

Peter H. Wilson



# Europe's Tragedy

A HISTORY  
OF THE THIRTY  
YEARS WAR

PETER H. WILSON

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**Europe's Tragedy**  
*A History of the Thirty Years War*



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KEY

		Imperial infantry
		Imperial cavalry
		Imperial attacks
		'Protestant' infantry
		'Protestant' cavalry
		'Protestant' attacks
		Artillery
		Blockhouses
		Entrenchments
		Abatis or barricades
		Housing
		Woods
		Hills
		Marsh
		Open water
		Roads



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## Note on Form

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Place names are given in the form most commonly used in English-language writing. For east and Central European locations, this tends to be the German version. The current name is given in parentheses at the first mention. Individuals are identified in the text using their first name and the title by which they are best known. Full names and titles, along with dates of birth and death (where known) are given for each person in the index. Emperor Ferdinand II's general has become known as Wallenstein since Schiller's drama trilogy at the end of the eighteenth century. This version has entrenched itself in English writing and will be used here rather than the Czech original, Waldstein. In contemporary documents, he generally appears as 'the Friedländer' after his duchy of Friedland. Though anachronistic, the term 'Britain' will be used for the lands of the Stuart monarchy in preference to the still more misleading 'England', unless it is intended to refer to the individual kingdoms or principalities. All dates are given in the New Style according to the Gregorian calendar introduced into the Catholic parts of Europe and the Holy Roman Empire around 1582. This was ten days ahead of the Julian calendar retained by Protestant Germans generally until 1700.

# The Habsburg Family Tree 1500–1665

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## *Note on Currencies*

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<b>Currency</b>	<b>Equivalent</b>
Escudo (Spain)	1.1 ducats (Spain, from 1620), or 2.5 fl. (Dutch)
Ducat (Spain)	2.35 fl. (Dutch), or 1.4 fl. (German)
Ducat (Naples)	0.7 ducat (Spain)
Florin (German)	1.7 fl. (Dutch)
Livre (French)	initially 0.7 fl. (German); 0.5 fl. after 1640
Pound sterling	4.2–4.8 talers
Riksdaler (Denmark/Sweden)	1–1.5 fl. (German)
Taler (Empire)	1.5 fl. (German), or 2.5 fl. (Dutch)

It is difficult to give modern equivalents to seventeenth-century currency. As a guide to value, 7.5–10 florins would buy enough grain to feed a person for a whole year in 1618.

## *Preface*

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The history of the Thirty Years War is rich in specialist studies, but poor in general accounts. Few authors provide more than short overviews intended for students. It is easy to see why. To cover all aspects would require knowledge of at least fourteen European languages, while there are sufficient archival records to occupy many lifetimes of research. Even the printed material runs to millions of pages; there are over 4,000 titles just on the Peace of Westphalia that concluded the conflict. The sheer volume of evidence has affected how previous histories have been written. Some cut through the detail by fitting the war into broader explanations of Europe's transition to modernity. Others give more scope to personalities and events but often signs of fatigue set in as the author approaches the mid-1630s. By then the heroes and villains giving life to the opening phases were largely dead, replaced by other figures ignored by posterity. There is a rush to wrap up the story and the last thirteen years are compressed into a quarter or less of the text, much of which is devoted to discussing the peace and aftermath.

The present work seeks to redress this through a more even coverage across the entire time span. Some of the distinctive features of this approach are set out in the introductory chapter. The most important is to view the war on its own terms as a struggle over the political and religious order of Central Europe, rather than submerging it within a general account of European conflict throughout the first half of the seventeenth century. While this simplifies some aspects, it also directs attention to the war's origins in the complex situation in the Holy Roman Empire during the later sixteenth century. The task of the first part of the book is to explain this and place it in the wider European context. The second part follows the unfolding tragedy roughly chronologically, paying particular regard to why peace-making efforts failed before the mid-1640s. The final part examines the war's political, economic, social and cultural impact and longer-term significance. Throughout, structural explanations have been combined with an emphasis on agency and contingency, giving more space than customary to minor as well as more prominent participants. Referencing is selective, excluding much of the older material used in favour of recent works that are more accessible for most readers and provide a useful guide to the specialist literature.

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a Research Leave Award in 2007–8 that enabled this book to be completed. I have also benefited from a supportive research environment during my time at the University of Sunderland, as well as a warm welcome by the History Department at Hull where the final sections were written. Leopold Auer and the staff of the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Vienna provided valuable assistance during my all-too-brief visit in 2006. I am grateful to Scott Dixon, Robert Evans, Ralph Morrison and Neil Rennoldson for their help in locating obscure works, and especially to Kacper Rekawek for assisting with Polish-language material. Clarissa Campbell Orr, Tryntje Helfferich, Michael Kaiser, Maureen Meikle, Géza Pálffy and Ciro Paoletti all generously shared their knowledge on numerous points of detail. I am particularly indebted to Trevor Johnson for providing a pre-publication version of his book on Bavarian policy. Sadly, his sudden death in 2007 means I am no longer able to reciprocate.

Simon Winder's encouragement sustained my faith that the book would eventually be



completed, while his editorial advice greatly improved its clarity. Charlotte Ridings' careful copyediting rooted out inconsistency and error, and Cecilia Mackay transformed my wish-list of illustrations into reality.

Eliane, Alec, Tom and Nina patiently tolerated my immersion in the past and, as usual, have provided the greatest assistance and inspiration. This book is dedicated to them with love.

### 1

## Introduction

### THREE MEN AND A WINDOW

Shortly after 9 a.m. on Wednesday 23 May 1618, Vilém Slavata found himself hanging from a window of the Hradšchin castle in Prague. This was not a predicament the 46-year-old aristocrat had encountered before. As president of the Bohemian treasury and a supreme court judge, he was a senior figure in the royal government with a distinguished career in the service of the ruling Habsburg dynasty. Thanks to his marriage to the heiress Lucia Ottilia, he was also one of the richest men in the entire kingdom.

Moments before, his equally distinguished colleague, Jaroslav Borita von Martinitz, had been seized by five armed men. Martinitz's pleas to be allowed a confessor had merely enraged his assailants who flung him unceremoniously headfirst from the same window from which Slavata now clung, dangling precariously above the seventeen-metre drop to the ditch below. Angry voices in the room indicated no prospect of human help. At that moment, Slavata felt the sharp cut of metal as someone smacked a sword hilt against his fingers. The pain became too much; his grip loosened and he plummeted downward, cracking the back of his head open on the sill of a lower window. As he disappeared into the void, his attackers noticed his secretary, Philipp Fabricius, his arms clutched around one of the less intimidating members of the gang. Ignoring his pleas for mercy, he was summarily despatched out of the window to share his master's fate.

That, however, turned out other than intended. While Slavata landed squarely at the bottom of the ditch, Martinitz had fallen further up. He now slithered down to help his friend, injuring himself on the way down with his own sword that his attackers had neglected to unbuckle. Shots rang out from the window above, but Martinitz managed to help the dazed Slavata to his feet and together they escaped to the nearby Lobkowitz palace, home of the Bohemian chancellor who had been absent from their disrupted meeting. Two men were sent to finish them off, but Lobkowitz's wife, Polyxena, bolted the door and eventually persuaded them to go away. Martinitz fled across the frontier to Bavaria the next day, but Slavata's injuries prevented him from leaving immediately and he was forced to hide. Fabricius, who, amazingly, had landed on his feet, meanwhile raced to Vienna, heart of the Habsburg monarchy and political centre of the Holy Roman Empire, to alert the emperor.<sup>1</sup>

This event has entered history as the Defenestration of Prague that triggered the Bohemian Revolt, the commonly accepted start of the Thirty Years War that claimed eight million lives and transformed the political and religious map of Europe. The war occupies a place in German and Czech history similar to that of the civil wars in Britain, Spain and the United States of America, or the revolutions in France and Russia: a defining moment of national

trauma that shaped how a country regards itself and its place in the world. The difficulty for later generations in coming to terms with the scale of the devastation has been compared to the problem of historicizing the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> For most Germans, the war came to symbolize national humiliation, retarding political, economic and social development and condemning their country to two centuries of internal division and international impotence.

## INTERPRETATIONS

This interpretation originated in a much later defeat that both revived interest in the Thirty Years War and transformed how it was regarded. For those who lived through it, and their children, the war retained the immediacy of contemporary events. From the outset, the conflict attracted wide interest across Europe, accelerating the early seventeenth-century 'media revolution' that saw the birth of the modern newspaper (see [Chapter 23](#)). The concluding Peace of Westphalia was an international bestseller, running through at least thirty editions within a year. Interest gradually dissipated towards the end of the seventeenth century as Central Europe entered another thirty years of war, mainly against France and the Ottoman Turks. The memory of the earlier conflict continued to be kept alive, however, in annual festivities celebrating the Peace of Westphalia, as well as through a relatively small number of books intended for a popular market. Like the public ceremonies, these works presented a broadly positive interpretation of the war's outcome in preserving the liberties of Protestant Germans and strengthening the imperial constitution.<sup>3</sup>

The view darkened dramatically in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleon's dismemberment of the Holy Roman Empire. The Austro-Prussian counter-attack against Revolutionary France in 1792 dragged Germans into another cycle of invasion, defeat, political upheaval and devastation. These experiences coincided with new intellectual and cultural currents associated with Romanticism and the literary 'Storm and Stress' movement. Lurid tales of mass death, rape and torture from the Thirty Years War had an immediate resonance, while the dramatic lives of individuals like the imperial general Wallenstein, or Sweden's King Gustavus Adolphus, assumed new meaning through comparison with Napoleon and other contemporary figures. Friedrich Schiller, the leading Storm and Stress writer, found an eager audience when he published his history of the war in 1791, followed by his *Wallenstein* trilogy in 1797–9 which remains the equivalent of Shakespeare's history plays for the German-speaking world.

The Romantic reinterpretation of the war established three elements that still shape writing today. One is a Gothic preoccupation with death, decline and destruction, with Germany usually presented as the helpless victim of foreign aggression. Atrocity stories were culled from folk tales and contemporary fiction, notably *The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus* by Grimmelshausen, which was rediscovered by the Romantic poets as the first authentic German novel and reissued in numerous 'improved' editions in the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The reappearance of these tales in historical novels and paintings, as well as school history lessons, reinforced folk memory and family tradition, not only in Germany but in other countries affected by the fighting. The Thirty Years War became the benchmark to measure

all later wars. The inhabitants of eastern France interpreted each subsequent invasion in the light of stories told about the Swedes and Croats who devastated their region in the 1630s. Soldiers fighting in the trenches along the eastern front of the First World War believed they were experiencing horrors not seen in three centuries. In his radio broadcast on 4 May 1945, Hitler's architect and armaments minister, Albert Speer, announced 'the destruction that has been inflicted on Germany can only be compared to that of the Thirty Years War. The decimation of our people through hunger and deprivation must not be allowed to reach the proportion of that epoch.' For this reason, he went on, Hitler's successor, Admiral Dönitz, had given the order to lay down arms. Public opinion surveys carried out in the 1960s revealed that Germans placed the Thirty Years War as their country's greatest disaster ahead of both world wars, the Holocaust and the Black Death.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of TV undoubtedly shifted this perception in the later twentieth century, especially through the dissemination of photographic images of more recent carnage. Nonetheless, even in the twenty-first century, German authors could assert that 'never before and also never since, not even during the horrors of the bombing during the Second World War, was the land so devastated and the people so tortured' as between 1618 and 1648.<sup>6</sup>

The second feature established by nineteenth-century historiography is the air of tragic inevitability. This is already apparent in Schiller's *Wallenstein*, which presents its central figure as an idealistic hero seeking peace but doomed to be murdered by his closest subordinates. The sense of unstoppable descent into chaos became general in writing after the Napoleonic Wars. The earlier positive reception for the Peace of Westphalia seemed inappropriate given the Empire's demise in 1806. Far from strengthening the imperial constitution, the war now seemed to have started its unravelling. More recent work reinforces this impression by shifting attention from personalities and constitutional failure to the long-term transition of the European economy from feudalism to capitalism that allegedly triggered the 'General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century'.<sup>7</sup> Others see the crisis as primarily political, environmental, or a combination of two or more factors. All versions, however, claim that underlying structural change stoked tensions that exploded into violent revolts and international conflict across Europe after 1600.<sup>8</sup>

Disagreements over the interpretation of these events in the Empire produced the third and probably most influential element in nineteenth-century German writing. The history of the Thirty Years War became enmeshed in the controversy surrounding German development after 1815. Two competing narratives emerged, each associated with one of the possible future Germanies. The 'Greater German' solution envisaged a loose federation that included Habsburg Austria as well as Hohenzollern Prussia and the 'third Germany' of the smaller states like Bavaria, Nassau and Württemberg. The 'Lesser German' alternative excluded Austria, largely because of the complications of incorporating the Habsburgs' other subjects in Italy and the Balkans. The Lesser German solution triumphed with Prussia's victory over Austria in 1866 and was consolidated with the defeat of France in 1870–1, establishing the Second Reich. Both visions for Germany's future had clear religious associations that were transposed onto the dispute over the country's past. The assumption that the Thirty Years War had been a religious conflict seemed so self-evident it was scarcely questioned.

It proved highly significant that the conflict over German statehood coincided with the birth of modern historical scholarship. Leopold von Ranke, the founder of the German

empirical school, chose Wallenstein as the subject of the only full biography among his extensive publications. Ranke and his contemporaries made a real effort to study the surviving archival material, and much of their writing remains of great value. They profoundly influenced how historians in other countries interpreted the war, though each country also fitted the conflict into its own national narrative. French historians generally saw it through the lens of Richelieu and Mazarin, whose policies reputedly laid the foundations for the era of 'French preponderance' over the continent from the mid-seventeenth century to Napoleon. For Spanish writers, the theme was one of national decline as their country appeared to have overreached itself after 1618. The Swiss, Dutch and Portuguese associated the conflict with national independence, in each case from the Habsburg monarchy, while Danes and Swedes placed it in the context of their mutual rivalry over the Baltic. British interpretations remained closest to the German view, partly because the Stuart dynasty was associated with the elector Palatine's fateful decision to support the Bohemian rebels after the Defenestration. Many contemporaries saw this dynastic link in religious terms as the 'Protestant Cause', something that was echoed in the confessionalized writing of nineteenth-century Germans whose works provided the main sources for historians working in Britain.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of a religious war also fitted the broader Protestant narrative behind much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historical writing that viewed events following the Reformation as liberation from the Catholic yoke. The same progressive trajectory could also be presented without a confessional bias as one of secularization and modernization. In one recent account, the war becomes the 'developmental and modernisation crisis' of European civilization; an 'inferno' that produced the modern world.<sup>10</sup>

It is a commonplace in historical writing and political science that the Westphalian settlement initiated the system of sovereign states that came to structure international relations around the globe. Military historians routinely credit key figures like Gustavus Adolphus as the 'fathers' of modern warfare. Politically, the war is believed to have fostered an era of absolute monarchy that dominated much of the continent until the French Revolution. The Europeans exported their quarrels to the Caribbean, Brazil, western Africa, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The silver that paid the soldiers of Catholic Europe was mined in appalling conditions by Mexicans, Peruvians and Bolivians, many thousands of whom can be numbered among the war's victims. African slaves toiled in Brazil for Dutch sugar planters whose profits helped finance their republic's struggle with Spain, along with money from the Baltic grain trade and North Sea fisheries.

Interest in this wider dimension has come to dominate writing in English on the war that presents events in the Empire as part of a wider struggle of France, Sweden and English, Dutch and German Protestants against Spanish-Habsburg hegemony. The war in the Empire was either an adjunct of this larger conflict, or became part of it once Sweden and France intervened in Germany in the 1630s. Though one leading exponent dismisses the older German interpretation as 'parochial', this international war school remains strongly influenced by nineteenth-century historiography, presenting the outbreak as inevitable, and the conduct characterized by escalating violence and religious animosity.<sup>11</sup>



The Thirty Years War was an extremely complex event. The problems of interpretation derive from attempts to simplify it by overemphasizing one facet to the detriment of others. The present book seeks to reconnect the different elements through their common relationship to the imperial constitution. The war in the Empire was related to other conflicts, but nonetheless remained distinct. Observers even outside the Empire believed the struggle that began with the Bohemian Revolt continued until the Peace of Westphalia. They began talking of a five or six years war in the early 1620s and continued counting until its conclusion in 1648.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, all Europe was affected and the course of the continent's history would have been very different had the war been avoided, or had another outcome. Of the major states, only Russia remained uninvolved. Poland and the Ottoman empire exercised a significant influence without engaging directly. The Dutch just managed to keep their own conflict with Spain separate, while trying to shape events in the Empire with limited indirect assistance. British engagement was more substantial, without that state ever becoming a formal belligerent. France and Spain intervened, but kept their participation separate from their own mutual struggle that had separate origins and continued another eleven years beyond 1648. Denmark and Sweden were full belligerents, though their intervention had little to do with the war's origins. Likewise, other neighbouring principalities like Savoy and Lorraine were drawn in, without losing sight of their own agendas and regional squabbles.

The second major distinction of the present argument is that it was not primarily a religious war.<sup>13</sup> Religion certainly provided a powerful focus for identity, but it had to compete with political, social, linguistic, gender and other distinctions. Most contemporary observers spoke of imperial, Bavarian, Swedish, or Bohemian troops, not Catholic or Protestant, which are anachronistic labels used for convenience since the nineteenth century to simplify accounts. The war was religious only to the extent that faith guided all early modern public policy and private behaviour. To understand the conflict's true relationship to the disputes within Christianity, we need to distinguish between militant and moderate believers. All were religious and we should not see moderates as necessarily more rational, reasonable or secular. The difference lay not in their religious zeal, but how they related faith and action. All were convinced their version of Christianity offered the only true path to salvation and the sole correct guide to justice, politics and daily life. Moderates, however, were more pragmatic, regarding the desired reunification of all Christians within a single church as a general, rather distant objective. Militants saw this goal as within their grasp and were not only prepared to use force rather than persuasion but also felt personally summoned by God to do so. They interpreted the Bible in providential, apocalyptic terms, relating current events directly to the text. For them, the conflict was a holy war; a cosmic showdown between good and evil in which the ends justified almost any means.

As we shall see, militants remained the minority, largely experiencing the war as observers or victims of defeat and displacement. Nonetheless, then as now, militancy proves especially dangerous when combined with political power. It creates a delusional sense in those who rule of being chosen by God for a divine purpose and reward. It encourages the conviction that their norms alone are absolute, their form of government is automatically superior to all

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