

The Thirty Years War and the Thirty Years Crisis

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Recently, international relations theorists have criticized the notion of the “Westphalian System”, the belief that the peace treaties signed in Westphalia in 1648 ending the Thirty Years War inaugurated a period when sovereign states were the only legitimate actors in international politics. The untidy blend of feudal lords, city assemblies, clerical authorities, and other intermediary potentates usually drove IR theorists to reject the idea that the history of medieval Europe had anything to teach the budding diplomat.

These criticisms rest largely in the recognition that viewing sovereign states as the exclusive or even principal actors in international politics is not terribly useful, no matter who possesses voting rights in the UN General Assembly. However, some of these critics of the Westphalian System have noted that the “Peace of Westphalia” of the international relations theorists have little connection with the actual treaties signed in Münster and Osnabrück or the facts of politics in the Seventeenth Century, and called for a greater engagement with history. These calls have not, seemingly, pushed these historically minded theorists so far as to peruse the over forty-three thick volumes of sources documenting the activities of the Peace congress known as the *Acta Pacis Westphalicae*, scrupulously edited by generations of German scholars over the last five decades. Historicism, after all, can be carried too far.

In this paper, I am not going to repeat the criticisms of the strange ahistorical role that international relations theorists have attributed to the Westphalian system, but rather ask why

Westphalia came to occupy such a prominent place in the intellectual apparatus of international relations. I can not hope to survey the historical literature concerning the Peace of Westphalia, as a bibliography from 1998 contained nearly five thousand works concerning the peace, and those works reflect the work of scholars divided by religion, nationality and many other factors. Rather I aim to suggest that the Thirty Years War served as one of the central historical parallels upon which scholars from the First World War until the early nineteen fifties drew to explain the chaotic nature of geopolitics in their own day. The manner in which people during the first half of the twentieth century drew historical parallels with the seventeenth century was not without consequences.

By the late Eighteenth Century, historians had come to depict the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as particularly significant to the development of their own political history, but the manner in which they narrated this history split the history of commercial and imperial expansion from the development of a system of states within Europe. The *Histoire des deux Indes* produced under the direction of the Abbé Raynal, surveyed the development of European empire outside of Europe. Even historians who treated both European history and the history of European empire tended to divide them into particular narratives, such as the Scottish historian William Robertson, who consciously excluded the history of Spanish empire from his *History of the Reign of Charles V* as he reserved treatment of it to a separate *History of America*. Robertson could thus in the *Reign of Charles V* depict the emergence of a new and modern political organization of Europe and the progress of European society that depended on it, free from imperial concern. His narrative, however, was important. The Reformation, Robertson opined, freed Europe from

specious papal claims to organize Christendom, ushering in an era in which political quarrels were particularly violent. However, from these conflicts

the powers of Europe were formed into one great political system, in which each took a station, wherein it has since remained with less variation than could have been expected after the shocks occasioned by so many internal revolutions, and so many foreign wars. The great events which happened then have not hitherto spent their force. The political principles and maxims, then established, still continue to operate. The ideas concerning the balance of power, then introduced or rendered general, still influence the councils of nations.

While Robertson traced the narrative of political events only as far down as the 1559 peace of Chateau Cambrensis, which ended the sixty five years of intermittent war between France and Spain, he added in a coda that it was only in the seventeenth century that Europe finally escaped Wars of Religion and instead truly became wars between states composing a system.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars perversely emphasized the importance of state system with its diplomatic rules, and increased discussion of the Thirty Years War as demonstrating both the limits and the advantages of the European states system. The Thirty Years War had always coloured memories in German speaking Central-Europe, where the Thirty Years War had induced population losses greater in percentage terms than the Napoleonic Wars (and, for that matter, the First and Second World Wars.) In the period following the Wars of Liberation, the Thirty Years War served both as a moment when Gustavus Adolphus—celebrated with increasing fervor as a Protestant and, oddly, Prussian martyr king with his own cult site at the battlefield of Lützen—might have assembled a *Großdeutschland*, and a demonstration of not having sufficiently powerful nation states to survive in an international system predicated upon the balance of power. The newly professionalizing historical discipline in the wake of Leopold von Ranke viewed the diplomatic reports of the early modern era not only as documents that

particularly revealed how history really was, but also as exemplars of a historically created but peculiarly relevant science of politics to be studied and emulated.

The Thirty Years War occupied a prominent place then both in the formulation of what historian Michael Geyer has termed “catastrophic nationalism” which opened the path to German idealistic self-annihilation, and the cultivation of the political prudence needed to avoid such catastrophes. In the last year of his life in May 1890, Helmuth von Moltke, who helped create the German empire by leading Prussian troops to victory in the Second Schleswig War, the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War, warned the Reichstag:

Gentlemen, if the war which has hung over our heads for more than ten years like a sword of Damocles—if this war were to break out, no one could foresee how long it would last nor how it would end. The greatest powers in Europe, armed as never before, would confront each other in battle. None of them could be so completely overthrown in one or two campaigns that they would have to admit defeat, accept peace on harsh terms, and not be able to revive again after a years’ long interval to renew the struggle. Gentlemen. . . it could be a Thirty Years’ War; and woe to the man who sets Europe ablaze, who first throws the match into the powder barrel!

Von Moltke’s use of the Thirty Years War as a counterexample to the typical prudential moves of power politics predicted a Thirty Years Crisis nearly a quarter century before the First World War.

While Germans might have had a peculiarly sensitive relation to the Thirty Years War, politicians from other European powers leading up to the outbreak of the First World War were deeply engaged with the period’s history. Gabriel Hanotaux, French Foreign minister from 1894-1898, wrote during his ministry a five volume history of the life of Cardinal Richelieu, the French minister who prompted France to enter the Thirty Years War to counter the threat of Hapsburg universal empire, not coincidentally while trying to form an alliance of European powers who would frustrate the power of the British Universal Empire. His successor as foreign minister,

Théophile Delcassé, was praised by the prime minister as a “new Richelieu” for negotiating the *Entente cordiale* that would bring the United Kingdom into the Triple Alliance with Russia and France. That Hanotaux’s biggest foreign policy challenge was Fashoda, and Delcassé chiefly had to resolve disputes about fishing rights off Newfoundland, custom regimes in Siam and Madagascar, and claims to possession in Egypt and Algeria—all against the background of the United States’s conquest of Cuba and the Philippines, Theodore Roosevelt’s mediation of the Russo-Japanese War, and Great Power cooperation to suppress the Boxer Rebellion —suggests the manner in which historical example helped prevent European statesmen from taking a global view of the state system. As Jürgen Österhammel notes “diplomatic history and colonial history have seldom really converged,” and even though “non-European locations provided the setting for power games directed at the European public”, such games did not significantly contribute to the outbreak of the First World War. (402)

The relevance of sixteenth and seventeenth century example carried beyond foreign ministries, however, to those who hoped to harness the exercise of *realpolitik* with the forces of international law and international governance. Thomas Balch, the American advocate of international mediation and supporter of the establishment of an institution for permanent diplomacy, drew upon the obscure 1623 book by Emeric Crucé, the *New Cyneas*. His son, Thomas Walling Balch, translated and published the work in 1909. More elaborately, the Carnegie endowment for international peace sponsored an extensive program of publishing modern editions of natural law works about the rights of war and peace, which they described as “Classics of International Law”. Under the directorship of the lawyer, law professor, and delegate to the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1905 James Brown Scott, the press provided new Latin editions

and fresh English translations of works on natural law and the laws of war and peace by Alberico Gentili, Hugo Grotius, and—Scott’s particular favorites—scholars of from the school of Salamanca such as Francisco Vitoria and Francisco Suarez. These scholarly editions were not erudite curiosities, but rather presented as deeply and immediately relevant models for how lawyers and statesmen could seek to impose moral order on the international scene in chaotic times.

Such works found readers who attempted to put them to exactly such practical use. Durward V. Sandifer, the U.S. State Department’s Legal Counsel, and later the Secretary General and Chief Technical Expert to the US Delegation to the 1945 San Francisco Conference, produced a curious article for the July, 1940 issue of the *American Journal of International Law*. In “Re-reading Grotius in the year 1940”, Sandifer took an almost elegiac look at James Brown Scott’s edition of Grotius’s *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*. He criticized Grotius’s work as too heavily reliant on a theological basis—sadly noting that “even the fear of God proved too frequently an inadequate restraint on monarchs sunk in the morass of the Thirty Years War” (464)—which could only be less relevant in what he termed an “age of science and skepticism.” (472) Reading Grotius in 1940, Sandifer longed for modern principles that would anchor international law and justice in as firm, convincing and universal a basis as Grotius thought he found in Christian theology and the happily concordant wisdom of ancient philosophers and poets. Sandifer wondered whether social science might not provide that function, by anchoring the law’s fundamental concepts through “a pragmatic study of their relation to the economic, political and social organization which they might serve.”(472)

Sandifer’s pragmatic shift accorded well to the end of the interwar years, when the optimistic hope for international organization seemed vain. It also accorded well with the social

scientific moment in political analysis that had flourished during the interwar years, which saw the study of international relations increasingly the subject of expert study at institutions founded immediately after the First World War, such as the Institute for International Affairs, (known as Chatham House by its location) founded in 1920, the New York based Council on Foreign Relations (founded 1921) or the Department of International Politics at the University of Aberystwyth. Interestingly, here, too, such realist theorists found matter for reflection in seventeenth century texts. Harold Nicholson looked to Abraham de Wiquefort and François de Callières as models of a diplomatic practice that was fundamentally political, not legal or moral, and came to view (as Quincy Wright would also, after the Second World War) Richelieu as inaugurating such an approach. The Woodrow Wilson Professor of International Relations at the University of Aberystwyth, E.H.Carr, in his *Twenty Years Crisis*, criticized appeasement and trust in the League of Nations by echoing the motto that Richelieu had cast onto his cannons, that the “*ultima ratio* of international politics is war.”(109)

It was perhaps easy for Cecily Wedgwood to begin her 1938—published weeks away from Chamberlain’s return from Munich—*The Thirty Years War* by declaring

The Year 1618 was like many others in those uneasy decades of armed neutrality which occur from time to time in the history of Europe. Political disturbances exploded intermittently in an atmosphere thick with the apprehension of conflict. Diplomats hesitated, weighing the gravity of each new crisis, politicians predicted, merchants complained of unsteady markets and wavering exchanges, while the forty million peasants, on whom the cumbrous structure of civilization rested, dug their fields and bound their sheaves and cared nothing for the remote activities of their rulers.(11)

Wedgwood’s remarkable narrative of the war was an extended demonstration that the politicians of the Seventeenth Century, whatever their raw cunning, did not control its outcome. She noted

that there was “no compulsion towards a conflict which, in despite of the apparent bitterness of parties, took so long to engage and needed so much assiduous blowing to fan the flame.. . “ The war itself was “morally subversive, economically destructive, socially degrading, confused in its causes, devious in its course, futile in its result; it is the outstanding example in European history of meaningless conflict.” Rather than extolling the sagacity of statesmen, or praising the resiliency of the European states system, Wedgwood concluded brusquely that European leaders “did not learn then, and have not since, that war breeds only war.”

Wedgwood’s conclusion may seem unobjectionable, though the dismissal of war in close conjunction with Munich may give one pause. Her final sentence resembles those of more recent English historical surveys of the war, whether Geoffrey Parker’s 1984 conclusion that a small group of prejudiced individuals made the Thirty Years War “what it was” or Peter H. Wilson’s 2009 survey, subtitled “Europe’s Tragedy” that concluded by noting that sources about the war “offer a warning of the dangers of entrusting power to those who feel summoned by God to war, or feel that their sense of justice and order is the only one valid.”(851) Historians since the Second World War—or, at least, Anglophone ones—seem to agree that the great statesmen of the war—whether Richelieu, Gustavus Adolphus, Olivares or Ferdinand III—were far from sage statesmen, exemplars of political pragmatism, or creators of a clever states system that endowed Europe with stability. Rather they document the manner in which their actions had consequences that were economically destructive and socially degrading, and formed part of a broader moment of social crisis. Perhaps one can speculate that the Eric Hobsbawm’s famous 1954 articles on the “General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century”, which argued that the Thirty Years War was merely one symptom of profound socio-economic change fostered Arno Mayer’s notion of a Thirty Years

Crisis, which moved the causes of the First World War from *Aussenpolitik* to profound socio-economic change and the domestic disagreements it caused.

Yet international relations theorists, training and advising prospective diplomats, were much more reluctant than historians to turn away from the Thirty Years War as merely a morally degrading spectacle. As noted, Carr and the British school of realists regarded Richelieu as the progenitor of diplomacy as an art of negotiation. (Henry Kissinger portrayed Richelieu in a similar manner, but depicts, un-surprisingly, Metternich as the incarnation of political wisdom free from blinkers.) The able Swedish historian and diplomat Gunnar Wetterberg has written a short report to the “Expert group for studies in public economics” and published by the Ministry of Finance in 2003, recommending that Swedish politicians and bureaucrats take Oxenstierna as an example. More immediately, too, the idea of the Westphalian system, resting on the putative supremacy of the sovereign state, often appears as a point of departure for larger ideas of overcoming anarchical international orders.

Historians have returned to the study of the workings of European diplomacy at the moment when international relations theorists have begun to rethink the idea of the Westphalian order. I do not think they will be content to agree that Richelieu is the model of how politicians should negotiate, nor that the Treaty of Westphalia was about sovereign states. They may all agree that the Thirty Years War was terrible and can continue to serve as a warning for unwise political decisions, which would at least broaden political reference beyond the last hundred years, but doesn't seem to require volumes of thick collections of sources. The sources, may, however, suggest another story. They contain convoluted narratives of how a variety of negotiators—from the dedicated and cunning, to the incompetent and the drunk (at least one could never get himself

into shape to negotiate before two in the afternoon)—managed eventually, often ploddingly, and with many needless deaths, to arrive at a settlement by agreeing to ignore some grand principles—such as freedom of trade or commerce—striking some bargains, and paying off some soldiers. Also, vitally, they descended into what might appear to be trivial detail:

Article V, 3: The cities of Augsburg, Dinkelsbühl, Biberach and Ravensburg shall retain the property, rights and exercise of religion that they had on the said year and day (1 January 1624—the so called “Normal Year”—chosen as a point of compromise); but regarding council seats and other public offices, these are to be equally divided among adherents of both religions.

Article V, 4: For the city of Augsburg in particular, however, there are to be seven senators of the privy council chosen from the patrician families; two of these are to be selected as presidents of the republic, commonly called *stadt-pfleger*, one of whom is to be Catholic, the other of the Augsburg Confession, and of the remaining five, three are to be of the Catholic Religion and two adherents of the Augsburg Confession. . . There are to be three quaestors of the public moneys, two of the one, the third of the other religion, such that in the first year two shall be Catholic, one of the Augsburg confession, in the next year, two of the Augsburg confession and the third Catholic, and so on alternating every year. [It continues with more and more minor offices, not quite including dog-catchers.]

We inhabit a world where we can not trust the happy concord of Christian theology and Greco-Roman sagacity. Nor can we agree even generally about the desirability of any particular political, economic and social organization; social scientists can't even agree upon the methods for a pragmatic study. In applying how the Thirty Years War might apply to a moment of multi-polarity, we might well train our students to be attentive to the careful choice of dog-catchers, though sadly we might observe in passing that sometimes it is impossible to agree over even that. Such clauses can appear tedious, of course, but what joy there is to behold sub-clauses in profusion if they enable deep strife about religious identity, social power, and economic privilege to give way to technicalities, tedium and peace.