The Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648)

The Thirty Years’ War was a 17th-century religious conflict fought primarily in central Europe. It remains one of the longest and most brutal wars in human history, with more than 8 million casualties resulting from military battles as well as from the famine and disease caused by the conflict. The war lasted from 1618 to 1648, starting as a battle among the Catholic and Protestant states that formed the Holy Roman Empire. However, as the Thirty Years’ War evolved, it became less about religion and more about which group would ultimately govern Europe. In the end, the conflict changed the geopolitical face of Europe and the role of religion and nation-state.

The Westphalian System

Treaty of Westphalia (1648) ended the Thirty Years War in Europe which was fought mainly in Germany. Initially the war was a conflict between Protestants and Catholics (in the Holy Roman Empire which ended with the war). But it grew into a larger conflict involving major European powers. European states embraced the notion of sovereignty centralizing control and producing ever-more powerful sovereign states with national armies. A core group of states (Austria, Russia, Prussia, England, France, United Provinces (Neth./Belgium) emerged and dominated the world until the beginning of 19th century. European politics became marked by absolutist regimes, multiple rivalries, and shifting alliances. This European order ended in 1945 with the beginning of bipolarism.