

**To what extent was the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War caused by religious tensions?**

The period of European history between 1500-1750 was filled with events and tendencies which to a large degree defined the later history of the whole world. Maybe that is why this period is also often called early modern history. Indeed, during this period the Renaissance concluded, new forms of science and philosophy emerged and laid grounds for the Enlightenment and for the appearance of the modern scientific methods, the great geographic discoveries opened up a multitude of new lands for exploration. However, there was one more development that took place within this early modern period of European history and which would influence the future course of events perhaps in the most profound way. This was the emergence and expansion of the Protestant Reformation, a powerful form of social protest which turned from a striving for reformation of religious institutions, initiated by Martin Luther, a professor of theology at Wittenberg University in Saxony, into a factor that profoundly influenced political situation within the Holy Roman Empire (Asch, 1997, p.188). Perhaps the most significant outcome of the religiously coloured tensions between adherents of the Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church, that ensued from the actual religious division within Germany, was represented by the devastating Thirty Years' War of 1618-48. Indeed, it is estimated that up to one-third of the German population was lost due to military activities and ensuing diseases and famine. Historians suppose that the pre-war population level was reached only in almost a century after the end of Thirty Years' War. Economy of Germany was also in disarray due to the ruin brought in by the Thirty Years' War, so that the economic deterioration that already was significant in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> was further worsened. The prosperous economies that some German towns had in the late Middle Ages and in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century declined, and Germany was

about to face a long period of economic depression that would end only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bonney, 2002, p.74).

Considering the long-lasting consequences of the devastating Thirty Years' War, it is important to understand what factors caused its outbreak. We have already mentioned the religious factor, and it is hardly a coincidence that such an important development as the spread of Protestantism preceded the war. But to what extent was the Thirty Years' War caused by religious tensions and to what degree such factors as a struggle for power or for territories within the Holy Roman Empire were involved? To answer this question let us overview the historical developments that occurred before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and try to establish the link between the religious factor and the causes of the Thirty Years' War.

All too often it happens in history that the connection between the studied events that seems to be self-evident is by far not the only explanation but rather just a part of the general picture. In the same vein, the effect that the Protestant Reformation seems to have had on Germany was equally just a part of the story. The other characteristic of the Germany before the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, which is important for our study, was inherited from an earlier time. This characteristic is the so-called German particularism - the presence of numerous states of different types, like free cities, electorates, principalities, and ecclesiastical territories. The roots of this peculiarity of Germany go back to the Carolingian Dynasty (752-911), when Charlemagne's empire was separated into three kingdoms, but in the East Kingdom regional duchies (namely Franconia, Saxony, Bavaria, Swabia, and Lorraine) strengthened and obtained form of small kingdoms. Such eastern subdivision initiated the German particularism, when territorial sovereigns pursued their particular interests without consideration of interests of the kingdom. When the Carolingian line ended in 911 such duchies were further reinforced because now there was no direct blood heritage of the throne and, correspondingly, no legitimate power could be exercised over the territorial

rulers (Wedgwood, 1975). Thus, in contrast to emergence of a centralised royal power in England or France, Germany turned into a number of petty kingdoms which were often conflicting with one another and were situationally combining to war against the emperors. But among those princes none was powerful enough to take control over the whole Germany.

On the other hand, at the time preceding the Protestant Reformation the institutions of the Holy Roman Empire were widely considered to be ineffective. The emperors Frederick III (r. 1440-93) and Maximilian I (r. 1493-1519) tried to deal with the German local princes to bring in necessary changes, but the enterprise was flawed as the emperors and local sovereigns had different purposes. The emperors tried to uphold the empire, and the local sovereigns wanted to obtain greater autonomy. Therefore relations between emperors and princes were complicated and often involved interventions from abroad, mostly from France. Additionally, a changes in economy created dissatisfaction as it was problematic for a rural population to procure means of subsistence, and a lot of peasants fled to the towns, within which class relations became very strained (Bonney, 2002, p.16). In these circumstances, dissent with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church that was voiced by Martin Luther initiated a succession of events that in a couple of decades erased religious unity within Germany. Being not alone in his dissent with the Roman Catholic Church and managing to powerfully present his ideas in his writings, Luther became the true founder of the Protestant Reformation and thus is one of the most prominent figures in German history. Luther rapidly secured a huge support from those who were equally repelled by unchecked corruption within church and by religious services that became lifeless. Rather quickly the ideas of Luther formed an essence of what would be called Lutheranism. The quick spread of Lutheranism had numerous reasons - influential followers such as princes welcomed Lutheranism sometimes because of sincere striving for reforms, sometimes out of a mere self-interest. In some cases, Lutheranism was adopted by small states after an example of a neighbouring

state, or local rulers embraced it because they wanted to keep control over their subjects who had had already accepted it. In the end, Lutheranism conquered almost all the imperial cities, even despite their existing emperor did not support it. However, even though Lutheranism had influential followers, its long-term survival was far from being guaranteed. In this regard, one of the dangers for Lutheranism was that the Protestant states in the north, ironically, divided over the Protestant religion itself and actually became split along two different Protestant teachings. Some states adopted the hard Lutheran line and some states, known as the Phillipists, propagated a mixed attitude to Protestantism in order to include in it some of the ideas of Calvin and Zwingli, another prominent Protestant figures, and later altogether switched to Calvinism (Hughes, 1992, pp.77-79). In this way, a visible division within the Protestant areas in Germany formed, which would later lead to difficulties in creation of a general coalition against the Catholic Church. Additionally, the main opponent of Protestantism was the emperor Charles V, who planned to reinstate the lost unity by the means of re-catholicising. But as Charles had stayed out of Germany between 1521 and 1530, when he came back he realised that the Protestant religion already had too many supporters to be extirpated with an ease. Naturally, within Germany forces were collected against Charles and in 1531 Protestant leaders formed the League of Schmalkalden to resist him. Moreover, Charles V also had to simultaneously deter external enemies, like the Turks or France, which aimed to undermine the power of the Habsburgs dynasty to which Charles belonged. Even the papacy sometimes conspired against Charles out fear of him becoming too influential. All in all, as north-western and north-eastern Germany and parts of southern Germany had adopted Protestantism, Charles was already not able to dictate his will on the German rulers and a mutual agreement between parties was clearly needed. The Peace of Augsburg was signed in 1555 and was to a large degree a victory for the German local sovereigns as it recognised both Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, so that each prince could chose the

preferable religion for his state. In this way, the Protestant Reformation only articulated the particularism in Germany as German rulers, both Catholic and Protestant, obtained more power and autonomy from the empire and Germany became disjoined because there was no longer one common religion. Protestant supporters got lands that were previously in the possession of the Roman Catholic Church, and each ruler headed the church within his domain. On the other hand, Catholic leaders secured a support of the Roman Catholic Church, which provided a greater access to its resources to help them oppose Protestantism. This agreement, however, was not enough for securing the sectarian peace. For example, its makers did not consider interests of supporters of Calvinism, an already widespread form of Protestantism, while Calvinists not less than Lutherans were trying to get new converts. At the same time the Catholic Church was attempting to halt the spread of Protestantism, the process that is often called the Counter-Reformation. Importantly, adherents of all those religions could be successful in their pursuits only at the expense of the other parties (Hughes, 1992, p.65). In general, Roman Catholicism retained the western and southern states of Germany, while Protestantism took a hold of the central and north-eastern areas.

In the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century religious confrontation grew so intensive that the Reichstag, the main political organ of the Empire, often could not properly function. In 1608 the Protestant defensive Evangelical Union was created by several cities and states. In 1609 Roman Catholic states responded by creation of a similar Catholic League. Although both unions were not so much concerned with a sectarian war but rather were occupied by specific matters of their members, their emergence exemplified the religious tint of the conflicts of that period (Gagliardo, 1991). Any incident could now initiate a war and such incident was to occur in Bohemia, a very important economic region of the empire. Bohemia was religiously tolerant as it was populated by Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, which all coexisted in a relative peace. But in general, around two-thirds of the population was Protestant and

Catholics constituted only 10%. In 1618 Bohemian nobles contested the designation of Ferdinand, who was Catholic, as a king of Bohemia and elected Frederick, a German Calvinist, to be their king. In order to bring back the control over Bohemia, armies of the empire and of the Catholic League fought with and defeated the Bohemian Protestants at the Battle of White Mountain near Prague in 1620. In their turn, the Protestant rulers of German states, disturbed by the power of the Catholic League and the perspective of Roman Catholic domination, cooperated to renovate their opposition to the empire, and in this endeavour they were assisted by France, which, while being Roman Catholic, was traditionally concerned with the growing power of the Habsburgs dynasty. However, in spite of French participation Emperor Ferdinand II and the Catholic League took control over the Protestant northern Germany and even demanded that all properties that previously belonged to the Roman Catholic Church be given back. This requirement stirred up Protestant opposition and at this time Catholic rulers started to oppose Ferdinand as well out of fear of his great influence. The war then continued, with Swedish invasions, with the victory of the Spain over Swedish army in 1634, with an armistice under the Treaty of Prague between the empire and some of the German rulers, with French invasion into Germany, and, finally, with the signature of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Asch, 1997).

As we can now see, the religious factor was constantly present during almost the whole course of the Thirty Years' War. And although considerations of power balance played a significant role in keeping the war going, the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, when consequences of aristocratic rivalries combined with the system of regional autonomy to reach an explosive level, was ignited by the religious confrontation. And even though the Thirty Years' War sparked off from a local revolt, the religious factor turned it into a European conflict that continued for more than a generation and which ruined Germany. The pre-existing internal instability of the empire and a confrontation between some areas of

northern countries with the imperial sovereign power, which intensified in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, only contributed to the escalation of the Bohemian conflict into a major war.

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