

Wars of Religion Without Borders

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ABSTRACT

Foreign influence, intervention and collaboration were part and parcel of every battle in the Wars of Religion. The principal zones of inter-denominational conflict – Germany from the early 16th century to the Thirty Years’ War, and France in the latter half of the 16th century – were theatres of European confrontation. Both the compromise solutions devised to enable religious coexistence and their refusal follow on equally from debate and discussion across all of Christendom. Nonetheless, for the most part, and despite the fear they inspired, the creation of huge blocs pitting Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists against each other, or even an international alliance between partisans of religious concord, never went past the project – and frightening threat – stage.



The Church of Christ (Calvinism) under attack from the Duke of Alba and the cardinals of Lorraine and Granvelle, as well as the Devil, the Antichrist and his troops, sovereigns, including the (Grand) Turk, soldiers, prelates, and monks, circa 1568. Anonymous Flemish etching, 28,4 x 44 cm (Source: Gallica, BnF)

The conviction that the fate of a denomination or a civil conflict would be determined at the scale of Christendom was widespread during the 16th and 17th centuries. The desire to favor one side, the fear of contagion, the pernicious example of challenging authority or the desire to seek refuge abroad all fueled interventions in the affairs of neighboring countries. Luther’s writings, which caught on as far as Castile; the English Jesuits, who went

to the continent to work out how to bring their nation back to Catholicism; the prince of Orange and the Flemish Calvinists, who led their first battles in Germany and England, all crossed borders to their own advantage. Veritable networks and global strategies did emerge. The papacy and religious orders, Calvin in Geneva and the Electors of the Palatinate were the most deeply involved in the construction of opposing denominational fronts. But did their advent actually occur?

Common Causes

The internationalization of national conflicts started in the Holy Roman Empire. Right from the Kappel Wars, the first two wars between Catholic and Protestant cantons in Switzerland (1529 and 1531), the warring parties sought allies beyond their borders. Even more so in Germany, where the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League, founded in 1531, forged long-lasting bonds with the kings of France, England and Denmark. This manner of reaching out to other countries largely followed a traditional framework and led to diplomatic support, financial aid, and occasionally, coordinated operations. Over the winter of 1551-1552, Charles V found himself under attack by German Protestant princes allied with Henry II, and was nearly kidnapped.

In the late 1550s, the troubles calmed down in the Empire, and Calvinism's dynamism began to divide western Europe deeply. Foreign intervention in denominational conflicts in England, Scotland, France and the Netherlands began to manifest itself in new ways. The internal workings of those governments were profoundly destabilized. Military, diplomatic and financial assistance was distributed directly, and politico-religious parties were as likely to benefit from it as sovereigns. In 1559-1560, thanks to English support, Calvinist noblemen in Scotland defeated the Catholic crown that their overly extended French ally had to abandon. Queen Elizabeth I of England withstood pontifical excommunication, plots backed by Rome and Madrid and several attempted invasions by Spanish Armadas between 1588 and 1602.

The fighting in France and the Netherlands was even more directly related to cooperation between the French Huguenots and the Flemish Gueux (literally "beggars"), as well as to the rivalry between the Hapsburgs and the Valois. Both zones became theatres of denominational and diplomatic confrontation on a European scale. In France, which had been in the midst of a crisis of succession since 1584, the monarch established ties with England and the Dutch rebels, while the Catholic League received support from several Catholic sovereigns, Philip II first among them.

New conflicts distinguished by denominational oppositions broke out during the 17th century. By that point, foreign assistance and attacks fit more into a pattern of foreign relations than of destabilizing interventionism. Once again, the main War of Religion - the Thirty Years War - took place in the Empire. Led by the Hapsburgs of both Austria and Spain, the Catholic side went up against the Evangelical Union (or Protestant Union), which received unwavering support from Denmark, Sweden and France. Neither the conflicts in Northern and Eastern Europe nor those in the three British kingdoms attracted comparable denominational mobilization from abroad.

Restoring Peace in Europe

The intensity of the conflicts never managed to entirely eliminate the dream of a reunited Christianity. Belief in the

possibility of an ecumenical synod was not irremediably shattered until the Protestants' refusal to participate in the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Political solutions, such as the peacemaking hegemony of either the king of France or the Hapsburgs, or even both dynasties united, were also considered. And the dream of Christian unity through the Crusades was limited in scope. On the Austro-Hungarian front, Catholics and Protestants from the Holy Roman Empire did indeed battle the Turks side by side. But the European leagues were episodic and always short-lived. They came into existence in 1538; then again from 1571 to 1574, enabling victory at the battle of Lepanto, and once again, after the siege of Vienna, from 1683 to 1699.

After the failure of the conciliation symposia between theologians and some dogmatic compromises, different forms of religious peace were drafted on various national and even multi-national scales as attempts to re-establish civil concord. Both their negotiations and their provisions led to great debate and much pressure. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) was atypical: two bilateral treaties, between the Holy Roman Empire on the one hand and the kings of France and Sweden respectively on the other, regulated political and denominational relationships in Germany.

The peace-making measures also founded a tradition at a European scale. They came to serve as models - or counter-models - to different parties. Switzerland's Peace of Kappel (1531) was referred to during the discussions of Germany's Peace of Augsburg (1555). The latter would then serve as a reference for France's peacemaking edicts. The efficacy of each of them was evaluated by the Dutch theologian Thierry Coornhaert, defender of the ephemeral *Religionsfriede* that the Netherlands attempted in 1578-1579. Despite these mutual influences and contacts between supporters of religious compromise, these models did not lead to the advent of religious concord throughout Europe.

Denominational Solidarity and Politics

Generally speaking, the participants in the Wars of Religion did not create long-lasting united fronts on the international scene. There was no clear leadership on either side. Neither the Pope nor the king of Spain were uncontested commanders on the Catholic side. The other allied nations obliged them to temper their ambitions. The Lutherans and the Calvinists displayed more mutual distrust than mutual aid and assistance. The English sovereigns, who might have hoped to coordinate the Protestant undertaking, never wished to get boxed in by denominational diplomacy. The Ottoman sultan, for his part, did discreetly support the Moriscos of Granada during the Rebellion of the Alpujarras, in 1568-1571, but he never became directly involved.

The collaboration and bonds of solidarity were real, but they tended to be expressed through *ad hoc* bilateral actions. They did not bring an end either to traditional rivalries or to nations defending their own interests. The weakening of sovereign authority was exploited with tremendous opportunism. The Spanish intervention alongside the League between 1589 and 1598 was intended to defend the Catholic cause as much as to protect the Netherlands, and to advance their dynastic ambitions in France as to assert Philip II's preeminence in Europe. Although the constitution of large, opposing denominational blocs was sometimes a real threat, it was more often a bugaboo.

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