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Research report

Forum: Historical Security Council

Issue: Establishing a peace treaty for the Thirty Years' War, thereby preventing religious and territorial conflict in Europe

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Introduction

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) was one of the most biggest and complex conflicts in European history. While it started off as a religious dispute within the Holy Roman Empire between smaller Protestant and Catholic states, it quickly turned into a complex power struggle between multiple major European nations. It started as a small rebellion against the Catholic rule in Bohemia soon transformed into a massive conflict between the entire continent.

The fighting, which involved countries like France, Sweden, and Spain, had a horrible impact on the civilian population. The war led to famine, disease, and the destruction of critical infrastructure. Entire towns were flattened, large amounts of agricultural systems had collapsed, and some regions especially in the German states, lost up to half their population. Religious tension was only one of many reasons of this war. Some of the others include political greed and territorial gain which became more important reasons as the war continued, making peace efforts more complicated (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica).



A map of all the major European Powers before the war

This report will give you an analysis of the war's causes, major actors, and its consequences. Delegates will be shown a historical overview and key definitions, followed by an examination of past peace attempts and a potential path to a resolution.

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Definitions of key terms

Holy Roman Empire

The varying complex of lands in western and central Europe ruled by the Holy Roman emperor, a title held first by Frankish and then by German kings for 10 centuries. The Holy Roman Empire existed from 800 to 1806 (Barraclough).

Peace of Westphalia

European settlements of 1648, which brought to an end the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Dutch and the German phase of the Thirty Years' War. The peace was negotiated, from 1644, in the Westphalian towns of Münster and Osnabrück (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Protestant Union

Military alliance (1608–21) among the Protestant states of Germany for mutual protection against the growing power of the Roman Catholic states of Counter-Reformation Europe (Parker).

Catholic League

Catholic League, a military alliance (1609–35) of the Catholic powers of Germany led by Maximilian I, duke of Bavaria, and designed to stem the growth of Protestantism in Germany (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Cuius Regio, Eius Religio

The principle that (with some exceptions) the inhabitants of each of Germany's numerous territories should follow the religion of the ruler (Barkin and Kirby).

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General overview

The war began in 1618 with the Defenestration of Prague, an incident in which Protestant Bohemian nobles, protesting against the Catholic authority, threw two Catholic envoys out of a castle window. This act of rebellion, dramatic as it was, caused a great deal of tension across the entire Holy Roman Empire, highlighting the deep division between Protestant and Catholic states. The situation in Bohemia quickly became a spark for wider conflict, as neighboring principalities watched closely and prepared to take sides. Within a few months, what had started as a local dispute escalated far beyond the Bohemian borders, as alliances formed and hostilities spread rapidly. A small rebellion turned into a continent-wide crisis, showing how fragile political and religious relations were in Europe at the time.

Although the initial causes of the war were religious, it soon became clear that political ambitions and territorial rivalries were equally important in driving the conflict. France, for example, became involved not out of concern for religion but to limit the power of the Catholic Habsburg dynasty, which controlled both Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. Sweden, under King Gustavus Adolphus, saw the war as an opportunity to strengthen its influence over the Baltic region and gain strategic advantages in Northern Europe. Spain joined the conflict to defend its ties to the Habsburg dynasty and protect its territories in Europe, particularly in the Spanish Netherlands. The variety of participants, each with different motivations, meant that the war was no longer just about religion. Instead, it became a complex struggle where political, economic, and military objectives were deeply intertwined. This mix of interests made peace negotiations extremely difficult, as each participant demanded its own strategic gains, often at the expense of others.

The human and material losses caused by the war were catastrophic. Agriculture and trade came to a halt in many regions, creating shortages of food and essential goods. Towns and villages were destroyed, leaving vast areas depopulated and ruined. In some parts of Germany, the population decreased by as much as fifty percent due to the combined effects of battle casualties, famine, and outbreaks of disease such as typhus and the plague. Ordinary civilians suffered the most, often caught between two armies that looted food, destroyed property, and forcibly recruited men for military service. The economic systems of many areas collapsed entirely, with inflation and scarcity adding to the misery. Markets failed, trade routes were blocked, and people struggled to survive under conditions that had not been seen before in Europe.

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By the mid-1640s, the scale of devastation forced European rulers to recognize that the war could not continue without risking the complete collapse of entire countries. The need for a lasting peace became apparent not only to the suffering civilian populations but also to the political leaders themselves. This realization led to the beginning of complex diplomatic negotiations, which eventually resulted in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The treaty ended the Thirty Years' War, restored a degree of stability across Europe, and marked a turning point in the relationship between religion and politics. It also established a precedent for negotiating peace among multiple states with differing interests, laying the groundwork for the future of international diplomacy in Europe.

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Major parties involved

Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation

The empire was under the rule of Emperor Ferdinand II and later Emperor Ferdinand III. They wanted to strengthen their central authority and reinforce Catholicism throughout its territories and Europe.

Kingdom of France

Although it was a Catholic nation, France opposed the political dominance of the Habsburg dynasty in both Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. Ruled by King Louis XIII it entered the war to counter their power in Europe.

Kingdom of Sweden

A Protestant kingdom led by King Gustavus Adolphus during most of its involvement in the war. Sweden wanted to protect the Protestant states within the Holy Roman Empire and secure its position in the Baltic regions.

Kingdom of Spain

A close ally of the Holy Roman Empire and ruled by the Spanish branch of the Habsburg dynasty. Spain wanted to keep its European territories, and maintain unity in the Catholic states, and support the Habsburg cause.

Republic of the Seven United Netherlands (Dutch Republic)

A Protestant led republic which engaged in the Eighty Years War against Spain. It sought to achieve full independence from Spanish rule and supported other Protestant states.

Kingdom of Bohemia

A kingdom within the Holy Roman Empire and the starting point of the conflict in 1618. Protestant nobles in Bohemia resisted the Catholic rule, sparking the initial rebellion that escalated into the Thirty Years War.

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Timeline of Key Events

1618 Defenestration of Prague: Protestant nobles in the Kingdom of Bohemia fight Catholic rule by throwing two envoys out of a castle window, marking the official start of the conflict.

1620 Battle of White Mountain: Catholic forces of the Holy Roman Empire defeat Bohemian Protestants, securing imperial control over the Kingdom of Bohemia.

1625 Denmark-Norway enters the war: Led by King Christian IV, Denmark–Norway joins on the side of the Protestant states.

1629 Treaty of Lübeck: Denmark-Norway withdraws from the war, stopping its participation.

1630 Kingdom of Sweden enters the war: Under King Gustavus Adolphus, Sweden joins to support the Protestant states and expand its territory in the Baltic region.

1631 Battle of Breitenfeld: Swedish and Saxon forces defeat the Catholics, marking, this was a major Protestant victory.

1635 Peace of Prague: A temporary truce among German states within the Holy Roman Empire, however this excluded foreign powers such as France and Sweden.

1635 Kingdom of France enters the war: France joins the conflict against the Habsburg powers to stop their rise to power in Europe.

1643 Battle of Rocroi: French forces achieve a victory over Spain, marking the end of Spanish military dominance.

1646 Peace talks: Negotiations begin in the Westphalian towns of Münster and Osnabrück.

1648 Peace of Westphalia: A series of treaties ends the Thirty Years War and redraws the political map of Europe.

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Previous attempts to solve the issue

During the conflict, several attempts were made to bring peace, but these efforts often failed as the interests of the war's participants shifted over time. One of the most significant attempts was the Peace of Prague in 1635, which sought to unite the different factions of the Holy Roman Empire and resolve ongoing disputes between German states. The treaty aimed to bring stability by reconciling internal differences and establishing common rules for governance and religious tolerance. While it succeeded in creating temporary peace among some German states, it excluded key foreign powers such as France and Sweden, both of which had not yet fully entered the conflict at the time. Because these influential nations remained outside the agreement, the Peace of Prague was unable to resolve the wider international aspects of the war. Prior to this, smaller truces and ceasefires had been negotiated between individual cities, regions, or local leaders. These efforts, however, were mostly short-lived, as they failed to address the larger causes of the war or the ambitions of powerful outside states. In many cases, fighting resumed almost immediately after agreements were made, demonstrating how fragile and localized these peace efforts were.

The main obstacle to lasting peace was the differing goals of the major powers. Religious freedom was a particularly contentious issue. Catholic rulers refused to tolerate Protestantism in territories under their control, fearing the erosion of their authority and the influence of Protestant neighbors. At the same time, Protestant states were determined to protect both their religious rights and their political representation, resisting any attempts at enforced conformity. Alongside these religious concerns, many participants were motivated by territorial ambitions and the desire to strengthen their political and economic influence. This meant that even when parties agreed on religious matters, disputes over land, trade, and power often continued to fuel the conflict. The absence of a trusted, neutral mediator further complicated negotiations. States were deeply suspicious of one another, and accusations of bad faith or hidden agendas were common. This widespread mistrust meant that even well-intentioned talks rarely succeeded and that agreements were often temporary, easily broken when circumstances changed or new opportunities for advantage arose.

The combination of religious, political, and territorial disagreements created a situation in which peace was almost impossible to achieve. Even when treaties like the Peace of Prague appeared promising, they only offered short-term solutions, postponing the larger resolution that Europe desperately needed. Negotiators were caught between the demands of their own states, the ambitions of foreign powers, and the suffering of populations who had endured years of war. Civilians continued to bear the consequences of ongoing violence, famine, and disease, while leaders struggled to find compromises that could satisfy all sides. This drawn-out cycle of negotiation and failure highlighted the complexity of the Thirty Years' War and set the stage for the eventual, far-reaching diplomatic efforts that culminated in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Only through such comprehensive and multilateral diplomacy could a lasting resolution finally be achieved, ending decades of destruction and establishing new norms for European politics.

Possible solutions

In order to make a peace treaty that would work, it would need practical, enforceable measures that solve both the immediate causes of the war and the long term stability of Europe. One important step could be the formal creation of religious tolerance as an important principle for all territories, ensuring that rulers allow the free practice of both Catholicism and Protestantism. This would directly address the main cause of the war.

Another measure could be the creation of neutral demilitarized zones within the Holy Roman Empire, serving as buffer areas to reduce the risk of direct military confrontation between rival states. For example, such zones could be established in contested border regions such as along the frontier between Catholic Bavaria and Protestant Saxony, or in sensitive areas like the Upper Palatinate and around the city of Magdeburg, which had experienced heavy conflict. In addition to this, foreign nations would need to withdraw their forces from imperial lands and agree to not intervene in the Empire's internal affairs.

In addition, a permanent diplomatic organization could be founded to address disputes before they escalate into armed conflict. This body could meet regularly, include representatives from all major powers, and act as a neutral platform for negotiation and diplomacy.

Finally, the destruction caused by the decades of war would need a large reconstruction effort. A program like this could focus on rebuilding destroyed towns, restoring farmland, reopening trade routes, and reviving local economies. Joint participation from both former enemies and neutral parties would help ensure fairness and shared responsibility, laying the groundwork for long term stability and cooperation across Europe.

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Further reading

For an understanding of the Thirty Years War the following topics are recommended:

- The Religious Divide in Early 17th Century Europe
- The Defenestration of Prague (1618)
- Role of the Habsburg Dynasty in European Politics
- The Peace of Augsburg (1555)
- Military Strategies and Innovations
- Economic Impact on German States
- The Eighty Years War
- The Diplomacy of the Peace of Westphalia
- Sweden's Role as a European Power
- France's Shift from Religious to Political motivations

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