

# THE PEACE OF WESTPHALIA AND THE RISE OF COLLECTIVIST SECURITY OVER IMPERIALISM

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*This paper explores how events surrounding the Thirty Year's War affected the political hierarchy within the Holy Roman Empire and her various states, as well as thoughts on collective security, state-sovereignty, and international relations across Europe. This essay will examine the Treaty of Westphalia, and the social and political effects that this extraordinary piece of international legislation had on major European powers. This essay will also analyze the influence the treaty would have over future disputes and conflicts arising in post-Westphalian Europe leading into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*

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The Treaty of Westphalia was a monumental piece of international legislation. Europe had never seen a piece of legislation that affected so many countries on such a large social, political, and economic scale. Although the treaty's primary intention was to end the Thirty Years' War in the Holy Roman Empire, it changed how many international leaders, both current and future, would view international relations and their own countries' power hierarchies. It phased out old political and social institutions that had previously held great power, drastically reducing the powers of political and religious leaders, such as the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope. The Peace of Westphalia, and its aftermath, laid the groundwork for what would evolve into the modern ideas of sovereignty we see today in its promotion of the ideas about the independence of nation-states and the collective European security that still survives today.

The independence and autonomy of nation-states was a central idea in the Treaty of Westphalia and others treaties, such as the Treaty of Pyrenees in 1659.<sup>1</sup> Since the Treaty of Westphalia was decided and written by diplomats from around a thousand of mostly autonomous nation-states and various countries across Europe,

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<sup>1</sup>Quainton, "Colonel Lockhart and the Peace of the Pyrenees," 267-68.

it took a unique, sovereignty-asserting view that had seldom been seen before.<sup>2</sup> Before the Treaty of Westphalia, peace treaties had been administered between rulers of nations, but in Westphalia's case this was not just a treaty between the Holy Roman Empire and a European nation; it was a treaty to bring peace within the Holy Roman Empire and subsequently settle the Empire's disputes with the rest of Europe. The Treaty of Westphalia allowed the Holy Roman Empire's nation-states to effectively operate as independent entities and paved the way for states, such as Austria, to pursue complete independence as its own powerful nation.<sup>3</sup> This autonomy was not just gained because the nation-states suddenly decided they wanted independence from the Holy Roman Emperor's control and interference; instead, this was achieved because the Holy Roman Empire's states had the backing of other independent nations. The Treaty of Westphalia was a peace treaty first and foremost for the Empire and countries such as Sweden, and France recognized that if a lasting peace was the ultimate aim it must first be achieved by the Holy Roman Empire's nation-states. In 1644, Count d'Avaux confirmed this sentiment when he proclaimed:

It would seem that...the honour and profit of France will best be served by placing first on the table the items concerning the public peace and the liberties of the Empire...because if they [the German states] do not yet truly wish for peace, it would be prejudicial and damaging to us if the talks broke down over our own particular demands.<sup>4</sup>

The French count acknowledged the need to have input, not just from the Holy Roman Emperor, but also from a delegation of the nation-states. After the creation of the delegation, its members successfully made several demands which were then granted and imposed on the appropriate European nations; usually by the signing of a later treaty or legislation. In 1648, the concept of international and multilateral agreements was relatively new, but would serve as a proponent of the kind of international diplomacy the world sees today.

Sections I and II of the Treaty of Westphalia showed the Empire and Europe's desire for peace and amnesty. Domestically, this meant the Holy Roman Empire and its nation-states could continue to debate and demand without the fear of war.<sup>5</sup> Now that peace had been achieved, many nation-states rushed to put forward their own demands which, in many cases, included the right to be independent, sovereign nations. From a religious point of view, many of the nation-states were also enforcing tolerance towards Protestants, giving them equal rights as Catholic

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<sup>2</sup>Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*, 156, 169; Ogg, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century*, 167.

<sup>3</sup>Wilson, *The Thirty Years' War: Europe's Tragedy*, 751.

<sup>4</sup>Parker, *The Thirty Years' War*, 180.

<sup>5</sup>"Treaty of Westphalia," *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*.

citizens. They understood that legislation that tolerated Protestants would garner strong oppositions from the Pope, so the delegates included a clause that claimed — despite the Church’s objections — that the Treaty was valid.<sup>6</sup> This measure is one of the first steps towards unity seen where several nation-states came together to limit the Pope’s power and supreme authority.<sup>7</sup> The next step that the German princes and lords within the Empire took was to limit the power of the weak and ineffective Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand III. With France and Sweden’s support, the German princes were able to gain considerable control and influence over the Holy Roman Empire’s internal affairs and their own states within that Empire. Decisions concerning war and trade all had to be approved by the council of princes and electors, effectively making the Holy Roman Emperor’s title purely symbolic.<sup>8</sup> Now, throughout German nation-states, real power is concentrated in Bavaria, Saxony, Brandenburg and Austria. Even though the Holy Roman Emperor’s title was seemingly irrelevant in making domestic decisions, his position as the Emperor of Austria still made him a powerful European leader internationally.<sup>9</sup> The political power that many of the newly independent nation-states gained not only shaped the Holy Roman Empire until its dissolution in 1806, but also Europe for centuries.

The Treaty of Westphalia’s effect on the Holy Roman Empire’s political landscape was felt across Europe as many autonomous nation-states sought to gain greater power and influence. With the Treaty, states gained the right to regulate their internal affairs without the influence or interference of other nations.<sup>10</sup> This meant that the nation-states of Austria, Bavaria, Saxony, and others were now free to trade with other nations, such as France and Britain, and also to keep a standing army to ensure the lasting defense of their state.<sup>11, 12</sup> Nation-states continued to exercise their new found powers and grew exponentially over the following centuries as they, and other European nations, made alliances. The Austrian Habsburgs’ alliance with the Spanish Habsburgs is just one of the many examples where two separate nations (or nation-states) could mutually agree to support one another in order to quell the growing power of another nation, such as France.<sup>13</sup> Since Ferdinand III could not support the Spanish via the Holy Roman Empire, he chose to do this through his own power in Austria. After this event, Austria was now seen as a growing power on the European stage, and it showed how multiple nations could work together to ensure the collective security of their peoples. Throughout the

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<sup>6</sup>Croxton, “The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Origins of Sovereignty,” 571-572.

<sup>7</sup>Croxton, 571-572.

<sup>8</sup>Cowie, *Seventeenth Century Europe*, 186.

<sup>9</sup>Cowie, 187.

<sup>10</sup>Sotirović, “The Peace Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and Its Consequences.”

<sup>11</sup>Wilson, 777.

<sup>12</sup>Sotirović.

<sup>13</sup>Wilson, 774.

following centuries, this alliance strategy would be seen numerous times, especially in international wars, such as World War I and World War II where, in effect, the entire globe came together to limit Germany's power.<sup>14</sup> In peacetime, this idea of collective security was the basis for modern ideas of collective security organizations, such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Organizations, like the EU, help ensure that one nation does not become too large and powerful.<sup>15</sup> This approach was first seen at Westphalia in 1648, and has been a significant and vital tool in creating stable and long-lasting peace agreements around the world.

While the Treaty of Westphalia was primarily conceived as a way to end the Thirty Years' War and ensure a "Christian and Universal Peace,"<sup>16</sup> it was more than just that. Whether intentional or unintentional, there is no doubt that the Treaty of Westphalia and other subsequent agreements, such as the Habsburgs' alliance, helped to bolster the German nation-states and shifted Europe to a more sovereignty-based political ideology which evolved into what we see today; a system where nations are equal and accepted. The Treaty of Westphalia also served as a basis for the collective security of European nations and put forward ideas to ensure that no one nation can become too powerful and dangerous; ideas that are still practiced today across Europe and around the world.

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<sup>14</sup>Sotirović.

<sup>15</sup>Sotirović.

<sup>16</sup>"Treaty of Westphalia."

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