

Chapter 1

The Thirty Years' War and Its Aftermath

Flung from the High Castle

The Thirty Years' War was a sign of the end times for those who lived through it. Brutality and utter riot upended the foundations of civilized European society. A reign of near continuous violence terrorized the peasantry, villagers, and city dwellers. Soldiers took their compensation by pillaging the property of friend and foe alike. To civilians it didn't matter which army was coming through their locale—Protestant or Catholic, German or Swede, French or Spanish—all lives were endangered.

It all began with a minor diplomatic incident. By 1618, the Protestant Revolt and the Catholic Reformation were a century old. Their positions had hardened. Tensions between Protestants and Catholic remained high throughout the 1500s. The lands along the Rhine River in Central Europe and southern Germany remained predominantly Catholic. Lutherans were the majority in northern Germany, and Calvinists dominated in west-central Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

To truly understand the religious controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we have to suspend our own twenty-first-century ideas and judgments about religious toleration. Our ethic of toleration developed in part as a consequence of the bloodletting of the Thirty Years'

War. In fact, toleration in early seventeenth-century Germany was a prescription not for peace but for war. The rulers of every state felt entitled and even required to forbid the practice of more than one religion. For error in doctrine had no rights. Each Protestant ruler in Germany outlawed the Mass in his domain. Catholic rulers for their part believed that by allowing Protestant practices, they were in effect creating centers of rebellion within their borders.

Germany was ground zero for the war. Unlike today, Germany was not a unified nation but rather a loose assembly of cities and territories. Most Germans were loyal to the long line of Holy Roman Emperors who ruled them since the 1200s. They were in the eyes of the Catholic Church legitimate successors of the Roman Empire. For centuries with little interruption, the emperor was also the king of Germany.¹ In the 1400s, the Habsburg dynasty took over the line of emperors.

The ambitions of the Habsburgs had always unsettled the great powers of Europe—the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, England, and especially France. Lutherans and Calvinists within the empire also worried about the Habsburgs. So much so that in 1608 they formed a Protestant alliance within the staunchly Catholic Holy Roman Empire. The members of this alliance, which they called the League of Evangelical Union, professed continued allegiance to the emperor. But they complained about his seeming unwillingness to protect their hard-won, centuries-old freedoms from the increasing violent upheavals within the empire. A year following the establishment of the Protestant league, a group of German Catholic princes formed the Catholic league. Like the Protestants, the Catholics publicly supported the emperor but worried that continued civil unrest would destroy the empire from within. Of course, each league blamed the other for causing public strife.

In April 1617, the Holy Roman Emperor Matthias (reigned 1612–1619) ordered both leagues to disband. The Catholics complied; the Protestants refused the order. Matthias then sent two representatives to Prague to

open negotiations with the Protestant league. Their mission was to hear and address Protestant grievances. The imperial counselors met with leaders of the Protestant league in Prague Castle, which was the time-honored seat of power for the kings of Bohemia, Holy Roman Emperors, and, in modern times, presidents of Czechoslovakia.

Tempers flared during the talks. A mob of Protestant protesters outside the castle stormed in with the intention of executing the emperor's men by the ancient practice of defenestration—a technical term meaning literally to throw someone out of a window. The two imperial envoys fought heroically for their lives against the crowd. They cried out appeals to the Blessed Virgin Mary for assistance. But their attackers succeeded in forcing them out a high window. Leaning over the windowsill as the two men fell, the leaders of the mob taunted them: “We will see if your Mary can help you!”² Apparently, she did.

The “Defenestration of Prague” stands as one of the most famous diplomatic incidents in history. Amazingly, the emperor's representatives survived the fall. What then unfolded was a series of diplomatic reactions accompanied by an increasingly heated propaganda war. The emperor and his supporters interpreted the survival of the representatives as a sign that their cause was just. Divine power, through Mother Mary's intercession, had intervened to save them. Protestants dismissed this reading of the event. The representatives were saved because they had fallen into a pile of manure that had been lying by the castle walls. No divine intervention was involved in the matter.

The incident and the war of words around it enflamed both sides and went from words to arms. Eventually, the conflict became international in scope, drawing in more than twenty nations by its end. Those living at the time were overwhelmed by the unprecedented scale of the Thirty Years' War. They referred to it as the Great War, a descriptor that persisted until the First World War of the twentieth century took over the title, thus suppressing the searing memory of the Thirty Years' War.

But for European thought leaders living in the tumultuous aftermath of the Thirty Years' War, the war was the logical outcome of dynastic tribalism and religious differences. To the “enlightened” elite of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the differences that led to the war were little more than outmoded superstitious squabbles or nationalist prejudices. Did not humankind share a common nature? Was not the natural world ordered and ruled by unchanging laws discoverable by the power of human reason alone? Was not then adherence to human reason superior to mental outlooks tainted by ethnic, nationalist, and sectarian loyalties? For those who answered these questions in the affirmative, the Christian religion that had so bitterly divided Europe had to be subordinated to the rule of universal, secular reason. The suppression of Christianity was their prime directive, superseding even the secondary problem of national and dynastic discord.

Ideas Whose Time Had Come

Ideas have consequences. This saying is true for any period in history, but especially so for the Enlightenment. The tumult of the Thirty Years' War created the social conditions for Enlightenment ideas to set in motion far-reaching and momentous changes in Europe and eventually the world. They transformed the way Europeans thought about human nature and the universe. The thought leaders of the Enlightenment trumpeted a “new philosophy” that challenged traditional religious beliefs about miracles, divine revelation, the authority of the Churches (Catholic and Protestant), virtue, and vice. They brought forward new ideas about government, society, and nature. They viewed with suspicion all traditional ways of thinking and all traditional authority. In short, the Enlightenment project started a cultural transformation more revolutionary than anything that had yet occurred in the history of the human race.

The seeds of the Enlightenment revolution had been planted in the 1500s. But they did not flourish until the mid-1600s. The revolution began with the age-old human fascination with the sky. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), a priest and highly accomplished physician, mathematician, and astronomer, proposed that the sun and not the Earth was the center of the universe. In doing so, he called into question a view of the cosmos that had held sway for well over a thousand years. Copernicus did not mean to stir controversy with his proposal. There was not a whiff of ambition about him. In fact, he refused to publish his heliocentric theory without solid proof that it was true.

There are those today who believe that the Catholic Church is an enemy of science. But it was prominent Catholic churchmen who enthusiastically encouraged Copernicus to publish his theory. He eventually did so, dedicating his groundbreaking book, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543), to Pope Paul III, who willingly accepted the dedication. The Church's encouragement for Copernicus—today regarded as the father of astronomy—was part of its centuries-long patronage of science. In fact, no other institution in history has a longer track record of benevolent support for scientific inquiry than the Catholic Church.³

Like Copernicus, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) insisted that theories had to prove their worth with hard evidence. But he needed technology to acquire the proof needed to validate Copernicus's theory. Galileo had heard about the efforts of a German-Dutch glassmaker to grind lenses that would aid the human eye in viewing distant objects in space. Galileo secured this new technology and improved it. The result was a telescope of unprecedented magnifying power. Turned up to the night sky, Galileo's telescope enabled him to observe the movements of the planets and prove the truth of Copernicus's theory.

Careful observation of the world was the cornerstone of Galileo's method. Francis Bacon (1561–1626), another key figure of the early Enlightenment, also emphasized the importance of observation. It was

for him the basis of knowledge. He established it as the first principle of a new kind of science. More so than any other Enlightenment thinker, Bacon was extremely disdainful of traditional ways of reasoning about nature. For they relied more on books and debates among scholars than on the study of nature. He called for a great renewal in how humans acquired and used knowledge. In his view, the learning of the past was barren. It provided little benefit to people's everyday lives. Bacon viewed knowledge as an untapped power for subduing nature for the benefit of humanity. If knowledge did not materially improve people's lives, it was worthless. Human progress, argued Bacon, depended on the widespread use of his new system of inductive, experimental reasoning.

Copernicus, Galileo, and Bacon were just three of the many brilliant figures who laid the groundwork for the full-blown expansion of the Enlightenment in the latter part of the seventeenth century. It took a major upheaval in European society to create the social and cultural conditions for the new ideas of the Enlightenment to gain acceptance. That upheaval was the Thirty Years' War. Waged in stages between 1618 and 1648, it was a cataclysmic civil war fought over complicated, explosive, and contradictory religious and political differences.

There is no denying that before and during the war, Enlightenment thinkers found an audience for their new ideas. New inventions, such as the printing press, the expansion of educational opportunities, and the rise of an educated, reading public, helped circulate their writings. But the Enlightenment's accelerant was the war and its aftermath. Thirty years of intermittent warfare tore apart the fabric of European society. The war's savagery, famine, and disease were commonplace throughout Central Europe. The war wiped out almost a third of Germany's population. The prewar institutions that gave people their bearings and the beliefs that ordered their lives lay in tatters. Postwar conditions were highly favorable to new ways of thinking and doing things. The time had come to try out the new ideas of the Enlightenment.

The Four Phases of the Thirty Years' War

The defenestration incident at Prague Castle sparked the first of four phases of the Thirty Years' War: the Bohemian phase (1618–1625), after which followed the Danish phase (1625–1629), the Swedish phase (1630–1635), and the French phase (1635–1648).

The Bohemian phase began soon after the death of Emperor Matthias in 1619. His successor, Ferdinand II of the House of Habsburg (reigned 1619–1637), was less inclined than Matthias to pursue a diplomatic solution to the religious and political conflicts within the empire. He threatened to use military force to break up the Protestant league. The league responded to the emperor's threats by refusing to acknowledge Ferdinand II's title to the throne of Bohemia, which all previous emperors had held. Instead, they elected a Calvinist king, Frederick V, called the "Winter King" because of his short reign. Frederick's election prompted a massive invasion of imperial forces led by Field Marshal Johann Tserclaes, count of Tilly. The embattled Protestant league appealed to other Protestant rulers and communities across Europe for support with little result.

Count Tilly's armies handily won a series of demoralizing victories against the Protestants. Tilly had subdued the rebellion. Its leaders were executed; their property, confiscated. But the rout of the Protestant forces had an unintended consequence. Tilly's success intensified the concern of other nations—Catholic and Protestant—about Habsburg ambitions and power. To them, the emperor's success in the Bohemian phase of the war signaled a consolidation and expansion that threatened the balance of power among European nations.

The second phase of the war, the Danish phase, expanded the war zone beyond Bohemia. European powers' growing uncertainty over imperial territorial interests moved Denmark's King Christian IV, a Lutheran, to invade Central Europe in 1625. The French backed the Danes' move with financial support, but not troops.

The Danish campaign against the Holy Roman Empire was disastrous. Imperial armies led by the strange but formidable Albrecht von Wallenstein turned back King Christian's invasion and brought the fight to the Danish homeland. In defeat, Denmark settled on terms dictated by the emperor at the Treaty of Lübeck in northern Germany in 1629.

Although the Danish phase of the war was a total victory for the empire, Wallenstein's invasion of Denmark and the brutality of his mercenary armies horrified Europeans. The Swedes perceived his surge northward to the Baltic Sea as a clear threat to their dominion over the Baltic Sea. It seemed to Sweden and other European nations that the Holy Roman Empire was not only consolidating power within Central Europe but also expanding it to northern Europe. There was also clear evidence that Emperor Ferdinand II was meddling in Sweden's internal affairs in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of Sweden's monarch, King Gustavus Adolphus—"the Lion of the North."

The success against the Danes fortified Emperor Ferdinand's confidence, which he underscored with the Edict of Restitution (1629). The edict rolled back much of the gains of the sixteenth-century Protestant revolt. It decreed that all lands seized from the Catholic Church since 1552 had to be returned to the Church. Surprisingly, France's reaction to the edict put the interest of the French state over its loyalty to the interests of the Catholic Church. Together with Europe's Protestant nation, France launched a propaganda campaign against the emperor in the name of safeguarding German liberties. The man who coordinated the campaign was Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642), France's *de facto* prime minister under King Louis XIII.

The third phase of the war began when Sweden invaded Central Europe in 1630. With financial support from France, King Adolphus landed a well-trained, well-armed force on an island off the northeast coast of Germany. In a series of brilliantly led campaigns, the Swedish army managed to push the imperial forces well into southern Germany.

Adolphus's war aims were to restore Protestant rights in Germany and establish a Protestant federation throughout north-central Europe under Swedish patronage. This turn of events in the war, which now positioned Sweden as a new Central European power, alarmed the French. In a fascinating twist, the Swedes and the French who had made common cause against the Holy Roman Empire, now found themselves working at cross-purposes.

The remarkable military successes of the Swedes owed much to the leadership of Gustavus Adolphus and to the absence of Wallenstein as leader of the imperial armies. Emperor Ferdinand had fired Wallenstein because he was too unpredictable and difficult to control. In 1632, with Sweden notching victory after victory, Ferdinand reinstated Wallenstein. Wallenstein contained the Swedish advance and forced the Swedes to join battle at Lützen, a town just southwest of Leipzig. King Adolphus was mortally wounded in the battle, which greatly demoralized the Swedish army. Nevertheless, the Swedes managed to hold their own in the field for a while against Wallenstein's superior forces. But eventually Wallenstein's armies pushed them back across the Baltic Sea. Soon after, in 1634, Wallenstein met his end at the hands of imperial assassins who feared his dictatorial ambitions.

The defeat of the Swedes opened the fourth and decisive French phase in 1635. It lasted thirteen years and marked a departure from the way Cardinal Richelieu sought to manage French involvement in the war. He had been supporting the enemies of the emperor with money, propaganda, and diplomatic maneuvers but avoided committing French troops to the war. But with the defeat of the Danes and the Swedes, Richelieu felt compelled to commit French troops to the war. He opened a two-front war: Germany to the east and Habsburg Spain to the west. The French intervention against Catholic states, even though the French ruling class was Catholic, is a perfect example of Richelieu's doctrine of *raison d'état*,

“reason of state.” It meant that the interests of the French monarchy were more important than religious consistency.

French forces fought against Spain successfully, scoring a significant victory at Rocroi in 1643. They also moved decisively into southern Germany. The new Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III (reigned 1637–1657) sought an end to the war. Peace talks began in 1643, but the war dragged on till 1848, when all sides to the conflict, exhausted by a constant state of war, signed the Treaty of Westphalia. (For a full-color map illustrating the religious divisions of Central Europe, see illustration 1.1 at <https://www.avemariapress.com/church-and-the-age-of-enlightenment-art>.)

The Experience of War: Notes from the Field

Dividing the Thirty Years’ War into phases based on military campaigns is one important way to understand the war’s impact on European society. But to really appreciate the effect of the war on the lives of the people involved, we need a ground-level perspective. Understanding the actions, experiences, sufferings, and perceptions of everyday people helps us see why postwar Europeans were so receptive to the Enlightenment’s new ideas about religion and society.

Let’s first take a look at life from the perspective of soldiers and civilians. The relationship between them was especially significant because the armies of all sides supplied themselves mostly from what their soldiers stole or extorted from peasants and villagers. But not all civilians were passive victims. Some fought back against the soldiers or deployed other resistance strategies.

The following encounter between Johan, an imperial cavalryman, and Karl, a shepherd is typical. The residents of Ottobeuren in southern Germany were forced to quarter Johan’s regiment. Johan went through the countryside in search of food for his men. Not too far from town he met Karl tending a flock of sheep. Johan demanded that Karl provide his