The Thirty Years’ War was a European continental war that took place from 1618-1648 (thirty years!). Most of the fighting took place in the Holy Roman Empire, although the war grew to include European powers outside of the Empire. What began as a local, religious conflict became more and more continental and political with each expanding phase of the war. Refer to your Thirty Years’ War map when necessary.

Background
Martin Luther’s Reformation sharply divided German princes within the Holy Roman Empire, leading to conflict between the Catholic Hapsburg emperors and the princes (primarily in the northern part of the Empire) who adopted Lutheran Protestantism. This led to several conflicts that ended with the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which established the principle of cuius regio, eius religio (whoever reigns, his religion) within the Holy Roman Empire. According to the terms of the Peace of Augsburg, the Holy Roman Emperor renounced the right to enforce a single religion throughout the “Empire” and each prince could choose between establishing Catholicism or Lutheranism in the lands under his own control. Calvinism, which was not established as a legal religion in the Empire by the Peace of Augsburg, spread throughout the Empire in spite of its prohibition, as Calvinists did not care whether their religion was legal or not. The spread of Calvinism threatened the tranquility of the Empire, as did places like Bohemia (modern-day Czech Republic), where the ruler’s religion was different from that of the majority of the population. The Thirty Years’ War began as a local religious conflict between the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor and his Protestant subjects in Bohemia, but grew into a continent-wide political conflict over the Balance of Power in Europe.

The Four Phases
The Thirty Years’ War is divided into four phases: Bohemian, Danish, Swedish, and French. The Bohemian Phase was purely a local, religious conflict. With each successive phase, the war became more continental in scope, bloodier, and more focused on political power than religion.

The Bohemian Phase
Although ruled directly by the Catholic Hapsburgs, Bohemian Protestants enjoyed a generous level of religious toleration (by the standards of the time). A Hapsburg ruler had issued a Letter of Majesty to the Bohemian Protestants guaranteeing their freedom to practice their religion. This letter was revoked by Ferdinand II, a Jesuit-educated Hapsburg who had no interest in tolerating Protestantism in any form. Ferdinand II went on to become the Holy Roman Emperor. The conflict started with the Defenestration of Prague, in which two emissaries of the Holy Roman Emperor were thrown out of a window. The emissaries somehow survived the 70 foot drop - how they did depends on who you ask. Catholics maintained that they were saved by the Virgin Mary and angels, while Protestants later wrote that they fell into a massive dung heap. Ferdinand took swift action against the rebels, defeating them decisively in the Battle of White Mountain (1620). The first phase of the Thirty Years’ War concluded with the Catholics squarely on top.

The Danish Phase
The King of Denmark - a Lutheran state immediately north of the Holy Roman Empire - responded by invading in order to help the Lutheran princes against the Emperor. This ended up being a colossal failure, as his expected allies didn’t give him aid they had promised and he had underestimated the strength of the Imperial armies. The Danish king retreated back into his own country with an army of Imperial mercenaries at his heels. The Danish Phase concluded with the Catholics again firmly in the lead. In 1629, Ferdinand issued the Edict of Restitution, which ordered the return of Catholic lands that had been taken over by Protestants since the Peace of Augsburg.
The Swedish Phase
The Protestant cause got a needed break when Gustavus Adolphus, the Lutheran King of Sweden, invaded the Holy Roman Empire at the head of a powerful army. Gustavus Adolphus has been called the “father of modern warfare,” being one of the first military commanders to make use of mobile artillery on the battlefield. He scored a decisive victory at the Battle of Breitenfeld (1631), strengthening the Protestant cause. The Swedes were helped by financial support from the French, who decided to support the Protestant faction in spite of France being a Catholic country. Cardinal Richelieu, the First Minister of France, was a politique in the vein of Henry IV, caring more about weakening the Hapsburgs than about what religion people professed in the Holy Roman Empire.

The French Phase
Gustavus Adolphus was killed in battle in 1632, ending Sweden’s active leadership in the Protestant cause. In the last phase of the Thirty Years’ War, the most dominant player on the Protestant side was Catholic France. Granted, the French had a bit of help from the Swedes, who had switched roles from fighter to financier. France’s main motivation was weakening the German states of the Holy Roman Empire and preventing any type of unity for them in the future. This phase was the bloodiest and failed to produce a decisive result. After thirty years, people were weary of war and had lost track of why they were even fighting. The warring parties gathered at Westphalia to hammer out a rational peace to end a long war that had begun as a local religious conflict.

The Balance of Power
In the 17th century, the Habsburgs were the most powerful family in Europe, controlling Austria, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, the Netherlands, and various other territories strewn throughout Europe. France found itself surrounded by Hapsburg power and sought to change this by allying themselves with the Protestants (a deal with the devil?).

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The Horrors of the Thirty Years’ War, 1626

A Lutheran weaver and churchwarden named Asmus Teufel, who lived in the North German town of Münden, recorded his memories of the fighting he saw in June 1626. More than two thousand people were killed when the emperor’s army stormed the small town. Sieges and attacks on towns with military garrisons took place frequently during the war.

At your request I will write, at least as much as I can remember, about the terrible, unmentionable blood bath in this city. Much has gone forgotten because of my often difficult situation, and therefore it is not possible to describe everything.

...In the days of the siege there was an unceasing firing of large cannon from several places where they had batteries, and they killed many. On Tuesday 748 shots, including 200 exploding shells, horrible fire balls, which I recorded with my own hand. Then came the assault and the slaughter with halberds [poles with ax blades], and neither young nor old, not even the child in its mother’s womb was spared. The truly blind, crippled, and dumb were cut down, even 8 preachers who had fled to the city from the villages. ...

And although some people wanted to save their lives with money, and gave up hundreds, even thousands [of florins], the bloody murderers took the money from them, but then others came, who received nothing, and they cut them down. It’s easy to imagine how they dealt with the womenfolk, many of whom they took back to their camp with them.

You can imagine what a wailing and screaming there was up at the castle, where they threw living and dead from the roof and out of the windows, even mothers with their children, so that in the trench behind the moat there was later more than enough evidence. They also cut people down, so that their blood flowed down the steps [of the castle], and at present there is still blood to see on the walls and on the tapestries.


Question to Consider
- Why did the Thirty Years’ War spark such gruesome violence, even against women, children, and the disabled?