The Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648)

The Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) was the last major European war of religion and the first all-European struggle for power. It was, in fact, a series of wars fought mainly on German soil and was only part of a larger struggle to alter the European balance of power.

The religious wars that had divided Germany and the Holy Roman Empire as a result of the Protestant Reformation ended in compromise with the Peace of Augsburg (1555), and there was peace between the Protestant and Roman Catholic states of the empire for the next 50 years. In the early 17th century, however, tensions between the rival faiths revived.

The Bohemian War

Hostilities broke out on May 23, 1618, when a number of Protestant Bohemian noblemen threw two royal governors of their country out of the windows of the Hradcany Palace in Prague (an event known as the Defenestration of Prague). It was a rebellion typical of this period by men of great privilege and power who saw a threat in the advance of royal power: in this case in the absolutist and Catholic policies of their king, Ferdinand of Habsburg, soon to be elected Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II. Both sides were convinced that they were fighting for a holy cause, and both feared not only political defeat but annihilation if the other won. Therefore, both sides looked for allies and widened the conflict, entangling it with the religious and political struggles of their neighbors.

The Bohemians appealed to Gábor Bethlen, Protestant prince of Transylvania, who, with the encouragement of his overlord, the Ottoman sultan of Turkey, was hoping to win the crown of Hungary from the Habsburgs. They also elected Frederick V of the Palatinate as their new king. They hoped that Frederick’s father-in-law, James I of England, and his uncle, Maurice of Nassau, virtual ruler of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, would lend him support.

Ferdinand called on Poland but especially on his cousins Maximilian, duke of Bavaria (leader of the Catholic League of German princes), and on the Habsburg king of Spain, Philip III. On Nov. 8, 1620, Maximilian’s general, Graf von Tilly, defeated the Bohemians at White Mountain near Prague, and Frederick—the Winter King—lost his crown as suddenly as he had won it. He continued to fight, employing various mercenary leaders, including Ernst, Graf von Mansfeld, and relying on some English and a great deal of Dutch help. In 1623, however, the Palatinate was overrun by Spanish and Bavarian troops, and Frederick’s electoral vote was transferred to Maximilian of Bavaria.

Expansion of the War

In 1621 the Dutch and Spanish had renewed the war that had started two generations previously with the revolt of the Netherlands (see Dutch Revolt). This struggle remained an important factor in the Thirty Years’ War. It ranged to the Caribbean Sea, the South Atlantic Ocean, and the Indian Ocean. The Dutch captured the Gold Coast, parts of Angola, and half of Brazil from the Portuguese, only to lose Angola and Brazil to Portugal, after that kingdom reasserted its independence from Spain, in 1640.

In Europe, Dutch and Spanish money and military expertise fueled the fighting. Spanish troops fought in Germany, Italy, and France. The Dutch, with a much smaller population, preferred to finance military allies. After Frederick’s generals these allies included, first, Christian IV of Denmark, who feared the continued victories of Tilly’s armies. In April 1626, Mansfeld met defeat at Dessau Bridge by a new imperial army raised by a wealthy and ambitious former Protestant Bohemian, Albrecht von Wallenstein. Four months later Christian was routed by Tilly at Lutter am Barenberge. With victory
apparently in hand, Emperor Ferdinand issued (Mar. 29, 1629) the Edict of Restitution, which restored to the Catholic church all property taken by the Protestants since 1552.

After Denmark's withdrawal (May 1629) from the war, however, another Scandinavian power joined the fray. Encouraged by France, Sweden concluded a truce with its Baltic rival Poland, and in July 1630 the Swedish king Gustav II Adolf landed in Pomerania to begin a series of victorious campaigns against the imperial armies. At Breitenfeld (Sept. 17, 1631) and at the Lech River (Apr. 15, 1632) he defeated Tilly, and at Lützen (Nov. 16, 1632) the Swedes defeated Wallenstein, although Gustav Adolf was killed.

Throughout these years, the Catholic King Louis XIII of France, the traditional rival of the house of Habsburg for preeminence in Europe, had observed Tilly's and Wallenstein's victories with increasing concern, although he had waged several civil wars against his own Protestant subjects, the Huguenots. Despite some help from England, the Huguenots were defeated, and France turned to fight Spain, with only partial success, in northern Italy. After Gustav Adolf's death and after the Swedes suffered a severe defeat at Nördlingen (Sept. 6, 1634), France openly declared (1635) war on Spain, in alliance with the United Provinces, Sweden, and some German Protestant princes.

The ring of alliances was virtually complete; no treaty between any two states, or even group of states, could now end the war. The intervention of France on the "Protestant" side cut across the religious alignments of the combatants. More and more, religious motivation and aims dropped into the background. In 1640 both Catalonia and Portugal rebelled against Spain, although all three were Catholic. In 1643 the Protestant Christian of Denmark, fearing the increasing power of Protestant Sweden, restarted the old Danish-Swedish rivalry for the control of the Sound (Öresund), the northwestern entrance to the Baltic. Once more the Danes were heavily defeated and lost their monopoly control over the Sound.

**Peace Settlements**

From 1643 the ambassadors of the combatants met in peace congresses in the Westphalian cities of Münster and Osnabrück. Because there was no truce, the relative position of parties continued to change; all wanted to negotiate from strength. It therefore took 5 years to conclude peace—in January 1648 between Spain and the United Provinces and in October 1648 between France, Sweden, the Holy Roman emperor, and the German princes (see Westphalia, Peace of). The war between France and Spain continued until 1659 (Peace of the Pyrenees), with Great Britain joining France against Spain in 1656; the wars between Sweden and Poland and between Sweden and Denmark flared up again and were not settled until 1660 (Peace of Oliva and Peace of Copenhagen).

The Peace of Westphalia solved some problems. The Habsburgs had failed to reassert imperial power, and the German princes were left with virtual political independence and with the right to choose their religion. Their subjects were given no such choice but were allowed to emigrate. In European power politics, religion no longer determined alliances, nor did it lead countries into war. Sweden had become the dominant power in the Baltic, and France had displaced Spain as the dominant power in Western Europe.

The common people bore the real cost of the war. Historians disagree on precise figures, but in Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Pomerania, the Palatinate, Württemberg, and parts of Bavaria, civilian population losses may have been 50 percent or more. The horrors of the Thirty Years' War lived on in popular memory as those of no other war in Europe before the 20th century.

*adapted from: Grolier Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved, H. G. Koenigsberger.*