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# The Thirty Years War(s)

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# The Thirty Years War(s)

Logan Kilsdonk

Honors Project

IHRTLUHC

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## Introduction

As it devastated Germany, the Thirty Years War involved nearly every major power in Europe at some point between 1618-1648. If one stands at the end of events and looks backwards, it doesn't seem to make much sense. A revolt in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) spiraled out of control and brought the Holy Roman Emperor into conflict with Denmark, Sweden, and France (to name just the biggest powers involved), a conflict which had a profound impact on European history. The most confounding part of this whole train of events is that the local revolt in Bohemia wasn't of any deep, international significance. The Bohemians didn't have far-flung allies rushing to their aid and they didn't hang on throughout the entire conflict. They were thoroughly defeated less than five years after it began. So what happened?

Before answering this question directly, it would be worthwhile to lay out a clear definition of what I mean when I discuss a war. This definition will be centrally important because, as I'll argue, the term "Thirty Years War" is a conceptual device for understanding the highly complex events of the period in question which fundamentally obscures reality by misdirecting our attention. It is a focusing mechanism to bring together a series of conflicts which, though intimately related, are distinct enough that they should be understood that way. Understanding the distinctions between the conflicts occurring is key to understanding the period as a whole.

With that said, what makes a war a war? I am not, to be clear, dealing with legal definitions. Rather, I'm considering what kind of concept the word conjures up for those who hear it, because this is fundamentally an argument about how the way the story is told affects our understanding of it. If you call something a war, it implies a certain unity and polarity to the conflict. Consider, for example, World War I. It has a beginning similarly ridiculous to the event which is supposed to begin the Thirty Years War in the assassination of the Austrian Archduke.

There is no particularly compelling reason that that event should lead to a global conflict on its own, because in reality it didn't. World War I didn't start because all of Europe took sides on whether it was right for Serb nationalists to have killed the Archduke or not. Countries didn't even take sides; they were already on them (with the exception of Italy). The assassination and Austria's subsequent war on Serbia triggered a series of alliances and military strategies that brought all the major powers into the war within a month (setting Italy aside as more of a secondary power). From the beginning of the war to the end, the only major power to join the fighting was the United States, which joined for clearly defined reasons and united its cause to that of their new allies.

Despite the fact that the war was unnecessary and the assassination is in no way a satisfactory or sufficient explanation for the war it caused, World War I has a unity and a polarity which makes it easily definable as a war: there were two sides fighting for the duration with minor changes and those sides united their war aims. The series of events given the moniker of the "Thirty Years War" has no such unity and polarity. If you accept the Thirty Years War, you have to accept that Saxony (an Imperial state which will be discussed more below) switched sides twice. You have to accept that Denmark and Sweden were on the same side of the conflict despite the fact that they fought a war against each other *during the larger conflict*.<sup>1</sup> You have to accept that Denmark, a participant, was also the neutral mediator of the final peace. The only sense in which there is unity in this war is that the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire found himself repeatedly under attack by a series of states who occasionally worked together and occasionally fought amongst themselves as well. There are no clearly defined sides, no polarity. If you accept the Thirty

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<sup>1</sup> I will not be dealing with this episode in this paper, because the story of how it came about and developed is not directly relevant to the larger point being made; its only relevance is that it happened. For more information about it, see Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 685-691.

Years War as a coherent whole, there is only an endless string of ‘interventions’ which have nothing to do with the war the intervening power is supposedly joining.

To be very clear, then, about what I mean by war, war is an armed conflict in pursuit of a defined set of goals. These goals can shift during the course of the war. Allied powers are only fighting the same war to the extent that their goals overlap. One war may become many, and many wars may become one if goals shift. Understood this way, every war has one set of goals only; Denmark’s war with the Emperor had a different set of goals than Sweden’s, and is therefore a different war. The same logic applied across the conflict would break it up into four wars:<sup>2</sup> Bohemia’s war with the Emperor (1618-1624), followed by Denmark’s (1625-1629), then Sweden’s (1630-1648), and finally France’s (1635-1648). Their goals occasionally overlapped, but they all had particular goals different from the others, and they were all ready to stop fighting if their particular goals were achieved. They did not merge their war goals as did the allies of World War I; the language of treaties notwithstanding, there was no real belief that any group of allies was in it together until the end.

To be fair to historians, there is a case for the Thirty Years War’s relevance to German historiography, and there is also evidence that contemporaries understood what they were living through as a “Thirty Years War.”<sup>3</sup> The majority of the participants were German princes, as nearly every prince in Germany took a side, and the conflict has therefore been called a German Civil War. This depiction is misleading, however, as I will discuss shortly. What really tied all these

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<sup>2</sup> Applying this standard to every power in the conflict would produce a myriad of wars, so I am only dealing with the four major ones. Many German princes had their own agendas and therefore could be considered to have been waging under their own separate wars under this analysis. I don’t consider this a problem, but a feature. It assists our understanding of the time by complicating what has generally been simplified. Nonetheless, such granular detail is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 8-11; Geoffrey Mortimer, “Did Contemporaries Recognize a ‘Thirty Years’ War?” *The English Historical Review* 116, no. 465 (2001): 124-136.

conflicts together in historical and contemporary understanding is not the presence of German princes on both sides, but is rather the fact that these wars had a common target: The Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. I'll also discuss the Holy Roman Empire in more detail shortly, but geographically it can be broadly described as Germany (extending well into today's Poland) plus Austria and the Czech Republic. With the Emperor continually being the target of wars, the fighting was almost exclusively confined to German territory, causing nearly every prince in Germany to take a side: they either armed and joined one side or were occupied and exploited by one. And if there was going to be widespread war which might devastate their lands regardless, why not try to get something out of it by joining what you hoped would be the winning side? This set of facts makes it easy to see why German historians have the best reason for writing about a "Thirty Years War": wars were waged on German soil by Germans for thirty continuous years.

Most historians accept the thesis of a Thirty Years War and try to explain its course. Many of them have done excellent work in this, especially C.V. Wedgwood and Geoffrey Parker. Both attempted to explain the war through the prism of Habsburg dominance of Europe, though Wedgwood puts far more emphasis on religion than Parker does. Wedgwood frames the war as one fundamentally between Protestants and Catholics, with internal theological and political divisions on each side weakening them both. This conflagration was, however, to prove their ultimate undoing. As she says, "Never had the Churches seemed stronger than in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. Yet a single generation was to witness their deposition from political dominance."<sup>4</sup> She determines that though both Protestantism and Catholicism were weakened by internal divisions, "Catholicism, as the older and more united faith, should have emerged victorious from the conflict. Barely a century had passed since the Reformation, and the Catholic Church cherished the far from illusory hope of re-uniting Christendom. The attempt

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<sup>4</sup> C.V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939) 19.

failed.”<sup>5</sup> This failure, she alleges, was due to the fact that “the fortune of the Church became fatally interwoven with that of the House of Austria [the Habsburgs].”<sup>6</sup> While acknowledging the complications of politics, Wedgwood clearly focuses on religion as the driving, if not the determining, factor.

Wedgwood’s emphasis on religion has since been widely abandoned by the broader historical community, but it is important to note that she does not mean to imply that religion was the only important factor. Many look at the fact that Catholics fought Catholics and Protestants fought Protestants and come to the conclusion that the war was not fundamentally concerned with religion, but Wedgwood concludes that although the aim of the war was fundamentally religious, the fact of the Habsburgs involvement allowed that goal to be at least partially supplanted by other dynastic interests. It is a point well worth keeping in mind, because the fundamental problem historians have always run into is figuring out what exactly the point of the war was.

Geoffrey Parker’s interpretation of the war is somewhat more difficult to pin down, because he doesn’t present a unified view of the whole. He does present the argument that “the religious and political passions which were to produce the Thirty Years’ War did not in fact originate in Germany, but in the lands that surrounded it, and above all the states governed by Europe’s foremost dynasty, the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs.”<sup>7</sup> Though he makes this claim, he spends the majority of the remainder of his introduction describing the situation in Germany, including such sections as “Germany before the war” and “The Union, the League and the politics of Europe,” with the Union and the League referring to religiously based alliances within

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years’ War* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 2. It is important to note here that the Habsburgs were both the hereditary rulers of the lands now comprising Austria (along with Hungary and the Czech Republic) as well as being the routinely elected Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire; because of this, when referring to ‘Austria’ in this context, it must be kept in mind that both the hereditary lands and the Holy Roman Empire are intended.

Germany. His focus on Germany is understandable, despite his contention that understanding those countries which surrounded it is more important, as those are the places where the war originated. Germany needs explaining because it is the place where the fighting happened, and it provided the majority of participants, though not the largest or the most important participants. While Parker identifies religion and politics as intertwined, and groups the combatants into a “Protestant” camp and a “Catholic” camp (without any seeming qualms about putting Catholic France into the Protestant camp), he puts more emphasis on politics, focusing in on the Habsburgs. What for Wedgwood had been a distraction from (and a tragedy for) the true religious motives had become for Parker the main focus, the driving force. It is an interpretation that does make some sense, though it’s important to recognize that the Habsburgs didn’t start any of the wars which form the Thirty Years War. They were, instead, attacked by many different countries. Their policies may have led them to be targeted for attack, but this is not a story of aggressive Habsburg expansion, as Parker and Wedgwood may seem to suggest. Instead, the Habsburgs found themselves on the defensive throughout (in terms of belligerence; their armies often went on the offensive and won battles).

One of the most recent historians of the period, Peter Wilson, makes the most compelling argument for *why* the Thirty Years war should be considered as a single conflict, and uses the lens of German history to do it. Wilson argues that “the war in the Empire was related to other conflicts, but nonetheless remained distinct.”<sup>8</sup> This is the “German Civil War” argument: that what was happening was a civil war in the Empire which outside powers routinely took advantage of. The argument is strong and compelling but it puts the emphasis in the wrong place. The key issue is who the *main* combatants were. According to Wilson, constitutional questions led to an

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson, 8.

Imperial civil war, into which other combatants regularly plunged.<sup>9</sup> The problem with this interpretation is that the Imperial civil war would have been over swiftly if not for the intervention of other powers. Though there was a through-line of Imperial princes fighting against the Emperor, what happened cannot be defined solely and predominantly through the prism of Imperial politics. After the first short phase of rebellion, ending around the time of Denmark's intervention in 1625, Imperial princes became more or less tools in the hands of invaders. They had their separate grievances, but they were not capable of putting up any kind of substantial fight without the armies of greater powers helping them. This power imbalance necessarily gave the impetus and the direction to whoever was invading the Empire. Their agenda came first, their demands got prioritized. This pattern remained roughly from 1625-1632, when events allowed the princes to reassert themselves to a certain extent, giving their demands a much higher priority, whichever side of the conflict they happened to find themselves on. The resurgence of the great powers undermined this reassertion of princely power by 1635, however, leading to the return of the previous pattern of external direction of the war. Looked at this way, the demands and priorities of invading powers, along with their motives, take on a renewed importance and demand our attention, drawing us back to the fact that this was not *a* war but several.

It is certainly understandable why contemporaries and later historians have sought to bring the unity of a single war to events: they were both extremely complex and extremely fast paced. The end of one war coincided nearly or exactly with the beginning of another, creating the illusion that the many wars had merged. This impulse to simplify and unify events must, however, be resisted. What happened was many wars, one right after the other, as a variety of powers pursued their own interests and agendas. They were simply consecutive because each war changed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 4.

circumstances as if the pieces on a chessboard had been rearranged: new possibilities existed where there had been no opportunity before, and old certainties were changed or shaken.

Not every historian has accepted the idea of a Thirty Years War, though the only major one to attack it, S.H. Steinberg, did so for very different reasons than I now do. Steinberg's assertion was that "The Thirty Years War was never exclusively, or even primarily, a German affair but concerned the whole of Europe. It was, to some extent, a by-product of France's efforts . . . to break her encirclement by the Habsburg powers of Spain and Austria."<sup>10</sup> Steinberg frames the conflicts which convulsed Europe during this period as a fundamental struggle between France and the Habsburgs in both Spain and Austria.<sup>11</sup> While this point of view can provide insight, it relegates crucial actors like Sweden, Denmark, and the Imperial princes to the role of French puppets. This despite France's extremely limited to nonexistent involvement prior to their declaration of war in 1635.

It would be fair to ask why I am spending my time revising a story which has, more or less, been held consistently for centuries. The answer includes three parts. First, the story of the Thirty Years War has been told and retold by historians to the point where it has become very well-trodden ground. The fact that there are still questions to be deliberated over and issues unresolved points, at least potentially, to the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with our conception. Some historians (though they are a minority) consider Russia to have been a participant, while others do not.<sup>12</sup> Some historians also argue for starting the war at a variety of

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<sup>10</sup> S.H. Steinberg, *The 'Thirty Years War' and the conflict for European hegemony 1600-1660* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966) 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, see Parker, 123. Though Parker does not seem to consider Russia a full participant, merely noting that they gave Sweden economic aid, the historians who do include Russia in the list of participants do so on this account. The general argument is that Russia, Poland and Sweden were all in competition over the Baltic, and that Russia decided to assist Sweden in their war against the Emperor in order to reduce the Emperor's ability to support Poland in their ongoing war against Russia. This kind of logic is emblematic of the problem of this period: everything becomes so interconnected that a case can be made for nearly anyone's involvement, at least indirectly.

earlier dates, particularly 1609.<sup>13</sup> If we cannot even agree on the list of those who participated and when the fighting started, it seems less as though we are describing a war and more as though we are describing multiple wars whose degree of overlap is debatable. Secondly, the interconnections of this period which can be explained by applying a single-war theory have been explained by historians. While this process often involves exploring in some depth the history of individual participants, there has not been any attempt to take apart the war into component wars, a conceptual approach which can provide new insight into what was happening, particularly when rulers appeared to be changing sides. Finally, the whole structure of the Thirty Years War concept appears overwhelming and unwieldy, stretching into every corner of Europe and backwards into European history for decades before the conflict. Upon closer examination, it appears that this is unnecessary, complicating our understanding of events. Sweden's intervention does not need a multi-decade backstory for explanation. Neither do those of France or Denmark. This is why I've chosen to break up the war at these points: doing so, I believe, offers us new insights and an easier understanding of each part of the conflict.

The complexity of the story to be told and the importance of particularity and detail in disentangling one war from another requires a greater degree of understanding of what was going on, who was involved, and where this was all happening than I have yet supplied. In order to make sure that my readers can follow along, I'll briefly lay out the setting, the principal figures involved (the players), and the international norms and expectations they were following (the game).

### **The Setting**

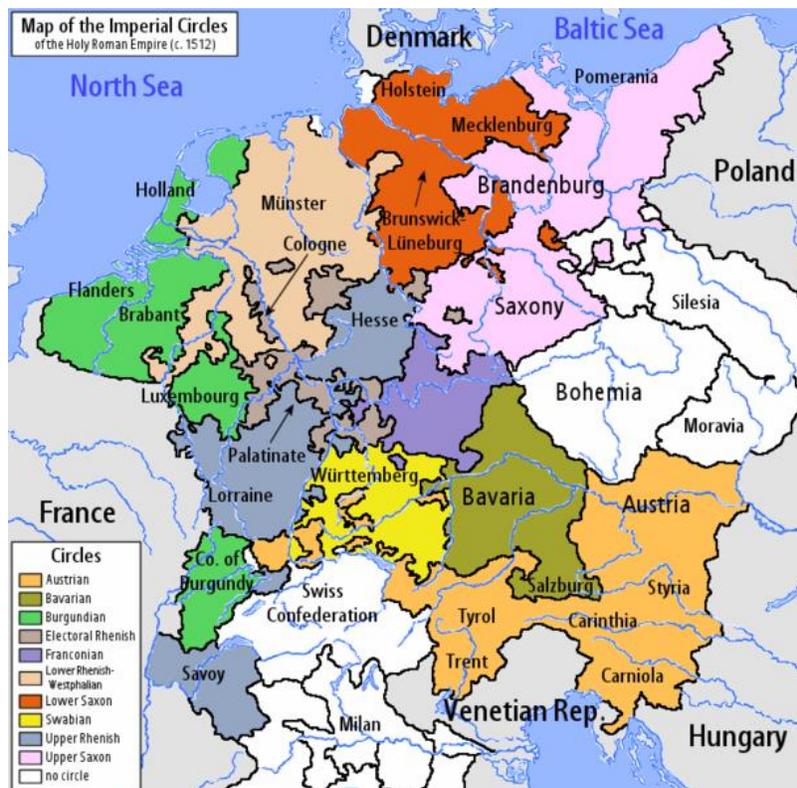
The Thirty Years War was primarily fought in the Holy Roman Empire, so there will be a few important things to know about it before we dive in. The first is that it was not a state after the

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson, 229.

modern sense; rather, it was much closer to the old feudal model, with the Emperor reigning over many princes and lower nobles who had considerable autonomy in their own lands. The Emperor's power came primarily from lands he directly controlled, and at this time the Emperor owned lands which are now Austria, the Czech Republic, and parts of Hungary.

The Empire also sits at the center of Europe, making it a potential threat to many states. This fact would be one of the main reasons that fighting continued. The fractured nature of power in the Empire prevented the Emperor from being a truly intimidating power, but as power became more consolidated during the war (as will be discussed later) the Empire's neighbors became concerned about the potential emergence of a large, powerful state on their borders. In addition to being potentially threatening, the Empire's central location made it a crossroads, exercising a sort of gravitational pull on many conflicts going on around it.



The map above does not show every individual Imperial prince; there are far too many for that to be practical, nor are all of them important. What the map does show is one of the administrative divisions of the Empire: The Imperial Kreise or circles. The Kreise were administrative units that existed between the level of the individual ruler and the level of the general diet<sup>14</sup> or Reichstag, the assembly of all Imperial princes which acted roughly the part of a parliament. The Kreise were empowered to defend themselves and to organize smaller, regional assemblies to decide what they needed to do to maintain the peace amongst themselves. The Reichstag met at the invitation of the Emperor and voted on proposals he put forward to them or allowed them to bring forward themselves. The Reichstag didn't, however, simply vote on the principle of one person one vote; far from it.<sup>15</sup>

The voting in the Reichstag was complex, but it suffices here to say that voting was based on titles. Titles which recognized their holders as princes of the Empire conferred a certain number of votes, which meant individuals with many titles had much more power. In addition to this title-based voting, voting was undertaken by corporate body. Those with the rank of Imperial prince all voted in a single body, while the representatives of the Imperial Free Cities<sup>16</sup> voted in a separate body and the electors in yet another separate body. A majority of two out of three of these bodies had to agree to pass something.<sup>17</sup>

The electors helped to set the Empire apart from other states and define it. The seven electors were empowered to vote for the next Emperor (despite this freedom, they had a tendency

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<sup>14</sup> A diet was an assembly of the lords and estates of a particular territory in order to make decisions, somewhat akin to a medieval version of a session of parliament. Those invited to a diet were the members (or their representatives) of the three estates of the territory: clergy, nobility, and the commons (usually counted in the form of cities who would send representatives).

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, 12-48.

<sup>16</sup> The Free Cities were those cities that were subject directly to the Emperor instead of recognizing another Duke or Count as their immediate feudal overlord.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, 19-23.

to vote for sons of current Emperors). Their freedom to choose the Emperor gave them a strong sense of corporate identity, leading them to assert the right to assemble and discuss Imperial affairs without the Emperor's presence or summons and to exercise some oversight over his decisions (at least when it came to Imperial affairs). The seven electors were: The Prince-Archbishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne, the King of Bohemia, the Duke of Saxony, the Count Palatine of the Rhine, and the Margrave of Brandenburg. The secular titles (those not held by Archbishops) were hereditary except for Bohemia, where the Estates asserted the right to elect their king (they had elected several generations of Habsburgs, who also happened to be the Emperors).<sup>18</sup>

In addition to its political complexity, the Empire was riven into religious factions. During Luther's lifetime in the early 1500s, many princes (including the Electors of Saxony, Brandenburg and the Palatinate) had converted to Lutheranism, and later a wave of conversions (which included Brandenburg and the Palatinate) created new problems as princes embraced Calvinism. Neither doctrine was accepted under Imperial law, which did not allow heretics to hold land. Nevertheless, the collective power of the Lutherans allowed them to win rights in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. The Calvinists, who hadn't yet attained great numbers, were not included, leaving them in legal limbo until 1648. Due to the legal precariousness of their situations, Calvinists were more likely to stick together than other religions, which had less to fear if they lost; their rights were already secured under Imperial law thanks to Augsburg.<sup>19</sup>

### The Players

The wars which raged across Germany throughout the period in question involved a wide variety of players, making a brief guide of enormous help. To begin with, we have the Emperor of

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson, 12-48.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

the Holy Roman Empire, Ferdinand II. He took power in 1619 shortly after the death of the previous Emperor, Matthias. Where Matthias had been considered a moderate on the subject of religion, seeking to preserve peace, Ferdinand was a well-known Catholic hardliner who kept company with Jesuits, an organization held in deep suspicion by many Protestants for their anti-Protestant zeal. Ferdinand II's reputation as a hardliner would cause him many problems throughout the years, but his actions supported it.

Another player of major importance throughout the period was Maximilian, Duke of Bavaria. He was the leader of the Catholic League, an alliance of Catholic estates in the Empire dedicated to defending their religious interests, especially against the Protestant Union, a comparable organization on the other side of the religious divide led by Frederick V of the Palatinate. Maximilian, though leading the Catholic League, was far more concerned with personal aggrandizement than religious questions, as his actions abundantly reveal. Frederick V is often portrayed as a weak-willed but pious individual, allowing him to be convinced to join the war shortly after its beginning in order to defend Protestant interests, which was the event which allowed the fighting to get out of control.

The last crucial Imperial figure was John George, Elector of Saxony. He was a moderate Lutheran most concerned with the intersection of the constitution and religion. When he had to choose, however, the evidence indicates that he cared more about constitutional questions than religious ones, which left him on both sides of the Emperor as different wars with different concerns arose.

Of the non-Imperial figures, the three most crucial are Cardinal Richelieu, Gustavus Adolphus, and Axel Oxenstierna. Richelieu was a Cardinal in the Catholic Church with almost no concern for the religious implications of his actions, instead practicing an early form of

*realpolitik*<sup>20</sup> as France's Prime Minister. Gustavus Adolphus was the King of Sweden, one of the greatest military leaders they ever produced and a primarily pragmatic figure constantly concerned with the safety of his kingdom and his crown. His right-hand man in life became his *de facto* successor in death, Axel Oxenstierna. As Gustavus Adolphus's chancellor he helped reform the administration of Sweden, making it the most modern in Europe and providing for the possibility of it continuing its work in the monarch's absence. After Gustavus's death, Oxenstierna would take the reins of state and lead Sweden through the remainder of the war, making him a crucial figure.

### The Game

In the game of chess, it is possible to reach a deadlocked situation: if you move, you put one of your pieces in danger of being taken by the enemy, but your enemy faces a similar situation. Any move will result in a rapid series of moves in which each side loses many pieces. In many respects, Europe resembled this in 1618, the year fighting began. The strategic situation was deadlocked: there were no major wars, but everyone knew that that could not be sustained. Outstanding issues between Poland and Sweden indicated a fight on the horizon there; Spain had still not recognized the independence of the Dutch Republic, despite this being established fact. Though fighting was not ongoing in this conflict, the 12-year truce signed in 1609 was due to expire in 1621, and it was widely assumed that both Spain and the Dutch were interested in renewing the war when that happened.

Despite the temporary stasis, fighting was clearly on the horizon, leaving all the rulers of Europe facing a similar question: How can I make the best of this situation? For some, the

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<sup>20</sup> The term *realpolitik* is most associated with Otto von Bismarck, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German statesman who oversaw the unification of the German states into the German Empire. It is used to describe an international relations based on pragmatism, rather than ideology or values. Practitioners of *realpolitik* tend not to care with whom they work so long as they achieve the goal or outcome they desire.

opportunity would come in war. Others would strive to avoid it, mostly unsuccessfully. This great European game of chess required patience and a deft command of rhetoric to play successfully. One of the most important aspects of war during this period was that there was a great deal of theatricality separate from the fighting. The fighting was of course crucial, but no less important was the show being put on for the other rulers of Europe.

War at this time was a morality play, and you had to cast yourself in the role of the righteous. You had either to be wronged or to be pursuing a just cause against a wrongful foe. The fact that war was conceived of as a righting of moral wrongs had the consequence that neutrality was not really considered possible; the rulers of Europe didn't conceive of the idea of both sides being equally wrong as valid, especially not when religion came into play (as it often did). An excellent example comes from the correspondence of Gustavus Adolphus with the Elector of Brandenburg, a man whose importance to the conflict was almost entirely geographical: Brandenburg was along one of the most important routes for marching into the depths of the Empire and the Emperor's lands. As he approached the border of Brandenburg, Gustavus wrote to the Elector "I don't want to hear about neutrality. His Grace [the Elector of Brandenburg] must be my friend or foe. When I arrive on the frontier, he must declare himself cold or hot. This is a fight between God and the devil. If His Grace is with God, he must join me, if he is for the devil, he must fight me. There is no third way."<sup>21</sup> The morality play is on vivid display here: not only is Gustavus in the right, he is either on the side of God or is God himself (depending on your interpretation of his ego). The enemy is literally the devil. If you think of the conflict in these

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<sup>21</sup> Letter of Gustavus Adolphus to Elector Georg Wilhelm of Brandenburg, June 1631, in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 136.

terms, it is easy to see why neutrality would not be thinkable: how could you stand neutral between God and the Devil, between right and wrong?<sup>22</sup>

Despite the need to put on a show of morality and righteousness, the reasons compelling war were often far more mundane. Sweden's intervention was a product of their deep concern for security, a product of the fact that they had been consistently embattled for nearly every year since they had become independent from Denmark and the dysfunctional Kalmar Union. They would spend the majority of the first phase of what has become known as the Thirty Years War engaged in a struggle against Poland, which threatened to take the crown of Sweden off Gustavus's head. Denmark's King Christian IV sought to control several strategically located bishoprics<sup>23</sup> in northern Germany so that he could expand his domination of trade and thereby his economic control of the region.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, both of these rulers phrased their interventions in highly moral terms.

One last note needs to be added, concerning religion in particular. The Thirty Years War has been frequently depicted as the last great war of religion, with Peter Wilson noting that in much of the historiography, "the assumption that the Thirty Years War had been a religious conflict seemed so self-evident it was scarcely questioned."<sup>25</sup> Though that assumption is now being challenged by excellent historians, such as Wilson himself, it is important to note where it came from. Some elements of some of the conflicts were very distinctly religious, and religion, then as now, was far more important to some than to others. Figures such as William Lamormaini, Ferdinand II's confessor, were ardent militants who would not compromise on the question of

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<sup>22</sup> For further reference on neutrality in this time period, see Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy*, 389.

<sup>23</sup> A bishopric is a territory directly overseen by a bishop. It is landed title that has become associated with a particular religious see, rather than a dynasty, so that instead of the titles passing from father to son they are passed from bishop to bishop.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 168-177.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 7.

religion.<sup>26</sup> There were, however, plenty of people, as we shall see, for whom religion was a secondary motive at best, or even a hindrance to policy, especially Cardinal Richelieu, the Catholic Cardinal who oversaw France's support of Germany's Protestants. For those like Lamormaini, religion was a fundamental cause and goal of policy; for those like Richelieu, it was one dimension to consider when making moves, but certainly not the foundation of any sort of strategic thinking or any goals. As we will see, three out of the four wars (Denmark's, Sweden's and France's) were all fought with no particular religious goal in mind. Some of the Imperial Estates considered it important and chose sides based on who they thought would best advance their religious interests, but none of the major powers staged their invasions solely or even primarily to protect Protestantism in the Empire.

With these general rules of the game laid out, and a general knowledge of the geography and political situation in the Empire, we're now prepared to launch into our main narrative, discussing each of the commonly recognized parts of the Thirty Years War along with the motivations of the players which reveal the separate wars involved, beginning with the Bohemian Rebellion.

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<sup>26</sup> On Lamormaini, see Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 29, 447, 449, 566-7 and especially see Robert Bireley, *Religion and Politics in the Age of the Counterreformation: Emperor Ferdinand II, William Lamormaini, S.J., and the Formation of Imperial Policy*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

## The Bohemian Rebellion

As I noted earlier, to say that the Thirty Years War started with the Bohemian Rebellion doesn't really make a lot of sense. Certainly, events in Bohemia in 1618 and 1619 changed the arrangement of the pieces on the chessboard of European politics and made other rulers reconsider their calculus. But if we examine the events in Bohemia, it becomes clear that the idea that what happened there ignited a broader European conflagration doesn't square with reality. The events in Bohemia intersected with other and much different conflicts only incidentally through the person of Frederick V. In the same way that a personal union during this time did not merge countries,<sup>27</sup> that Frederick became involved in many wars did not merge them into a single conflict.

So what did happen in Bohemia? The conflict here concerns the Letter of Majesty. Granted originally by Emperor Rudolph II and confirmed by Emperor Matthias, the letter laid out a series of concessions to Bohemian Protestants, who had become the majority in the country. According to the Protestant Estates in their post-Defenestration<sup>28</sup> *Apology*, "The Letter of Majesty . . . forcefully confirmed and approved that no side would molest the other, but rather . . . both Catholics and Protestants might and ought freely and peacefully to serve the Lord God everywhere, in any place, and without interruption by either ecclesiastic or temporal authority."<sup>29</sup> This was in response to problems "provoked by evil and turbulent people, both clergy and laymen, but especially by members of the Jesuit sect, whose impetuses, writings, and endeavors have always

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<sup>27</sup> For example, consider Denmark-Norway, which shared a ruler for centuries before becoming separate from each other. Spain and the Austrian lands were also unified under Charles V only to be separated upon his abdication. Certainly, exceptions can be found where personal unions did lead to long term mergers, but this does not make it the rule.

<sup>28</sup> The throwing by certain members of the Estates of Regents Wilhelm Slavata and Jaroslav Martinitz out of the window of the Hradschin in Prague. This event precipitated fighting and will be addressed directly later.

<sup>29</sup> "Apology of the Bohemian Estates (25 May 1618)" in *The Thirty Years War: A Documentary History*, edited and translated by Tryntje Helfferich (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), 21.

been aimed primarily toward fraudulently subjugating not only His Majesty [the Emperor], but also all Protestant residents and estates of this entire kingdom under the lordship of the Roman See [The Papacy].”<sup>30</sup> The Protestant estates maintained that the letter had been affirmed by Emperor Matthias, who indeed responded to the Defenestration by writing “we make it clear to you [the Protestant Estates] through this open letter that we have no intention of rescinding the Letter of Majesty, or the agreement between the religions, still less want anyone else to do this.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite Matthias’s expressed support for the Letter, the Protestant estates, led especially by Count Heinrich Matthias von Thurn, had some complaints. They alleged that certain individuals, described as “enemies of the king, land, and general peace,”<sup>32</sup> would not accept the Letter of Majesty and worked with Jesuits to undermine it by publishing attacks on Protestantism generally and proclaiming that Catholics had no need to keep faith with agreements made with heretics.<sup>33</sup> Worse still, some of these Catholic zealots got into high office as regents while Matthias was in Vienna and proceeded to purge Protestants from service and from ministry.<sup>34</sup> Forgiving the Emperor for being busy with other matters and unable to pay full attention to Bohemia, the Protestant Estates allege that the zealot regents ordered that Protestant subjects living on lands owned by the Catholic church were not allowed to build their own churches (though it should be pointed out that the interpretation of the law allowing this in the first place is strenuously disputed by the Catholics).<sup>35</sup> Not only were they not allowed to build churches, one already built in Klostergrab was torn down, and the town of Braunau was ordered to cease construction of another

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Emperor Matthias to the Bohemians, 18 June 1618, in *A Sourcebook*, ed. and trans. Wilson, 40.

<sup>32</sup> “*Apology*,” Helfferich, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>35</sup> The law clearly stated that Protestants were allowed to build churches on Crown lands. The point in dispute was whether Church lands were also Crown lands. The Protestants maintained that all lands were crown lands under Bohemian law. The Catholics disagreed, arguing that Church land did not count as Crown land on account of it being given to another party to administer and own. “*Apology*,” Helfferich 24.

and to turn in the keys to it. When the citizens refused, many were arrested.<sup>36</sup> With all of these things going on, the Protestant Estates demanded a response from the Emperor, which was not forthcoming.

Asserting the right to assemble on their own to discuss potential violations of the Letter of Majesty, the Protestant Estates held a diet in late 1617 and sent a request for an answer to the Emperor. When they reassembled to hear the response, on May 21, 1618, they discovered that “through the provocation and instigation of our oft-mentioned enemies, His Majesty had sent a very sharp letter that placed not only the Defenders<sup>37</sup> but also us [the whole Protestant Estates], in most extreme danger.”<sup>38</sup> Feeling thus endangered, several members of the Estates, notably led by Count Thurn, decided to move against the regents. Barging into the Imperial castle in Prague, they demanded a response from the four regents they found there. When this was not forthcoming, they decided to release two of the regents present because they were “pious, and would not advise such a thing [the violation of the Letter of Majesty], nor wish to harm us [the Protestant Estates].”<sup>39</sup>

Thurn and those with him determined that the other two regents present, Lords Wilhelm Slavata and Jaroslav Martinitz, must have instigated the Emperor and the other regents to such outrages. When the two other regents were gone, the assembled Protestant Estates threw Martinitz and Slavata out the window [they were on the second floor, making it a long, though not necessarily fatal, drop], along with their secretary. Slavata was by far the most injured, though all three survived. Apparently, Martinitz was saved by the Virgin Mary, to whom he was praying at the time. “It was then commonly said and staunchly avowed as certain by many pious, God-fearing people . . . that in the air above Lord von Martinitz . . . appeared the most holy and praiseworthy

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

<sup>37</sup> A group of high-ranking Protestants appointed under the Letter of Majesty to protect the rights of Protestants in Bohemia which would consider and act on subjects which didn't require the full diet.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>39</sup> “The Defenestration of Prague (23 May 1618)” in *A Documentary History* Helfferich, 17.

Virgin Mary . . . [she] slowed him in his fall with her outstretched coat placed beneath him, such that he might fall to the earth much more softly.”<sup>40</sup> This story comes from Martinitz’s account, and is confirmed in Slavata’s. Perhaps if the latter had prayed harder, he wouldn’t have been so injured.

The die was thus cast. Two very high ranking Imperial regents thrown, at peril of life, from the window of the Imperial castle in Prague by the leading Protestant members of the Estates. The Defenestrators quickly determined that their only chance was rebellion, and reassembled the Protestant Estates, who unanimously approved the publishing of the *Apology* from which I have been quoting. They argue not only that the Imperial government (dominated by the regents, not the Emperor) was acting in bad faith and under the influence of the Jesuits in order to destroy the Letter of Majesty and return Bohemia to Catholic domination, but this is only part of their goal: they also argue extensively that they followed all prescribed procedures for redress and did everything through proper and legal channels up to the point when, pressed by desperation, they took drastic action against Slavata and Martinitz.<sup>41</sup> Their intent was clear: they needed all the other rulers of Europe to know that they were the just and aggrieved party. The race for allies was on. It is here that they erred so profoundly and brought their small, local conflict into connection with far larger and more dangerous political squabbles.

### The Worst of Saviors

It would be difficult for me to think of a worse decision than that made by the Bohemian Confederacy<sup>42</sup> than the selection of Frederick V of the Palatinate to be the new wearer of the Crown of Bohemia. The long-term consequences of this decision were catastrophic in the extreme,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>41</sup> “*Apology*,” Helfferich, 20-30.

<sup>42</sup> Shortly after deposing the new King and Emperor Ferdinand II, the provinces of the Kingdom of Bohemia united under a confederal government and selected a new king. These events will be covered in more detail later.

though perhaps the result for Bohemia itself would have been the same regardless of Frederick; this we cannot know. What we do know is that because of Frederick's involvement, the war spiraled out of control. As leader of the alliance known as the Protestant Union, Frederick was selected for the many allies he could bring. In the end, his German allies abandoned him, Bohemia was crushed, and he was forced to accept allies where he could find them and beg funding from the Dutch and the British. So how did the rebellion turn into this?<sup>43</sup>

The most important moment in the evolution of the rebellion was the death of Emperor Matthias on 20 March 1619. At that moment, according to their earlier election of him as Crown Prince, Ferdinand of Austria was due to become the next King of Bohemia (and almost assuredly the next Holy Roman Emperor). Ferdinand's election as Crown Prince had been arranged by Matthias before tensions had boiled over, but now that they had, Ferdinand became a thoroughly unacceptable candidate. Far from being a new Matthias, somebody they could negotiate with, Ferdinand had a reputation as a Catholic hardliner bent on spreading the Counterreformation as far and wide as he possibly could. It was alleged that during the Ferdinand's Counter-Reformation push in the Austrian provinces of Styria, Carinthia, and Carniola that "many Cathedrall [sic] and other Parish Churches [were] also violently taken from them [Protestants]. . . . Also many privileged Churches, pulled downe, and blowne up with Gunpowder."<sup>44</sup> In addition to these charges, it was alleged that Protestant gravesites were destroyed, preachers, ministers, and school teachers were banished, bibles burnt, and Protestants tortured.<sup>45</sup> Whether or not we believe all of the allegations in this source, it is clear that Ferdinand's international reputation was as a hardline counter-reformer. In addition, consider this description of him from 1628:

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<sup>43</sup> Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 282-284; for the collapse of Frederick's support and the failure of the rebellion, see Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 299-361.

<sup>44</sup> "The Counter Reformation in Habsburg Austria" in *A Sourcebook* ed. and trans. Wilson, 24.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Once he has got up, his majesty goes to the chapel to hear two masses, one for the soul of his first wife. . . . If it is a feast day, the emperor then takes holy communion, for which purpose he goes to the church and hears a German sermon. This is usually given by a Jesuit and lasts an hour. After the sermon he remains at the high altar, usually for an hour and a half accompanied by specially selected music . . . On those days that are not feast days, the emperor, after attending two masses (something from which he never deviates), spends the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon in council meetings.<sup>46</sup>

It seems clear from the available evidence that Ferdinand II was a deeply pious man who was not likely to give the Protestants any more concessions than absolutely necessary, an opinion which they shared. Instead of permitting him to become King of Bohemia, they elected to take their rebellion to the next step, creating a new constitution [31 July 1619] in the form of a confederation of the provinces of Bohemia and electing a new king. The confederation also included as allies the provinces of Upper and Lower Austria, integral parts of the Habsburg lands dominated by Protestant nobility who feared Ferdinand II's reign over them in light of his track record in Styria. The Confederation stressed the religious character of their concerns, stating "the Almighty has also given his grace and blessing as this Confederation is solely in defence [sic] of religion."<sup>47</sup>

So the question now before the Estates was who would lead their new confederation as they tried to free themselves from the perceived religious tyranny of the new Emperor? Though many of the members preferred John George of Saxony, a moderate Lutheran who would bring legitimacy and respectability to their cause, he declined to stand for election, forcing them to turn elsewhere. In near unanimity, they selected Fredrick V, Count Palatine of the Rhine and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire. It was without a doubt a thoroughly terrible decision. To be fair,

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<sup>46</sup> "The character of Emperor Ferdinand II" in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 32.

<sup>47</sup> "The Bohemian Confederation, 31 July 1619" *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 41.

however, it didn't seem so at the time. Frederick, as noted in the introduction, was the head of the relatively powerful Protestant Union, who the estates expected would follow Frederick into war<sup>48</sup> (they did not)<sup>49</sup>. He was also married to a princess of England, and therefore James I was his father-in-law; the Estates expected great subsidies to flow from this source (to call the money that flowed "great" would be a gross exaggeration). The fundamental reasons for choosing him, therefore, were misguided, though understandably so. It was the effects which would prove to be catastrophic.

The question remains, why did Frederick accept? According to an open letter he had published on 7 November 1619, he considered it his Christian duty.

Even in these recent times, when differences of opinion have emerged in matters of belief and religion, it is clear from Holy Scripture and the teaching of the church fathers that people's consciences cannot be commanded, bound or overpowered, but that whenever such compulsion has been attempted overtly or covertly it has had evil consequences. . . . Furthermore and in particular, after various foreign peoples [the Jesuits] crept into the Empire of the German Nation [The Holy Roman Empire] . . . a new teaching and opinion emerged that is fundamentally extremely dangerous to all potentates and rulers. Using the cover of apparent holiness, these people insinuated themselves not only with great lords and rulers, but also their advisors and officials . . . thereby promoting a marked increase in the false zeal to pressure, persecute and, wherever they failed to yield, completely recover those who had separated from the Roman Church [Catholicism]. . . .they were able to implement one innovation after the other, and not only used public writings to cast doubts on all religious concessions, agreements and other obligations and laws, but also to actively weaken, abolish and annul them.<sup>50</sup>

We can see here Frederick echoes the language of the Bohemian estates in his attacks on the Jesuits as the wrongful party, and he defends the idea that the Protestant Estates were free of

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<sup>48</sup> "The Protestant Union, 1608" in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 12-16.

<sup>49</sup> "The Treaty of Ulm (July 3, 1620)" in *A Documentary History*, Helfferich, 46-49.

<sup>50</sup> Open letter from Frederick V regarding his acceptance of the Bohemian Crown, 7 November 1619" in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 47-48.

blame, merely trying to enforce the law as it existed. He later indicates that he had no desire for the crown, but felt compelled by the unanimous (it wasn't actually, but close enough) vote for him to become king. He also asserts that he only accepts because if he did not, he fears the war would continue longer.<sup>51</sup>

So with Frederick wearing the crown, how does the war spiral out of control? The main issue is geographic. As Count Palatine of the Rhine, Frederick controlled a bifurcated territory: one section, the Upper Palatinate, was in central Germany near the border of Bohemia. The other section, however, straddled the Rhine river and had the potential to cause Spain massive problems. Spain was, at the time, involved in a very long war against the Dutch (though as noted previously, a truce was in force during this period, it was due to end in 1621), and their war required massive troops across the continent. Dutch control of the sea and the need of the Spanish fleet elsewhere meant that the overwhelming majority of Spanish armies marched a route known as the Spanish Road: starting in Genoa and Milan, they marched north over the Alps and down the valley of the Rhine until they linked up with Spanish forces already stationed in the Spanish Netherlands (Belgium today). From there they could campaign against the Dutch. This made the Rhine valley of immense strategic importance to both the Spanish and the Dutch, and one fact worried the Spanish in particular: both the Dutch Republic and Frederick V were not only Protestant but Calvinist.

The very real possibility of Frederick attempting to help his coreligionists by closing down part of the Spanish Road and thus crippling the Spanish war effort was a prospect not to be tolerated in Madrid, leading them to dispatch armies to take his lands.<sup>52</sup> The intersection of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Letter of Queen Elisabeth of Bohemia to Prince Charles of Wales, 15/25 September 1620, in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 52-53.

Bohemian rebellion with the entirely separate Spanish-Dutch War would prove to be the event that allowed things to spiral out of control. The Netherlands had already considered supporting the Bohemians, even writing in summer of 1619 (before the crowning of Frederick) that “the Bohemian war will decide the fates of all of us” but at the time promised only that “we shall seek out all ways of bringing you [the Protestant Union] help . . . though we have many difficulties to face.”<sup>53</sup> This same writer indicated that some small aid had been given by The Netherlands, but that there was significant resistance to the idea there. That resistance would fade once the Spanish got involved, to the point where a representative of the Republic would beseech help from James I of England on behalf of the Palatine forces by early 1621.<sup>54</sup>

There is yet one final piece which we need to deal with before we move on to the next war, and that is the ever-present figure of Maximilian of Bavaria. His importance can be attributed to his apparent saving of the Emperor from utter destruction. Despite the ultimate failure of the Bohemian rebellion, its initial successes were sufficient to scare the Emperor, even resulting in estates’ forces approaching Vienna twice. Faced with attack and with no armies around to defend him, Ferdinand decided to call upon the only forces that could save him quickly, and he paid a price for it. Maximilian of Bavaria was at the head of the Catholic League, an alliance of Catholic states formed to defend against the Protestant Union. With Bavaria situated next to both Bohemia and the Habsburg hereditary lands, his army was ideally placed to save the Emperor.

In the Treaty of Munich confirming this arrangement (signed 8 October 1619), the Emperor conceded “absolute and total command” of the “Catholic defences [sic] to which the high Catholic Estates of the Empire, His Imperial Majesty, his dynasty and the endangered lands

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<sup>53</sup> Letter of a Dutch agent to Benjamin Buwinckhausen, summer 1619, in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 52.

<sup>54</sup> “Memorial presented to James I’s Privy Council, 15 February 1621” in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 77.

have been constrained for their own preservation to agree.”<sup>55</sup> Not only was Maximilian given direct and absolute operational control, the Emperor was forbidden by the treaty from undertaking any peace negotiations without him, and he promised to refund all war costs in excess of the cost of maintaining the regular Bavarian army. This repayment scheme extended to pawning or even selling Austrians lands to the control of Bavaria.<sup>56</sup> Due to this treaty and his leadership of the Catholic League, Maximilian would remain a crucial player until the end of the war, despite his having no vested interest in the outcome of any of the wars. His interest was only in what he could gain out of the situation. Because all of the goals he hoped to achieve depended upon the Emperor’s good will and support, Maximilian’s only hope of achieving them was to entirely unite his war goals with the Emperors; if the Emperor was defeated, all of his gains would disappear. Therefore, Maximilian, though a semi-independent agent, was not waging his own war but the Emperor’s. With the pieces on the chessboard having moved, he meant to take full advantage to expand his authority and holdings in whatever way possible, as we will continue to see.

### Denmark’s War with the Emperor

Maximilian’s pursuit of glory and power for himself ruffled feathers in the Empire, and with no one perhaps more so than with John George, the Elector of Saxony. He had felt that the Emperor was in the right in his dealings with the Bohemians, and so had not only refused to lead them (as we have seen) but actively helped the Emperor recover control of his lands.<sup>57</sup> He was not, however, prepared to countenance what Maximilian had demanded of the Emperor in return for his help. On 29 January 1621, Ferdinand had declared Frederick under the Imperial Ban, “and thereby according to the law deprived him of his electorate of the Palatinate, together with the

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<sup>55</sup> “The Treaty of Munich, 8 October 1619” in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 56-58.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Letter of Ferdinand II to Elector John George of Saxony, 6 June 1620, in *A Sourcebook* ed. and trans. Wilson, 60.

office of Arch Seneschal and the associated electoral title, as well as his other principalities and lordships, regalia, fiefs, dignities, rights and jurisdictions that he held from us [the Emperor] and the Holy Empire.”<sup>58</sup> This was quite a bit more than John George wanted to be done, but it wasn’t entirely unreasonable and it wasn’t outside of the Emperor’s prerogatives. What was outside of his prerogatives, so John George believed, was what came next.

Under the Imperial Ban, Frederick had been stripped of all his titles and political power. In theory, this meant that all of these offices and titles devolved upon his heir. Upon Maximilian’s insistence, however, Ferdinand did not allow this, instead transferring most of his lands and most importantly his electoral title onto Maximilian himself. The significance and gravity of the electoral title, as well as the long hereditary nature of its holders, meant that its transfer from one family to another was an action of incredible significance, and one that John George did not feel that Ferdinand had the authority to undertake without the consent of the Electoral College.<sup>59</sup> Though John George didn’t move openly against the Emperor at this juncture, he would no longer support him and was drifting towards open rebellion. It would take a further push later to get him over the line.

As tensions rose in the Empire during the years of Frederick’s rebellion (1621-24), events beyond it moved towards a new war. England and the Netherlands were becoming increasingly concerned over this period at the strength and success of the Imperial army and they worried that Ferdinand would suppress all dissent, push the Counter-Reformation on all of Germany and move to intervene aggressively against the Dutch in their war with Spain (England had been a staunch backer of the Netherlands for years, giving them a vested interest in that country’s survival quite apart from their interest in maintaining their son-in-law Frederick’s position in the Empire). With

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<sup>58</sup> “Deed of enfeoffment from Emperor Ferdinand II, 25 February 1623.” in *A Sourcebook* ed. and trans. Wilson, 91.

<sup>59</sup> “Saxon concerns, 1621” in *A Sourcebook* ed. and trans. Wilson, 90-91.

Frederick and his various allies flailing and attacking unrelated targets such as the Archbishop of Cologne,<sup>60</sup> England and the Netherlands were looking desperately for a new ally to lead the war effort for them. They found the King of Denmark, who was examining the state of the chessboard and decided it looked promising to achieve a few of his goals. Despite the help of the Emperor's old foes the Dutch and the English, Denmark's war would be entirely new.

The Bohemian Rebellion was a clearly religious war; Denmark's war would not be. Though Bohemia's Rebellion clearly had elements of a conflict over power (could the Estates assemble themselves or did the Emperor need to call them, what could the Estates decide on their own, etc.) it also had a fundamental underlying religious issue. The Estates were concerned for their religious freedom, and the Emperor and his court wanted to curtail it as much as possible. Denmark, on the other hand, had no wish to start a crusade for the sake of German Protestantism; The Danish King Christian IV simply sought to gain control of three strategically situated bishoprics: Bremen, Verden, and Osnabruck. They had already been under Protestant control for many years, and he had a reasonably legitimate claim to them. Not only did he believe in the mid-1620s that it was a good time to try to take them, he was coming to believe that it might be the only time left available to him. With Ferdinand's increasing power in the Empire, it was beginning to look as though he would soon reign supreme over the Empire, marshalling its full resources against any enemy, a far more daunting prospect than facing the Empire in its current fragmented form.

Accordingly, many meetings of representatives resulted in the Treaty of The Hague between England, The Netherlands and Denmark. In it, they agreed that Denmark would provide an army of "28 to 30,000 foot soldiers and 7 to 8,000 horses" in return for monthly subsidies from

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<sup>60</sup> Letter of Archbishop Ferdinand of Cologne to Count Franz Christoph Khevenhüller, Bonn, 6 July 1622, in *A Documentary History* ed. and trans. Helfferich, 61-63. In this letter to the Imperial ambassador in Spain, the Archbishop requests Spanish military assistance to dislodge an ally of Frederick who has taken up camp in his lands, further widening the war.

England and the Netherlands of 300,000 and 50,000 florins, respectively.<sup>61</sup> In addition, as was usual, each of the signatories agreed not to make peace without the other. Interestingly, the treaty also makes reference to Swedish and French offers of help which didn't pan out, saying that both powers would be welcome to contribute either by helping the alliance or joining it whenever they should feel ready.<sup>62</sup> Both of these countries had reasons for wanting to join the war, but both had compelling reasons not to at this particular time. France's interest, as will be discussed in more detail when they actually do join the war, was primarily to break their encirclement by the Habsburg dynasty. Sweden's was about control of the Baltic Sea, a goal shared by Denmark, which drove the two powers into competition. If Denmark was joining, Sweden would not. In addition, Sweden was far more interested at that time in their wars against Poland, which will also be discussed in somewhat more detail at the appropriate juncture. The point of saying all this is to show that there was not a unified war aim drawing countries together. Sweden didn't join because their interest in the war competed with Denmark's, and France, though their interest didn't compete with Denmark's, was interested in a completely different goal. They didn't care about Denmark's control of a few bishoprics in northern Germany, but they considered joining the war anyway because they had a separate reason for wanting to fight the Emperor. Ultimately the timing and circumstances proved inopportune for both Sweden and France, leaving Denmark the sole invader.

It is important here to recognize that what was happening was actually the beginning of a new war. Frederick and his allies had been defeated. In their desperation to prevent the Emperor's supporting Spain against the Netherlands, the Dutch and the English were willing to finance any new power willing and able to distract the Emperor. Christian IV took the money not because he

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<sup>61</sup> "The Treaty of The Hague, 29 November 1625" in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 92-94.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

was interested in Frederick's cause, but because he was interested in conquest. He wasn't intervening to restore the King of Bohemia and put right the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, he was doing it for personal gain. His attack was not an 'intervention,' as it has commonly been described,<sup>63</sup> it was an entirely new war which he was only willing to start because he had ambitions of his own, separate from the cause of Frederick or of the Dutch.

The nature of this alliance contrasts strongly with Maximilian's alliance with Ferdinand. In Maximilian's case, his personal goals necessitated a complete alliance with the Emperor for their achievement. If the Emperor lost, he would lose, so Maximilian adopted the Emperor's war goals and it would be fair to say that despite the fact that they hoped to get different things out of the war, they were fighting the same war: a war for survival. If one fell, so did the other, and all their gains would be lost, so they were in it together until the end. Denmark's alliance with England and The Netherlands didn't function like that, because England and The Netherlands wanted something different than Denmark. To them, Denmark was a means to an end: they wanted someone to distract the Emperor so that the Habsburgs couldn't bring their combined might down on The Netherlands. They were not concerned with Denmark's own ambitions, just as Denmark was not concerned with their priorities. Denmark joined the war for conquest, not to provide a distraction. If the war became inconvenient or dangerous for Denmark, they would feel no qualms about backing out.

Of course, Christian still needed a pretext to attack the Emperor. Denmark would be the only power fielding an army, and it had no legitimate quarrel with the Emperor at this point; Christian devised a deeply legal solution. In his capacity as Duke of Holstein, Christian IV was

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<sup>63</sup> See for example Parker, 71-75.

technically a Prince of the Empire.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, he had the ability (theoretically) to take part in Imperial institutions, including the Kreis system (outlined in the introduction). As Duke of Holstein, Christian was a member of the Lower Saxon Kreis, and moved to take control of it. As colonel of the Kreis, he could respond to what many of its members perceived as unlawful aggression: Imperial invasion.<sup>65</sup>

Frederick V had gained allies in the Kreis, and as part of the Emperor's conclusion of the war, the forces under his command (which now included not only the Catholic League army, led by General Tilly, but also an army under the command of Albrecht Wallenstein, Duke of Friedland, which was commissioned by the Emperor and actually under his control) moved to take control of Brunswick and Halberstadt, which other members of the Kreis considered an unlawful invasion and disruption of their peace. In a mandate published by the Kreis calling for the Imperial forces to leave, they say:

In July of last year 1625 the Bavarian and [Catholic] League Lieutenant General . . . Tilly, followed by Albrecht . . . Duke of Friedland, with their large armies invaded the [Lower Saxon] Kreis, first in the worthy principality of Brunswick, then in the archbishopric of Magdeburg and the bishopric of Halberstadt, and violently attacked fortresses, cities, towns, villages and noble houses, occupied and plundered them, not sparing the churches and houses of God, tyrannically stole not only all the property and means of sustenance of many thousands of innocent subjects and their wives and children, but also in many cases their honour, bodies, lives and health, and burnt a great number of beautiful houses, villages, monasteries, farms and mills and other buildings to the ground and in short behaved so gruesomely in the Kreis that one would not have expected the same from the hereditary and arch enemy of all Christianity [the Ottoman Empire]. And all this occurred with no more reason than blatant pretexts that were used to disguise the

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<sup>64</sup> It may seem strange that a foreign power was also a prince of the Empire. This was possible because the Empire was, technically and legally, a collection of titles associated with Imperial law and the Emperor's jurisdiction; those titles did not have to be held exclusively by people who were vassals of his, and nor did his vassals have to exclusively hold those titles. The Elector of Brandenburg, for instance, acquired in the later part of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century the title of Duke of Prussia, which was not part of the Empire. The Kings of Denmark were not vassals of the Emperor, because the Kingdom of Denmark was not a title associated with the Empire, but the Dukedom of Holstein was.

<sup>65</sup> Parker, 75; Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 387.

long-held intention to exterminate from the reformed archbishoprics and bishoprics of this Kreis the Augsburg Confession, that is the sole means of salvation, the godly, previous, true Christian religion. Such procedures not only grossly violate the proper and traditional liberty in religious and profane matters, but also completely contravene the Holy Imperial fundamental laws and constitution and stamp on all legal order together with German liberty.<sup>66</sup>

I have quoted this source at length because it illustrates well many aspects of the conflict which allowed it to continue to expand over the years. First, we see the charge that the Emperor is attacking innocents and neutrals in a barbaric manner, a charge often levied during the war but which, despite its exaggeration, would nevertheless stain the Emperor's reputation and make Protestants increasingly willing to abandon him. Second, we see the charge that the Emperor's actions, quite apart from being brutal, violate the fundamental laws of the Holy Roman Empire, making them unconstitutional. Thirdly, and finally, we see the perception that the intent of the Emperor was simply to eradicate Protestantism (the Augsburg Confession) wherever it existed and to reassert Catholicism. In combination with his reputation for brutality and tyranny, and his actions prior to becoming Emperor (and his treatment of Bohemia post-victory), this interpretation of his intent made sense. It was the kind of international reputation that meant that potential enemies would always find a pretext for invasion when the chess pieces lined up for them, and that they would always find willing allies in the Empire once they got there.

One unifying theme across all four wars which Peter Wilson uses to justify and explain the 'Thirty Years War' narrative is the idea of fighting for "German Liberties," with the word being very deliberately *libert/ez* and not *liberty*; the ideal supposedly fought for was not some single set of rights common to all members or subjects of the Empire. It was, rather, the idea of the many individual rights and liberties held by the princes which collectively formed what was thought of as

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<sup>66</sup> "The failure of neutrality: Lower Saxon Kreis Mandate, 4 March 1626" in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 95.

the Holy Roman Empire's constitution. These rights were by no means uniform; the right of the Electors to choose the Emperor would have been considered part of the German liberties, despite only seven princes (four of which were hereditary titles) having this right. Invoking the ideal of the German Liberties was a way of saying that you were fighting against the tyranny of the Emperor and for the constitution. It is, however, either a smokescreen or a secondary concern for those external powers who attacked the Empire during this period (Denmark, Sweden and France). Though they were concerned about the possibility of the Empire becoming a strong, centralized state (which would make them virtually undefeatable), they were all primarily interested in pursuing other, what might be called proactive or constructive aims: adding to their own territory, as opposed to the destructive aim of simply denying the Emperor certain powers and rights.

Wilson certainly is not lacking evidence for the idea of a war for German Liberties; Christian IV himself invokes the concept when writing to the Electors to justify his war against the Emperor: "Similarly, we [Christian IV] are told that ill-intentioned people are being found who pretend that our confederation [the Lower Saxon Kreis's defensive alliance], which was established for the maintenance of German Liberties (with several neighboring potentates and sovereigns who are extremely interested in the conservation of the traditional constitution of the [Holy] Roman Empire), was instead supposed to oppress those princes and estates of the [Holy] Roman Empire who belong to the Roman Catholic religion."<sup>67</sup> We see here that religion played an important role in propaganda, especially in attacking the other side: Catholic forces had claimed that Christian and his allies sought to oppress Catholicism, a charge which needed to be defended against because the majority of princes (this was, recall, a letter to the Electors) were not militants but moderates who considered religion important but were not prepared to fight a war to convert or oppress other Christians. We also see that in deflecting the charge of a religious war, the automatic

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<sup>67</sup> "Letter of King Christian IV of Denmark (February 21, 1626)" in *A Documentary History*, 78.

go-to of Christian is that of a defensive, righteous constitutional war: he has taken up his sword to defend the German Liberties, or put another way, to defeat the tyranny of the Emperor. We know, however, that this is not what made him go to war. It may, as noted, have been incidental to his thinking: A stronger, centralized Empire would be far harder to attack in the future. But he didn't go to war just to prevent that. He wanted the north German bishoprics to which he could lay claim for substantive, strategic reasons. All else was excuses.

Despite strong financial backing and a substantial army, Christian's invasion was a failure, and by 1628 he was negotiating what would become the Peace of Lubeck (1629). In light of the military situation, Denmark came out of the peace remarkably well. After occupying the entire peninsula of Jutland, reducing the Danish king to occupying Copenhagen, he was left with all of his lands intact. The peace did stipulate that "His Royal Majesty [the King of Denmark] . . . will not claim the archbishoprics and bishoprics on behalf of his dear sons on whatever pretext, nor hinder His Roman Imperial Majesty in the exercise of his imperial government."<sup>68</sup> In addition, the peace was broadened to include Spain, Poland, Great Britain, France, Sweden and the Netherlands, which indicates how many powers had taken an interest and a side in this conflict regardless of how involved they had been.<sup>69</sup>

This would be a convenient place to end the narrative. The Emperor's enemies were all defeated. He hadn't come to an agreement with Frederick and his allies, true, but they were under the Imperial Ban and unable to carry on offensive operations, rendering them all but irrelevant. Major war was over. A separate conflict flared up in Mantua, to which Ferdinand diverted the Imperial army against the advice of Wallenstein,<sup>70</sup> but peace had been concluded with Denmark

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<sup>68</sup> "The Peace of Lubeck, 22 May 1629" in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 98.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ferdinand II to Albrecht Wallenstein, 8 December 1628, in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 108; Albrecht Wallenstein to Ferdinand II, 10 October 1629, in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 108-109.

and no major challenger remained in the field. Things could have stopped. Instead, two more wars would be fought which, because of their relation to previous conflicts, historians tie into the Thirty Years War, giving it its last eighteen years. Both, however, are simply reflections of the changed state of affairs, the rearranged piece on the chessboard. So before we get into the next two wars, let's take just a moment to set up the conditions which led to them.

### Moving Towards Another War

If the transfer of Frederick's electoral title to Maximilian was an upsetting and disturbing power grab, what Ferdinand did to try to end all conflict in the Empire was seen as far graver and more dangerous. The Edict of Restitution, promulgated 6 March 1629 (2 months before the official end of the war with Denmark), sought to resolve deep and fundamental issues in the Holy Roman Empire via Imperial fiat. The legality of Protestants, whom the main part of Christendom considered heretics, holding Imperial fiefs had always been somewhat murky. After religious tensions exploded into open war in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Imperial estates came to an arrangement with the Emperor Ferdinand I in the Peace of Passau and the Peace of Augsburg.<sup>71</sup>

These treaties allowed the principle that the ruler would decide the religious character of the territory, but it did not directly address the issue of whether Lutheran rulers could take over lands owned by the Catholic Church. To deal with the issue, Ferdinand I issued the *declaratio Ferdinandi*, which held that Catholic Church lands which had not been sequestered by Lutheran rulers or converted to Lutheranism before the Peace of Passau (the so-called "normative year") would not be allowed to convert. The provision, intended to preserve the existing strength of the Catholic Church even if all the rulers became Lutheran, was never approved by the Protestants

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<sup>71</sup> Parker, 18-19.

who signed the Passau treaty, nor was it rigorously and consistently enforced by Imperial courts in the decades between Passau and the Bohemian rebellion.<sup>72</sup>

By 1629, however, the situation had changed. Ferdinand II reconsidered the calculus of the situation and determined now was the time to act, unilaterally for ease, to restore the power of the Catholic Church by enforcing the *declaratio* fully. Every piece of church land seized by Lutherans since 1555—a very considerable amount—would be at the stroke of a pen returned to Catholic ownership without the adjudication of the courts, the consent of the Reichstag, or even the consent of the electors.<sup>73</sup> It was a truly breathtaking assertion of what we would today call executive power, and it was deeply concerning not only to Lutherans who either stood to lose land or stood in doubt of whether they would, but also to Catholic rulers concerned about just how much power the Emperor was amassing. Even those who agreed with the goal did not want to create an unchecked monarch in the process of achieving it.

The Swabian Kreis responded with a complaint to the Reichshofrat, the Emperor's advisory council, saying

Thanks to the Imperial Edict [of Restitution], we and other Evangelical [Protestant] princes and Estates are threatened with judicial punishments the like of which has neither been heard nor used before in the Empire, [and] are being de facto deprived of our property that we have held for many years through legal entitlement and inherited from several generations of ancestors. Instead, the directions of the Imperial constitution should be followed to the current situation in the Empire and that such religious and church matters should be dealt with according to the usual custom, as equality and justice should apply to them, as well as the Treaty of Passau and the Religious Peace, and everything done differently, and care taken, and matters handled according to the constitutional ways and means so that no one has cause for complaint, but on the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> "The Edict, 6 March 1629" in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 114-117.

contrary the authorized separation and difficulty of the Empire and Estates can thereby be removed.<sup>74</sup>

The Edict took an already inflamed religious and constitutional crisis in the Empire and turned the heat up dramatically, keeping what Protestant forces were still in the field from retiring in the face of overwhelming Imperial superiority. Meanwhile, events were transpiring to bring a new war to German shores, preventing peace. As Wallenstein sat on the shores of the Baltic in 1627 and 1628 considering how to bring the war with Denmark (now retreated to Copenhagen) to a close, he came to a firm conclusion: the only way to deal with the Danish would be to build an Imperial Baltic Fleet. To make his fleet a reality, he needed both safe harbors and a great deal of ships.

King Sigismund III of Poland, a Catholic, watched the Danish war with immense interest. He ought by right to have been King of Sweden as well as Poland, and he had been, but in the late 1590s the Estates of Sweden, overwhelmingly Lutheran, deposed their absent King—he was spending almost all of his time in Poland—in favor of his uncle, the Regent, who became King Karl IX, a Protestant. Sweden’s nobility was almost entirely Protestant, so they were much more comfortable with the new King than they had been with the old one, even when he had been in Sweden. Sweden and Poland had been at war near constantly since then, as Sigismund tried to reclaim his throne. In Sweden, however, Karl had died in the early 1610s and been succeeded by his son, Gustavus Adolphus. Gustavus was a committed reformer of Sweden’s institutions, and his military was subsequently much more effective than his father’s, allowing him to carry the fight into Poland and put Sigismund on the defensive.

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<sup>74</sup> “The Protestant response: complaint from the Swabian Kreis to the Reichshofrat, January 1630” in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 118.

Seeking a way out of this situation, looking at the movements of the international chessboard, Sigismund thought he saw an opportunity: joining his fleet with a fledgling Imperial fleet, they could defeat Denmark and possibly retake Sweden for Catholicism at the same time. As Sigismund wrote to Wallenstein on 10 November 1627,

We also do not want to omit telling Your Grace that certain reports have arrived that Denmark is currently seeking a peace treaty with His Majesty the Emperor and eagerly wants this. However, this is not pleasant to us, since such peace negotiations will not only do more harm than good to His Majesty the Emperor . . . but also to ourselves. Because, with God's help, victory is in His Majesty's and Your Grace's hands and, because the [enemy] population is greatly afraid, by continuing the campaign one can easily obtain the Sound and other places, and so conquer the entire kingdom of Denmark with such a powerful fleet.<sup>75</sup>

Not only might the combined fleets conquer Denmark, but also, Sigismund suggests, the King of Spain had given him assurance that he would assist him in reconquering Sweden. This, he continues, would be significantly easier if Denmark had been dealt with and brought under Catholic control. Wallenstein was not enthused with the plan to conquer Sweden, but he welcomed Polish assistance in subduing Denmark, having written Sigismund at the end of October 1627 “We hope that Our Lord will, as till today, support the just cause, now that Your Majesty is willing to join your ships to ours and bring them to a safe port.”<sup>76</sup>

We can see in Sweden's conflict with Poland a fact of significance to the broader times: religious and non-religious motives were deeply mixed, to the point where one may easily have become a cover for the other. Sigismund is Catholic and wants to reconquer Sweden for the true faith, but he is also technically its lawful ruler and wants to reclaim his rightful throne. So which is the true motive? The question may be unfair; both could have been strong motivators. But

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<sup>75</sup> Letter of Sigismund III Vasa to Albrecht Wallenstein, 10 November 1627, in *A Sourcebook*, Wilson, 106.

<sup>76</sup> Letter of Albrecht Wallenstein to Sigismund III Vasa, 28 October 1627, in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 106.

whether he emphasized one or the other might depend on the audience he was writing to, giving him a degree of flexibility in explaining himself and his intentions. This example is instructive in its clarity; others were not so clear. Did Sweden really care about the German Protestants? Maybe, but did it care more about securing control of the Baltic for itself? All evidence suggests this, yet Sweden did not scruple to tell the Protestants in the Empire what they wanted to hear. Using a righteous motive to cover a more mundane one was increasingly possible, and increasingly used, as the actual motivations became much harder to defend.

As the Empire's power in the Baltic grew, Sweden became more alarmed, and all focus turned to the port town of Stralsund, situated in the Duchy of Pomerania, which refused to allow an Imperial garrison. Determined to occupy the city, both for prestige and for its naval value, Wallenstein ordered his deputy Hans Georg von Arnim to take it,<sup>77</sup> which he failed to do. As the siege began, the Stralsunders accepted a garrison from Sweden, which was determined to resist this expansion of Imperial power.<sup>78</sup> When the Imperial army refused to break the siege, the stage was set for some kind of clash. The nature of it depended on Sweden: They could decide to abandon Stralsund and leave Germany to its fate, hoping that the Imperial army wouldn't be invading any time soon. Or, they could take the chance to invade while there was a chance of allies and the fighting would be in Germany rather than Sweden. They opted for the latter.

### **Sweden's War with the Emperor**

Sweden has been depicted as entering this war to champion the cause of Protestantism, and certainly they presented themselves that way on occasion to potential Protestant allies. To say that their intervention was caused by the religious situation in the Empire is, however, deeply

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<sup>77</sup> Letter of Albrecht Wallenstein to Duke Bogislav of Pomerania, 17 June 1628, in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 107.

<sup>78</sup> On Swedish thinking, see Jörg-Peter Findeisen, *Axel Oxenstierna: Architekt der schwedischen Großmacht-Ära und Sieger des Dreißigjährigen Krieges* (Gernsbach: Casimir Katz Verlag, 2007) 146-147.

misguided, as their own official and internal statements reveal. The most significant thing on their minds as they entered the war was what they consistently referred to as “security”: the idea that the Emperor’s power had grown too great on the Baltic Coast and that therefore they needed to push him back. To the extent they considered the religious situation in the Empire, they considered it opportune in providing them ready-made German allies in their quest.

“It is an old adage that no one can be at peace any longer than it suits or pleases his neighbor.”<sup>79</sup> So announced Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden upon landing on the coast of Pomerania with a Swedish army. The manifesto he released explaining his conduct pointed the finger of blame squarely at the Emperor’s aggressiveness. He asserts that he had been called upon to intervene by German allies many years ago when the Emperor was engaged in fighting in southern Germany, but that he had assumed at the time that things would be resolved quickly and peace would return. Instead, he claims, all the dire warnings of his German correspondents had proven true as the Emperor brought the war ever closer to the Baltic Sea and with ever more ferocity.<sup>80</sup>

The final straw was the attack of the city of Stralsund, mentioned above. As the manifesto says,

At this any man might perhaps judge that as long as his opponent remained on the opposite side of the border, these things should have been tolerated and borne in patience, lest it seem as if one wished to meddle in another’s affairs. Yet after they chose the seaport of Stralsund as a base for their piracy and moved to extend their power over the sea itself, it was clear that this was a matter of great prejudice or loss to everyone who depended on this sea. . . . And thus it was even less tolerable to the most serene king of Sweden, principally because the rightful protection of this sea had remained in the hands of the kings of Sweden since time immemorial.

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<sup>79</sup> “Gustavus Adolphus, Manifesto on Invading the Empire (July 1630)” in *A Documentary History* Helfferich, 100.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, once the most serene king of Sweden considered that . . . the pleas of the tormented city [Stralsund] were grounded upon divine and secular rights; further considered that the city had always been attached to His Royal Majesty's ancestors, to the kings and empire of Sweden, by the bonds of honor, proximity, common religion, liberty, and commerce; and finally [considered] what great danger would arise, not only to himself and the kingdom of Sweden, but also to all of his neighbors, if anyone, out of private ambition, were to establish in this port a nest from which to launch piratical raids; His Royal Majesty could then not, in any fashion or by any right, wait any longer to come to the assistance of the oppressed, who had so urgently requested help, solace, and advice; nor to act for the benefit of neighbors and friends, but also for both his own and the public and common security.<sup>81</sup>

In the view of Sweden, then, their security had become entwined with the idea of a free and independent Stralsund. Letting it fall would be tantamount to letting the Empire have control over the Baltic Sea, a prospect which, given their alliance and cooperation with Poland, would surely endanger Gustavus's continued hold on the Swedish throne. What the manifesto does not say anything about is religion. Sweden's public declaration of their intentions did not call for some kind of great Protestant crusade against the Emperor's power, but rather depicted the Emperor as a dangerous tyrant on the border, driven by ambition and greed. Yet when it came to picking sides in the war, the members of the Empire shook out roughly along religious lines: Why?

As I noted above, however, though security was viewed as the primary objective, religion was viewed as the key to allies: while there were German states disaffected by the Emperor's religious acts (especially the Edict), there were potential Swedish allies. Because of this, the ideas of security and the restoration of the religious conditions *ante bellum* became entwined. Sweden, in essence, partially adopted the goals of their potential German allies in order to make sure that they would have allies who would stand with them to the end: "we [Sweden] cannot enter into any

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 101-102.

reconciliation with our enemies unless a new religious peace can be reached and confirmed for all of Germany, and our neighbors and friends are returned to their previous state and condition, so that we, through their safety, may be secure and safe in our fatherland.”<sup>82</sup>

What we see in Sweden’s war aim of security is the desire for powerful states, allied to it, which would stand between the Emperor and the Baltic coast. This would prevent the Emperor’s infringing on Sweden’s plans for Baltic dominance. This idea would later become known as “buffer states”: states which stand between rival powers and (ostensibly) prevent them from going to war with each other. Sweden’s quest for what are now known as buffer states was part of a broader shift happening in European thought at the time, away from the universalism characterized by the Empire itself (the idea of a universal European/Christian Monarch was at the core of Imperial ideology) towards what theorists would later call a “balance of power” dynamic, which would dominate European international thought until the twentieth century.<sup>83</sup> In many ways the Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the wars being fought in Germany in 1648, was a crystallizing moment in this transition. The balance of power theory not being articulated yet, however, necessitated righteous cover stories such as Sweden presented. You can see them moving towards the model: they mention neither religion nor German Liberties in their manifesto, yet they cannot break with it completely, seeking allies bound to them by both.

Sweden’s invasion, however, was slow at the beginning, as many northern German princes tried to take a neutral, middle stance, distrusting the Emperor (especially after the Edict of Restitution) but also unwilling to side with Sweden while they were unsure of whether the Swedish would win. After Gustavus’s triumphant victory at the battle of Breitenfeld (1631), however, the

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<sup>82</sup> Letter of Gustavus Adolphus to Axel Oxenstierna, 8 October 1630, in *A Documentary History* Helfferich, 104.

<sup>83</sup> For more information on the ideal of the Emperor as the Monarch of Christendom, see especially Wilson, *Heart of Europe: A History of the Holy Roman Empire* (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press 2016).

prospect of Swedish victory looked much better. Both because of their distrust of the Emperor and because Gustavus didn't tolerate neutrality, many German princes, including the electors of Brandenburg and Saxony, allied themselves to Sweden after the battle. Saxony was by far the most important.<sup>84</sup>

As Imperial forces approached, John George could have chosen the other side, helping push Sweden out. Instead, he chose to side with the foreign aggressor against the Emperor. The only reasonable conclusion to draw is that he was beyond the point of accepting Ferdinand's actions. From the Imperial Ban on Frederick to the transfer of his electoral title to the Edict of Restitution, the Emperor had acted unilaterally to reorder the state of affairs in the Empire profoundly, increasing his power and diminishing the strength of the Protestant faith. John George could not stand by any longer and allow it to happen, but he was far from enthused about cooperating with a foreign aggressor who listed religious security for Germany as a secondary goal. He was on board with Sweden now, but would not hesitate to jump ship when the chance came, A sure sign that they were fighting different wars: Saxony for constitutional greivances, Sweden for conquest and hegemony under the name of "security".<sup>85</sup>

### France's War

In addition to German princes, Sweden had one big ally: France. France had been lurking around the edges of events since the early days, invited to join The Hague Alliance yet unable at the time, and now it was finally getting ready to intervene more significantly. Their interest in events in Germany was broadly similar to Sweden's: contain the Emperor's power. France faced Spain below them, the Spanish Netherlands above them, and the Empire to the east of them.

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<sup>84</sup> Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 476-487.

<sup>85</sup> Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 477-480.

Habsburgs all around.<sup>86</sup> They feared, not unreasonably, that a united Habsburg attack on them would be the end of an independent France, and thus were always seeking ways to weaken either side. For this reason, France had long supported the Dutch, and now they sought to support Sweden through subsidies.<sup>87</sup> They did not, however, join Sweden in declaring war on the Emperor, preferring not to get directly involved in the war when it began.

Not only was France Catholic, its prime minister was a cardinal in the Catholic Church! Cardinal Richelieu, the French Prime Minister, was not known to be particularly devout, however, and practiced an early form of what could be called *realpolitik*. Nevertheless, cooperating with Protestants to overthrow (or at least to fight) the Catholic Emperor caused a great deal of consternation inside the French administration, and partly to ameliorate this, but also for substantive and strategic reasons, the alliance between France and Sweden included clauses which ensured that catholic lands captured by Sweden would be allowed to remain catholic, and that Bavaria and the Catholic League were to be treated as neutrals provided they conducted themselves as such.<sup>88</sup> At the same time as France was moving to support Sweden with significant subsidies, they were also developing a much closer relationship with Bavaria, the Emperor's ally since the Bohemian war, concluding the Treaty of Fontainebleau just a few months later. The treaty, which was strictly secret, pledged France and Bavaria to mutual defense and, significantly, pledged France to recognize Bavaria's electoral title and to defend it.<sup>89</sup>

What, exactly, was France trying to accomplish by apparently playing both sides? This is where it's important to remember that there aren't two sides in this war, but at least three: The Emperor, Sweden, and Bavaria. You could even make a case that the war had as many sides as

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<sup>86</sup> The Spanish Empire was at this point ruled by the Habsburg family as well as the Holy Roman Empire.

<sup>87</sup> "The Treaty of Barwalde, 23 January 1631, and the Guarantee for Bavaria, 15 January 1631" *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 140.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>89</sup> "The Treaty of Fontainebleau, 30 May 1631" in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 142.

actors, because every power was looking to get out of it with maximal advantage regardless of the other actors. France was trying to weaken the Emperor himself, and part of their plan appears to have been the creation of a neutral block in the Empire. If they could convince Bavaria and the Catholic League not to support the Emperor in his war with Sweden, the Emperor would be much more overwhelmed and much less free to intervene in the Spanish-Dutch war, which the French were preparing to formally enter. And if that strategic goal lined up with defending Catholicism in the Empire as well, so much the better. The problem with this plan was that Maximilian's gains, as we've seen, depended on Ferdinand's victory, making it nearly impossible for him to act truly independently. He had bound his aims to the Emperor's and not even France could change that. No one else could guarantee him the kind of liberties he wanted within the Empire.

The war, however, did not go according to French plans. Gustavus Adolphus, one of the greatest leaders in Swedish military history, was killed at the Battle of Lützen in late 1632, leaving the Swedish state temporarily rudderless and Swedish allies confused. The Swedish heir was a 6-year-old girl, Queen Christina. Luckily, Gustavus and his chancellor Axel Oxenstierna had pushed through significant administrative reforms before his death, allowing Oxenstierna and the Swedish government to continue in his absence, and Oxenstierna was also meeting with delegates of the myriad allies Sweden had accrued in Germany over the course of the past two years. Oxenstierna therefore assumed leadership of the Swedish state and organized Sweden's allies (with the notable exception of Saxony) into the League of Heilbronn, which would fight until "German liberty, and a respect for the principles and constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, are once again firmly established, the restoration of the Evangelical [Protestant] Estates is secured, and a just and certain

religious and profane peace . . . is obtained and concluded, and also until the royal dignity and majesty of the crown of Sweden has been assured of an appropriate satisfaction.”<sup>90</sup>

It is significant that the two goals, restoration of religious peace through a fundamental reassertion of the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire and the satisfaction due to the crown of Sweden, were put in that order and not the other. It reflects the changed balance of power in the Empire. With Gustavus dead, the Swedish position was in significant danger of collapsing altogether. Oxenstierna’s diplomacy didn’t exactly make it safe, but it stopped an immediate and catastrophic collapse. Sweden could continue to go on fighting, but at the price of pushing its German allies’ priorities to the fore. Oxenstierna, as the controller of the largest armies in Germany, was named the Director of the League, giving him (and his principal Swedish subordinates) direction of the war effort. A compromise was of necessity struck in Heilbronn, and it would not prove wholly successful.

Just three years later, in 1635, the military situation looked dire. The Swedish forces had been largely smashed at the end of the last year at the battle of Nördlingen, and as the French looked on, they decided now was the time to intervene; any later and the opportunity might be lost. Almost uniquely, they moved not when the chess pieces seemed most advantageous, but when they seemed at risk of moving into an extremely disadvantageous position. Their war existed separately from Sweden’s, because their main concern was the Spanish (Spanish forces moving through the Empire had been instrumental in smashing the Swedish at Nördlingen). In fact, on 19 May, 1635, France declared war on Spain, coming into conflict with the Emperor only incidentally as a Spanish ally.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “The League of Heilbronn, 13 April 1633” in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 179-180.

<sup>91</sup> “French declaration of war against Spain, 19 May 1635” in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 217.

Cardinal Richelieu, Prime Minister of France, laid out all of his reasons for declaring war in a memo to the King near the end of 1634. As he states:

It is certain that if the [Protestant] party is entirely ruined, the brunt of the power of the House of Austria will fall on France. It is also certain that after the recent setback [Nördlingen], the party cannot subsist if it is not sustained by present and notable help . . . it being certain that without such help, all the imperial cities would disarm, Saxony would come to terms, and each one would think of his own affairs so that this great party would soon become a shadow of its former self. . . . It is also certain that the worst thing that France can do is to conduct herself in such a manner that she would remain alone to bear the brunt of the emperor and Spain, which will be inevitable if she does not gather up the remainder of this great party<sup>92</sup>

So, with France moving to declare war on Spain and to fight on all fronts, the Spanish would not be able to assist the Emperor as he dealt with the Swedes, who took the breathing room to reorganize themselves and return to full strength. All the players were now on the field, and their various wars each depended on the others. There would be many more years of war, but it was now a matter of maneuvering for the most advantageous peace. Negotiations would be nearly constantly ongoing, resulting in two major peace accords: The Peace of Prague and the Peace of Westphalia. The Peace of Prague clearly demonstrates that there were dramatically different agendas at play, and therefore different wars. In the Peace of Prague, detailed below, many of Sweden's allies broke from them, leaving Sweden with only a few partners to continue the war. If Sweden had joined an already existing war to support its allies' agendas, as they would have if Sweden had really intervened, as historians have claimed, instead of invading, then the war would have been over. It wasn't, because Sweden had its own agenda that existed independently of its allies, and was fighting its own war.

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<sup>92</sup> "Advice of Cardinal Richelieu of France" in *A Documentary History* Helfferich, 151.

## Moving Towards Peace

The most significant peace accord before the end of war was the Peace of Prague, signed in 1635. The peace was negotiated between Saxony, driven to the Swedish side and always uncomfortable there, and the Emperor, who realized that he was facing too many enemies at one time. Sweden, despite their setbacks, was still a powerful enemy, though in the aftermath of Nördlingen their German allies were their greatest weapon. Ferdinand II (who died in 1637, leaving the final phase of war to his son Ferdinand III) sought to isolate Sweden from their allies and thereby bring the war to a far quicker end, especially considering the intervention of France, which added a great deal more pressure for the Emperor to deal with.<sup>93</sup>

The peace was declared to be open to all Imperial princes who wanted to sign on and accept its terms, and many did. Its terms seemed generous, but only because of how far from moderate Ferdinand had been previously in his reign. The *declaratio Ferdinandi*, never official Imperial law, was codified, though the so-called normative date, the day before which Catholic church lands needed to have been sequestrated to have been sequestrated legally, was moved up from 1555 to November 1627, which effectively rescinded the Edict (for all those princes who signed the peace) and stabilized the religious situation in the Empire as it had been, broadly speaking, before the Bohemian rebellion (note how very far we have come from then). The peace also resolved the Palatine question by confirming everything the Emperor had already done and altering nothing, except that Frederick V's widow (he died in 1632) was to be given a lifetime pension. The final important aspect of the treaty was that all princes who signed it were obliged to

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<sup>93</sup> Parker, 142-143.

unite their armies with the Imperial army to drive out the Swedes and anyone else disturbing the peace.<sup>94</sup>

With Saxony now turned against them and many more princes flocking to the Imperial peace to ensure that they did not lose everything in the final agreement, Sweden faced a difficult position. French arms were primarily focused elsewhere and now the Imperial forces arrayed against them were growing significantly. The minutes of a meeting of the Swedish Council of the Realm, at which Oxenstierna was not present, on 17 September show that they resolved to order Oxenstierna to accept peace, saying “If he [Oxenstierna] can obtain any territory, that would be the best; if not, to take satisfaction in money; and if he cannot get that, to try every means consistent with reputation and safety to *extricate himself from the German business* [emphasis added].”<sup>95</sup> However, the Council minutes for several sessions in October of the same year show a raging debate, with some pushing back: Sweden, though in dire straits, must obtain peace with honor, which means some kind of satisfaction.<sup>96</sup> Short of that, it should not make peace.<sup>97</sup> Others, however, still pushed for immediate peace, arguing that “The longer the German business lasts, the worse for us.”<sup>98</sup> They worry that the army is made up almost entirely of Germans, and if they try to fight Saxony the army will melt away. Despite their inability to agree on whether or not to accept peace on any terms, the council did agree to open negotiations.<sup>99</sup>

However, in the event, the Council did not accept a peace offer made in 1636. By then Oxenstierna, indisputably the leader of Sweden, had returned and stiffened the Council’s resolve, reporting on an improved situation in Germany and reminding them of the reasons which

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<sup>94</sup> “The Peace of Prague (June 12, 1635)” in *A Documentary History* Helfferich, 166-176.

<sup>95</sup> “Minutes of the Council of the Realm, September-October 1635” in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 210.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

impelled them to war in the first place. By 1 August 1636, the Council was willing to reject peace in order to continue fighting with the few German allies they still had.<sup>100</sup> And so, the war raged on.

As the fighting continued through the end of the 1630s, however, the participants became ever more exhausted and unwilling to continue on. Their armies marched through ever more devastated lands, and the myriad small rulers of Germany were desperately looking for any way to get out of the conflict and save their lands and peoples from further depredation. As the war neared its end, major powers were increasingly willing to sign armistices with small powers, provided they stayed strictly neutral in a way previously not thinkable.<sup>101</sup> This change in the conception of neutrality was representative of the broader shift in thinking discussed earlier, as Europe transitioned towards a more modern balance-of-power conception of international relations. The moralistic and righteous outrages which supposedly started the wars were being forgotten as pragmatism dominated. No longer did the Elector of Brandenburg have to choose, as Gustavus Adolphus had framed it, between “God and the Devil.” Now it was enough for him not to help the other side, because this wasn’t really a war between God and the Devil; it was a war over land and power. Concessions could be made for peace to be won.

Eventually this desire for peace led to the Hamburg Peace Preliminaries in 1641, which decided that the cities of Munster and Osnabruck, in the Duchy of Westphalia, would be the home to peace negotiations between all involved in any war that touched on Germany, including the Emperor and all of the Imperial princes, Sweden, France, Spain, and the Netherlands, with Denmark serving as mediator.<sup>102</sup> It is especially noteworthy that Denmark served as mediator at the Congress, given that, if you consider the Thirty Years War as a single war, they were technically a

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<sup>100</sup> “Resolution of the Regency rejecting the Peace, 1 August 1636” in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 211-212.

<sup>101</sup> “True between Sweden and Brandenburg, 15 June 1644” in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 281-283.

<sup>102</sup> “The Hamburg Peace Preliminaries, 25 December 1641” in *A Sourcebook* Wilson, 280.

participant. They may have signed their own treaty to back out, but if you count the war from 1618 forward then it seems quite strange for a power which clearly joined on one side to be considered a neutral arbiter. The reason they were, of course, is because they had never participated in the wars that they were there to resolve. The Emperor was there to negotiate with Sweden and France, primarily, along with a few of their holdout German allies. Denmark had never been part of either war, and thus could mediate neutrally. All that was left was the negotiating. Seven years of it.

### The Peace(s)

Three peace treaties were signed in Westphalia in 1648, though only two are generally considered to fall under the rubric of “The Peace of Westphalia.” The third, not considered part of it, is a peace treaty signed in May between Spain and the Dutch, which the Spanish finally agreed to recognize as an independent state. The ending of the Dutch war was significant and should be considered part of the Peace of Westphalia because without the Spanish-Dutch war the involvement of the Frederick V would have had little effect on the Bohemian rebellion; it was his geographical position in connection with the Spanish-Dutch war that drew the Spanish and the Dutch into Germany, extending their own conflict and allowing ever more participants to find a pretext for attacking the Emperor. Without the Spanish-Dutch conflict there would not have been anything that historians could label a “Thirty Years War.”

The Spanish-Dutch Treaty of Munster is not traditionally included as part of the Peace of Westphalia primarily because it was not signed on the same day. Spain and The Netherlands concluded peace in May; the other two treaties, ending the wars between the Empire and Sweden and the Empire and France, respectively, were concluded and signed on the same day, 24 October 1648. These two treaties, the Treaty of Osnabruck and the Treaty of Munster, dealt with all the

outstanding issues in the Empire, giving territorial and financial concessions to Sweden and France so that both could go home with their heads held high, and reorganizing the Imperial Constitution and the Religious Peace to accommodate the changes the wars had wrought.

The normative date, set in November 1627 at the Peace of Prague, was moved back to 1624, allowing the Protestants to keep more territory than if all the Catholic usurpations in the intervening years had been allowed. The issue of the Palatinate was finally resolved, with Frederick V's eldest son and heir, Karl Ludwig, legitimized as the new Elector Palatine and given back the Rhenish territory of his father, though he was forced to part with the central German lands. It should also be noted that his electoral title was newly created; instead of 7, there would now be 8 Electors in the Holy Roman Empire, as Maximilian of Bavaria was allowed to retain the title he had been granted as a hereditary one. Importantly, Calvinism was recognized as an acceptable faith for rulers in the Empire, meaning that all protestant rulers could now rest easily that they were not in danger of getting their lands sequestrated suddenly and without warning. The authority of the Estates within the Empire was also reset to where it had been and more strictly formalized, including allowing all the individual estates to conduct independent foreign policies, depriving the Emperor of the ability to act as the Empire's sole international negotiator. The major Protestant princes who had rebelled during the past 30 years were given amnesty and compensation, significantly enlarging the territory of many of them.

Bohemia was not mentioned in the Peace. It was mentioned in the Peace of Prague, though only to say that the Emperor asserted his absolute right under the principle "whose rule, his religion" to decide to recatholicize those lands if he saw fit (he most certainly did). The concerns of that small group of people, led by Count Thurn, who had started what we know as the Thirty Years War, faded into the background, forgotten in the peace. Forgotten because they did not spark this war. What was resolved at Westphalia was not a war that had started in 1618, it was

three wars, one of which had started long before (that between Spain and the Dutch) and two which had started after, the wars with Sweden (1630) and France (1635).

A new religious peace was promulgated for the Empire because the Swedes and the French had played upon existing tensions within the Empire to gain allies. The religious peace was included in both the Empire's treaties with Sweden and France, treaties which nevertheless remained separate because Sweden and France shared allies, not goals. Each was given different territorial concessions and allowed different rights in the Empire. The tangle of interests and motives in these wars was complex, but the fact that everything has become entangled with everything else should not deceive us into seeing what happened as one war. It was many, each started because the international chessboard of European politics had been rearranged by the last.<sup>103</sup>

### Conclusion

The idea of a Thirty Years War brings a unity to events which obscures our understanding. It implies that there was some kind of consistent fight across thirty years, when the only thing consistent across the entire period was that there was fighting. The combatants changed and their reasons for being on the field at all changed. In the case of Saxony most notably, their side changed. All of this confusion about motives and goals and the awkwardness of describing an endless series of 'interventions' in a war whose original point has been entirely subsumed by the agendas of outside powers can be alleviated if we accept that the 'Thirty Years War' was, in actuality, four different wars. Without the 'intervention' of Denmark, Frederick and his allies would have been utterly defeated. Without Sweden's 'intervention,' there would have been no

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<sup>103</sup> Specifics for the contents of the peaces are widely available, but for a concise summary and the documents themselves see "The Peace of Westphalia" in *A Sourcebook*, ed. and trans. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 303-323.

fighting in Germany. Without France providing a distraction, Sweden would not have been able to continue the fight. None of these so-called interventions were staged to save an already extant cause that was intrinsically valued by the intervening power; rather, they were all staged so that the intervening power could take maximum advantage for itself from a situation created by the already ongoing or recently finished wars.

The difficulty of deconstructing the narrative is that it requires repeating it so as to point out the places where it doesn't make sense. The very act of repeating it seems to give it some validity. I cannot undo the idea of the Thirty Years War without patiently walking through the history of the supposed war, making it perhaps seem as if the narrative made sense and fit together. My contention is not that the narrative *should not* make sense, but rather that the common conception of a Thirty Years War is not best suited to facilitating understanding of the period. That Denmark's and Sweden's and France's wars with the Emperor can all be explained within the framework of the Thirty Years War narrative doesn't entail that that narrative is best suited for explaining them. It is a fundamentally clunky narrative which requires either an enormous amount of background information or frequent regression so as to explain the reason that this new and unexpected and, frankly, nonsensical seeming intervention actually makes perfect sense. It is a narrative which takes readers and researchers alike down a seeming infinity of specialized rabbit holes to understand every facet and feature of thirty years of economic, political and religious life in Europe, which is not necessary. To describe Sweden's attack on the Emperor doesn't require describing the history of the Empire leading up to 1618 and then walking through the early part of the 'war'. All it requires is to know Sweden's situation and the actions Wallenstein was taking to invade Copenhagen. Similarly, explaining Denmark's intervention doesn't require explaining the Bohemian revolt, because Christian IV didn't care about the Bohemian revolt. He wasn't attacking the Emperor to restore Frederick to the throne. Explaining Denmark's intervention only requires

explaining Denmark's desire for certain north German territories and the Empire's general state of unrest.

A similar logic applies to France, which is perhaps the best case. Explaining France's intervention not only does not require explaining Bohemia, it *does require* explaining Spain's war with the Netherlands, a conflict quite independent from the 'Thirty Years War'. France's actions were aimed towards securing their self-interest in terms of neutralizing the threat of Spain and containing the threat of the Habsburgs, and those motives exist independent of what Sweden or the Bohemian nobility were doing; Sweden's war and the constitutional grievances of German princes were merely swords in France's hand.

Not only is it possible to explain each war without reference to the supposed starting point of the conflict and without substantial reference to the motives or goals of other actors, it is in fact unhelpful to do so. To try to explain France's motives or goals in relation to Sweden's wouldn't make sense; they wanted fundamentally different things and their only area of overlap was the goals they adopted to satisfy or recruit German allies, who were so far from not caring about or pursuing Sweden's or France's goals that they opposed them. Brandenburg was temporarily allied with Sweden despite the fact that Sweden had claimed Pomerania, which Brandenburg otherwise stood to inherit entirely. Saxony joined Sweden to try and force Ferdinand to back off his hardline Catholic positions, not because Saxony wanted Sweden to become the new hegemon of the Empire or because Saxony really cared whether or not Sweden felt safe from Imperial invasion. War often creates strange bedfellows, but not to this degree. The differing agendas of the participants, the side-switching endemic to imperial princes and epitomized by Saxony, and the utterly unconnected nature of the motivations of the major powers all point to the idea that what happened between 1618-1648 was not one war but four.



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