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a cura di
GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI



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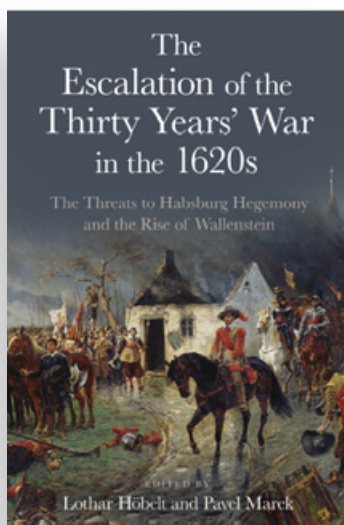


Vienna, Monumento equestre al Principe Eugenio di Savoia, particolare.
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EDITED BY
LOTHAR HÖBELT, PAVEL MAREK,

*The Escalation of the Thirty Years' War in the
1620s The Threats to Habsburg Hegemony
and the Rise of Wallenstein*

Boydell Press, 2026



The Thirty Years' War remains a rich field for studying warfare across different scales and perspectives. In today's historiography, syntheses have largely abandoned the image of a merely confessional conflict, emphasizing instead the entanglement of different factors and interests, at the crossroads of constitutional, dynastic, fiscal, diplomatic and military dynamics¹. This new

¹ Peter H. WILSON, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy*, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2009; Geoffrey PARKER (ed.), *The Thirty Years'*

edited volume does not seek to replace such broad works. Its merit lies in narrowing the lens to the years 1624–26 and asking why a conflict that seemed almost over after the Bohemian-Palatine phase did not become, to use Axel Gotthard's phrase, a «Five Years' War»². It is therefore not a narrative of the war as an uninterrupted multipolar war, but a detailed and intensive study (as if these two years were seen through a microscope) of the escalation whose consequences extend through to the Peace of Lübeck (1629) and beyond.

The introduction is particularly effective in formulating the problem. The year 1624 is presented as a «fake year of peace»: Mansfeld had been neutralised, Gabriel Bethlen was negotiating, and the Empire was not yet the theatre of major operations. Yet this apparent calm generated new anxieties. Vienna feared an anti-Habsburg convergence from several directions: France and Venice in the Valtellina, Denmark and England in the north, Bethlen and the Ottomans in the east, Sweden in the Baltic, and the Dutch war against Spain in the west. The thesis, sustained through different analytical chapters, is that the result was not an inevitable renewal of war, but a political atmosphere in which preventive action increasingly appeared rational. A hypothetical comparison with Christopher Clark's controversial *The Sleepwalkers* is suggestive as an exercise for the readers: the actors of 1624–26 were not passive sleepwalkers, yet the volume in the end shows how locally rational decisions, imperfect information and exaggerated threat perceptions could produce an escalation no one fully controlled.³ In this sense the book accepts Wilson's contingentism but radicalises it on a far more

War, London and New York, Routledge, 1997 (2nd ed), in part. Part II: 'The Indecisive War, 1618–1629', pp. 33–57; Claire Gantet, *La Guerre de Trente Ans*, Paris, Tallandier, 2024; Axel GOTTHARD, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg: eine Einführung*, Cologne, Böhlau Verlag, 2016; Georg SCHMIDT, *Die Reiter der Apokalypse: Geschichte des Dreißigjährigen Krieges*, Munich, Beck, 2018.

- 2 The title is borrowed from Axel GOTTHARD, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg...*, p. 112, where the formulation *Warum kein Fünfjähriger Krieg?* appears. The Wilson epigraph is drawn from Peter H. WILSON, «Dynasty, Constitution and Confession: The Role of Religion in the Thirty Years' War», *The International History Review*, 30 (2008), p. 513.
- 3 The distinction between escalation, prolongation, and intensification is made explicit in: Lothar HÖBELT, Pavel MAREK, «Conclusion: Escalation, Prolongation, Intensification of the War», in Eid (eds), *The Escalation of the Thirty Years' War in the 1620s. The Threats to Habsburg Hegemony and the Rise of Wallenstein*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2026, pp. 299–313. On the contingentist reading of the prelude to great conflicts and the 'sleepwalker' metaphor as a suggestion, see Christopher CLARK, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, New York, Harper, 2012.

compressed scale. Where Wilson's synthesis inevitably reintegrates contingency into an overarching narrative of 'imperial tragedy', Höbelt and Marek hold the focus on a precise window of open possibilities.

The four parts of the book follow this logic from different geographic angles. The western section merits attention alongside the Central European chapters: Michael Bregnsbo avoids reducing Christian IV's intervention to religion alone, stressing the king's position as duke of Holstein and his rivalry with Sweden; Thomas G. Otte presents Jacobean policy as a mixture of moral ambition and structural incapacity. The chapters by Ziober and Kármán are especially useful, since they show how Poland-Lithuania, Transylvania and the Ottoman frontier shaped the room for manoeuvre available to Vienna. David Parrott's chapter is one of the strongest in the volume. Drawing on his seminal monograph⁴, Parrott effectively shows that Wallenstein was almost absent from French political perception in the mid-1620s, because Richelieu and his ministers still looked primarily at Spain and the Rhine. The chapters by Signorotto and Černušák on Italy, the Valtellina and the diplomatic perception of crisis show how different combinations of information and diplomatic perception mattered as much as troop movements.

Manuel Rivero Rodríguez's chapter on Olivares and the *Unión de Armas* is perhaps the most globally ambitious contribution. The recapture of Salvador da Bahia in 1625 becomes, in Olivares' political imagination, evidence that the composite Spanish monarchy could coordinate its resources against a common enemy. Even more striking is the discussion of Juan Niño de Távora's later plan for a joint Spanish-Portuguese command centred on Manila or Macao and aimed at strengthening Iberian action in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Here the perspective is enriched by the naval dimension, not merely as a background to continental war, but as a structural problem of imperial mobilisation (and Rivero Rodríguez is the only contributor to treat it as such). The chapter therefore brings into dialogue a tradition of Iberian global history that rarely intersects with the Central European focus of most Thirty Years' War scholarship.

The figure holding the volume together is Wallenstein, but the book avoids

4 David PARROTT, *Richelieu's Army. War, Government and Society in France, 1624–1642*, Cambridge, CUP, 2001, pp. 84–88.

turning him into a purely biographical subject⁵. He appears as a centre of gravity through which several problems intersect: military enterprise, credit, court politics, territorial lordship and imperial strategy. Höbelt's chapter usefully questions retrospective narratives of his first generalate, criticising the famous image of the man who could maintain fifty thousand soldiers better than twenty thousand, treating it not as a self-evident truth of 1625, but as a later simplification of a more uncertain process. The emperor did not choose Wallenstein primarily out of strategic vision, but – as demonstrated through extensive archival documentation – because few viable alternatives existed. Petr Vorel's chapter on coinage also introduces a new perspective, reinforcing this picture from a different angle, linking Wallenstein's military career to money creation, land acquisition and princely representation. This chapter, moving beyond the image of the pure contractor of violence, presenting him as a broker of credit, status, patronage, logistics and territorial sovereignty. Zdislava Röhsner's archival essay, finally, introduces readers to archival complexities, underlining that the history of Wallenstein also depends on the survival and political classification of sources.

The volume also speaks to the historiography of military entrepreneurship beyond the purely economic dimension. Wallenstein and Mansfeld were brokers of political possibility and information. In this respect the book fits well with David Parrott's reassessment of military enterprise and with Suzanne Sutherland's recent emphasis on the military entrepreneur as a diplomatic and intellectual figure, although this latter line of interpretation is not developed here⁶. The volume shows clearly how military entrepreneurs created constraints as well as solutions. Once men had been recruited, paid only in part, and set in motion, their very existence shaped political choices that no single actor could fully control.

Finally, some limitations and potential opportunities for the future should be noted. As often happens in edited volumes, not all chapters have the same inter-

5 On Wallenstein's appointment and the financial mechanics of his army, the classic reference remains Golo MANN, *Wallenstein: His Life Narrated*, London, André Deutsch, 1976 (1st ed. 1971). For a more recent and archivally grounded reassessment: Robert REBITSCH, *Wallenstein: Biografie eines Machtmenschen*, Vienna, Böhlau 2010.

6 David PARROTT, *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, CUP, 2012; Suzanne SUTHERLAND, *The Rise of the Military Entrepreneur: War, Diplomacy, and Knowledge in Habsburg Europe*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2022.

pretative density, and a more explicit theoretical conclusion on 'escalation' as an analytical category would have strengthened the book. The volume's strength lies more in archival precision than in theoretical framing. The Dutch Republic, Saxony and the Ottoman perspective could also have received more autonomous treatment. However, these absences could form the basis of future work. Moreover, while the Spanish *annus mirabilis* of 1625 appears in Rivero Rodríguez's chapter, it probably does not occupy a sufficiently central place in the introduction⁷.

Aside from these minor reservations, it is clear that the main achievement of the book is to show that escalation was not a straight line. The renewal of war in 1625 was produced by fears, expectations, delays, misreadings and improvised solutions, and the window of 1624–26 is where those mechanisms are most legible. As I stated in the previous early modern issue of this journal, commenting on Lucian Staiano Daniels's excellent book on the life of a regiment in these same years⁸, for military historians (not only of the seventeenth century), this volume's most useful lesson is perhaps that wars are often shaped by incomplete information, fiscal improvisation, maritime vulnerability and private enterprise, whose cumulative effects produce outcomes no actor originally intended.

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7 On the Spanish *annus mirabilis* and the reconquest of Salvador de Bahía, see the recent exhibition catalogue Inés Abril Benavides (coord.), *Annus Mirabilis. Salvador de Bahía, 1625: El crédito de España / The Credit of Spain*, Madrid, Ministerio de Defensa, 2025; David Ramírez MURIANA, *Annus Mirabilis: La reconquista de Salvador de Bahía y otros triunfos de 1625*, Madrid, Edaf, 2025. For the broader strategic and military framework of the Spanish monarchy in seventeenth-century Europe, see R. A. STRADLING, *Spain's Struggle for Europe, 1598–1668*, London, Hambledon Press, 1994, pp. 214–216.

8 Luca DOMIZIO, Review of Lucian Staiano-Daniels, «The War People. A Social History of Common Soldiers during the Era of the Thirty Years War» (2024), *Nuova Antologia Militare* (NAM), Anno VI, Fascicolo N. 23 (luglio 2025), pp. 593–602.



Michiel Jans. van Jansz. van Mierevelt, Portrait of the Duke of Wallenstein
(1583-1634). National art Museum of Azerbaijan
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Johann Georg Ziesenis (1716-1776). Portrait of Friedrich the Great (1763).
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