The Thirty Years War

Background

Some background about what was happening in Germany around the time of the 30 years war. In 1415, Jan (pronounced “yawn”) Hus was burned at the stake for heresy. For refusing to believe in a religion he did not agree with. Bohemia a province or state in Germany is where most of this was happening. It was a tough place to be no matter what religion you where. The only thing that these people of different religions agreed on was that they all hated each other.

At this time Germany was not a county, just a geographic location. It was a group of over 300 principalities and each one was ruled by an independent prince. They had sovereignty (a government free from external control). The beginning of the thirty years war would start in Bohemia. By 1600, there were more Protestants than Catholics in Bohemia. The protestant were divided into different denominations or sects. The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 officially recognized two religions in Germany, Catholicism and Lutheranism. But they forgot one and it was beginning to be a big one, Calvinism.

Lots of the princes of the 300 provinces that made up Germany started switching to Calvinism. This is a problem because Calvinism was not recognized in the Peace of Augsburg, so technically this was outside the law.

Emperor Rudolph II issued a Letter of Majesty that said you could be a protestant but not too much. In other words, you could practice the religion if you didn’t cause any problems. And if there is not already a protestant church in your town you’re not allowed to build one.

Ferdinand is going to be the new king of Bohemia and he is very Catholic and very militant.

The Defenestration of Prague

Defenestration is from the Latin of “out the window”. Defenestration is the act of throwing someone out a window, no kidding.

The face that Ferdinand was so catholic freaked the Protestants out. So they sent letters and requested a meeting. On May 23, 1618 some Protestants meet with two catholic officials in Prague. The meeting did not go well. The Protestants were pissed so they threw both officials out the window. And just to make their point they threw the secretary out too. The guys threw out the window lived.
Why depends on your religious views. If you were a catholic it’s because they cried out to God for help and God caught them and set them down gently on the ground. If you were protestant those guys were just lucky because they landed in a dung heap and it broke their fall. This event is largely considered to be the spark that ignited the thirty years war. This has got to be one of the strangest events in European history.

The Four Phases

- The Bohemian Phase
- The Danish Phase
- The Swedish Phase
- The French Phase

The Bohemian Phase (1618 – 1625)

Right after the defenestration of Prague the fighting begins between the Catholics and Protestants. The Protestants were mostly Czechs which makes sense since most of them were in Prague. They rose up and forced Ferdinand to leave office. To replace Ferdinand the chose Frederick V. Ferdinand was the Holy Roman Emperor and used money from the Catholic League and the Spanish Hapsburgs to build an army. The catholic league was a group of catholic princes who pooled their money and armies to oppose the spread of Protestantism in Germany. The Hapsburgs were one of the most influential ruling families in all of European history. They ruled Austria. At this point they had control over the Holy Roman Empire. They also had rulers on the throne in Spain.

The Hapsburgs will be a major player in the thirty years war. Ferdinand with his huge army begins the war. Things start off well for the Protestants until the battle of White Mountain, where the Protestants are crushed. Things looked bad for the Protestants after this. After White Mountain the Jesuits (Catholic Church members) went about trying to convert those Protestants that didn’t want to fight. The catholic forces took care of the Protestants on the battle field while the Jesuits worked away on the Protestants that were not on the battlefield.

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The thirty years war was the first great conflict in which the printing press had free rein, and events both major and minor are widely reported in contemporary newspapers, pamphlets and broadsheets, often providing graphic depictions in which sensationalism and propaganda are barely distinguishable..." (Mortimer, 3)

However, this tactic did not have the intended effect. The crushing defeat actually inspired the Protestants. As the war continued mercenaries flooded in to get in on all this fighting. As Machiavelli said in The Prince, don’t trust mercenaries. Their loyalty lies in how much they are paid not in who wins. If these mercenaries knew that the problems they would have getting paid they may not have bothered. For every year that they fought they might get paid for only 3 of those 12 months. In 1633 the Swedish army actually went on strike for 3 months, refusing the engage the enemy until they were paid.

All the soldiers regardless of what side of the battle they were on had a hard time keeping shoes on their feet and food in the stomachs. The compensated by looting, but also sometimes whipped or even shot for stealing by officers. The officers had it no better than they though.

Albrecht von Wallenstein was born a Czech protestant, but was also a mercenary and offered his services and his 125,000 soldiers to the Emperor (the Catholics). The emperor accepted. Wallenstein was ruthless and blood thirsty. All in all a very bad guy. He and his army raped, pillaged, burned and plundered each village and town. This was bad for everyone. The way that Wallenstein fought made the emperor look bad. Of course it was bad for the Protestants, because they were being wiped out by one of their own. It was bad for Germany because the place was being devastated. It was clear to everyone that the Emperor had lost control of Wallenstein.

During the fighting in Bohemia the Spanish Hapsburgs attacked the holdings of Frederick along the Rhine River. Frederick had his hands full fighting the emperor and was unable to win back his land along the Rhine.

Danish Phase (1625 – 1630)

The Hapsburgs enemies were horrified at what Wallenstein was doing. King Christian IV of Denmark enters the war on the side of the Protestants. Christian’s goal was to turn the tide of the war and help the Protestants win, but Wallenstein and his men where too much for him.

The emperor issued the Edict of Restitution in 1629. The Edict outlawed all forms of religion, but Catholicism and Lutheranism. Reaffirming the Peace of Augsburg. But it was different from the Peace of Augsburg in the
fact that all of the Lutheran princes who had taken Catholic land during the reformation had to give it back.

By 1630 the Hapsburg family were at the zenith of their power. The war was going the way they wanted it to. They seemed well on their way to controlling Germany. They had Spain under control with the Hapsburgs they had there. Wallenstein was now scaring everyone. He was getting too powerful. The emperor started feeling a lot of pressure of reign in Wallenstein. So, the emperor gives into the pressure and pulls Wallenstein back. In doing so he puts an end to the atrocities that Wallenstein was committing.

The Swedish Phase (1630 – 1635)

Another protestant enters the ring. This time king Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden enters with a 100,000 man army. Adolphus wanted the Protestants to win, but he also wanted some more land (alternative motives). The French, who were Catholics, subsidized the Swedish army. The catholic French are now supporting a protestant army. They wanted to undermine the Hapsburgs. Adolphus was having some success so the emperor was forced to bring back Wallenstein. Adolphus was injured in battle and shortly thereafter died in 1632. Without Adolphus things looked bad and by 1634 the Swedes were pretty much defeated.

The French Phase (1635 – 1648)

Wallenstein was pissed at the Emperor for his earlier dismissal and decided to turn on the emperor and create his own empire. Again, Machiavelli called it. Don’t trust mercenaries. The emperor finally gets it and figures out that Wallenstein’s troops can be bought. So that’s what he does and he has the troops murder Wallenstein.

At this point it looked like the emperor was going to win so some of the protestant princes joined the emperor. France was getting even more nervous now. They found themselves right between Hapsburg controlled Spain and Hapsburg controlled Germany. France goes for it and enters completely into the war, no longer just subsidizing other armies.

King Christian of Denmark was really the only person who had a standing army. He was viewed as an innovator for this. It wasn’t that large but it was a paid professional army as we think of them today. These guys were real soldiers for a living instead of farmers with no formal training, like most other armies.

The armies involved in the struggles of the 30 years war were so evenly matched that the fighting would go on and on until 1643. Everyone was exhausted at this point. So the fighting kind of petered out. There were some small skirmishes here and there after this but for the most part it was over. Finally in 1648 everybody meets at the bargaining table and starts to sign treaties. This meeting was known as the Peace of Westphalia. It is one of the most significant documents in all of European history. Because if ended the 30 years war. It is actually a number of treaties. The peace recognized the sovereignty (government free from external control) of over 300 German princes. The peace also excluded the pope. He had nothing to do with the settlement. It made him almost irrelevant. The peace said the pope would not be able to meddle in the religious affairs of the provinces. The peace upheld the Peace of Augsburg with the addition of Calvinism. The peace also nullified the Edict of Restitution.

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Results of 30 Years War

The German princes could choose their own religion, as long as it was one of the big three. The northern principalities remained primarily protestant while the southern principalities remained mainly Catholic. It is still that way today. The United Provinces and Switzerland both won recognition as independent states. Today we know the United Provinces as the Netherlands. This is where the Netherlands won their independence from Spain. German princes won the right to form alliances and sign treaties as long as they didn’t declare war against the Holy Roman Empire. How the Holy Roman Empire was going to enforce this is beyond me. Sweden won a lot of money and became the dominate power in the Baltic with more land there. France won the region of Alsace (pronounced “all sauce”).

Political Fallout

Spain loses territory and France gained it. France is now the most powerful nation on the continent. France also benefited from the weakening of the Holy Roman Empire and the Hapsburg family influence. The Political power of the Holy Roman Empire pretty much dies here. The Hapsburg family stays strong because remember the war didn’t cause them anything. It was the Spanish Hapsburgs and the catholic league that paid for it. The Hapsburgs would go on to rule the Austro-Hungarian Empire later.

Aftermath in Germany

German homes, businesses and farms were destroyed during the thirty years of the war. Lots of it by Wallenstein. German population was reduced by a third by some estimates. That’s 4 or 5 million over the course of the war. Many from battle but also some from diseases and starvation. For those that survived the war there were huge food shortages. With the food shortages came increased prices for the rare food which caused a terrible inflation. There was also a large influx of money into Spain from the new world. This impacted all of Europe, devaluing money for the whole region. All this happened at the same time. Trade routes pretty much were gone. No one wanted to travel a trade route that went right through a war, and that lasted for 30 years, no one on trade routes for 30 years! After the war there was nothing to trade for, Wallenstein had destroyed everything and there was a food shortage and high prices. Why would you go to Germany to trade? The one single small good thing was that some cities actually grew in population; this was because of war refuges coming to the safer walled or otherwise protected cities.

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Further Reading

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