

chapter 5

The Thirty Years' War, 1618–1648



The Thirty Years' War marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. It began an era in which nation-states struggled for territorial and political power. It ended the dominance of the powerful Hapsburg family and began the era in which France was the strongest nation in Europe. It ended an era of Spanish military domination. It also ushered in an era in which states completed the long process of centralizing their governments, becoming what we recognize today as modern nations.

The Thirty Years' War was fought over religious, dynastic, and political/territorial issues. It was a religious war fought between Catholics and Protestants, with much bitterness on both sides. It was a war of two powerful families, the Catholic Hapsburgs and the Protestant Wittelsbachs. It was a political war in which nations fought for territorial expansion and to gain stronger positions in the balance of European power.

Many historians have described the Thirty Years' War as the last religious war in Europe. This is an exaggeration; religion is a powerful motivating factor in some present-day European conflicts, such as those within the United Kingdom and in the Balkans. However, it is true that from 1648 on, European leaders have openly claimed political, territorial, and economic reasons for warfare, but not religious ones.

CHAPTER 5 OBJECTIVES

- Identify the causes of the Thirty Years' War.
- Describe the major provisions of the Peace of Westphalia.
- Identify the major figures of the era and match each person to his or her role in the Thirty Years' War.

Chapter 5 Time Line

- 1617 Ferdinand Hapsburg becomes king of Bohemia; revokes Letter of Majesty
- 1618 Defenestration of Prague; Thirty Years' War begins
- 1619 Ferdinand II elected Holy Roman Emperor; Bohemians crown Frederick Wittelsbach king, deposing Ferdinand
- 1620 Battle of White Mountain
- 1629 Edict of Restitution bans Protestantism throughout Holy Roman Empire
- 1635 France declares war on Spain
- 1648 Peace of Westphalia; Thirty Years' War ends

Thirty Years' War

The Thirty Years' War is the name given to a series of religious and political wars fought in the Holy Roman Empire from 1618 to 1648. In religious terms, Catholics and Protestants struggled for ascendancy. In political terms, two prominent ruling families each tried to dominate the other, and several nation-states fought to improve their position.

As you read in Chapter 2, the Holy Roman Empire was not a nation; it had no form of central government. It was a loose collection of seven electorates, covering present-day Austria and Germany and parts of the Czech Republic. The emperor was chosen by the seven ruling electors. The people of the empire spoke German, French, and Czech. In Chapter 4, you read that the Peace of Augsburg (1555) stated that each elector could choose the state religion of his own principality. In 1600, three of the electorates were Protestant and the other four were Catholic. Of course, Catholics and Protestants hated one

another, but there was also quite a bit of conflict within the Protestant portions of the empire. For instance, Calvinists loathed Lutherans, believing that they were far too lax in their approach to religion.

In the early modern era, European rule was a family affair rather than an official form of government as we understand government today. National borders changed with bewildering rapidity as monarchs died and passed their authority and their lands on to their children. Kings, princes, and electors of Europe ran their territories in much the same way that a lord ran his estate. The territory was considered to be similar to private property; the king owed his subjects his protection in return for their obedience.

The two most important and influential ruling families in the Holy Roman Empire were the Wittelsbachs and the Hapsburgs. As of 1600, there was religious dissension within each family, although the Hapsburgs were mainly Catholic and the Wittelsbachs were mainly Protestant. One major figure emerged in each family in the early 1600s: Ferdinand Hapsburg, elected king of Bohemia in 1617 and Holy Roman Emperor two years later, and his rival Frederick Wittelsbach.

The Thirty Years' War falls into three major phases, although fighting continued in various parts of the empire throughout the entire span of time.

Bohemian War, 1618–1620

In the years leading up to the outbreak of war, the situation between Catholics and Protestants in Bohemia had become tense. A 1609 document called the Letter of Majesty had extended the rights of Protestants within the state. The result of this tolerance was a mostly Lutheran landed gentry whose members resented being controlled by Catholic officials in the civil service. The two sides could not get along.

The Catholic side gained an important victory when Ferdinand Hapsburg was elected king of Bohemia in 1617. A zealous Catholic, Ferdinand revoked the Letter of Majesty, thus creating many enemies among the wealthy and powerful Bohemians. Hostility between the two sides came to a head one day in Prague Castle, when a group of discontented Lutherans threw several of the hated civil servants through the upstairs windows onto a compost heap in the courtyard below. This event, called the Defenestration of Prague, marked the start of a major Protestant uprising in Bohemia. It ended with the Protes-

tants declaring that Ferdinand could not be their king; they deposed him and replaced him with Frederick Wittelsbach in 1619.

Ferdinand, of course, fought back against the Protestant defiance. By this time the Holy Roman Emperor had died, and Ferdinand had been chosen in his place. This gave him a much greater position of power from which to fight for control of Bohemia.

The electorates and free cities within the empire lined up on opposite sides along religious lines, with the Catholics supporting the emperor. The Protestant armies under King Frederick fared badly against the Catholic armies under Maximilian of Bavaria. In 1620, the Catholic side won a decisive victory at the Battle of White Mountain. Frederick hastily decamped to The Hague in Amsterdam, abandoning Bohemia to a brutally enforced program of conversion back to Catholicism.

Swedish War, 1630–1634

As Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand now had much more authority to pass laws against Protestantism. In 1628, he decreed that all Protestant landowners in Inner Austria must leave the country, turning over their property to the state. Many of them converted in order to avoid banishment. In 1629, Ferdinand signed the Edict of Restitution, which banned Protestantism throughout the Holy Roman Empire. It also stated that any originally Catholic lands and property must be restored to the Church.

Ferdinand did not realize that the time for such high-handed conduct had passed into history. Instead of meekly obeying his edicts, his Lutheran and Calvinist subjects abandoned their own quarrel and united against him as their common enemy. Not even Ferdinand's fellow monarchs and ministers of state sympathized with him. The Lutheran nation of Sweden immediately made preparations to march into Germany and fight for the Protestant side. Even France, always a reliably Catholic nation, considered the ban and the Edict of Restitution reactionary and dangerous. For the moment, however, the French bided their time.

Gustav II Adolf succeeded to the throne of Sweden in 1611, at age seventeen. Like all successful absolute monarchs, he turned his energies toward streamlining the civil service to make it more efficient and expanding the military to aid in foreign conquest. Spiritually, Gustav was a devout Lutheran; on

practical grounds, he believed that a culturally and religiously homogeneous Sweden would be more stable and easier for the monarch to control. With this goal in mind, he banned the practice of Roman and Orthodox Catholicism from his realm; of course, this meant that all Church land and riches became the property of the crown. Sweden became a Lutheran state that tolerated other forms of Protestantism. This tolerance proved practical on Gustav's part once Sweden entered the fighting in the empire.

Sweden entered the Thirty Years' War to assist an ally, but also with an eye to expanding the Swedish empire by picking up new territory on the Baltic. If Sweden could take over all the land around the Baltic Sea, it would be able to control the trade routes, an enormous advantage over other nations in the region.

In 1631, Gustav led his troops to a major victory over veteran General Count Johann Tilly's imperial forces at Breitenfeld, near the town of Leipzig. Gustav then formed alliances with most of the Calvinist leaders in areas such as Brandenburg. Over the course of the next year, Gustav and his forces marched south, progressing in triumph all the way to Munich. Gustav fell at the battle of Lützen in 1632. Despite this disaster, Sweden's great generals maintained the advantage on the battlefield.

Franco-Swedish War, 1635–1648

As a Catholic nation, France should have been the natural ally of Ferdinand II in his attempts to impose Catholicism on his subjects. The chief French minister of state, in fact, was a cardinal of the Catholic Church. However, France fought on the Protestant side and played a decisive role in the Hapsburg's defeat.

Born into the minor French nobility in 1585, Armand Jean du Plessis de Richelieu became a cardinal in 1622. Richelieu was also the king's chief minister; as such, his goal was to make France the most powerful nation in Europe. Logically, this meant France's foreign policy would be to weaken other nations as much as possible.

Up to this time, the Holy Roman Empire and the Hapsburg family had always been a thorn in France's side. Geographically, the empire occupied a very strong central position on the continent. In addition, the Austrian Hapsburgs were related to the Spanish royal family and had been acquiring more and more authority in the empire. All this created potential for a strong, united

German state under Hapsburg rule, with Spain as a powerful ally. Richelieu wanted to avoid this at all costs; France's geographical position between two strong allied nations would be very vulnerable.

This situation indicates that religion was by no means the central issue in the Thirty Years' War, at least not in the minds of all the combatants. Richelieu's position as a minister of the Church took second place to his position as minister of France. When Jules Mazarin—also a Catholic cardinal—succeeded Richelieu on the latter's death in 1642, he continued Richelieu's policies. Both were hardheaded men with great common sense who excelled at the politics of realism as described by Machiavelli in *The Prince* (see Chapter 1).

The French watched the progress of Gustav II Adolf and the Swedish army. Their decisive military success inspired Richelieu to offer substantial monetary support to the Swedes. French troops finally joined the fighting in 1635. The combined French and Swedish troops continued to win victories for the next ten years.

By 1644, Gustav's daughter Kristina had reached the age of eighteen and was old enough to rule Sweden in her own right, assisted by the canny advice of her chief minister Axel Oxenstierna. Sweden was also fortunate to have some brilliant generals, who achieved an impressive series of military victories. The Swedish army had reached Bavaria by 1646 and Prague by 1647; by the terms of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Sweden annexed several important territories.

Results of the Thirty Years' War

The Peace of Westphalia cemented the work begun under Ferdinand—the creation of a unified Austrian nation-state, which would before long become the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Hapsburgs would continue to rule Austria into the twentieth century.

Provisions of the Peace of Westphalia

- Restored borders within the Holy Roman Empire to their 1624 locations
- Revoked the Edict of Restitution
- Gave Alsace to France
- Recognized Switzerland and the Netherlands as independent nation-states

- Made Bavaria, Prussia, Saxony, and Wurttemberg self-governing, independent states within the Holy Roman Empire
- Created a unified Austrian empire including Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and parts of Hungary

Since the war had been fought entirely within the Holy Roman Empire, the Germans suffered most from the violence. Of a total ethnic German population of about 17 million, historians agree that between 3.5 million and 7 million died; additionally, millions of acres of farmland were laid waste, and foreign troops released from combat duties were roaming the countryside, looting and murdering. German unification, which had seemed possible in the early 1600s, was set back for some time to come.

With north central Europe devastated by the war, France emerged as the dominant nation-state. Spain had lost its navy during the defeat of the Armada, Italy was still a collection of city-states that were constantly being invaded by Austria or France, and England, as always, maintained a measure of isolation on the far side of the English Channel. By contrast, France was a large, continuous landmass with a strong central position on the continent, and it had a strong central government. It would remain Europe's greatest power until Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

The Holy Roman Empire would continue to exist on paper, but the emperor would have only nominal authority. Four of the electorates—Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and Wurttemberg—were made independent, self-governing states owing pro forma allegiance to the emperor; the others were made part of the Austrian empire.

The Peace of Westphalia was the result of the monarchs and ministers gathering together—the first time this had happened in European history. The nations agreed to recognize one another's sovereignty and to create and maintain a balance of power that would prevent future wars. The Peace of Westphalia was thus an important first step toward recognizing that affairs of state could be settled around a conference table rather than on the battlefield.

QUIZ

- 1. Most of the fighting in the Thirty Years' War took place in**
 - A. France.
 - B. the Holy Roman Empire.
 - C. Italy.
 - D. Spain.
- 2. Austria should have expected help from France during the war because both nations were**
 - A. Catholic.
 - B. Protestant.
 - C. ruled by a member of the Hapsburg family.
 - D. enemies of England.
- 3. _____ emerged from the Thirty Years' War as the dominant power in Europe.**
 - A. England
 - B. France
 - C. Spain
 - D. Sweden
- 4. Which nation became a unified empire as a result of the Thirty Years' War?**
 - A. Austria
 - B. France
 - C. Germany
 - D. Italy
- 5. France's primary reason for entering the Thirty Years' War was**
 - A. to weaken its hostile neighbors Austria and Spain.
 - B. to help its most prominent Catholic ally defeat the Protestants.
 - C. to end the threat of Swedish expansion on the continent.
 - D. to stimulate an economic recovery at home.
- 6. What did the Edict of Restitution state?**
 - A. It settled the terms of surrender among the Holy Roman Empire, France, and Switzerland.
 - B. It replaced Ferdinand II with Frederick as king of Bohemia.
 - C. It banned Protestantism throughout the Holy Roman Empire.
 - D. It allowed each elector to decide the official religion of his own state.

- 7. What happened in Bohemia as a result of the Battle of White Mountain?**
- A. Catholicism was restored as the state religion.
 - B. Catholics emigrated to other nations to escape enforced conversion.
 - C. Maximilian of Bavaria was crowned king.
 - D. Citizens threw some city officials through the Prague Castle windows.
- 8. _____ revoked the Letter of Majesty in 1617.**
- A. Cardinal Richelieu
 - B. Gustav II Adolf
 - C. Ferdinand II
 - D. Frederich of Bohemia
- 9. Although Lutherans were fellow Protestants, Calvinists despised them because**
- A. they had too much in common with Catholics.
 - B. they conducted church services in the language spoken by the people.
 - C. they maintained their loyalty to the pope.
 - D. their approach to religion was too lax for Calvinist taste.
- 10. In 1648, the prospects for a unified German nation were dim because the German-speaking states**
- A. lost the friendship of their most powerful ally, Spain.
 - B. agreed to the strengthening of the Austrian empire.
 - C. had suffered too much damage and lost too many people during the fighting.
 - D. refused to consider establishing a policy of religious freedom.