



## THE THIRTY YEARS WAR

by Sara Tusek

*"This was the most devastating European war in history, until World War One arrived and changed the very yardstick by which wars were measured. Unlike earlier extended wars, such as the Hundred Years War, which were marked by truces and lulls, this war was widespread and nearly continual. It took place mainly in Germany, but spilled over into other theatres. With a couple of post-scripts, the end of the war also is often used to mark the end of the Reformation era as well."*

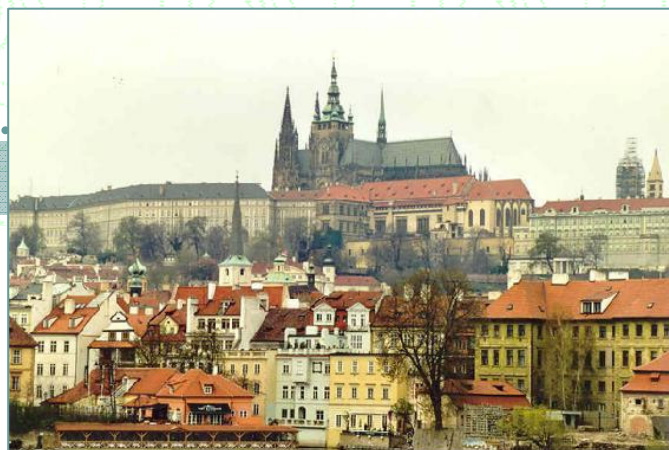
*From <http://www.boisestate.edu/courses/reformation/germany/30yw.shtml>*

### The Second Defenestration of Prague

Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia Rudolph II (1576-1612), whose palace in Prague was a European center for the arts and sciences, died in 1612; his brother Matthias, an ardent Catholic, succeeded Rudolph. Matthias promoted the Catholic religion, seeking to lessen the influence of the Protestants, who had come into power in Bohemia after the martyrdom of Jan Hus and the failed crusades against the militant Bohemian Hussite armies. In 1617, Matthias appointed two new bishops who seized the lands on which Protestant churches had been built.

Bohemian nobles feared that the Emperor was curtailing their rights, which were tied to their Protestantism. They took action: on May 23, 1618, a group of nobles entered the chambers of the City Council of Prague (which was loyal to the Emperor). The nobles laid hands on three Councilmen, and pitched them out of the window. It was three stories to the ground, yet none of the men died. (In Catholic versions of the event, angels appeared to lower the men to safety; in Protestant versions, there was a dung heap below and they fell into that.)

The Bohemian nobles signaled their open defiance of the emperor, issuing an appeal to the Bohemian nation, justifying their actions and calling for support under the title of the Bohemian Estates. They raised troops, tried to raise taxes, and obtained money by seizing the lands of Catholics



wherever they could. By June, Bohemia was in rebellion, igniting the Thirty Years War.

### The Winter King and the Battle of White Mountain

Emperor Matthias died in March 1619, and was succeeded as King of Bohemia by the Catholic Ferdinand of Styria, Matthias' choice. The Protestant nobles of the Estates of Bohemia refused to recognize Ferdinand as their king; fearing an invasion by Imperial forces, the nobles formed the Protestant Bohemian Confederacy with Moravia, Silesia and Lusatia as defense against the Emperor's armies.

In August 1619, the general parliament of the Bohemian Confederacy declared that Ferdinand had forfeited the Bohemian throne, thus formally severing all ties between Bohemia and the Habsburgs. On August 26, the Bohemian Confederacy elected the Protestant Elector of Palantine, Frederick V, as new King of Bohemia.

Frederick's nickname, "Winter King," reflects his very short reign; he and his wife Elizabeth were forced to flee the country in November 1620 after the Battle of White Mountain (*Bílá hora* in Czech). At White Mountain, an army of 15,000 Bohemians and mercenaries were routed by 27,000 men of the combined armies of Ferdinand II and the Catholic League. Twenty-seven Bohemian nobles were tried and executed on what is called "the Day of Blood" by Protestants at Prague's Old Town Square; 27 crosses are inlaid in the cobblestone as a tribute to those victims. An estimated five-sixths of the Bohemian nobility went into exile soon after the Battle of White Mountain, and their properties were confiscated. The battle marked the end of the Bohemian period of the Thirty Years' War. *To p. 2*



**Religion and Politics Clash**

The conflict that began with a defenestration in Bohemia widened into a “fight to the death” among various nobles, armies, empires, and nations in Europe. First, Styria and Savoy become involved in the war, for their own political and religious reasons; later, Sweden, England, Italy, the Dutch Republic, Spain, Poland, Denmark, France, and present-day Germany, all eventually became embroiled in the Thirty Years War.

This war began with questions about religion: would the nascent Protestant church be allowed to co-exist with the established Roman Catholic church? Could the historic church of Jesus, the “one true catholic church,” stamp out the Protestant heresies and restore the church to unity? Or was it too late to uproot the changes planted by church reformers such as Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox?

But as nations were drawn into the war, the religious imperatives that initially sparked the Thirty Years War were joined by equally urgent political and economic factors. The bedrock foundation of Europe was changing rapidly and decisively, as the unity of political and religious power which had existed since Constantine’s conversion to Christianity crumbled into dust.

The Middle Ages perceived that earthly political authority derived from spiritual legitimacy; the Pope crowned kings, not the other way around. But the Middle Ages were over. The European era known as the Enlightenment was gathering momentum, bringing profoundly

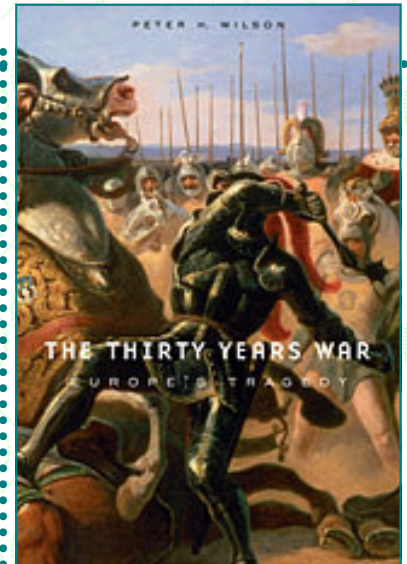
different ways of structuring the relationship between the nation-state and the Church, between the group and the individual, and between scientific evidence and religious faith.

The Thirty Years War not only pitted Protestant against Catholic, but called into question the source of legitimate power in human endeavors. Such new notions as deliberately-designed nationhood, direct democracy and free markets (not controlled by king or church) followed this war.

The battles of the Thirty Years War redefined the political boundaries of Europe. The final treaties of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 involved the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand III (Hapsburg), the Kingdoms of Spain, France, Sweden, the Dutch Republic and their allies, the Princes of the Holy Roman Empire, and sovereigns of the Free imperial cities.

The war resulted in the deaths of millions of Europeans and the destruction of vast swathes of land all over Europe. In the areas affected by the war, by 1648 there was a 40% population loss in the countryside, with 33% loss in the cities. Before the war about 151,000 farmsteads existed in Bohemia, while only 50,000 remained after the year 1648. The number of inhabitants in Bohemia decreased from 3 million to 800,000.

Yet on the positive side, the Thirty Years War marks the end of the great conflicts of the Reformation and the closing of the era of great mercenary armies. The continent enjoyed peace and the development of a highly-civilized culture for several centuries after the Thirty Years War.



By Peter H. Wilson, Harvard University Press, 2009

“A deadly continental struggle, the Thirty Years War devastated seventeenth-century Europe, killing nearly a quarter of all Germans and laying waste to towns and countryside alike.

When defiant Bohemians tossed the Habsburg emperor’s envoys from the castle windows in Prague in 1618, the Holy Roman Empire struck back with a vengeance. Bohemia was ravaged by mercenary troops in the first battle of a conflagration that would engulf Europe from Spain to Sweden. The sweeping narrative encompasses dramatic events and unforgettable individuals—the sack of Magdeburg; the Dutch revolt; the Swedish militant king Gustavus Adolphus; the imperial generals, opportunistic Wallenstein and pious Tilly; and crafty diplomat Cardinal Richelieu. In a major reassessment, Wilson argues that religion was not the catalyst, but one element in a lethal stew of political, social, and dynastic forces that fed the conflict.”

By war’s end a recognizably modern Europe had been created, but at what price? The Thirty Years War condemned the Germans to two centuries of internal division and international impotence and became a benchmark of brutality for centuries. As late as the 1960s, Germans placed it ahead of both world wars and the Black Death as their country’s greatest disaster.

reviewed at <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674036345>

