



The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy

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A deadly continental struggle, the Thirty Years War devastated seventeenth-century Europe, killing nearly a quarter of all Germans and laying waste to towns and countryside alike. Peter Wilson offers the first new history in a generation of a horrifying conflict that transformed the map of the modern world.

When defiant Bohemians tossed the Habsburg emperor's envoys from the castle windows in Prague in 1618, the Holy Roman Empire struck back with a vengeance. Bohemia was ravaged by mercenary troops in the first battle of a conflagration that would engulf Europe from Spain to Sweden. The sweeping narrative encompasses dramatic events and unforgettable individuals—the sack of Magdeburg; the Dutch revolt; the Swedish militant king Gustavus Adolphus; the imperial generals, opportunistic Wallenstein and pious Tilly; and crafty diplomat Cardinal Richelieu. In a major reassessment, Wilson argues that religion was not the catalyst, but one element in a lethal stew of political, social, and dynastic forces that fed the conflict.

By war's end a recognizably modern Europe had been created, but at what price? The Thirty Years War condemned the Germans to two centuries of internal division and international impotence and became a benchmark of brutality for centuries. As late as the 1960s, Germans placed it ahead of both world wars and the Black Death as their country's greatest disaster.

An understanding of the Thirty Years War is essential to comprehending modern European history. Wilson's masterful book will stand as the definitive account of this epic conflict.

The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy Details

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From Reader Review The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy for online ebook

4triplezed says

A subject that I knew little about. The book is set out into three parts, The Beginning, Conflict and finally Aftermath. I initially got through the 1st part of the book and realised that I knew little of the reformation. I read The Reformation In Germany by C Scott Dixon and restarted Europe's Tragedy again. This made life a little easier in understanding the religious tensions that were present in the Holy Roman Empire in the time leading up to the outbreak of the war in 1618.

In the end Peter H Wilson's broad and complicated tome has been a fine read indeed. It has shown a time of complicated religious and political violence that had a remarkable effect on the Germanic people's both culturally and as to their thinking well into the future. For the beginner a slight knowledge of the Reformation is a must in my opinion but be that as it may once understood it makes this book fascinating. Highly recommended.(less)

Thomas Paul says

There are a few problems with this book but the main one is that it is simply too long. 800 pages on the Thirty Years War is just too much unless you have an extreme interest in the topic. I was interested in learning about the war because it is one of those topics that are skimmed over in European history classes and there really isn't that much out there to read. Plus the start of the book makes it seem like it will be fun reading as he discusses how the war was started because of some Bohemian Protestants tossing the Emperor's representatives out a window. But the book quickly drags with incredible unnecessary detail that for most people will be out of their head three pages later anyway. Yes, I did learn a lot about the war but with so much detail I didn't enjoy learning it and a lot of what the book covered I have no memory of whatsoever.

Let's compare this book to Desmond Seward's book on the Hundred Years War. Seward covers his topic in sufficient detail in only 300 pages. That book moves quickly and is fun and interesting. But it takes Wilson eight chapters (almost 250 pages) to even get to the beginning of the Thirty Years War. And Wilson throws so many people and places at us without enough maps or family trees that trying to remember who's who and where's where makes the book even more frustrating. We get emperors, kings, dukes, princes, knights, bishops, generals, electors from German states, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Italy, Holland with cities, towns, provinces, principalities, protectorates and trying to keep track of who is in charge of what place and where that place is in relation to the next place is impossible or at least it was for me. The book has only two maps other than battle maps. One is a map of central Europe that lacks sufficient detail and the other is a map of Switzerland(!) that is mostly useless. The battle maps themselves look like something Wilson might have drawn on the back of a cocktail napkin. This is the 21st century so getting a clear and detailed map should not be a great difficulty. Try to imagine someone writing a book on World War II without including several maps showing the pitch and flow of the war across Europe during the 6 years of fighting. And as far as pictures go, the pictures on Wikipedia's article on the war are better than anything you will find in this book.

But the main problem is that the book is way too long because Wilson feels a need to tell us everything about the war (and the 50 or so years before the war started) that his research dug up. Plus Wilson is a lousy writer.

If Wilson had limited himself to even 500 pages and aimed his book at a reader other than the historian in the next office this book could have been worth reading. It's too bad that Wilson didn't use his first chapter as a model for writing the book.

José Luís Fernandes says

This work is a very good read on the Thirty Years' War. It details all of the conflict very well and contextualizes it in early Modern Europe.

The author has a great knowledge of his matters and gives examples when he claims something, making his argumentation very strong. He just has some small issues with early modern history outside of Central Europe (like describing the Ottoman court as very similar to the medieval Roman one, despite all the obvious influences, or confusing between principality, earldom and Kingdom regarding Catalonia), but from what I realize this is mostly due to his highly specialized studies on early modern Central Europe and his narrowing of historical perspective (although he covers in an appropriate way many of the other related conflicts on his work), but that's compensated by his almost encyclopedic knowledge about the inner workings of the Holy Roman Empire (it's needed a huge study to master such a complex topic). He also arguments against seeing the Thirty Years' War as the last conflict driven by religion and focuses instead on dynastic, geopolitical, ambition (both by the rulers who participated and the Bohemian rebels) and constitutional issues inside the Empire, while not completely denying the influence of the fundamentalists mainly in the Palatinate or in Ferdinand II (which were factors which delayed the war's end) and sees the conflict not as the founder of the modern state, but as a catalyst of that institution.

This author's style of writing, while giving much information and suiting me very well, isn't the best one for most people. Wilson has a dense academic text full of statistical examples, which is the cause of many critiques here, but I discount that in my evaluation because that's what is expected of a major account. Popular History is fine and I might give it the maximum grade if it's very well done, but people can't punish this work because they are used to reading easier books and stumbled on reading a more scholarly work. As this work (despite the flaws above) is an excellent work, I give it the maximum grade (especially considering it has almost 1000 pages, which forces any evaluation to be careful with the huge scope presented here).

Hadrian says

Nine hundred pages on one of the bloodiest wars in European history. A considerable portion of Germans, when polled, consider this to be the worst war in Germany's history, including both World Wars!

Perfect Christmas-time reading.

This is a very thorough one-volume overview of the Thirty Years War, providing some 290 pages of background before finally reaching the Defenestration of Prague.

The machinations of the Swedes, the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs, the French, and the separate duchies, kingdoms, and bishoprics of the Holy Roman Empire are a bit hard to follow at times, although the author does try extremely hard to make it all follow some chronology. The battles and tactics are described well, as

is society before, during, and the aftermath of this long struggle.

Out of all of this mess, the Dutch finally received their independence, and the very idea of the nation-state was born, perhaps being the spark of the whole modern era in Europe. Out of the hottest crucibles of war, the Enlightenment rose.

Steven Peterson says

This is a difficult book. Peter Wilson clearly has provided us with a detailed volume that is a major resource on the Thirty Years War. However, it is not a reader-friendly work. For one thing, we need more maps to make sense of events--whether of the entire region being discussed or lower level, more focused maps. For another, the actors move by in kaleidoscopic fashion, one after the other, and it is not easy to keep track of key players and the governments that they represent. A table summarizing such information at key points in the narrative would be useful.

However, one cannot question Wilson's mastery of the subject. He begins the work before the outset of the War, to provide background and context, and ground the sanguinary struggle within a larger setting. It is clear from the book that countries were trying to maintain some semblance of piece. But religious differences, dynastic power struggles, and a variety of other forces pushed toward war. The actors ranged, geographically, from Sweden to Spain, from France to the Ottoman Empire.

The war itself was brutal. There are maps outlining the basics of key battles, but, as noted, larger scale maps would have been useful. Also, the print in the maps is not the easiest style to read. Wilson provides a good sense of the ebb and flow of the war, as well as the varying skill levels of military commanders and their leaders.

The book concludes with a very detailed analysis of the end results and impact of the war. The Treaty of Westphalia has been hailed by many as marking the modern understanding of states and the concept of sovereignty. Wilson examines the contention skillfully. There were profound economic and demographic effects, as well as larger political consequences. Again, Wilson addresses these with considerable sensitivity, not given to hyperbole.

My sense (I am not an expert in this part of history) is that this is an impressive resource for those who want a detailed view of this historical trauma. But be forewarned that this is not a reader friendly work.

Mike says

So how does someone review a book as large, in depth, and complex as this one? This conflict, which I certainly learned less than nothing about in school, was a brutal, long, and devastating war that ravaged many parts of Central Europe. Modern estimates put total losses at 15%-20% of the Holy Roman Empire's population, a loss rate greater than that suffered by the Soviet Union during WWII.

I still cannot conceptualize just how terrible this conflict was. There were domestic armies crisscrossing the land, taking what they needed to sustain itself like a heavily armed swarm of locusts, foreign armies taking

advantage of the Empire's weakness to pick off territory, economic collapse, the plague (!!!), and massive population displacements over the course of 30 years. The land was so devastated that by the later parts of the war military strategy had to take into account what regions were still even capable of supporting an army.

Wilson does an excellent job walking the reader through the immense complexity of the war (though the book would have been immensely improved by the addition of more maps). Wisely starting in the years leading up to the actual outbreak of hostilities. The politics that culminated in this devastating conflict were a toxic brew of ambitious nobles, religious zealotry, familial relations, imperial politicking, and the sabotage of existing imperial institutions that could have served as a venue for developing a consensus and compromise.

"Imperial politics was thus a series of formal meetings of rulers and their representatives at irregular intervals, supplemented by lesser assemblies to discuss specific issues... Contact was maintained in between by couriers or informal meetings. The large number of relatively weak elements made it difficult for anyone to act alone, discouraging extremism and diluting any agenda to a minimum that all could agree."

What surprised me most was the proto-representative structures that were already in existence within the Empire. It was nothing close to the representative institutions that exist today, but did provide some degree of representation, even if only among the nobles and other notable citizens. The HRE was much less imperial/autocratic than I initially assumed and there was much too be admired in its structure when compared to its neighbors. Unfortunately those institutions were not strong enough to prevent war (partially through sabotage by religious militants and partially by a very stubborn emperor).

Another thing that surprised me about the conflict was how little religion impacted events. Yes, there was certainly a religious influence on the political decisions of rulers and rebels, but it was not a hard a fast barrier. Protestants served and attained very high positions in the Imperial army while Catholic powers such as France allied with protestant Sweden to take advantage of the Empire's weakness. While being the same religion as your superiors was an advantage, protestants and Catholics served under the banners of all sides. Political gain, more so than religion, was the driving force of nation states with confessional alignments serving as convenient to propaganda efforts.

Speaking of protestant Sweden, it is often forgotten this now benign Nordic country was a world beater back in the 17th Century and successfully invaded and held a portion of the HRE for quite a while. While it had a small population, it more than made up for it by hiring mercenaries and recruiting Germans into its forces. In fact, the vast majority of its army for most of the war was comprised of Germans who preferred the yolk of Sweden to the rule of the HRE. So remember, the next time a volvo cuts you off, they could mean serious business (as long as their were Germans to hire to do their dirty work).

Another fascinating aspect of this war was the inability of contemporary states to sustain the country in a time of war. Financial systems were just beginning to develop their more modern aspects, but were still small and weak. Taxing the population was a difficult activity and rarely raised the expected amount of revenue. Shortfalls were made by loans, IOUS, and granting lands and titles to secure financing. Because this conflict lasted much longer than previous conflicts and had such high stakes, nations, even rich ones such as Spain which could draw upon New World silver, had to take out more and more loans to maintain itself. Sufficed to say, the interest costs ballooned rather quickly:

"Of this [Spanish government expenditures], 30.5 million went to the civil budget; 44.2 million directly to the armed forces; and 175.8 million to bondholders and contractors for loans and interest."

Not surprisingly the lenders had little interest in any sort of public good and could care less if the world went to hell:

"The formal structure of ordinary taxation became little more than a front behind which the financiers carried on their affairs with studied indifference towards the damage that they did to the government and contempt for the suffering of the tax-paying element of the population."

This financial weakness made seizing property from enemies even more important and led to further crimes against civilians and their property. This, in turn, made it more difficult for states to generate tax revenues, continuing the cycle of loans, interest payments, pillaging and more loans. Continue this for 30 years and you can see why this was such a terrible war.

A final note I would like to add is just how few battles there actually were over the course of 30 years. It was primarily a war of maneuver, siege, and diplomacy. Armies lost many more soldiers to desertion and disease than enemy contact. In fact the biggest problem most generals faced was retaining soldiers so that they could threaten the enemy with maneuver and sieges. Unlike the battles and wars we see in so many fantasy novels even crushing victories in the field would not guarantee success in the war. The campaign seasons were short making it difficult to follow up smashing victories, cities and towns could hold out against siege forces that were attritioned through hunger, desertions, and disease, the Empire was large with little in the way of major transportation arteries apart from rivers, and even in victories the winning army would often be severely diminished themselves.

"[Military] Operations were essentially intended to secure local military advantage to lend weight to these negotiations and compel the other side to be more reasonable."

Military victories had to be paired with diplomacy that could extract concessions from the defeated party. Before Clausewitz rulers of the time knew war was merely politics carried out by other means.

All in all reading this book reinforced by fervent belief that a representative secular government is the ideal arrangement for a nation. The Thirty Years War provides a striking example of just what can go wrong in a state so closely tied a specific religion and with so little recourse among the ruled.

"Though they are now largely silent, the voices from the 17th century still speak to us... They offer a warning of the dangers of entrusting power to those who feel summoned by God to war, or feel that their sense of justice and order is the only one valid."

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Some other passages that struck me as ringing true and still relevant to today's world:

*"Nevertheless, then as now, militancy proves especially dangerous when combined with political power. It creates a delusional sense in those who rule of being chosen by God for a divine purpose and reward. It encourages the conviction that their norms alone are absolute... their faith is the only really true religion."*

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The two [law and faith] were considered indivisible because religion provided the guide for all human endeavor: since there could be only one truth, there could be only one law. But now Catholics and Lutherans both claimed to be right."

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*"...while the Germans as a whole were regarded as backward and boorish, too busy gorging themselves on*

*fatty foods and guzzling barrels of beer to achieve the heights of Castilian civilization. They lived in a rain-soaked land of dreary forests... and expensive, uncomfortable inns." Wait, how did that one get in here?*

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"Factions in both Spain and the [Dutch] Republic saw war as the means to assert control over their own governments and promote what they regarded as their country's best interest."

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*The Imperialists occupied Meissen and dispatched Croats towards Dresden with the message that Johann Georg would no longer need candles for his banquets as the Imperialists would now provide light by burning Saxony's villages." Mostly because this was the most badass line in the entire book.*

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## **Heikki says**

This 30 year period of European History is sadly neglected, but it seems I have found the right book for unraveling the turbulent times of 1618-1648. This war, incidentally, was the one that launched the Finns onto the world scene: King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden employed Finnish horsemen, whose war cry, "HAKKAA PÄÄLLE" (up and at 'em!) was turned into the name of the troops, the Hakkapelites.

Now that I have finished it, I must say, Prof. Wilson has produced a massive, yet approachable tome, which fully covers all the facets of this thorniest of wars. The Bohemian Revolt, the Catholic/Lutheran schisms, Sweden's run for superpower status in Europe and France's meddling in just about everybody's business are all explained in detail.

This is a book I can recommend to any serious fan of military and social history, but it will not appeal to the casual reader. There's simply too much of everything here, so if you want the Idiot's Guide to the 30 Years War, this is not it. This will drag you in, take you through villages on campaign and over winter billeting, and tell you everything you ever want to know of this famous war (or set of wars, actually).

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## **James Folan says**

This book's erudition and scope are both its strength and weakness: the wealth of unrelenting detail makes for a gruelling read.

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## **Mitch says**

This is a comprehensive and authoritative history of the 30 Years War. No stone goes unturned, but few are picked up and examined with a storyteller's eye. Rather, it is dense and difficult to read because the stories require the author to compress weeks into a sentence. I know more about this seminal event in European history after reading Wilson's 1,000-page book, however I still couldn't tell you the story of the war. This feels like a book that can benefit from the author's excerpting and elaborating on key themes, as Norman Cantor's medieval and Crusades history did when he revisited and popularized his work.

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## A.J. Howard says

Only upon reading the first chapter of *Europe's Tragedy* did I realize how little I actually knew about the 30 Years War. Usually when I pick up a history book, I have a general idea of the subject matter. I might not have a firm grasp of the details but I'm aware of the major events, and players. The Thirty Years War was an almost completely dark gap in my knowledge. It was jumbled up with several other European Wars that took place between the Reformation and the French Revolution. I knew it lasted approximately three decades, and that it involved much of Europe. I was pretty sure religion was probably an issue and that the Dutch were involved.

Having finished Peter Wilson's massive study, I consider myself adequately informed. Within the first few chapters, Wilson argues convincingly against several widely held misconceptions about the conflict. Wilson then effectively introduces the framework of the conflict. Wilson is at his best as a writer when he refrains from the details and gives a broad overview. With this subject, providing such a broad overview is no small task. Wilson's argument is that the War was much less a religious Crusade of any kind than a conflict over the exact workings of government in the Holy Roman Empire. In order to convince the reader of this fact, he has to introduce the enormously complicated structure of the Empire, as well as incorporate about a hundred years of buildup before he can begin to touch upon the subject of his book. Topics that simply must be discussed in this long introduction include the effects of the Reformation (which started in the Empire), the opposing Counter-Reformation, the complex mechanisms of the Hapsburg family (the family of the Holy Roman Emperors since the 13th century, since the 1530's one branch ruled the Empire while another held the throne of Spain), and the Dutch War of Independence. Perhaps most difficultly, he has to describe the complexities of the German constitution. To give you a hint of how difficult this task could be, keep in mind that although a German constitution was almost universally accepted as existing, there was neither a written constitution or a political entity known as Germany.

Wilson accomplishes this pretty skillfully. Unfortunately, Wilson is not nearly as adept at describing the actual war as he is at laying the groundwork for it. Let me make clear, it is obvious that Wilson is extremely well acquainted with his subject and that he has done a lifetime of research. However, the book completely fails to transfer its author's expertise to the reader in an engaging or stimulating manner. There is a complete lack of narrative flow in Wilson's account of the fighting. Wilson doesn't delve into any of the personalizing details. Major figures are given at best a minimal introduction. There is no awareness of the human scale of the events. Generals and armies blur with each other. Accounts of battles are extremely dry and almost exclusively explanatory. Compounding the issue is a lack of maps. The map provided is less than mediocre, and fails completely when Wilson is describing conflicts in more localized areas.

It would be one thing if Wilson was attempting a scholarly work. But he constructs the book as a general survey, and there isn't a whole lot here to that would give more understanding of the subject to someone more familiar with the conflict than I was. After admirably setting the stage, *Europe's Tragedy* becomes a dry and dull textbook at onset the main event. I did learn a lot from the over 800 pages. However, the combination of the inadequacies of information with Wilson's weaknesses as a writer make the majority of the book excruciatingly dull and a chore to get through. *Europe's Tragedy* succeeds as a comprehensive reference, but fails as an enjoyable reading experience.

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## Robert says

Outstanding dissection of the causes and course of the 30 years War. Wilson spends something like a quarter of the book exploring the 16th century origins of the conditions that set the stage for the war starting in 1618. Wilson's take on the Swedish motives for intervention is the first I've ever seen where the more mercenary aspects of Sweden's grasp at empire are plainly explained. If you have read Wedgewood's or Parker's books on the TYW, do not miss this volume. There is much new information here to digest.

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## **Scriptor Ignotus says**

### **THIRTY YEARS WARS**

2014 marks one hundred years since the outbreak of the Great War, which was itself the beginning of a conflagration which some historians have referred to as the Second Thirty Years War (1914-1945). Yet while the Second Thirty Years War continues to transfix our collective consciousness, hardly any of our contemporary political discourse in the West reflects on the original Thirty Years War, or even seems to acknowledge the fact that the horrors Europe experienced in the twentieth century represented merely the latest European "general war" in a tradition of such periodic calamities stretching back through the centuries: The Napoleonic Wars, the Seven Years War, and the Thirty Years War are but the most prominent examples.

But what could we in the West stand to learn from studying a conflict which began nearly four hundred years ago? Quite a lot, it seems to me. The Thirty Years War is often dismissed as the grotesque death rattle of European medievalism; a struggle between culturally and intellectually backward religious fanatics in an exotic historical setting quite removed from our own time, in which we have learned the values of liberty, justice, toleration, empathy, and self-restraint.

Yet while reading through Peter Wilson's account, I found myself more often struck by the continuities between Early Modern Man and his twenty-first century evolutionary descendant, Millennial Man. The European princes who plunged into war in the first half of the seventeenth century were certainly religious men - some of them even to the point of zealotry - but oftentimes their religious persuasions were bound up with political ambitions, tribal animosities, and moral questions of freedom, autonomy, political representation, self-determination, and redress of grievances which are perfectly intelligible to our postmodern universe.

This realization may be cause for discomfort; if such a calamity could fall upon largely reasonable people living centuries ago, despite the best efforts of a large body of moderate statesmen genuinely interested in peace, then who is to say that such a crisis could not confound us in our own time, despite the elegant liberal internationalist structures we have built for ourselves; the "partnerships for peace"? Is it possible that the cultural and political archetypes which gave birth to the hellish monster of continental war in the seventeenth century are still active, like a volcanic magma chamber covered by earth, ready to burst forth at some future time of seismic activity?

At a time in which entire Palestinian families are killed by Israeli airstrikes in Gaza and Israeli families are terrorized by Hamas rockets; in which Vladimir Putin and pro-Russian partisans dismember the sovereign state of Ukraine in the name of ethnic kinship; in which the religious zealots of ISIS battle to create an

Islamic state in Iraq and Syria; in which the extreme right rears its head in European politics for the first time in decades; in which the United States casually expands its Afghan War into Pakistan, patrolling the skies and killing innocents with robotic drones; in which political repression persists and perpetuates itself in all its overt and covert forms; we must pause to reflect on the past and the future. We must not allow the superficial answers to satisfy us. And we must be very, very careful.

## **THE WAR**

The Thirty Years War was precipitated by a long political crisis within the Holy Roman Empire, which was exacerbated to the point of open warfare by relatively small factions of religious extremists on all sides who were driven by a dangerous single-mindedness and sense of divine purpose. The 1555 Peace of Augsburg represented a truce between the Catholic and Lutheran princes of the empire, and a recognition on the part of the Catholic emperors that total religious conformity could not be enforced at swordpoint and the Protestant Reformation could not simply be undone - at least not overnight.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, the Augsburg order became strained, as devout Calvinist principalities like Palatine, Hessen-Kassel, and Brandenburg, excluded from the political concessions given to the Lutherans, began to take extra-constitutional measures to increase their influence within the empire. Frederick V of Palatine headed a Union of protestant princes, while Maximilian of Bavaria led the Catholic Liga in response, as the Emperor himself and moderate Protestant princes like those in Saxony, the birthplace of the Reformation, sought to avoid allowing the Empire to become divided on religious grounds.

This buildup culminated in the famous Defenestration of Prague in 1618, in which the Emperor's envoys, sent to negotiate with protestant statesmen in the Prague Castle, were seized and hurled from the castle windows, marking the beginning of the Bohemian Revolt. Frederick V of Palatine was subsequently crowned King of Bohemia, as anti-Habsburg rebels overran the countryside.

Ferdinand II, Holy Roman Emperor, relied on the Liga forces to crush the revolt, furthering the conflict's sectarian character. The enterprising Liga general, Count Tilly, scores a decisive victory against the rebels at the Battle of White Mountain, and by the year 1623, the rebels have been thoroughly trounced and Frederick has fled to the Netherlands.

It is here that the conflict begins to take on an even more tragic character, because though the war could have ended here, the structural weakness of the Holy Roman Empire and the sense of religious mission so pervasive among European rulers invited outside intervention on behalf of the beleaguered protestant princes of the Empire, continuously stoking the fires of blood lust, ambition, and religious passion which fed the carnage and contributed to the brutal character of the war.

In the latter 1620s, King Christian IV of Denmark, which has a seat on the Reichstag thanks to its holdings in Holstein, tries to salvage the protestant cause by intervening in northern Germany in 1625, partially out of religious sympathy, and partly to secure his dynastic holdings near the river systems of the region and contribute to the maritime tributary system which financed the Danish monarchy and made the Danish royals some of the richest people in Europe.

Christian is comprehensively defeated by Tilly's forces, and the imperialists advance all the way to the Baltic, alarming Sweden and prompting its king, Gustav II Adolf, wrapping up a war with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to contemplate his own intervention in the Empire.

Gustav lands in Pomerania in 1630, opening a bloody new chapter in the war and extending it by another eighteen years. He is lionized in protestant propaganda as a messianic figure of sorts, sent from the heavens to liberate the German protestants from the satanic tyranny of the Habsburgs. Tilly's run comes to an end, as his army is smashed at the Battle of Breitenfeld (1631), and Gustav secures the support of Brandenburg, Hessen-Kassel, and Saxony. The war becomes a massive and convoluted struggle between the German princes, as foreign powers like Sweden, France, and Spain feed in troops on either side, each finding a cause to support - or at least an enemy to thwart - in the Empire.

Gustav's luck runs out at Lutzen, where he is killed in battle against Wallenstein's imperial army in 1632, leaving the Swedes rudderless and causing the war to become even more universal, localized, convoluted, and directionless, and subsequently adding to the plight of civilians throughout the empire. For them, a nominally friendly army is as dangerous as a hostile one, as the underdeveloped military-financial system of Europe compels armies to make war at the enemy's expense; plundering cities and villages for supplies, billeting in private homes, extorting money and information from the local people, and generally making life miserable for the European peasantry.

Armies become criminal gangs, as rape, murder, arson, and highway robbery become a ways of life for the still semi-mercenary European soldiery. Peasants take matters into their own hands, resisting armies on all sides in the pursuit of perhaps the most noble cause of the war: that of not allowing their communities to be ravaged by private warfare between the European princes. Isolated soldiers are ambushed, robbed, and killed by peasant guerillas.

Armies carry not only weapons with which to murder and terrorize, but infectious diseases which decimate populations. Having plundered the countryside and run out of food, none of the belligerents in Germany are able to field large armies for the final decade of the war. Most of the fighting is between small, mobile forces of cavalry which are unable to conduct sieges or garrison captured fortifications without adequate infantry contingents.

After Gustav II Adolf's death at Lutzen, Wallenstein inexplicably withdraws from the battlefield. He mystifies Ferdinand II by refusing to press his advantage against the now leaderless Swedes. He conducts unilateral negotiations with the Pro-Swedish princes, in direct defiance of the Emperor. With his loyalty to the Habsburgs cast into doubt, the emperor quietly issues a statement stripping him of command. On February 25, 1634, a group of Irish and Scottish (!) officers burst into his bedroom and run him through with a halberd.

The war becomes increasingly internationalized as the Swedish presence weakens in Germany. France and Spain become proactive belligerents, in pursuit of their wider European objectives.

Spain, under the Count-Duke Olivares, seeks Habsburg support against the ongoing Dutch Revolt, as its ongoing war in the Spanish Netherlands (modern Belgium) is the theatre of massive, grinding engagements that would later become typical of the First World War.

Spain's problems are further exacerbated by open war with France, and revolts in Portugal and Catalonia in 1640. Olivares hopes to stabilize the Empire by helping the Emperor win the war; thereby freeing Imperial troops to join the battle against France and the Dutch.

France, under the feckless Louis XIII and the hardnosed realist Cardinal Richelieu, seeks to stave off encirclement by the Habsburgs. Despite the Catholicism of the French monarchy, Richelieu supports the Dutch Revolt to drive the Spanish off France's northern border, stirs up trouble in Italy to threaten Spain's duchy in Milan, and finally sends military expeditions into Germany to support the anti-Habsburg forces, hoping to create a neutral protestant power bloc that will neutralize the Austrian wing of the Habsburg monarchy.

By the mid 1640s, it is apparent that the disaster is only going to end through a widespread negotiated settlement. After confusion and controversy on all sides during the Congress of Westphalia from 1646-48, the catastrophe finally ends in 1648, as Spain makes peace with the Dutch with the treaty of Munster, and the Empire is pacified by the Peace of Westphalia.

Though stemming from the pragmatic needs of the belligerents, Westphalia was a milestone in the history of European statecraft. It created a paradigm in European politics in which interventions in the sovereign territory of another state or principality were stripped of much of their legitimacy. It was also among the first truly secular political conferences in European history; although the stated goal of the Congress was to forge a lasting "Christian peace". The Emperor's power was significantly weakened, inaugurating a new era in which Austria largely disengaged from German affairs, instead expanding the Austrian state through conquests in Eastern Europe and the Balkans until challenged by Frederick II in 1740, and eventually ejected from Germany by Bismarck in 1866-71. Religious and political toleration was extended to Calvinists in the Empire.

The Peace was a foundational event for modern internationalism, as the representatives of the various European powers present at the Congress were addressed largely on equal terms, undermining the traditionally hierarchical structure of European politics in which the Emperor was taken to be higher in status than the mere kings who ruled the rest of Europe.

## **THOUGHTS AND REACTIONS**

Reading about the Thirty Years War, one can't help but wonder: how is it that any of the millions of people who were victimized by the war were able to hold on to their religious faith, when so many people, with genuine religious convictions similar to their own, were doing such horrible things to one another? Having one's home plundered and family murdered on multiple occasions by multiple armies under leaders of different, yet equally heartfelt, religious persuasions must have caused a great deal of cynicism.

Why would God allow such a thing to happen? Wilson points out a common refrain from all sides of the

war: everyone acknowledged that the Christians of Europe were treating one another with far more cruelty, barbarity, and pure, unadulterated malice than was ever perpetrated against them by the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire. The Turks could never dream of doing as much damage to Christendom as Christians themselves did during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The paradox surrounding the ferocity of conflicts within Christianity, among zealous followers of a faith which implores us to turn the other cheek, remains to me one of the great enigmas of the Christian faith.

It seems to me that what happened politically in the Thirty Years War is somewhat analogous to the crisis in Syria over the last few years - just on a much larger scale. In both cases, the governing regime suffered a partial breakdown, as dissenting factions took up arms. Then ambitious foreign powers began to project their ideological projects onto the internal war. In Syria, the Americans saw a chance to support freedom fighters rebelling against a tyrannical government, while Russia saw a conservative, sovereign state under attack from an international gang of radicals. Weakness within a state is a siren's song which invites aggression from other, stronger powers. The Thirty Years War was a much deadlier conflagration than that in Syria simply because the Holy Roman Empire was, comparatively speaking, a much larger, more populous, and more strategically important entity encompassing the heart of Europe.

It was this slippery-sloped logic of intervention that drove the Thirty Years War from a revolt in Bohemia to a major European war which deprived Germany of perhaps one quarter of its population and permanently set back its political development. For my part, I remain intimidated that in many quarters, the most important lessons of the war have still not been learned. Against all who would take up arms to fulfill their ambitions through the fires of war, let our refrain be thus: remember Westphalia!

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## **Mark says**

Peter Wilson's book is about more than the war that consumed central Europe in the 17th century. To adequately explain the factors that led up to it and influenced its outcome, he describes the context of politics and government in the Holy Roman Empire. This vast, unwieldy, and yet surprisingly effective institution was at the center of the struggle, as Protestants and Catholics struggle to coexist within it in the years following the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. Fragile as it was, this peace was strained by the efforts of successive Habsburg emperors to strengthen their power within the empire, an effort that fueled Protestant anxieties that the Habsburgs would use this power to advance the Catholic faith at their expense.

Yet Wilson makes a persuasive argument that the war was more about politics than religion. Though confessional issues sparked the initial outbreak, the war often led to cross-confessional alliances that set co-religionists against each other. Here Wilson builds upon his extensive discussion of prewar politics to highlight the dynastic ambitions of people like Frederick V of Palatine and Maximilian of Bavaria and their efforts to use the war to advance their interests. Nobody exemplified this better than Gustavus Adolphus, the Swedish king whose intervention reversed the string of Imperial victories. Though his death deprived the rebels of their greatest leader, the war dragged on thanks to the support provided by the French, whose rise to European dominance coincided with the conflict.

All of this is described in an elaborate narrative designed to give the reader an understanding of the factors at work in the conflict and how the war turned out the way it did. The text is dense with the names of people and locations, yet this helps convey the considerable complexity of events. Simply put, this is the best history of the war available, and will remain the definitive source for anyone interested in the conflict for years to come.

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## **Liviu says**

Slightly disappointing as dull and only moderately well presented; magisterial in scope and presumably accurate and well researched, but it falls into the middle hole of not scholarly enough for a reference book and neither entertaining enough nor presented superbly by bogging down into details for a "popular book"

Makes one really appreciate John Julius Norwich, Adrian Goldsworthy and several other historians who manage to be both comprehensive and good writers

Still recommended but it could have been much better if the author were more than a mediocre writer

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## **William says**

Writing a history of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) presents the historian with many problems because of the complexity of the conflict. Major stumbling blocks to the study of the war include the need to work with at least fourteen languages, study thousands of published works, and toil in numerous archives to produce a study that would cover all aspects of a conflict that involved much of Europe. As such, there are few full-length general accounts of the Thirty Years War. Most of the published literature is meant for specialists, and many of the brief overviews are geared for students.

Dr Peter H. Wilson, Professor of History at the University of Hull, and a leading historian of Early Modern Germany, has taken up this task, and given us the first general account of the conflict since Geoffrey Parker's *The Thirty Years War* (1984). Wilson's previous studies include *War, State and Society in Württemberg, 1677-1793* (1995), *German Armies: War and German Society, 1648-1806* (1998), *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495-1806* (1999), *From Reich to Revolution: German History 1558-1806* (2004), as well as a recently published document collection *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* (2010).

Wilson's massive detailed account, based on the latest research, examines the political, economic, social, and military history of the era with respect to the origins, conduct, and outcome of the most destructive war of the seventeenth century. The author sees the Thirty Years War as a conflict in Central Europe, and this region is his main focus. But, the study addresses all of the major and minor players, including Spain, France, the Dutch Republic, Sweden, Denmark, England, Transylvania, Savoy, and the Ottoman Empire, that had an impact on the origins or course of the conflict. The author strives to show the distinctiveness of the "German War" in respect to other related conflicts, such as the Hispano-Dutch, Polish-Swedish, and Mantuan wars, during the era.

Wilson begins by examining the origins of the conflict in the Holy Roman Empire in relation to the general European situation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. To do so, he introduces key issues and participants inside and outside the Empire. The weakened state of the Austrian Habsburgs after the Long Turkish War (1593-1606), the roles of the Protestant Union and Catholic League in German politics, and legal issues such as the Jülich-Cleves Crises are fully examined. Readers of this journal will appreciate the influence of the Dutch Revolt (1568-1609) and Long Turkish War on military leaders with regard to strategy, military technology, fighting tactics, and logistics in the Thirty Years War.

The author devotes nearly five hundred pages to the conduct of the Thirty Years War. He fully describes the politics, diplomacy, and military action of the many participants involved in the war from the Bohemian Revolt to the Peace of Westphalia. He argues throughout his study that the Thirty Years War was a series of secular conflicts with religious overtones. The Bohemian Revolt of 1618 was a coup carried out by a minority of anxious militant Protestants against Habsburg rule for political reasons (pp. 269-70). Emperor Ferdinand II drew the support of Maximilian of Bavaria, the Catholic League, and Spain against Frederick V of the Palatinate and the Bohemian rebels, not for religious motives, but to uphold the imperial constitution (p. 297). The dynastic ambitions of Christian IV of Denmark, not a religious cause, led to the Danish phase of the Thirty Years War in 1625 (p. 387). Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden intervened in German affairs for security reasons in 1630 (p.462). Protestant Sweden and Catholic France became allies against the Austrian Habsburgs for secular goals. Most studies of the Thirty Years War give limited coverage to the period after 1635. Historians tend to see this period as chaotic and extremely destructive. Wilson, however, devotes equal attention to this period of the conflict. In fact, his book is especially important for the detailed discussion of activities during the last thirteen years of the war. He stresses that this phase of the war “wreaked havoc, but it also remained firmly controlled and directed. Operations continued to support political objectives as rulers sought to improve their negotiating positions” (p. 624).

Wilson succeeds in providing a well-written, authoritative study of the Thirty Years War. Specialists as well as general readers will gain much from this work. Military historians will enjoy his coverage of the many campaigns. There are numerous battle plan maps. However, the study lacks an overall map of Central Europe and smaller operational maps dealing with military campaigns.

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