

REVIEW

Peter H. Wilson

Europe's Tragedy: a History of the Thirty Years' War

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THE brutal warfare which shaped Europe between 1618 and 1648 has generally been given only slight attention from British historians, particularly those working within an English context. Peter Wilson's thorough account of the Thirty Years' War is undoubtedly welcome and the author deserves high praise for distilling the complex narrative of the conflict into a readable account. The author successfully portrays the inter-connected web of European political, dynastic and religious alliances that dragged both eastern and western Europe into war. In particular, praise must be given to his analysis of the Turkish wars in the early part of the seventeenth century which, alongside Frank Tallet and D.J.B. Trim's recent collection on European Warfare, gives a convincing argument for the integration of these conflicts into the 'western' historical narrative.¹ However, this review has not been written with the intent of commenting on the book as a whole since this has been done far more capably by others, notably Ronald Asch.² Instead I intend to focus on the author's treatment of British involvement and interaction with the conflict, a field of study which has radically changed over the past decade. The work produced by a core of historians studying the activities of the Scottish European diaspora during the early modern period has fundamentally altered not only perceptions of Britain's relationships with the continent but also of the Stuart monarchy's involvement in the Thirty Years' War. The new understanding

1 Frank Tallet and D.J.B. Trim, *European Warfare 135-1750* (Cambridge, 2010).

2 Ronald Asch, Review of *Europe's Tragedy: a History of the Thirty Years' War*, *IHR Reviews in History* (no. 866) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/866>.

of this relationship has led to my own research into the role played by the English in these events and a far more complicated picture of Britain's conduct throughout the conflict is now emerging.

The impact of this recent work on the Scottish, and indeed Irish, involvement in continental developments is clear, particularly when Wilson provides a summary of his findings relating to Britain's actions. Indeed the strength of this research means that Scottish or Irish cases are regularly cited, for example within the context of the Dutch republic, when an English example, such as Sir John Borlase, would have perhaps been more appropriate. Despite this, any acknowledgements of Britain's role deserve strong acclaim as many historians still continue to sidestep these events, focussing instead on domestic policy, parliament and the dramatic Cadiz and La Rochelle expeditions. Wilson correctly points out the presence of English and Scottish soldiers within the army of the Palatinate and Bohemia during the opening blows of the conflict; however, he fails to appreciate the significance of these troops to Stuart policy. The English soldiers under Sir Horace Vere are described as 'volunteers', which is misleading since the word bears the implication that the troops were either unpaid or unsanctioned by royal authority. In reality neither was the case as they were paid for directly by the English exchequer. The actions of the English troops within the war of the Palatinate are also passed over relatively quickly: even the siege of Frankenthal, which was held by English troops and was the last city within the Palatinate to surrender (1623), is only briefly discussed.

Wilson gives equally brief treatment of the British levies to Denmark before he moves on to the entry of Sweden into the Thirty Years' War. The threat from the Empire felt by both of the Scandinavian powers was such that decades of hostility were shelved and open co-operation commenced during the siege of Stralsund in 1628. The British, and in particular Scottish involvement, in this was significant since the handover from Danish to Swedish control actually occurred within Stralsund when one Scottish governor stood down (Alexander Seaton) and was replaced with another (Alexander Leslie). Further, the regiments the Swedes allowed into Stralsund comprised Scotsmen and Englishmen, making one of the crucial sieges of the conflict a very British affair. This unfortunately fails to come across within Wilson's narrative. Equally, the significant role played by the Scots in the Swedish officer corps is addressed but only in limited scope. Wilson's book certainly fails to emphasise the impact that the Scottish officers had on Sweden who, after all, comprised around 12% of the officers; a further 2% of them were English. Much of this oversight seems to stem from Wilson's ignorance of the work of Alexia Grosjean, whose monograph thoroughly

addresses the Scottish contribution to both the Swedish military and the Swedish state.³ This becomes particularly apparent in relation to the Battle of Wittstock at which, with the exception of Johan Banér, the senior officers present were Scottish (and a considerable number of Scottish regiments were also present). Indeed, many of the contemporary accounts of the battle came from the Scottish commanders Alexander Leslie and James King. This Scottish dominance, combined with the presence of an English regiment, exemplify the new understanding of Britain's involvement in the Thirty Years' War, a wider involvement than the one described by Wilson.

The role of veterans returning to Britain during the Civil Wars is one which historians are only just beginning to be aware of (at least in a non-Scottish context). Allan Macinnes controversially described the conflicts within the Stuart kingdoms as the 'British Theatre' of the Thirty Years' War and, although there are limitations to this argument (particularly within an English context during the latter 1640s), it is clear that during the early stages of civil war there was a considerable overlap of personnel and strong motivational parallels between the conflicts. For example, Alexander Leslie's role within the army of the National Covenant and that of Phillip Skippon within the London militia provide just two examples of veterans who went on to fight within Britain. It would have been nice to see Wilson acknowledge this overlap of personnel more overtly since he is clearly aware that there were connections between continental and British events. In particular, he points to English pamphlets that discussed German events and emphasises that the Westphalian negotiations did not attempt to end the Civil Wars. In many ways this is perhaps illustrative of the author's approach to British involvement in the continental conflict. He is clearly aware that English and Scottish soldiers did serve in the Thirty Years' War but he does not adequately analyse their actions in order to make a real contribution to our understanding of the conflict from their perspective. These comments should not detract from the overall success of the volume; however, they do hopefully contribute towards creating a greater understanding of the actions of both the Stuart state and of those men who chose to fight abroad during the period.

Adam Marks
University of St Andrews

3 Alexia Grosjean, *An Unofficial Alliance: Scotland and Sweden 1569-1654* (Leiden, 2003).