

Europe's Tragedy

A History of the Thirty Years War

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The history of the Thirty Years War played a very important role in the history lessons I so eagerly absorbed as an eleven year old. We were taught that it was the only time in history Sweden had played an international role, and we were not only taught the tales of the victorious battles, but also of the realities of the engagement. That war above all cost money, that Sweden would not have survived without French subsidies, and that it was in fact a colossus on clay feet. It was the glorious initiation into an era known as the time of great power (*stormaktstiden*). I paid close attention and learned all the major engagements of the War, at least from the Swedish point of view. Breitenfeld, Ltzen, Nrdlingen, Wittstock, as well as the expedition into Jutland subjugating the Danes. In fact my familiarity must have predated the instruction at school, as I remember coming across an old text book of history long before that, reading about the Swedish exploits with great excitement. And at the age of nine I remember distinctly getting the books by the Swedo-Finnish writer Topelius (*Fltskrns berttelser*) reading with great satisfaction the literary interpretation of Breitenfeld and Nrdlingen and the subsequent events of Swedish history of which I must have been already quite versant before we even had history at school. It certainly made for drama and national pride, and as a child and thereby lacking in empathy and constructive imagination, one is particularly sensitive to the seductions of the glory of war¹. As everything that makes a deep impression on you as a child, for better or for worse, it will stay with you for life. And after all it does make a good narrative, at least up to a point. Yet, the more mature human being cannot help to ask questions. What is so great about a battle? why does it have such an impact? Is it not more in the nature of a sports event,?be it riddled with cruel sacrifices which are the worse for being real.

This book is about the Thirty Years War, the bulk of it is devoted to chronicling the events, a task rather formidable, as so many things were going on at the same time. But such reporting tend to be rather confusing as well as tedious, unless of course you know almost all of it all before. I certainly was aided by prior familiarity, yet the study of wars and battles, providing the backbone of traditional narrative history, is somehow rather unsatisfying. So much sound and fury, and what does it all signify? It is like recording Brownian motion. One damned thing after another happens, there being little rhyme or reason to at least the literal succession of events. You are bombarded by statistical facts, so and so many men were mastered by this and that commander moving from A to B, and you better have a firm sense of the geography. It is of course a game, a game of territorial

¹ As the Polish journalist Kapucinsky once remarked, child soldiers are the worst, they neither know fear nor empathy

control, establishing garrisons and strongholds, keeping lines of communications open, and occasionally engaging in battle, the outcome more often than not being a result of chance beyond the controls of humans. Indeed in a stylized sense it is a game of chess or go, where positioned strength is the strategic key. How to make sense of it all?

Judging from the account there might be enough documentation possible to produce a fairly accurate and frequently timed 'weather-charts'. Those would show at appropriate intervals the location and strength of different troops, some would be stationary, others would be on the move. From those data one would get a fair sense of territorial command, perhaps a better sense than was available to the actual actors at the time, something that is not unusual when history is concerned, and lends weight to Collingwood's dictum that history is the reconstruction of the past in the present. And once such maps would be constructed, they could also be complemented showing the territories ravaged by war and those lucky enough to have been spared. Of course graphic descriptions do not stand by themselves, they need to be complemented by explanatory text, but much of what counts for narrative transportation may be rendered superfluous by such graphic stratagems, as well as making the consequences more transparent.

The Thirty Years War was a religious war. In fact it does not make sense without assuming this as the driving force and ultimate motivation. But why should wars make sense? Or at least why should they make simple sense? The question of a religious war is immediately contradicted by the fact that through most of the war, Protestant Sweden and Catholic France were close allies (as were Calvinist Dutchland and France). Of course there is no simple explanation to make sense of it all, too many things were going on at the same time. First there is the issue of the Habsburg Dynasty. The romantic notion of a nation state, especially as an intrinsic unity, did not really exist. It is more illuminating to compare with the modern notion of international corporations with an intricate network of ownership and a complicated hierarchical structure. Basically it was a feudal system in which suzerainty was a rather diffuse and vague concept. To start out with there was the notion of the Holy Roman Empire consisting of more or less independent principalities electing an Emperor. Thus the Danish King both enjoyed being an absolute Monarch of the ancient kingdom of Denmark, as well as being a fief to the Emperor in his capacity as a Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, a split position which made much more sense then, than it would do now. Now, as with corporations, there were mergers and sometimes hostile take-overs, and by dynastic machinations Spain was for some period united with Austria, the king of which was the natural choice as German emperor. The figure of Charles V represented by the well-known portrait, readily comes to the readers mind. This dynastic union did eventually split into a Western Spanish part and an Eastern Austrian, two different branches of the Habsburgs ruling in parallel, yet with close ties, in which originally Austria was the junior party.

The Lutheran reformation was a momentous event in the beginning of the 16th century, first as a form of heresy, but secondly and more importantly as a political force breaking the political and economical power of the Catholic church. The Protestants never made a cohesive common front, for that the deep split between the more radical Calvinists and the Lutherans was too deep. (Besides even in the Lutheran movement there were initially radical splinter groups, which Luther tried to reign in.) Still the Protestant inroads

into Catholic lands were significant and caused something close to panic to the Catholic church, which saw its possessions being appropriated. Nevertheless for almost a hundred years there was a truce between the two, formalized by the understanding of Augsburg in 1555. However, the Catholic church had been revived as a result of the reformation, and a counter-surge was slowly taking place. Still some sort of delicate *modus vivendus* had nevertheless been achieved.

A central component of the Thirty Years War was the liberation struggles of the Dutch. This had a long pedigree starting from the 16th century. The Dutch although more or less German speaking (still to this day there is a continuous deformation of Low-German to Dutch across North-west Germany at the level of local dialect) were under Spanish domination. For a variety of reasons they rebelled, and the struggle extended in time involving local devoted forces against a more or less absentee landlord. The Spanish had problems quenching the Dutch rebellion for a variety of reasons. They needed to have access to a corridor through German lands up to present-day Holland, a corridor which encircled France. There was also the possibility of a naval corridor through the English channel, which likewise encircled the French, but Spanish naval superiority never was firm enough to make that the sole line of communication. In short France was hemmed in by Spain and it was both in its interest to support the Dutch rebellion to break the encirclement, as well as having the Austrian emperor embroiled in war, as to be unable to supply sustained support to the Spain. Thus its support of the Swedes. The Dutch rebellion vitalized Dutch society². There was an upswing in trade and the start of colonial adventures; and the Dutch also made a major innovation in warfare, replacing the deep Spanish formations (based on Roman models ?) for thinner ones, being able to provide more fire-power. The Dutch innovations were taken up by Gustavus Adolphus and perfected by him in his various campaigns across the Baltic. This part of the conflict is relatively easy to understand and straightforward. The Treaty of Westphalia did indeed confirm once and for all the independence of the Netherlands and launched it on a relatively brief period of naval expansion rivaling the English, distracted and weakened by Civil War. France became as an outcome the dominant European power, a position it would keep until the collapse engineered by the Napoleonic outstretch. Spain went into terminal decay, the roots of which predated the war, and whose real cause had more to do with political and economical ossification³ than war-time setbacks, although the latter certainly did not help matters.

The most dramatic component of the war took place on German territories and is rather hard to understand. It clearly was in the nature of a civil war that fed on itself and only led to peace through exhaustion. In many ways it seems to have been self-propelling, with large armies employed that needed to be constantly on the move, both to be fed and to have their presence justified. In short war justifying itself. Religion certainly provided a rallying cry, although much of the war was fought by mercenary troops, always on the verge of mutiny, always ready to desert and to join the highest bidders. Thus religious denotation was no hindrance to join the opposite camp. The war seems to mainly have

² or maybe the vitalized Dutch society gave the impetus for the rebellion, or rather both reinforcing the other

³ Adam Smith is really critical of Spain's economical conduct in his classic

been conducted through the repeated ability of the belligerents to raise fresh armies. A general commanding an army became a source of mobile and independent power hard to reign. This explains the fate of Wallenstein, who became too big and powerful for his own good. And Bernhard of Weimar, ostensibly under Swedish command, more and more started to do the bidding of the French (and of course looking out for his own interests as well.)

In retrospect there is an obvious beginning of the war, namely the defenestration in Prague 1618, with which the author fittingly starts his story. Bohemia, part of the hereditary lands of the Austrian Emperor, was mostly Protestant, and managed to elect their own King bypassing the emperor Ferdinand II. The King was a son-in-law of the ostensibly Protestant British King James I, and was quickly ousted from his realm, through the battle of the White Mountain outside Prague. Once again an example of a battle having wide and long-ranging ramifications. The king, known derisively as the winter-king due to his brief tenure, became somewhat of an outcast, trying in vain to enlist decisive support from his fellow Protestants. Nevertheless attempts were made by Protestant princes to reinstitute him, but efforts were stymied, both by the Imperialist armies, as well as by the Liga, a federation of Catholic States, under the tutelage of the Bavarian King, who was careful to exclude the emperor from joining. The result was a steady erosion of Protestant influence and a gradual increase of Catholic control and reinstitution. The intervention of the Danish King Christian IV ended up in defeat, and the British, although supplying subsidies and troupes were reluctant to commit themselves. The situation changed with the Swedish intervention in 1630, although its beginnings were not auspicious.

Denmark and Sweden were two Scandinavian countries which were very different politically. The Swedes were the junior partners, who had only in the last century finally broken away from forced membership in the Kalmar Union under Danish supervision. The Thirty Years War would once and for all change the balance of power between the two monarchies. Denmark was ruled by an absolute monarch, who personally owned a very large part of the country, making him in effect one of the wealthiest individuals in Europe, able to wage war at his own discretion. There was also a fairly substantial aristocracy, while free-holding peasants provided a negligible minority. The situation in Sweden was different. The monarch had considerable less power and financial muscle, the aristocracy was relatively limited in number, and a large part of the peasant population were actually freeholders⁴. While Denmark was territorially hemmed in, Sweden was free to expand eastwards, having already in the previous century taken the first steps of becoming the predominant Baltic Power first by restricting the influence of the Hanseatic league, then exploiting the weakness of the Russians, the Polish decline, and the vulnerability of the order of the Teutonic Knights. The armies Gustavus Adolphus landed at Usedom in 1630 establishing a beachhead on the southern Baltic coast, had been seasoned by years of campaigning against the Poles, whose King had aspirations on the Swedish crown⁵. Still he

⁴ Although one of the effects of the Thirty Years War would be a strengthening of the Swedish aristocracy at the expense of the kings lands, as the state was in financial dire straits and the giving of land was the only way of rewarding successful generals and favorites. A process which at the end of the century was reversed under the kings Charles XI and Charles XII, who had acquired absolute powers.

⁵ In fact legal ones. Sigismund III, was the grandson of the founder of the Swedish dynasty of Vasa,

had not proven himself where it mattered, and the sorry performance of the Danish King did not augur well for his project. What he needed was a decisive victory in battle, which so far had evaded him. This all changed by the battle at Breitenfeld in 1631 in which the army of Tilly, who had been given Imperial command, was shattered. The result was electric. German protestant princes flocked to him, while the Swedes skillfully exploited the propaganda machinery, painting the Swedish King as the Lion of the North, set out to champion the cause of the Protestants (and among other things avenge the recent sacking of Magdeburg, which had left the entire city in smoldering ruins⁶). Within the next few months most of southern Germany was overrun, Sweden establishing garrisons and strongholds all over Germany. There were rumors that not only was the King liable to march to Vienna and bring the war to a victorious conclusion, maybe even that he as a descendant of the Goths, would march all the way to Rome and like his forefathers sack the city?

For one year the Swedes enjoyed an unparalleled triumph. Hard-nosed they were determined to let the Germans pay for their services, generously disposing of conquered territory as temporary rewards for those who served them, with the understanding that upon their eventual deaths, those would revert to the Swedish Crown.

What was behind such a military success, which although to some extent foreshadowed in Poland, had never been achieved before? Success feeds success, especially in war, where projected potential is paramount, and soon the Swedish army got a reputation of invincibility, something that still influences military appraisals more than three hundred years later. Was the Swedish military machine so much more effective than those of its adversaries? The author doubts it. He claims, as noted above, that the innovations of the Swedes were marginal, they had simply copied the Dutch, maybe perfecting it in Polish battles. The use of light leather cannons was not the invention of the King, but such had been in use long before. As to the seasoned Finnish and Swedish warriors, the number of those quickly melted by attrition due to disease and starvation. Although during the fifteen odd years the Swedes campaigned in Germany maybe 200'000 conscripts were drawn from the motherland, most of the armies were made up of mercenaries, mostly German, but also Scots and Hungarians. Cossacks and Croats were almost exclusively used by the Catholic armies, having a reputation of ferocity, no doubt carefully nourished.

Wallenstein, a few years earlier dismissed from Imperial service was recalled after the debacle at Breitenfeld (and the elderly Tilly⁷ anyway had died shortly thereafter). Wallenstein threatened to cut off the rear guard of the Swedish Army which henceforth went north seeking winter quarters. As everybody know, at least in Sweden, an engagement between the armies took place at Lützen on November 6 (O.S.⁸). Although the effect of the battle probably was a draw, especially as Wallenstein omitted to drive home his advantage,

and had succeeded his own father - John III as Swedish King, before being ousted by his uncle later known as Charles IX, father of Gustavus Adolphus, who hence was his cousin.

⁶ Probably more by accident than design. True is that the city suffered far more from the conquest by Tilly than during allied bombings during the second world war

⁷ He was a seasoned veteran if any, over seventy years old with experience both of action against the Dutch and the Ottomans

⁸ The Gregorian calendar, seen as a Popish imposition was resisted in Protestant lands, and was not

was nevertheless a serious blow to Sweden and the Protestant cause, as the charismatic figure of the Swedish King, on whom so much of the necessary propaganda was pinned, fell in the battle. The real disaster did not happen until 1634 at Nrdlingen, where a defeat had consequences out of proportions, resulting in a more or less complete collapse of the Swedish possessions in Southern Germany. For the next eight years or so, the Swedes and the Protestant cause would be pushed back into a precarious stalemate, during which most of the former allies defected, either becoming neutral or seeking an accommodation with the emperor. Brandenburg and Saxony being the two most important defectors. The Swedish army of Bernard of Weimar, was active, as noted above, on behalf of the French west of the Rhine, while Banér was active in Brandenburg, achieving a few successes on the battle field⁹.

The Thirty Years War was a war of commanders. A good commander could make the difference between victory or defeat. Or so it has been assumed, although as noted above, the actual outcome of a battle seems to have been mostly a matter of luck. Still battle was an exception, most of the time an army was fighting not against other armies, but simply to stay alive, not to succumb to disease and starvation. And in fact disease and starvation were the real dangers of a life in the field. Far more soldiers succumbed to such prosaic ends, than actually fell in battle¹⁰. A commander's task was not only to orchestrate an engagement with the enemy, but as usefully to avoid engaging him at all. He had to maintain a force, more liable than not to disintegrate, and to instal in his charges loyalty and enthusiasm. And certainly victory in battles never hurt. And the Swedish armies, in which Swedish (including Finnish) nationalities always were in a minority, were lucky enough to enjoy the services of a line of very able commanders, such as Banér, Torstensson and later Wrangel and the future Swedish King Charles X, who however, much to his regret, entered the scene too late. Swedish activity at the end of the war centered in the north east, involving forays into Saxony, Bohemia and Moravia (with a digressive interlude in Jutland, briefly referred to above), although there were also once again engagements in the south, but none of lasting impact. The exhaustion of the war was palpable already by the early 1640's, and the peace talks at Osnabrück and Münster were carried on for five years until the final treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Peace talks did not inhibit military hostilities, on the contrary, as so often the desire for peace is a powerful incentive for war¹¹, and truly illustrating the dictum of Clausewitz to the effect that war being just another form of diplomacy. In modern parlance, it was all a scramble to establish facts on the ground. It is in this light the late push of the Swedes towards the gates of Prague has to be understood. The war may ostensibly have been religious, but when all was said and one, it was a war of conquest and advantage. And of course this was what one as a school-boy instinctively understood. The Protestant cause may have provided a good excuse, and certainly there was a certain pride in being Lutheran,

accepted in Sweden until the mid 18th century. The date is still billed in Sweden as November 6, rather than the more accurate November 17

⁹ What I remember from school was his more or less miraculous escape once from being trapped with his army. Could that have been Wittstock?

¹⁰ This is a well-established fact which held true until the end of the 19th century.

¹¹ not to say its ultimate motivation

but what really made Swedish history exciting to the young mind, was the quest for glory, of territorial expansion, of power. The lesson of the Thirty Years War was not religious freedom of the Protestants, but it made Sweden important.

And the treaty was concluded, although of course the complete cessation of hostilities took some time, as the dismantling of armies was a rather drawn out affair, but perhaps by modern standards not exceptionally so, by the early 50's an essentially full-blown demobilization had been effected. And what were the real consequences of the war? As noted above, the Dutch had achieved their freedom, and that was a lasting legacy, and a peaceful one to boot, colonial enterprises excluded. France became the predominant player of continental European politics for more than 150 years until it overextended itself during the Napoleonic era, and has since then been a second-class power, but still to this day ridiculously proud of its military past. The gains for the Swedes were short-lived. Their trans-baltic possessions were rather shaky and more than once during the remainder of the century they had to be bailed out by French intervention. Russia, long suppressed, were vitalized during Peter the Great and the encounter of the early 18th century could have just one outcome. Even if the valiant young Swedish king Charles XII won the initial battles, history was on the side of the emerging Russians, and Sweden lost its prominent role, which had been sustained no longer than a healthy life-span. Still Sweden did hang onto its Pomeranian holdings until the early 19th century, when the Napoleonic upheavals rewrote the maps of Europe. The Baltic city of Wismar was pledged away for a hundred years in 1803, and was never reclaimed at the end of the period in 1903. Thus ending the last legacy of the territorial conquests of the Thirty Years War¹². More interestingly is what happened to Germany.

It was a catastrophe. The full extent of which, not to mention the nature of the real, lived through tragedies of those involved, is impossible to appreciate. It was a ruthless war, in which discipline among troupes was more of an exception than a rule, in which plunder and looting were necessary aspects of verging war. Clearly for the generic man in the Western street (willfully ignoring the fate in store of unfortunate minorities) Nazi occupation was surely to be preferred to the vagaries to be endured during the Thirty years war, and even comparing casualties in the East, where the Wehrmacht acted with unprecedented and unprovoked brutality¹³ the relative incident of loss of life and limb was far higher during the Thirty Years War. However, the Thirty Years War lasted for thirty years, while the German campaign in the east was only effective for two. In addition starvation and disease played the major role, although its incidence in Eastern Europe in the 40s should not be underestimated as well. Still, plunder and atrocity being rampant, there was, in spite of the religious overtones, no ethnic cleansing in the modern sense, or at

¹² The conquests made on the Scandinavian Peninsula on the other hand remain firm to this day. The author writes somewhat anachronistically about the Swedish province of Scania (Skne) held by the Danes. It is true that it had been Swedish for a very brief period in the 14th century, but even to this day, in spite of more than 300 years of Swedish suzerainty, it has preserved very many of its Danish (and continental) characteristics, and to a regular Swede, visiting Skne, is a little bit like going abroad. Finland is still culturally closer to Sweden.

¹³ Some Swedish writers like J.Myrdal and S.Lindqvist, note that Hitler just had the audacity to treat Europeans as Europeans were accustomed to treat colonial populations

least not in any systematic way. Also total war of the 17th century, if in intent, could never be as total as it could be in the 20th century. The control of nature and its resources simply was not as extensive. The armies crisscrossed the territory like swarms of locusts, devouring anything in its way. But they were never able to cover everything, many regions were by luck spared. Obviously there is enough historical documentation, as suggested above, to enable us to make fairly detailed charts of the war's ravage. Such maps, if compiled, would be interesting to consult. One should also keep in mind that central Europe was not as densely populated at the time (although to the Northern invaders it must have appeared as a land of plenty) and large areas were probably left untouched, simply because they were too sparsely populated to offer any interest to marauding armies. Demographically it is clear that the German population must have stalled, and its internal conquest of the land being postponed, maybe by half a century, maybe even more. Germany as a political factor was marginalized, being split into small principalities (which to some extent explains the relatively long Swedish tenure on its Baltic shores). But Austria thrived, but its German base being peripheral, instead emerging as a truly Eastern power, doing justice to its name. And Prussia, merely incipient as Brandenburg during the times of Gustavus Adolphus, quickly became a regional power. Not until the 19th century did Germany emerge as a coherent political power, its cultural and economical one already having established itself. Still the idea of German unification, being based on romantic notions of nations and languages, would probably not have arisen sooner anyway, had it not been ravaged by the war. Then of course, returning to what is usually seen as the red herring, the religious aspect of the war. Had there been no war, what would have happened to the reformation? Clearly this having its own momentum would have sustained itself, but how would the Catholic powers have reacted? By some sort of containment? And would not the Austrian influence have become greater. The Thirty Years War effectively checked Habsburg expansion.

Counterfactual speculation, although an indispensable exercise to the policy maker, becomes in the hand of the historian (thus turned novelist) a seductive yet insidious exercise, where there are by definition no facts onto which to spear your head bloody. It is a soft world, a truly post-modernistic one, in which everything is possible, and hence nothing really matters.