23 May 1618

The Defenestration of Prague

The Start of the Thirty Years War

This business is like to put all Christendom in combustion.

Dudley Carleton, England’s ambassador in The Hague: 18 September 1619

The armed conflict between the Catholic and Protestant powers of the Holy Roman Empire started when a delegation of local noblemen from the Bohemian representative estates forced their way into Prague’s Hradcany castle. They had arrived to protest against the imposition of Catholic policies on Bohemia (now part of the modern Czech Republic), a country inherited in 1526 by the Habsburgs as part of their family domain. The rebellion led by the reformer Jan Huss (1369–1415), along with his subsequent martyrdom, had made Bohemia fertile territory for Protestantism. But the Catholic archduke Ferdinand of Styria, cousin and heir to the Holy Roman Emperor Matthias (r. 1612–19), had pursued a policy of intolerant Catholicism since becoming heir presumptive to the kingdom of Bohemia. Jaroslav von Martinitz and Wilhelm von Slavata, the two regents who governed Bohemia in the name of the Habsburg king and emperor, were now confronted by Bohemian fury. Attacks on Protestant churches had violated the religious toleration enshrined in the charter of 1609 granted to Bohemia by the emperor, Rudolf II. Ferdinand had also assumed the right of succession to Bohemia’s throne without prior election by the country’s representative estates. The ensuing violence was inspired by a similar defenestration during the Hussite rebellion. The regents were thrown out of a window and fell more than fifty feet into the castle ditch, where a dungheap broke their fall.

Count Heinrich von Thurn led the revolt of the Bohemian Protestants and the Protestant Union sent an army commanded by Count Ernst von Mansfeld to support von Thurn’s rebels. Wenceslas William von Ruppa formed a provisional government which replaced the Habsburg administration. The Evangelical Union of German Protestant princes, led by Frederick, the Elector Palatine, prepared to confront the Catholic League of German princes led by Maximilian, elector of Bavaria. The death in March 1619 of the conciliatory emperor
Matthias aggravated the crisis since Ferdinand, now reigning as King Ferdinand II of Bohemia, was also elected Matthias’ successor as emperor. The Bohemian estates deposed Ferdinand and then elected as king the Elector Frederick V (the Count Palatine) who, in November, was crowned in Prague’s St Vitus’ cathedral. Radical Calvinists had followed Frederick to Prague and ‘purged’ the churches of images, pictures and statues. Frederick’s queen, Elisabeth, the daughter of James I of England, objected to the Catholic crucifix on Prague’s Charles bridge, describing it as a ‘naked bather’, and had it thrown into the River Vltava. The graphic imagery of printed flysheets spread news of the iconoclasm and defenestration across Europe. Meanwhile, Frederick presented himself as a champion of European Protestantism, and the Spanish branch of the Habsburgs, drawing on the resources of its possessions in the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, prepared to intervene as Catholic defenders.

Ever since the Peace of Augsburg (1555) the German states had developed along separate religious lines with the population of each state followed their rulers’ confessional allegiances. The arrangement meant peace of a kind but no true religious tolerance (except in the imperial cities) and it applied only to Catholics and Lutherans since the provisions excluded Calvinists. German churches, along with educational and welfare programmes, were administered by the princes and the Christian welfare state acquired its German roots. The emperor Rudolph II, a cultivated and introspective fantasist, was based at the Hradcany palace, where he surrounded himself with astronomers and alchemists. Rudolph introduced Counter-Reformation policies into the empire’s Catholic territories but it was his more active brother, and imperial successor, Matthias who attempted the restoration of Austrian Habsburg authority. Meanwhile, Calvinism became an ever more dynamic presence in the territory of the Electoral Palatinate in the west, which became a centre linking the German, French, Dutch and Bohemian members of an international Calvinist network. Lutheranism, whose chief advocate was Electoral Saxony, aimed at state stability and preached obedience to the ruler’s will. Ferdinand, while archduke of Austria, had been responsible for a brutal extermination of Protestantism in Styria, Carinthia and Carniola from 1596 onwards. Maximilian I of Bavaria established a Catholic League in 1609 with Spanish support while Frederick IV of the Palatinate founded an equivalent Protestant Union of German princes in 1608 linked to France, England and the United Provinces. As the religious dispute accelerated the emperor Rudolf was forced to grant religious freedom to the Hungarian estates in 1606 and then to the Bohemian ones. His brother and successor Matthias was elected king within their territories by the Austrian, Hungarian and Moravian estates and Matthias
had also given the Bohemian estates the right to elect their king after he became emperor. Ferdinand therefore represented a particularly savage Austrian regression.

The Thirty Years War falls into four phases and shows how, as the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus said, ‘things had come to such a pass that all wars being waged in Europe were mixed up together and became one war’.

During the war’s first phase (1618–23) Catholic forces triumphed following the Protestant defeat at the battle of the White Mountain in 1620 near Prague: Heidelberg in the Palatinate was stormed; Westphalia and Lower Saxony were occupied; Ferdinand was restored to his throne. Bohemia was now governed directly from Vienna: the country was forcibly re-Catholicized and German culture imposed upon it. Christian IV of Denmark emerged as a protagonist during the conflict’s second phase (1625–9) and the Bohemian nobleman Albrecht von Wallenstein, a Catholic convert commanding a mercenary army, subjected most of northern Germany to his personal control after the Danish army was pushed back to Jutland. By the Edict of Restitution (1629) the emperor ordered all Protestants to surrender the church lands they had acquired since the peace of Augsburg and when Wallenstein, whose mercenary army contained many non-Catholics, objected he was dismissed.

Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, the Protestant champion during the conflict’s Swedish period (1628–35), was supported by France for tactical anti-Habsburg reasons. At the battle of Breitenfeld he liberated the Palatinate and then entered Bavaria. With the Swedes threatening Vienna the emperor was forced to recall Wallenstein. At the battle of Lützen the Swedes were victorious but Gustavus was killed. The League of Heilbronn revived the Protestant cause and Wallenstein decided to start independent peace negotiations with the Swedes and their Saxon allies. He was then placed under the ban of the empire and assassinated. At the battle of Nördlingen Sweden lost its control of southern Germany but a weary emperor concluded the Peace of Prague (1635) with the Lutheran princes.

During the final, Franco-Swedish, phase (1635–48) France protected the League of Heilbronn, whose Calvinist members had been excluded from the peace provisions of 1635. France pursued its own state interests by declaring war on Spain, allying itself with Sweden, and invading Alsace. The war now advanced on three fronts: in the Netherlands, on the Rhine, and in Saxony. In 1638 the
French gained Breisach on the Rhine and their victory at Rocroi in the Ardennes was a decisive blow to Spanish military might. The death of the emperor Ferdinand and the accession of Ferdinand III (1637–57) led to informal peace negotiations which culminated in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

The treaty confirmed Franco-Swedish dominance and the subordination of the Habsburgs to the German princes. Calvinists now had the same rights as Catholics and Lutherans. The year 1624 was the point in time which determined church possessions. Individual denominational changes were allowed for, except in the case of the Upper Palatinate and the emperor’s hereditary lands, where only Catholicism could be tolerated. The treaty gave the German princes the right to sign foreign treaties and all imperial legislation had to be approved by the Diet. Bavaria remained an electorate and the Palatinate returned to its electoral status. Switzerland and the United Provinces were granted independence and left the empire. French power was confirmed: it received the southern part of upper Alsace and acquired sovereignty over Metz, Toul and Verdun. Its border points on the Rhine were secured by bridgeheads at Breisach and Philippsburg. Brandenburg got eastern Pomerania and also therefore a new frontier with Poland. Sweden got western Pomerania including Stettin, as well as Bremen and Verden. The mouths of Germany’s three great rivers, the Rhine, Elbe and Oder, were controlled by, respectively, the Dutch, Danes and Swedes. The French held the middle Rhine. German resentment would demand a later restitution. Austria, once an empire, was now just one of the four predominant German states along with Bavaria, Saxony and Brandenburg-Prussia. France and Spain continued their war until 1659.

The ideal of a united Christendom had vanished and was replaced by a European continent whose countries tolerated each other’s mutually exclusive sovereignty within internationally agreed boundaries. Witch-hunting persecutions had been a major by-product of the period’s paranoia. But the carnage of war confirmed the enlightened view that a secularized state and religious toleration were the only way to gain and keep a European peace. Westphalia established that a subject whose faith was different from the ruler’s was not an automatic traitor.

This was Europe’s first civil war and would not be repeated until 1914. The German population fell from twenty-one to around thirteen million: urban centres lost thirty per cent, and rural areas some sixty per cent, of their total population. Arable turned to pasture and agrarian serfdom returned as a way of tying down the diminished labour force to a deserted land. Beyond Germany the
general crisis of the European 1640s showed the internal problems confronted by central power however ‘sovereign’ its aspirations. France, victorious abroad, was shaken by the Fronde aristocratic rebellion (1648–53); England’s civil war was also an Irish and Scottish conflict; Spain faced rebellions in Catalonia and Portugal; Cossacks revolted in Poland-Lithuania. The foundations of this international order were no more secure than the dead illusion of a united Christendom.