The Thirty Years' Wars

1618-1648 & 1733-1763

Most textbooks refer to two different series of events as the "Thirty Years' War. One occurs in the first half of the 17th century and the other in the middle of the 18th century. You must be certain that you do not confuse these two events. Following is a summary of both wars. Use this page to help keep the ideas and events straight.

The Thirty Years' Wars 1618-1648

The Origins of the Conflict

The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 had brought a temporary truce in the religious conflict in the German states. This settlement had recognized only Lutherans and Roman Catholics, but Calvinism had subsequently made gains in a number of states. The Calvinists began to demand recognition of their rights. The Thirty Years' War began, however, as a direct result of a conflict in the Hapsburg-ruled Kingdom of Bohemia.

The Bohemian Period (1618-1625)

In 1617, the Bohemian Diet elected Ferdinand of Styria as king of Bohemia. Ferdinand, a member of the Hapsburg family, became Holy Roman emperor two years later, as Ferdinand II (r. 1619-1637). He was an ardent supporter of the Catholic cause.

Ferdinand's election alarmed Bohemian Calvinists, who feared the loss of their religious rights. In May 1618, the Calvinist revolt began when the rebels threw two Catholic members of the Bohemian royal council from a window some seventy feet above the ground. Both councillors fell into a pile of manure, and suffered only minor injuries. This incident became known as the Defenestration of Prague.

Emperor Ferdinand II won the support of Maximilian I (1573-1651) of Bavaria, the leader of Catholic League. Troops of the Holy Roman Empire and Bavaria commanded by Baron Tilly (1559-1632), invaded Bohemia. Tilly won a decisive victory over the forces of Fredreick V at the Battle of White Mountain, near Prague. Frederick fled to Holland.

Emperor Ferdinand II regained the Bohemian throne, Maximilian of Bavaria acquired the Palatinate. The Bohemian phase of the Thirty Years' War thus ended with a Hapsburg and Catholic victory.

The Danish Period (1625-1629)

The Danish period of the conflict began when King Christian IV (r. 1588-1648), the Lutheran ruler of Denmark supported the Protestants in 1625 against Ferdinand II.

King Christian was also the duke of Holstein and a prince of the Holy Roman Empire.

Ferdinand secured the assistance of Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583-1634), who raised an independent army of 50,000. The combined forces of Wallenstein and Tilly defeated Christian in 1626 and then occupied the duchy of Holstein.
Taking control of Prague, the rebels declared Ferdinand deposed and elected a new king, Frederick V (1596-1632), the elector of the Palatinate in western Germany and a Calvinist. The German Protestant Union, which Frederick headed, provided some aid to the Bohemian rebels.

The Treaty of Lubeck of 1629 restored Holstein to Christian IV, but the Danish king pledged not to intervene further in German affairs. The Danish period of the war, like the Bohemian period, thus ended with a Hapsburg and Catholic victory.

The Swedish Period (1630-1635)

The Catholic victories alarmed Protestants almost everywhere. The victories of the emperor endangered the independence of the German princes, while the French Bourbons were concerned about the growth of Hapsburg power.

The new Protestant leader became King Gustavus Adolphus (r. 1611-1632) of Sweden. In the summer of 1630, the Swedes moved into Germany. Later in the year, France and Sweden signed an alliance, and France entered the war against the Hapsburgs.

The Thirty Years’ War had begun primarily as a German conflict over religious issues. The conflict now became a wider European war, fought mainly over political issues, as Catholic France and Protestant Sweden joined forces against the Catholic Hapsburgs.

During the early stages of the conflict, the Swedes won several notable victories. Tilly, the imperial commander, fell in battle in 1632.

Emperor Ferdinand II called on Wallenstein to form a new army. In November 1632, at the Battle of Lutzen, the Swedes defeated Wallenstein, but Gustavus Adolphus was killed in the fighting.

When Wallenstein entered into secret negotiations with Sweden and France, he was assassinated a few days later. The emperor's army decisively defeated the Swedes at Nordlingen in southern Germany.

The Treaty of Prague

The deaths of both Gustavus Adolphus and Wallenstein, together with the exhaustion of both the Holy Roman emperor and the German Protestant princes, brought an end to the Swedish period of the war. The Treaty of Prague, 1635 generally strengthened the Hapsburgs and weakened the power of the German princes.

The French Period (1635-1648)

The settlement reached in the Treaty of Prague was wrecked by the French decision to intervene directly in the war. Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), the chief minister of King Louis XIII (r. 161~1643) of France wanted to weaken the power of the Hapsburgs and take the province of Alsace from the Holy Roman Empire. In addition, Richelieu was plotting against Spain and its Hapsburg king, Philip IV (r. 1621-1665).

Both in Germany and in the Franco-Spanish conflict, the fortunes of war fluctuated. For a time, the forces of the Holy Roman emperor, aided by King Maximilian of Bavaria and other Catholic princes, more than held their
own against the Swedes and German Protestants. France's success against Spain, enabled the French to send larger forces into Germany. This helped tip the balance in favor of the emperor's foes.

Emperor Ferdinand II died in 1637 and was succeeded by his son, Ferdinand III (r. 1637-1657). Peace negotiations began in 1641, but made little progress until the death of Cardinal Richelieu in 1642 and the French occupation of Bavaria in 1646.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648)

The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 ended the Thirty Years' War. Sweden acquired western Pomerania, Eastern Pomerania was assigned to Brandenburg. France annexed part of Alsace and some nearby territory.

The settlement formally recognized the independence of the Dutch Republic and Switzerland and granted the German states the right to make treaties and alliances, thereby further weakening the authority of the Holy Roman emperor.

In religious affairs, the Peace of Westphalia expanded the Peace of Augsburg to include Calvinists, as well as Catholics and Lutherans.

The Peace of Westphalia ended the Holy Roman emperor's hope of restoring both his own power and the Catholic faith throughout the empire. The empire was now fragmented into a number of virtually independent states.

The end of the Thirty Years' War left Hapsburg Spain isolated.

The French war against Spain continued until 1659, when the Treaty of the Pyrenees awarded France part of the Spanish Netherlands and some territory in northern Spain. King Philip IV of Spain agreed to the marriage of his daughter Maria Theresa to King Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715) of France.

Together, the Peace of Westphalia and the Treaty of the Pyrenees established France as the predominant power on the European continent.