

Peter H. Wilson unravels one of the most notoriously bloody and complex conflicts in European history to answer the question ...

WHO WON THE THIRTY YEARS WAR?

Dame Veronica Wedgwood concluded her celebrated account of the Thirty Years War, first published in 1938, by claiming it 'solved no problem' and was 'the outstanding example in European history of meaningless conflict.' To those caught in its maw, as well as later generations struggling to understand it, the war seemed an endless succession of horrifying events which ravaged all who became involved and devastated its principal battleground, the Holy Roman Empire. The sheer length of

the struggle contributes to this impression by obscuring the connection between the initial causes, its outbreak in 1618 and the eventual outcome in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. Other than the rulers of Bavaria and Saxony, none of the major players of 1618 was still alive 30 years later. When peace came it was determined to a considerable extent by Sweden and France who only became involved in 1630 and 1635 respectively. The very nature of the peace makes it harder to assess whether anyone profited

from the bloodshed. The treaties open with statements of eternal friendship, followed by renunciations of reparations and promises to bury past differences in the interests of lasting tranquillity.

Yet anyone reading the vast literature on the conflict is left with a lingering sense of a Protestant triumph over Catholicism. The peace modified the Empire's constitution to give legal and political equality to Calvinists alongside Lutherans and Catholics. The voting procedure in the imperial diet and other

A contemporary depiction by Pieter Snayers of the battle of White Mountain, November 8th, 1620.



institutions was changed to protect Protestants from the in-built Catholic majority where the agenda touched matters of religion. Lutheran Sweden, along with the Calvinist Hohenzollern dynasty ruling Brandenburg-Prussia, emerged with significant territorial gains in northern Germany. Numerous lands long associated with the Catholic imperial church were secularised as Protestant principalities. The Catholic Habsburg dynasty appeared confined to their own hereditary lands in Austria, Bohemia and Hungary, leaving the Empire little more than a loose confederation of primarily Protestant principalities. This was certainly how it looked to 19th-century historians whose works were profoundly influenced by the struggle between Protestant Prussia and Catholic Austria for the mastery of Germany. Prussia's triumph by 1871 seemed to confirm that the future was Protestant, something that received a further boost from influential commentators like the sociologist Max Weber, who presented Protestantism as a modernising, secularising force in history.

This interpretation does not sit well with how the war was interpreted in the century and a half following 1648. Most late 17th- and 18th-century writers argued that the peace had strengthened the imperial constitution by resolving the political and religious issues causing the war. This broadly positive reception is supported by a large body of research since the late 1960s which agrees that the Empire, while still flawed in many respects after 1648, proved surprisingly successful in resolving internal tensions and defending itself against external attack until the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars forced its final dissolution in 1806.

The question of who might have won helps disentangle what the war was actually about. The standard presentation of it as a religious struggle is seductively misleading. Closer inspection reveals that the combatants do not divide neatly along confessional lines. Not only did Catholic France back Protestant Sweden financially from 1631 and militarily from 1635, but Saxony and many Lutheran princes supported the Catholic Habsburg emperor for most of the conflict. More fundamentally, the term 'religious war' has little utility as a historical concept. Religious issues were at stake in other



Above The conflict became notorious for atrocities against civilians, especially during the 1630s. Engraving by Hans Ulrich Frank, 1646.

Below The Defenestration of Prague, 1618, when members of Bohemia's government were thrown from the castle of Hradcany by Protestant rebels.



conflicts both before and after the Thirty Years War without these being interpreted as sectarian struggles. Defence of the 'true religion' was a general characteristic of all public policy in early modern Europe. While it cannot be divorced from wider politics, it would be equally wrong to see all political action as subordinate to religious concerns.

It is helpful here to distinguish between what can be considered 'militant'

and 'moderate' mentalities. The latter was not necessarily more rational, reasonable or secular than the former. Few saw toleration as anything other than a temporary expedient until the schism in the Christian church could be healed by the other parties recognising the errors of their ways and embracing the 'true' version of Christianity. Where militants differed from moderates was in the methods they proposed to achieve this

goal and their conviction they had been summoned personally by God to do so. For them it was a holy, not merely a 'religious' struggle. This militant outlook certainly influenced events. Elector Frederick V of the Palatinate, Emperor Ferdinand II and the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus all acted with the conviction that they were doing God's will. However, none lost sight of more immediate dynastic and political goals. Even at the height of his power, Ferdinand II rejected calls from some Catholics to expropriate all Protestants. Habsburg policy remained guided not by scripture but by the emperor's, albeit narrowly monarchical, interpretation of the imperial constitution.

Militancy remained restricted to those on the fringes of decision-making such as Ferdinand's Jesuit confessor, William Lamormaini (1570-1648), whom the emperor deliberately overruled when making peace with most of his Protestant German opponents in 1635. No one actually exercising power seriously believed the militants' interpretation that all Europe's wars were merging into a single Armageddon. Gustavus Adolphus quipped that, if it had really been a religious struggle, he would have declared war on the pope, not the emperor.

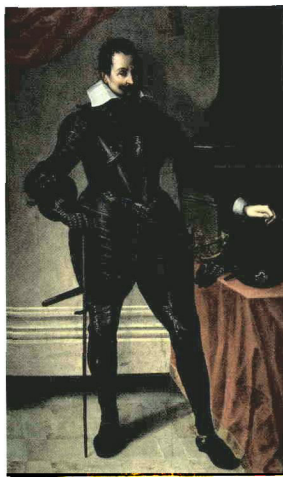
Ultimately, militants of all confessions were the principal losers since religious goals were largely sacrificed to obtain the compromise peace. The treaties of Westphalia that brought the war to an end changed the imperial constitution by imposing 1624 as the 'normative year', fixing the distribution of land between the three recognised faiths within the Empire as it had been on January 1st, 1624. This represented a significant limitation on princely power since rulers could no longer impose their own beliefs on their subjects. Other clauses reinforced the continued sovereignty of the Empire over its component territories which did not, contrary to the popular perception, become independent in 1648. Nonetheless, princely power was strengthened, contributing to what is generally known as the 'age of absolutism'. The peace confirmed the princes' 'right of reformation', which they acquired when the Peace of Augsburg (1555) defused tensions arising directly from Luther's challenge to papal authority. This right entrusted supervision of churches and



Above Ferdinand II, 'doing God's will' as Holy Roman Emperor, in a contemporary likeness.

“At its most basic level, the Thirty Years War was a struggle over the governance of both the Empire and the Habsburg hereditary lands”

Below Maximilian of Bavaria, the Catholic ruler who received the Palatinate lands of the rebel Frederick V in 1623. An anonymous portrait, 1620.



religious belief in each territory to the local prince and was used by Catholics and Protestants alike to consolidate their authority over their subjects.

The normative year secured Protestant possession of all church land that had passed into their hands since the Peace of Augsburg had attempted to stem such secularisation. The Catholic ecclesiastical princes backed the emperor during the war in the hope of recovering this property. Their failure to do so is one area where the outcome can be interpreted as a Protestant triumph. However, the Protestants had to return the land that they had captured after 1624, including abandoning claims to the south German bishoprics conquered by the Swedes in the years 1631-34. They likewise had to accept the de facto division of the Empire between three confessions in which the Catholics also had equal rights. Dissenters in each territory were granted various safeguards, but those without rights recognised in 1624 could be expelled after due notice. Acceptance of Calvinism as a second Protestant creed was bitterly resented by Catholics like Maximilian of Bavaria, but many Lutherans like Johann Georg of Saxony detested it even more. Calvinist conversions largely came at Lutheran, not Catholic expense, something which helps explain the Lutherans' support for the emperor.

The peace elaborated a complex legal framework to regulate this confessional co-existence that was unique among Europe's major states: Louis XIV abolished the last vestiges of Protestant rights in France in 1685, while British and Irish Catholics had to wait until 1829 for their Emancipation Act. Once regarded as a weakness, this very complexity helped the Empire overcome religious antagonism that shifted from conflicts about true faith to disagreements over legal rights and jurisdictions that could be resolved through the imperial courts.

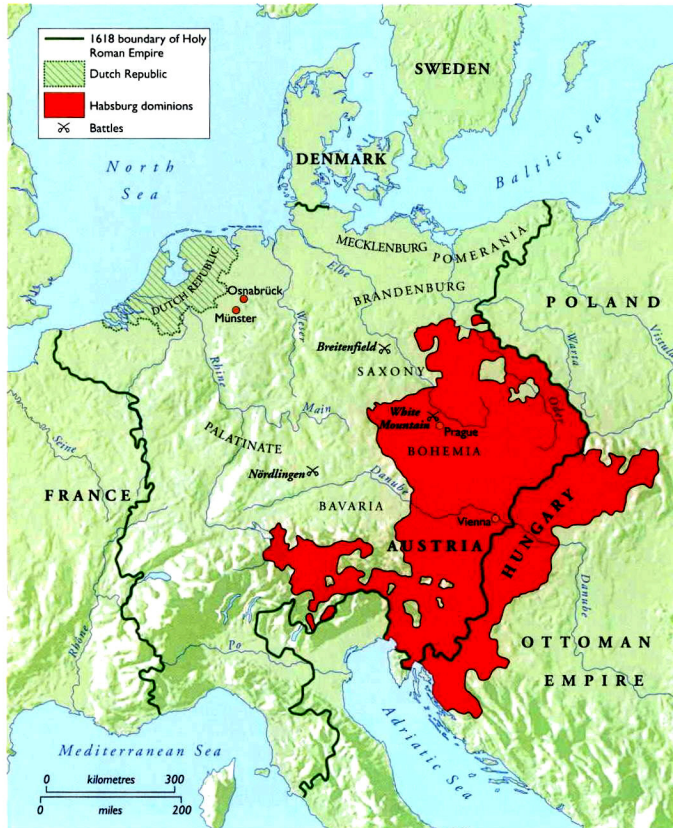
Alongside various minor changes to settle local disputes, two major exceptions to the normative year favoured Catholic rulers. Bavaria was allowed to retain the Upper Palatinate as a Catholic land, even though it had been formally Protestant until 1628, while the entire Habsburg hereditary lands were exempted from these arrangements, other than a few Protestant churches in

Silesia left as a special concession to Saxon support during the war.

Examination of these exceptions allows us to see the root causes of the conflict and assess how far initial goals were achieved in the outcome. At its most basic level, the Thirty Years War was a struggle over the governance of both the Empire and the Habsburg hereditary lands. Habsburg authority had been undermined in both. The spread of Protestantism among the Austrian and Bohemian nobility challenged the dynasty's power as well as its faith. Protestant nobles claimed their own right of reformation to found churches and supervise parish life. The unceasing cost of defending the Hungarian frontier against the Ottoman Turks obliged the Habsburgs to trade concessions to the nobles in return for taxes paid by their tenants. These taxes were negotiated in the Estates or assemblies that existed in all the Habsburg provinces.

Attempts to reverse this state of affairs coalesced around 1579 in a strategy of reserving court and military appointments for Catholics, thus making confession a test of political loyalty. Protestant nobles resented exclusion, especially as many could not live off peasant rents and looked to crown employment to supplement their income. A wave of conversions to Catholicism among prominent families around 1600 indicated the Habsburg strategy was bearing fruit. Though still the majority among the nobility, Protestant nobles felt increasingly threatened.

Infighting within the Habsburg dynasty offered them a reprieve. The mentally unstable Emperor Rudolf II refused to marry, creating confusion over the succession to both the Habsburg lands and the Empire. He and his relations granted further concessions to the nobility in return for military support in a largely bloodless yet extremely debilitating struggle after 1608. Toleration for Protestants was extended and the nobles were permitted their own institutions to safeguard such rights. These concessions split the Estates, since the Catholic minority, while not always backing the dynasty, nonetheless generally opposed the separate Protestant institutions. The Bohemian Revolt of May 1618 was engineered by a small clique of Protestant aristocrats who feared the more assertive Habsburg government under Archduke



Above The territories and principal battles of the Thirty Years War.

Right A parody of the Biblical passage Matthew 11, v. 2-10, in which Elector Frederick V is imprisoned in his beehive of a pleasure house while Marquis Spinola, the imperial general, ravages the Palatinate.



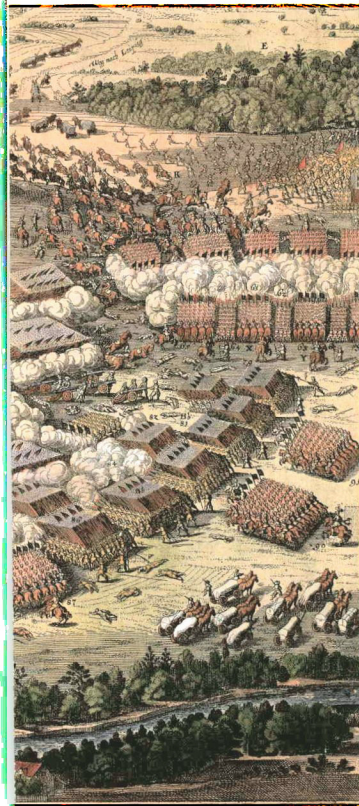
- 1555 Peace of Augsburg grants legal rights to Lutherans in the Empire.
- 1568 Dutch revolt against Spanish Habsburg rule (until 1648).
- 1576 Accession of Emperor Rudolf II (until 1612).
- 1608-12 Succession dispute in the Austrian Habsburg lands.
- 1609-21 Twelve Year Truce between Spain and the Dutch.
- 1612 Accession of Emperor Matthias.
- 1618 Defenestration of Prague starts Bohemian Revolt. Thirty Years War begins.
- 1619 Accession of Emperor Ferdinand II. Frederick V of the Palatinate accepts Bohemian crown.
- 1620 Imperial victory at White Mountain.
- 1621 Resumption of Spanish-Dutch war. Thirty Years War shifts to the Rhineland where the Palatinate is defeated by 1624.
- 1625 Danish intervention moves the war to northern Germany.
- 1629 Denmark agrees Peace of Lübeck. Ferdinand II issues Edict of Restitution demanding return of former Catholic church land taken by Protestants since 1555.
- 1630 Swedish Invasion of Pomerania.
- 1631 Swedish victory at Breitenfeld. Rapid escalation of the war and worst period of destruction (to about 1640).
- 1634 Imperial victory at Nördlingen enables emperor to make Peace of Prague (1635), isolating Sweden.
- 1635 Start of Franco-Spanish war (till 1659). French intervention in Germany in support of Sweden.
- 1637 Accession of Emperor Ferdinand III (till 1657). Increase of French involvement.
- 1641 Franco-Swedish alliance consolidated as both agree not to make a separate peace in the Empire. Brandenburg's truce with Sweden signals drift of German princes into neutrality.
- 1643 Congress of Westphalia opens in the towns of Münster and Osnabrück.
- 1645 Military stalemate forces Ferdinand III to begin serious negotiations at Westphalia.
- 1647 Spanish-Dutch truce leading to first Peace of Münster (May 15th, 1648).
- 1648 War concluded in the Empire through the dual treaties of Münster and Osnabrück (both October 24th).
- 1659 Peace of the Pyrenees concludes Franco-Spanish war.



Ferdinand, who was installed as Bohemian king in 1617 and became emperor two years later.

Though triggering crisis, the revolt ultimately benefited the Habsburgs by removing the need to respect Protestant rights. In Ferdinand's opinion, those Protestants who took up arms automatically forfeited their political and religious privileges. The imperial victory at White Mountain outside Prague in November 1620 enabled him to put this into practice. Though 27 rebels lost their lives in a gruesome execution seven months later, the emperor was not primarily interested in exterminating his opponents. Indeed, he repeatedly pardoned key figures throughout the war, provided they submitted to his authority. The real imperial retribution lay in confiscating the property

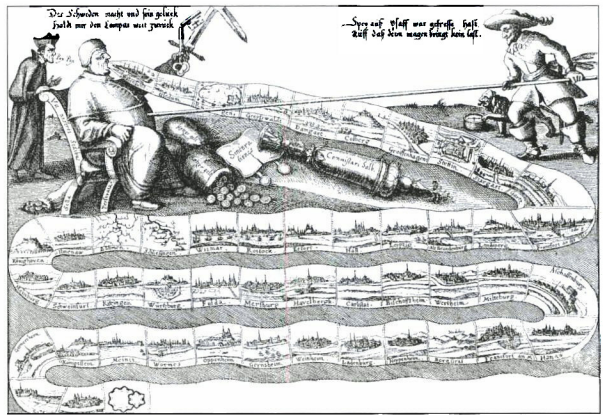
of those refusing to submit. Beginning in 1621, this eventually entailed the largest transfer of property in Central Europe before the Communist seizure of power in Poland and Czechoslovakia after 1945. A politically and confessionally suspect elite was driven into exile and replaced by loyalists drawn both locally and from other Habsburg lands. These changes far outweighed the significance of the 'Reformation mandates' ordering the population to convert, or the 'renewed constitutions' imposed on the Estates to strengthen Habsburg authority. With the wealth largely in the hands of those whose fortunes were tied closely to the fate of the dynasty, the emperor had no need to abolish the Estates or to expel those ordinary subjects reluctant to abandon Protestantism.



Left The Battle of Breitenfeld, September 7th, 1631, in which the Swedish forces under Gustavus Adolphus overwhelmed Count Tilly's imperial armies.



Above A Protestant leaflet celebrating the capture of Augsburg, April 24th, 1632.
Below An anti-Catholic lampoon in which a prelate regurgitates cities that have fallen to Sweden, 1632.



Ferdinand secured acceptance of this victory from the German princes in the Peace of Prague in 1635 which he negotiated from a position of strength following the imperial triumph over the Swedes at Nördlingen the year before. Defence of these achievements was the primary reason why the emperor continued fighting thereafter. Likewise, his opponents championed the cause of the Bohemian and Austrian exiles precisely because their reinstatement would undermine Habsburg power. Despite professions of Protestant solidarity, Sweden eventually abandoned the exiles at Westphalia in order to secure Habsburg recognition of its north German territorial gains (also largely at the expense of Protestant Germans). This represented a major Habsburg achievement, stabilising their authority

and providing the basis for Austria's emergence as a great power in its own right alongside the Empire by the early 18th century.

Disputes over imperial governance constituted the war's other primary cause. Emperor Rudolf alienated princes, Catholic as well as Protestant, by abandoning the consensual policies of his two predecessors in favour of asserting an exclusive right to make decisions, including those in controversial religious disputes. His brother and successor after 1612, Matthias, had some success in defusing tension through a more inclusive approach, but was interrupted by the Bohemian Revolt and his own failing health. Ferdinand II tried to reassert exclusive authority once he became emperor in 1619, restricting consultation

to the narrow elite of senior princes, called electors, and a few other key figures like Duke Maximilian of Bavaria.

The decision of Elector Frederick V of the Palatinate to accept the Bohemian crown from the rebels in 1619 fused the revolt there with wider tension in the Empire. The war entered a new phase as the imperial victory at White Mountain secured Habsburg control in their own lands, allowing the dynasty to extend its policies to the rest of the Empire. Frederick and his supporters were declared rebels and their lands were distributed to the emperor's supporters once they had been conquered. The chief beneficiary was Maximilian of Bavaria who received the Palatine lands and titles in 1623. Like the Bohemian exiles, the Palatinate was among the war's principal losers.

The battle of Nördlingen, August 27th, 1634 marked the end of Swedish military supremacy. Contemporary painting by Pieter Meulener.



Though Frederick's son eventually recovered half his lands and a less prestigious electoral title, the Palatinate was no longer the most important secular principality.

The growth of Habsburg power was temporarily checked by Danish intervention in 1625, which shifted the focus of the war from the Rhineland to northern Germany. Denmark held land within the Empire and its monarch was closely related to some of the leading Lutheran princely families. King Christian IV regarded his influence in Germany as securing the vulnerable Danish peninsula and allowing his country to concentrate on upholding its dominance of the Baltic. Danish intervention was delayed until its Baltic rival, Sweden, became embroiled in a separate war with Poland. Denmark's defeat allowed Ferdinand to extend his policy of confiscation and redistribution to northern Germany after

1627. However, the scale of the military success encouraged the emperor to heed militant calls and issue the Edict of Restitution in 1629, demanding the return of all church land lost to Protestants since the mid-16th century. This alienated moderate Protestant princes such as the electors of Saxony and Brandenburg. Meanwhile, Catholics such as Maximilian of Bavaria were alarmed by the extent of the redistribution of captured land to Habsburg clients, notably General Albrecht von Wallenstein, commander of the imperial army.

Thus few rushed to support the emperor when Sweden invaded in June 1630 by landing in Pomerania on the Baltic coast. Gustavus Adolphus presented his actions as defending the imperial constitution, but only the Pomeranian town of Stralsund had appealed for aid and it was promptly annexed as part of Sweden's Baltic empire. Nonetheless,

Swedish arguments appealed to the minor German princes, counts and aristocrats who lacked the resources, prestige and political privileges of old princely houses like that of Bavaria. They had already provided the backbone of the Palatine and Danish forces and now helped Sweden recruit the thousands of German soldiers it needed to fight in the Empire. The war entered a third phase as the emperor defended his earlier gains against Sweden's bid to reorganise the Empire as an aristocracy under its protection and to confine the Habsburgs to Austria. Gustavus's victory at Breitenfeld in September 1631 enabled him to break out from his Baltic bridgehead and conquer much of southern and western Germany. Captured land was redistributed to Sweden's German collaborators in a mirror of Ferdinand's earlier policy.

Sweden's success stalled at Nördlingen in 1634. The outbreak of a separate

Franco-Spanish war early the next year prompted France to send an army into the Empire to support Sweden. French intervention always remained subordinate to their own struggle against Spain and was intended to prevent the emperor from assisting his Spanish relations. The desire to weaken the Habsburgs encouraged France to back the Swedish interpretation of the Empire as an aristocracy with the emperor merely first among equals. By accepting some restrictions on imperial prerogatives, the emperor won broad support from the princes to reject the Franco-Swedish proposals at Westphalia. The Habsburgs were able to retain the imperial title (with one break between 1740-45) until the Empire's dissolution. The constitution remained hierarchical, headed by an emperor who shared key powers with the electors and princes through imperial institutions like the diet.

The peace settlement awarded areas along the Rhine, chiefly Alsace, to France, but severed the connection between these and the Empire. France lost the opportunity to influence imperial politics from within, compelling it to rely in the future on brute force and bilateral alliances with ambitious princes. By contrast, Sweden accepted that its far larger gains were still part of the Empire. Sweden was too small to sustain its own Baltic domains. Underlying weakness soon transformed it from a threat to a

friend of the Empire as it relied on the imperial framework to protect its German possessions during its later wars with Denmark, Poland and Russia.



Above Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden in Polish costume, c. 1632. Painting by Matthäus Merian.

The original champions of Protestant political and religious rights had been defeated. The Habsburg lands were now officially Catholic, while Bavaria now exercised the Palatinate's former title and influence. Calvinism was recognised under the imperial constitution, but had lost its political and theological vigour.

The century after 1648 saw numerous Protestant princes convert to Catholicism. Religious militancy waned as a political force. Consensus once more characterised imperial politics, accounting for the slow pace of decision-making that so frustrated outsiders and many later historians. The Habsburgs failed to assert greater monarchical control in the Empire but retained the imperial title and recovered the sympathy of most German princes. None of the foreign belligerents emerged a clear victor. France gained territory, but certainly not mastery over imperial politics. Its failure to make peace with Spain at the Westphalian congress condemned it to a further 11 years of fighting which brought no better terms at the end of that conflict. Sweden was in no position to assert greater influence and became, within a decade, one of the chief supporters of the hierarchical imperial order that persisted until 1806.

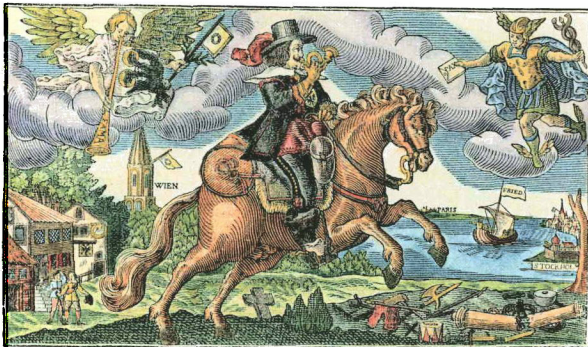
The real tragedy of the conflict was that much of this could have been achieved without such bloodshed and destruction. The constitutional changes were all proposed prior to 1618 but were prevented by mutual suspicion and the rapid escalation of violence following the Bohemian Revolt. The Empire's incapacity then facilitated foreign invasion and conquest. The pattern was repeated a century and a half later when Austro-Prussian rivalry impaired the Empire's ability to resist Revolutionary and Napoleonic France.

Peter H. Wilson is G. F. Grant Professor of History at the University of Hull and the author of a new general history of the conflict, *Europe's Tragedy: A History of the Thirty Years War*, published by Allen Lane/Penguin this month.

Further Reading

Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years War and German Memory in the 19th Century* (University of Nebraska, 2007); Derek Croxton, *Peacemaking in Early Modern Europe: Cardinal Mazarin and the Congress of Westphalia, 1643-1648* (Susquehanna University Press, 1999); Brennan C. Pursell, *Frederick V of the Palatinate and the Coming of the Thirty Years War* (Ashgate, 2003); C. V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (Penguin, 1938).

For further articles on this subject, visit: www.historytoday.com/military



Above A courier leaves the city of Münster on October 25th, 1648 with news of the Peace of Westphalia, signed the previous day, which brought the Thirty Years War to an end.