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## The Thirty-Years-War

Europe had expected that the struggle between Catholic and Protestant would be renewed in 1621, when the truce between Spain and the northern provinces of the Netherlands came to an end. But it began in the Empire several years earlier and gradually most of Europe became involved. Since Charles V, backed by the power of Spain, had been unable either to strengthen his authority at the expense of the territorial princes or to wipe out Protestantism, it was natural that his immediate successors preferred to leave the constitutional and religious issues alone. Ferdinand I (1556–1564) and Maximilian II (1564–1576) devoted most of their energy to fighting the Turks, while Rudolf II (1576–1612) preferred to dabble in astrology and to search for the philosopher's stone to turn base metals into gold. During their reigns, however, the Catholic revival was gathering momentum, and it remained only for Ferdinand II (1619–1637) to put the new Catholic fervor into action.

### I. FERDINAND II

The red-haired, red-faced, good-natured Ferdinand was not a great man, but he possessed more virtues than most kings. He was both a devoted husband and father and a conscientious ruler interested in the welfare of his people. It was said with exaggeration no doubt that when he was Duke of Styria, he knew the names of all his subjects and that he provided free legal service for the poorest of their number. Above all else, however, he was a Habsburg: he was dedicated to the twofold task of re-storing the authority of the emperor in the Empire and of re-establishing Catholicism in central Europe.

In his desire to restore the authority of the emperor, he could count on the support of Spain. Spain was only awaiting the end of a twelve-year truce made in 1609 to renew its efforts to reconquer the rebellious provinces in the Netherlands. Because of Dutch naval strength, the Spanish would have to send their troops to the Netherlands by way of Italy, the Alpine passes, and the Rhine River Valley. A strong emperor meant greater imperial authority in the Rhineland and with it more ease in moving troops. Indeed, Ferdinand had already promised Alsace to his Spanish cousins in return for supporting his candidacy to the imperial throne, and he was to promise more in return for military assistance.

Ferdinand could rely on the forces of the Catholic Reformation in his efforts to roll back the tide of Protestantism. The Catholic revival had already recouped a few losses in southern Germany, and Ferdinand himself had stamped out Protestantism in his duchies. Unfortunately, his allies were at cross purposes. The Spanish emphasized the need to increase imperial authority because it was essential to their reconquest of the Netherlands, but the German Catholic princes were only willing to help Ferdinand against the Protestants and strongly opposed any increase in imperial power that might curb their own independence.

More serious still was the interest of foreign powers in Germany. Would France permit Spain to take Alsace, the rest of the Rhineland, and the Netherlands, thereby drawing a tight net around its borders? Would Denmark and Sweden sit quietly by while the Habsburgs extended their power to the Baltic Sea and suppressed their fellow Lutherans? Or would they intervene to maintain their security and, perhaps, to add to their lands in northern Germany? Germany was in central Europe, and the

German problem could not be settled without the intervention of surrounding states. It was not enough for Ferdinand to win the allies necessary to defeat the German Protestant princes. He ought to have been less ambitious or else prepared to fight both France and the leading Protestant states. It was not, however, left to him to decide to break the peace. The first step was taken by his rebellious subjects in Bohemia. Gradually and inevitably, the struggle spread to the rest of Germany and then to Europe.

The majority of the inhabitants of Bohemia were Lutheran, Calvinist, or members of one of the Hussite sects, although the Catholic minority supported by the Habsburgs was growing in strength. In addition, the Bohemian nobles were opposed to the encroachment by Habsburg officials on their power. This dissatisfaction with the religious and political policies of the Habsburgs, taken with the certainty that Ferdinand would push them further when he came to power, led to the revolt. On May 23, 1618, a year before Ferdinand was named emperor, the Bohemian leaders unceremoniously threw two imperial officials out of a window in the palace at Prague. They fell seventy feet, but escaped with their lives, either because of the intercession of the Virgin Mary, as Catholic propagandists confidently asserted, or because they landed in a dung hill, as Protestants claimed. In any case, civil war was now inevitable and a European conflict almost certain.

The rebels quickly seized control of Bohemia, won assistance from Transylvania, elected as king the Calvinist Elector Frederick of the Palatinate, and marched on Vienna. Ferdinand had neither money nor troops, but he had to regain Bohemia. That wealthy country furnished half the imperial revenue, and its king held one of the seven electoral votes that determined who would be emperor. Since three votes already belonged to Protestant princes, the loss of Bohemia might mean the choice of a Protestant instead of a Catholic Habsburg in an imperial election.

Ferdinand turned to Maximilian (1597–1651) of Bavaria and Spain for assistance. Maximilian was an able prince who had consolidated his hold over his duchy and had organized a Catholic League. Furthermore, he had the rare good fortune to have an army under an able, loyal commander. To him, Ferdinand promised the upper Palatinate and Frederick's title of elector. To Spain, he offered the control of Frederick's Rhineland possessions. With these allies, Ferdinand quickly reconquered Bohemia. Catholicism and imperial authority were ruthlessly restored. The once elective monarchy was made an hereditary Habsburg dominion. By 1623, Ferdinand and his Catholic allies had also occupied Frederick's hereditary lands. Southern Germany was theirs, but the Protestant princes in northern Germany had become alarmed, and foreign powers determined to intervene before the Habsburgs could consolidate their position. France took steps to cut the Spanish supply route through the Alps, and the Danes, financed in part by the English, the Dutch, and the French, marched into Germany with 30,000 men.

## II. WALLENSTEIN

However, Ferdinand had come to realize that he could not achieve his objectives if he had to depend solely on allies. He therefore accepted the offer of a Bohemian nobleman named Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583–1634) to raise an imperial army. Born a Lutheran, Wallenstein had become a Catholic to qualify for imperial favor. Certainly religion was not the motivating force in this tall, thin, forbidding man. It was to the stars that he turned for guidance when he doubted the conclusions reached by his own brilliant but undisciplined mind. He was born under the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. The great astronomer Kepler informed him when he cast his horoscope that he had "a restless, exacting mind, impatient of old methods and forever striving for the new and the untried, secretive, melancholy, suspicious, contemptuous of his fellow men and their conventions. He would be avaricious, deceitful, greedy for power, loving no one and by no one beloved, changeable in his humours, quarrelsome, friendless and cruel." Seldom have the stars spoken more truly.

The first step the wily Wallenstein took toward greatness was to marry a wealthy widow who conveniently died soon thereafter, leaving him her estates and the freedom to espouse the daughter of one of Ferdinand's councillors. To wealth and influence he added a businessman's instinct for organization and profit. He managed his estates so well that he came to control a quarter of the land in Bohemia and was able to offer to raise, quarter, and provision 50,000 men at his own expense, leaving to Ferdinand only the responsibility of their pay. The emperor recognized the danger of giving too much power to this powerful subject but the alternative was continued dependence on the Spanish and Bavarians. He therefore accepted Wallenstein's offer and was rewarded with quick victories by the Bavarian and imperial forces over the Danes. Much of northern Germany was occupied, and the ascendant Wallenstein was given Mecklenburg as a reward for his services, the former ruler of this Baltic duchy having made the mistake of siding with the Danes. Internal developments caused France and England to withdraw, and by the end of 1626 it looked as though the war might come to an end.

The fate of Germany rested upon Ferdinand's next step. He could accept Wallenstein's advice and use his great power to create a more centralized Germany, or he could satisfy the Catholic Reformation's demand for the restoration of the Church lands seized by the Protestants since the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. To choose the former course would alienate Maximilian and other Catholic princes who were opposed to any increase in imperial power. To choose the latter would frighten the remaining Protestant princes, some of whom had thus far been neutral. Ferdinand lacked the strength to take both courses simultaneously. He hesitated but finally chose Catholicism and political disunity. By the Edict of Restitution in 1629, he ordered the restoration of the former ecclesiastical territories to the Catholics, and to placate Maximilian, he dismissed Wallenstein. By placing his reliance on Maximilian and the Catholic League, Ferdinand had condemned Germany to more than two centuries of political disunity.

### III. THE SWEDISH INTERVENTION

The folly of his choice was soon revealed. On July 4, 1630, Gustavus Adolphus (1611–1632) landed in Germany with a well-trained, well-disciplined army. The Swedish king was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a big appetite but simple tastes. From childhood he had been trained to be a king. When he was six, he began to accompany the army on campaigns; when he was ten, he began to sit at the council table and give his opinions; and when he was in his teens, he received ambassadors unaided. Now thirty-six, Gustavus had already given evidence of being one of the greatest men of his age. In his nineteen years as king, he had proved himself to be as able an administrator as Maximilian of Bavaria and as careful a military organizer as Wallenstein. He was now about to show that he was a gifted diplomat, a devout Protestant, and at the same time one of the greatest field commanders of his age.

His tactics deserve special comment. He abandoned the current emphasis on mass battle formations in order to achieve greater mobility and firepower. Cavalry and infantry were deployed in a series of alternating small squares so that they could turn easily in any direction. Light artillery was substituted for heavy artillery because it could be advanced rapidly, fired from the front lines in battle, and withdraw quickly if necessary. Musketeers were organized in files five deep. The first file was taught to fire and step back to reload. Then the second file fired and stepped back to reload, and then the third and the fourth and the fifth, by which time the first file was ready to fire again. Thus, continuous fire emerged from the Swedish lines.

The one important advantage that Gustavus Adolphus lacked was money, for Sweden was a poor country. When the French offered financial assistance, he therefore accepted but was careful never to let French wishes interfere with his policy. During his brief, glorious career in Germany, he was clearly his own master.

Many considerations led Gustavus Adolphus to enter the war. First, he dared not permit the Habsburgs to consolidate their hold on the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. Sooner or later, they were sure to use the ports of this area as a jumping off place to attack Sweden. Their ally, the Catholic Sigismund of Poland, had a good claim to the Swedish throne. All he needed was imperial assistance to seek to depose Gustavus Adolphus and re-establish Catholicism in the northern kingdom. But if Sweden seized the southern shores of the Baltic, no invasion was possible. "It is better," the Swedish estates declared when they learned of the situation, "that we tether our horses to the enemy's fence, than he to ours." Second, the Swedes had long desired to turn the Baltic into a Swedish lake, and northern Germany would have to become theirs to make this dream a reality. Already a large part of the royal revenue came from Baltic commerce. Third, Gustavus Adolphus, a sincere Lutheran, was genuinely distressed to see the plight of his coreligionists in Germany.

The Swedish invasion completely altered the situation in the Empire. After a great victory in the battle of Breitenfeld, Gustavus Adolphus was free to march where he pleased. Ferdinand had no choice but to recall Wallenstein. The two generals fought an indecisive battle at Nuremberg, and Gustavus Adolphus withdrew to the north. Once more they clashed at Lützen, and this time the Swedes were victorious, but at the cost of their king's life.

The death of Gustavus Adolphus gave the Catholics new hope, but the rivalry between Maximilian and Wallenstein weakened their cause. The Bohemian, who had never forgiven Maximilian and Ferdinand for his first dismissal, plotted with the Swedes and French. Some think that he wanted to create a great middle European empire in which Catholic and Protestant could live in peace. Others see him as a Czech patriot who sought to re-vive the Bohemian state with himself as king. More probably he was motivated only by his selfish, restless ambition. Whatever Wallenstein's plans, Ferdinand knew that he could not be trusted. He was declared guilty of treason and was murdered, defenseless in his bedroom, by a disloyal contingent of his own troops.

Ferdinand was freed from one peril, and in September, 1634, six months later, he was relieved of another. The imperial forces defeated the Swedes at Nördlingen. The northern kingdom was no longer a serious threat, and one by one the German Protestant princes made peace in return for the abandonment of the Edict of Restitution. Ferdinand kept the gains he had made before 1627, and he now had the united support of the German princes. Their support was an important asset, because nine days before the terms of the peace were published, France had declared war in order to check the power of Spain.

#### **IV. THE FRENCH INTERVENTION AND THE TREATY OF WESTPHALIA**

The conflict entered a new phase. Spain, Austria, and the other German states were pitted against the French, the Dutch, and what was left of the Swedes. Religion had become a secondary issue, and the old struggle between the Habsburgs and the French, now ruled by the Bourbons rather than the Valois, held the center of the stage. There were no decisive battles, with the possible exception of Rocroi in 1643 where the young Duke of Enghien—later Prince of Conde—won a victory over the Spanish.

Peace negotiations were begun in 1643, but they proceeded slowly. Not until 1648 was the Treaty of Westphalia signed by most of the conflicting powers, France and Spain alone continuing the struggle. Finally, with the Treaty of Pyrenees in 1659, even this conflict was brought to an end. The Habsburgs had lost the first round of their struggle with the Bourbons.

The results of the war and the two peace treaties were highly significant. France replaced Spain as the greatest power in Europe. With Sweden, France had blocked the Habsburg efforts to strengthen their

authority in the Empire. At Westphalia, the right of the individual states within the Empire to make war and conclude alliances was recognized. In theory as well as in fact, the most important of these states became virtually autonomous, and German unity was postponed for more than two centuries. The Empire was further dismembered by the recognition of the independence of Switzerland and the seven northern provinces of the Netherlands. Two new powers emerged in northern Germany. Sweden received part of Pomerania and the bishoprics of Bremen and Verden; Brandenburg-Prussia added the rest of Pomerania and several secularized bishoprics to its possessions. In southern Germany, the Bavarian rulers were permitted to keep the upper Palatinate and the title of elector, but the Lower Palatinate was restored to Frederick's son and an eighth electorate was created for him. France received most of Alsace by the Treaty of Westphalia, and by the Treaty of Pyrenees parts of Flanders and Artois in the Spanish Netherlands and lands in the Pyrenees.

The religious settlement at Westphalia confirmed the predominance of Catholicism in southern Germany and of Protestantism in northern Germany. The principle accepted by the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 that Catholic and Lutheran princes could determine the religion practiced in their territory was maintained, and this privilege was extended to include the Calvinists as well.

The Austrian Habsburgs had failed in their efforts to increase their authority in the Empire and to eradicate Protestantism, but they emerged from the war stronger than before. In Bohemia, they had stamped out Protestantism, broken the power of the old nobility, and declared the crown hereditary in the male line of their family. With Bohemia now firmly in their grasp and with their large group of adjoining territories, they were ready to expand to the east in the Balkans, to the south in Italy, or to interfere once more in the Empire.

The real losers in the war were the German people. Over 300,000 had been killed in battle. Millions of civilians had died of malnutrition and disease, and wandering, undisciplined troops had robbed, burned, and looted almost at will. Most authorities believe that the population of the Empire dropped from about 21,000,000 to 13,500,000 between 1618 and 1648. Even if they exaggerate, the Thirty Years War remains one of the most terrible in history.

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