

Thoughts on the Thirty Years' War from War to Peace: History in the Age of ... ?

At the end of the Reformation (Luther died in 1546), an atmosphere of tolerance and peace was forged by means of the Religious Peace Treaty of 1555. After some very tense conflict, Roman Catholics and Lutherans saw that it was necessary for them to live together peacefully, even though they strongly disagreed with one another, because their many small kingdoms, principalities, and duchies bordered each other; they saw that peace was necessary: the alternative would be continuous war and near-total destruction of their societies. The Lutherans and Catholics who created this peace agreement also realized that, despite their differences, the Christian faith which they had in common demanded peace, not war.

The era from 1555 until 1618 was, then, a time of peace and tolerance.

But in 1618, the Thirty Years' War began. This would be one of the cruelest, bloodiest, and most destructive wars in the history of the world.

How did Europe go from "peace and tolerance" to horrid killing on a scale which rivals World War One?

The generation of princes and dukes who formed the peace treaty of 1555 was a generation which (a) knew the horrors of war, and (b) knew clearly what their own religious beliefs required.

The generation of 1555 had lived through a number of smaller military conflicts (e.g., the peasant revolt of the early 1500's), and knew that their principalities would be hard-pressed to provide soldiers and money to fund war. They knew that it took decades to recover from such war, when villages were destroyed, and many people killed.

This same generation also had lived through the Reformation, and had been forced to make complex choices: "shall I be Lutheran or Roman Catholic?" Because they had wrestled with these questions, they understood the concepts behind both the Roman church and the Lutheran church. They had made informed decisions, and they knew what the people on the opposite side believed. And in order to form the peaceful co-existence, in which different versions of the Christian religion were tolerated and lived side-by-side with each other, they discovered that their faith did not ask them to destroy those who believed otherwise.

A third religious group also benefitted from this religious tolerance: the Jews. After 1555, the Jews enjoyed more tolerance, security, safety, and freedom than before, especially in central Europe.

But by 1618, a very different generation of princes and dukes was in power. This new generation had enjoyed decades of peace, and did not know first-hand the horrors of war. Thus they were more likely to engage in war. They also had ceased to have a meaningful decision in their religious faith. Rather than examining Lutheranism or Romanism and choosing one or the other, they merely "inherited" a religion. In practice, this meant that they were un-informed and un-interested in their religions. They have carried a label "Lutheran" or "Catholic", but they had very little knowledge about what this meant, and didn't really care.

In 1618, the main power struggle in Europe was between two families: the Hapsburgs (also spelled "Habsburgs") and the Hohenzollerns. The Hapsburg family included most of the dukes and princes in southern-central Europe, and the Hohenzollern family include those in northern-central Europe.

The fact that most of the Hohenzollern family was nominally Lutheran, and most of the Hapsburg family was nominally Catholic, provided an excuse to call their power struggle a "religious war". This way, the princes could persuade their subjects to support the war. But in fact, many of the important leaders on the Hohenzollern side were Catholic, supporting the Lutheran king, and on the Hapsburg side, there were many Lutheran military leaders supporting a Catholic empire.

By the time the two sides were done making alliances with other countries, we find the "Lutheran" Swedes fighting on same side as the "Catholic" French. It becomes clear that this war was not about religion, but it was about land, money, and power. This is true of most wars. Both sides hired mercenaries who had no religious leanings; it became clear that this was not a religious war.

By 1648, Lutherans and Catholics were working together to persuade the princes to stop the fighting! The series of negotiations which finally brought peace were organized by the two churches. It was clear that the Lutheran faith and the Catholic faith demanded peace.

How then to explain the Thirty Years' War? The key lies in the personalities of two generations of monarchs: the generation of 1555, and the generation of 1618. One generation chose peace, the other war.