Micah Austin

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***Confessional Diplomacy and Constitutionalism:***

***Frederick V and the Thirty Years’ War***

In the study of history, scholars have examined numerous events which have impacted the impending landscapes of ideas and political geography. For those who study the early-modern period, the Thirty Years’ War is one such event. Historians have long debated aspects about the Thirty Years’ War, with many disagreeing over its causes, nature, and importance. In one intellectual camp, historians claim the conflict was inherently religious in nature, therefore making it another “War of Religion.” Though this claim has been popularly theorized since the late nineteenth century, others, such as Josef V. Polišenský, argue the conflict being merely a political one around social and economic changes; and Ronald Asch, who claims the wars to be multifaceted with both religious and political causes (surrounding sovereignty between princes and Estates and the cost of war), have challenged this former claim. Though these scholars, and others following them have brought forward viewpoints that attempt to not overemphasize one idea, many have lacked in better explaining other influences that impacted decision making, specifically that of Frederick V. Two such major influences which have been neglected in dealing with the igniter of the Thirty Years’ War, are “protestant confessional diplomacy” and constitutionalism.

While recent scholar Peter Wilson does mention the influences and importance of diplomacy and constitutionalism on Frederick V in his book *The Thirty Years’ War: Europe’s Tragedy*, Wilson somewhat negates the confessional basis on the aspect of diplomacy. This negation is due to Wilsons view on the aspect of religion. To Wilson the war was not primarily religious; instead religion was a powerful focus of identity that had to compete against more powerful aspects and issues, in addition to faith only being a guide to public policy and private behavior.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rather, religion was a major basis and foundation for igniting the conflict, in that it affected more than just public policy and private behavior, it changed the way diplomacy in Western Europe was conducted. For the first time since the Great Schism of 1054, European Christianity was greatly divided amongst confessional beliefs, creating an environment of state separation based on confession, not just political desires and motivations. Alongside the new confession-based diplomacy, is the constitutional vigor connected to Frederick V. As pointed out by Brennan Pursell in his book *The Winter King: Ferderick V Palatinate and the Coming of the Thirty Years’ War*, Frederick V is clearly shown in his confessional correspondences to Protestant allies as implying constitutional arguments to intervene against the Catholics/Hapsburgs, implying he was no dupe, which many historians have also claimed before.[[2]](#footnote-2) Overall, protestant confessional diplomacy and constitutionalism were the major influencers of Frederick’s decision thought process, making these major catalysts to igniting the Thirty Years’ War.

**Section 1: *Primary Accounts of the Time, Francis Nethersole and Others*-**

Primary Accounts of the time, whether they be diplomatic correspondences, records, or publicly released statements, all have an important role to play in explaining the influences protestant confessional diplomacy and constitutionalism had on Frederick V. One of the major resources available for this project were documents acquired from the British Library in London, which hold multiple organized manuscripts and letters from diplomats, major parliament figures, and even letters from King James I. Manuscripts used, such as the specific MS 5950: *The Register of the Dispatches etc. of Sir Francis Netherole, agent From King James to the King of Bohemia*, and the more general MS 34079: *Original Letters and Documents…1513-1839*, all provide accounts important to understanding the wide scope and development of confessional diplomacy, and the relaying of ideas/information to and from England and Frederick V. To Frederick V, England was his most important ally, due to it being a major Protestant state alongside himself being married to James I’s daughter, Elizabeth Stuart. These sources are invaluable, and without them, would make the claims made in this project lacking in the effective substance.

**Section 2: *The Historical Backstory: Early Reformation, Religious and Political State of Affairs, and Growth of Protestant Confessional Diplomacy.***

By the early sixteenth century, the Catholic Church, and the religious-political community it controlled, had fallen on times of accused corruption and need for reform. However, many in the Catholic Church desired for no changes to be made, leaving the state of the faith in question. Martin Luther, born in 1483, in Eisleben, Germany was one of these religious professors and priests calling for such reforms in the Catholic Church. By 1517, Luther decided to write and nail a list of propositions titled the *Ninety-Five Theses* on the doors of the Wittenberg Castle church in hopes of triggering an academic disputation. Yet unbeknownst to Luther, someone translated his theses into German, and circulated the theses in an inexpensive edition for people to obtain.[[3]](#footnote-3) With the theses now readily available to non-Latin speaking citizens, Luther effectively ignited the movement what historians call the Reformation.

From 1517 to 1555, the Holy Roman Empire faced constant religious and political strife, creating an environment of cross-confessional conflict that only ended thanks to the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. However, though the concept of *Cuius regio, eius religio*, which means “whose realm, his religion,” gave German princes and Imperial cities in the empire the ability to choose the religious practices of their land, it could not discern away the impact of previous events.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to German historian Ernst Walter Zeeden, this process of confessionalization ran rampant within both the Catholic and Protestant states of the Holy Roman Empire, making confession building within a European state a process German princes used to increase the power of their confession, while also rapidly increasing the separation between Christianity in Germany. [[5]](#footnote-5) This increasing separation then procured an environment favorable toward the practice of confessional diplomatic separation between the differing confessions of the German nobility, not just within the Holy Roman Empire, but outside of it.

With this growing autonomy allowed for Protestant German princes to procure confessional change, many sought the expansion of confessional alliances along with increasing their own constitutional authority. The Palatinate is one such principality/electorship. Ruled by the Electors of the Palatinate, the Palatinate sought to increase and expand religious alliances and constitutional authority ever since their conversion towards the Calvinistic (a protestant confession) faith by Frederick III of the Palatinate.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Platinate became a stronghold of the reformed faith, making it a fruitful target for protestant confessional diplomacy.

One such nation to increase her diplomatic channels in Germany, and more specifically with Platinate, was the Kingdom of England. To England, who also was Protestant by the late sixteenth-century, openness to German Protestantism in both the international and domestic theatre seemed a reasonable one. Though the increase in diplomatic relations with the German Protestant princes did not create a firm alliance between them and the Kingdom of England, it nevertheless did achieve success in broadening the diplomatic breaks within the Holy Roman Empire.[[7]](#footnote-7) For many years, most English diplomatic channels engaged with the Holy Roman Empire’s Emperor or a subordinate to him. However, from the start of the Protestant Reformation to the early-seventeenth century, England had sent over thirty or more diplomatic missions to various German Protestant princes. [[8]](#footnote-8) This rapid change increased the process of international autonomy some German princes and electors were already gaining, increasing the tensions within the Empire alongside the increasing agendas surrounding confessionalization. This process eventually leads towards a increasing trust of support from German Protestant States towards England.

***Section 3:*** ***Frederick V and the Growing Catholic Hapsburg Threat (2 paragraphs)***

By the time of 1607, protestant confessional diplomatic connections expanded to the point where many in the German protestant camp, especially the Palatinate believed England to be a strong confessional ally. With this confidence, along with aggressive Catholic incursions, such as the one in Donauwörth, where Emperor Rudolf II placed an imperial ban on the Lutheran city, Frederick IV sought to increase this religious diplomatic alliance through marriage.[[9]](#footnote-9) Though Frederick IV did see his son marry the daughter of James I of England, the concept stuck with his son, who married Elizabeth Stuart in 1612. After the marriage, being seemingly backed by the protestant confessional diplomatic connection with England, and England entering the protestant alliance called the “Protestant Union,” Frederick V moved towards expanding the protections given to Protestants within his realm and elsewhere in the Holy Roman Empire.[[10]](#footnote-10)

***Section 4: “The Decision” and its Outcome***

With the protestant confessional diplomatic actions providing more religious and political foundation towards Frederick V cause against the Hapsburg’s and other Catholic princes, the confessional split between Protestant and Catholic princes widened. The increasing scope of the confessional split along with constitutional angsts came to ahead in 1618, when Protestants of Bohemia rebelled against their Ferdinand II, due to multiple confessional and constitutional issues. At this point Frederick V has the important “decision” to make, whether to protect the Bohemians by claiming the vacant crown, or leave them to their own devices. Many historians have found Frederick V did indeed supported the revolt both financially and diplomatically, but when it came towards claiming the vacant crown of Bohemia, he did jump toward that opportunity.[[11]](#footnote-11) Frederick V was not incompetent, and actuality desired peace and respect between both Protestant and Catholic. However, Frederick V knew if he were to intervene publicly he would need the support of many, including England and the Holy Roman Constitution.

On the aspect of support from England, Frederick V seemed to his understanding that he had the full support of those of power in England, as well as from his father-in-law King James I of England. Reasons for this trust in support, besides what has previously been stated (growth of protestant alliance since the 1560’s Elizabethan period), is partly due to more recent events in Frederick V’s life. After his marriage to Elizabeth, Frederick V took part in increasing communication with his father-in-law and diplomats to England. This can be clearly seen through diplomatic correspondences and recorded expenses. On one such occasion in 1618, the ambassador for the Platinate, the Baron of Wyninberg, visited England to discuss matters of importance of the times. To show grace towards the visitor the Master of the Ceremonies, Sir Lewes Lewkenor, to assist the ambassador in his stay through payment.[[12]](#footnote-12) Besides having constant ambassador communication England that was assisted and welcomed, Frederick V also had ambassadors closer to him that came from England, such as Francis Nethersole.

Nethersole was a pro-protestant diplomat and agent from King James I, unto Frederick V. In many of Nethersole’s writings, it is clear to see his pro-protestant leadings. Due to this, it is not farfetched to notice or claim, Nethersole, as a supporter for Frederick V. In his writings such as one from Prague on October 26, 1620, days before the Battle of White Mountain, Nethersole writes to English secretary of State that “There is cause,” and that “due dillegence” was needed in examining the present state of affairs.[[13]](#footnote-13) Though it is shown through the writings of The Marquis of Buckingham, that James I intended to “use his good offices in the business of the Bohemians” to help settle the matter peaceably, one cannot ignore that this specific correspondence came from Spain, not the Palatinate, and that it was at the behest of Spain for James I to intervene in mediation.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The view Frederick V had on James I did not come from those outside his circle, rather it came from the pro-protestant leaning councilman, Nethersole, and most likely his wife. From this analysis on the confessional diplomatic interactions, it can be logically assumed Frederick V saw his father-in law as a supporter to him, even though James I really only desired to protect his son-in-law, while also keeping close ties toward Spain. From this assumption by Frederick V, which was logical in nature due to previous events and influences, it should not come as a surprise to Frederick V’s “rash” religiously diplomatic decision to claim the Bohemian Crown before his father-in-law could be consulted and before James I could send the mediator the Viscount of Doncaster.[[15]](#footnote-15)

On the second aspect of Frederick V’s decision, it can be shown that Frederick V indeed also believed his action to be constitutionally just. When the Bohemian Crown became vacant in 1617, Ferdinand II of Styria was placed in power. However, Protestant leaders of Bohemia claimed that Ferdinand II was not supported by a vote, making him illegitimate. After a year, the defenestration of Prague occurred, which also happened around the same time of the reelection process for the Holy Roman Emperor.[[16]](#footnote-16) Before the news could reach the electors, Ferdinand had already been crowned the Holy Roman Emperor. After hearing of this Frederick entered into a state of internal religious and constitutional debate.[[17]](#footnote-17) For Frederick, the Hapsburgs had broken both Imperial and Bohemian constitutions, making the seats hereditary, rather than based off of elective vote. In addition, Frederick V noted that it was the elector’s duty within the Golden Bull to “elect an honest ruler.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Frederick V actively sought a constitutionally agenda in his domestic politics, which made him not desire the Imperial throne or initially the Bohemian throne. Rather, Frederick V sought to have a “non-Hapsburg” be elected into those positions of power, which cease the breaking of Imperial constitution.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, with Ferdinand II being elected Emperor, and Frederick V himself being elected by the Bohemian rebels as king in both August of 1619, Frederick had to make his decision. After months of discussion, and the “wanting of two things: advice and allies,” Frederick V, feeling he had both constitutional and protestant confessional diplomatic backing, rationally accepted the crown, and ignited the Thirty Years’ War.[[20]](#footnote-20)

***Section 5: Conclusion***

After examining both the confessional diplomatic background and Frederick V’s constitutional assessments, it is clear to see that the former assumption of him being incompetent, along with the main assumption of these aspects lacking influence, is clearly faulty. Indeed, from an outsider’s perspective, Frederick V’s move to claim the Bohemian crown was a disastrous political move, most likely being based on either greed, Calvinist militancy, or purely political in nature. However, having access to documents Frederick V might not have had available to him, these viewpoints of influence and causation of the Thirty Years’ War can be to rapidly presumed. We must examine this scenario in the way Frederick would have viewed it. By examining his viewpoint, leading up historical events, and correspondences of the time, it is clear, the cause of the Thirty Years’ War was based in both protestant confessional diplomacy and Frederick’s view of the Holy Roman constitution.

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1. Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 9, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brennan C. Pursell, *The Winter King Frederick V of the Palatinate and the Coming of Thirty Years' War*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 3-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity. the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 19-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495-1806* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Joel F. Harrington, and Helmut Walser Smith, "Confessionalization, Community, and State Building in Germany, 1555-1870." *The Journal of Modern History* 69,( no. 1 (1997), 78-80, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Regina Pörtner, *The Counter-Reformation in Central Europe: Styria 1580-1630* (Oxford, NY: Clarendon, 2003), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Scott Gehring, *Anglo-German relations and the Protestant cause Elizabethan foreign policy and pan-Protestantism*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gary M. Bell, *A Handlist of British Diplomatic Representatives, 1509-1688*, (Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks, No. 16. Offices of the Royal Historical Society ; Boydell & Brewer, [distributor], 1990), 126-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bernd Roeck (ed.), *Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, Vol. IV: Gegenreformation und Dreissgjahriger Krieg 1555-1648* (Stuttgart, 1996), pp. 133-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Pursell, 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pursell, 48-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sir Lewes Lewkenor, Master of Ceremonies Bill for expenses of attendance of the Count Palatinate’s Ambassador, 1618, Original letters and documents, official and Private;1513-1839, MS 34079, British Library (hereafter cited as MS 34079). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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15. Robert Zaller, ““Interest of State”: James I and the Palatinate”, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies 6,* no. 2 (1974): 144-146 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Pursell, 47-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Zaller, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Francis Robin Houssemayne Du Boulay, *Germany in the Later Middle Ages* (Athlone Pr, 1988), 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sir John Finett, *Letters and Documents: England and Germany at the Commencement of the Thirty Years' War* (Edited by Samuel Rawson Gardiner, Westminster, GB: John Bowyer Nichols and Sons, 1865), 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pursell, 76, This is specifically quoting not just Pursell, but specifically also Georg Franz edit of *Die Politik Maximilians I*, #120. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)