

Thirty Years War



[Image Source: Wikimedia Commons](#)

The Thirty Years War and the AP European History Exam

AP European History is full of significant and memorable wars that shaped the direction of Europe and, by extension, the world. One of these wars is the Thirty Years War. Perhaps your course did not emphasize this war, or maybe you just don't remember it! In this AP European History Crash Course Review, you will learn when the Thirty Years War happened, who it involved, and in this case, most importantly what its end meant for Europe.

Thirty Years War Cont.

What Led to the Thirty Years War?

The Protestant Reformation began in 1517, but its effects were to last far longer. The authority of the Catholic Church in Europe was in question for the first time in a long time, and the continent divided into Catholics and Protestants. While some countries were more clearly Protestant, such as England and the Netherlands, and others remained staunchly Catholic like Spain, still others were marked by acute internal division. It is important for you to remember that because of the link between ecclesiastical (church) and state power at the time in history, the religious divide had serious political implications. Don't think of the church and state as separate entities, but as sometimes combined and sometimes competing powers.

Background to the Thirty Years War

The Thirty Years War occurred from 1618-1648. Which groups were in conflict? After the Reformation, German Lutherans and the Catholics were pitted against one another. In the 1530's the Lutherans submitted a petition for religious freedom to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. How did he respond? He outright rejected their offer. There was one catch, though. Charles V did not have the ability to actually challenge the Protestants.

If you want an example of the bloody religious conflict that predated the war, it's the death of Ulrich Zwingli, considered by Protestants to be the third most influential reformer —after Luther and Calvin. Zwingli started as a Catholic priest in Switzerland, but grew to criticize the church openly. He joined forces with political rulers to gain the independence he believed priests should have, such as the right to marry. In 1531, in one of the religious conflicts fought between Catholic and Protestant forces, Zwingli was on the battlefield, helping to lead the fight for Swiss Protestant rights. He was killed in battle, which led to his glorification as a Protestant martyr and inspired future Swiss to fight on in his name in the soon-to-come Thirty Years War.

Thirty Years War Cont.

The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 somehow and temporarily resolved the conflict in Europe, allowing each territory within the empire to choose a government that would align itself with either Lutheranism or Catholicism. The northern and central German lands chose Lutheranism, while the southern territories elected to remain Catholic. Charles V realized that his primary goal as emperor, the uniting of all the lands of the Holy Roman Empire under Catholicism, was over. He abdicated the throne, moving to a monastery in 1556. Although other rulers of the HRE followed Charles V, he was the last crowned by the Pope, which allowed him the right to be called “Emperor.”

What Led to the Outbreak of War?

The Peace of Augsburg was successful in keeping the German states from warring against each other for about 50 years, but by the first decade of the new century, the Protestants and Catholics of Germany were preparing for a fight. Gearing up for a fight, both groups formed leagues or unions to defend their territories and faith. The Spanish Habsburg rulers were very concerned that all rulers of the HRE would continue to profess Catholicism, and they were jealous guardians of the royal thrones throughout Europe. One way they tried to ensure their continued domination was through marriage of Habsburg heirs to royals around Europe!

The Four Phases of the Thirty Years War

Get ready! Because the Thirty Years War eventually involved the armies of multiple nations and because of its religious nature that sometimes caused warring within a nation, we can understand it in four phases.

Phase One: The Bohemian Phase (1618-1625)

In 1618, Ferdinand II, Catholic ruler of Bohemia, started to limit the kinds of religious activities allowed by his subjects. Protestants under his rule felt restricted and oppressed and began to look for help from Protestants in other areas. These areas included Denmark, the Dutch, and Great Britain. When Ferdinand got wind that these nations planned to come to the Protestant aid, he reached out to Spain, German Catholics, and of course, the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church.

Thirty Years War Cont.

Ferdinand and his pals were able to defeat the Protestant group in the Battle of White Mountain.

Phase Two: The Danish Phase (1625-1629)

In this part of the Thirty Years War, the Protestant Danes were challenged by the Catholic Imperial armies. Their success led to major Catholic victories and put the Catholic Habsburg rulers of Spain and Austria at the height of their power. After this Catholic victory, Ferdinand declared an “Edict of Restitution” which took back lands for the Catholic Church that had previously been overtaken by Protestants. Ferdinand also limited worship in the HRE to only two groups: Catholics and Lutherans.

Phase Three: The Swedish Phase (1630-1635)

Here’s where it gets interesting! In this phase, we look at how Sweden’s Protestant king, Gustavus Adolphus, decided to get involved in defending the Protestants in the HRE. However, France’s Catholic chief minister and Catholic Cardinal Richelieu were getting nervous about the increased power of the Hapsburgs. He, therefore, aided the Swedish Protestants in their fight against Habsburg Catholicism! Gustavus Adolphus was killed in battle in 1632, weakening the Protestants after two successive victories.

Phase Four: The French Phase (1635-1648)

Though Gustavus Adolphus death had dealt a blow to the Protestants course, Cardinal Richelieu was actually more afraid of the threat of the Habsburgs, who were gaining more and more power as they racked up victories, than he was of the Protestants. He believed the Hapsburg rulers could become a rival to the French absolute kings he had worked so hard to strengthen. As a result, Richelieu funded and sent the military to Spain to make war on the weaker side of the Habsburg clan.

Thirty Years War Cont.

Why does this War Matter?

Don't let all of the detail about the Thirty Years War distract you from the larger point in your AP Euro History Review. Now that you know how the war was fought, keep reading to understand the war's significance in European history!

The war that had dragged on for three decades resulted in deaths of between 30% and 66% of the entire male population of many German territories. These figures seem hard to believe, but you must consider that not all of the deaths came from battle. Disease, which was far more likely to kill the soldiers in their war-weakened states, and starvation, also played huge roles in the body count.

Europe had fought itself into exhaustion by 1648, and all of the countries were devastated by their losses. Religiously, there was still a great divide between Catholics and Protestants, but Europeans began to believe that the religious differences could not be solved by war. The rise of stronger absolute rulers meant that political power would soon replace the power of the church as the great prize.

The Peace of Westphalia

Finally in 1648, the countries agreed to stop the religious conflict in the Peace of Westphalia. In it, over 300 German princes were given the right to decide which religions would dominate in their principalities. Because of this independence, the leader of the Holy Roman Empire's influence, and the goal of Christendom, – a huge tract of Europe to be dominated by Catholic rulers and the Catholic faith – would never be realized. With Catholicism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism now permitted, Northern Germany would remain Protestant and southern Germany Catholic.

As you continue to work through your AP European History Crash Course, you will find that the Northern Protestant and Southern Catholic division in Germany persisted into modern times, affecting the actions and approaches of future German leaders such as Otto von Bismarck and Adolph Hitler. This gives you an indication of just how important the Thirty Years War is to your study!

Thirty Years War Cont.

The Thirty Years War on the AP European History Exam

A new format for the AP European History exam was administered for the first time in 2016. However, a look at past, released exam questions is still helpful. In fact, today's exam requires more writing than the previous one, and therefore more chance you will be asked to recall the events and effects of the Thirty years War. In 2009, [one of the essays was entirely dedicated to the war](#): *"Analyze the various ways in which the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) represented a turning point in European history."*

Even if you do not get a question as narrowly focused as the above, it is likely that you will be asked about religious conflicts in European history, or about the rise of political power over religious power in time. Studying the Thirty Years War in your AP Euro Review is a perfect way to ensure you will be ready for the exam!

The Thirty Years War: The Bottom Line

You should know that the Thirty Years War was a direct result of the reformation, and originated as a fight between Protestants and Catholics, but evolved into a highly political conflict. A big theme of this time of war was the question of authority for individual states. The Thirty Years War also marks the last major war to be fought over religious issues, as European rulers were cementing their power and became serious rivals to the influence of the church.

If you can remember these important themes and ideas, you will be ready to answer any question you might have about the Thirty years War on the AP Euro Exam.

AP European History is full of big and memorable wars that shaped the direction of Europe and the world at large. One of these wars is the Thirty Years War. Perhaps your course did not emphasize this war, or maybe you just don't remember it! In this AP European History Crash Course Review, you will learn when the Thirty Years War happened, who it involved, and in this case, most importantly what its end meant for Europe.