

Axel Gotthard. Der Dreißigjährige Krieg. Eine Einführung, Köln, Weimar, Wien (Böhlau) 2016, 390 S., 3 Abb., 4 Kt. (UTB, 4555), ISBN 978-3-8252-4555-9, EUR 24,99.

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Peter H. Wilson, Oxford

The Thirty Years War was one of the most destructive and complex conflicts in European history. Rendering it comprehensible within the format of a relatively short book is no easy task. Perhaps inevitably, most attempts to provide concise, accessible interpretations have oversimplified the events and issues, and present the war as either a pan-European struggle against Habsburg hegemonic pretensions, or as more geographically-contained, but nonetheless violent »German« war. Cutting across these two geographical perspectives are those variously emphasising religion and politics. Finally, there is the question of the scale and scope of the fighting changed between 1618 and 1648. The classic interpretation argues that the war was over religion and was the inevitable consequence of the supposed failings of the Peace of Augsburg of 1555. The Defenestration of Prague was the spark that ignited a conflict which expanded from its original Bohemian starting point to spread across Germany and then beyond as other countries were drawn in. Usually, religious issues are regarded as having faded around 1635 when the war, in this conventional approach, is thought to have become a general European power struggle. The supposed secularisation of the contested issues is usually considered an important factor facilitating the termination of the war in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

In what is explicitly presented as a »Studienbuch«, Axel Gotthard offers his own distinctive interpretation of the war. Central to this is his argument that the war was a confessional conflict in the Holy Roman Empire. This leads him to reject the conventional view of the war expanding outwards in concentric circles to become a European conflict, though he does note the growing significance of foreign involvement after 1635. Otherwise, his chronology remains broadly conventional, with the thirty-year timespan subdivided into the familiar phases, each associated with a principal belligerent: an initial Bohemian phase from 1618 to 1620, a Palatine phase 1621–1624 when the war moved to the Rhineland, a Danish phase 1625–1629 with that country's intervention in northern Germany, a Swedish phase opening with Gustavus Adolphus' intervention in 1630, and finally an extended Franco-Swedish phase 1635–48 once France openly backed Sweden against the emperor.

Like most historians, Gotthard identifies the problematic Peace of Augsburg as a root cause of the war, but his interpretation diverges considerably from the usual catalogue of ambiguous terms which became increasingly contentious around 1600. Instead of simply being faded, the peace was ahead of its time (p. 15) in attempting a secular political peace at a time when truth was still regarded as singular, and any attempt at toleration was considered to jeopardise inhabitants' salvation. The various confessional parties expressed their arguments in legalistic terms, because this was fundamental to all political behaviour in the Empire, but, Gotthard argues, they were primarily using constitutional arguments to advance their exclusive claims to religious truth (p. 58). This



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approach did not represent a conscious or cynical manipulation of the constitution for religious ends. Rather, it sprang from contemporaries' fear that political or legal concessions endangered their souls. Gotthard gives due consideration to other factors, such as the incapacity of Emperor Rudolf II, as well as the clash between the Habsburgs' proto-absolutist conception of monarchical rule in their own lands, and the Estates-based mixed monarchy advocated by the majority of the nobility. However, throughout it is confession that assumes the leading place in explaining why the various actors were repeatedly incapable of resolving their differences peacefully.

There are passages where the stress on confession is contradicted by the admission that no one was prepared for such a war, and that many repeatedly took steps to avoid it, and then to end it once it had begun, or at least prevent its further spread (p.54, 73–74, 79–81, 89–94, 310–311). It is also arguable whether the term »outliers« (»Grenzfälle«) is appropriate for the continual tensions within confessional groupings, such as between the Habsburgs and Bavaria, as well as cross-confessional cooperation, such as between Saxony and the emperor. These were structural features of the war, rather than simply exceptions to an otherwise solidly confessionalised situation.

The work is divided into five chapters, with the first advancing the argument that this was a confessional war. The second examines the period 1618–1629 in a broadly chronological approach. The third offers a thematic survey of how the war was fought and sustained, as well as some brief comments on how it affected daily life and how it was perceived by ordinary people. The chronological discussion resumes in the fourth chapter covering the period from the Swedish invasion of 1630 into the later 1640s. The final chapter concentrates on explaining why it took so long to make peace, as well as engaging briefly in the debates on the wider historical significance of the Peace of Westphalia. Throughout, Gotthard's writing is lively and ideally suited to his stated purpose of engaging students who have little or no prior knowledge of the period. The deliberate decision not to discuss historiography in any length, together with the idiosyncratic bibliography mainly restricted to the author's own works detract somewhat from the book's utility as a text book. However, the repeated discussions of why peace proved so elusive are very well-handled and strengthen the book considerably by providing a second theme alongside the emphasis on confession.



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