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Abstract

The Siege of Magdeburg has often been considered representative of the Thirty Years War. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, this essay will analyze the validity of this perspective by comparing the religious, political, and militant aspects of the Thirty Years War to the internal dynamics of Magdeburg. Delving deeper into the dynamics of the Siege of Magdeburg reveals the tension between the more immediate causes of the catastrophe, such as local circumstances, and the underlying causes of the Thirty Years War, highlighting the importance of understanding history's complexities. It is only through this comprehension that we can truly appreciate how historical events have been manipulated both intentionally (such as in propaganda) and unintentionally (such as in collective memory).

The Magdeburg Maiden: The Siege of Magdeburg as a Microcosm for the Thirty Years War

Maid and castle, mighty city

To God through Roman deed

Did sacrifice her virginity.¹

Though the Siege of Magdeburg (1631) is renowned for its devastating human and material cost, the above epigraph suggests an alternative way to interpret this crucial event. As Hans Medick and Pamela Selwyn note, the famous conflagration of the siege was interpreted by some contemporaries in a positive light, an “act of heroism and sacrifice with both classical-antique and Lutheran-Protestant echoes.”² This epigraph, then, illuminates not only the symbolism that was infused into the Siege of Magdeburg but also the various contemporary — and subsequent — interpretations that this event has garnered. The Siege of Magdeburg was part of the larger Thirty Years War (1618–1648). Considered to be the “bloodiest and most destructive war in European history before the twentieth century,” the Thirty Years War was a series of conflicts, mainly occurring within the Holy Roman Empire, between a variety of political entities, each possessing individual motives for their involvement.³ Arising out of changes in political, religious, and economic affairs, the Thirty Years War was anything but inevitable, the result of differing responses to challenges produced by these rapid changes.⁴

The Siege of Magdeburg has often been considered representative of the Thirty Years War, becoming a sort of synecdoche for the estimated 5 million people (20 percent of the

¹ “The Magdeburg Maiden (c. 1631),” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 151.

² Hans Medick and Pamela Selwyn, “Historical Event and Contemporary Experience: The Capture and Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 52 (2001): 32.

³ Mark Koonert, *Medieval to Modern: Early Modern Europe* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2017), 164.

⁴ Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 2; It should also be noted that this brief explanation of the Thirty Years War is an extreme simplification of a complex event.

Empire’s prewar population) who lost their lives as a consequence of the war.⁵ For example, general textbooks on European history, which do not have much space to dedicate to the Thirty Years War, often mention the Siege of Magdeburg.⁶ Peter Wilson, an eminent European historian and a leading expert on the Thirty Years War, also encapsulates this sentiment with his observation that “Magdeburg’s complex internal politics are a microcosm of the tangled web of issues behind the war in the Empire.”⁷ Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, this essay will analyze the validity of Wilson’s observation by comparing the religious, political, and militant aspects of the Thirty Years War to the internal dynamics of Magdeburg. Delving deeper into the dynamics of the Siege of Magdeburg reveals the tension between the more immediate causes of the catastrophe, such as local circumstances, and the underlying causes of the Thirty Years War, highlighting the importance of understanding history’s complexities. It is only through this comprehension that we can truly appreciate how historical events have been



Figure 1: Daniel Manasser, *The Destruction of Magdeburg* (1631)

manipulated both intentionally (such as in propaganda) and unintentionally (such as in collective memory), bringing our world into sharper relief.

The analysis of Magdeburg as a microcosm necessitates a brief contextualization of the city and its subsequent siege. Though somewhat difficult to

see through all the smoke, the background of Daniel Manasser’s engraving (see fig. 1)

⁵ This estimation includes those who died both directly (through violence) and indirectly (through disease and famine) as a result of the war; Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe’s Tragedy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009): 787.

⁶ See, for example, *A People’s History of Modern Europe* by William A. Pelz.

⁷ Peter H. Wilson, “The Destruction of Magdeburg,” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 144.

incorporates one of Magdeburg's key geographic features: the Elbe River. Strategically situated at a bend in the river, Magdeburg possessed the only strong bridge in the middle and lower portions of the Elbe, enabling the city to become a prominent commercial centre.⁸ This bustling trade enabled Magdeburg to grow into a city of notable size (and the largest in its region).⁹ Most of the population of early modern Europe lived in small rural communities that rarely exceeded 1000 people; in 1600, there was only 36 cities in Europe with a population of 25 000 to 50 000 people.¹⁰ With a population close 30 000, Magdeburg was one such exception.¹¹ It is within this context that Magdeburg cemented its historical legacy as a place of intense tragedy. On May 20, 1631, after repudiating the final summons for surrender, Magdeburg, defended by 2500 regular soldiers and 5000 citizens, was stormed by 18 000 Imperial and Catholic League troops, led by Johann Tserclaes, Count of Tilly, and Gottfried Heinrich Graf zu Pappenheim.¹² Ravaged not only by soldiers but by a fire as well, the city suffered staggering casualties and material loss (1700 of the city's 1900 buildings were destroyed).¹³ Although Pastor Michaelis's claim that "some sixty thousand souls" lost their lives at Magdeburg is drastically inflated, Pappenheim's

⁸ Jeffrey Chipps Smith, "The Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631: The Art of a Disastrous Victory," in *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700*, ed. Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 251; Lauro Martines, *Furies: War in Europe 1450-1700* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014): 74; Tilly originally intended to capture the city as a base because of its strategic position, it was never intended that Magdeburg be fully destroyed (Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 469).

⁹ Smith, "The Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631," 251.

¹⁰ Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 17.

¹¹ Smith, "The Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631," 251; It should be noted that even before the siege of 1631, Magdeburg's population suffered a decline. Invading Imperialist troops brought with them the plague, which killed up to 40% of the urban population within the archbishoprics of Magdeburg and Halberstadt (Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 782). Disease's presence in Magdeburg reflects not only the Thirty Years War, as troop movements encouraged the transmission of disease, but also the "General Crisis" occurring more broadly throughout the early modern period, discussed extensively in Geoffrey Parker's impressive tome *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change, and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*.

¹² Smith, "The Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631," 251.

¹³ This fire has gained great fame, with some Protestant propagandists claiming that the "Magdeburg Maiden" would rather immolate herself than surrender to the Catholics, and others simply blaming the invading Catholic forces. The second seems to more probable as Captain Ackermann notes that "the Adjutant General [...] ordered that a few houses be set on fire, thinking this would force the burghers to drop their weapons to put the fire out" ("Captain Ackermann's Autobiography," 165); Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 469.

estimate that “over twenty thousand souls were lost” seems to be an accurate indication of the death toll.¹⁴ With a city obliterated, we now “turn back the clock” in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the destruction of Magdeburg reflects elements of the larger Thirty Years War.

Interpreting the origins of the Thirty Years War has been a subject of much debate among historians, with each attributing varying levels of significance to the assorted religious and political catalysts. Lauro Martines, author of *Furies: War in Europe, 1450–1700*, asserts that the “triggers of the Thirty Years War lay in religious beliefs.”¹⁵ Though the Peace of Augsburg (1555) had facilitated a tenuous religious peace after the Schmalkaldic War, as the result of military stalemate, it attempted to “preserve a status quo that was the outcome of particular historical circumstances.”¹⁶ These historical circumstances changed in the late sixteenth century as Calvinism, which the Peace did not incorporate into its terms, continued to spread throughout the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁷ Additionally, the late sixteenth century bore witness to the Catholic Counter-Reformation, not only reinvigorating the Catholic faith across the Continent but, more importantly, re-establishing the pre-eminence of Catholicism within the Holy Roman Emperor’s policy, a particularly prominent item on the agenda of Ferdinand II.¹⁸ As King of Bohemia, Ferdinand, a staunch Catholic Habsburg, continually infringed on the religious and political liberties of the Calvinist Bohemian nobles supposedly guaranteed within the Letter of Majesty,

¹⁴ “Diverging Protestant and Catholic Reactions: Pastor Michaelis’s Diary (1631),” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 153; “A General’s View: Pappenheim’s Report (21 May 1631),” “The Destruction of Magdeburg,” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 146; Wilson, “The Destruction of Magdeburg,” 144.

¹⁵ Martines *Furies*, 220.

¹⁶ Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 163-164.

¹⁷ Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 164.

¹⁸ Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 164.

sparkling the revolt that would eventually evolve into the Thirty Years War.¹⁹ The origins of the Thirty Years War illustrates the war's religious tinge, a theme that is also present in the Siege of Magdeburg.

Before I recognize the Papist League

And call it master

*I'd rather run into the blaze.*²⁰

Demonstrating Magdeburgians' fierce devotion to their religion, the anonymous poet of "The Magdeburg Maiden," the poem from which the above epigraph is taken, evokes the vivid image of someone willingly walking into the fire to preserve their belief. This depiction of fierce religious devotion is somewhat fitting as Magdeburg was considered to be the "Lord's Chancellery," a Protestant stronghold since 1524.²¹ Even the city's name, *Magd* (maid) and *burg* (castle), was imbued with religious imagery, inspiring the adoption of a young maiden as the city's symbol.²² Beyond the obvious religious themes of the Siege of Magdeburg (with Catholic troops invading the Protestant city), religion was crucial to contemporary perceptions of the event.²³ The perspectives of Nicolaus Michaelis, a Calvinist pastor, and Zacharias Bandauer, a Catholic prior, exemplify how religious divisions influenced interpretations of the Siege of Magdeburg. In his diary, after receiving news of the siege in June, Michaelis recorded the

¹⁹ The Letter of Majesty was established by Rudolf II in 1609. To secure Habsburg rule in Bohemia, Rudolf promised to respect the religious and political liberties of the Bohemian nobles; Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 165.

²⁰ "The Magdeburg Maiden (c. 1631)," in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 151.

²¹ Cited in Karl Wittich, *Magdeburg, Gustaf Adolf und Tilly*, Berlin, 1874, vol. 2, part 1, p. 141; Wilson, "The Destruction of Magdeburg," 144.

²² Smith, "The Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631," 258; The imagery of the Maiden of Magdeburg was especially prominent after the siege. Unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, Jeffrey Smith has an excellent analysis of the maiden's appearance throughout contemporary publications.

²³ Interestingly, Magdeburg had already weathered a siege during the Schmalkaldic War (1550-1551) and had previously resisted submitting to Wallenstein's troops in 1629 (Medick, "Historical Event and Contemporary Experience," 23). These previous events, especially that of the Schmalkaldic War, deepens the connection between Magdeburg and the Thirty Years War as both had roots in the 1550s. Additionally, perhaps these historical instances of resistance further augmented the tragedy of the 1631 siege.

reactions of his parishioners. Michaelis notes that “all Protestants were terribly saddened and appalled by the wretched downfall of the city of Magdeburg, but the papists rejoiced and were glad.”²⁴ What is most striking about Michaelis’s diary entry, however, is his subsequent biting description of the “papists” who he characterizes as having a “murderous bloodthirsty heart [...] who cannot get enough of innocent human blood here on earth.”²⁵ In stark contrast to Michaelis’s Protestant interpretation is Prior Bandauer’s Catholic account. Though he mourns for Magdeburg, Bandauer asserts that “God’s punishment is not lacking if one turns away from the ancient Christian Catholic religion and embraces a new one.”²⁶ Unlike Michaelis, who blamed the tragedy on the invading Catholics, Bandauer likens the city’s Protestantism to a transgression against God, one that was justly (if harshly) punished. These decidedly different accounts epitomize the religious divisions that helped initiate the Thirty Years War, reinforcing the notion that Magdeburg can act as a microcosm for essential issues in the larger conflict.

Though noting that religion had a role, Peter Wilson ascribes the cause of the Thirty Years War primarily to political factors. Observing that the war was fought over the “religious and political balance in the Empire and the Habsburg hereditary lands,” Wilson argues that this origin did not make the conflict a “parochial affair.”²⁷ One of the clearest examples of the presence of politics is the founding declaration of the Protestant Union, one of the sectarian alliances that emerged prior to the outbreak of the Thirty Years War.²⁸ Established in 1609, the

²⁴ “Diverging Protestant and Catholic Reactions: Pastor Michaelis’s Diary (1631),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 152.

²⁵ “Diverging Protestant and Catholic Reactions: Pastor Michaelis’s Diary (1631),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 152-153.

²⁶ “A Catholic Interpretation: Prior Bandauer’s Account,” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 153.

²⁷ Peter H. Wilson, “The Causes of the Thirty Years War 1618-48,” *The English Historical Review* 123, no. 502 (2008): 585.

²⁸ The Protestant League was a small collection of Protestant princes who, fearing for their religious and political autonomy, created an alliance under the Calvinist Elector Palatine in 1609 (Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 164).

Protestant Union justified its existence constitutionally. As the signatories to the Union noted, their predecessors had “set up a general peace and unity in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation [...] so that everyone had equal rights.”²⁹ Of course, this grand statement is not entirely accurate; even the Peace of Augsburg, which excluded Calvinism, demonstrates how not everyone had equal rights. That being said, members of the Protestant Union believed that it was within their constitutional rights to protect their religious liberties, stating that they were “not at all against His Roman Imperial Majesty [...] let alone against the Holy Imperial constitution, but on the contrary [wanted] to strengthen it and to better uphold peace and unity in the Empire.”³⁰ The creation of the Protestant Union reinforces Wilson’s claim that the Thirty Years War was “religious only to the extent that faith guided all early modern public policy and private behaviour.”³¹

Providing further evidence about the strength of political factors during the Thirty Years War is foreign intervention, particularly evident in the participation of the French and the Swedes. Despite being a Catholic power, France supported Protestant Sweden against the Catholic Habsburgs, hoping to weaken their long-time geopolitical rivals.³² Within the Treaty of Bärwalde, France agreed to “contribute 400 000 Imperial thaler [...] every year” to the King of Sweden who would “take his share of the great burden of the war by bringing an army of 30 000 infantry and 6000 cavalry.”³³ This treaty also treats religion as a constitutional issue as it states that if Sweden succeeds, the King should “in matters of religion [...] treat territories occupied or

²⁹ “The Protestant Union (1608),” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 13.

³⁰ “The Protestant Union (1608),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 14.

³¹ Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 9.

³² Peter H. Wilson, “Dynasty, Constitution, and Confession: The Role of Religion in the Thirty Years War,” *The International History Review* 30, no. 3 (2008): 475.

³³ “The Treaty of Bärwalde (23 January 1631) and the Guarantee for Bavaria (15 January 1631),” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 140.

ceded to him according to the laws and constitution of the Empire.”³⁴ Though each a little different, both the Protestant Union and Franco-Swedish intervention exemplify the influence of political concerns during the Thirty Years War.

*The one dear Swedish hero true
Gave me tons of gold coin too
I praise his name to all the world.*³⁵

The complex internal political dynamics of Magdeburg, alluded to in the above epigraph, are also apparent in the account of the siege typically attributed to Otto Guericke (1602–1686), a city counsellor and later mayor of Magdeburg.³⁶ Outlining the divisiveness of the city, Guericke notes that there were “all sorts of arguments and misunderstandings [that] divided the city’s inhabitants and citizens.”³⁷ According to Guericke, “one party refused to tolerate the imperial and League armies, because of the suffering of the war and the feared Counter Reformation.”³⁸ Interestingly, the demographics of this group included “several councillors [and] the clergy” but was comprised “mainly [of] the common people.”³⁹ The other group, which “included the majority and most prominent of the council, but few pastors and citizens,” stood in direct opposition: “they could not advise the city, as a minor, powerless, imperial Estate, to withstand

³⁴ “The Treaty of Bärwalde (23 January 1631) and the Guarantee for Bavaria (15 January 1631),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 141.

³⁵ “The Magdeburg Maiden (c. 1631),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 152.

³⁶ Wilson, “The Destruction of Magdeburg,” 145; It should be noted that while Guericke’s account is considered to be one of the best accounts of the Siege of Magdeburg, as a councillor, he sought to excuse himself (and his colleagues) from any real part in the disaster (Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 469).

³⁷ “A Councillor’s View: Guericke’s History,” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 146.

³⁸ “A Councillor’s View: Guericke’s History,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 146.

³⁹ “A Councillor’s View: Guericke’s History,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 146; The overwhelming support of the common people for resisting negotiation illustrates how political decisions impacted ordinary people the most, a central theme in Lauro Martines’s book *Furies: War in Europe 1450-1700*. As Peter Wilson notes in “The Destruction of Magdeburg,” the poorer citizens knew that any compromise would likely result in soldiers being admitted to the city, presumably to be billeted in poorer homes than that of the city’s richer patricians (145).

the mighty army.”⁴⁰ Advocating neutrality, this group was willing to allow imperial officers into the city to “recruit and to purchase all kinds of provisions,” drawing much hatred and suspicion from the opposing party.⁴¹ Just as France was willing to overlook confessional differences with the Swedish to rally against the Habsburgs, so too was Magdeburg’s city council willing to minimize the religious differences of the imperial troops for their political survival, even at the risk of being perceived as “abandon[ing] the evangelical religion.”⁴² Guericke’s account, then, in its brief description of Magdeburg’s internal political debates on the eve of the siege, further endorses viewing the Siege of Magdeburg as a microcosm for the Thirty Years War.

Throughout the early modern period, military technique and technology slowly evolved away from those of the medieval period. Though the exact nature and extent of this evolution has been much debated, there can be no doubt that fort design, artillery, and military strategy all underwent change during this period.⁴³ As a result of these developments, armies also increased in size. In the sixteenth century, Charles V had commanded one of the larger European forces, comprised of 100 000 men, against the Turks in Hungary.⁴⁴ By the 1630s, the time of the Thirty Years War, Spain had a fighting force of almost 300 000 men, with France and Sweden deploying 150 000 and 45 000 respectively.⁴⁵ The Treaty of Bärwalde, discussed above to illustrate political aspects of the Thirty Years War, also evinces one of the biggest challenges for war-time states in the early modern period. In order to maintain their large forces, early modern

⁴⁰ “A Councillor’s View: Guericke’s History,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 146-147.

⁴¹ “A Councillor’s View: Guericke’s History,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 147.

⁴² “A Councillor’s View: Guericke’s History,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 147; Though beyond the scope of this paper, Guericke’s account also discusses the involvement of Falkenberg (a German in Swedish service) in the siege. Falkenberg played a crucial role in persuading the council not to accept Tilly’s terms of surrender, utterly convinced that the King of Sweden would provide support to the city (even though Gustavus was still 90 km away at Potsdam on the day of the siege) (Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 468). This furthers the validity of viewing Magdeburg as a microcosm for the Thirty Years War as foreign intervention were prominent in both.

⁴³ Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 136.

⁴⁴ Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 139.

⁴⁵ Konnert, *Medieval to Modern*, 139.

states had to devise ways to pay for them.⁴⁶ Most early modern states lacked a tax system coherent and efficient enough to support large, prolonged military campaigns, creating essential preconditions for outbreaks of uncontrolled violence against civilians.⁴⁷ Part of the brutality of the Thirty Years War, especially in terms of plundering, can then be viewed as the result of desperate soldiers trying to supplement their inadequate pay from their superiors.⁴⁸ Ronald G. Asch, however, observes that sympathy for these soldiers as victims of discrimination has “recently come to obscure the fact that the soldiers were active agents and not just the hapless victims of circumstance.”⁴⁹ Despite being trapped within a harsh system, soldiers had the power to control their actions, a quality which presents itself within primary accounts of the Siege of Magdeburg.

*The Bavarian speaks pretty words,
But with his troops he strides ahead,
Putting all Lutheran folk to the sword.*⁵⁰

The individual Magdeburgian’s experience of the siege was defined by their interactions with the besieging soldiers and despite what the above epigraph suggests, not all Lutheran folk were put “to the sword.” Of the many primary accounts of the siege concerning the interaction between civilians and soldiers, there are two illustrative accounts, that of Pastor Christophorus Thodänus and Friedrich Friese, which demonstrate not only the violent plundering, but also the kindness, present during the Siege of Magdeburg. Of Pappenheim’s four-line report, in which he

⁴⁶ It should be noted that these large forces were not standing armies, which would not begin to develop until the eighteenth century (X, “The Military Revolution”). These forces were led by elite military contractors, hired by the state to fight in specific campaigns (X, “The Military Revolution”). Though beyond the scope of this paper, hired forces added many interesting dynamics to early modern militaries.

⁴⁷ Ronald G. Asch, “‘Wo der soldat hinko imbt, da ist alles sein’: Military Violence and Atrocities in the Thirty Years War Re-examined,” *German History* 18, no. 3 (2000): 294, 308; Parker, *Global Crisis*, 89.

⁴⁸ Asch, “Military Violence and Atrocities,” 294; Martines, *Furies*, 22.

⁴⁹ Asch, “Military Violence and Atrocities,” 294.

⁵⁰ “The Magdeburg Maiden (c. 1631),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 152.

summarizes the destruction of Magdeburg, one line is dedicated to the observation that: “All of our soldiers became rich.”⁵¹ These soldiers were only able to do so, however, at the expense of the inhabitants of Magdeburg. Contemporary military conventions entitled the soldiers to sack the city as they saw fit as the city had previously refused Tilly’s terms of surrender.⁵² Here was the soldiers’ opportunity to “get rich quick.” A pastor at St. Catherine’s Church, Christophorus Thodänuš recorded his series of interactions with plundering soldiers. Thodänuš speaks of four separate groups of plundering soldiers, all which demanded some form of payment from him as money was “always their solution.”⁵³ One such episode within Thodänuš’s account is of particular note. In the later hours of the siege, Thodänuš and his wife encountered a man who “looked like the devil himself.”⁵⁴ With Thodänuš failing to produce the requested money, because of previous groups plundering him, the man “aimed a musket at [him].”⁵⁵ Though Thodänuš remained unscathed, due to the failure of a match and the courage of his wife, this encounter exposes how soldiers were quick to resort to violence if they did not receive the wealth they so desired.

The plundering soldiers that ravaged Magdeburg, however, were ultimately still human. Friedrich Friese’s memoirs, drawing upon a manuscript written by his father, validates Asch’s argument that soldiers were active agents within the destruction. Sheltering in an old loft, the Frieses were discovered by a soldier who had followed their maid to their hiding place. At first, the soldier “came at [Friedrich’s] father with a pick axe.”⁵⁶ Friedrich describes how he and his

⁵¹ “A General’s View: Pappenheim’s Report (21 May 1631),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 144.

⁵² Asch, “Military Violence and Atrocities,” 299.

⁵³ “Pastor Christophorus Thodänuš’s Account,” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 156.

⁵⁴ “Pastor Christophorus Thodänuš’s Account,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 156.

⁵⁵ “Pastor Christophorus Thodänuš’s Account,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 156.

⁵⁶ “Friedrich Friese’s Memoirs,” in *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, ed. Peter H. Wilson, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 160.

brothers “crowded round the soldier, begging and crying that he should please let [their] father live.”⁵⁷ Upon hearing the children’s pleads, the soldier immediately became “friendly.”⁵⁸ Though still focused on “booty,” the soldier agreed to help the Frieses escape Magdeburg.⁵⁹ The soldier’s kindness towards the Frieses, despite being sometimes diverted by material gain, demonstrates how even amidst the destruction, humanity could be found. The civilian experience of plundering soldiers, evident within the accounts of Thodänus and Friedrich, reflect issues associated with the larger armies that fought in the Thirty Years War. The account of Friedrich, however, is the ultimate example of the viability of the “Magdeburg microcosm;” by presenting a sliver of light amid the dark destruction, Friedrich’s account embodies the nuances inherent in all historical events.

*Awake, thou German honesty,
And take up arms in my strife,
Thou shalt be praised eternally!*⁶⁰

Through the common themes of religion, politics, and military, Magdeburg, and its infamous siege, can be interpreted as a microcosm for the larger Thirty Years War. That being said, any analysis of the Thirty Years War requires a brief discussion about historical memory as this event has been subject to contemporary and subsequent manipulation, eternally — yet not accurately — praised. In *The Thirty Years’ War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century*, Kevin Cramer analyzes how nineteenth century German historians rediscovered and retold the story of the Thirty Years War, seeming to uncover the “meaning of centuries of defeat, territorial

⁵⁷ “Friedrich Friese’s Memoirs,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 160.

⁵⁸ “Friedrich Friese’s Memoirs,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 160.

⁵⁹ “Friedrich Friese’s Memoirs,” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 160.

⁶⁰ “The Magdeburg Maiden (c. 1631),” in Wilson, *Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, 152.

fragmentation, and political disunity.”⁶¹ Retold, the Siege of Magdeburg not only provided a warning of the cost of German disunity, but also pointed toward the triumph of a united Germany.⁶² Building on this tradition, German nationalists, in the aftermath of World War One, once again turned to the Thirty Years War to explain their defeat. For example, in 1939, Hans Chilian published a book in which he concluded that “there was ‘a direct line from Gustavus Adolphus to Adolf Hitler.’”⁶³ The continual manipulation of the Siege of Magdeburg, and the Thirty Years War more broadly, act as a cautionary tale for historians. While comparisons between certain historical events can enhance our understanding of history, we must remember that all of history – even primary sources – is an interpretation and can be distorted to fit certain agendas, a truism particularly relevant for our own contemporary time.

⁶¹ Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007): 217.

⁶² Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century*, 143.

⁶³ Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century*, 230.

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