



The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy

By Peter H. Wilson

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A deadly continental struggle, the Thirty Years War devastated seventeenth-century Europe, killing nearly a quarter of all Germans and laying waste to towns and countryside alike. Peter Wilson offers the first new history in a generation of a horrifying conflict that transformed the map of the modern world.

When defiant Bohemians tossed the Habsburg emperor's envoys from the castle windows in Prague in 1618, the Holy Roman Empire struck back with a vengeance. Bohemia was ravaged by mercenary troops in the first battle of a conflagration that would engulf Europe from Spain to Sweden. The sweeping narrative encompasses dramatic events and unforgettable individuals—the sack of Magdeburg; the Dutch revolt; the Swedish militant king Gustavus Adolphus; the imperial generals, opportunistic Wallenstein and pious Tilly; and crafty diplomat Cardinal Richelieu. In a major reassessment, Wilson argues that religion was not the catalyst, but one element in a lethal stew of political, social, and dynastic forces that fed the conflict.

By war's end a recognizably modern Europe had been created, but at what price? The Thirty Years War condemned the Germans to two centuries of internal division and international impotence and became a benchmark of brutality for centuries. As late as the 1960s, Germans placed it ahead of both world wars and the Black Death as their country's greatest disaster.

An understanding of the Thirty Years War is essential to comprehending modern European history. Wilson's masterful book will stand as the definitive account of this epic conflict.

For a map of Central Europe in 1618, referenced on page XVI, please visit the book feature.

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The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy By Peter H. Wilson Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #45885 in Books
- Published on: 2011-10-15
- Released on: 2011-09-06
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x 5.25" w x 2.25" l, 2.70 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 1024 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. From the Defenestration of Prague in 1618 until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, brutal warfare swept across Europe. In his monumental study of the causes and the consequences of the Thirty Years War, Wilson, a professor of history at the University of Hull in England, challenges traditional interpretations of the war as primarily religious. He explores instead the political, social, economic as well as religious forces behind the conflict—for example, an Ottoman incursion left the Hapsburg Empire considerably weakened and overshadowed by the Spanish empire. Wilson then provides a meticulous account of the war, introducing some of its great personalities: the crafty General Wallenstein; the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus, who preserved his state through canny political treaties and military operations; and Hapsburg archdukes Rudolf and Matthias, the brothers whose quarrels marked the future of Bohemia, Austria and Hungary. By the war's end, ravaged as all the states were by violence, disease and destruction, Europe was more stable, but with sovereign states rather than empires, and with a secular order. Wilson's scholarship and attention to both the details and the larger picture make his the definitive history of the Thirty Years War. 16 pages of color photos; 22 maps. (Oct.)

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Review

In his monumental study of the causes and the consequences of the Thirty Years War, Wilson challenges traditional interpretations of the war as primarily religious. He explores instead the political, social, economic as well as religious forces behind the conflict...Wilson then provides a meticulous account of the war, introducing some of its great personalities: the crafty General Wallenstein; the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus, who preserved his state through canny political treaties and military operations; and Hapsburg archdukes Rudolf and Matthias, the brothers whose quarrels marked the future of Bohemia, Austria and Hungary. By the war's end, ravaged as all the states were by violence, disease and destruction, Europe was more stable, but with sovereign states rather than empires, and with a secular order. Wilson's scholarship and attention to both the details and the larger picture make his the definitive history of the Thirty Years War. (*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) 2009-08-24)

Among continental Europeans, the Thirty Years War is etched in memory...A definitive account has been needed, and now Peter Wilson, one of Britain's leading historians of Germany, has provided it. *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* is a history of prodigious erudition that manages to corral the byzantine complexity of the Thirty Years War into a coherent narrative. It also offers a bracingly novel interpretation. Historians typically portray the Thirty Years War as the last and goriest of Europe's religious wars--a final bonfire of the zealots before the cooler age of enlightened statecraft. Mr. Wilson severely qualifies this conventional wisdom. It turns out that the quintessential war of religion was scarcely one at all...Wilson's masterful account of the Thirty Years War is a reminder that war, and peace, are almost never the offspring of conviction alone. (Jeffrey Collins *Wall Street Journal* 2009-10-01)

Only in retrospect did the strife acquire coherence as the Thirty Years' War, and Wilson incisively cuts through its several phases to recount the objectives and options of the warring parties...Confidently argued, clearly written, Wilson's history is superb coverage of this pivotal period in European history. (Gilbert Taylor *Booklist* 2009-10-01)

Peter Wilson's book is a major work, the first new history of the Thirty Years' War in a generation. It is a fascinating, brilliantly written attempt to explain a compelling series of events, which tore the heart out of

Europe. (*The Times* 2009-08-01)

[It] succeeds brilliantly. It is huge both in its scene-setting and its unfolding narrative detail...It is to Wilson's credit that he can both offer the reader a detailed account of this terrible and complicated war and step back to give due summaries. His scholarship seems to me remarkable, his prose light and lovely, his judgments fair. This is a heavyweight book, no doubt. Sometimes, though, the very best of them have to be. (Paul Kennedy *Sunday Times* 2009-07-19)

Wilson's monumental study captures both the complexities of the political and military transformations and the level of brutality that the endemic struggles unleashed...This will be the defining study of the Thirty Years War for the next generation. (P. G. Wallace *Choice* 2010-04-01)

About the Author

Peter H. Wilson is Chichele Professor of the History of War at the University of Oxford.

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