The Thirty Years War

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The Thirty Years War

The Thirty Years War was a major European conflict that claimed the lives of eight million people and ushered in great change in European states in the form of the “birth of absolutism, of the standing army, and of an international order based on sovereign states.”1 Author Peter Wilson in his article *The Causes of the Thirty Years War 1618-48* writes on the causes of said war while focusing on four areas in particular. The first was whether the war actually lasted 30 years or whether it could be classified as being part of a much larger European conflict. Secondly he attempts to determine if the war was inevitable and if so, could it have at least been contained more than it was. The third was whether the war could be classified as a German war in which other powers joined or if it was truly part of a larger international conflict. Finally he addresses if the causes for the war were primarily religious or if there were a number of secular ulterior factors at play. While the author writes primarily in regards to Germany, much of his article contains analysis of the situations of other European powers at the time and the conflicts aside from the Thirty Years War which they participated in and why those wars occurred.

The author begins by first describing the “standard interpretation”2 of the war and how that has effected views on the conflict. First the Bohemian revolt against the Habsburgs initiated the conflict. The Bohemian rebels were defeated in 1620 shifting the war westward into the next phase where the Palatine got involved. After that the range of the war widened even greater when Spain became an active participant after the expiration of the Spanish-Dutch truce in 1621.
The remaining phases where the Danish, Swedish and French phases which the author did not put much focus on. With each new belligerent added to the fray, Germany lost status from an active participant to more of a victim. The standard interoperation limits the scope of the war to strictly these combatants instead of examining Europe as whole and the larger conflict that was occurring at the time.

The author suggests that the Thirty Years war was simply part of a much bigger struggle occurring in Europe at the time which he dubbed the “anti-Habsburg” struggle which spanned more than three centuries. The Habsburgs gained immense power in Europe especially after the acquisitions of “Spain, the Netherlands and Bohemia between 1477 and 1526.” France was the country to initiate the first phase in 1494 when France invaded Italy in 1494 and ended in 1559 with the Habsburgs regaining dominion over Italy. The second phase was the Dutch Revolt in 1568 and Anglo-Spanish war of 1585-1604. The third phase spanned from 1598 to the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659 and culminates in the replacement of Habsburg Spain by France as the leading European power. The Thirty Years War coincides with the third phase which means the struggles against the Habsburgs weakened them enough for France to weaken the Spanish crown.

He argues that Europe was previously a united Christendom with the mutual threat of the Turks uniting the Europeans against a common enemy but the Protestant Schism destroyed the united Christendom and opened the European continent to increased rates of conflicts between itself. The author writes “sixteenth century rulers saw themselves not as independent sovereigns, but as the leading Estates of a single Christendom.” Religious wars could now be waged on the European continent. Aside from outright religious wars, differences in religion contributed to discontent between countries that eventually escalated into wars. The author uses Sweden as an example, “Sweden intervened in 1630, not to gain economic or political advantage, or to ward
off imminent attack, but because the king and aristocratic counselors sought recognition from their subjects and neighbors as legitimate rulers. Previous animosities that were not present in prior situations were bolstered by religious differences after the Protestant schism.

Aside from the new religious tensions created from the schism of Christianity, the author includes other aspects that contributed to the tensions that existed in 17th century Europe which led to an increased amount of wars. One aspect was “reliance on hereditary dynasticism to provide political stability.” If the current monarch couldn’t produce an heir, then disputes would arise over who would ascend to the throne. The author criticizes this by saying it placed the fate of international relations on something as inconstant as human reproduction. Another aspect was the inability of governments to handle the fiscal-military burdens caused by these new wars. The introduction of monetary and credit systems allowed for long drawn out wars when compared with the past. Lack of autonomy was another aspect which had its roots in religion. The author again draws on the Reformation saying that it created new “standard solution was to enforce confessional unity as the bedrock of political stability.” Whatever the religion of the monarch was, that was the official religion of the state which caused other minority religions to be restricted from enjoying the same privileges as followers of the enforced religion.

After addressing those political issues, the author moved into the economic problems associated with this time period. He states “the Bohemian Revolt stemmed from the radicalization of the lesser nobility, excluded on account of their Protestant faith from opportunities in the Habsburg monarchy at a time when their economic position was in decline.” So the animosity between the Protestants and Habsburgs only reached a climax at this point because of economic difficulties. The economic decline could be a result of inflation which the author stated “slowed in Spain, Italy and France after 1590, but continued in the Empire until
the 1630s." He also makes an interesting point by bringing up the fact that the outbreak of the war coincided with a decline in silver imports from the new world needed for coinage which resulted in hyperinflation during 1620. That led to a decrease in the standard of living and further economic decline. These economic problems contributed to the discontent of the Empire and eventually resulted in the Bohemian Revolt.

The author then moves into examining the religious atmosphere of 17th century Europe in detail. He summarizes by saying “minorities, whether Protestant or Catholic, disputed the right of the ruling majority to decide which doctrine was correct.” This presented Europe with a constant tension between religious factions that could be triggered by a multitude of things as in the example of the Bohemian Revolt. The author constantly highlights the Schism caused by the Protestant Reformation throughout his article. It lead to a series of ‘confessional wars’ which he defined as wars within the now shattered Christendom of Europe. Religious wars were no longer confined to just being against the Muslims, they could now be freely waged throughout Europe.

Next the author analyzes the political situation of the Holy Roman Empire prior to the war and how it contributed to the war itself. It begins with the accession of Rudolph II in 1576 who the author describes as mentally unstable. His interventions in the Donauworth and Julich conflicts seemed erratic in the eyes of the German princes leaving them to question his leadership. The Palatine and many Protestants accused of him of breaching the imperial constitution. The author writes “the Protestant Union of 1608 was an expression of this… the Catholic response was the formation of the League the following year by Duke Maximilian.” The factions for the eventual war were already forming based on constitutional issues within the Empire and were further separated due to religious differences. “war followed because the Revolt became linked to discontent in the empire”
The last section the author chose to compare the Thirty Years War with other wars that coincided with it or those which recently occurred. He points out that Sweden and Denmark were feuding with each other and only became involved in the Thirty Years war when one achieved superiority over the other. “There were long-running tensions along the fault line between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, but no major conflict occurred despite the carnage in Germany and elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{13} The Germans were occupied with the Thirty Years War and the Ottomans were occupied with Persia. It would’ve been a good opportunity for the Ottomans to strike and regain territory lost in previous wars, but both states couldn’t afford to further the conflicts they were involved in. The author also mentions how it Italy could have become involved due to the Northern regions still being part of the empire but didn’t because of the emperor’s reluctance to further spread destruction. He summarizes this section with “while several major wars coincided during the first half of the seventeenth century, they each had their own separate causes that led them to finishing at different times.”\textsuperscript{14}

The information of presented in the article makes several strong and logical points. He goes beyond the standard interpretation for the cause of the war being religious and instead dwells deeper into the concurrent political and economic situations in Europe at the time. Be that as it may, the organization of the information could definitely be sorted more practically. The author doesn’t organize the article in regards to the four subjects in his opening that he claimed he was going to extrapolate on. He instead constantly backtracks and interconnects points throughout the entire paper, causing the reader to constantly search for the previous related information in order to connect the information. The article wasn’t organized any other way either such as chronologically or by country.
There were several times in the article where the author seemed to be contradicting himself. An example would be when he said the conflict was not primarily German because Germany did not exist as it does today. That in itself is a weak argument since although the country we know as Germany does not exist, the area was still inhabited by primarily ethnically German peoples. Anyway, at another point in the article he concludes that the Thirty Years War was indeed primarily German war over religious and political tensions within the Empire and other powers simply temporarily stepped in for their own reasons. Another example would be how he presented an argument against the length of the war being only 30 years by stating contemporaries did not use the phrase “Thirty Years War.” Then immediately after that he claims that most Germans recognized the war as lasting thirty years. Even though they didn’t call it the Thirty Years War it was still agreed it lasted for 30 years.

Also, not a lot of focus was given to the actual war or the German belligerents themselves. The author spends a disproportional amount of time explaining the general trends of 17th century Europe that led to conflict instead of examining those trends within the Thirty Years War itself. Again, it was very informative, but it did not have as much relation to the title topic as it could have. He should have written directly on what he called the “general Crisis of the 17th Century” which he almost did, and named the article “Tensions in 17th Century Europe caused by the Reformation.”

In conclusion, the Thirty Years War was a major European conflict that changed the direction of history. It was the last major war fought based largely on religious religions. Wilson presents an article which thoroughly examined the cause of the war and concluded it was primarily religious. The Protestant Schism was the main cause for conflicts throughout Europe such as the Thirty Years War, The Eighty Years War and the French religious wars of the late
16th century. Though religion was the main cause, a number of economic and political factors also contributed to the commencement of the war at the specific time it began.
End Notes


2. Wilson, 555

3. Wilson, 559

4. Wilson, 565

5. Wilson, 568

6. Wilson, 566

7. Wilson, 567

8. Wilson, 570

9. Wilson, 572

10. Wilson, 576

11. Wilson, 581

12. Wilson, 583

13. Wilson, 585

14. Wilson, 585
Bibliography