

The general crisis in the 17th century history essay



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The period of crisis that happened in Europe in the seventeenth century was one of the toughest in history. After the process of expansion and growth experienced during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europe found itself in a deep crisis that lasted nearly a century. A crisis that was characterized by various features, foremost the demographic, because after the late Middle Ages the population had increased steadily; until it stops abruptly in the sixteenth century even to recede in many places. Other reasons that were attributed for causing this crisis included hunger, wars, revolts, politics, plagues and climate changes. Eric Hobsbawm argues that on the big picture, it was economic and social forces that created this mid 17th century crisis. On the other hand, Trevor Roper emphasized that the main causes for this crisis were the religious and political conflict. Although both arguments can be valid and were present in this disaster, I believe that the root causes of this crisis were religious and political differences, which ultimately led Europe to have economic and social conflicts as well.

One important example of this crisis is the thirty years war. It was a war that took place in central Europe (especially in Germany) between 1618 and 1648, in which the majority of the great European powers intervened. This war would mark the future of the European continent in the centuries to follow[1]. The origin of this war goes back to the Peace of Augsburg, which basically stated that the religion of the ruler of the land will be the religion of the people. This resolved the conflicts between the Catholics and the Protestants for a while, but due to the diverse religions practiced in the German states, it did not solve the underlying religious issues definitively. Just by analyzing the phrases above, we automatically get the sense that it

was religious conflicts the root cause of this war. This is confirmed by the event that sparked the war, the revolt in Bohemia. In this revolt, member of the predominantly protestant bohemian legislature threw two catholic government officials out the window, as a sign of protest against the religious policies of the newly elected king, the catholic Ferdinand II[2]. However, the Catholics defeated the protestants, and this leads us to another example of religion causing the 30 years war; the intervention of the Danish and then the Swedish. This happened because of the fear of these kingdoms that their sovereignty as protestant lands was threatened by the Catholic success in the war, and also because the declarations of the king Frederick V, where he said that all Europe should be back to Catholic. Nevertheless, at this point the Catholics are still winning the war, and this catches the awareness of Cardinal Richelieu, who was the chief minister of King Louis XII of France. From this point on, this religious war becomes political, because even though he was catholic, France decides to join the war and help the Protestants. The reason for this was simple, balance of power; the French felt that Habsburgs have gained too much power and they did not want just one great power to control Europe[3].

This war is a great example of how religious and political reasons shaped this European crisis, and how these events led to the economic and social problems that a war brings, in order to fund the war with money and men. After all, this war was ended with the Treaty of Westphalia; which ironically ended up being like the treaty of the peace Augsburg that stated that the religion of the prince is the religion of the people. The political effects of this war were very traumatic as well, first it weakened the power of the empire,

and the individual territories of the Germany gained more autonomy even than before the war[4].

Another problem that rose during this crisis was the war of the three kingdoms. This is another great example to argue that Trevor Roper was correct in explaining the main cause of the crisis. This war happened after England, Ireland and Scotland became united under the power of only one ruler. This was possible because, since Queen Elizabeth of England had no direct heir to her throne, the next in line was James Stuart, the king of Scotland[5]. So what types of problems this created? First, James was a firm believer of the “divine right monarchy”, which basically means that he was placed there by god and does not have to report to anyone else. This belief did not bring many problems to other nations; however, the fact that England had a parliament created a lot of political tensions in this era. Expanding upon this, the wealth that the members of the parliament had acquired from the agricultural innovation, the expansion of their land and sheep count, increased these problems even more, because they now wanted to match their political power with their economic power. The fact of this happening brings us back to our thesis, and shows a religious problem becoming political, which ultimately becomes social. I argue this because the parliament starts to have power from the times of King Henry, when he needed their approval to separate from the Catholic Church (religion). Years after, this backfires to King James, because it gave more authority to the wealthy parliament, and clash with his ideals of divine right and absolutism (Politics). Subsequently, creating a lot of tension and confusion among the

people of the three kingdoms, whose laws and taxes kept changing as the power of the monarchy and the parliament would fluctuate (Social)[6].

To further support our point, we can cite the historian Paul Hazard, who coined the term “ crisis of the European consciousness” to define an ideological crisis that could be found in the intellectual ambient of Europe after the wars of religion[7]. This is a valid argument since it is logical to believe that religious conflicts could rupture the emotional stability of a society that is very much influenced by god and religion. The raise and growth of new religions that differed in many matters with ancient Catholicism brought into the map many thinkers that challenged even more the traditional beliefs. Intellectuals such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke and Newton share a common time, it can even be dated astronomically with the famous Halley’s comet of 1680 which allowed Pierre Bayle drafting its Charter, and use this to make fun (in a way) at the Religious superstitions and affirm that knowledge must be constantly proven and updated[8]. However, this eventually created some social problems, since most of the universities and teaching centers were controlled and had the patronage of the church, being either catholic, like the Jesuits, or protestants. This is another example of how religious conflicts (Trevor’s argument) happened first and the led to social problems (Hobsbawn argument)

Possibly the best example of the religious and political causes of this crisis was the glorious revolution. Going back to the origin of the problem, old King James II was a Catholic that had already irritated the parliament by relaxing the restrictions on the Catholics and allowing them to hold positions in public

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offices[9]. Nevertheless, James was old and next line for the throne was his daughter Mary, a protestant that was married to William of Orange; so the parliament does not really take any action. However, things turn ugly after James II has a son that would mean the continuity of Catholic rule in England, which the parliament would not allow. This caused the glorious revolution, and causes James to escape to France with his son, and William of Orange is invited to be king of England[10].

It is interesting to see how the biggest political problem that King James II had was the fact that he was catholic; once again religion. In addition, the fact that the parliament is the one that invites William to be king summarizes the amount of power that he would have, which as we can see, was very limited. He was given many restrictions, such as the obligation to be an Anglican, he was not allowed to have a standing army, he was not allowed to veto a parliament act and there was no arbitrary arrest[11]. Based on this, comes a liberal social movement that will support the ideas of the parliament in a way, and moves England even further away from absolutism. A leader of this movement is John Locke. We can see in his "Two treatises to the government" his idea of the natural right to live, which basically states that we all have a right to liberty and the possession of property. Moreover, if the government does not protect the natural right to live of the people, they can rebel and demand a ruler who does not violate their rights[12].

Trevor and Hobsbawm use the Fronde in France as another example of the general crisis. It began because of general discontent of the people. Its beginnings were based on the economic crisis and increasing the tax burden generated to address the cost of participation of France in the Thirty Years War.
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War. Its most direct cause, however, can be found in the means used by the monarchy to raise taxes. With the arrival of the regent the people expected the monarchy to cut rates, but not so: Cardinal Mazarin thought that France could support the war and did not let up the pressure. In addition, the Parliament of Paris tried to limit the power of King Louis XIV and also the nobility felt threatened by the king and wanted more of a voice in the government. All of the causes of the Fronde have political implications to it. Even if it is argued that the raise of the taxes was a social problem, it was a political decision to raise the taxes for war and specially to actually enter the war, with the ideals of balance of power[13].

In conclusion, the general crisis was characterized by a series of wars, revolts, decline of population and political and social changes that in many cases could have been avoided if the right precautions would have been taken. However, the fact Europe was undergoing a time political absolutism (at least that is what the rulers intended) and the close relation between church and government, made it impossible to avoid the conflicts. The numerous wars that happened (all for political and religious reasons) aided by plagues and diseases, caused the first decline in the population after the middle ages, therefore creating social and economic problems in the region. This is the reason why I believe that Trevor Roper was right by saying that the root cause of the crisis was political and religious (decisions to go to war, monarchs selected for their religion, etc); which then led to economic and social problem (increase of taxation, price revolution, and decline in population), aggravating even more the situation.