Thirty Years' War (Overview)

The Thirty Years' War, which raged from 1618 until 1648, embroiled most of Europe in a conflict that dramatically changed not only the map but also the balance of European power. By the end of the war much of Germany was in ruins, the Habsburgs were no longer masters of the continent, and the wars of religion which had ravaged Europe since the early 16th century were finally over. The immediate cause of the conflict was a crisis within the Habsburg family's Bohemian branch, but the war also owed much to the religious and political crises caused by the Reformation and the competition between monarchs, particularly the Habsburgs of the Holy Roman Empire, various German princes, and the monarchs of Sweden and France.

Underlying Causes

One of the most significant issues that led to the Thirty Years' War was the Protestant Reformation. That movement was both religiously divisive and politically destabilizing. It is difficult to separate religion and politics, for at the time they were intertwined. What began as an attempt to correct abuses within the Catholic Church eventually led to a number of violent conflicts within that institution as well as between nations. For example, among the various German principalities, many vied against their overlord, the Catholic Holy Roman emperor, for control over religion. In September 1555, the contending parties met and concluded an agreement, the Peace of Augsburg. An important aspect of the peace was the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (Latin for "whose district, his religion"), which granted each state's ruler religious freedom within his state. States that were Protestant would remain so, while states that were Catholic would likewise remain Catholic. Though that peace did much to reduce the warfare that had plagued Germany for nearly 50 years, it sanctioned freedom of religion only for Catholics and Lutheran Protestants—any prince favoring such other Protestant sects as Calvinism did not enjoy similar freedom.

An important outcome of the Peace of Augsburg, and a major factor in the crisis that became the Thirty Years' War, was the formation of the Protestant Union in 1608. The product of six Calvinist princes, that alliance promised mutual aid against Catholic interests. For example, in 1610, members of the Protestant Union were able to ensure that the successor to the German state Cleves-Julich was a Protestant, a feat partly

accomplished through a willingness to resort to arms. Worry over the growing power of Protestants inspired Catholic princes likewise to band together. Maximilian, the duke of Bavaria, encouraged his neighbors to join together, and in 1609, they formed the Catholic League, which grew as trouble in the Rhineland increased. Those associations, which had yet to be called into full effect, took on new importance when trouble erupted in Bohemia.

Politically, the instability of the Holy Roman Empire also contributed to the conflict. It was difficult for the emperor to rule a disparate population, especially one free to make its own alliances. Protestants, especially Prince Christian of Anhalt-Bernburg, a leading member of the Protestant Union, looked not only to other German rulers but also to Protestants in other lands. Anhalt-Bernburg viewed the Habsburgs, the family that had long supplied the Holy Roman emperor, as the primary hindrance to progress, and so he encouraged others to revolt in addition to courting outside support. In 1618, one state, Bohemia, did attempt to throw off the Habsburg yoke.

Immediate Cause: the Defenestration of Prague

While there were underlying issues which set the stage for the Thirty Years' War, the immediate cause was the expulsion of two Catholic officials by Protestants from a window in Bohemia's capital, Prague. That event, known as the Defenestration of Prague, was the result of a meeting between Bohemian Protestants upset over Catholic oppression. Nine years earlier, in 1609, Holy Roman emperor Rudolf II had granted religious freedom in Bohemia in an attempt to curb rising tensions between different sects. Seven years later, however, the Catholic archbishop closed several Protestant churches, an act that enraged his opposition and went against the agreement of 1609. The meeting in May 1618 led to the conviction of two imperial agents, both of whom were tossed from a window in Hradcany Castle, the site of the assembly.

While Protestants all over Europe viewed the event as a blow against their enemies, Catholics were angered by the mistreatment of the emperor's men. Reaction in Bohemia was swift—Protestants openly rebelled and invited Frederick V, the elector palatine, to reign as king of Bohemia, a move encouraged by Frederick's advisers, among them Christian of Anhalt-Bernburg. Ferdinand II, who was king of Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary and would soon be the new Holy Roman emperor, naturally objected to the usurper.

Phases of the War

Once war broke out, it spread due to rivalries between the emperor's opponents as well as those between foreign powers interested in expansion, such as King Louis XIII of France and Gabriel Bethlen, the prince of Transylvania. At the same time that Ferdinand found Bohemia in revolt, Bethlen invaded Habsburg lands in Hungary and thus placed Ferdinand in a delicate position. Lacking an army of his own, Ferdinand relied upon such Habsburg relatives as Philip III of Spain to help him against the rebels. Philip's troops marched into Frederick's domain, while the Catholic League's army under the command of Johann Tserclaes von Tilly destroyed the Bohemian rebels at the Battle of White Mountain. Meanwhile, Sigismund III of Poland pushed Bethlen out of Hungary. Early successes and the rise of Ferdinand's own army under the Bohemian general Albrecht von Wallenstein, however, threatened even Catholic princes within Germany. Ferdinand was pressured into recalling Wallenstein, but the invasion of Pomerania by Gustav II Adolf of Sweden forced him to reinstate Wallenstein.

The Thirty Years' War is typically broken into phases: the Bohemian, Palatinate, Danish, Swedish, and Franco-Swedish periods. Each of those phases reflect the entry or impact of a particular state. The network of alliances, however, was more complicated than those categories suggest; France, for example, had been supporting Sweden before its own entry into the conflict in 1635.

The Peace of Westphalia

With the Peace of Westphalia, signed in 1648, the Thirty Years' War came to an end. There were several outcomes of the war that forever changed Europe. First, the Peace of Westphalia brought to a close the wars of religion that had followed in the wake of the Reformation. Second, because Germany had served as the principal battleground of the war, it was devastated and even depopulated throughout much of its territory. That widespread destruction affected Germany in a number of ways, but perhaps most significantly, it further fragmented an already politically divided region. While other countries worked toward greater unification, the German states remained independent—they would not be united until some 200 years after the Thirty Years' War. Third, the Habsburg dynasty, while it survived, no longer ruled as vast or powerful a territory as it had previously. New states, such as the Dutch Republic, and those that had weathered the war far more successfully, like France, came into new prominence. Exhausted by war and with agriculture, industry, and towns in ruins, most Europeans were disgusted with the cost of religious factionalism and began to embrace a new era of religious toleration.