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THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR (1618–1648): CLIMATIC CONTEXT, GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES AND THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE AGE

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Abstract. This article is devoted to a comprehensive study of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) – the bloodiest armed conflict of early modern Europe – across several interrelated dimensions: geopolitical, climatic, and cultural-material. The key phases of the conflict, its participants, and long-term consequences are examined – from the Peace of Westphalia to post-war instability. Particular attention is paid to the role of the climatic factor – the cold depression of the Maunder Minimum – in deepening the humanitarian catastrophe. The influence of extreme winters on the formation of René Descartes's philosophical method is explored. A separate section is devoted to cast-iron fireback plates of the Richelieu era – artefacts reflecting the state of metallurgical production under wartime conditions, as well as the regional artistic and heraldic traditions of Burgundy, Dauphiné, and Champagne. The study combines methods of historical climatology, genealogy, art history, and regional history.

Key words: Thirty Years' War, René Descartes, Cardinal Richelieu, fireback plates, Franche-Comté, early modern period, France, 17th century.

Introduction. The Thirty Years' War was a series of successive military conflicts – the Bohemian War (1618–1620), the Palatinate War (1620–1623), the Dano–German Lower Saxon War (1625–1629), the Swedish War (1630–1635), and the final pan-European phase of 1635–1648, brought about by France's direct participation. All these conflicts were subsequently united by historiography under the common name of the Thirty Years' War, and in recent decades have received thorough analysis (Parker, 2013) (Münkler, 2023) (Gantet, 2024) (Bogdan, 2006) (Faure, 2019) et al. There also exists an unconventional and debated definition of this conflict as a “European civil war,” proposed by the British historian Helmut G. Koenigsberger and supported by Parker in his fundamental work “Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century” (Parker, 2013, 211).

At the same time, it is difficult to fully agree with such an interpretation, for already in the first half of the 17th century regional and political identities in Europe were sufficiently formed, and the religious factor was gradually yielding to state and dynastic interests, particularly in the final phase of the war. It was in this very war that an awareness of political belonging – of being “French,” “Swedish,” “Czech,” and so on – manifested itself clearly.

The Thirty Years' War may also be viewed as the first “geopolitical winter” of the modern age, reflecting the aggregate of prolonged cold periods, climatic anomalies, “years without summer,” and a pan-European political crisis that lasted for decades. Climatic changes were not a direct cause of the war, yet they substantially deepened the suffering of the population and prolonged the consequences of the conflict.

Ultimately, the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 laid the foundations of international law and the European political order: the principle of state sovereignty, the balance of power, and respect for borders.

It is generally accepted that the human losses and mass displacement of population during the Thirty Years' War were proportionally greater than in the Second World War; the material and cultural destruction – almost equally vast in scale, and the catastrophic consequences – more prolonged in time (Parker, 2013, 211). In modern wars, as NATO General Christopher Cavoli noted in 2024,

“you either win quickly, or you face a long haul full of unpredictable turns” (Voice of America, 19 July 2024). These words could well have applied to the greatest and most far-reaching war of the 17th century, and would likely have been agreed upon by one of the most celebrated commanders of that war, Albrecht von Wallenstein. In 2025, Steven Bannon, the provocative political strategist of US President Donald Trump, described the protracted Russian–Ukrainian war as “an old-fashioned, grinding war in the bloody lands of Europe” (War Room, 14 July 2025). This characterisation may also be read as an allusion to the great wars of the past, in particular to the Thirty Years’ War – the bloodiest conflict of early modern Europe.

Europe slowly healed its wounds after the Thirty Years’ War. France, having emerged as one of the principal victors of the conflict, acquired Alsace and considerably strengthened its geopolitical position. Its traditional rival – the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation – after 1648 increasingly lost its internal cohesion, concentrating real power mainly in the Austrian hereditary lands and retaining influence over the surrounding provinces rather in a formal-legal dimension. This one of the most ancient medieval empires of Europe, destined to survive for almost eight and a half centuries, was gradually transforming from a great elective empire into a complex supra-regional construction. The harshest consequences of the war fell upon the German lands, where over thirty years of military operations, epidemics, and famine, between 20 and 40 per cent of the population was lost, by various estimates, and in some regions even more. No one could be certain that war would not break out again shortly after the signing of the Treaties of Münster and Westphalia on 24 October 1648. Throughout 1649–1650 an extraordinarily complex demobilisation of armies numbering tens of thousands took place. A considerable part of the soldiers had no skills in peacetime labour and knew only the life of war. Born and shaped in conditions of conflict, they frequently resorted to violence, plunder, and participation in local skirmishes. It is for this reason that in the first post-war years, as researchers note, the threat of a renewed large armed conflict in Europe was considered entirely real, and the general stability of the continent rested on an extremely fragile balance.

France emerged as one of the principal victors of this great European war. From the period after 1648 onwards, as Cecily Wedgwood notes, “the fashion for France swept the whole world: England, Italy, the United Provinces (Holland) and even Sweden and Denmark” (Wedgwood, 2011, 513). This tendency is also traceable in the art of making cast-iron fireback plates: it is precisely in France that they reach the pinnacle of their artistic development, while other countries, England in particular, increasingly attempt to imitate French models. The German lands, which suffered the particularly severe consequences of the Thirty Years’ War, for some time remained apart from these processes. In the second half of the 17th century, a gradual retreat from the strict asceticism and isolation characteristic of the preceding era took place there, and an inclusion in the broader current of European cultural interaction.

The aim of the study is a multi-dimensional analysis of the Thirty Years’ War as a geopolitical, climatic, and cultural-material phenomenon.

The study employs a complex of interdisciplinary methods. For the analysis of geopolitical processes and diplomatic relations, the comparative-historical and problem-chronological methods were used. The climatic dimension of the conflict was examined with the involvement of data from historical climatology and dendrochronological reconstructions. The study of fireback plates as artefacts of material culture was carried out by means of art-historical analysis, heraldry, and attribution. To establish the social context of the use of everyday objects, the methods of genealogy and prosopography were employed. The source base of the study comprises published archival documents, memoir literature, narrative sources of the 17th century, and databases of cultural heritage objects of France.

The Climatic Factor. The Thirty Years’ War coincided with the cold depression caused by the Maunder Minimum. One of the most thorough and methodologically balanced analyses of weather conditions during the Thirty Years’ War, focused primarily on Central-Eastern Europe, was published in 2023 by a team of Czech–Swiss researchers (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023).

The coldest temperature extremes were observed in the 1620s, specifically in 1621 and 1628, as well as in 1635 (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023, 1868). At the same time, below-average temperatures persisted over longer periods, especially during the winter months of 1618–1624 and 1634–1642. During these periods Central Europe generally experienced considerably colder weather conditions compared to the reference period of 1961–1990. The coldest areas were predominantly located in the western half of Central Europe, while the most humid regions formed a belt along the German–Polish border and a cluster covering the southern part of Central Europe (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023, 1873). In addition, the great inflation associated with the war was among the highest in 1627 and 1628 under the influence of a general harvest failure linked to climatic conditions (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023, 8821).

With regard to solar activity, a tendency towards a decrease in annual total solar radiation was observed for the period 1618–1648; specifically, low values were recorded up to the early 1630s, after which a local solar maximum occurred around 1640, followed by a sharp decline (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023, 1870).

Warmth, Self-Isolation, and Methodical Doubt: René Descartes's Experience in the Age of the Thirty Years' War and Extreme Winters

Historians who studied European wars of the early modern period, notably the 17th and early 18th centuries, paid particular attention to winter quarters as a period of suspension of military campaigns, and also to winter as a favourable time for conducting diplomatic negotiations. These tendencies, as the historian François Royal noted, are especially clearly traceable from the end of the Thirty Years' War, and from the perspective of historical climatology – from the beginning of the Maunder Minimum. Analysing the influence of winter quarters on the course of individual campaigns, Royal cites the German negotiator of the Münster talks – Adam Adami, Prior of Murrhardt (Ger. Adam Adami, Prior von Murrhardt, 1610–1663), who wrote in his memoirs: “In winter we negotiate, in summer we fight” (Royal, 2017, 208). Yet winter was used not only as a time for negotiations. As an example, at the beginning of the War of the Palatinate Succession, French forces applied a “scorched earth” tactic against the castles, villages, and towns of the Electorate of the Palatinate (Mannheim and Heidelberg in particular) precisely during the winter period – in December 1688 and January–February 1689. Despite this, the influence of the climatic factor on the course of military campaigns from 1645 to 1715 still remains insufficiently accounted for in contemporary historiography.

It is considered that the period of two particularly cold winters – those of 1619–1620 and 1628–1629 – which the philosopher René Descartes spent during the quartering of imperial troops in self-imposed isolation in a warm room, may have influenced his formation of the principles of the method of radical doubt. The Central European temperature series identifies 1621, 1627, and 1628 (alongside 1618) as the three coldest summers of the early 17th century. These years are regarded as potential “years without summer” (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023, 1872).

Speaking of Descartes, it is worthwhile to examine separately the need for warmth as one of the conditions for concentrated intellectual work and its significance for the formation of the Cartesian critical mind. “I was then in Germany, to which country I had been attracted by the wars which are not yet ended there; and as I was returning from the coronation of the Emperor to join the army, the onset of winter detained me in quarters where, finding no conversation to divert me, and having, fortunately, no cares or passions to trouble me, I remained the whole day shut up alone in a room heated by an enclosed stove (Fr. poêle), where I had complete leisure to occupy myself with my own thoughts” (Descartes, 1966, 9).

These lines were written by René Descartes in his “Discourse on the Method” (*Discours de la méthode*, 1637), recalling the winter of 1619, when, following the coronation of Emperor Ferdinand II, he, as a mercenary officer in the army of Maximilian of Bavaria, was quartered in Germany (Haldane, 1905, 59). The philosopher describes those optimal conditions under which he applied his method-

ical doubt and critical mode of scientific inquiry, spending whole days in a warm room heated by a German stove in the winter of 1619. In other places of his life – in the Netherlands and in France – this role was performed rather by a fire in the hearth, which created an atmosphere of solitude and concentration.

During the cold years of the Maunder Minimum, residing, in particular, in the Netherlands in 1647 and subsequently in Paris, Descartes rewrote in French his treatise “Meditations on First Philosophy” (Fr. *Méditations sur la philosophie première*, 1641, 1647). In it he makes a second important mention of how, sitting in a dressing gown by the hearth and gazing into the fire, he applied his methodical doubt (Descartes, 2011, 13). The verbatim quotation from Descartes: “...for example, that I am here, seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown...” (Descartes, 2011, 13). Descartes’s biographers associate this mention with the extremely cold winter of 1628–1629 (Adam, 1910, 130).

“Shut up in a room with the stove” as early as the winter of 1619–1620, Descartes first mastered his scientific method. After the “winter by the stove” of 1619–1620, during which he experienced his “dreams,” the philosopher began to develop the four principles of logic. His principles of philosophy and physics only took their final form in 1628–1629 (Adam, 1910, 34, 47, 55), that is, during the following extreme winter. Charles Adam called these two important periods of Descartes’s formation “voluntary confinement in the stove” (Fr. *réclusion volontaire dans un poêle*) (Adam, 1910, 48–49). In both cases it concerns periods that Descartes described as seclusion in warmth – in a room with a stove or by a hearth. Charles Adam wrote that in the winter of 1628–1629 René Descartes “shut himself up in a room heated by a stove, as he had already done in 1619” (Adam, 1910, 130). Although in reality, in the conditions of 1628–1629, when Descartes was in the Netherlands, it was more likely a case of the hearth, since the philosopher himself writes that he is sitting by the fire, evidently meaning an open fire indoors. This underscores the important significance of warmth in the cold seasons of the year, above all in winter, for his scientific inquiry. In 1628 in the northern part of Germany, neighbouring the Netherlands, particularly cold conditions were observed (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023, 1875).

Descartes understandably feared the winter cold, though the northern coolness of the Netherlands was more acceptable to him than the Italian heat. “Tell me,” he wrote in 1628 to Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, “what curtains, what fans, what fountains can protect you as well in Rome from the discomforts of the heat as a stove and a bright fire here can protect you from the cold?” (Haldane, 1905, 115–116). Ultimately, the harsher climate of Sweden, to which he set out at the end of 1649 hoping to spend only a short time there, cut short the philosopher’s life. Descartes said that in a cold climate “thoughts freeze in a person” (Makhun, ZN, 10.02.2006). Just before his death in February 1650, as his valet-de-chambre Schlüter testified, Descartes in Stockholm felt somewhat better and sat down by his beloved hearth with the help of his faithful servant (Haldane, 1905, 352). Thus the hearth became for the philosopher not only a space of concentration and intellectual work, but also the place of his final rest before death.

The Burgundian Fireback of the Richelieu Era in the Context of the Thirty Years’ War

The Thirty Years’ War dealt a blow to economic activity and the financial capacity to maintain armies in virtually every country of Europe involved in it (with the exception of the Dutch Republic (Brázdil, Dobrovolný, Pfister et al., 2023, 1876)). This also affected cast-iron production: a number of blast furnaces ceased operations due to military actions and a shortage of skilled workers. Consequently, the number of fireback/stove plates for heating, produced under the cold years of the Brueghel period and the subsequent Maunder solar minimum, from territories that were within or adjacent to the zone of military operations, is limited.

Few fireback plates dated to the period of the Thirty Years’ War have come down to us. Let us draw attention to several plates from different regions of France, cast on the eve of France’s entry into the Thirty Years’ War.



Fig. 1. Fireback plate of 1634. Found in Avignon. Probably manufactured in the foundries of the Oche valley, former Duchy of Burgundy. Dimensions: 80 by 78 cm, thickness 3.5 cm, weight (actual) – 110 kg. Private collection. Source: photograph by the author

Among them, particular attention is drawn to a fireback plate of 1634, on which the royal coat of arms of France and Navarre is displayed in the style of cuir bouilli tooling. It is adorned with a pediment resembling a temple, resting on two turned baluster columns, typical primarily of the then Free County of Burgundy (Franche-Comté). The simplest explanation is therefore that this fireback plate of 1634 was manufactured precisely in Franche-Comté. The traditional motif of two columns could serve as a weighty argument in favour of such an assumption. But was the fireback plate, cast in 1634, truly of Comtois origin, all the more so on the eve of the French military campaign against the “Free County” of Franche-Comté, which was under the protection of the Holy Roman Empire? By this French military campaign is meant the Ten Years’ War (Fr. Guerre de Dix Ans) – a term introduced by Girardot de Noseroy to denote the period of 1636–1646 as a separate episode of the Thirty Years’ War.



Fig. 2. Fireback plate without a date, probably from the 1630s. The cliché with the coat of arms of France and Navarre “on leather” is identical to that observed on the plate of 1634; the coat of arms is placed in an architectural surround in the form of a temple with four columns and crowned with a cherub. Dimensions: 90 by 93 cm. Private collection. Source: curator.org. It may rather be a case of two plates having been manufactured in one and the same foundry workshop

Doubt is already raised by the very possibility of the coat of arms of France and Navarre appearing on a fireback plate from Franche-Comté, all the more so in 1634. On the one hand, this was a time of political neutrality that the elites of Franche-Comté had maintained in their relations with France for over a hundred years – since 1522 (Girardot de Noseroy, 1843, 10). At the same time, seeking to avoid military confrontation with France, certain representatives of the county were inclined to make gestures of goodwill towards the French crown, which was interpreted by opponents of such a policy in the region as a dangerous flirtation with one of the opposition political forces of France – Gaston of Orléans, the brother of King Louis XIII. Being in disgrace, the Duke of Orléans was compelled to leave France and sought permission for transit and asylum in Franche-Comté. It cannot be ruled out that certain lords – owners of blast furnaces – were interested precisely in such political manoeuvring, which the free imperial city of Besançon also occasionally displayed, harbouring a long-standing jealousy towards the county's capital – the city of Dole (Girardot de Noseroy, 1843, X, 23–28).

However, the French army of the Duke of Orléans, assembled on the territory of many villages of Franche-Comté in 1631 in opposition to King Louis XIII, sowed cruelty in the county and became a kind of prelude to the beginning of Louis XIII's Ten Years' War against Franche-Comté; its effective start may be dated as early as 1634, when the county gradually lost its neutrality. It is therefore hardly likely that after the cruelties perpetrated by the army of the Duke of Orléans in Franche-Comté, the local foundry workshops would have dared to cast fireback plates with the coat of arms of an unfriendly, and in fact hostile, kingdom.

The mere presence of columns on a fireback plate does not automatically assign it to Franche-Comté. This is a mistaken judgement often held by antique experts or owners of such objects. Columns, albeit infrequently, also appear on fireback plates manufactured in the foundries of the Duchies of Lorraine and Bar during the late rule of Duke Charles III (late 16th – early 17th century). Individual plates with columns, cast in the foundries of the Isère valley near Allevard, are also known. At the same time, certain artistic parallels in the decoration of fireback plates are traceable also in Ducal Burgundy, specifically in the metallurgical valley of the Oche river, where similarly styled plates with two columns supporting a temple pediment have likewise been recorded. We are therefore inclined to identify this plate as one that was cast in the province neighbouring Franche-Comté – Ducal Burgundy.

The fireback plate of 1634 refers us to a pivotal stage of the Thirty Years' War – the year when France was already openly preparing to enter the armed conflict against the Spanish Monarchy. This year was significant both for the history of France and for Europe as a whole. The year before, the troops of Louis XIII had invaded the Duchy of Lorraine and forced Duke Charles IV to abandon his domains; the fact that political asylum in the German lands was offered to him by the commander of the imperial army, Generalissimus Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583–1634) (Du Boys de Riocourt, 1861, 62), merely underscores the profound polarisation of the military-political forces of the time in Europe. Proceeding from the date “1634” inscribed on the fireback plate, it should be emphasised that it was in this very year that Wallenstein was killed, and the leading role in imperial command was assumed by Archduke Ferdinand, the future Emperor Ferdinand III. In that same year of 1634 the Swedish–Saxon coalition suffered a crushing defeat, which compelled the First Minister of France, Cardinal Richelieu, to take the final decision to enter the country into the war. In 1635 France – a Catholic state with pronounced hegemonic ambitions – officially entered the Thirty Years' War against the Habsburg dynasty, supporting the anti-Habsburg forces of Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. From that moment the war definitively lost its original religious character, transforming into a struggle between the leading European dynasties for hegemony.

The Fireback Plate of 1634 with the Coat of Arms of the Maniquet du Fayet Family. Isère Valley, Dauphiné

Yet another fireback plate of 1634 refers us to a different iron-ore region of France – the province of Dauphiné.

In the first decades of the 17th century (approximately up to 1630) blast furnaces were built along the Isère river valley in Dauphiné – at Touët, Lansy, Tancen, and in Adras; at this same time blast furnaces appeared at Vaulnaveys and Vizille. All of them operated on ore from the deposits of Allevard (Belhoste, 1992, 7).

In the 16th–17th centuries Allevard, as an ancient metallurgical centre, adopted smelting technologies from northern Italy, Styria, Carinthia, and above all from the metallurgical valley of the Upper Saône (Franche-Comté) with the participation of experienced masters and furnace operators from these regions (Bourgin, 1920, 170–171) (Belhoste, 1992, 7). As late as 1778, a representative of one of the leading foundry families of Franche-Comté, Jean-Renobert Monniot (Fr. Jean-Renobert Monniot), was invited by the President of the Parliament of Dauphiné to work for a year in Allevard for a high monthly salary (36 livres, as well as 400 livres for travel) (Lassus, 1987, 468). Thus, the foundry masters from Franche-Comté brought with them not only technical knowledge and skills in operating blast furnaces, but also production traditions and artistic approaches to the decoration of fireback plates, which were subsequently partially modified by the local masters of Allevard.

Below we shall examine the heraldic fireback plate, cast from pig iron in one of these blast furnaces, which represents yet another combination of Besançon columns within a temple.



Fig. 3. Fireback plate with the coat of arms of Charles Maniquet du Fayet or his son Prosper Maniquet du Fayet in high relief. Found in an old manor house.
Source: photograph by the author

The coat of arms on the plate belongs to the captain, seigneur du Fayet, Charles de Maniquet du Fayet (Fr. Charles de Maniquet du Fayet, ? – before 1651) or his son Prosper de Maniquet du Fayet (Fr. Prosper de Maniquet, seigneur du Fayet, 1616 – c. 1684), captain of the Richelieu regiment (Fr. capitaine au régiment de Richelieu).

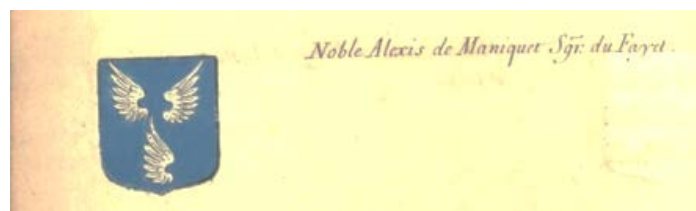


Fig. 4. Coat of arms of the house of Maniquet du Fayet.
Source: Pompery, 1906



Fig. 5. Coat of arms of Hector-Alexis de Maniquet, seigneur du Fayet (? – 1705), captain of cavalry of the Bourbon regiment (Fr. Capitaine de cavalerie au régiment de Bourbon). Source: Hozier Ch. BnF. Ms. 32238, Dauphiné, XI, 200

Members of the Maniquet family probably came to Dauphiné from Italy in the second half of the 15th century (Gallier, 1866, 5) (Pompery, 1906, 5). The provincial lords Maniquet du Fayet from Dauphiné appear at the royal court of Charles IX in the 1560s. The father of Charles de Maniquet, Hector de Maniquet, seigneur du Fayet, was chief steward (Fr. maître d'hôtel) of the sister of King Charles IX – Margaret of Valois (1567–1585) (Courcelles, 1820, T.2, 9) (Pompery, 1906, 5). King Charles IX and his mother Catherine de Medici entrusted Hector de Maniquet with a number of secret diplomatic missions (Gallier, 1866) (Pompery, 1906, 13). In 1573, at the Château du Fayet, in great secrecy, Marie Touchet (Fr. Marie Touchet), mistress of Charles IX, gave birth to a son – Charles de Valois (1573–1650) (Gallier, 1866, 7). The illegitimate son of the king was subsequently legitimised and received the title of Duke of Angoulême. In addition to chief steward, Hector de Maniquet was honoured to hold the position of Grand Master of the Royal Waters and Forests of France (Fr. grand maître des Eaux et Forêts de France) (Pompery, 1906, 6, 14–15).

As Anatole de Gallier (Fr. Anatole de Gallier) wrote, the ancient fief of du Fayet was situated at the foot of a wooded hill, overlooking the greyish waters of the Isère river and the Graisivaudan valley (Fr. Graisivaudan), opposite the mountain range beyond which lies Allevard (Gallier, 1866, 4). This part of the Alps, crowning the French border with Savoy, contained significant deposits of iron ore (Bourgin, 1920, 169). It is known that in 1571 Charles IX granted Hector de Maniquet extensive holdings in the royal Servette (Fr. Servette) near du Fayet (Gallier, 1866, 6), which were probably also used to supply the blast furnace at Allevard, which repeatedly ceased operations precisely due to a shortage of charcoal (Bourgin, 1920, 169–171).

We have no doubt that the fireback plate with the Maniquet du Fayet coat of arms was manufactured in the foundry workshops of Allevard and may have been intended for installation in the hearth of one of the manor houses of the seigneurs Maniquet du Fayet.

On one of the photographic postcards (early 20th century) of the Château du Fayet, a fireplace is depicted, the overmantel of which is decorated with a coat of arms bearing three demi-wings, which readily identifies the owners – the Maniquet du Fayet family. In the fireplace in this photograph can be seen a fireback plate of 1609 with a relief inscription conveying the content and purpose of such objects for the noble milieu: “PELLISSIER MA FORGÉE POUR LUSAGE DES FEUX POUR MONSEIGNEUR ET MAISTRE ET LUY DONNER PLAISIR CEST POUR LUY QUON MA FAIT ET GUILME FAUT FINIR DES FEUX IAY PRINS MA FORME ET LA PERDRAY PAR EUX LE PREMIER IENVIER 1609” (Pellissier – this more likely refers to a person, possibly a master founder – author – cast me for use in the fires, for my lord and master and to give him pleasure; it is

for him that I was made. I have taken my form – and shall perish through them (through the fires). The first of January 1609) (POP, PA00117118).



Fig. 6. Photograph of the fireback plate of 1609 from the Château du Fayet; state at the beginning of the 20th century. Photographer unknown. Source: Ministère de la Culture. Château du Fayet (Barraux, Isère). Plaque de cheminée, 1609. Notice PA00117118. Base POP – Plateforme Ouverte du Patrimoine

Evidently the owners of the family Château du Fayet, in which these fireback plates may have been located, during meals and conversations by the fire discussed an event that by its ceremony stirred not only France but the whole of Europe. This refers to the ritual of declaration of war – a practice that had not been employed by European states for several centuries. In May 1635 heralds in medieval attire bearing the coats of arms of France and Navarre (precisely the coat of arms depicted on the plate) set out from Paris; one of them solemnly delivered the act of declaration of war to the King of Spain, Philip IV, in Madrid. This gesture marked the beginning of the final act of the German tragedy in the Thirty Years' War. France, preserving historical traditions, knew how to wage war combining political calculation with a refined symbolic gesture.

Cast-iron fireback plates from the province of Dauphiné belong to the few regional traditions in France where production was not substantially interrupted and continued during the period of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Characteristic of these plates is a composition in which fleur-de-lis alternate with dolphins – the heraldic symbols of the province – along the left, right, and upper edges of the object; in the centre the year of casting was usually placed together with other iconographic elements.

Upper Marne, Champagne: Plates with the Coat of Arms of Richelieu

The firebacks from Dauphiné of 1634 may be considered “plates of the Richelieu era.” Attention should also be directed to plates bearing directly the coat of arms of Cardinal Richelieu. A cast-iron fireback plate with the coat of arms of Cardinal Richelieu, preserved in the Museum of Fine and Decorative Arts in Châlons-en-Champagne (Fr. Châlons-en-Champagne). Dimensions: width 1.28 m, height 1.07 m, depth 5 cm. As the founder of the military fleet, Richelieu established customs barriers to protect domestic iron production (1632), thinking above all of arming vessels with cast-iron cannons and cannonballs.

The ingenious Cardinal Richelieu, as “the sinew of the state” (Wedgwood), with his talents and resources conducted many events, buying numerous important figures of foreign states, and subsi-

dised Protestant Sweden. And all of this for the wellbeing and might of the French monarchy. Through defeats and setbacks in the Thirty Years' War, Richelieu managed to bring into France's hands the small Duchy of Savoy in the Alps, to secure from Catalonia the election of Louis XIII as Duke of Barcelona, independent of the Spanish crown, weakened Spain and the Spanish Netherlands, created a highly efficient professional nationally homogeneous army, one of the strongest in Europe, and made an attempt to bring the French Kingdom's control over Alsace, Lorraine, and Franche-Comté. "This cruel war," wrote the noted Comtois figure Jean Girardot de Noseroy,

"was exclusively Richelieu's affair, planned and conducted thanks to the subtlety of his mind, the absolute power he held over the arms, treasuries, and councils of France" (Girardot de Noseroy, 1843, 19).



Fig. 7. Fireback plate with the coat of arms of Cardinal Richelieu, preserved in the Museum of Art and Archaeology in Châlons-en-Champagne.

Period of manufacture – 1633–1642, probably in Upper Marne.

Dimensions: width 1.28 m, height 1.07 m, depth 5 cm. Photograph by the author



Fig. 8. Fireback plate with the coat of arms of Cardinal Richelieu. Originates from the house of Eugène Alluaud, artist and ceramicist from Crozant in the Creuse département, historical region of Limousin (Fr. Crozant en Creuse).

Period of manufacture – 1633–1642, probably in Upper Marne, province of Champagne. Dimensions: height 0.94 m, width 0.84 m, depth 4 cm.

Source: private collection, Claude Augustin

France's participation in the Thirty Years' War substantially undermined the socio-economic situation in the country, effectively nullifying a considerable part of the results of Henry IV's reforming efforts. By the time the war ended in 1648, France had once again set upon the path of deep destabilisation. Plague, cold, and famine, as well as the internal political unrest of the Fronde period, placed the state on the edge of survival.

Conclusions. The Thirty Years' War emerges as a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon that goes far beyond the bounds of a purely military conflict. Its geopolitical outcome was the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which laid the foundations of the system of state sovereignty and international law and determined the contours of European politics for the following two centuries. France emerged as one of the principal beneficiaries of the conflict, while the German lands bore catastrophic human and material losses.

The climatic factor – the cold depression of the Maunder Minimum – played a significant role in deepening the humanitarian consequences of the war: harvest failures, inflation, and climatic anomalies of the 1620s and 1630s substantially complicated the situation of the population. At the same time, the extreme winters of that era also influenced intellectual culture: the conditions of isolation in warmth described by René Descartes became the environment for the formation of his method of radical doubt.

The analysis of cast-iron fireback plates – Burgundian, Dauphinois, and Champenois – allows them to be viewed as authentic testimonies of the age: artefacts reflecting the state of regional metallurgy, the heraldic and diplomatic signals of their era, and the indirect presence of the great war in the everyday life of the French provinces. The introduction of these objects into scholarly circulation broadens the source base for the study of the material culture of early modern France.

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