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THE 30 YEARS' WAR (1618-48) AND THE SECOND DEFENESTRATION OF PRAGUE

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Introduction

The Thirty Years War was a struggle over the political and religious balance in the Holy Roman Empire (early modern Europe's largest state). It began precisely 400 years ago today with the famous Defenestration of Prague 1618 when three Habsburg officials were thrown out of a window in Prague Castle. Led by Heinrich Matthias Thurn, a party of disgruntled Bohemian aristocrats forced their way into the meeting chamber of the Habsburg councillors who governed Bohemia for the monarch, the ailing Emperor Matthias, who was away in Vienna. Finding most of their targets also absent, the angry Bohemians seized two of the councillors, Vilem Slavata and Jaroslav Borita von Martinitz. After a short altercation, both were bundled out of the window before several of those present fully knew what was going on. The two were shortly followed by their secretary, Philipp Fabricius, whose pleas for mercy inadvertently attracted the attention of the more resolute of the Defenestrators. Despite some injuries, all three survived the fall, and Fabricius was able to escape to warn the authorities in Vienna (and was subsequently ennobled as von Hohenfall, or 'of the high fall', for this).

This event opened what became the Thirty Years War which drew in virtually all the other European countries, either directly as belligerents, or indirectly supplying aid to one or other side. Spain, France, Denmark, Sweden, and Transylvania all intervened directly at least once. Britain, the Dutch Republic, Poland-Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire, the papacy and various Italian states all intervened indirectly, mainly by providing financial and military aid to one or more of the active belligerents.

The Thirty Years War was a distinct conflict, despite the tendency of some interpretations to merge it with other European wars. Nonetheless, it was related to other major wars, notably the Dutch Revolt, otherwise known as the Eighty Years' War fought between Spain and what became the Dutch Republic in two stages (1568-1609 and 1621-48). The latter half of the Thirty Years War overlapped with a separate Franco-Spanish war which began in 1635 and continued until 1659, despite efforts to resolve it at the Peace of Westphalia which ended both the Dutch Revolt and the Thirty Years War in 1648. This Franco-Spanish conflict in turn involved the Catalan Revolt (1641-54), the Portuguese War of Independence (1640-68), and the Neapolitan Revolt (1647), all of which prevented Spain from aiding Austria in the final stages of the Thirty Years War. Further Swedish-Polish (1621-9) and Swedish-Danish (1643-5) wars also influenced the course of events in the Empire, as did a series of civil wars and revolts in France which continued periodically into the 1630s and re-emerged in very different form as the Fronde between 1648-53. Finally, many soldiers who fought in the Thirty Years War also served during the British Civil Wars, including the Royalist cavalry commander Prince Rupert who was the son of the Elector Palatine, Frederick V, one of the principal protagonists in the immediate aftermath of the Defenestration of Prague.

This paper will review briefly the war's significance, its causes, why it lasted so long and how it was eventually concluded in the Peace of Westphalia. Doing so places the Defenestration into context, revising the conventional view that it was the spark that ignited the powder keg of a supposedly-inevitable general war. Instead, it emerges as the culmination of more specific factors in Bohemia. It was the failure to contain first the

Bohemian Revolt and then a succession of later crises that led to what might have remained a short, regional war, becoming a major, protracted and destructive war.

Significance

Why is it still significant: why are we still talking about it now? The first reason is that this was the most destructive conflict in European history prior to the twentieth century world wars. At least 5 million people died in the Empire, reducing its population by about a fifth (though some estimates put the total losses much higher). On this basis, the war emerges as even more destructive than the world wars: the Soviet Union suffered the highest losses in the Second World War (at around 40 million deaths), but had a much larger population (making its proportional loss at about 12%, or considerably lower than in the Thirty Years War). In addition, we need to remember that we are talking about a pre-industrial society when it was much harder to replace human labour with machines. This explains the very slow post-war recovery: the 1618 population levels were only restored around 1713, or 65 years after the war ended.

Secondly, the scale and persistence of the destruction have given the Thirty Years War a benchmark character. Subsequent conflicts are frequently measured against it and have often been assessed as less destructive. Thirdly, the war has entered Central European consciousness as a traumatic event, far exceeding later disasters. For example, soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front in the two world wars thought they were experiencing something *almost* as bad as the Thirty Years War. In public opinion surveys after 1945, Germans placed the Thirty Years War ahead of Nazism or the Black Death as their country's greatest disaster. Horror stories from the war are still deeply embedded in Central Europeans' popular consciousness, as is clear from how the conflict is being discussed today in the German media. The impression of a barbaric conflict escaping all restraints has been kept alive by folk tales and its deep presence in German literature. The first German novel, *The Adventures of Simplicissimus*, was published 1668 by Johann Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen who grew up during the war and served as a soldier. This work was rediscovered by the late eighteenth-century poets and playwrights, especially Friedrich Schiller who wrote a history of the war, as well as a drama trilogy about the imperial general Wallenstein. Schiller's works appeared in the 1790s as Germany faced renewed invasion from the forces of Revolutionary France; something which reinforced how the Thirty Years War became a lens through which later national traumas have been interpreted. Both *Simplicissimus* and Schiller's *Wallenstein* have been made into films, TV series etc.

All of this has heightened the sense of the war as a major historical event. The war has become a marker for key changes in European and, indeed, world history. It is widely seen as the culmination of a whole 'age of religious wars' beginning with the Reformation in 1517 and lasting until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. It is associated with wider shifts in other developments, notably the economic shift 'from feudalism to capitalism', and the changes in warfare which have been labelled a Military Revolution. The peace settlement is widely regarded amongst political scientists and others as the birth of the modern 'Westphalian system' of an international order composed of sovereign national states. These interpretations of the war's impact are open to numerous criticisms on points of substance as well as detail. However, the fact that these interpretations exist at all, points to how the war is widely perceived as an event of major significance for European and even world history.

Causes

What was the war about? As with all great historical events, there are numerous interpretations. There is not the time to set all of these out in detail, so I will concentrate on outlining what I think caused the war. Before that, however, we must confront the misconception that it was a primarily a 'religious war'. This rests partly on problems of definition, especially how subsequent, increasingly secular ages have defined 'religious war' and back-projected this concept into the past. And it stems partly from the problems of the surviving evidence and the challenges inherent in interpreting it.

The Thirty Years War is usually seen as the culmination of an 'age of religious war' originating in the Reformation. The Empire was the first European state to have to deal with the Reformation (Luther was from Saxony, in the heart of the Empire). The Reformation posed a fundamental problem by breaking the unity of

faith and law which had guided medieval politics. There were now competing versions of what constituted 'true religion', meaning there were different versions of the 'truth'. Early modern Europeans were not prepared to accept that: they wanted one truth as the source of all legitimacy and the basis for law, morality, and politics. Toleration in the modern sense was impossible, since it entailed recognising the potential validity of opposing views. For early modern Europeans, toleration was simply a licence to serve the devil: if you tolerated opposing views you were endangering your own salvation by allowing evil to persist.

Most European states employed a monarchical solution. The king decided which was the 'correct' version of Christianity and imposed this as the official faith. This was politically explosive since it made dissenters subversives; i.e. to hold a faith different from that of your king made you a potential rebel. It was for this reason that religion became a factor in civil wars, such as those in France between 1562 and 1629, as well as the Dutch Revolt, and the repeated problems of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Britain, including the civil wars and the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The Empire adopted a different solution in the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 by extending legal recognition to Lutherans as well as Catholics and acknowledging that adherents of both faiths had equal political rights. The decision of which faith to adopt was devolved to the princes ruling the different territories making up the Empire. Thus, the Empire's solution to the religious problem reflected its political character as a 'mixed monarchy': The emperor was head of the Empire but had to share the exercise of some of his powers with the princes.

Historians have traditionally presented the Peace of Augsburg as a truce which merely postponed supposedly inevitable conflict. Yet, the period 1555-1618 (63 years) was the longest period of peace in modern German history, prior to the current era since 1945 (the 63-year mark being only passed in 2008). The Empire's relative tranquillity contrasted sharply with what was happening elsewhere in Europe. For instance, there was no German equivalent of the Massacre of St Bartholomew in 1572 when French Catholics murdered at least 10,000 Huguenots.

More importantly, when war did break out in 1618, the belligerents did not neatly divide along confessional lines. Most of the German Lutheran princes remained neutral (or tried to), or even backed the emperor who was a Catholic. The Calvinists (the Empire's equivalent to England's Puritans) who had emerged since 1560, indeed largely opposed the emperor, but individuals still fought on the other side. One prominent example was Peter Melander Count Hotzapfel who commanded the imperial army 1647-8, despite Calvinism officially being banned by the emperor. Likewise, individual Catholics were found in the armies of Protestant powers, and the man who let the Defenestrators into Prague castle was a Catholic. The same is true for the international dimension. Catholic Spain did support the emperor, but inconsistently and frequently urged him to make peace with his Protestant opponents. France backed Protestant Danish and later Swedish intervention, and eventually openly fought the emperor. More fundamentally, we do not find calls to holy war. No government or church tried to rally ordinary people to fight opponents defined purely as religious enemies. The Bohemian rebels even preferred to negotiate with the Muslim Ottoman sultan 1620 for regular troops than arm their own peasants who would, of course, have demanded social concessions in return.

In short, the role of religion is complex and for contemporaries was mainly a matter of perspective. Some people really did see it as a religious war in which the fate of their church and version of Christianity were at stake. Such views were generally expressed by clergy and those driven into exile following the occupation of their homeland. However, religion mainly served to reinforce appeals for solidarity and assistance; something used to persuade other countries/powers that your cause was the same as theirs, so please come and help. We should not, however, misinterpret this to mean religion was simply manipulated to legitimate or mask what were otherwise secular aims. Rather, most actors and observers regarded religious goals as relatively distant and were more pragmatic in how they pursued them.

Rejecting the conventional interpretation of this as a religious war compels us to seek an alternative explanation for its causes. To answer this, we also need to ask the question: why did it break out when it did (i.e. in 1618,

after 63 years of relative peace in the Empire. The root cause lay in the Empire's character as a mixed monarchy. The very thing that helped it defuse tension in 1555, also led to war in 1618.

The problem was not with the Empire's basic structure; rather it was that individuals in this structure thought it should be adjusted to suit them. No one wanted to make major changes, but many among the Empire's political elite wanted to improve their own position within the imperial constitution. Power was shared unevenly amongst the princes. Some at the top felt that their families deserved greater influence, notably Frederick V elector Palatine, and his relation Duke Maximilian from the rival branch of the Wittelsbach family ruling Bavaria. In addition, there were many minor princes, counts and knights who were disadvantaged under the established hierarchy and who wanted to level the status distinctions and to obtain more equal political rights. Religious differences sharpened the political ones (the elector Palatine was Calvinist, Maximilian was a Catholic), but never in such a way to split the Empire neatly into confessional camps. For example, Maximilian wanted to improve his own position, but not that of the Catholic Habsburg family which had the imperial title and his actions sometimes directly contradicted Habsburg policies.

The political differences crystalized in the dispute over the fate of the 'imperial church', or ecclesiastical principalities which collectively about a seventh of the Empire. These lands had been reserved for Catholics in 1555, but in a deliberately ambiguous way to reconcile Lutherans to the Peace of Augsburg. As church lands, they were governed by bishops, abbots and priors who were princes (with a share in the mixed monarchy) but were not hereditary rulers like the secular princes. Instead they were elected by the senior clergy of each territory. The problem was that these lands were traditionally regarded as the preserves of princely and aristocratic families who saw the imperial church as the ideal home for their younger sons and unmarried daughters. The Protestant princes were not prepared to pass up on this, just because of their new faith. Additionally, though individually small, the church lands were numerous, and the Protestants (rightly) feared that if these principalities remained in Catholic hands, the Catholics would always hold the majority in imperial institutions and could outvote them.

Habsburg weakness was another factor contributing to an unstable situation. Though the princes collectively had considerable influence in the Empire, they lacked the final say in important matters which still rested with the emperor. Since 1438, the senior princes (the electors) had always chosen a member of the Habsburg family as emperor. The Habsburgs had the most land and were well placed to carry the primary burden of defending the Empire against the ever-present threat posed by the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately, the partition of the Habsburg lands into Spanish and Austrian branches left Austria the poor relation as Spain kept its rich overseas colonies. The Austrian Habsburgs needed money to pay for border defence in Hungary and were forced to negotiate with the nobles who dominated the provincial assemblies in their hereditary lands. Many of these nobles had converted to some form of Protestantism by the 1570s and compelled the Habsburgs to concede religious and political concessions in return for taxes (paid by their peasants) to maintain border defences. Even more concessions were granted 1608-11 when the Austrian Habsburgs imploded in a dispute over who would succeed the indecisive Rudolf II. The rival archdukes gave more concessions (including the famous Letter of Majesty) in return for the nobles' support. Thus, the emperor was always distracted and unable (and unwilling) to address the dispute over the church lands in the German part of the Empire.

However, there was no inevitable slide to war, nor was the Empire primed to explode when the Habsburg officials were defenestrated. The Bohemian crisis stemmed not from weakness, but a relative revival in Habsburg strength associated with Archduke Ferdinand who emerged as the designated successor to the Austrian lands by 1617. Ferdinand sought to reassert his family's power in its own lands by making Catholicism a test for political loyalty. Protestants were not immediately removed from office, but new appointments to court and military posts were now reserved for Catholics. The leading Protestant nobles in Bohemia felt threatened and the more militant among them staged the Defenestration as a coup. They knew they were a minority – what they wanted to do was to force the moderate majority to get off the fence and oppose Habsburg re-Catholicisation.

Why Thirty Years?

Neither the Defenestrators, nor the Habsburgs wanted a protracted conflict, and both parties initially hoped that a show of strength and some tough talking would be sufficient to end the crisis. So, we are left with the question why it took thirty years to resolve the Empire's problems? To understand this, we need to examine what those involved were trying to achieve.

For Ferdinand and his successor Ferdinand III this was not a war; it was a rebellion. As rebels, their opponents were automatically in the wrong as 'notorious rebels'. This entitled the Habsburgs to deprive them of their property, whenever they could. The near-unbroken string of military victories throughout the 1620s made this possible. The Bohemians' defeat at the Battle of White Mountain in November 1620 was followed by the largest transfer of private property in Europe before Communists in 1945 as lands were taken from the rebels and distributed or sold cheaply to those nobles who had remained loyal to the Habsburgs. The Habsburgs regained control of their own lands and ruled through noble families which had benefited from the redistribution of property, cementing an alliance that lasted until 1918. This policy was extended to other parts of the Empire after 1620 following the subsequent defeat of Frederick V who had unwisely accepted the rebels' offer of the Bohemian crown – ruling briefly as 'winter king'. His lands and titles were given to Maximilian of Bavaria who had helped crush the revolt.

This policy created a large number of embittered exiles: Bohemian, Austrian and German nobles who had lost their land, as well as the elector Palatine and his supporters. Though some acquiesced in return for a pardon and at least partial reinstatement, most felt they had nothing left to lose by fighting on. They provided a vital pool of support to those foreign powers which wanted to intervene in the Empire. They not only helped raise much of the military manpower required to intervene, but they represented a cause which foreign powers could use to legitimate their own policies in the Empire by claiming they had come not to conquer, but to restore the 'proper' balance to the imperial constitution.

Thus, we can now understand why the war spread. Spain helped Austria because it wanted its Habsburg relations to settle matters in the Empire so that they could in turn help against the Dutch. The Dutch knew this and accordingly sponsored anyone who would prolong the war in the Empire to keep Austria busy. France feared Spain and so copied the Dutch policy after some initial hesitation and aided those who opposed the Habsburgs, including sponsoring Denmark. That kingdom had a stake in the German church lands and intervened in 1625 when it feared the Habsburgs would seize these, so intervened. Denmark's defeat by 1629 opened opportunities for their Baltic rival Sweden which extracted itself from an increasingly unprofitable war in Poland and switched to the Empire where it hoped for easier picking to extend and sustain its Baltic empire. Sweden's temporary collapse following defeat in battle in 1634 finally forced France to intervene directly the following year to stop a total imperial victory.

France and Sweden never trusted each other, but eventually evolved into an effective political and military partnership by the early 1640s. A host of practical matters, including the accumulative effects of destruction and its negative impact on resource extraction, hindered any party from gaining decisive victory. Peace was further delayed by the difficulties inherent in coordinating military operations with diplomacy, especially once the peace congress got underway in the two Westphalian towns of Münster and Osnabrück by 1644. The political leadership and diplomats kept asking for just one more victory to improve their bargaining position and help them make an honourable peace. Eventually, the balance tilted increasingly in favour of the Franco-Swedish alliance once they managed to force many of the princes to abandon the emperor and to declare neutrality. With his support and resource base dwindling, Emperor Ferdinand III skilfully offered just enough concessions to persuade France and Sweden that they had more to gain by making peace now, rather than risking losing relatively good terms should military events turn against them.

The Peace of Westphalia

This shifting balance has encouraged many to see the Peace of Westphalia as a 'Protestant victory'. This view took hold in the nineteenth century when much of the war's history was written by Protestant historians.

Certainly, the terms favoured Protestants. Calvinism was recognised as an official faith, but by then it was largely spent as a religious movement and it failed to make further headway in the Empire after 1648. Its formal recognition in any case represented a defeat for the Lutherans, since most conversions to Calvinism had come at their expense. Catholicism revived both spiritually and politically after 1648 during the age of the baroque and around fifty princes converted to Catholicism in the following century. Sweden secured considerable German territory granted as 'compensation' for its efforts on behalf of those who had opposed the emperor's interpretation of the imperial constitution. France also gained part of Alsace and (more importantly from its perspective at the time) compelled Austria to promise not to assist Spain during the on-going Franco-Spanish war (which continued until 1659).

However, Bavaria kept most of its gains and emerged as a major factor in the Empire, while the Palatinate was only recovered half of its lands. Crucially, the Austrian Habsburgs kept the settlement they had imposed on their own lands during the 1620s, and the defeated exiles were not restored. The dynasty emerged stronger, setting Austria on the road to becoming a great power in its own right – something it achieved after 1683 with the reconquest of Hungary from the Ottoman Empire.

Likewise, the Empire has customarily been presented as an empty shell after 1648, largely because the peace is associated with the principal of sovereignty. In fact, the Westphalian settlement did not make the princes independent sovereigns, and, in some important respects, even curtailed their powers: henceforth, they were no longer able to decide which of the Empire's three official faiths their subjects should follow. The complex constitutional adjustments, combined with the Habsburgs recovery of influence, enabled the Empire to function effectively well into the eighteenth century.

The general population was largely unaware of these longer-term shifts. Instead, their perceptions of the war were shaped by its official presentation as a great disaster which sinful Germans had brought upon themselves. The political and ecclesiastical authorities argued that the only way to avoid such a calamity again was to be pious, obedient subjects. In this way, the war contributed to the growth of princely power, as well as profoundly influencing how this terrible conflict has been remembered.