

Preface

The history of the Thirty Years War is rich in specialist studies, but poor in general accounts. Few authors provide more than short overviews intended for students. It is easy to see why. To cover all aspects would require knowledge of at least fourteen European languages, while there are sufficient archival records to occupy many lifetimes of research. Even the printed material runs to millions of pages; there are over 4,000 titles just on the Peace of Westphalia that concluded the conflict. The sheer volume of evidence has affected how previous histories have been written. Some cut through the detail by fitting the war into broader explanations of Europe's transition to modernity. Others give more scope to personalities and events but often signs of fatigue set in as the author approaches the mid-1630s. By then the heroes and villains giving life to the opening phases were largely dead, replaced by other figures ignored by posterity. There is a rush to wrap up the story and the last thirteen years are compressed into a quarter or less of the text, much of which is devoted to discussing the peace and aftermath.

The present work seeks to redress this through a more even coverage across the entire time span. Some of the distinctive features of this approach are set out in the introductory chapter. The most important is to view the war on its own terms as a struggle over the political and religious order of Central Europe, rather than submerging it within a general account of European conflict throughout the first half of the seventeenth century. While this simplifies some aspects, it also directs attention to the war's origins in the complex situation in the Holy Roman Empire during the later sixteenth century. The task of the first part of the book is to explain this and place it in the wider European context. The second part follows the unfolding tragedy roughly chronologically, paying particular regard to why peace-making efforts failed

before the mid-1640s. The final part examines the war's political, economic, social and cultural impact and longer-term significance. Throughout, structural explanations have been combined with an emphasis on agency and contingency, giving more space than customary to minor as well as more prominent participants. Referencing is selective, excluding much of the older material used in favour of recent works that are more accessible for most readers and provide a useful guide to the specialist literature.

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