

world. He produced three versions of his political philosophy in little more than a decade: one in 1640 (*The Elements of Law*), just before the start of the English civil war; one in 1642 (*De Cive*), republished in 1647 while the fighting was going on; and one in 1651 (*Leviathan*), when it was effectively over. The last of these is the book for which he is known today. *Leviathan* is his masterpiece. It is perhaps the greatest work of political philosophy in the English language.



During most of this period Hobbes was living in Paris, having fled England to escape the violence. Thanks to his eagerness to get out of harm's way, his life eventually spanned the best part of a century: he was born in 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada, and died in 1679, as English politics was gearing itself up for its next revolution (the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 that initiated the age of parliamentary government). It was a tempestuous and frightening time to be alive.

England was bad. Much of Europe was worse. The Thirty Years War, which consumed the continent from 1618 to 1648, was a true bloodbath: a maelstrom of religious, ethnic and dynastic conflict that swallowed up entire communities (that's one reason why you would not want to have found yourself in Denmark at the wrong moment in its history). The viciousness of the current fighting in Syria is sometimes seen as a reflection of the peculiarly violence-prone mindset of the Islamic world. This is not true. Even Syria pales in comparison with what happened in early to mid-seventeenth-century Christian Europe, where the technology of mass destruction was nowhere near as advanced as it is today. Without the help of chemical weapons or precision bombs, Christians still slaughtered each other in their millions.

Though he wrote it three times in three different sets of circumstances – once when England still had a king, once when there was no agreed government, once when parliament was in charge – Hobbes's basic political philosophy never changed. Civil war was a disaster, and the first task in thinking about politics was how to avoid it. To this end, Hobbes conducted a thought experiment. Imagine a world without politics. Human beings, Hobbes thought, are naturally competitive: they want to seem better, stronger, more powerful than each other. They are also naturally vulnerable: even the strongest individuals can be taken down by the weakest when their backs are turned. As a result, the natural condition of mankind is a state of war. Competitive, vulnerable human beings will end up trying to kill each other.