

Book review on the thirty years war history essay



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The book I chose to review was “ The Thirty Years War: The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618-48” written by Ronald G. Asch, a professor of early modern history at the university of Osnabruck, Germany. He uses detailed facts, specific dates, and many primary sources of witnesses in this time in history. He is very affective at describing the conflict because of his attention to detail and use of facts in his evidence. He has easily over a hundred sources cited and footnoted throughout his book which gives his description of that time in history even more credibility.

I selected this book because, although I consider myself very knowledgeable of history, especially western history, I found myself having little knowledge on the Thirty Years War. I had only heard of this epic conflict few times and had never fully studied this subject in any history course prior to this year. The lectures in class shed some light on the subject, but because of how complicated and how many different nations were involved in the conflict the few lectures we spent examining the war I felt did little to capture the huge significance of this momentous time in history. As a protestant Christian I also took this opportunity to discover my religion’s past and how it came to be. I was taught briefly about the Protestant Reformation in my confirmation classes, but we failed to discuss the incredible consequences of this religious movement. Being able to study not only what my German ancestors faced, but also those who have followed my religion before me is amazing and very enlightening.

“ The Thirty Years War: The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618-48” is a narrative account of key dates and major turning points throughout the conflict. It provides the reader with not only an analysis of the origins of the

war and organization of the warfare, but gives a narrative of all the events which led up to the conflict and the initial war. He discusses the series of wars fought by many different nations for reasons of religion, sovereignty, territory, and economic rivalries. The destructiveness of the many campaigns and battles, which occurred over most of continental Europe, is captured in Asch's narratives and accounts of the principal characters of the conflict.

The book begins by describing the struggles which occurred prior to the outbreak of the war in the late sixteenth century such as The Peace of Augsburg and various other reforms, which the various courts of the Holy Roman Empire created to try and reconcile the arising conflict between protestant and catholic principalities. Although these reforms were able to promote peace for a short while, it was short lived due to the rise in counter-reformation efforts from the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire's aristocratic family, the Hapsburg's concerns about the rising want for autonomy by its protestant regions of the Holy Roman Empire. The conflict was inevitable as Asch points out by the early seventeenth century and eventually the eruption of war would come after the heir to the Holy Roman throne, Ferdinand II attempted to impose Roman Catholicism as the dominate religion in all his provinces in 1618 as the king of the Bohemia region. The protestant nobilities of the region and neighboring regions rebelled and carried out the defenestration of Prague on May, 23 1618, creating the Protestant Union, electing an Elector Palatine kicking off the war. Ferdinand after a long five year struggle, eventually achieved victory over the protestant rebels at the battle of White Mountain in 1620.

The second phase of the war in 1625, the combined foreign powers of France, England, and the Dutch formed a league to contest the Habsburgs. They selected the Danish King Christian IV to lead the fight which he used to try and regain lost Baltic territory earlier lost to the Swedes. He was eventually blown a crushing defeat in 1629 which resulted in the Peace of Lubek ending Denmark's reign as a European power. This was shortly followed in 1630 by Sweden's king Gustavus Adolphus invasion of northern Germany which was subsidized by France. He was welcomed by many German princes who were anti-Roman Catholic, anti-Imperial and threw there lot in with the Swedes seeing this as a prime opportunity. The Swedish army and its allies met the Imperial Army at Breitenfield and obliterated it allowing the Swedes to quickly occupy southwest Germany. The Imperial general Wallenstein was recalled by the Emperor and sent his new Imperial army to face Gustavus at the battle of Lutzen resulting in a draw, but Gustavus was killed. The joined forces of the Imperial army and the newly arrived Spanish troops dealt a crushing blow to the Swedes at the battle of Nordlingen causing Sweden to lose its gains in southern Germany.

The third phase of the war resulted after the battle of Nordlingen resulted in most of the German principalities to make peace with the Emperor and were granted amnesty. The French however declared war on Spain and increased their extent of their interventions on the continent. Gradually the Imperial forces were weakened allowing France to take control of Alsace and much of the Rhineland, while the Swedes continued to battle the Empire in northern Germany and into Bohemia.

Over the last few years of the war all nations were negotiating in the region of Westphalia at the cities of Munster and Osnabruk. On October, 1648 the Peace of Westphalia was signed ending the Thirty Years War. Sweden was given a large cash sum and remained control over its northern German territories, the French remained control of the Alsace region of western Germany, within the Empire the control over the territorial rulers became null. Within the German part of the Empire the private exercise of non-conforming religion was allowed and the sections of government became religiously neutral with the lands secularized by the protestants in 1624 were allowed to stay the same. The Austrian and Bohemian regions of the Empire was given over to the Emperor to re-impose Catholicism.

The aftermath of the Thirty Years War produced a number of dramatic consequences and altered Western Europe in significant religious, political, and social ways. The cause of the war cannot be necessarily determined, although the original religious strife is said to have been the reasons, it is hard to recognize when looking at how many parties and different motives that were involved. It produced the devolvement of the Holy Roman Empire and the dissolution of Hapsburg dominance. It took away Roman Catholic central power from Europe and split the religious territories into the way they are today in modern times, with the protestant regions in the north and Roman Catholics in the south. The Peace of Westphalia also quelled many religious struggles of the region allowing for more religious tolerance. The conflict also greatly affected European society, especially in the German regions. The average people of Europe were by far affected the worst. It decimated crops and the German economy, and aided in the spread of

disease. The mercenary armies who were not being paid turned toward pillaging nearby towns and villages already strained by high taxes and demands of the war. This in turn led to the devastation of German populations up to sixty percent in some areas. The political map of western Europe was changed with the Netherlands and Swiss Confederation gaining independence from Hapsburg control and France gaining new lands in western Germany. Additionally the German principalities gained autonomy in the Empire and could now freely declare war.

With the fall of the Holy Roman Empire and the Hapsburgs, Western Europe changed dramatically as the balance of power shifted from Rome and religion to a more secular set of nations and governance that were more interested in trade, economics, and non-religious affairs. One of the most significant consequences of the Thirty Years War is that it was, essentially, the religious war to end all wars. After this point, religious differences were no longer of primary importance in foreign policy, especially because there was an increasingly unbalanced distribution of wealth between countries in the few years to follow the Peace of Westphalia. Countries that had proven themselves strong like Sweden and Denmark during the first years of the Thirty Years War were to find themselves behind wealthier nations such as France. In many ways then, another more general consequence of the War was that it allowed, for the first time in European history, a country to obtain prominence because of trade, economics, and politics rather than because it was the center of a religious hierarchy.

After finishing this book my knowledge on this subject coupled with the lectures in class has greatly increased. I now know the horrors of this conflict

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and the vast destruction it brought to Europe. I was very ignorant to such an important and influential piece of history, which my ancestors were most likely involved in. Because of the epic proportion of this war and the many different reasons and parties involved it was hard to compile all of the information into a couple lectures. Where the lectures lacked in detail, this book made up for and supplemented what I had already learned in class. I enjoyed learning about this subject in greater detail and I my knowledge of this subject will help me to understand the political and cultural aspects of Europe when I study abroad next year.