

THE
IRON
PRINCESS

Amalia Elisabeth
and the Thirty Years War

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Contents

Note to the Reader	<i>vii</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>
I An Imperial Princess	<i>16</i>
2 Teetering on the Brink	<i>41</i>
3 The Imperial Mandate	<i>62</i>
4 Deeper into the Labyrinth	<i>84</i>
5 An Amazing Consequence	<i>98</i>
6 To the Lord God Nothing Is Impossible	<i>116</i>
7 The Long Struggle	<i>140</i>
8 A Manly Resolve	<i>161</i>
9 Westphalian Maneuverings	<i>179</i>
10 Pressing the Attack	<i>197</i>
11 Satisfaction	<i>214</i>
Conclusion	<i>233</i>
Abbreviations	<i>247</i>
Notes	<i>249</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>311</i>
Index	<i>313</i>

Introduction

AT THE AGE of thirty-two, having served as wife to the landgrave of a small German state, having borne him twelve children, eight of whom had already died, having supported his challenge to the emperor and having fled with him into exile, and then having watched him slowly die, Amalia Elisabeth of Hesse-Cassel took the reins of power into her own hands. Her subsequent rule, which lasted from 1637 until 1650, encompassed some of the most violent and destructive years in European history. Her iron determination to undo her husband's mistakes, protect her children's birthright, and strengthen the Calvinist church propelled her squarely into the bloody fray.

To the latter seventeenth century, Amalia Elisabeth of Hesse-Cassel was a towering figure, one to whom, in the words of a contemporary, "the empire owes a great part of its liberty." And if she did not receive universal applause, she did possess an army of at least twenty thousand men, and was thus a woman of whom every European leader was exquisitely aware. Today, however, few, even among scholars of the Thirty Years War, know much if anything about her. Her story, along with its consequences and import, has been lost. I suspect this is largely because she was a woman, for her role in the Thirty Years War rivaled that of Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar, Cardinal Mazarin, or even King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. Indeed, she was singularly responsible not only for the shape and duration of the last decade of the war, but also for the form and

character of the treaty that ended it, and so for the future religious and constitutional makeup of the empire.¹

The Thirty Years War, with which Amalia Elisabeth's life would be so entangled, was unprecedented in European history both in its enormous scope and in its long-lasting repercussions. The issues involved in the war were many and complex. Hanging in the balance was the structure of the Holy Roman Empire, the future of Protestantism, and the territorial boundaries and security of almost every state in Europe. In the end, the war foiled the emperor's attempts at centralization, preserving each individual German state's right to conduct its own foreign policy; settled for good the problem of religious conflict within the empire; legalized German Calvinism; and completely redrew the map of Europe. The war also crippled the Spanish economy, saw the beginning of French attempts at hegemony, and set into motion the Franco-German quarrel over Alsace that would so define Europe's future. The war spared almost no one, for it was the first great pan-European war, involving in some way France, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, the United Provinces, the Spanish Netherlands, Bohemia, Poland, Transylvania, the papacy, the Italian states, Portugal, the Swiss Confederation, Russia, England, and even the Americas. The war had an especially brutal and lasting impact on the Holy Roman Empire, for it served as the principal battleground and as a result lost as much as 40 percent of its population. Even more than 350 years after the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, the Thirty Years War is a horror still fresh in cultural memory. A study of German villagers performed in the 1960s, for example, showed that many believed the Thirty Years War was the "greatest historical calamity to befall their villages."²

The cause of the war has long been a contentious issue, but confusion and disagreement over the rights, sovereignty, and nature of states, especially within the empire, was one of its driving forces. Indeed, it would be hard to explain this period without accounting for the shifting relationship between early modern estates (or parliaments) and states on the one hand, and between states and composite states or empires on the other, or without addressing the numerous adjustments such states were forced to make to their military, governmental, and diplomatic infrastructures in order to respond to the pressures of the time—particularly the structural problems brought on by the spread of Protestantism.³

The study of the war has also been obstructed by a major problem, that of sources. The extent and complexity of this war forced states to deal

with unprecedented political, military, economic, ideological, and social problems, which in turn led them to produce an unprecedented amount of correspondence, acts, minutes, and treaties, leaving the modern historian virtually swamped by the documentation. Furthermore, the international nature of the war meant that such paperwork was produced in numerous languages and is now scattered in archives all across Europe. This problem of sources has seriously hindered historians' efforts to grasp the war in its entirety, for it is impossible for any one person ever to read all the relevant documents. So although the Thirty Years War set the stage for some of the key religious and political developments in European history and its aftermath continues to shape modern European culture and conceptions of national identity, this extremely significant and fertile area of study has yet to be fully investigated. The classic English-language general texts, C. V. Wedgwood's *Thirty Years War* and Geoffrey Parker's *Thirty Years' War*, as well as Peter Wilson's recent *Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy*, are all excellent, despite being hindered by the difficulty of summarizing such a complex subject. It is particularly encouraging, as well, that German-language scholarship on the Thirty Years War and Peace of Westphalia is currently booming, relatively speaking, with splendid modern editions by Johannes Burkhardt, Fritz Dickmann, Konrad Reppen, and Heinz Duchhardt, to name just a few. Despite such efforts, however, when one considers the forests sacrificed for scholarship on World War I and II, the number of studies of the Thirty Years War is downright minuscule, and our knowledge of the period is sadly limited.⁴

Tied together with the problem of sources is the problem of breadth. Given the impossibility of covering such a huge war thoroughly, many scholars have narrowed their focus. In this, studies tend to slip into one of two patterns. Either they attempt to survey the entire war by stressing only the roles of the larger powers, such as France or Spain, or they produce an isolated and purely local, though much more in-depth, study of the period. This is a fair strategy, but its problems are clear. Either one oversimplifies the conflict by ignoring the many subtexts that helped to define the war, or one loses the larger perspective that gives meaning to local behavior. An example of this failure to integrate local and general history is the extremely common interpretation that the general war lasted thirty years, but the 1635 Peace of Prague ended its German phase. Popular authors such as Peter Milger put it more bluntly than most, stating that after 1635 "not only was there no longer war among the states of the

empire, there was also no longer any reason for it.” As comical as it may sound, he argued, the Thirty Years War lasted only seventeen years, with the succeeding thirteen years being fought between the great powers for their own ends, though admittedly on German soil. Yet to argue that the reasons for internal strife had been extinguished is patently untrue, and to argue that the German civil war had ended while Hesse-Cassel and other German rulers still fought, the problems of the Palatinate and the emperor’s hereditary lands remained unresolved, and the place of Calvinism within the empire was still vague, is ridiculous. And even though no serious scholar would go quite as far as Milger, most studies of the Thirty Years War lose interest in internal German conflicts after the year 1635 and turn instead to the larger French-Swedish-Spanish-imperial contest. This interpretation has colored scholarship for well over a century, with everyone from Friedrich Schiller to Michael Roberts arguing that, as Roberts stated, “the peace of May 1635 reconciled the emperor with so many of his enemies, opposition to the Habsburgs thereby fell almost exclusively into the hands of the foreigners.” Well, yes and no. Yes, there is no doubt that the 1635 Peace of Prague did bring most of the German princes to the side of the emperor. But no, the exceptions were significant enough to disprove the rule. Contemporaries were fully aware of the danger to peace posed by such exceptions, with the elector of Saxony himself warning the emperor that the war in Germany would continue as long as Hesse-Cassel and other German princes were excluded from the peace. The disinterest of many historians in the decade stretching from 1635 to 1644 (the beginning of the Congress of Westphalia) is caused, I believe, by an underappreciation of the role of the smaller states in the war. So even though a handful of German states continued to fight the Habsburg emperors, and even though the war might well have ended soon after 1638 had the emperor agreed to satisfy Amalia Elisabeth’s demand for religious security, the full significance of these facts has as yet failed to affect many historians’ views.⁵

In order to overcome these twin problems—impossibly numerous sources and a subsequent neglect among historians to incorporate the actions of the smaller states into the larger historiography—this study does not attempt to survey the entire war or the motivations of every individual who fought it. Instead, this study covers only the last third of the war, and that from the viewpoint of one key participant. Such a narrowing of focus has allowed me to limit the overwhelming number of sources neces-

sary while simultaneously permitting a much more extensive range of documentation. The foundation of this project has been the Hessische Staatsarchiv Marburg with its wealth of unpublished personal and diplomatic correspondence (especially Amalia Elisabeth's own), documents and letters of Hessian councilors, and documents relating directly to Hesse-Cassel's prosecution of the war. But in order to use this investigation to make a larger argument about the Thirty Years War, I have also incorporated numerous documents from the other key parties involved in the war and in the peace negotiations, especially the instructions and correspondence of the French, Swedish, and imperial sides, and of other smaller German states. These additional sources from across Europe have not only provided valuable insights into the goals and policies of the landgravine and of those in her employ, they have also allowed a more complete analysis of the interplay among states and the impact these interactions had on the course of the war.

The precipitating moment for this study occurred in the autumn of 1637, when at the death of her husband, Wilhelm V, Amalia Elisabeth suddenly became regent to their young son and heir. The landgravine also deftly stepped into her husband's place as protector of Hesse-Cassel's political, religious, dynastic, and diplomatic interests, despite the considerable opposition of her own nobility and advisors and the initial disdain of the international community. With astonishing skill she continued and forwarded a long and bloody war against half of Europe while playing off against each other such major powers as Sweden, France, and the emperor. In the end, she managed not only to save Hesse-Cassel from destruction, but even enlarged its boundaries. Furthermore, her considerable influence with the larger powers meant that her war aims significantly affected both the nature and the outcome of the war, and thus the very face of Europe. For example, her stubborn championship of the rights of the smaller German states played a key role in shaping the future constitutional structure of Germany, while her powerful defense of Calvinism ensured its acceptance with Lutheranism as a tolerated, and legitimate, religion within the empire, an outcome of immense importance for the future of both Germany and Europe.

In this, Amalia Elisabeth was quite different from most female leaders of the time. As the ubiquity of war and the ravages of disease killed numerous male leaders at an early age, many women became regents or, less often, rulers in their own right. And while there are certainly examples of

strong-willed and powerful regents or queens, many such women lost, or delegated, their power to male relatives or councilors. Queen Christina of Sweden, for example, depended utterly on her prime minister, Oxenstierna, while the French queen regent, Anne of Austria, allowed her government to be controlled by Cardinal Mazarin. Amalia Elisabeth, however, both firmly rejected the assistance of well-meaning male rescuers and withstood the furious legal and military attacks on her regency by her enemies. That she would desire to do such a thing is interesting, but that she could succeed is astounding.⁶

Amalia Elisabeth's motivations in taking on the gargantuan task of ruling in her husband's place are tied to her conception of her role. First and foremost, she saw her role as that of mother and protector of her children. Thus her principal duty as regent, she told her estates, was to "perform and administer such a high and difficult office" in order to ensure the "well-being of our beloved children" and the "restoration of their dear fatherland." In this, the preservation of the honor and standing of the house of Hesse-Cassel was as important as the preservation of lands, peoples, and rights. Even when offered a peace that might have maintained most of her territory intact, for example, she refused partially on the grounds that any concession, however minor, would irreparably harm her children by forever demeaning the honor of their house. This role of mother-protector was one that she stressed frequently in her correspondence, and one that seemed to make the most sense to contemporary observers. "Her only plan and intention," a French diplomat wrote, "is to conserve and advance her children. This is where all her cares and worries go." Motherhood and its requirements thus served to justify her actions to those who might otherwise deplore them.⁷

Amalia Elisabeth's war aims stemmed not only from her desire to support and maintain the inheritance, rights, and honor of her children, but also from her belief that she must accept her husband's charge to take up his roles along with her own. So in addition to her responsibility toward her children, she also agreed to uphold her husband's legacy, take responsibility for his state, serve as military and political leader to his people, and become protector of the state church and head of the Hessian dynasty. She must be both mother and prince. This was a heavy burden, as her husband's death had left her stranded with her two sons in the Hessian military quarters in East Frisia, surrounded by an army that would quickly mutiny at the least suggestion of their ruler's weakness or inability to pay.

Her infant daughters, along with the greatest part of her husband's governing council, were besieged in the landgrave's resident city of Cassel. Imperial armies roamed the Hessian countryside, burning and looting, and Landgrave Georg of Hesse-Darmstadt, head of a rival branch of the family, waited less than a week after the death of his cousin Wilhelm V to inform the panicked councilmen that they must either immediately surrender the country and the administration of Hesse-Cassel to him or die a slow and painful death.

Amalia Elisabeth told her councilors that she would gladly renounce her burden if she could, but this was not possible. She had a responsibility to God, the world, her husband's memory, and above all her "beloved children along with their land and people," to take up the regency and administration. To set her duty aside would violate everything she believed in. "I would rather take the most extreme measures," she wrote, "than to agree to anything that is so against my honor and reputation, against the love and devotion that I owe to my beloved husband who now rests with God and to the dear children he has left behind, and also against my own conscience."⁸

Amalia Elisabeth's conscience and deep belief in her responsibilities toward God are further keys in understanding her actions. Her militant Calvinism, with its stress on humankind's absolute duty to obey God's commands and to struggle always to safeguard the true church, was intertwined with all of her decisions. She saw herself as one of those singular women "raised up by divine authority," in Calvin's words (paraphrasing Isaiah 49:23), to be "the nursing mothers of the church." Thus by taking up the Hessian administration and continuing the war she was doing God's work, fulfilling her destiny as chosen by God. In other matters, however, God's will was unclear, and she could only follow her conscience. "I have no other means," she wrote,

than humbly to beg God from my heart that He give me and others inspiration for what we should do. For things are very difficult, and it is particularly hard to make a decision. But when one should choose the better of two evils, in my small opinion if the one is somewhat better than the other, and one might emerge from it maintaining so much the better faithfulness, then there is nothing left to say. For God's counsel, which is known only to Him, is still hidden from our eyes.

Yet while she firmly believed that God would “not abandon such a righteous affair or all honest hearts who depend on and support Him,” but rather would “gloriously succor, bless, and rescue them,” she also believed that life on earth was a painful struggle and that God required her personal sacrifice. “I am, and will remain,” she wrote, “a poor martyr in this world as long as it shall please God.” For God had given her a heavy cross to bear. He had placed onto her frail shoulders the duty not only to preserve and even to extend the true church in her own time, but also to ensure that this church would be safe for generations to come. She could thus not abandon such a weighty responsibility, or the fate of her state or her sons, to any man, but instead meekly submitted to God’s awesome power and put all her hopes and trust in the irresistible force of Providence.⁹

In this effort Amalia Elisabeth pursued a strategy different from many of her German coreligionists. For while the principal strategy of the Reformed (as German Calvinists, influenced greatly by not just John Calvin, but also Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, called themselves) had been to argue that the Reformed faith was merely a variant of Lutheranism—which enjoyed legal recognition and protection under imperial law—Amalia Elisabeth believed this gave the emperor a dangerous loophole for future persecution. He could merely declare that the German Reformed were not, in fact, Lutherans, and all protections and rights would disappear. Both the present and future liberty of her church, therefore, depended entirely on the good will and word of the Catholic emperor—something she thought extremely dubious. Given the clear and continuing enmity of both Catholics and Lutherans to Calvinists, she argued, an unwritten or even stated toleration would not be nearly enough. Only by forcing the emperor to grant specific recognition of Calvinism as a separate, distinct, and legal religion of the empire would she and her church gain lasting security. By stubbornly refusing to allow her such religious satisfaction, the emperor ensured that she would keep fighting, and so lost a priceless opportunity to end the war in his favor a full decade before its actual conclusion. While some scholars have downplayed the larger significance of religion in the war, the Hessians had no doubt of it. “We see clearly,” the Cassel secret council wrote the landgravine in 1638, “that the entire peace project rests almost entirely and solely on the point of religion.”¹⁰

The legal recognition of Calvinism was an issue not just of faith, however, but of internal territorial control and princely sovereignty—“the German liberties,” as Amalia Elisabeth and her allies termed them—the

rights of the individual princes over their own internal affairs. Such recognition would allow her and her heirs not only to hold in their hands all matters of religion in Hesse-Cassel, but also to establish the nature of the school system and to have the legal right to keep all ecclesiastical properties seized in the earlier years of the Reformation. And just as her desire to force religious reform on the imperial constitution was closely tied to issues of power and sovereignty, it was also tied to her belief that she must uphold the Hessian administration given to her by both human and divine law, ensure the inheritance of her children, protect the territorial integrity of Hesse-Cassel, and maintain the honor of her house. What was good for the church and the glory of God, in other words, was what was good for her state and her children. It was also good for the empire as a whole, for in her view the imperial constitution required that all imperial estates, without exception, be granted the same legal rights and privileges. It was the recent violation of this fundamental and ancient principle that had so damaged the integrity of the empire and caused, she argued, “an extremely harmful division and dangerous rift” among its members. She was not fighting a war *of* religion, therefore, but a war *for* religion or inextricably intertwined *with* religion. The difference is a vital one, and one that ties Amalia Elisabeth’s experience to the broader scholarly interpretation of the Thirty Years War. For while some have argued that the tendency of rulers in this period of the war to ally with those who embraced other religions is proof that the war, which they argue began as a religious one, was now driven solely by the machinations of politics, this proves nothing of the sort. The distinction itself is a false one. To Amalia Elisabeth, as to her husband and father-in-law before her, there was little difference between alliances with Calvinists and alliances with Catholics or Lutherans, for all alliances were simply tools in achieving larger objectives, objectives that served both religious and political aims.¹¹

This study thus underlines the need for a careful analysis of religion and politics when attempting to understand the motivations for war, and reinforces the argument that one cannot understand international relations entirely in terms of rational choice or *raison d’état* (terms frequently used interchangeably). International relations are not like a game of chess, bound by fixed rules and focused on a simple, universally applicable goal. States can interact in seemingly unpredictable ways, and the goals are as varied as the participants. Amalia Elisabeth’s choices, for example, which seemed bizarre and politically destructive to some of her contemporaries, possessed

their own internal rationality and order. Her actions were not senseless, but were based on a strong belief both in their properness and in their ultimate success, and were focused unflinchingly on a single multifaceted result. Rationality, in other words, is in the eye of the beholder, and is thus an absolutely useless tool in understanding international conflict. The only way to understand war is to understand the motivations of its individual participants, as well as the forces that may influence them.

Since Amalia Elisabeth's motives often seemed mysterious to those around her, and her actions fell outside those of ordinary women, contemporary descriptions of her, either positive or negative, often flailed. Observers struggled for some way to explain her, portraying her as some sort of superwoman, an Amazon, or an evil mythical beast such as a harpy. A Danish diplomat, for example, described her as "the heroine of our century," a "new Penthesilia," and a "hermaphroditic genius" who spoke, like an ancient oracle, with two tongues; while an Austrian Jesuit priest, less impressed, described her as being one of the three "Gorgon sisters," along with Queen Christina of Sweden and Anne of Austria. To those whose interests were different, her stubbornness seemed wild, unreasonable, unseemly, and contrary not only to a sane consideration of reasons of state, but to the natural and supernatural order as well. Her husband's cousin, Georg of Hesse-Darmstadt, who wanted Hesse-Cassel for himself, criticized her "female imbecility" and blamed her for bringing her state to "total ruin," for causing the death of "so many thousand innocent subjects," and for exposing her people to the most unthinkable distress, fire, and sword. Her seemingly blatant disregard for the misery within and growing danger to her lands and state was unconscionable for a leader of a state, while her refusal to hand over her armies to a strong man and her stubbornness itself were contrary to the natural actions of a woman.¹²

To those who favored her actions, however, and especially to her allies, Amalia Elisabeth was a paragon of virtue and a queen among women. "In my humble opinion," the French agent Tercy wrote, she "is no more lacking in courage, judgment, and experience in affairs than this great queen whose name she carries, and even the looks of her face." The contemporary playwright Samuel Chappuzeau was no less enthusiastic, stating that she was a "great genius" who "showed to all the world that the scepter rests well in the hands of a woman, when endowed with the qualities that she possessed." This acclaim, however, challenges many contemporary depictions of the proper role and competence of women. The French prime

minister Cardinal Richelieu's description of her as "a courageous woman, who surmounted the infirmity of her sex by her virtue," for example, strongly suggests the contrast between contemporary theory and action when it came to women of power. Even John Calvin, who ordinarily scorned the government of women as "a monstrous thing," and "like a tyranny . . . [that] is to be tolerated till God sees fit to overthrow it," agreed that some extraordinary women, such as the biblical figure Deborah, could be "supernaturally called" to rule "by the Spirit of God." So while women were inferior rulers in theory, incapable of clear rational thought and sensible action, in practice certain women of strong will and ability could surmount or overcome their gender roles and could thus be treated like men.¹³

The first pillar of Amalia Elisabeth's success was her own stubborn determination. As her sincere admirer Richelieu put it, "she defended herself with courage, not least by the force, as by the justice of her cause." Had she been a weaker person, less resolute and principled, she surely would have folded in the face of what her advisors saw as impossible odds. But in only a few years she managed to overcome opposition from her own secret council, the Hessian estates, her military and especially her husband's principal general, Peter Melander, her husband's relatives, neighboring states, dubious allies, and the armies of the empire—and all this from exile. Her ability to see the larger tactical situation and to think quickly also aided her, as did her gift for manipulating people. These things, in combination, allowed her to move immediately after the death of her husband to grab control of his councilors, army, and state with a skill and speed that surprised even her admirers.¹⁴

Though the military failures of her husband forced Amalia Elisabeth to rule in absentia for years, she benefited a great deal from some of his earlier successes, particularly his taking of a great part of western and northern Germany, lands that included much of Westphalia and all of East Frisia. Wilhelm V and then Amalia Elisabeth used these vast conquests to create a more centralized and responsive military state, financed not by the intransigent Hessian aristocracy but by the "contributions" forcefully extracted from the newly subject residents of these conquered territories. While the aspirations of many other European kings and princes were impinged upon by traditional restrictions and the unwillingness of local estates to pay taxes, Amalia Elisabeth was able to sidestep these difficulties. Since she supported her army through her conquests and

foreign subsidies, and not solely off the yields of her own hereditary lands, she could pursue her larger military, political, and religious goals with impunity. So even while Hesse-Cassel was burnt, looted, invaded, and generally destroyed by imperial armies, she remained a powerful actor, controlling one of the largest and most experienced armies in Europe, an army, one contemporary noted, “of twenty thousand men, always nimble, always ready, and always victorious.” That this army was firmly entrenched in strategically important lands, lands that belonged to some of the greatest princes of the empire, including the electors of Mainz and of Cologne, was also quite a negotiating perk, and one she used both as a carrot to encourage the loyalty of her allies and as a stick to threaten her enemies.¹⁵

By freeing her from the purse strings of the Hessian estates, these lands also gave Amalia Elisabeth much greater flexibility and centralized control in conducting her domestic policy. Unlike Landgrave Moritz, her father-in-law, whose inability to maintain control resulted in his forced abdication, Amalia Elisabeth gained the upper hand and could ignore her subjects’ demands as she wished. She cared for her people and was distressed at their suffering, but the stakes were too high for compromise, and God would ensure that all would turn out well in the end. Thus while her desperate council, estates, and people repeatedly begged and threatened her to make a speedy peace, any peace, she felt no great urgency. This lack of urgency also defined her international relationships, for though she depended heavily on the subsidies of the French for extraordinary expenses, she could use her conquered territories to maintain her army at a certain level indefinitely. Thus relatively free from many of the usual internal and external pressures of war, she could delay until she got what she wanted. This was a tremendous strategic advantage, and she milked it for everything it was worth.¹⁶

This use of conquered territories and freedom from responsibility to her own people is both a key aspect of Amalia Elisabeth’s success and a clue to why the war continued well past the point when most people had had quite enough of death and bloodshed. Since her army, like those of many other great states and rulers of the age, could live almost indefinitely off the land, the war was self-sustaining, at least at a certain level of activity. And given the constant inflow of additional funds from powers such as Spain, Bavaria, and France, which allowed large annual levies of new men both to fight in battles and to maintain sufficient garrisons within occupied territories, it was extremely difficult to knock any party out of the war by

force. Depleted forces could be replenished and strengthened, so only by completely destroying the land on which a state or army depended could someone hope to gain a great advantage, and even then an army might well (and did) simply move to new quarters. Until a ruler's individual goals or interests were met, therefore, or until someone lost his (or her) nerve, the war could continue forever.¹⁷

That rulers often joined the larger conflict in attempts to solve local problems complicated the situation even more. Amalia Elisabeth and her husband, for example, put themselves in the role of condottieri, or mercenary generals, fielding armies for the benefit of their great allies the French and Swedes. Yet they saw themselves not as mere private military contractors at the beck and call of an employer, but as sovereign imperial princes with independent political, religious, and dynastic goals. They had no great love for the Catholic French or Lutheran Swedes; such foreign alliances and relationships merely offered a solution to otherwise intractable domestic problems. And they were far from alone in this. Many other imperial princes, such as the Elector Palatine or the dukes of Brunswick-Lüneburg, also sought foreign intervention in homegrown conflicts. For although the empire had judicial structures designed to resolve internal territorial and dynastic disputes, these structures had not proven sufficient to deal with the challenge of religious division. The roughly representative Reichskammergericht (Imperial Supreme Court) had become paralyzed and dysfunctional in 1608 after a power struggle between the Protestant and Catholic members, so the Reichshofrat (Imperial Aulic Council), which was under the exclusive control of the Catholic Habsburg emperors, became the only practical means for German princes to resolve their disputes. However, since many Protestants now suspected the Reichshofrat of corruption and Catholic bias, they saw no remaining legitimate recourse for their complaints. Such structural problems radicalized princes such as the landgraves of Hesse-Cassel, who argued that without concrete, specific, and fundamental constitutional changes, there would never be any justice or liberty in the empire. The bitter territorial and dynastic dispute between Hesse-Cassel and Hesse-Darmstadt, therefore, which might earlier have been solved by a judicious ruling from the Reichskammergericht, instead escalated into bloodshed, driving these two houses to take opposite sides in the larger war.

In the past, historians of the empire, influenced no doubt by early modern Protestant propaganda, have scorned it as unnatural or dysfunctional,

arguing that its peculiar structure had retarded the proper progression of Germany into a nation-state like France or England, and that, suffering as it did under a totally unworkable constitutional structure, it was doomed to fail. Recently a number of scholars have argued the contrary: the empire was flourishing, its institutions were vigorous, stable, flexible, and beloved by its people, and despite its clear problems, it worked remarkably well. This has been an important corrective, but in attempting to counteract the overly negative views of the empire popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such current scholarship may well have overstated the case. To a large number of imperial princes of the seventeenth century, especially the Elector Palatine, the elector of Brandenburg, and, of course, the landgraves of Hesse-Cassel, the once glorious imperial constitution had been defiled and dismembered, and was now rotten to the core, unjust, prejudicial, and corrupt. While there was no internal interest in the empire's dissolution, but enormous respect for its fundamental principles of compromise, peace, and the protection of rights and liberties, such princes came to believe that without solid constitutional guarantees, the emperor would push through innovative changes that would elevate him to an absolute monarch, thereby belittling and oppressing the imperial princes and estates, and forever damaging the very foundations of the Holy Roman Empire. These princes were extremely conservative in their own eyes, wanting only to preserve and protect what they believed to be the aristocratic nature of the empire, and thus to maintain their sacred and traditional rights to internal jurisdiction and sovereignty (*Landeshoheit*) over their own lands and people.¹⁸

Such structural problems within the empire were also confounded by the sheer number of independent and semisovereign states, princes, and even cities involved in the war. With so many combatants, each with his own goals, and each of whom might at any one time lose or win a major battle, die, drop out of the war, or switch allegiances, there was almost no way to know which side would eventually win. This made decision-making difficult, but also aided those smaller states, such as Hesse-Cassel and Brunswick-Lüneburg, that desired to play larger roles, since the great powers were constantly forced to juggle coalitions in order to get on top. Such complexity also helps explain the failure of repeated rounds of negotiations to resolve the conflict. Every year, as a result of the various military campaigns and the constant shifts in the warring states' circumstances or rulership, the material conditions upon which all decision-making was

based changed. “One sees only how fortune miraculously changes,” Amalia Elisabeth wrote. “The ball is round—quickly good, quickly otherwise.” This constant flux ensured that any attempt at diplomacy was undermined by changes in the existing situations and by expectations, hopes, and anxieties about changes to come. In a situation where no one power could ever dominate the others and where the success or failure of each side remained eternally undecided, peace was elusive, no matter the desire or exhaustion of the parties. In the words of a local chronicler, this meant year after year of “misery and want, famine and death.” “In sum,” he stated, “it was such a miserable business that even a stone would have been moved to pity, not to mention a human heart. For we were hunted like wild animals in the forests.”¹⁹