

## Thirty Years War

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The main characters of the war, giving it its special character, are the armies, each of them characterized by its leader. In the beginning there was the Protestant Mansfield, the pioneer and the one whose experiences set the trend. Then followed the Imperial Tilly and Wallenstein, the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus, Bernard of Saxe-Weimar, and the Swedes Horn, Baner, Torstensson and Wrangler, and at the very end the coming King Charles X of Sweden who however entered the fray too late, and had to show his mettle later on. To those should be added a hoist of minor characters.

The armies were typically ten to twenty thousand man strong, although someone such as the Swedish King may have a hundred thousand under his flag, but then the forces were spread over a larger territory. The crucial issue of warfare is logistics. An army has to be fed. And an army, especially in those time, did not only consist of soldiers, but also hangers-on. Sometimes the ratio could be as low (or high) as 1:4. Those masses of people have to be fed. There is only one thing making that possible, and that is to be on the move and feed on the land, which in practice means ravaging the countryside by plunder. Forcefully taking what is needed, subjugating any resistance. In theory victuals should be paid for, but normally soldiers were short on cash as pay was typically in arrears. Thus an army was like a swarm of locusts, devouring anything in its way.

One notable exception being perhaps Wallenstein. Not that his armies did not perpetrate the usual atrocities, but he was probably more of an organizer than a field marshal, understanding that looting was not a reliable way of sustaining an army. Using his large estates, the result of his successful activities in the field, he was able to sustain his armies, and when he was temporarily debarred from imperial service, he denied his successor the elderly Tilly his services, which no doubt contributed to the defeat of the latter in Breitenfeld. While looting would never be routed out, in the future the basis for field activities would rely on systematic logistics in the Wallenstein mood, rather than the vagaries of plunder.

The great majority of soldiers were mercenaries. They were in it not for the glory but for the money, and often the only option for them to stay alive in those troubled times was to join an army to be on the attacking end not the receiving one. To be armed in an encounter was surely better than not. As the war progressed, the greater the section of the population reduced to such destitution. In addition to locals there were adventurers from abroad. Scots, Croations, Swiss, Italians, in addition to the Swedes and Finns who were conscripted. Consequently there were no real allegiance to a cause, mutinies were rampant, desertions the order of the day, and changing sides merely a question of convenience. The marshal that paid best was the rational choice, it was not a matter of nationality nor religion.

War is often described as long tedious stretches of boredom interrupted by moments of sheer horror. While most of the time of the soldier actually consisted in securing victuals,

there were not so much actual fighting, and what there was was usually in skirmishes or subjugating inferior forces such as taking a fort or invading a town, the latter usually a treat as it involved looting. The Swedish King initially had a reputation for restraint and discipline hanging offending looters, but on the other hand when circumstances required it, he made plunder and looting a systematic weapon of terror and subjugation. Discipline can work in many ways. But an actual confrontation of two armies was a terrible thing as it often meant the destruction of one and a serious weakening of the other. Thus there were few actual battles, and many of them have gone down to posterity, such as Breitenfeld, Lützen, Nördlingen, Wittstock, to name four in which the Swedish army was involved. One may say that the War of the Thirty Years, was a case of the tail wagging the dog. The armies, instead of being implements of the political process, actually tended to direct politics, becoming impossible to fully control. A case is that of Wallenstein who became too powerful for his own good, frightening the emperor, until he was successfully assassinated in his bed-chamber.

Politically a lot of things were going on. First there was the Habsburg dynasty which had managed to assume the crowns of both Austria and Spain, at one time united under a single monarch - Charles V. In the beginning of the 17th century they were split but working in tandem, closely related by blood. Spain was embroiled with a war of the rebellious Protestant United provinces, still having full control over the Catholic Flanders. France being in the middle, wary of Spanish power and influence, naturally allied themselves with the rebels, having as a strategic goal to cut off the lines of communications between the motherland and the northern possessions. The Austrian branch had the ambition of becoming emperors of a united Germany. Germany was politically fractured in many principalities, some large and influential, whose princely heads served as Electors, yet in a formal sense making up a German Reich, which since the days of Charlemagne, saw itself as the continuation of the Roman Empire, styling itself the Holy Roman Empire. The Emperor was elected by the German Diet, where only the most powerful German princes - the Electors, had the right to vote. In addition to the political division in Germany there was the religious. Luther was not the first who had opposed the Catholic church, but he was the first one to succeed. Later on there was Calvin in Switzerland. Between the Lutherans and the Calvinists there was naturally a schism, the Calvinists in many ways being a much more radical form of Protestantism. While the Catholics held that salvation was open to anyone provided they earned it by good deeds, the radical conclusion of which led to the spectacle of indulgences, because if good deeds could lead to salvation, so should cash; Luther claimed that salvation was only possible through the grace of God. This is an important intellectual distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism, which few people actually are aware of, thinking of Catholicism primarily in terms of extravagant sacral decoration and the idolatry devotion to saints. Calvinists went one step further, claiming the doctrine of predestination. Eventual salvation was preordained, and thus being, one would be tempted to infer, even beyond the power of God to change, although one presumes that he was the one who made the predestination in the first place. It meant that the Protestant cause was split, after all you can be against something for very different reasons. After the reformation, so eagerly espoused by the local princes, as it offered the riches of the Catholic churches to be confiscated, there was a religious truce, namely that

of Augsburg in 1555, which supposedly guaranteed religious freedom over the entire realm. This was something the Austrian emperor wanted to roll back, starting in Bohemia the king of which he wanted to become. This led to a popular rebellion, the Elector of the Palatine - the young Frederick, son-in-law of the the English King James I - being elected as the king instead. This would lead to his aggrandizement, jealously resented by his fellow German princes, especially the Elector Maximilian of Bavaria, who was forming the Catholic League. The young Frederick only enjoyed his kingship for a season, hence derisively known as the Winter King to posterity. At a battle outside Prague the forces of Mansfield were routed and the king had to flee, and would spend the rest of his life in various exiles, desperately seeking support for his personal cause, and thus becoming a liability than a resource.

For the next twelve years the Austrian Habsburgs would be in ascendance, their forces were superior and successful, Wallenstein, who had raised an army on his own resources putting it to the service of the emperor, drove out the meddling Danish King - Christian IV- who in addition of being an absolute monarch of Denmark was also because of the suzerainty of Schleswig-Holstein a member of the German Diet. Meanwhile Lutheran pastors were driven out of Bohemia, along with their flocks, and replaced by Catholic priests of which there was not enough of a supply. The Spanish war, however, was checked by Dutch resistance and French diplomacy. To the French, led by Richelieu, the supreme object was the quenching of Spanish power, the supreme power of the 16th century, which threatened to encircle it. Thus they welcomed any anti-Habsburg forces. The Swedish King had been courted before, but he had refused to join forces with the Danish king, the latter being the Scandinavian rival, and besides he was busy with an extended war in Poland. Through French diplomacy a truce was effected, freeing the Swedish King, and an alliance were formed between the two countries, in which Sweden would provide fire power and the French financial support. The Swedish King demanded that the terms of the agreement were made public, lest it would appear that he was merely serving the interests of the French. In 1630 Gustavus II Adolphus landed at Usedom on German soil, formed alliances with the Electors of Brandenburg and Saxony, and the rest is history. The exploits of the Swedish King belong to the most romantic of the war, and he was after the stunning defeat of Tilly at Breitenfeld, hailed as the savior of the Protestant cause, the first military victory against the Austrian Habsburgs, almost deified as the Lion from the North (still all over Germany you can encounter references to him). Breitenfeld had an enormous psychological effect, probably out of proportion to its military. After that the road to Vienna was open. Within the span of a few months most of Southern Germany was overrun. But the Swedish forces were overextended, the King did not trust his German allies, especially not the Elector John George of Saxony, whose troops had performed so poorly at Breitenfeld, and returned north for the winter quarters of 1632-33. In so doing they came in contact with Wallensteins forces, who after the debacle at Breitenfeld had been reinstated as the head of the Imperial forces. On November 6th (O.S.) the two armies clashed on the foggy plains at Lützen, the Swedish King fell at the battle, and the command was taken over by Bernard of Saxe-Weimar. Heavy losses on both sides, and the army of Wallenstein had to retreat. The loss of the Swedish King had a tremendous impact, the whole momentum of the counter-surge being stalled. Had it been allowed to

continue to a successful completion, the war may have ended much sooner (and hence been known under a different name) and led to some kind of unification of Protestant Germany more than two hundred years ahead of Bismarck, be it with heavy territorial cessations to the victorious Swedes. But it was not to be, and Richelieu must have been relieved to be rid of an ally too independent and powerful.

The war dragged on for another fifteen years, and it would be tedious to recapitulate all the ups and downs inevitable in any kind of Brownian motion. The Swedes under Horn and Bernard Saxe-Weimar suffered a humiliating defeat at Nördlingen, which once and for all destroyed the reputation of the Swedes as invincible. Bernard then joined forces with the French, occupying Alsace, with a view of making it his own lands, as any leader of a powerful army had personal ambitions of acquiring lands and wealth and titles to redeem their possessions, as looting occurred at all levels. The devastation in the country was immense, although of course due to the limited fire power of the armies at the time, not as systematic as it would later become in history, led to an exhaustion and a desire for peace. But peace was late in coming, the actual formal process lasting for over five years in the cities of Münster and Osnabrück, while fighting continued unabated, as being part of the diplomatic process of establishing facts on the ground.

The main facts of the war was the independence of the United Provinces, to be known as the Netherlands, which resulted in a brief period of commercial and colonial expansion of that country and the emergence of France as the continental power par excellence, a position it would hold until the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars. The unification of Germany was postponed by two hundred years and the Austrian influence marginalized, and the Catholic counterrevolution permanently halted. To the Swedes it led to a brief period of glory, but the country was too poor and weak to sustain its gains, and would inevitably lose out to the Russians half a century later.

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