

# The 30 Years' War

**Graham Darby examines the nature and effects of the war that dominated the first half of the seventeenth century.**

GRAHAM DARBY

**F**or those who wrestle with seventeenth-century Europe there is no more complex topic than the Thirty Years' War. It is also an issue that generates a large number of questions in examinations—on the origins, course and consequences of the war. In addition, there can be questions about its nature: how far was it a war of religion, what was its social and economic impact and what were its military and financial implications? It is the purpose of this article to help clarify the latter topics, beginning with religion.

## A Religious War?

This is a difficult issue. For one thing, in early modern times religion and politics were inextricably intertwined, so that our present-day approach, which makes a clear distinction between the two, is often inappropriate. Secondly, early modern language was couched in religious terminology to such an extent that it is often difficult to distinguish between what was, perhaps, formulaic or habitual and what was sincere and meaningful. And thirdly, in our secular age, it is quite simply very difficult to appreciate the extent and depth of religious feeling in the seventeenth century.

Was this the last religious war? Given that Protestant England and Catholic Spain had made peace in 1604, and the Protestant Dutch rebels had reached an accommodation with Catholic Spain in 1609, it could be argued that the outbreak of war in Germany, in which the fate of Protestantism seemed to be at stake, brought religious issues back to the forefront of European politics. Historians have usually suggested that the Thirty Years' War began as a religious war, but became more secular as it progressed, and this formulation is a useful one.

If we begin at the beginning, in 1618, we can clearly see that religious issues were fundamental to the Bohemian Revolt. Religious toleration within the Habsburg lands became a major issue in the first decade of the seventeenth century, but the growth of Protestantism in Austria, Hungary and Bohemia represented a political challenge to Habsburg sovereignty as well—so that events clearly had political implications too. However, it was the Catholic reaction in Bohemia—the pulling down of Protestant churches, the election of the Jesuit-educated Ferdinand of Styria

as king-designate, the appointment of a (largely) Catholic regency council and the banning of Protestants from civic office—that led to the outbreak of hostilities. Moreover, the way events unfolded was interpreted in religious terms too. In the Defenestration of Prague, the fact that the Catholic regents survived the fall was clearly interpreted as divine intervention. Similarly the defeat of the Protestants at White Mountain in 1620 was to some extent credited to the intervention of a priest, Father Dominicus.

The issue here, then, seems pretty clear: the revolt was a struggle between Catholics and Protestants. Or was it? Even at the beginning, when the war might be viewed as being at its 'most religious', we discover that John George of Saxony, a Protestant, allied with the Catholic Emperor to defeat the Protestant rebels of Bohemia in return for some of their territory. Clearly this was a political decision. John George did not like rebels; nor indeed, as a Lutheran, did he like Calvinists. So he opposed Frederick of the Palatinate, whom the rebels embraced as their leader, because he was a Calvinist—but not just because he was Calvinist. Quite clearly by placing himself at the head of a Protestant revolt Frederick had challenged what John George felt to be his rightful leadership of the Protestant princes in Germany. From this example it can be appreciated that the war cannot be easily reduced to any simple formula.

Possibly the easiest way into this topic is to try to determine the motives of the principal participants. There is no doubting Emperor Ferdinand II's motivation: he was devoted to the Catholic church. He equated Protestantism with disloyalty and saw it as his duty to revive and reimpose the 'true faith' throughout the Empire where this was possible. Thus the successes of the Spanish, Imperial and Catholic League armies in the 1620s came to be seen as victories for the Counter Reformation too, and spawned contrary Protestant alignments. But the equation of Habsburg success with the cause of Catholicism became too much even for some Catholics—particularly Maximilian of Bavaria and especially Cardinal Richelieu of France.

The Edict of Restitution in 1629 represented the peak of religiosity in the war. But what was to Ferdinand a genuinely religious measure, to impose religious uniformity, was seen by the Princes of the Empire as a way of establishing Imperial absolutism, a political measure. Thus not only were neutral, mod-

erate Protestants alienated, but Catholic allies too. The opposition to the Edict came as a great disappointment to Ferdinand. Indeed when he made the Peace of Prague with Protestants in 1635, and was prepared to suspend the Edict for 40 years, it is a clear indication that the nature of the war had changed. If Ferdinand was prepared to compromise and drop his ideals for a practical settlement, then clearly it had become a different war.

What had changed matters was the intervention of Sweden and France. From the time of his intervention, Gustavus Adolphus has been portrayed as not only the champion of Protestantism but its saviour too. More recently this interpretation has been called into question. It has been pointed out that Swedish security was his main motive and that his deal with Catholic France was an indication of the pragmatic nature of much of this policy. Yet religion and politics were inseparable in Sweden. Catholicism—in the form of the legitimist Vasa line, Sigismund of Poland—represented a fundamental challenge to the Protestant line of the family represented by Gustavus Vasa. Indeed it was fear of a Habsburg-Polish (Catholic) invasion that prompted Swedish intervention. The defence of the Protestant faith was therefore not just a propaganda ploy to win allies: it was a matter of great importance for the survival of the Swedish monarchy. Ultimately, however, Swedish policy came to be subordinate to that of France.

There is irony in the fact that it was a prince of the Catholic Church who probably did most to 'deconfessionalise' the war. Cardinal Richelieu may have justified his policy by claiming that it was God's will to create a general universal peace, but his anti-Habsburg position was a negation of Catholic unanimity. His approach appears to be entirely secular, putting French interests first. However, it would probably be more accurate to state that he put his own interests above everything else. After all, he had staked his reputation and his position as first minister on the successful outcome of an anti-Habsburg policy. Accordingly he was prepared to make deals with Protestants in order to bring down Spain and the Emperor. After 1635, as French influence grew, the war took on an increasingly secular character.

In the peace negotiations a less extreme religious position was taken by both sides. There is no doubt that after this war, and as a result of it, religious issues receded and were no longer a major destabilising influence in European politics. So, was it the last religious war? Of course religion continued to be politically important. For example, the fight against the Turks in the 1680s was undoubtedly a religious war with the fervour of a crusade. But generally speaking the Thirty Years' War did lead to a decline in the importance of religion as an issue of war. It was certainly the last religious war in Germany. The fact that the Pope's condemnation of the peace settlement was not only ignored but anticipated and ignored in advance speaks volumes about the new religious climate. Secular issues would now come to the fore, though it should be remembered that secular questions of security, prestige, reputation and dynastic rights had been important even during the times of greatest religious fervour.

## Did Warfare Change?

In 1955 Michael Roberts suggested that there had been a Military Revolution in Europe between 1550 and 1650, which originated with Maurice of Nassau in the Dutch Revolt and was further developed by Gustavus Adolphus during the Thirty Years' War. Gustavus increased firepower with field guns, the double salvo and brigades in arrow formation. He also increased mobility and used the cavalry charge. Yet, though the battle of Breitenfeld in 1631 is usually cited as the triumph of new tactics over old, what is striking about the battles of the Thirty Years' War is that the victor was usually the possessor of the larger army, regardless of tactics.

Despite (allegedly) being at the cutting edge of military change, the Swedes fought an inconclusive engagement in 1632 and were thoroughly defeated in 1634: When Torstensson won the battle of Jankov in 1645 with a force of 15,000, equal to that of his opponents, he did so by outmanoeuvring them and attacking from the rear. If, then, victory tended to go to the larger army, Roberts' stress on new tactics is probably misleading.

As far as the growth in army sizes is concerned, both Wallenstein and Gustavus Adolphus were able to put together huge forces in excess of 100,000 men. However, only a small proportion would be mobile and used in battle; the rest would garrison captured territory or be involved in supply. Moreover, as the war progressed, army sizes actually declined, as military capacity diminished considerably. Thus army sizes reverted to about 10-15,000 men. What is in fact striking about all this military activity is how indecisive battles and even whole campaigns were. Thus Wallenstein was unable to deliver the knock-out blow against Denmark in 1628; Nordlingen (1634) was not followed up; the Swedes' success at Wittstock in 1636 was soon reversed; and after Jankov the Swedes advanced to Vienna but then had to retire. Victories, then, were most often not followed up at all. Why was this?

Basically the inconclusive character of warfare owed much to problems with the supply of men, money and provisions, and to the strength of fortifications. Logistics (supply) and finance were the real problems. The early modern state was just inadequate to the task. Whatever military innovations there were, logistics counted for more. There could be no total victories, no total defeats. It is no wonder warfare was indecisive, when armies were constantly in search of supplies. Indeed the war became a struggle for resources as whole regions were devastated. Defending and keeping areas for supply often took precedence over the development of an offensive strategy.

So far from witnessing a military revolution, what we can say about the Thirty Years' War is that it was probably one of the longest and most indecisive wars in all history! Peace really only came about when a state of exhaustion had been reached on both sides.

## Government Finance

Basically the governments involved in the war could not afford to raise armies from their current resources. Consequently they relied on military entrepreneurs to advance the cash to recruit

mercenaries from a wide variety of nationalities. The entrepreneurs did this in the belief that they would recoup their outlay and make a profit by defrauding the government (by receiving pay for exaggerated numbers of soldiers, by underpaying the troops, by forced contributions from the locality, and by pillage when on a campaign). The greatest of the military entrepreneurs were Count Mansfeld, Bernard of Saxe-Weimar and, of course, Albrecht von Wallenstein.

Initially the Emperor Ferdinand II was able to survive and prosper because he did not have to rely on his own meagre resources. He received Spanish and Papal subsidies as well as the contribution of Maximilian of Bavaria, perhaps the wealthiest of the German princes, and Christian IV of Denmark, who was able to finance his own campaign. Subsequently Ferdinand enjoyed the services of the most successful entrepreneur, Count Wallenstein. All commanders exacted contributions from occupied territory, but Wallenstein extended this system to friend and foe alike, and was so efficient that his dismissal in 1630 was not unrelated to the unpopularity he had engendered by these means. In later years, campaigns out of a given region could not be funded and whole armies could be wiped out by famine, disease and desertion, as happened to the Imperial army in 1644. Indeed Imperial effectiveness after 1635 was greatly reduced, not only because of the loss of Wallenstein and the lack of Spanish help after 1640, but because increasingly the Swedes came to occupy territory that deprived the Emperor of tax revenue. In short, when he had to rely on his own resources, the Emperor found the going tough.

The Swedes, on the other hand, had a system of conscription which gave them a relatively cheap core of reliable native troops. Obviously under Gustavus Adolphus, the army was augmented by vast numbers of mercenaries—so much so that eventually only about 10 per cent of the army was manned by Swedes—but they remained a reliable, loyal and efficient component (and were usually the officers). Swedish taxation only provided a tiny fraction of the cost of these forces and the Swedes adopted Wallenstein's methods to extract resources from occupied territory. Indeed the motto *bellum se ipsum alet* (the war must pay for itself) was very much the basis for Swedish policy. However, after the defeat at Nordlingen this policy was no longer possible and, while exactions were sufficient for the conscripts in the garrisons in northern Germany, the Swedes came to rely entirely on French subsidies to provide central funds for their mobile forces. Indeed between 1638 and 1648 the French supplied the Swedes with over 3.5 million thalers. Yet, despite this, the funds were not enough. Hence the Swedes could not follow up their successes and insisted on an indemnity in the peace negotiations in order to make up unpaid wages.

By far the wealthiest of the participants was France. It did not have American silver mines for credit purposes as the Spanish did; it could not meet costs out of occupied territory, because the French army did not really occupy any; and its tax system was illogical and inefficient. Yet France was a relatively rich country with a large population (possibly as many as 20 million) and a diverse agriculture, and was, accordingly, able to finance the war by increased domestic taxation and borrowing. Indeed French taxation more than doubled between the 1620s and the

1640s, and the inadequate means of collection led Richelieu to appoint intendants, accountable government appointees, in order to ensure the monies reached the treasury. Thus inadvertently the Cardinal was able to extend government control. Even so, funds were inadequate and France had to muddle through by borrowing on the basis of future tax receipts. Moreover, all this change met opposition and resistance, which led directly to the end of the Thirty Years' War.

So, all in all, we can see that the war was often inconclusive because adequate resources were just not available to fund what could have been a decisive campaign. Hence only mutual exhaustion could bring about an end—and that is what happened.

## Economic and Social Effects

Despite a wealth of local records, historians have been unable to agree on the economic, social and demographic effects of the war. In the nineteenth century the belief was that the war had created widespread death and destruction, decimating about two-thirds of Germany's population and causing massive economic damage which set her back about a century. Yet such views were the result of generalising about the whole of Germany from a few incidents and taking unreliable contemporary sources at face-value. Town councils, for instance, often exaggerated the damage they had suffered in order to obtain tax cuts, and some rulers (e.g. the Great Elector of Brandenburg) exaggerated the effects of the war to enhance their achievements in postwar restoration work.

More recent research in the localities has demonstrated that the amount of devastation had been inflated. There was a decline in population in Germany, but in the region of 20-40 per cent, rather than two-thirds. In many cases what appeared to be population loss was really migration, as inhabitants abandoned villages in campaigning areas and became refugees. And of course geographically the picture was very varied. Clearly there were war zones, which experienced repeated devastation, but other areas were wholly untouched. North-eastern Germany suffered considerably; but north-western Germany saw very little population loss.

What were the principal causes of population loss? Death from direct military action does not seem to have been the major reason, though there were many atrocities. In the 1620s exactions seem to have been imposed in a relatively orderly manner (when soldiers were reasonably paid they were unlikely to burn or loot). From the later 1630s onwards, however, half-starved soldiers were a real threat to the civilian population. The worst period seems to have been the years 1634-40 when all the armies experienced logistical problems. Moreover, we have to distinguish between the undisciplined behaviour of individual groups of soldiers and the systematic devastation perpetrated by an entire army. The latter was rare, but did occur in Bavaria twice, in 1632 and 1646, at the hands of the Swedish army. Thus the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians and the burning of villages and towns seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. Although many villages and smaller towns were burned down, larger towns were generally spared as they were considered to be valuable as fortresses and sources of wealth (Magde-

## ANNUAL EDITIONS

DATE	BATTLE	NUMBERS
1620	White Mountain	28,000 beat 21,000
1631	Breitenfeld	42,000 beat 35,000
1632	Lutzen	9,000 on each side: a stalemate
1634	Nordlingen	33,000 beat 25,000

### TIMELINE

#### I) THE BOHEMIAN AND PALATINE WAR 1618-23

1618	Defenestration of Prague
1620	Defeat of Bohemian rebels at White Mountain
1621-2	Palatinate overrun
1623	Maximilian of Bavaria obtains electoral title

#### II) THE DANISH EPISODE 1625-9

1626	Christian IV defeated at Lutter
1627-8	Wallenstein overruns much of Denmark and Mecklenburg
1629	Edict of Restitution; Peace of Lubeck

#### III) THE SWEDISH EPISODE 1630-5

1630	Gustavus Adolphus lands in Germany
1631	He wins the battle of Breitenfeld
1632	He is killed at Lutzen
1634	Wallenstein assassinated; Habsburg victory at Nordlingen
1635	Peace of Prague

#### IV) FRENCH INTERVENTION 1638-48

1638	Franco—Swedish Treaty of Hamburg
1639	France takes over Rhine army
1641	Hamburg renewed
1643-5	War between Denmark and Sweden
1645	Imperial defeat at Jankov
1648	Peace of Westphalia

burg was a singular exception). By far the most common cause of death in the conflict was war-related food shortages (brought about by requisitioning, abandoned farmland and irreplaceable livestock losses) and epidemic diseases such as typhus, influenza and dysentery (spread both armies and refugees) which struck the vulnerable (the very young and the very old) already weakened by malnutrition. Clearly the plague was also a factor but this had little to do with the war. In addition, many marriages became infertile and families disintegrated. In many places the normal social structure broke down.

Although the verdict now is that the effects of the war have been exaggerated, we should not play down the enormous suf-

fering the population endured. Many were ruined and lost everything. The statistics to some extent disguise a myriad of personal catastrophes. And there can be no adequate appreciation of the anxiety, uncertainty and fear that was generated by the war over such a long period. It is little wonder that contemporaries believed that they had lived through a nightmare or that many lost their traditional religious beliefs.

It has been suggested that there was an overall decline in economic activity which began before the war and was a part of a long-term trend, and this seems convincing—though there were exceptions such as Hamburg and Bremen which prospered. Agriculture undoubtedly suffered, as farmland was devastated by soldiery and peasants deserted the land. It is true that agriculture recovered quite quickly and that traditional rural society was preserved, but a reduced population accentuated serfdom, as peasants were increasingly tied to the land. Changes in agriculture outside Germany tended to stem from population pressures, but the Empire remained underdeveloped and her peasantry unfree. The better off managed to survive—large landowners and wealthy peasants—but small tenants and cottagers were bankrupted and their property snapped up by others.

Many lords took advantage of their peasants. In many cases wealthy families were displaced by loyal ones, an occurrence that was not just confined to Bohemia. Thus there occurred a considerable redistribution of capital and wealth. But even the very rich suffered. Many nobles and mercantile families were bankrupted. Certain occupational groups did benefit—brewers and those involved in military supplies—but overall trade was disrupted, and what we see is a general disruption of economic activity and a considerable growth of debt, at personal, municipal and governmental level. Overall the princes were strengthened by the war: the scope of government activity was greatly increased, the level of taxation went up enormously and the church was now more strictly under government control.

Although there is evidence to suggest that many regions of central Europe experienced a rapid recovery after 1650, those who had lived through the previous 30 years had experienced a most traumatic time and had reason to give thanks when the last Swedish troops left occupied territory in the 1650s

### Further Reading

There are many books on the Thirty Years' War, each with that title. The most recent and up-to-date are by Geoffrey Parker (Routledge, 2nd ed. 1997), Ronald Asch (Macmillan, 1997) and Graham Darby (Access series, Hodder 2001). Graham Darby is Head of History at King Edward VI School, Southampton. His *The Thirty Years' War* is published by Hodder & Stoughton in 2001.