

**Did Grimmelshausen make valid observations about the causes of the
Thirty Years War in his book Adventures of a Simpleton?**

Dan Kellar, beingthechange.ca

The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) had many primary and secondary factors leading to its beginning, its four distinct phases, and its end. Religious reformations and strife, disease and starvation, oppressive dynasties, and the potential unbalancing of power in Europe threw many countries into the war. In *The Adventures of a Simpleton*, the author H.J.C. von Grimmelshausen has his own opinions regarding the causes of the war. Many of Grimmelshausen's opinions are now regarded as actual causes, while others are mere fancy. Grimmelshausen's ideas about the causes of the war are summed up early on in the book:

“And as I watched it seemed to me as if all the trees I saw were but a single tree at the top which sat Mars, the god of war, and the tree's branches covered all of Europe. Indeed, this tree could have overshadowed the whole world, but envy and hate, suspicion and jealousy, pride, arrogance, avarice, and other such pleasing virtues blew it about like a blistering north wind, so that it was quite thin and transparent¹”

Picking through this passage, other evidence from the book, and course textbook, this essay will prove that Grimmelshausen did have valid observations for the cause of the Thirty Years' War.

Grimmelshausen wrote this tale with much of his own experiences taking place as the main 'fictional' character, Simplicius Simplicissimus. The two share a birthplace and were born during the war, both were sacked by Croats, the pair both served in the army, and both spent time in Hanau. The book was first published in 1669, in a time where memory was still fresh from the Thirty Years' War and was not at first regarded as the

¹ Grimmelshausen, H.J.C. von, *The Adventures of a Simpleton*. In Walter Wallich translation. (New York, 2000), PP 29.

masterpiece it has become. Perhaps at the time of publishing, his opinions were not viewed with much validity, nor his style appreciated. In recent times however, through the study of history we can see that his thoughts do have a legitimate character.

The author starts off his book with the idea that people are trying to be more than they are. Peasants attempting to show nobility, and kings attempting to be God's representative on earth shows the arrogance of men at this time in history. Peoples' pride leads them to believe that they are better than others, or their country or religion is superior to others. As Grimmelshausen points out in this first sentence: "In recent years, there has arisen a disease among humble folk which makes them claim noble birth and ancient lineage as soon as they have scraped together a little money..."² In England with Charles I and in France with Louis XIII, and elsewhere in Europe, there were Kings believing they had God's grace to be in power and all they did was God's will³. This divine right theory made any disagreements matters of religion. And with the devout following of religious beliefs, these disagreements quickly escalated to battles and wars. This pride and arrogance were surly some of the primary causes for the start of the Thirty Years War especially where violence first erupted.

Bohemian Protestant churches were closed by Ferdinand of Styria (the new Catholic king) in 1617. In 1618, Protestants hurled two of Ferdinand's officials from a castle window. The violence spread from there and the Catholic League, led by Ferdinand, and the Protestant Union fought until 1625. The goal for the Protestants was religious freedom and independence from Habsburg rule. Eventually the Protestants were defeated and the religion temporarily wiped out of Bohemia, ending the first phase

² Ibid, pp 1.

³ McKay, John, P et al. *A History of Western Society*. Volume B: *From the Renaissance to 1815*, 7th edition (Boston, 2003), pp 549.

of the war.⁴ As Grimmelshausen observed, the arrogance and pride of one group trying to control the fate of another, was the primary factor that led to the start of the war, and was also a major theme throughout its entirety.

Envy and hate, as Grimmelshausen mentions, were the primary factors leading to the second phase of the war. As the Catholic armies of Ferdinand, under the control of Albert of Wallenstein swept northward towards the coast enforcing the Edict of Restitution, their forces were divided (due to internal envy and hate). Wallenstein was looking for personal gain and glory; he seemed to be looking to create his own empire. His envy of the other kings and leaders, and his own avarice led to the brutal enforcement of the Edict of Restitution and also to quarrel with the Catholic League. The army he created, loyal to him, separated from the Catholic league, and envy and hate eclipsed Religion as the basic issue of the war. The Danish phase of the war was a poor time for the Protestants. Led by Christian IV of Denmark, the armies were unable to hold back the Habsburgs advance. The hate for the Protestants and perhaps the envy of the Danish way of life meant the Catholics would not be stopped. Religion being partially eclipsed, the Protestants of Europe began to worry of a collapse in the balance of power in north-central Europe.⁵

Suspicion and jealousy marked the final two phases of the war. Firstly, to help the oppressed Protestants, Sweden entered the war even though their king, Gustavus Adolphus was a devout Lutheran.⁶ The Swedes were subsidized by the French who were suspicious of future Habsburg intentions and also jealous of their new found power and influence. The Swedes were successful for a time, but in 1632 Adolphus was fatally

⁴ Ibid, pp 501.

⁵ Ibid, pp 501.

⁶ Ibid, pp 501.

injured in battle (Lutzen) and in 1634 the Swedes were beaten in battle (Nordlingen).

This loss drove the French into the war with more than just financial support.

Grimmelshausen knew that the jealousy and suspicion were the new primary forces keeping the war going. In 1648, with both sides exhausted, treaties were signed at Munster and Osnabruck (the Peace of Westphalia) and the war was over.

Suspicion and jealousy, hate and envy, pride and arrogance, and avarice were all primary factors in the war. These factors, together and apart, started the war and kept it going through the multiple phases. When peace was declared, conflicts over religion subsided, empires were re-aligned and powers were shuffled. There were of course multiple secondary causes leading to all aspects of the war.

Peasant uprisings due to lack of food, security and over taxation, were common occurrences in the years before, during and after the war. The peasants felt oppressed as their burden continued to grow as more soldiers were sent off to war. As Grimmelshausen notes multiple times in the book, peasants were quick to violently act against lost soldiers and looting marauders. As Simplicius's tree observes: "The roots of the trees consisted of people of no account: peasants mostly, artisans and labourers, but who gave the tree its sap and renewed its strength...But in general those on the lower branches hoped for the fall of those above them so that they could take their places."⁷ The peasants were the ones holding the societies together yet they were the most burdened. They wished for those in power to fall so they could rise to a better standard of living. The avarice and arrogance of those in power oppressed these people and filled them with envy and hate.

⁷ Grimmelshausen *Simpleton* pp 26.

Further, it seems that many in the society were of questionable character. As the tree model explains above the roots, on the lower branches are those who are “merrier than the roots and also arrogant, tyrannical, godless as a rule, and a perpetual and intolerable burden to the roots.⁸” This class had no care for anyone and generally had no direction in life but to get to the higher branches as better thieves. This lawless class, mercenaries and brutes were easy to convince to go to war as it meant they had an income. With no real allegiance to their king it can be presumed that from these ranks, many followed Simplicius’s lead and fought ‘sometimes on this side, sometimes on that.’

The Wolf in Grimmelshausen’s novel represents all the evils in world at the time of the war, an indication of the ripeness the time had for war. Young Simplicius is told to be careful of the wolf “for he is a four-legged rouse and thief who eats man and beast.⁹” He confuses the evil cavalry for wolves and then confuses the strange man in the woods as the wolf. All things he perceives as evil becomes a wolf in his mind.

From the above evidence it is clear to see that Grimmelshausen wrote valid points in regard to the primary and secondary factors causing the Thirty Years’ War. Envy and hatred, avarice, suspicion and jealousy, and pride and arrogance along with a world ripe for war through oppression of religions and peoples were all contributing factors in a war that led to large scale changes in 17th century Europe.

⁸ Ibid, pp 27.

⁹ Ibid, pp 4.