MEANINGLESS CONFLICT?
THE CHARACTER OF THE THIRTY YEARS WAR

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‘The land was flooded by friendly and hostile armies which behaved with equal barbarity. Like storm-driven clouds they clashed together. They inun- dated the land one moment; the next they drew apart and left it devastated. The misery reached its peak when those inhabitants who had escaped the soldiers’ swords succumbed to evil plagues.’

This verdict on the Thirty Years War (1618–48), written a century after its conclusion by the Prussian king, Frederick II, encapsulates a general perception of pointless destruction, which persists today. It forms a common thread through five general characteristics, which emerge from writing on the war since the seventeenth century. This paper will review these characteristics briefly, before challenging their assumptions about the relationship between politics and the conduct of the war. This relationship will then be explored in three chronological sections, examining in turn the period of Austrian Habsburg victories in the 1620s, Swedish intervention in the early 1630s, and the later stages of the war following French intervention in 1635. It will conclude by relating the findings to four wider issues raised by the war’s place in the history of warfare and of early modern Europe.


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Five Characteristics

The war was undoubtedly Europe’s most destructive conflict prior to the twentieth-century world wars. However, its alleged character as an ‘all-destructive fury’ has attracted sustained criticism since the late nineteenth century from those who have questioned earlier claims about the level of material destruction and demographic decline. Whereas most

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2 The earlier literature is summarised by R. Ergang, The myth of the all-destructive fury of the Thirty Years War (Pocono Pines PA: Craftsmen, 1956).
central Europeans continued to believe – in many cases into the twenty-first century – that the Thirty Years War exceeded even the horrors of the world wars and Nazi dictatorship, writers living outside the countries once affected grew increasingly sceptical. The most strident and influential critique was launched by Sigfrid Henry Steinberg who essentially argued the received picture derived from a massive fraud as ordinary people pleaded poverty to dodge post-war taxes, or simply left for better opportunities elsewhere. Though wellreceived, including in Germany, few now accept Steinberg’s assertion that the German population actually increased during the war. The debate on the death toll and material destruction rumbles on, but has been overlaid in the last fifteen years by a greater focus on the psychological impact assessed through the paradigm of ‘experience’. Findings from this new research reaffirm the earlier picture of the war making a profound impact on those who experienced it, without returning to the exaggerated generalisations common to earlier accounts.

The second characteristic is of a religious war. Most nineteenth-century historians were in little doubt that the war was caused by sectarian hatred between Catholics and Protestants, even if they sometimes allowed for other factors. The Peace of Augsburg from 1555 was generally blamed for only putting a temporary break on the tensions arising from the Reformation which then, allegedly, erupted in the Bohemian Revolt of 1618 triggering the war. These arguments temporarily receded during the icy blast of Cold War secularism between the 1950s and ‘80s when the war became the epicentre of the ‘General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century’.

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6 This agreement has entered English-language historiography as the Religious Peace, but was known to contemporaries as the ‘religious and profane peace’ and was in fact a summary of changes to the imperial constitution, rather than a peace treaty in the conventional sense. The best, if somewhat jaundiced account is A. Gotthard, Der Augsburger Religionsfrieden (Münster: Aschendorff, 2004).

7 For a critical review with good references to the older literature, see the special issue of the American Historical Review, 113 (2008) devoted to the crisis thesis.