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Religious Conflicts during the Reformation

Period 2

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The Religious Reformation was a tumultuous time in European history where Protestants of all sects were defecting from the Catholic Church after being disillusioned with the corruption of its clergy and papacy, contradictory doctrine and practices, and high amounts of wealth from indulgences and tithings. Protestantism would begin to take hold in the eyes of Europeans in the Holy Roman Empire (Bohemia and Germany), western countries such as England and France, and northern countries like Sweden. The Catholic Church tried its best to keep religious unity under its control with efforts such as the Society of Jesus, Council of Trent, and the Index of Prohibited Books in order to reconvert and keep its grip on loyal Catholics and reign in the Protestants. The advent of the printing press’ application of spreading information, prior disillusionment with the Catholic Church, and eventually violence between the Catholics and Protestants from France and England to the Netherlands and Germany would undo the Church’s efforts of suppressing Protestantism in the Holy Roman Empire, much less the whole continent. Three notable catalysts that built up to this conclusion include the Netherlands’ revolts, French religious wars, and the Thirty Years’ War.

First, there were contributing causes to these three conflicts alongside religious tension between Protestants and Catholics. Many of the Protestants such as the Dutch and Huguenots wished to be able to practice their faith without being condemned by their monarchies or the Church. In the case of their revolts, the Dutch in the Netherlands desired political independence from Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. The Spanish and HRE (Holy Roman Empire) refused to allow the Netherlands independence or to be openly Protestant. A root cause of the French religious wars would be the decline of the Valois family from weaker heirs and by extension the division of the French nobility by religious sect for independence from the crown. France, being a Catholic country at the time and having a matching monarchy, denied such rights to the Huguenots. The biggest causes for the Thirty Years’ War would be the failure to add Calvinism to the Peace of Augsburg, appease the German princes, and the intimidation Ferdinand II placed on Calvinists.

Second, there were crucial events within each conflict that led to the ultimate impact of their clashing. The Dutch Revolts centered around William I (William of Orange) (1533-1584) leading seventeen provinces against the Spanish Inquisition. Philip II would try to shut down Calvinism in the Netherlands and later cut off English aid from Elizabeth I in 1588. He would do so in the form of the Spanish Armada after Elizabeth rejected his proposal and helped the Netherlands gain independence from Spain. During the French Religious Wars between 1592-1598, Catherine de Medicis fought to keep Catholic reins on France against the Bourbons, who made up many of the Huguenots (French Calvinists). Catherine and Henry of Guise would be behind the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre (August 24, 1572), which the latter caused by executing the ringleader of the Huguenots prior to the wedding of Margret of Valois and Henry of Navarre, a Catholic and a Calvinist. Catherine ordered the massacre of Huguenots from the subsequent rioting, which lead to the deaths of twenty thousand Huguenots by early October, 1572. Two other parties, the politiques and the Guises, would fight to either gain a stronger crown or fight the Bourbons directly for power respectively. The Guise, Bourbon, and Valois families vying for the crown and the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre are what caused the War of the Three Henrys, which would tie into the religious conflict in terms of political control of France. The Thirty Years’ War would be commonly divided up into four phases of impact: Bohemian, Danish, Swedish, and French. The Defenestration of Prague initiated war in Bohemia after the HR Emperor placed severe restrictions on Protestantism by two HRE officials being thrown out a window 70 feet above ground. The emperor proceeded to try eliminating Protestantism in Bohemia, and the Protestant forces were defeated in the state. In later parts of the Thirty Years’ War, Sweden and France would ally themselves together to take down the HRE and avoid a powerful Catholic state at their doorsteps. The Swedish army was defeated and eventually forced to retreat in 1634 after their king, Gustavus Adolphus, died in 1632 from battle. But the pushback of Catholic forces to Bohemia and the fear of a resurgence of Catholicism in the HRE motivated the French, with Cardinal Richelieu’s policies and Protestant aid, to fight in the war.

Then, the resolutions to the Thirty Years’ War, Netherlands revolts, and the French civil wars led to great impacts during the Reformation and beyond. The end of the Netherlands revolts allowed for the Netherlands to gain de facto independence from Spain as the United Provinces of the Netherlands in 1581, which would later become official after the Thirty Years’ War via the Treaty of Westphalia. The French Religious Wars concluded when the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre and in-fighting allowed Henry IV (Henry of Navarre) to claim the throne and pass the Edict of Nantes in 1598. A politique and semi-Machiavellian in practice, Henry IV converted to Catholicism to appease the Catholics, though he practiced Calvinism privately. The Edict of Nantes allowed the Huguenots to have a degree of religious toleration in France, access to universities and public office and the rights of private worship and town maintenance of 200 protected towns in southwestern and western France for self-protection. However, it didn’t guarantee public worship or any worship in staunchly Catholic territories. Finally, the Treaty of Westphalia concluded the Thirty Years’ War by allowing Switzerland and the Netherlands independence from Spain, accepting Calvinism in a renewed version of the Peace of Augsburg, crippled the HRE, Catholic Church, and the Habsburgs, and divided Germany into sovereign states politically and religiously most notably. France, Sweden, and Brandenburg (later Prussia) would receive various territories within the HRE and gain international status. It also ended the Catholic and Protestant Reformations entirely and ended the practice of wars for religious reasons in Europe.

In conclusion, the Thirty Years’ War, Netherlands Revolts, and French Religious Wars are three of the most noteworthy conflicts during the Reformation. Each would bring a significant impact to their country’s religion, politics, and culture as well as Europe going forward. The motivations behind crumbling the declining power of the HRE and Catholic Church on a political and religious level was based on the desire for more independence, religious freedom, and sovereign power for the people. Whether the Netherlands desired independence, or the Huguenots wanted the right to worship to any degree, the pressure from Spain and the Valois motivated them to act. Be it the Thirty Years’ War or the Spanish Armada, the conflicts therein pushed these causes into action and allowed the resolution needed to solve them. Finally, these resolutions would begin to impact Europe to begin shaping it as we know it today, as in the case of the Treaty of Westphalia in its concept of political borders, nationalism, religious tolerance, and the separation of Church from State.