

Johannes Burkhardt, Der Krieg der Kriege. Eine neue Geschichte des Dreißigjährigen Krieges, Stuttgart (Klett-Cotta) 2018, 296 S., 9 Abb., ISBN 978-3-608-96176-8, EUR 25,00.

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Regine Maritz, Paris

A range of monographs have been published to coincide with the anniversary of the Peace of Westphalia. Many of them have sought to give a survey account of the Thirty Years' War, and, as a result of the scope of the subject matter, they are rarely slimmer than six hundred pages. Johannes Burkhardt's book bucks this trend as it comes in under three hundred pages and positions itself between a very short survey narrative and an intervention in the debate on how best to interpret this war. His argument is twofold. The first part will be familiar to those familiar with Burkhardt's previous work¹. He reads the Thirty Years' War as a conflict fought in the first place over state formation and not religion. Here he revisits that notion and insists specifically on the opposition of the concepts of universal, and plural sovereign statehood as competing visions for the future of Europe that clashed violently at this time. Secondly – despite a somewhat misleading title – Burkhardt is concerned with the forging of peace, which he views as an incremental process that spanned many important way stations throughout the duration of the hostilities. These points are developed lucidly throughout the text, and they are bolstered by a well-crafted narrative.

Burkhardt sets out the parameters of his investigation in a provocatively phrased prologue. He reminds the reader of the extreme devastation triggered by the Thirty Years' War by revisiting topics such as the decimation of the population in the Holy Roman Empire through violence, hunger, and disease. At the end of each section, he repeats his central research question: Why was this devastating war not terminated sooner?

The first chapter builds on this by arguing that in the wake of the Defenestration of Prague the Empire actually possessed the human and institutional resources needed in order to deescalate the situation and to avoid warfare. Burkhardt points to Emperor Matthias's measured response to the mistreatment of his representatives in Bohemia, as well as to territorial rulers' right to confessional self-determination, which had served the Empire well for several decades. The author lends much emphasis to Saxony's decision to join forces with the Emperor in his opposition of the Bohemian estates, which were in open revolt, when they crowned the Protestant Elector Palatine Frederick V as their new king. Since Saxony itself was a Protestant territory, their support of the Catholic head of the Empire can be read as a political statement



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¹Johannes Burkhardt, Der Dreißigjährige Krieg, Frankfurt a. M. 1992.

that rejected confessional warfare, thus underlining Burkhardt's argument.

This perspective is further developed in the second chapter. The quest to become the universal power in European politics, which pitched Bourbon France against the Habsburgs in an intricate web of proxy conflicts, collided violently with the demands for independence made by Bohemian and Dutch separatists. Burkhardt sees a certain irony in the fact that a possible solution to accommodate such conflicting demands already existed in the federal structure of the Holy Roman Empire, yet failed to assert itself at this time. Instead, the many partial conflicts were followed by numerous temporary peace agreements, all of which served to hone the creativity and the diplomatic toolboxes of the belligerents involved.

Chapters three, four, and five are concerned with the crucial figures Albrecht von Wallenstein and Gustav II Adolph, the king of Sweden. Burkhardt argues that it is too simplistic to view these actors as the ultimate warmongers of their age, and instead works to render visible the opportunities for peace that were created by their antagonism. The mixed blessings of Wallenstein's invention of the standing imperial army, which had the potential to create increased security, as well as being a temptation for further military engagement is a central theme here, yet the chapter also explores more recently discovered means of warfare, such as the impact of images and pamphlets on the perception of Gustav Adolph's involvement in the hostilities. The fifth chapter in particular emphasises Wallenstein's diplomatic talents and leaves us with the thought-provoking assertion that the supreme commander's quest for peace negotiations provided important groundwork for the Peace of Prague.

The peace of 1635 thus follows logically as the focal point of chapter six. Although this treaty could not end the war, Burkhardt insists on its importance, since it created a precedent for the usage of a normative year in order to settle disputes over Protestant and Catholic land-holding disagreements, a practice which should prove to be crucial to the later conclusion of the Peace of Westphalia. Furthermore, the author pauses here briefly to reflect on how migration and the durability of many administrative and social institutions were crucial in ensuring that the German lands of the Empire endured even after this protracted war came to an end.

The seventh and concluding chapter is devoted to the negotiations which culminated in the Peace of Westphalia. Here the author connects the dots of his argument and demonstrates how several of the diplomatic tools and innovations, which had previously proven their usefulness in the conclusion of partial peace agreements during the war, now came into their own and facilitated the hammering out of a resilient peace deal with a long-lasting impact.

In an epilogue Burkhardt reflects on which – if any – lessons for the construction of peace might be drawn from the period of the Thirty Years' War.

The straightforward presentation of the book's arguments is a strength, but at times the author's quest for clarity of argument threatens to result in a lack of nuance. For instance, his proposition



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that Saxony understood early on that the Bohemian revolt was triggered by a »political conflict« and not by religious questions imposes an overly rigid set of grid lines on what was surely a fuzzier situation (see e. g. p. 243). »Political« decision-making in this period necessarily comprised dynastic reasoning (and thus religious and cultural markers)², as much as the modern conception of politics centred on institutions and power, which informs Burkhardt's understanding of the term. This reviewer feels that the author's arguments about the importance of the state-formation context in this war, could not only survive the inclusion of cultural, social, and religious factors, but would be enhanced by such broader readings. Nevertheless, this book provides an accessible and interesting reading of the Thirty Years' War and is peppered with thought-provoking ideas and reflections. It is recommended to specialists and general readers alike.



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² See also Peter Wilson, *Europe's Tragedy. A History of the Thirty Years War*, London 2009, p. 809–811.