

## Europe's Tragedy: a History of the Thirty Years War

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**Reviewer:**

Ronald Asch

Peter Wilson's monumental history of the Thirty Years War is a work which impresses the reader both by the author's unrivalled command of detail and by the balanced account he gives of the main events and episodes of the war. Not perhaps since the days of Moriz Ritter's *German History in the Age of the Counter Reformation and the Thirty Years War* (1) – written in the late 19th century and still in many ways unsurpassed in its judicious assessment of the principal forces shaping the course of the war – has any historian written such a detailed scholarly book on the war; and then, of course, Ritter never finished his study which ends in 1635. Geoffrey Parker's *Thirty Years War* (2), in comparison, is really a book written by nine different authors although Parker himself wrote about two thirds himself. Thus Wilson's work is an impressive achievement by any standards. As opposed to Parker, Wilson focuses on events in Central Europe – the Thirty Years War is for him primarily a German war. This makes the title slightly misleading, it should perhaps rather be 'Germany's tragedy' instead of 'Europe's', but Wilson is certainly right in looking at matters in this way; any other perspective tends to dissolve the coherence of the narrative as the dates 1618 and 1648 only make sense as the starting and the closing point of events if one looks primarily at the Holy Roman Empire and not at Spain or France. Wilson neglects no major issue, dealing with the Edict of Restitution and Wallenstein's complicated personality as much as the with the appeals to German patriotism after 1635 or the peace negotiations in Osnabrück and Münster, but he is perhaps most convincing when he writes about military matters, that is both about battles and about logistics. His explanation of the way Wallenstein paid his vast army is much more subtle and nuanced than most other accounts of war finance and the role of the military entrepreneur. He rightly points out that Wallenstein never ceased to rely on taxation raised in the imperial hereditary lands as much as on contributions in areas under occupation. Thus Wilson rejects the idea that warfare after 1618 was largely privatized at least as far as the imperial army and its commanders were concerned. 'Plunder could not make war pay and restricted the size of

armies' as Wilson writes (p. 405). He is equally justified in stating: 'The real core was credit not extortion' (p. 399). This meant however that princes and commanders-in-chief often owed huge amounts of money to their colonels as well as to inferior officers and ordinary soldiers, so that it became almost impossible to disband armies, as this required enormous sums to pay off the various creditors among the military (p. 400). This was in fact one of the reasons why it was so difficult to end the war in the 1640s.

Also particularly valuable are the earlier introductory chapters in which Wilson sets the scene for the conflict. In eight sections he explains how the Holy Roman Empire worked and where its failings lay, and deals with the impact of the Turkish menace on Central Europe, with the Pax Hispanica and with the growing crisis of the Habsburg monarchy before 1618. His concise account of confessionalization and its limits is particularly instructive and incorporates all relevant recent research. Equally important are brief subchapters on Sweden, Denmark and Poland before 1618. The latter two countries are often seen as only minor players or even – in the case of Poland – as largely irrelevant for the events in central Europe. However in around 1610 Denmark was still more powerful and far richer than Sweden – a rather backwards country then – and the Vasa kings ruling the vast kingdom of Poland-Lithuania could with some justification look down on their cousins in Stockholm. Swedish fears of an alliance between the Emperor and the Poles became a major factor in shaping Swedish policy after 1629.

Later Wilson deals in greater detail with Swedish policy in the 1630s. He rightly dismisses the suggestion that Gustavus Adolphus wanted to create a new universal monarchy, as a sort of Protestant Charles V and at the same time as a successor to the Goths and Vandals – the legendary forbears of the Swedes – who had in late antiquity conquered Rome. Nevertheless he points out that the Swedish network of clients and allies in Germany created after 1630 presented a possible basis for a future Swedish hegemony in Central Europe itself with Gustavus Adolphus as a possible protestant Emperor. In discussing such points Wilson's study is as judicious in its assessments as Moriz Ritter's once was. Wilson's attempt to do justice to both and in fact to all sides is a prominent feature of this major study. But he does pay a price for this endeavour to always get the balance right and to give a hearing to both sides of an argument among modern historians as much as among the contemporary participants of the war. In the end the war almost appears at times as a remarkably un-dramatic series of events, despite the fact that Wilson paints a vivid picture of the destruction caused by warfare. Nevertheless even here he feels obliged to discuss Sigfrid Steinberg's thesis, that the population of the Empire did not decline at all between 1618 and 1648; surely an interpretation which has been refuted long ago and can now be considered as obsolete and so it remains surprising that Steinberg is one of the very few modern historians to get an entry in the index. Other historians such as Johannes Burkhardt or Geoffrey Parker who have both published widely on this period are not mentioned by name and their work is not explicitly discussed as such.

Moreover Wilson shows a certain tendency at times not to commit himself too clearly to any position which may seem controversial when issues arise which have been the subject of prolonged debate among historians. He rightly rejects the old interpretation that the Peace of Westphalia weakened the constitution of the Empire mortally and was responsible for the fact that Germany did not become a modern nation state at the same time as France or England. Neither does he subscribe to Johannes Burkhardt's somewhat extreme opposite view that the peace treaties were a sort of modern constitution which transformed the Empire into a well balanced and almost indestructible political system, giving Germany the best constitution it ever had before the Grundgesetz of 1949. But nevertheless Wilson's own position remains in the end somewhat vague on this issue. Clearly Wilson does not like his war and the politics of the war to be too dramatic and in this he clearly differs from his publishers who have printed on the cover of the book a quotation from one of Gustavus Adolphus's letters: 'This is a fight between God and the Devil. If His Grace is with God, he must join me, if he is for the Devil, he must fight me. There is no third way.' This was the stark choice the Swedish king offered to German princes who hesitated, whether to stay neutral or join the King's forces. Now Wilson is undoubtedly right in pointing out that a lot of this was mere propaganda and that Gustavus had intervened in Germany not so much to save Protestantism but – *inter alia* – in order to strengthen his country's position in its struggle with Poland and Denmark, both habitual rivals and enemies, and to preempt a possible attack by an imperial fleet in the future. Nevertheless the rhetoric of religious and in fact,

Holy War was – at least until the mid 1630s – one of the languages which often dominated appeals to potential allies and to the population in general. It would be difficult to deny that this sort of justification for military and political actions gained a momentum of its own. As late as 1648, when many of the religious conflicts of the late 1620s had receded there was still a lot of mileage in appealing to religious allegiances, although in the end the moderates managed to marginalize the militants who still believed like the Superior General of the Jesuits, Vincenzo de Carafa, that “‘a peace that will enslave souls is worse than any war and the ruin of souls is more to be avoided than that of bodies’” (pp. 720–2). In 1648 Carafa was an increasingly isolated hardliner, but in the earlier stages of the conflict militants like the Jesuit were able to shape the perception of political events by many ordinary people as well as by princes and their councillors to a considerable extent. One should not forget that confessors giving advice to Catholic princes or Protestant court preachers addressing their rulers from the pulpit could exert a lot of influence.

But clearly the rhetoric and the discourse of warfare is not what Wilson is primarily interested in. Whereas many early modernists these days see cultural history as a necessary framework for any kind of story or analysis, Wilson tends to see the subjective experience of the war and the way contemporaries perceived the conflict in churches, in inns and or in town halls – or were taught to perceive it by sermons, cheap prints and pamphlets – as something which did not in itself greatly effect the course of events as such, and this course of events is what matters for him.

Wilson does provide the reader with a chapter on ‘experiencing the war’. It is however the last chapter of the book, clearly more a sort of afterthought and rather brief as well. Only a page and a half are dedicated to witchcraft and its persecution despite the fact that in many parts of Germany the witch crazes were at their absolute height in the early 1630s. Equally there are a few paragraphs on fear and commemoration – recently a major topic in German writings on this period – but clearly these are not issues which greatly interest Wilson. To some extent the present reviewer can sympathize with this approach. Words and symbols are indeed not everything. Soldiers, even when they are mercenaries, may be persuaded by fanatical preachers that there is nothing more glorious for them than to die in a religious or in fact holy war but even so they may not win a battle if they have neither powder and bullets for their muskets nor boots to walk in. History is more than the history of discourse. Nevertheless the drama, the excitement and the terror of the Thirty Years War which become so tangible when we look at broadsheets and pamphlets of the period or read diaries written at the time, are certainly not among the most prominent elements in Wilson’s account of the War. However, had he given more space to such sources it would probably have been much more difficult to write a coherent narrative history of the entire war, and that is what he most admirably has managed to do. One notices certainly that Wilson is at his best when dealing with issues of German and Scandinavian history. France, which played such a prominent role in the war after 1635, is given much shorter shrift and Richelieu is clearly not one of Wilson’s heroes, although he is not much given to hero worship anyhow. Also the effect of warfare on state building or – the other way round – warfare as a cause for administrative and political disintegration (as in the case of Spain) are not discussed in any detail or systematically (apart from some observations on pages 807–12) but only briefly mentioned. But this book is not designed to give an analysis of a limited number of structural changes between 1618–48 – it wants to provide the reader with a straightforward and comprehensive story of the war itself while at the same time incorporating the insights of economic, administrative and ecclesiastical history etc. And this objective Wilson undoubtedly achieves most convincingly. His work will remain the definitive account of the war for a long time to come, at least in English, and as it is well written and reads easily the book certainly has a chance to find a wide readership despite its considerable length and enormous weight. Perhaps one should add though, as a warning, that the latter may possibly render it difficult if not impossible to handle for readers who are physically less than fit.

## Notes

1. Moriz Ritter, *Deutsche geschichte im zeitalter der gegen-reformation und des Drei?ssigj?hrigen krieges (1555-1648)* (3 vols., Stuttgart, 1889-1908).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years War* (London, 1984).[Back to \(2\)](#)

**Other reviews:**

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