

Summary of The Thirty Years War

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Chapter 1: Europe in a Century of Crisis and Revolution.

The central thesis is a refutation of long-standing historical scholarship that maintains that the 16th Century was a century of unchecked crisis. Evidently historical analysis had focused on eroding feudalism and emerging systems of trade, culminating in successive and increasing tensions. Instead of this explanation, Polisensky offers the following: "What caused the conflict between these two conceptions of civilizations, these two approaches to the questions of life and death, society and the state, education and the progress of the mind? The answer is simple: the civilizations created their own ideologies, in other words there were developed in certain restricted areas (Spain and the Netherlands) conceptual attitudes which, while never embracing the whole breadth of those civilizations or even their most progressive aspects, became so far the support of certain forms of government that any attack on them was regarded as an attack on the state itself and its social framework. Within the given society these attitudes came to be placed before any other considerations, which were only allowed expression on condition that they remained subordinate to the ruling official doctrine. Thus it was the transformation of *civilizations* into *ideologies* which created the precondition for open conflict, and the danger of such a conflict was directly dependent on the stage

which had been reached in the evolution of a 'doctrine of state'.¹ The book explains the Thirty Years War as a conflict of ideologies.

Chapter 2: The World at the Turn of the Century.

Europe and the Hapsburg Empire were polarized by Catholicism and Protestantism. The two main players were Spain and the Netherlands. Bohemia (the Czechs) occupied an important geographical location because they bordered Turkish lands; and they occupied an important ideological position because of the high degree of religious tolerance that they enjoyed after the Hussite Revolution.²

The first half of the second chapter is a detailed description of Czech (Bohemian) economic and social life. There is a general tone of prosperity, with expected interjections about normal downturns in economy. As the narrative turns to matters cultural, Polisensky describes a country of tremendous and unusual religious tolerance, as well as of ample cultural developments. Slowly, between pages 46 and 52, one feels a impending sense of calamity as Polisensky introduces the Hapsburgs: "Yet this success of the Czech Protestant Churches was achieved at the very time when the forces of revitalized Catholicism were beginning to reorganize themselves on a broader and sounder base, both internationally and within the domestic political scene in Bohemia. The bitter conflicts in Western Europe and their blend of religious and political animosities formed a somber backcloth to Bohemia's peaceful evolution. The four civil wars in France, the attempt at Catholic restoration in England and its ruthless suppression, the

¹ P. 8.

² "The fact of religious tolerance and its consequences for society had become so characteristic of life in the Czech lands, and were so rooted in all sections of the population, that even the changes which followed the linking of the Bohemian state with the Alpine lands of the Hapsburgs left the new ruler no opportunity to upset the balance, at least in the first years of his reign." (Page 24).

successful struggle of the Dutch against the Spanish counter-reforming attempts; all showed how the burning issues of Church and State were molding the destiny of European society and drawing ever-wider circles of humanity into their bloody embrace. Czech religious tolerance found itself faced from the 1580s onward by an uncompromising Catholic offensive in which the interests of the Church of Rome were joined with a new absolutist ideology of State, and the Hapsburg striving after total monarchy was underpinned by the moral and material support of the Church Militant. The Council of Trent had given dogmatic and organizational content to this Catholic onslaught, and from the 1570s the Papal divisions engaged on a planned assault of the broadest dimensions against every brand of Protestantism. The main force of the Tridentine armoury was turned against the entrenched Protestants of Germany; but Bohemia which stood a little to one side of this line of attack, was nevertheless itself soon to feel the consequences of the new disposition of ideologies and powers."³

It is a powerful, foretelling, and saddening passage.

Chapter 3: The End of Equilibrium and First Attempts to Resolve the Crisis.

The chapter begins with a sketch of general economic prosperity and general religious tolerance against a background of Catholic interest in Bohemia. Slowly we hear more and more mention of Roman Catholic influence in Bohemia, if only in the minority. One particular chronicler mentions the 'Jesuitical oppressors'. One

³ P. 49.

historian, Comenius writes, "that the clouds of persecution were gathering, and that lightning always flashes before it strikes."⁴

Throughout Europe there were signs of political problems and of the increasing persecution from the arch-Catholic front. But Bohemia was not ready. Gratefully, the Hapsburgs were not ready either for an offensive. Their wars, means, and alliances were spread over too much land and over too many differing political relationships to allow them to mount a cohesive Catholic offensive. The Jesuits marshaled perhaps the one unified front: "The educational system of the Jesuits with its expertly planned instruction was expressly directed to achieve long-term incorporation of Bohemia, especially its younger generation, in the intellectual world of Spain and the Papacy... The Jesuit headquarters in Prague and later in Vienna came to be controlled by the Papal nuncios, first established in 1560 and increasingly the leading representatives of Rome in central Europe, who held together a network of agents to spread the ideological and political message of the Counter-Reformation."

Infighting among the numerous German-Lutheran-Calvinist groups facilitated the growing strength of the Jesuits and the Hapsburgs. Bohemia remained somewhat tolerant, and somewhat removed. Yet the political tension thickened as Lutherans and Calvinists combined plans to displace the Hapsburg power. Surrounded by this power struggle, Bohemia's somewhat insulated position was compromised when Ferdinand of Styria, a devout Roman Catholic zealot, was supported in his candidacy to assume the throne in Bohemia. Diarists from the day sensed that the tacit political-ideological conflict would be settled with blood. As

⁴ p. 77

Traiano Boccalini wrote, "...since modern heresy has now become an affair of the state, disputations and councils are no longer enough, and arms must decide the issue."⁵

In the Spanish court the Hapsburgs found plenty of support for forays—if not outright aggression—against the Netherlands on purely ideological grounds. (The juxtaposition of this idea with a description of the Araucanian uprising in Chile gives the impression that Spain sought a European encounter to counterbalance the humiliation in the Americas). This concern for the Netherlands seems to have made Bohemia guilty by ideological association: "Thus any threat to the dynasty in Bohemia or Germany must mean danger to the whole edifice of Spanish interests."⁶ So Bohemia was now officially a "problem"—problematic in the sense that there remained something less than ideological homogeneity within the Hapsburg Empire.

Chapter 4: The Bohemian War: the Local Conflict and its Wider Importance.

The Spanish Catholic Monarchy did not, of course, honor any traditional laws that promoted religious tolerance. As the Jesuit program spread, its nearsightedness and vindictiveness spread with it. Churches were closed, and intolerance for Protestantism—no matter how benign—increased exponentially. Naturally, opposition within Protestant regions to all things related to Spanish Catholicism and its political agenda of domination grew accordingly. This opposition grew to include its own form of intolerance, at times expelling Catholics from their towns and homes. Protestant political bodies began taking measures against Catholic institutions and Hapsburg sympathizers. While the author does not

⁵ P. 94.

⁶ P. 91.

consider how deeply these measures influenced the Spanish Crown in its determination to annihilate Bohemia's independence, it seems logical that Bohemia's reaction would have served as one of Spain's primary justifications for an intensified offensive.

Bohemia did what it could to repel the Hapsburg aggression, rebuffing two significant offensives, uniting all of its Estates, and garnering the support of Moravia. But the Spanish war machine could not be defeated. Beginning with the inexplicable losses at the Battle of White Mountain (in which Frederick essentially induced panic and confusion by turning and running from an enemy that was certainly not superior to his troops), Bohemia began to crumble. Contemporary resources explain the pivotal loss as the will of God as punishment for Bohemia's sins; only occasional sources mention that cowardice and incompetence were at the root of the loss.

But whether the loss came soon or later seems to have mattered little. Frederick's cowardice may have done nothing more than expedite the inevitable. Back in Castile, politicians and monarchists were coping with a shrinking supply of silver from the New World, and increasing demands for it to fight Dutch Protestants. Unwilling to lose its position as the world's greatest power, Spain sought easy resources to support its conflicts, its sagging economy, and its shrinking empire. In this sense, ideology was but an excuse to mask less-than-ideological goals.

The Jesuits may have weakened the terrain by opening the wounds of conflict among the tolerant, but they could not finish the job. That would be left to Bohemia's own inability to sustain a war against a country supplied by the seemingly infinite wealth of South American mines. Even with decreased silver

flowing into the Iberian Peninsula, mercenary troops were easily had, and indifference could be purchased from even the most Protestant of countries. Combining these advantages with Bohemia's inability to provide its troops with food made the outcome predictable. Prague fell when she could have been defended throughout an entire winter, and Spain had its way.

Chapter 5: The Dutch Period of the War, 1621-5.

When the Catholics conquered Bohemia, they followed their victory with violence. Ferdinand especially sought to extract vengeance in the form of money, lands, and goods from the heretical residents of heretical lands. To compensate for the large amounts of money he spent to conquer them, he robbed the Bohemians of everything they owned, taxed them relentlessly, and expelled the worthless from their homes. Soldiers sacked towns and took up residence where the defeated had fled. They installed their own system of incompetent government and proceeded to turn a prosperous, peaceful country into a debilitated, war-ridden wreck. The conquerors took their victory to heart, seeing plunder as their reward. The people of Bohemia were turned into slaves in all but name.

As if bankrupting the country and leaving no hope for economic recovery were not enough, the Hapsburg front took aim at religion. The goal was nothing less than "the utter extirpation of all non-Catholic confessions."⁷ First Calvinist, then Lutheran, then Utraquist preachers were banished. In 1624, all Protestant preachers of all kinds were banished. Evidently secure that the populace would find Catholicism more appealing than a void of leadership, the Jesuits sought to bring all

⁷ P. 140.

to the light of Rome, willingly or not. As Polisensky says, the Jesuits “pressed the Catholic dogmas pitilessly on all levels of society.”⁸ Evidently the Jesuit reasoning was not as compelling as they had dreamed, for they were forced to offer many Bohemians the choice between Catholicism and death.

For a job well done, the Jesuits and sympathetic political leaders were well paid. They received the best homes, strong donations, and wealth that they never would have enjoyed without rapine. Documents attest to the fact that not a single wealthy family or individual remained in Bohemia: every ounce of monetary good was squeezed from the prosperous under the pretense of disobedience. In 1627 the Catholic powers issued an edict banning all non-Catholic persons from their home country, evidently banishing them to some neighboring territory where they could await the next wave of despotism to arrive.

Those who fled suffered varied fates. Many were carried off by Turks; the more literary escaped to Britain, and the more rebellious escaped to the mountains of Moravia and joined the Wallachians—warriors who simply refused to renounce their religion, and who continued to cause serious problems through unexpected raids on Catholic camps.

But Spain had a greater enemy than the bands of rebels who descended upon them when small victories were certain: the Protestant countries (Germany, the Netherlands, and Moravia) were planning a unified offensive against the hated Spanish Catholics. Guessing that a long offensive would weaken an effective defense, the Protestants began to join hands without even so much as the need to

⁸ P. 141.

know what the reward of victory would be. Defeat of the Hapsburgs would be reward enough.

Chapter 6: The Danish War and the Rise of Wallenstein.

This is an odd chapter because it strays in tone from the general topic of the book: that the war had ideological roots. Instead it is a narrative of battles intertwined with a short biography of Wallenstein—whose significance doesn't bear as fully as one would expect on the overall chapter.

There are some interesting moments, such as Ferdinand II's issuance of the Edict of Restitution in which he awards all property belonging to the Catholic Church in 1552 back to the Church. The point of this is that such arrant abuse of the people in the name of God only further united all against the despot. In all, most of the points in the chapter had already been made, and the biography of Wallenstein is sketchy enough to not really be useful.

Chapter 7: The Swedish War and the Fall of Wallenstein, 1631-5.

The general theme of this chapter is hard to detect, despite the precision of the title. The Swedish intervention in Western Europe is important to the theme because the Swedes generally supported Protestant initiatives and opposed Hapsburg agendas. But the narrative treats only isolated military engagements and does not speak of any ideological motives. And while Wallenstein was decidedly Catholic, his power in Bohemia and his willingness to allow the populace to govern themselves, trade freely, and worship as they liked seemed to raise suspicions because those methods of government were foreign to Spain, and therefore must

be opposed to Spain. So when the Swedish army suffered an enormous defeat on German lands and Wallenstein was murdered, hopes of a recovery of past freedoms seemed dashed. There were minor rebellions, to be sure, and ample literature decrying the Hapsburg military monster, but nothing took root within the populace enough to be called a threat. The result of this vacuum of opposition was that France inherited the duty and title of opposing the Hapsburgs, with the main political decisions being made by Cardinal Richelieu. So the anti-Hapsburg sentiment shifted from a Swedish military protectorate and a local Catholic liberality in an isolated part of Bohemia to France.

Chapter 8: New Horizons and New Miseries.

The picture painted in this chapter is one of increasing military and political complexity. More and more faces enter the war, what is at stake is constantly shifting, and reasons for taking action at one front or another is often dictated by myriad factors outside the realm of the war itself. But while the Hapsburgs and the Swedes and the Germans and the power-hungry commanders of local battalions jostled for position, lives and towns and cities and regions and economies were destroyed. A particularly touching contemporary passage read: "There were in Olomouc before the coming of the Swedes 700 houses of burghers, noblemen and priests. Now however of the 77 which belonged to the nobility and clergy only 23 are habitable, 18 are completely destroyed and 36 are in a devastated condition; while of the 623 burgher dwellings only 145 are lived in, 242 being utterly ruined and the rest ravaged. Besides this there used to be 656 houses in the suburbs

tributary to the city, but of these not one is still standing. Even in 1640 the population of this place was 30,000 souls, now there are not more than 1,675.”⁹

Chapter 9: The Compromise and the Peace.

When the various countries involved in the Thirty Years War simply could not sustain a war, most parties sought peace. The oddest part of this fact is that Spain and Vienna and others sought to establish a specific date upon which they would base territories and governance. By this time so many countries had entered and left the fray, and so many issues were at stake, that negotiations became impossible. Because there were too many issues and too much at stake, the powers decided upon January 1, 1624, which was a date that lay between the date of the incipience of the war and one in which Spain wielded the greatest power. This meant that the political situation of Western Europe would be governed, and territories would be divided, based upon the boundaries in effect in 1624. The date, of course, was arbitrary: its very arbitrariness belies its absurd importance, as well as the complete ignorance of the rulers to discern any complexity in a situation that was impossibly complex.

Bohemia, of course, suffered irreparable damage. It suffered under the weight of unpayable debt, it lost its culture to the imposition of imperialist Catholicism, it lost its citizenry to war, it lost its economy to greed, and above all it surrendered its freedom of religious worship to despotic Iberian idealism. She started as an innocent and prosperous country and lost all because her innocence left her open to attack and her prosperity invited opportunity.

⁹ P. 232.

Chapter 10: The Peace and Its Consequences.

The Peace in Western Europe was a peace of exhaustion. The battle over ideologies turned into a war over something that everyone forgot—ideologies disappeared into the background as actions and reactions, and possibilities of winning moved to the foreground. In summary: “the War, which was a power-political and diplomatic struggle underpinned by a transition in the evolution of economies, changed the order of European politics and directed it into new channels. Of the two organizational models which the men of 1618 had seen as the focus of the two belligerent camps, the United Provinces and Spain, the latter had by 1648 vanished irretrievably from the perspectives of a succeeding generation. Olivares’ dream of world monarchy, so suggestively formulated in the middle of the 1620’s, was taken over after 1648 by the publicists of the *Roi Soliel*.”¹⁰

Comments

Interestingly the author spent little time on ideology, despite the book’s claim that ideology was at the root of the war. What emerged in the end was a theory that the Thirty Years War was a primary cause of a new Europe.

I wanted a little more background to the Bohemian question, so I returned to Henry Charles Lea’s *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, volume II, chapter VII, titled, “Bohemia”. Lea begins the history of heresy in Bohemia in the 1250’s, where we find the first records of doctrinal irregularities practiced broadly enough to cause concern and work their way into public record. As far back as that

¹⁰ P. 261

time there existed a combined hatred of Roman oppression and fear of Roman retribution.¹¹ He cites the fascinating example of Milicz of Kremsier who preached against the “sins and crimes of clergy and laity” with such vehemence that his furor convinced himself that the Antichrist would arrive between 1365 and 1367, just a few years removed from his current preaching. His vehemence and anti-clericalism landed him in prison when he visited Rome with the express purpose of enlightening the guilty of their sins; the Pope pardoned him, which allowed him to return to his country and pick up the same theme in a louder voice and in more antagonistic terms. Here we see the origins of anti-Catholicism that would allow Bohemia to have a diverse religious environment.

I can’t do the following passage justice, so I will quote it in its entirety: “The spirit of indignation and disquiet did not confine itself to denunciations of clerical abuses. Men were growing bolder, and began to question some of the cherished dogmas which gave rise to those abuses. In the synod of 1384 one of the subjects discussed was whether the saints were cognizant of the prayers addressed to them, and whether the worshipper was benefited by their suffrages—the mere raising of such a question showing how dangerously bold had become the spirit of inquiry.”¹²

At the same time in England, John Wycliffe was preparing clear, philosophical arguments demonstrating the contradictory nature of certain key doctrines, as well as exposing the sins of the clergy in light of the scriptures. He carried his arguments to their logical conclusions, which quite naturally was a sweeping implication of the degree of “domination which the Church had acquired over the

¹¹ p. 434

¹² p. 437

life, here and hereafter, of its members."¹³ Bohemia seized his doctrines eagerly. In particular, John Hus mimicked his teachings and methods in preaching reform of the Church in Bohemia. The reform movement caused a considerable expense of energy in print and out, but the Inquisition's investigations did not produce a single condemnation during their earliest efforts to discover heresy amongst Hussites. The Church issued the requisite number of verbal and written chastisements, which only increased the fervor with which the people defended their right to believe what they would.

Just when Bohemia enjoyed liberties available only to the isolated, the Church set out to resolve the greatest difficulty of the Middle Ages: the Great Schism. The aim published abroad was to settle the difficulty of a Christendom of two Popes, and to effect the reform of the errors of the clergy and purge Europe of heresy. The thought animated Hus, and he sought out audience at the Council of Constance in which he could simultaneously clear himself of charges of heresy, and assist through his devotion to cleanse the Church of its evil practices and evil practitioners. He traveled under the illusion of innocence and the calm of a promise of safe passage from the emperor Sigismund. His self-assurance of innocence led to his death as much as did the easy revocability of the imperial promise of safe passage. The latter was nullified conveniently with the excuse that it had been issued after Hus' departure; while the former could not be revoked as part and parcel of his pure conscience.

Some considerable attention is paid to individual doctrines, such as transubstantiation, with the obvious intent of exposing the ridiculousness of the

¹³ p. 438.

vehemence with which it was argued and by the simplicity with which it is stated. A good example of this comes from the footnote on page 472 in which Lea describes the battles over protecting the consecrated host and wine from impurities that beset the sacred objects while a man with a beard might drink it or an infant might spill it. The height of this stupidity was reached when the Church condemned the practice of dipping the bread in wine to conduct both safely, but allowing such a practice to the infirm. The only thing that remained was for Aquinas to prove beyond refutation that the body lay in the blood and the blood in the body in theology and in reality; but still they could not mix in practice.

Returning to the “trial”, Lea recounts the numerous efforts to get Hus to recant his errors—efforts that surpassed any degree of leniency required by law or evidenced by precedent. Hus refused every offer of kindness that did not include the opportunity to defend himself, clarify the accusations leveled against him, and clear his name in front of the tribunal. The fathers, of course, wanted no part of anything that deviated even the slightest from inquisitorial practice, and Hus was renounced time and time again as a contumacious heretic. Despite what was obvious to others, Hus held out hope. When the Pope and Emperor parted, Hus knew that the emperor would defend him. That hope exposed his naive nature more than any other: Sigismund sold Hus at every opportunity to collect even the smallest favor.

And so Hus entered the trial only to be further surprised that it proceeded as anyone else could have predicted: he was told time and time again to answer questions with only a “yeah” or a “nay”; he was denied his repeated requests to clarify his own misquoted words; and he was told to recant his heresies. Since he

recognized no such heresies, he asked that they be explained, only to find that he had never held them. And so his gentle conscience was placed in a position of lying before God and losing his soul or telling the truth and losing his life. He chose the latter. Despite private assurances from all who could reach him that his life would be spared if he would but recant, he could not do so except under the conditions that he be shown where and how he erred in order to recant what God would have him recant.

The impasse led to the inevitable *auto de fe*, which must have been the most ostentatious in the history of the world. It proceeded as the law required, Hus was condemned, the Inquisitors handed him over to the secular arm, and he was burned at the stake. Throughout all, he comported himself as a saint, which he soon became in the eyes of the Bohemians: a phenomenon that surprisingly surprised the Church. Thus elevated to the status of martyr, the Church undertook the task of erasing his memory through continued condemnations, none of which was the least bit effectual.

While Lea never arrives at the seventeenth century, it is obvious from the foundation laid by years of religious tolerance (or rampant heresy) and the continued reverence of its own holy martyr that Bohemia would hardly return to an orthodoxy that would satisfy the Holy Roman Church. Others followed, such as Jerome of Prague, but they merely accepted a hussian fate with the same alacrity as their adored leader. And so the battle between the Church and Bohemia continued without interruption until the Thirty Years War—and beyond.