

A Local Apocalypse—The Sack of Magdeburg (1631)

Abstract

When King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden and his army landed on German territory in June 1630, Catholic commanders saw Magdeburg on the Elbe River as the best base for defending their northern gains, keeping watch on Saxony and Brandenburg, and blocking the Swedish passage to the south. The seat of a secularized archbishopric, Magdeburg was then in Protestant hands. In late March 1631, Catholic field commanders concentrated their forces, some 40,000 strong, before Magdeburg, and on May 20, 1631, the storm began. Led by Count Gottfried Henry von Pappenheim (d. 1632), the troops quickly breached the walls and entered the city. During confused and disorganized street fighting, Pappenheim lost control of his men, and the garrison's commander, Dietrich von Falkenberg, was killed. Fires broke out and spread throughout the city, and invading troops plundered and murdered at will. As the wind fanned the flames, much of the city was laid in ashes, and perhaps two-thirds of Magdeburg's 30,000 inhabitants were either killed or subsequently died of starvation and exposure.

News of the sack of Magdeburg ran like wildfire through Protestant Europe. Reports of the tragedy were spread by at least twenty newsletters and nearly 250 pamphlets, as well as printed sermons, poems, and at least one drama. One of the immediate consequences of the sack of Magdeburg was the Elector of Brandenburg's alliance with Gustavus Adolphus, but the moral effects were certainly just as important. Bitterness and outrage stiffened the Protestants' desire for revenge, and the slogan "Magdeburg Quarter" (= no mercy) became famous. The most famous eyewitness account of the sack comes from a chronicle composed by Magdeburg mayor Otto Guericke (1602–86). Excerpts from his account are reproduced below.

Source

At this point, in the manner described by General Pappenheim^[1], a considerable force of men gathered on the wall near Reustadt [Neustadt?] and nearby in the city streets. Falkenberg^[2] was shot, and fires were set everywhere. By this time, it was too late for the city and all resistance was in vain. In several places, to be sure, citizens and soldiers gathered and resisted, but the Imperial forces received ever more reinforcements and had sufficient cavalry. The moat at the point of this bulwark was not yet finished, and the new wall was so low that the cavalry could ride over it into the city. At last, the invaders opened the Kröckenthor and let in the entire Imperial army and the army of the Catholic League—Hungarians, Croats, Poles, Haiduks,^[3] Italians, Spaniards, French, Walloons, North and South Germans, etc. Thus did the city and all of its inhabitants fall into the hands of and were placed at the mercy of their enemies. These had all become very violent and cruel, partly from their common hatred for those who adhered to the Confession of Augsburg, partly from having been abused, angered, and embittered after they had been fired upon with chain-shot^[4] and other missiles from the ramparts, as usually happens. Then the city was given over to murder, burning, plundering, torture, and beatings. Every enemy soldier demanded booty. When such men entered a house, if the master was able to give them something, he could save and protect himself and his household—until another came along to take whatever he had. Finally, when everything had been given away, and there was nothing left to give, the real trouble began. The soldiers began to beat and frighten; they threatened to shoot, skewer, hang, etc., so that had anything remained, either buried in the earth or locked up in a thousand castles, the people would have gotten it and brought it forth. During such rage, this wonderful and great city, like a princess over the entire land, stood completely in flames amidst terrible misery, unspeakable distress, and heartbreak. Accompanied by unspeakable, terrible cries and much hullabaloo, many thousands of innocent men,

women, and children were murdered and slaughtered in all sorts of merciless and wretched ways, so that words alone cannot adequately describe these acts nor tears adequately bemoan them.

This most terrible moment lasted not much more than two hours in the city, as the wind unexpectedly picked up and furiously spread the fire. While Count von Pappenheim is said to have ordered at first that the citizens and inhabitants be made anxious and fearful, later the vile rabble of soldiers showed no discretion and would not stop. By around ten o'clock in the morning everything was engulfed in flames, and by ten o'clock that night, the entire city, along with its beautiful town hall and all its churches, lay in ashes, just a heap of stones. Then, to avoid being burned with the city, the Imperial marauders had to flee the city and retreat to their camps.

On a single day, this renowned and noble city, an ornament of the entire land, was seen to go up in smoke and flames, and the inhabitants who remained with their wives and children were held captive and led before their enemies. Their cries were heard far and wide, as the wind spread the flames and ashes to Wanzleben, Egel, and other locations.[5] [...]

The women, young women, daughters, and maids, those who had no husbands, parents, or relatives who could ransom them, could still seek help and advice among high-ranking officers. This led to much evil, for some were raped and dishonored, others kept as concubines. [...]

The number of those murdered and killed within the city cannot be known with any certainty, because many lives were taken by sword and by fire. After this terrible holocaust, General Tilly[6] ordered that the burnt corpses and other bodies be gathered from the streets, walls, and other places and taken by wagons to be dumped into the Elbe. Furthermore, up to a year after this time, many dead bodies—as many as 5, 6, 8, 10 or more—were found in ruined cellars, where they had suffocated and died. The remnants of those who were badly burned and crushed by falling walls had to be cleared away with pitchforks. Hence, no one can know the total figure. In general, however, it is reckoned that, including the two suburbs and those killed by the Imperial cavalry—who not only took part in the storming of the city but later searched around in the cellars and houses—some 20,000 persons, old and young, lost their lives through such sufferings or in other ways. The dead bodies in front of the watergate that had been carried into the Elbe could not float away because there was no ripple or eddy there to move them. Many also bobbed around there for a long time, some with their heads out of the water, some with their hands stretched to the heavens, giving onlookers quite a horrid spectacle. This sight gave rise to much babbling, just as if the dead were still praying, singing, and crying to God for vengeance. People will gossip about visions, apparitions, and other such things, but no one wants to affirm the truth of them.

NOTES

[1] Gottfried Heinrich Count of Pappenheim (1594–1632), an Imperial commander.

[2] Dietrich von Falkenberg (d. 1631), the Swedish commander in Magdeburg.

[3] Haiduks were mercenary infantry from Hungary—trans.

[4] Two missiles joined by a chain—trans.

[5] These are towns in the district of Magdeburg—trans.

[6] Johan Tserclaes, Count of Tilly (1559–1632), was commander of the Imperial troops.

Source of original German text: Friedrich Wilhelm Hoffmann, *Geschichte der Belagerung, Eroberung und Zerstörung Magdeburg's von Otto von Guericke, Churfürstlich-Brandenburgischem Rath und Bürgermeister besagter Stadt*. Magdeburg: Baensch, 1860, pp. 82–87, available online at: <https://data.historicaltexts.jisc.ac.uk/view?pubId=bl-001533787>; reprinted in Bernd Roeck, ed., *Gegenreformation und Dreißigjähriger Krieg 1555–1648*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und

Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, Volume 4. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1996, pp. 296–301.

Translation: Julie K. Tanaka

Recommended Citation: A Local Apocalypse—The Sack of Magdeburg (1631), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-5458>> [April 03, 2025].