of Alsace** as well as prestige and power
- Sweden gains Pomerania
- Bavaria and the Palatinate become electorates
- **Ecclesiastical restitution dates to 1624** (not to 1555 as in the Edict of Restitution)
- **Swiss and Dutch (United Provinces) gain complete independence**
- **Spain loses Netherlands** and its power declines

The war between France and Spain continues on until 1659 with the Peace of the Pyrenees with France getting more territory and Louis XIV gets the daughter of the King of Spain, Maria Theresa as his bride.

Long term consequences:

Last religious war

Population of Germany declined from 21 million in 1618 to 16 million in 1648

France gains international prestige and Spain loses it

Austrian Habsburgs focus more to the east and south

Brandenburg / **Prussia an incipient northern European power**

Destructiveness of war made Germans prize security and order so they would later embrace the rise of absolutist rule in Prussia

In 1608, a group of Calvinists formed themselves into the Protestant Union, and were responded to in kind by the formation of the Catholic League in 1609. The Catholic League was headed by Maximilian of Bavaria and was allied with Emperor Ferdinand, the Hapsburg head of the Holy Roman Empire. Hence, a decade before the beginning of the Thirty Years War, the Empire was already divided into rival camps, and a violent solution to the crisis became inevitable. The Bohemian arm of the Protestant Union struck the first blow.

THE THIRTY YEARS WAR

This war, which was one of the most destructive conflicts in European history, may be divided into four phases, usually designated and dated as follows:

Bohemian (1618-25)
Danish (1625-29)
Swedish (1630-35)
French (1635-48).

THE BOHEMIAN PERIOD (1618-1625)

Outraged by the aggressive policies of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Bohemia, the Bohemian Protestants, a majority of the population, demanded that Ferdinand II, then king of Bohemia, intervene.

In terms of character, Ferdinand II was a good man. He was a devoted husband and father, and showed an unusual interest in the well-being of his subjects. Earlier in his life, when he was the Duke of Styria, it was said that he knew the name of every peasant in his duchy, and frequently came to their aid with both legal and material assistance. He was, however, an ardent Roman Catholic and the Habsburg heir presumptive to the Holy Roman Empire, and felt it in the best interest of Bohemia to ignore the Protestant appeal.

On May 23, 1618, the crisis could be stalled no longer, and the Protestants of Prague invaded the royal palace, seized two of the king's ministers, and threw them out a window. They two ministers fell 70 feet, but escaped with their lives. Catholics were quick to assert that they had been saved through the direct intervention of the Virgin Mary. Protestants, however, emphasized that the Virgin Mary must have strategically placed the manure heap which broke their fall. This act, known as the Defenestration of Prague, was the beginning of a national Protestant uprising.

THE THIRTY YEARS WAR

News of the "The Defenestration of Prague," spread quickly and revolt spread with it. Soon the respite brought by the Peace of Augsburg was ended, and open civil war broke out across Germany. The Emperor, Rudolph II, sent out a call to those loyal to the Catholic cause to join him in his effort to suppress the rebellion.

He knew that he could count on the support of the government of Spain, ruled by his Hapsburg cousins. More than simply familial loyalty, the Spanish were waiting for their twelve-year treaty of peace with the Netherlands to expire before they attempted to reconquer the rebellious provinces. Aid given to the Emperor would surely be returned later. Additionally, the Emperor promised the Spanish control of Alsace, a small territory between France and Germany, and historically the most intensely-contested bit of land in all of Europe.

Interestingly, the German Catholic princes, who had the most to lose or gain, were reluctant to enter the conflict. They valued their independence, and feared a strong emperor, albeit a strong Roman Catholic emperor, more than the influence of Protestantism.

There were other pressing questions, as well. Would France stand by and allow the Spanish to take control of Alsace, essentially placing the French nation in a Hapsburg vise? Also, the extension of Hapsburg power to the Baltic sea would threaten the existence of both Sweden and Denmark, both independent and thoroughly Protestant. The suppression of the German uprising had monumental international implications.

Following the Defenestration of Prague, the rebels quickly seized control of Bohemia, and chose Elector Frederick of the Palatinate, a staunch Calvinist, as their king.

Ferdinand II was now the Holy Roman Emperor, though having lost his own kingdom he now possessed neither money nor troops. He knew that he must retake Bohemia. In the first place, more than half of the imperial revenue was generated by that country, and secondly, Bohemia controlled one of the seven imperial electoral votes. With that territory now in the hands of Protestants, the balance had been tipped, since Protestant princes already controlled three of the electoral votes. Such a balance would have the unspeakable potential of placing a Protestant king as the Holy Roman Emperor in the event of an imperial election.

Ferdinand turned to the Catholic prince of Bavaria, Maximilian, and the Spanish for aid. To Maximilian, he promised control of Frederick's Palatinate, as well as the position of elector, and to Spain he promised control of Frederick's territory in the Rhineland.

The aid was adequate, and Ferdinand was able to bring Bohemia back under imperial control. More important, the office of Emperor, previously a freely-elected position was now made hereditary as well. The Emperor from that day forward must be a Hapsburg.

Eyebrows went up across Europe. The German Protestant princes in the northern portion of the Holy Roman Empire saw their electoral power nullified in a moment, and their own territories threatened as well. Abroad, the French, English, Dutch, and Danish, knew that some action must be taken to prevent Hapsburg consolidation. In the end, an internationally-financed force Danish force of 30,000, led by King Christian IV, began to make their way into the heart of Germany.

THE DANISH PERIOD (1625-1629)

As Christian IV's army descended into northern Germany to aid the beleaguered Protestant princes, it was clear that he could expect no DIRECT assistance. France and England were allied against Spain, but both were involved in serious domestic problems. The great powers would assist financially, but they could offer little help. At this stage of the conflict, Christian IV and Denmark were on their own.

For Christian IV, his intervention not primarily religious in nature. Denmark controlled the duchy of Holstein, Germany, and the continued pressure of Ferdinand II made the continued presence of Denmark questionable.

Ferdinand, however, realized that he would need more than the unstable German Catholic princes if he was to overcome the might of Christian IV. To secure the forces he needed, Ferdinand turned to the powerful Wallenstein, a wealthy and opportunistic duke.

Wallenstein

Wallenstein was born a Lutheran, but he converted to Catholicism for political reasons. He was tall, thin, and forbidding. Wallenstein was not religious, but he was very superstitious, frequently turning to the stars for guidance. He was born under the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter that Tycho had observed as a young man, and at one point he asked Kepler to cast his horoscope. According to Kepler's reading of the stars, Wallenstein possessed:

"... a restless, exacting mind, impatient of old methods and forever striving for the new and the untried, secretive, melancholy, suspicious, contemptuous of his fellow men and their conventions. He would be avaricious, deceitful, greedy for power, loving no one and by no one beloved, changeable in his humours, quarrelsome, friendless and cruel."

In this case, the counsel of the stars spoke true.

Wallenstein had married a wealthy widow who conveniently died soon thereafter, leaving him her estates and the freedom to espouse the daughter of one of Ferdinand's councilors. When this wealth and influence was combined with Wallenstein's own natural business instinct, he quickly came to control a quarter of the land in Bohemia and was able to offer to raise, quarter, and provision an army of mercenaries 50,000 strong at his own expense. Ferdinand had only to provide their pay.

The emperor recognized the danger of giving too much authority to this powerful subject, but he could no longer afford to rely upon the Catholic princes of Germany and the Spanish. He accepted Wallenstein's offer, and with these augmented forces he gained several quick victories over the Danes. Northern Germany was occupied, and Wallenstein was given Mecklenburg as a

reward for his assistance. A duchy on the Baltic Sea whose former ruler had made the mistake of siding with the Danes.

In 1627 Christian IV was driven into the Jutland Peninsula, and the future fate of the Holy Roman Empire rested upon Ferdinand's next step.

On the one hand, Wallenstein advised Ferdinand to use the power at his disposal to create a more centralized German state. This, however, would alienate the Catholic princes who had opposed any increase in imperial power. On the other, he could satisfy the demands of the Church, and restore the lands that had been seized by the Protestants since the Peace of Augsburg. In this case, he would further alienate the Protestant princes, many of whom had remained neutral in the conflict.

Ferdinand chose the latter course and issued the Edict of Restitution in 1629, thereby restoring ecclesiastical territories to the Catholics. Then, to placate Maximilian and the Catholic League, he dismissed Wallenstein. By refusing to follow Wallenstein's advice, Ferdinand condemned Germany to more than two centuries of political disunity.

THE SWEDISH PERIOD (1630-1635)

Though the Catholic forces were at their peak, the lack of wisdom Ferdinand demonstrated by refusing to follow Wallenstein's counsel soon became obvious.

In 1630, the Protestants of northern Germany gained a new champion in the person of Gustavus Adolphus, the king of Sweden. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, and from childhood he had been trained to be a king. When he was six, he began to accompany the army on campaigns; when he was ten, he began to sit at the council table and give his opinions; and when he was in his teens, he received ambassadors unaided. Now thirty-six, Gustavus had already given evidence of being one of the greatest men of his age. In his nineteen years as king, he had proved himself to be as able an administrator as Maximilian of Bavaria and as careful a military organizer as Wallenstein. He was now about to show that he was a gifted diplomat, a devout Protestant. And he was about to move into Germany with a well-trained, well-disciplined army.

Interestingly, his forces were subsidized in part by the French through negotiations with Richelieu. The ironic thing here is that Richelieu was a Cardinal in the Catholic Church. More importantly, he was a Frenchman, and his first loyalty was to his country rather than to his Church. His strong motivation to aid the Protestants was due to the fact that an Imperial victory would essentially surround France, with the Spanish Hapsburgs to the south and the Austrian Hapsburgs to the northeast.

As in everything else, Adolphus demonstrated that he was a military tactician of extraordinary genius. The fashion of the day was to utilize the most massive battle assemblages possible. Adolphus abandoned this in order to achieve greater mobility and firepower. Cavalry and infantry were deployed in a series of alternating small squares so that they could turn easily in any direction. Light artillery was substituted for heavy artillery because it could be advanced rapidly, fired from the front lines in battle, and withdrawn quickly if necessary.

Musketeers were organized in files five deep. The first file was taught to fire and step back to reload. Then the second file fired and stepped back to reload, and then the third and the fourth and the fifth, by which time the first file was ready to fire again. Thus, continuous fire emerged from the Swedish lines.

The one important advantage that Gustavus Adolphus lacked was money, for Sweden was a poor country. When the French offered financial assistance, he therefore accepted but was careful never to let French wishes interfere with his policy. During his brief, glorious career in Germany, he was clearly his own master.

Many considerations led Gustavus Adolphus to enter the war. First, the strategic motivation: If the Hapsburgs were allowed to consolidate their hold on the southern shores of

the Baltic Sea, sooner or later they were sure to use the ports of this area as a staging area for an attack Sweden. By seizing the southern shores of the Baltic the threat of invasion was averted. "It is better," the Swedish estates declared when they learned of the situation, "that we tether our horses to the enemy's fence, than he to ours."

Second, the economic motivation: Baltic commerce made up the larger portion of the royal income, and Gustavus had frequently voiced his desire to turn the Baltic into a Swedish lake. In order to make a reality of this dream, they would have to gain possession of northern Germany.

Third, there was true religious motivation: Gustavus Adolphus, a sincere Lutheran, was genuinely distressed to see the plight of fellow Lutherans in Germany. As an added incentive, the forces of the Emperor had sacked the city of Magdeburg in 1631. Magdeburg was the 'maidencity' of the Protestants. It was one of the first cities to be converted, and was therefore a powerful symbol of the Protestant cause.

The Swedish invasion completely altered the situation in the Empire. And after a great victory in the battle of Breitenfeld, Gustavus Adolphus was free to march where he pleased. Ferdinand had no choice: he had to humble himself and recall Wallenstein.

The two generals fought an indecisive battle at Nuremberg, and Gustavus Adolphus withdrew to the north. Once more they clashed at Lützen, and this time the Swedes were victorious. Unfortunately, Gustavus was killed in the engagement.

The death of Gustavus Adolphus gave the Catholics new hope, but the rivalry between Maximilian, duke of Bavaria, and Wallenstein weakened their cause. Wallenstein, who had never forgiven Maximilian and Ferdinand for his first dismissal, plotted with the Swedes and French.

Some think that he wanted to create a great middle European empire in which Catholic and Protestant could live in peace. Others see him as a Czech patriot who sought to revive the Bohemian state with himself as king. More probably he was motivated only by his selfish, restless ambition. Whatever Wallenstein's plans, Ferdinand knew that he could not be trusted. He was declared guilty of treason and was murdered, defenseless in his bedroom, by a disloyal contingent of his own troops.

Six months after the death of Wallenstein, Ferdinand received another bit of good news. His imperial forces defeated the Swedes at Nördlingen in 1634. The northern kingdom was no longer a serious threat, and the Peace of Prague (1635) formally ended the third phase of the conflict. One by one the German Protestant princes made peace in return for the certain modifications of the Edict of Restitution.

Ferdinand kept the gains he had made before 1627, and he now had the united support of the German princes. Their support was an important asset, because nine days before the terms of the peace were published, France had declared war on the Holy Roman Empire in order to check the power of Spain.

THE FRENCH PERIOD (1635-1648)

The French declaration of war on the Spanish Hapsburgs transformed the conflict from a religious contest to a dynastic struggle. The French, the Dutch and the Swedes allied themselves against the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, and in a remarkable turn of allegiances, Denmark. Christian IV had decided that he feared the Swedes more than the Catholics.

The progress of the war was slow and terrible. The French were able to effectively repel the Spanish advances into their territory, while simultaneously advancing to the east against the Holy Roman Empire. From the north, the Swedes were able to advance, augmented by the Dutch and those German Protestant princes who were still able to fight.

From 1638 onward, the imperial armies were forced to surrender their European strongholds one after another. For the next eight years, the Empire resisted. Finally, after central Bavaria was invaded, Maximilian I of Bavaria concluded, the Truce of Ulm, with Sweden and France in 1647.

Ferdinand III, who had succeeded his father in 1637, refused to capitulate, and as a result, fighting continued in Germany, Luxembourg, the Low Countries, Italy, and Spain throughout the remainder of 1647. Maximilian I broke the truce of Ulm, and reentered the war on the side of the empire, to little avail. By the end of 1648, the Swedes had laid siege to the city of Prague, the French to the city of Munich, and Ferdinand, in his capital of Vienna, was threatened by the same treatment. In such a situation, Ferdinand III could only agree to the peace conditions of the victors.

THE TREATY OF WESTPHALIA

In 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia was signed by most of the conflicting powers, France and Spain alone continuing the struggle. This conflict would continue for another eleven years, finally to be settled by the Treaty of Pyrenees in 1659.

RESULTS OF THE WAR AND THE TREATY OF WESTPHALIA

1. By effectively blocking the Habsburg efforts to strengthen their authority in the empire, France replaced Spain as the most powerful nation in Europe.

2. The individual states of the HRE were given authority to conduct their own political affairs. Henceforth they could enter into alliances and negotiations with one another and with foreign powers without the approval of the Emperor.

The conditions of the Peace of Augsburg (1555) were reinstated, and the rights guaranteed to the Lutherans under that treaty were now extended to Calvinists and other Protestants, as well as to the Lutherans. Though the prince could still determine the religious affiliation of his district, dissidents would be free to emigrate. The multiplicity of new Protestant sects was accepted.

These two conditions insured that the most important of the German states became virtually autonomous, and German unity was postponed for more than two centuries.

3. The independence of Switzerland and the seven northern provinces of the Netherlands was officially recognized.

4. France received most of Alsace. The French also received the cities of Verdun, Metz, and Toulon their northwestern frontier. The significance of this is that it established a defensive perimeter against any future German aggression.

Those who suffered most were the German people. Over 300,000 were killed in battle. Millions of non-combatants died of malnutrition and disease, and the remnants of undisciplined armies wandered about the countryside, taking what they wanted and destroying what they wished. It is estimated that the population of the Holy Roman Empire dropped by a third during those years; from about 21,000,000 to 13,500,000 between 1618 and 1648, an average of one percent decline per year. Even if the figures exaggerate, the Thirty Years War remains one of history's most costly in terms of lives and resources.