Discovering a New Wargaming Period
By Steve Turner

Ever wanted to branch out into a new wargaming period but found it difficult to settle on which era to choose? A few years ago, I found myself in just this situation. For months I struggled to decide on a period, one that would provide an interesting experience and also appeal to my rather over-active imagination (imagination being the key word here). Let me attempt to explain just how I went about solving this particular problem and maybe I can introduce you to a gaming period that you may not have considered before.

Firstly, let me say that I'm a gamer who generally steers clear of the (so called) "popular" wargaming periods (such as Napoleonics, WW2, Ancients etc.) This is probably because I neither belong to any club, nor do I play many "face to face" games. I have very little time to paint and have virtually no spare cash to lavish on excessive numbers of figures, especially those that are required to play the more fashionable periods mentioned above. In addition, I must admit that very few historical struggles actually "tick all the boxes" for me or fire my imagination. As a result, therefore I tend to concentrate on a limited number of eras and conflicts, ones that I can develop into long running campaigns without too much difficulty.

So, which historical period did I finally decide upon? Well, initially I was drawn toward the Dark Ages and the Medieval eras, although I knew very little about the Dark Ages (Eric Bloodaxe, King Canute, Edmund Ironsides, 1066 and all that) and was already engrossed in an extensive medieval campaign (set during the early 14th century). I decided therefore to hang fire with that original idea and instead tried to think of something completely different. In what was a flash of inspiration I thought of re-fighting the Boer War, but just as quickly abandoned that idea because I knew I would be too partisan to be an impartial umpire and because I had a late 19th century Sudanese campaign already underway (General Gordon of Khartoum and General Kitchener against the forces of the Mahdi). I then considered taking up arms in the French Wars of Religion (a very interesting period - if you haven't studied it - as long as you yourself aren't religiously overzealous or fanatical). However, none of these conflicts seemed quite what I was looking for. They did not quite fit the bill. But then, in something of a eureka moment, I realised that I had the answer within arm's reach.

Indeed, since 1974 I'd had resting on my bookshelves (and it still is) a classic work of history that I must have read cover to cover at least ten or fifteen times, yet had never considered it as a serious candidate for my wargaming activities (more fool me). First published in 1938, it is a brilliant piece of work, written by a dedicated intellectual, and for long time was one of the few historical volumes written in English that dealt with the subject it encompassed. The title of this fascinating tome turns out to be "The Thirty Years War" by C.V. Wedgewood. It is a 525-page book crammed with historical detail of the period and was acquired by "yours truly" as a gift on my twenty-first birthday (yes, I am that old). Now don't go shaking your head and turning over the page, because it was this inspirational volume that eventually triggered the idea for my new project - the 30 Years War.

Now, from what I can gather, it appears that up to a couple of decades ago C.V. Wedgewood's book was perhaps the definitive work written in English on the subject. Though possibly a little tricky to follow for anyone who isn't steeped in early seventeenth century politics and the religious dissensions and dynastic disagreements of that era it does cover the entire conflict in detail, even though it is somewhat light on maps, battle details and army composition. Nevertheless, it offers an insight into the period as a whole as well as the individual struggles as each unfolded.

However, later publications, like that of Geoffrey Parker "The Thirty Years War" published in 1984, as well as the most comprehensive work (that I've seen) on the subject, Peter H. Wilson's 850-page volume "Europe's Tragedy – A History of the Thirty Years War" (2009) have certainly changed and added considerably to our knowledge. Peter Wilson's book is studded with campaign details and battle maps and takes the reader through the twists and turns of early 17th century European history prior to the struggle and continues its theme until after the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. (*By the way, there is lecture given by Professor Wilson posted onto YouTube if anyone is interested enough to learn more*). In addition to the titles above, there are now also a number of very acceptable biographies available, ones that deal specifically with the more "colourful" characters of the conflict (Wallenstein & Gustavus Adolphus for example) and there are also quite a number of paperbacks dealing with the military dress, weaponry and the flags & standards of the period.

Unfortunately, some of the above books can turn out to be quite expensive, but most should be available in one form or another through a local library. Take a look at them if you get the chance.

Now, I know of no gamer who would wish to waste their hard-earned cash on what might turn out simply to be a failed experiment. I've done too much of that sort of thing myself in the past, leaving me with a sorry collection of unpainted and discarded figures cluttering up my cupboards. Therefore, a little caution and forethought is required before splashing out on any new activity. Of course, beginning something new will always take *some* investment (unless you manufacture your own miniatures that is) though not as much as you might think if you use your intelligence. Go about things the correct way and you'll save yourself a great deal of frustration and regret. Research the "historical source material" until you're confident you know what it's all about. Then invest your cash wisely (don't spend money where you don't need to) and you won't waste either your time or your money. And by "historical source material" I mean books, films, and the internet. Only purchase what you need once you are certain you want to invest in the subject for the future – that's the same with *any* figures/miniatures you are tempted to buy.

Speaking of miniatures, where once there might have been a deficiency of models for the 30 Years War period, there are now quite a large number obtainable from various manufacturers,

and in a wide variety of scales. Besides which, miniatures designed for the later English Civil War period can easily be utilized to lend additional diversity to a 30 Years War army.

Interestingly, individual units of the period, (of whatever nationality or religious persuasion) wore clothing broadly similar to each other, though usually fashioned in their own respective regimental or national colours. In addition, most infantry & cavalry weapons used by one army (matchlocks, early smooth-bore muskets, arquebuses, pikes, swords etc.) were almost indistinguishable from those employed by their enemies. All of which means that a unit of miniatures (of whatever type, infantry, cavalry or artillery) once painted, may be enlisted – with a little manipulation of course - into almost any other European army of the period (although the Turkish and Eastern European forces might be here considered as exceptions to the rule). For my own part, once I had started on my journey into the 30 Years War and had decided to concentrate on 6mm scale figures (you get more for your money that way) I purchased and painted up a number of generic units of foot (30 in total, in a collection of colours). In addition, I painted a few standard bearers (say, 3 or 4 for each regiment) some carrying Imperial or Spanish flags and some shouldering French or Swedish standards). By painting my miniatures in this way, the units can be employed in one of four (or maybe even five) different armies on the wargames table (Imperial, Spanish, Bavarian, French, Swedish or even Bohemian/Palatine). This, for me at least, is a definite plus, because it saves me a whole wallet load of money.

As for the history of the war itself, it is quite fascinating. What started off as a dynastic struggle for the Royal Crown of Bohemia turned very quickly into a religious quarrel throughout Germany and a fight for the Imperial Throne. And yes, because of its length and the complicated political intricacies of the times, it can become quite challenging to understand. Nevertheless, with an increasing amount of historical and military information now available, I'm quite surprised that more wargamers haven't investigated the 30 Years War (1618 – 1648) for themselves. Admittedly, from a distance of 400 years the political & religious arguments of the opposing sides might now appear somewhat incomprehensible to our modern eyes. But these should not necessarily distract from the era's playability as a wargaming period. Indeed, they probably make things even more interesting. If, as an example, one takes the political situation in Bohemia prior to the outbreak of hostilities, it becomes patently obvious that there existed an ingrained enmity between the majority protestant population of that country and their catholic Hapsburg overloads, as can be seen by the so called "Defenestration of Prague" (23rd May 1618) when two of the Emperor's officials (and their secretary) were unceremoniously flung from a high window of the Chancellery in the centre of Prague. Unfortunately for Bohemia (and the rest of Europe) things just went downhill from there.

The Defenestration of Prague

Being more of a connected series of individual conflicts rather than one continuous, all-encompassing struggle, the 30 Years War was fought between a number of protagonists all with their own individual agendas. However, almost all the campaigns involved at least some Hapsburg military forces (Austrian and/or Spanish) as well as their close allies (such as Duke Maximilian of Bavaria and the "so called" Catholic League). Their enemies on the other hand, were generally comprised of supporters who either feared Hapsburg power within the "Holy Roman Empire" or wished to curtail it for one reason or another. In that respect, the entire conflict, although at first appearing to be principally a war of religion (Protestant against Catholic) became just as much a dynastic struggle. This did not mean that influences outside "the Empire" were denied a say in the fighting, indeed, countries such as Sweden, Denmark, England, France, Transylvania, Poland and the Papacy all concerned themselves with the outcome of the war, either directly, or indirectly depending upon their own government's policies.

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Because of monetary and supply limitations armies tended to be on the small side – generally less than 25,000 men – but these usually included a large proportion of cavalry, which meant foraging took on special importance. The artillery of the time was cumbersome and came in a wide range of calibres, nevertheless these were quite effective when exploited efficiently. Sieges were common, and supply trains were large, slow, and exceedingly difficult to move over the poor roads, many of which were little more than dirt tracks. Casualties could be very high, especially when disease broke out amongst the ranks. Similarly, victims of plague within towns and cities added to the ever-increasing death tolls, and it was quite common for even ranking commanders to suffer the same fate as their men. Indeed, two of the senior Spanish army commanders sent to aid the Hapsburg cause at the beginning of the war were killed on the battlefield.

And outright assassination was not unknown, as the fate of the imperial general Wallenstein at the hands of his own officers can attest. It isn't surprising then, that up to the outbreak of the second World War the 30 Years War was probably the bloodiest and most destructive war in German history. It was a conflict with more than its fair share of violent action, skulduggery, and treason, and plenty for the imaginative wargamer to get his or her teeth into.

However, don't let my preferences influence you too much. There are any number of playable periods of military history that a wargamer can choose for a new project. As well as the ones I have already mentioned above, how about a campaign based on the North-West Frontier of India, or maybe one set during the Nine Years Wars (you'd be surprised just how few people have even heard of that conflict). It really is up to the individual. What fires the imagination of one wargamer may not have any effect on another. That's why I'm already researching the "Battles of the Wars of the Roses."