

H-Net Reviews

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Olaf Asbach, Peter Schröder, eds. *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Thirty Years' War*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014. xiv + 347 pp. \$149.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4094-0629-7; \$149.95 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-4094-0630-3.

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The Thirty Years' War continues to capture and demand a significant amount of scholarly attention. Numerous well-known interpretations of history hinge on this convoluted, confusing, and utterly destructive episode of European history. Was it the last of the wars of religion? Was it a religious war at all? Did the equally complicated Peace of Westphalia which ended the struggle usher in a new form of international diplomacy.[1] The complexity of the event means that it is difficult to treat in its entirety while simultaneously allowing for a multitude of competing and sometimes contradictory interpretations. The ambitious *Ashgate Research Companion to the Thirty Years' War* is an attempt to take stock of the current state of scholarship, with contributions from a multitude of scholars treating a mix of both traditional and underexplored aspects of the conflict.

The stated goal of the work is to provide an authoritative overview of research for scholars and graduate students. An introduction and twenty-five chapters comprise the work, with sections focusing on the Holy Roman Empire before the war, the aims and goals of various combatants, the stages and theaters of war, religion and politics, the experiences and material conditions of war, and the broader geographic and lasting impacts of the war and the Peace of Westphalia. Although most scholars could find something in this lengthy work pertaining to their own research, in general it will be most useful for historians specializing in warfare in the early modern period. While the majority of the contributions are well written, are well organized, and make innovative claims, the detail of the discussion is often myopic, which many readers may find obstructive.

Before examining the strengths of the work, of which there are many, it is probably useful to begin with a dis-

cussion of the weaknesses. The biggest issue is an embarrassing editorial mistake regarding the sectioning of the work. In the introduction, the editors note that the book is divided into six different themes. However, in the table of contents and in the actual work there are only five sections listed. The chapters detailing the experience and material conditions and experience of the war (chaps. 19-21) were clearly meant to be a distinct section on their own as indicated in the introduction and several of the contributors' remarks, but it is not clear from the layout of the book. Whether this was the publisher's or the editors' oversight is unclear, but careless editing issues like this recur throughout the work. Chapter 3, which focuses on the role of the Holy Roman Empire, provides another good example, as it is divided and subdivided into so many segments that the overall argument and connections are obscured because of the confusing organization. A more thorough and consistent focus on these issues would have been beneficial.

Despite the editorial issues, there are a lot of admirable and recommendable features worth highlighting. The most notable contribution of the work is historiographical, as readers are introduced and confronted with competing interpretations and themes that run throughout different aspects of the conflict. The biggest historiographical debate that struck me is the idea of a "failed settlement" and the notion of the inevitability of the war. Two different chapters (15 and 22) discussing the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Peace of Prague (1635) specifically use the term "failed settlement" to discuss the success of these two peace accords. Interestingly, these two chapters call into question the paradigm of a "failed settlement" yet both still invoke it. As Martin Espenhorst (née Peters) remarks in his chapter on the Peace

of Prague, there were two thousand “intergovernmental” peace agreements between 1450 and 1789, none of which led to a lasting peace (p. 294). As numerous other chapters detail, such as Joachim Whaley’s contribution on imperial politics, there were concerted attempts to maintain peace and avoid conflict. The “failed settlement” paradigm makes the march toward war seem inexorable and unstoppable. Given that this work details one of the most destructive wars in European history, it is refreshing that so many of the contributions focus on attempts to maintain the peace.

Another interesting theme that cuts across several chapters is the role that propaganda played in the conflict. Several contributors suggest the importance of propaganda, but often only in passing. For instance, Pärtel Piirimäe’s work on Sweden notes that Gustav Adolphus portrayed two different, and seemingly contradictory, interpretations of his state’s role in the Thirty Years’ War. Internationally, Sweden and Adolphus were portrayed as biblical warriors with a godly mission to save the Protestant cause, while domestically the king and his supporters focused on the political rationale behind the war, downplaying religious dimensions. Similarly, in his work on the first phase of the war (1618-29), Ronald G. Asch mentions how the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II sought to portray the early fighting in secular terms, as a struggle between a ruler and his unruly subjects in order to allay the fears of moderate Protestants in the empire and hopefully avoid future conflicts. The attentive reader will be able to follow threads such as this one through the various chapters of the work.

There are numerous excellent contributions in this research companion, but a few stand out for comment. In

general the most profound chapters are those with the most basic arguments. For example, Paul Douglas Lockhart’s chapter, which notes that it “may appear curious to the modern students of the seventeenth century that Denmark was once of pivotal importance in European international politics,” is one of the best written and clearly argued chapters (p. 65). Sigrun Haude’s piece, “The Experience of War,” is likewise an excellent addition. She demonstrates how fear permeated society, as people felt dislocated and uncertain, struggling with the vicissitudes of warfare. Her examination of a prioress’ diary of the war is one of the most memorable parts of the work. In actuality, all three chapters in part 5, on the experience and material conduct of the war, are exemplary; John Theibault’s remark that “it proved easier for war to feed itself than to be sated” provides an apt summary of this section (p. 256).

Overall the *Ashgate Research Companion to the Thirty Years’ War* is an ambitious work, treating numerous facets of the Thirty Years’ War in a detailed and interesting fashion. The work will be of use to early modernist scholars and students alike. In spite of some editorial issues, the various contributions demonstrate the importance of the war and point to how the interpretations have splintered into a historiography that continues to flourish. Simultaneously, this work demonstrates that sometimes the most profound interpretations are often the most straightforward.

Note

[1]. See my previous review of *Westphalia: The Last Christian Peace*, by Derek Croxton, *H-War, H-Net Reviews* (June 2014).

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