The 17th Century Crisis: Crash Course

Crash Course: European History
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

[intro]

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course: European History and today we're going to talk about what is sometimes called the 17th Century Crisis. Now, I know what you're thinking, this whole history business is just one crisis after another. And yes dear viewer, it's true. Human kind careens on from disaster to disaster but still we press on like boats against the current, and sometimes we even learn from previous disasters. And since the 17th Century Crisis involves climate change and catastrophic war, we should maybe pay attention to this one.

[title sequence]

Let's begin with the Little Ice Age. The Little Ice Age started around 1300, but it really escalated beginning in 1570, and then the climate continued to cool for over 100 years after that. In some places the temperature may have shifted 2 degrees Celsius, or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, but the average was about half a degree Celsius. That may not sound dramatic, but it was. Intense rainfall, lack of sunshine, and lower temperatures decreased harvests, or ruined them entirely. Europeans hypothermia, the birthrate dropped, and famines became more common... as did cannibalism. In New England, the end of the 17th century was the worst part of the Little Ice Age. 1697 was especially brutal. Settler Samuel Sewall noted in his diary:

"To horses, swine, nett-cattell, sheep, and deer, ninety and seven prov'd a mortal yeer."

Now unlike contemporary climate change, the Little Ice Age was not caused primarily by human behavior. It may have been caused by volcanic activity or orbital cycles or cyclical lows in solar radiation. We like to think of the earth's climate as entirely stable, but it never has been. That said, contemporary climate change is caused by humans, and even the most ambitious goals to limit would result in an average global temperature change of 1.5 degrees Celsius, far higher than the average shifts seen during the catastrophic Little Ice Age.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

And something else was happening in the 17th century that felt as mysterious and strange as lower temperatures: higher prices. Sometimes called a 'price revolution' that increased prices for foods and other goods. This was caused partly by the growing population we discussed in our last episode, and partly by inflation. More precious metals were entering Europe, especially due to mining in the Americas, which decreased the value of coinage. But this was really baffling for people.

I mean, imagine that you're living in Spain in the 17th century, watching precious metals pour into your country via the New World, and despite all this New Wealth, you're finding it harder to pay for bread and clothing and almost everything else. Inflation, like climate, is extremely complex, and also a hugely important historical force. And so as prices soared and prices declined, it really did feel like the 17th century might just be the end. As one pamphleteer from Spain wrote in 1643:

"Every nation is turned upside down, leading some great ming to suspect that we are approaching the end of the world."

And then, there was the 30 Years War, which unlike the Hundred Years War actually did last for 30 years. The war took place between 1618 and 1648 and it was tremendously destructive in central Europe. Millions of people were killed, including many from starvation brought on by the war. Many different states from the quickly fracturing Holy Roman Empire were involved, as were France and Sweden and Denmark and England. The war started in 1618 over... you guessed it, religion.

It began when Ferdinand the Second, the devotedly Catholic Hapsburg King of Bohemia sent representatives to inform powerful Protestants that Prague and the rest of Bohemia would be Catholic territory from now on. Unsurprisngly, the Protestant lords from Prague weren't terribly happy with this news. In fact, they were so unhappy that they threw Ferdinand's representatives out. Literally. Out the window, in the so-called "Defenstration of Prague".

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Did the center of the world just open? Is there a window in there? Now this is a famous moment in European history, in part because it's called the Defenestration of Prague, which is just irresistible. But in part because it was the Second Defenestration of Prague. The first one occurred in 1419 and resulted in the deaths of 7 people. The second one, the one we're concerned with now, resulted in the deaths of no people because all four of the defenestrated people landed in manure. Ferdinand's people of course called this a divine miracle while Protestants were like "they landed in poop!"

Ah, god, I love history.

Soon after the defenestration Ferdinand the Second was elected Holy Roman Emporer, which lead the Protestant Czechs to reject him as King of Bohemia and choose the Protestant Frederick the Fifth of the Palatinate to replace him, and then war truly erupted. The Czechs would be initially defeated by Hapsburg forces in the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 and the Hapsburg family would in fact rule the area until 1918, but that didn't settle the war, nor in fact did Ferdinand's next victories.

Let's go to the ThoughtBubble.

[into the ThoughtBubble]

So on the one hand you have the imperial forces lead by the Catholic Hapsburg, Ferdinand the Second. And on the other hand, you have Protestant Frederick the Fifth and his allies among the Protestant aristocrats of central Europe. The Hapsburgs went on to crush Frederick's allies. In the 1620s, Ferdinand took the Palatinate from the defeated Frederick and awarded it to his Catholic ally, Maximilian of Bavaria. Ferdinand then awarded other lands to Catholic allies that had belonged to defeated Protestant princes, and he decreed that in conquered territories, those who had bought Catholic lands, like monasteries, had to return them. Furthermore, all citizens needed to return to the Catholic Church, or else leave their homes. The Little Ice Age, inflation, and war had crashed the economies, making it difficult for people to dispose of their property before they moved. And we see this again and again and again in refugee crises throughout history.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

So, it seemed the Catholic Hapsburgs were going to win. But then, the Protestant King of Denmark, Christian the Fourth, a hugely wealth ruler, decided to enter the war to block imperial expansion, protect Protestants, and preserve the traditional rights of the many hundreds of independent kingdoms and duchies and cities in the Holy Roman Empire. And that meant that the war, instead of being over, was just getting started. Thanks, ThoughtBubble.

[exit the ThoughtBubble]

So, Emperor Ferdinand had hired the Albrecht von Wallenstein to confront the Danish menace and to continue conquering the Protestant princes in the empire, thus restoring more property to the Catholic Church. Wallenstein was Czeck, and he'd been born a Protestant, but he converted to Catholicism as a teenager, and then went on to marry a widow, who died a few years after their marriage, leaving him a lot of property.

But that was just the beginning of Wallenstein gaining property via death and/or marriage. Wallenstein did his conquering with such gusto and success that Ferdinand constantly rewarded him with more estates. And when Wallenstein married again, he gained even more wealth and prestige. He started out as hired help, but eventually grew to be very powerful in his own right. It's a real Holy Roman Empire dream story. You know, you start out in the war-making mail room and then eventually work your way up to being the CEO of war. He raised armies of tens of thousands of fighters who laid waste to Protestant lands. And Wallenstein expanded the battlefield in the 30 Years War by seeking out any nearby Protestants whose lands could be captured and returned to the Catholic side. Thereby bringing new entrants into the war. The Netherlands came to the Palatinate's rescue. Spain, Italian states, and France also got involved, as did Sweden, a military powerhouse at the time, unlike today when the Swedes are primarily a flat-packed home goods powerhouse.

Then, in 1626, Danish king Christian the Fourth lost half his army in the Battle of Lutter.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Ferdinand the Second's confidence soared, and with it, his Counter-Reformation zeal. In 1629, he issued the Edict of Restitution, a sweeping confiscation of formerly Catholic lands, and a harsh directive for non-Catholics to emigrate. And Ferdinand was merciless. When his armies would defeat the rebels, Ferdinand would have those taken prisoner disemboweled after their right hands were hacked off. His German price allies counseled moderation, but Ferdinand preferred the advice of his Jesuit priest, to push the Counter-Reformation ever further. Ferdinand, his confessor announced, could quote:

"lose all his kingdoms and provinces and whatever he has in this world, provided he save his soul."

So there would be no compromise.

Then in 1631, Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus defeated the imperial army at the Battle of Breitenfeld, the first major Protestant victory of the war, which by then was 13 years old. Though Gustavus Adolphus was killed in battle the next year, that Catholic defeat heartened Protestant forces who kept the war going. Meanwhile the war stopped being about just religion. For instance, Louis the Thirteenth of France allied himself with the Swedish king, even though Louis was Catholic and the Swedes were Protestant because Louis didn't want the Holy Roman Empire to become too powerful.

Overtime, the daily realities of the war became even more brutal. As armies simply wandered across central Europe killing and scrounging for food. Young and old peasants and townspeople were stabbed or captured and tortured to death as waves of soldiers went from house to house. The first waves took obvious treasure, and then each successive wave settled on smaller objects. Those were the minor offenses. Roasting people alive, torturing people's genitals until victims died, and raping girls to death now became standard behavior in the war. Meanwhile, civilians were also dying of hunger and cold and disease.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

The Little Ice Age was taking its toll along with the armies who fought in the name of Catholic or Lutheran or Calvinist causes, or just merely to survive. Desperate refugee families were forced to leave their homes to start over, dozens of times. Just one example of the horror: in Protestant Magdeberg, city officials faced an imperial army and its mercenaries at the city limits in the fall of 1630. And over the course of seven months, devastation unfolded. Residents harassed the Catholic invaders, hurling rocks and other objects on them from the city ramparts. And once the imperial armies breached the walls, they started to torch the city. Magdeberg citizens struggled to escape both the armies and the fire. Of 25,000 people, only 5,000 were left at the end of the battle for the city, which was, in the end, destroyed by fire.

In 1634, Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand the Second had his own general Wallenstein assassinated because it appeared that Wallenstein was plotting to make peace with Sweden and perhaps planning a coup. Although, why anyone would want to be the Holy Roman Emperor at that point is an absolute mystery to me. But the war continued. The 1640s brought more horrendous weather and disorder reigned as social and political systems just completely fell apart. There was often very little in the way of a functioning government. Economies completely collapsed, and all manner of social norms broke down. There were for instance many reports of cannibalism, and public spaces became additionally dangerous when wolves and other wild animals arrived in villages and private farms.

Finally, in 1648, the Peace of Westphalia brought an end to the war. Even hardheaded theologians by that time allowed concessions to the other religion in order to obtain peace. And the fact that French Catholics united with Swedish and other Protestants lead to the conclusion that this maybe meant the end of religious war. At least in Europe. At least for now.

===== (12:00) to (13:30) =====

The War tapered off because of political and economic considerations, but also because the level of devastation just became too horrifying. Combatants finally met at a peace conference where Emperor Ferdinand the Third made concessions of land and cash, reluctantly forced by exhaustion and the continual miseries inflicted by the Little Ice Age.

[conclusding remarks]

All of this marked a turn toward more practical concerns in government policy, rather than just, like, going to war to promote your religion. Rates of mortality were very high in the 17th century because of the pervasiveness of the Little Ice Age, and because of devastating warfare. And we need to remember the immense human costs of the Thirty Years War. Some 20% of the central European population died, while in areas of intense and continuous fighting it was closer to 50%. If I can return to a shockingly positive picture, amidst all of that, the creation of our modern view of science and its benefits was taking place in many of the same regions. Which reminds us that history is not one human story, but all human stories.

Some good news is coming next week. Thanks for watching. I'll see you then.

[end credits]

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