

G-SIG FORUM #50

GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY EDITION

...from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society (www.stlgs.org/) and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis, Mo. (www.gahs-stlouis.org).

This communication is a forum for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher serves as *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

If you would like to include a notice or request, please submit your information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). *EXCHANGE!* notices run only once, but you may resubmit. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to persch3@hotmail.com.

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WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT...?

... That renewed interest in Germanic history has reached huge proportions?
... That countless Americans every day are turning to their German ancestry?
... That G-SIG would be marking its 50th edition of this *FORUM*?

A special word of thanks to everyone involved with supporting (and reading) the *FORUM!* Special thanks to Pat von zur Muehlen for electronic delivery of each edition, for the creative input and submissions made by a wide range of G-SIG participants, and for the encouragement of the G-SIG Steering Committee plus the interest and nurturing of the St. Louis Genealogical Society and the German American Heritage Society.

This *special anniversary edition* looks at one of the most serious watersheds of Germanic history. It's a real keeper! Read on. **GP**

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DER DREISSIGJAHRIGEN KRIEG

By Gerald Perschbacher

Imagine 30 years of war in the United States. Imagine the passing of mighty armies back and forth like waves of destruction. Imagine crop failures, economic upheavals, and pestilence. This is what the Holy

Roman Empire endured from 1618 to 1648. This may be the story of your ancestors!

Historians agree that “*der Dreissigjahrigen Krieg*” (*Dreissig* = Thirty, *Jahrigen* = Years, *Krieg* = War) was the greatest watershed in Germanic history. It changed the course of Western Europe. It was epic in impact. It destroyed the wealth, health, and prominence of many among the nobility and among the “Burghers” (city officials). Great cities and territories fell to ruin and second-level importance. The war paved the way for the rise of France, Austria, and other neighboring nations, setting off an occasional progression of major wars well into the 20th Century.

“Kicking boy” for the Thirty Years War was the Germanic Holy Roman Empire, otherwise known by outsiders as the Empire of the Germans.

SEGMENTED WAR

Those three decades of war are divided into segments by scholars. The war began in Bohemia. How and why? Many reasons. Go online at http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/30YW_western_europe.htm or check other comparable sources for details. Large libraries usually have several books on the topic. We will limit our study in this **FORUM** to the impact on and in the German lands of the Empire.

In 1618, Bohemia, which was part of the Empire, was a hotbed of difficulties with its population divided between Slavic (especially Czech) and German people. Areas had aligned by religious loyalties. Basically, there were Moravians, Lutherans, and Catholics.

Several generations before the war, Bohemia was the home of Jan (John) Hus, a Catholic priest and teacher who aimed to reform the Church. He was not alone. Many of like mind banded with him. In 1415, officials burned Hus at the stake, a typical form of merciless execution for heretics, witches, and the worst kinds of criminals.

A century later, Dr. Martin Luther picked up where Hus was stopped, and the Reformation began in Wittenberg, Germany, 1517. There were numerous theological and social similarities to the movement of Hus, so Bohemian nobility and city leaders who longed for change gravitated to that camp. Discontent increased between the religions, but social improvement and unhappiness with appointed leaders were equally strong reasons for an uprising. It seemed that the Empire was rife for change as a whole.

THE FIRE SPREAD!

Like a tinderbox, the fire of discontent spread to various other areas, to the north in what we call the Low Countries (now generally Belgium and the Netherlands), and in pockets throughout the Empire.

When military force was used by the Habsburg dynasty in the person of Philip III of Spain, more discontent arose. To reach trouble spots, Spain moved its forces northward along the Spanish Road. This was near the border of France and took troops into Luxembourg and the Low Countries. France, while generally Catholic as was Spain, still did not trust the political moves of that monarchy. Tension mounted.

Political and religious dissidents were quashed by armies moving under Catholic regimes. Catching the brunt along the Rhine were Calvinists (Reformed) and Lutherans.

Armies joined forces under the Catholic League (*Liga*) or the Protestant Union. Check more deeply into the war, and you will note that many communities were invaded several times. It was pretty serious when an army came to town, even if the army was there to defend the location. In the 1600s, armies were not fed by their own supply lines but foraged in the areas where they were staying. If a city had walls and refused to open the gate for entry, even friendly armies were known to break down the gate and take control of the town.

The rationale was that the city being “liberated” or “protected” had to shoulder its part in the process. That meant providing shelter for soldiers. Soldiers were assigned to homes throughout the city. Sometimes this amounted to a small handful of troops per house.

Those soldiers had to be fed, also, and this was the duty of the city. Imagine if you heard a knock on your front door tonight. Ten soldiers were standing there. You were forced to keep them for several days. They slept in your guest beds, your two couches, and a couple reclining chairs. They probably had not showered for days and their uniforms were dirty from marching. Regardless, you HAD to house them.

Once they were in your home, you had to cook a meal. These men were hungry! It was almost as though your extended family surprised you on the eve of a holiday and expected you to have the turkey or ham or steak ready for them in an hour. When they had finished eating, there wouldn't be leftovers for the next day.

Realizing this, we can understand that the United States Bill of Rights has the following assertions:

“Third Amendment: Protection from quartering of troops. No soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.” And **“Fourth Amendment:** Protection from unreasonable search and seizure. The right of the people to secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searched and seizures, shall not be violated....”

In the Thirty Years War, you as a citizens may have had your horses confiscated, your cows slaughtered for food, and your warm clothing taken to keep the soldiers warm if weather turned chilly. If your household had weapons, the soldiers may have taken those, also.

Unbelievably, this was for the army that was PROTECTING you! Imagine the army that was your **enemy!**

There are stories of the enemy forcing towns to surrender. Anything of worth made of silver or gold, or having precious stones, was taken to pay your “war debt.” Any money found in your home was claimed by an officer. It was tantamount to legalized stealing.

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THEY THOUGHT IT WAS SAFE...

Some towns in Protestant regions thought their riches and precious worldly keepsakes, though meager, were safe if hidden in the town church. They reasoned that since Catholic soldiers were marching into town, the troops would respect a church (even if it were Protestant) and not enter it or cause damage. WRONG! If an officer declared a Protestant church as “open game,” then soldiers went inside, trashed it, stole what they wanted, and burned the structure to the ground.

The same may be said of Catholic churches when forces of the Protestant Union marched into town.

City records were at risk. Many were destroyed or left to rot in vacant cities. Yes, occasionally entire city populations abandoned their homes or generally died off. Paper burns easily, so if troops were staying in an abandoned town, why not gain some moments of warmth or light by burning the city record books in the fireplace?

Armies moved in nearly all directions at one time or another during that war. Nations did not maintain alliances as in recent memory. But they seemed ready to march to war at the drop of a hat in the first half of the 1600s.

The Danes went to battle but made peace in 1629.

King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden flexed his military might against the Poles and advanced his nation's prominence and wealth by marching boldly into the German Empire in 1630. His troops were generally successful due to superior training and new tactics. He swung through north and central portions of the land, chasing armies and waging major encounters.

Notable generals and commanders rose and sank, such as Tilly and Wallenstein, and – on November 15, 1632, even Gustavus Adolphus who was killed in battle, bettered by Wallenstein. For more on troops and engagements, check a good source.

This can tie directly into your ancestry and heritage. If your family lived where troops marched and fought, then your family may have been the target of bullets, pikes, and sabers.



MAYBE THREE OR FOUR TIMES!

Further imagine that your town had been attacked, then liberated, then attacked again, then liberated once more. Armies moved through it four times, each time taking a little more. By the fourth entry, there was little left to sustain your family. You packed what you could carry (since your horse was stolen and your wagon confiscated), and traveled as fast as you could to seek refuge in the next big town. Your spouse and children went with you. Small children had to be carried. You brought two sheep and a goat for future food or to barter for your life!

Sometimes a family had elderly relatives who were left behind to fend for themselves. It was practically a death sentence since little (if any!) food remained, no one was there to collect wood (entire areas of trees were harvested for the fire place or bond fire as armies camped at night), and there were no weapons for protection.

When your family arrived at the next safe town, you banged on the door. A guard whom you knew – perhaps even a distant relative! – opened a peep hole and asked what you wanted. “Entry, please!” came your reply. The answer: “Go elsewhere. We already have people from five villages in our streets, eating our food, and coughing in every corner. Go away. And may God bless you.”

Could it get worse?

Yes. There was disease. Soldiers caught all sorts of ailments ranging from the common cold to flu, diarrhea to syphilis. These were expected.

What was feared above all during those three decades of war was THE PEST (we call it The Plague, although there were different strains).

Indeed, the Black Death of the 1300s was not the only time The Plague ravaged Western Europe. It crept into history several times over succeeding centuries. It seemed to become a widespread danger at times of major war. One reason: soldiers marched from town to town. If even one soldier was ill with The Plague, he would spread it among his kind, and they would carry it to town after town. Once planted in a community deprived of good food, heavy clothing, lack of medicines and herbs, and little wood for warmth, The Plague sprout up and devastated entire families.

The Germans of that era did not always pause to examine the type of PEST (pestilence) had settled in their community. Didn't really matter if it was The Plague or a dire outbreak of the flu or diarrhea. Whole families were snuffed out in two or three weeks. Pffft! Gone. That left a vacant house to fall to ruin or be confiscated by the community.

Fires were common. Why should a soldier put out the fire he was ordered to set? And townsfolk did not wish to risk putting out flames since it exposed them to soldiers in the street. If danger was near due to the close proximity of the flaming structure, then bold and courageous citizens formed bucket brigades to douse the fire before it engulfed their community in a massive conflagration.

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RECENT RESEARCH IN OLD FILES

I studied a massive compilation of data gleaned from files of Babenhausen, Hessen-Darmstadt, thanks to a couple friends in Germany who conveyed the details. The files were typical of many other cities of that era, regardless of the location in the Empire. The files listed names, dates (for births, baptisms, deaths, and marriages), relationships, ages, occupations, and occasionally an extra word of background (such as towns where people had lived prior to moving to Babenhausen).

I concentrated on the period of the Thirty Years War to see what I could notice. It was quite eye opening! Here are some highlights.

Several families died within a short period, probably due to disease. Mother or father usually was first, then a young child, and in some cases two or three in one day! There was one entry that indicated a young daughter (I think she was around 10 years of age) was the only survivor among the six (or so) members of her family. Wow! What a loss! This got me thinking about the poor orphan. She either was given refuge by family

or friends or became a ward of the city. Now, think about one salient fact. Would YOU have taken in that girl, considering that she had lived with deadly pestilence all around her? Doubtless she was a carrier. I found no entry to date that said where she went, and there was no indication she had died. Perhaps she was cast out (I really cannot imagine that happening). I don't think she went to another town, but I suppose it was possible. Dangerous at that time, but possible.

I imagine that the head of each household was warned: "Fathers, protect your daughters." That's because a significant number of soldiers were listed in the official records as sponsors at baptisms, as marrying local women, and as fathering illegitimate children. Yes, there are indications of the fathers' names when this happened. And the word "soldier" or the rank of the officer is listed. So yet another aftermath of the war was the impact soldiers had among the common folk due to marriage or intimate contact.

Analysis also shows that soldiers came to the town from various armies. A polish soldier is listed. So are some Swedes. There are a few Catholics listed in what was a Lutheran town. Can you imagine the reactions to those families? They had come to Babenhausen for help or refuge when the Catholic League was marching against Babenhausen! Moments of intrigue?

Nobility was not immune to THE PEST. Some members of the local Count's family succumbed.

We can surmise when THE PEST was at its height if we add up the number of deaths on certain days. There were at least two peaks in different years.

As I studied the data, I felt compassion for the people. I felt closer to the era in which they lived. And I wished to learn more.

If your ancestors lived in or near any of the war-torn areas of Germany from 1618-1648, these may have been the events YOUR family faced in der Dreissigjahrigen Krieg. And since you are alive today, someone in your past SURVIVED that war. Take consolation in that fact.

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THE AFTERMATH

When thirty years of war finally ended in 1648, the Holy Roman Empire was hardly the same. Many major cities had been devastated, their populations diminished to half (or less) of prewar totals. Rural communities dried up. Famine had also rid towns and villages of their ability to be self-

sufficient. Debris and wreckage were strewn about, not just in cities but also along roads into pristine areas of natural beauty. Remnants of war included the remains of unclaimed, unburied dead bodies. Here and there were the rib cages and other dried, bleached bones of large domestic animals killed in the carnage.

The most severe loss to the Empire was its population. Without people, noble families could not protect their land. Without farmers, crops would not be raised and weeds would take over. Without workers turning a profit for the noble families, they could not afford to raise an army and protect their holdings. A town did not fully function unless it had a balance of artisans and specialists.

To offset this loss, people were imported. Jews were brought into the region commonly known as Alsace. Dutch immigrants were settled in areas east of the Rhine. This explains the shift in surnames that is reflected in church and town records.

Historians in Germany say that the devastation of their land during the Second World War can hardly be compared with the woes of the Thirty Years War and its years of rebuilding. Interesting, but true. If for no other reason than this, each of us should have a better understanding of the three decades of destruction that struck the old German Empire.

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EXCHANGE! G-SIG comments, ideas, & requests:

+ You can download an impressive history of the Thirty Years War by going to <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/566>

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