

The Political Impact of the Reformation

The massive turmoil that the Reformation caused had a lasting impact on European politics. Soon after the Catholic Church deemed Martin Luther a “protestant,” Europe became divided along confessional, as well as territorial, lines. The religious turmoil of the period led to warfare within most states and between many. This warfare, especially the Thirty Years’ War from 1618 to 1648, decimated Europe.

While many areas in Europe were engulfed in warfare throughout much of this period, some countries enjoyed peace and were not much affected by the Reformation. In Poland, for instance, while the king and much of the gentry were sympathetic to Protestant (usually Calvinist) ideals, and Protestants were tolerated, the Catholic Church remained ascendant without recourse to violent struggle or the Inquisition. This reading, however, will concentrate on those areas where the Reformation was the most fiercely contested.

Lutherans and the Holy Roman Empire

In 1530 the Protestant princes in the Holy Roman Empire formed an alliance called the Schmalkaldic League to protect themselves against Emperor Charles V, who was Catholic. After a period of tenuous peace, war broke out in 1546. In the first phase of the war, the Holy Roman Empire crushed the Schmalkaldic League, but France sided with the League in the second phase because the French were worried about the balance of power in Europe.

In 1555 the war ended in a stalemate, and the combatants signed the Peace of Augsburg. The most crucial part of the treaty was the phrase “*cuius regio eius religio*,” meaning that whatever political entity controlled an area had the right to decide what religion that area would follow. This framework only permitted Lutheran and Catholic states; Calvinist states were still not permitted, even though Calvinism had become widespread in some parts of Europe. The Peace of Augsburg was only intended to be temporary, but it split Germany until its unification in the 1860s.

Luther’s calls for reform had wide-ranging and sometimes unintended consequences, however, and these consequences were not always in the realm of politics. In particular, Luther’s teachings were used as part of the justification for the German Peasants’ Revolt, which was the largest popular uprising before the French Revolution in 1789. The revolt took place in southern and central Germany from February to May 1525. By April 1525, there were over 300,000 peasants in arms.

In the end, however, the peasants were doomed to failure. They were not militarily adept like their opponents. Many of the peasants fought with swords against trained soldiers who had horses and guns. They were therefore easily crushed by a fairly small army of princes, who had more money and experience; at the Battle of Frankenhausen, for instance, several thousand peasants were killed by a superior noble army. Despite the peasants’ defeat, however, the size of their uprising shocked many European observers of Luther’s message and strengthened the reaction to it.

The episode was equally significant because of how Luther responded to it. While he initially supported the peasants’ demands and exhorted them to use peaceful

methods, as the revolt grew more fevered he spoke out harshly against it. As the nobles began their counterattack against the peasants, Luther wrote a diatribe entitled “Against the Robbing and Murdering Peasant Hordes.” Ultimately, he was blamed for inciting the peasants’ revolt in the first place and then for betraying the peasants and condoning their slaughter.

Making England Anglican

King Henry VIII of England considered himself a good Catholic king. He prayed, he went to mass, and he honored the church. He had enthusiastically attacked the outbreak of Protestant heresy when it began, and the papacy gave him the title Defender of the Faith as a result. This mattered little when Henry wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon, with whom he had been unable to conceive a son. When the church would not grant the divorce, Henry’s resulting decision to create the Church of England set the stage for more than a century of religious conflict in England.

The difficulties began in the years after 1534, when the Act of Supremacy made Henry VIII the head of the Church of England. Anyone who did not swear to the Act of Supremacy was executed. In all, four hundred people were executed, including Thomas More and John Fischer. Fidelity was cast in political terms, though, not religious, and some Protestants were also executed for treason.

From 1536 to 1540, Henry VIII oversaw the dissolution of the English monasteries. English monasteries were often large landowners, and Henry appropriated their wealth and sold off the land to the highest bidder. The dissolution of the monasteries had a devastating impact, greater than anywhere else in Europe. Whereas fifty percent of female convents in the Holy Roman Empire survived the Reformation, for instance, no female convents survived the dissolution in England.

By Henry VIII’s death in 1547, the people of England had mostly become Protestant. His son, Edward VI, continued Henry’s religious policy, but he died in 1553. The difficulty was that Henry’s daughter, Mary, was next in line for the English throne. She was staunchly Catholic and strongly opposed to the English Protestant church, especially since its formation had resulted in Henry’s divorce from her mother, Catherine of Aragon. Mary’s attempt to reestablish Catholicism in England earned her the nickname “Bloody Mary”; she had all the Protestant leaders executed, returned the clergy’s lands to them, and ordered former monks and nuns to return to their convents. If they had married, they had to abandon their spouses.

Mary’s reign only lasted until 1558, however, and ironically it helped to strengthen Protestant feeling in England. Her half-sister Elizabeth shifted the country back to Protestantism, but she used less radical methods than Mary. While her reign solidified Anglicanism as the state religion, religious conflict continued in England until the end of the seventeenth century, as several kings flirted with bringing the country back into the Catholic Church.

Calvinists in France and the Netherlands

The doctrines of John Calvin proved popular in France in the middle of the sixteenth century, particularly in the south and west of the country. The new Protestant minority were called the Huguenots. About forty percent of the nobility also converted, though one of their motivations was to make trouble for the monarchy, which was trying to unify France religiously under the Crown.

The Protestant Reformation began late in France because the monarchy had little to gain from sponsoring reforms. The French monarchy had long been independent of the church in Rome, and early in the rule of Francis I (r. 1515–47), he gained the power to appoint French bishops in return for supporting the pope against the invading armies of Charles V. Attacking Catholicism therefore was considered attacking the country and the king, since he represented the church.

Upon Francis's death, however, a series of weak kings inherited the throne and gave the Huguenots the opportunity to get established. After a period of infighting among the Catholic nobles, a series of wars broke out, lasting from 1562 to 1598. The most significant event of the wars was the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre on August 24, 1572. It is difficult to determine exactly what happened, as the participants all gave exaggerated versions of events. Nonetheless, around the time of St. Bartholomew's Day, a series of popular protests broke out in Paris, and these included the murder of as many as 2,000 Protestants. The violence spread into the countryside over the next six weeks, with 3,000 more Protestants killed. Eventually, the Protestant Henry of Navarre won the War of the Three Henrys in 1589. He converted to Catholicism in 1594 and passed the Edict of Nantes in 1598, in which he officially extended toleration to the Huguenots.

The brutality of the wars in France was equaled, if not surpassed, by fighting between the Dutch Calvinists and the Catholic Habsburgs who controlled their territory. The Dutch had a variety of political and economic motives for waging a war of independence, but religion was central to the struggle. This war also had a popular element to it; after the nobles presented a compromise in 1566, the Iconoclastic Fury erupted throughout the Low Countries (modern Belgium and the Netherlands). Small gangs of iconoclasts roamed the Low Countries smashing churches, defacing carvings, statues, and paintings, and burning and soiling books and vestments. Priests, monks, and nuns were assaulted and sometimes murdered, while prominent Catholic laymen were intimidated and publicly humiliated. In response, the Habsburgs began a bloody reaction, but it was ultimately unsuccessful, and the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia declared the independence of the new Dutch Republic.

The Thirty Years' War

Among the conflicts of the Reformation, the carnage of the Thirty Years' War was the worst. Forty percent of the population in modern-day Germany, where most of the fighting occurred, died as a result of the war. Famine and disease claimed most of the lives lost. For example, the Black Death descended upon the town of Nordlingen, killing 1,549 people. The fighting also claimed many victims, however, as in 1631, when

rampaging soldiers destroyed the city of Magdeburg and its 20,000 inhabitants. The war began as a religious conflict with potential political consequences, but by 1630 the political motives outweighed the religious. The war's end in 1648 marked the last time that religion would plunge Europe into war, and it ended the age of the Reformation.

The war began in Bohemia. In 1618 Ferdinand II, the Holy Roman Emperor, revoked the privileges of Bohemian Protestants as part of his wider effort to convert the whole empire back to Catholicism. The Protestant nobility travelled to Prague and, on May 23, 1618, threw the Catholic representatives out a window. This event, called the Defenestration of Prague, was the starting point of the war.

The war encompassed four phases. Unlike the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia established the right of Calvinist states to exist, which provided for the recognition of the Dutch Republic. By this point, however, territorial considerations had already begun to reassert their precedence in European international affairs. In 1635, the Catholic French monarchy entered the war on the side of the Protestant princes to counterbalance the Catholic Habsburgs, who had been winning too many battles and becoming too strong. With religion out of the way as a major motivation for war, European states soon began to consider nationalism—in addition to, and in some cases instead of, religion—as a unifying force.

Summary

- War broke out many times during the Reformation period. In the Holy Roman Empire, the 1555 Peace of Augsburg proved to be only a temporary fix—it did not prevent later wars of religion.
- The outbreak of the German Peasants' Revolt shocked Europeans, as they saw the power of Luther's teachings. It also shocked Luther, and he harshly repudiated the peasants.
- Henry VIII's decision to create the Church of England resulted in more than a century of religious turmoil in England, whether due to the Catholic sympathies of monarchs like Mary I or the government's constant attempts to quench Catholicism among the people.
- Calvinist revolts in France and the Netherlands resulted in bloody massacres and popular uprisings.
- After more than a century of religious warfare in Europe, the bloody Thirty Years' War marked the last such conflict and set the stage for the national conflicts that engulfed Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.