

Primary Source 4.7

THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR (1618–1648)¹

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) began as a religious war between Protestants and Catholics in Central Europe. Gradually, however, the Ottoman Empire and France joined the Protestants in order to undermine the power of the Catholic Habsburg Empire. Ultimately, most of Europe became involved. The war resulted in horrific violence and destruction, as the main combatants foraged in the territories environing battlefields, denuding them of food, fuel, and other supplies. The worst damage occurred in the German lands, where up to one-third of the population was annihilated. Peace treaties signed in 1648 ended both the Thirty Years' War and the Dutch Revolt, or the Eighty Years' War, and established a political balance of power which, despite some intermittent warfare, lasted until the French Revolutionary Wars.

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The Protestant princes of Germany formed a military alliance, the Protestant Union, in 1608 in response to Catholic demands for the return of former church lands. The excerpt below, taken from a letter written in 1608 by the elector of Saxony, a Lutheran, to his representative at the Imperial Diet (assembly), reflects the hostilities between Protestants and Catholics in the German lands.

How violently the restless Jesuits and their followers are exerting themselves to undo, by their absurd interpretations and preposterous attacks, the precious and solemnly ratified Religious Peace [of Augsburg]² which was drawn up long years ago for many weighty reasons by his Roman Imperial Majesty and all the estates of the empire, is but too clear. Nay, they would completely abolish it and then do away altogether with our true Christian religion, in which we were born and brought up and in which we would live and die. All this is sufficiently proved by the innumerable, violent, and poisonous books which they issue throughout the Roman Empire, directed against the said Religious Peace and its clear provisions, declaring it to be no more than *ad interim*—a temporary concession of toleration, designed to last only until the conclusion of the Council of Trent; even going so far as to imply that his Imperial Majesty of happy memory had no authority to arrange the peace among the estates of the empire without the consent of the pope. Moreover they stir up harsh persecutions hitherto unheard of in the Holy Roman Empire, all with a view to accomplishing their end, namely, to promote discord among the estates of the Holy Roman Empire, to rouse the several governments against their subjects and *vice versa*, and to check and suppress our true Christian religion and bring it back into the condition and contempt in which it was before the establishment of the religious and secular peace.

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¹ J. H. Robinson, (Ed. and Trans., *Readings in European History*, 2 vols. (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 2:200-201, 202, 203, 205-8, 211, 212, 214-15.

² A peace treaty between Lutheran and Catholic princes of 1555, which officially ended the religious conflict between them and formally recognized the religious divisions within the Holy Roman Empire.

Below is a description of the opening of the Thirty Years' War by an English historian of the time, John Rushworth (c. 1612–1690). When it broke out in 1618, James I of England was deeply interested in negotiating a marriage between his son and heir, Charles, and a Spanish princess.

...

The clouds gather thick in the German sky; jealousies and discontents arise between the Catholics and the Evangelics, or Lutherans, of the Confession of Augsburg. Both parties draw into confederacies and hold assemblies; the one seeking by the advantage of power to encroach and get ground, the other to stand their ground and hold their own. The potency of the house of Austria, a house devoted to the persecution of the reformed religion, became formidable. The old emperor Mathias declared his cousin german,³ the archduke Ferdinand, to be his adopted son and successor, and caused him to be chosen and crowned king of Bohemia and Hungary, yet reserving to himself the sole exercise of kingly power during his life.

The Jesuits triumphed in their hopes of King Ferdinand. The pope exhorted the Catholics to keep a day of jubilee and to implore aid of God for the Church's high occasions. To answer this festival the elector of Saxony called to mind that it was then the hundredth year complete since Martin Luther opposed the papal indulgences, which was the first beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Whereupon he ordained a solemn feast of three days for thanksgiving and for prayer to God to maintain in peace the purity of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. The professors of the universities of Lipsick and Wittemberg, the imperial towns of Franckford, Worms, and Noremburg—yea, the Calvinists also—observed the same days of jubilee against the Romish Church, and much gold and silver was cast abroad in memory of Luther, whom they called blessed. . . .⁴

...

On the 23d of May the chief of the Evangelics went armed into the castle of Prague, entered the council chamber, and opened their grievances; but, enraged by opposition, they threw Slabata, the chief justice, and Smesansius, one of the council, and Fabricius, the secretary, from an high window into the castle ditch;⁵ others of the council, temporizing in this tumult and seeming to accord with their demands, were peacefully conducted to their own houses. Hereupon the assembly took advice to settle the towns and castle of Prague with new guards; likewise to appease the people and take the oath of fidelity. They chose directors, governors, councilors provincial to govern affairs of state, and to consult of raising forces against the enemies of God and the king and the edicts of his Imperial Majesty. They banished the Jesuits throughout all Bohemia.

Here follows a contemporaneous account of the Diet of Electors in 1630 in Regensburg. The leading German princes of the Holy Roman Empire, the electors, sought to weaken the position of the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, even though on 6 July, shortly after the Diet opened, Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden landed in Pomerania. Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583–1634), the supreme commander of the Catholic armies of the Habsburg Monarchy, had

³ A child of one's aunt or uncle.

⁴ Ellipses in original.

⁵ This was the second famous "Defenestration of Prague," the first being during the Hussite Wars in 1419.

until then secured numerous military victories against the opposing Protestant coalition. His harsh administrative style and low birth, along with a few recent military losses, prompted numerous electors to demand his dismissal. Ferdinand complied since he needed the princes' support.

The electors, in a dignified and reasonable address, expressed their firm conviction that the whole blame for the misery, disgrace, and infamy, the cruel and unnecessary military exactions, which were daily increasing, rested with the new duke in Mecklenburg,⁶ who, as commander of the imperial forces, had been invested, without the consent of the estates, with such powers as no one before him had ever exercised. The soldiery, now become unspeakably numerous, served no other purpose than to lay waste the common fatherland. Moreover war has been waged upon those against whom it had never been declared. Contributions which, according to the decrees of the diet, no one had the right to demand without the consent of the assembled estates, were levied at the duke's own will and pleasure and wrung from the people in barbarous ways. It was shown that the electorate of Brandenburg alone in the last few years had furnished hventy million gulden, to say nothing of the terrible disturbances and destruction that war always brings with it. They complained, moreover, most bitterly of the excessive pomp and magnificence maintained by the duke and his officers, in the way of clothing, gold and silver utensils, and costly horses.

...

Worst of all are the vexatious means used in collecting these monthly contributions from our officials and subjects. A new and unheard-of *modus extorquendi* has been invented, such as was never before practiced by honest soldiers quartered in a friendly land; and the exactions are carried out with such rigorous excess under the officers in charge that the miserable victims can scarce keep shirts on their backs. And what insolent excesses and willful interference with church services, despoiling of churches, violation of graves of the dead, infringements of every sort of our sovereignty and authority, disarming of our subjects and curtailing of our revenue as ruler! This last has actually gone so far that it is impossible for us, from all the length and breadth of our land, to maintain a table befitting our princely rank; whereas every captain, out of his own district alone, lives in more than princely style and sends away large sums besides. Toward the poor people they are barbarous and tyrannical beyond words, beating, burning, and plundering, and depriving them of the very necessities of existence, till they are in danger of soul as well as body, for they are driven to such unnatural and inhuman food as buds of trees and grass, and even to the flesh of their own children and of dead bodies.

King Gustavus Adolphus before sailing for Germany bade farewell to the representatives of his people assembled at Stockholm (May, 1630).

I call on the all-powerful God to witness, by whose providence we are here assembled, that it is not by my own wish, or from any love of war, that I undertake this campaign. On the contrary, I have been now for several years goaded into it by the imperial party, not only through the reception accorded to our emissary to Lübeck, but also by the

⁶ That is, Wallenstein. The princes also resented that he had received a high noble title.

action of their general in aiding with his army our enemies, the Poles, to our great detriment. We have been urged, moreover, by our harassed brother-in-law [the elector of Brandenburg] to undertake this war, the chief object of which is to free our oppressed brothers in the faith from the clutches of the pope, which, God helping us, we hope to do.

But even as the pitcher that goes daily to the well must sometime break, so will it be with me; for though, for the welfare of the Swedish kingdom, I have already gone through many dangers and seen much shedding of blood, and have come through it all so far—thanks to God’s gracious protection—without bodily harm, yet the time will come when all is over for me and I must say farewell to life. Therefore I have desired before my departure to see you all, from far and near, subjects and estates of Sweden, gathered about me, that we may together commend ourselves and each other, in body, soul, and estate, to our all-gracious God, in the hope that it may be his will, after this weary and troublous life, to bring us again together in the heavenly and everlasting life that he has prepared for us.

...

Gustavus lingered in northern Germany for some months, until finally the Protestant princes were induced to join him by the fall of Magdeburg in 1631 and the fearful massacre of its inhabitants by the Imperial troops under Field Marshal Gottfried Graf zu Pappenheim (1594–1632) and Johann Tserclaes, Count of Tilly (1559–1632), another leading Imperial commander. This event thus described by a writer of the time,

So then General Pappenheim collected a number of his people on the ramparts by the New Town, and brought them from there into the streets of the city. Von Falckenberg⁷ was shot, and fires were kindled in different quarters; then indeed it was all over with the city, and further resistance was useless. Nevertheless some of the soldiers and citizens did try to make a stand here and there, but the imperial troops kept bringing on more and more forces—cavalry, too—to help them, and finally they got the Krockenthor open and let in the whole imperial army and the forces of the Catholic League—Hungarians, Croats, Poles, Walloons, Italians, Spaniards, French, North and South Germans.

...

Thus it came about that the city and all its inhabitants fell into the hands of the enemy, whose violence and cruelty were due in part to their common hatred of the adherents of the Augsburg Confession, and in part to their being embittered by the chain shot which had been fired at them and by the derision and insults that the Magdeburgers had heaped upon them from the ramparts.

...

In addition to all this, quantities of sumptuous and irreplaceable house furnishings and movable property of all kinds, such as books, manuscripts, paintings, memorials of all sorts, . . .⁸ which money could not buy, were either burned or carried away by the soldiers as booty. The most magnificent garments, hangings, silk stuffs, gold and silver lace, linen of all sorts, and other household goods were bought by the army sutlers⁹ for a mere song and peddled about by the cart load all through the archbishopric of Magdeburg and in Anhalt

⁷ The ambassador of Gustavus Adolphus, who had brought some aid to the beleaguered city.

⁸ Ellipses in original.

⁹ Civilian military suppliers.

and Brunswick. Gold chains and rings, jewels, and every kind of gold and silver utensils were to be bought from the common soldiers for a tenth of their real value. . . .¹⁰

The Peace of Westphalia consisted in numerous peace treaties, which ended the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) between Spain and the Dutch Republic. The treaties fixed political boundaries throughout central and northwestern Europe. They also established several principles: the sanctity of national sovereignty and the nonintervention of foreign powers, the right of rulers to impose their denomination of Christianity on their subjects, and the right of believers to practice in private their denomination if it differed from that of their ruler. As head of the Catholic Church, Pope Innocent X on 26 November 1648 declared null and void all the articles in the treaties of Westphalia relating to religious matters.

Consumed by zeal for the house of the Lord, we are especially concerned with the endeavor everywhere to maintain the integrity of the orthodox faith and the authority of the Catholic Church, so that the ecclesiastical rights of which we have been appointed guardian by our Saviour shall not in any way be impaired by those who seek their own interest rather than God's, and that we may not be accused of negligence when we shall render account to the Sovereign Judge. Accordingly it is not without deep pain that we have learned that by several articles in the peace concluded at Osnabrück, August 6,¹¹ 1648, between our very dear son in Christ, Ferdinand, king of the Romans and emperor elect, his allies and adherents, on the one hand, and the Swedes, with their allies and adherents, on the other, as well as in that peace which was likewise concluded at Munster in Westphalia on the twenty-fourth day of October of this same year 1648, between the same Ferdinand, king of the Romans, etc., and our very dear son in Jesus Christ, Louis, the very Christian king of the French, his allies and adherents, great prejudice has been done to the Catholic religion, the divine service, the Roman apostolic see, the ecclesiastical order, their jurisdictions, authority, immunities, liberties, exemptions, privileges, possessions, and rights; since by various articles in one of these treaties of peace the ecclesiastical possessions which the heretics formerly seized are abandoned to them and to their successors, and the heretics, called those of the Augsburg Confession, are permitted the free exercise of their heresy in various districts. They are promised places in which they may build temples for their worship and are admitted with the Catholics to public offices and positions. . . .¹²

...

[Accordingly]¹³ we assert and declare by these presents that all the said articles in one or both of the said treaties which in any way impair or prejudice in the slightest degree, or that can be said, alleged, understood, or imagined to be able in any way to injure or to have injured the Catholic religion, divine worship, the salvation of souls, the said Roman apostolic see, the inferior churches, the ecclesiastical order or estate, their persons, affairs, possessions, jurisdictions, authorities, immunities, liberties, privileges, prerogatives, and

¹⁰ Ellipses in original.

¹¹ The treaty was in fact concluded on 14 October 1648.

¹² Ellipses in original.

¹³ Square brackets in original.

rights whatsoever—all such provisions have been, and are of right, and shall perpetually be, null and void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, condemned, rejected, frivolous, without force or effect, and no one is to observe them, even when they be ratified by oath. . . .¹⁴

¹⁴ Ellipses in original.