

THE
**IRON
PRINCESS**

Amalia Elisabeth
and the Thirty Years War

Tryntje Helfferich

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Note to the Reader

AMALIA ELISABETH'S name is usually spelled "Amalie" in the German literature, and sometimes "Amelie" or "Amelia." She herself spelled her name as "Amalia," so I have chosen that variant. For other proper names I have given the usual German or French spelling, though to avoid confusion I have made an exception for those place names, such as Hesse-Cassel or Brunswick (i.e., Hessen-Kassel and Braunschweig), where a customary English version exists. All translations throughout this work, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

Seventeenth-century currencies were not fully stable, but for the first years of the war an imperial thaler (Reichsthaler) was equal to approximately 2 French livres; after 1640 the exchange rate had slipped to 1:3. The Reichsthaler was usually a money of account, not of ordinary usage. For usage, there was the Gulden (fl.), equal to 0.66 Reichsthalers, which was usually subdivided into 60 Kreuzer (kr.) or 240 Pfennige or, as in Hesse, into 24 Albus or 288 Heller. For comparison purposes, in Baden-Württemberg in 1617 one goose cost 20 kr., in 1635 one liter of Munich brown beer cost 10 kr., and in 1640 three hundred liters of wine cost 13 fl. 35 kr., which was the same as fifty-one days' labor for an ordinary workman (for this see Jürgen Rauser, *Waldenburger Heimatbuch*, 14).

A note on dates: since not all states at this time, especially Protestant ones, had adopted Pope Gregory XIII's 1582 calendar reform, contemporary correspondence used either the old style or the new (a difference of ten days), or gave both dates. To assist readers, all dates appear here in the new style in the body of the text, and as double dates in the notes for correspondence that either used the old style or gave both dates.

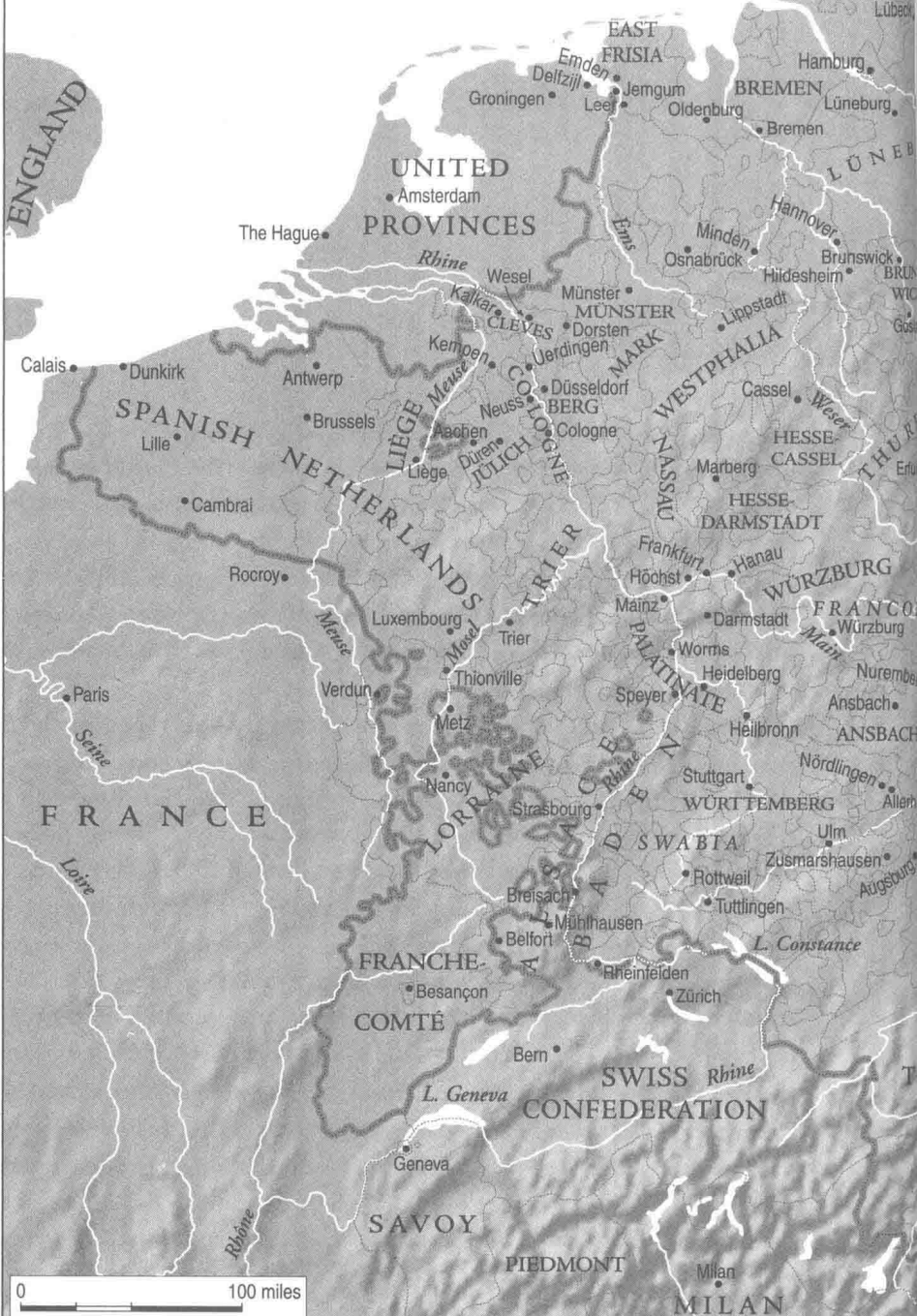
Holy Roman Empire, 1648

— Boundary of the Holy Roman Empire
- - - Other boundaries

North Sea

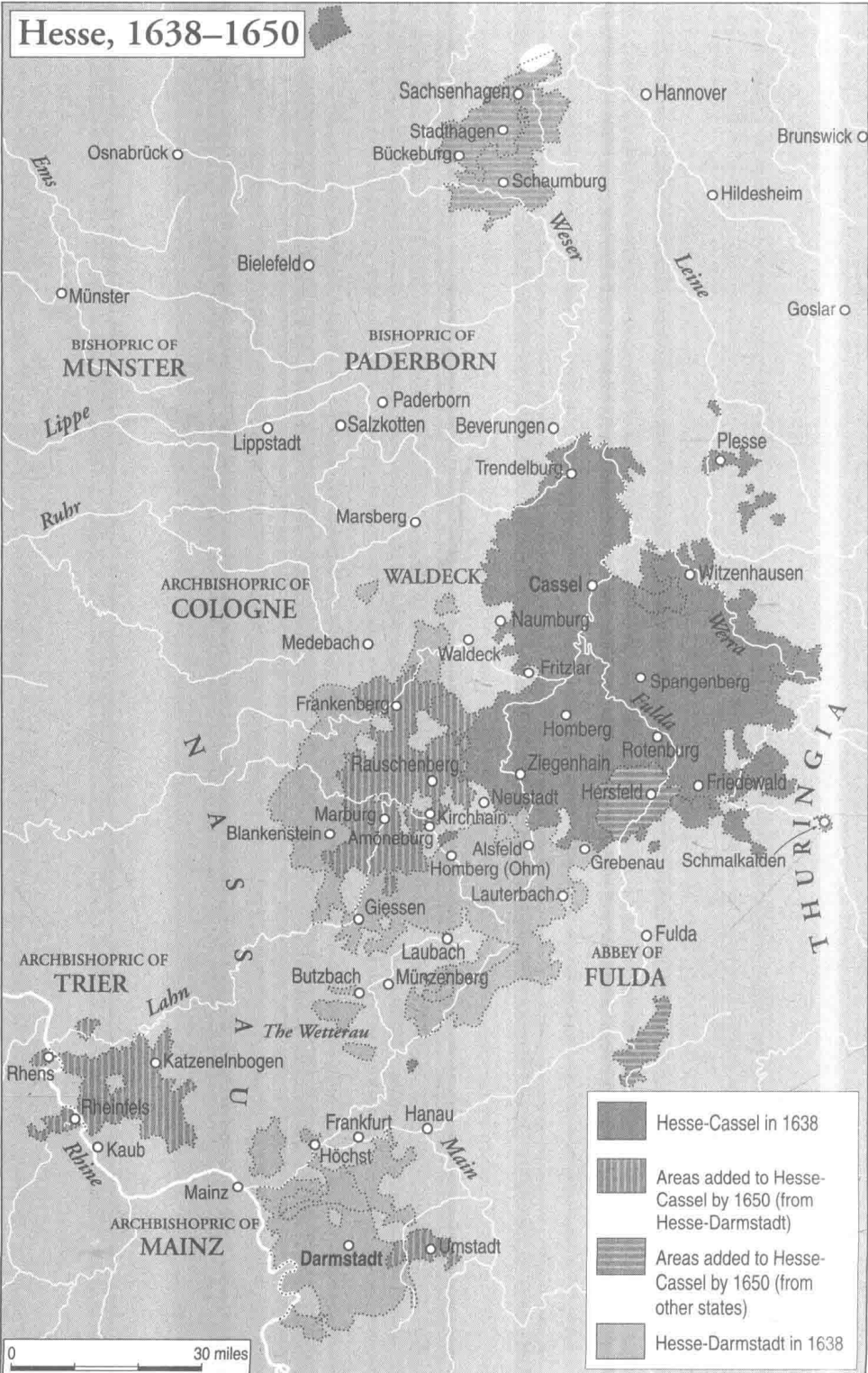
ENGLAND

DENMARK





Hesse, 1638–1650



-  Hesse-Cassel in 1638
-  Areas added to Hesse-Cassel by 1650 (from Hesse-Darmstadt)
-  Areas added to Hesse-Cassel by 1650 (from other states)
-  Hesse-Darmstadt in 1638

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Introduction

AT THE AGE of thirty-two, having served as wife to the landgrave of a small German state, having borne him twelve children, eight of whom had already died, having supported his challenge to the emperor and having fled with him into exile, and then having watched him slowly die, Amalia Elisabeth of Hesse-Cassel took the reins of power into her own hands. Her subsequent rule, which lasted from 1637 until 1650, encompassed some of the most violent and destructive years in European history. Her iron determination to undo her husband's mistakes, protect her children's birthright, and strengthen the Calvinist church propelled her squarely into the bloody fray.

To the latter seventeenth century, Amalia Elisabeth of Hesse-Cassel was a towering figure, one to whom, in the words of a contemporary, "the empire owes a great part of its liberty." And if she did not receive universal applause, she did possess an army of at least twenty thousand men, and was thus a woman of whom every European leader was exquisitely aware. Today, however, few, even among scholars of the Thirty Years War, know much if anything about her. Her story, along with its consequences and import, has been lost. I suspect this is largely because she was a woman, for her role in the Thirty Years War rivaled that of Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar, Cardinal Mazarin, or even King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. Indeed, she was singularly responsible not only for the shape and duration of the last decade of the war, but also for the form and

character of the treaty that ended it, and so for the future religious and constitutional makeup of the empire.¹

The Thirty Years War, with which Amalia Elisabeth's life would be so entangled, was unprecedented in European history both in its enormous scope and in its long-lasting repercussions. The issues involved in the war were many and complex. Hanging in the balance was the structure of the Holy Roman Empire, the future of Protestantism, and the territorial boundaries and security of almost every state in Europe. In the end, the war foiled the emperor's attempts at centralization, preserving each individual German state's right to conduct its own foreign policy; settled for good the problem of religious conflict within the empire; legalized German Calvinism; and completely redrew the map of Europe. The war also crippled the Spanish economy, saw the beginning of French attempts at hegemony, and set into motion the Franco-German quarrel over Alsace that would so define Europe's future. The war spared almost no one, for it was the first great pan-European war, involving in some way France, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, the United Provinces, the Spanish Netherlands, Bohemia, Poland, Transylvania, the papacy, the Italian states, Portugal, the Swiss Confederation, Russia, England, and even the Americas. The war had an especially brutal and lasting impact on the Holy Roman Empire, for it served as the principal battleground and as a result lost as much as 40 percent of its population. Even more than 350 years after the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, the Thirty Years War is a horror still fresh in cultural memory. A study of German villagers performed in the 1960s, for example, showed that many believed the Thirty Years War was the "greatest historical calamity to befall their villages."²

The cause of the war has long been a contentious issue, but confusion and disagreement over the rights, sovereignty, and nature of states, especially within the empire, was one of its driving forces. Indeed, it would be hard to explain this period without accounting for the shifting relationship between early modern estates (or parliaments) and states on the one hand, and between states and composite states or empires on the other, or without addressing the numerous adjustments such states were forced to make to their military, governmental, and diplomatic infrastructures in order to respond to the pressures of the time—particularly the structural problems brought on by the spread of Protestantism.³

The study of the war has also been obstructed by a major problem, that of sources. The extent and complexity of this war forced states to deal

with unprecedented political, military, economic, ideological, and social problems, which in turn led them to produce an unprecedented amount of correspondence, acts, minutes, and treaties, leaving the modern historian virtually swamped by the documentation. Furthermore, the international nature of the war meant that such paperwork was produced in numerous languages and is now scattered in archives all across Europe. This problem of sources has seriously hindered historians' efforts to grasp the war in its entirety, for it is impossible for any one person ever to read all the relevant documents. So although the Thirty Years War set the stage for some of the key religious and political developments in European history and its aftermath continues to shape modern European culture and conceptions of national identity, this extremely significant and fertile area of study has yet to be fully investigated. The classic English-language general texts, C. V. Wedgwood's *Thirty Years War* and Geoffrey Parker's *Thirty Years' War*, as well as Peter Wilson's recent *Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy*, are all excellent, despite being hindered by the difficulty of summarizing such a complex subject. It is particularly encouraging, as well, that German-language scholarship on the Thirty Years War and Peace of Westphalia is currently booming, relatively speaking, with splendid modern editions by Johannes Burkhardt, Fritz Dickmann, Konrad Repgen, and Heinz Duchhardt, to name just a few. Despite such efforts, however, when one considers the forests sacrificed for scholarship on World War I and II, the number of studies of the Thirty Years War is downright minuscule, and our knowledge of the period is sadly limited.⁴

Tied together with the problem of sources is the problem of breadth. Given the impossibility of covering such a huge war thoroughly, many scholars have narrowed their focus. In this, studies tend to slip into one of two patterns. Either they attempt to survey the entire war by stressing only the roles of the larger powers, such as France or Spain, or they produce an isolated and purely local, though much more in-depth, study of the period. This is a fair strategy, but its problems are clear. Either one oversimplifies the conflict by ignoring the many subtexts that helped to define the war, or one loses the larger perspective that gives meaning to local behavior. An example of this failure to integrate local and general history is the extremely common interpretation that the general war lasted thirty years, but the 1635 Peace of Prague ended its German phase. Popular authors such as Peter Milger put it more bluntly than most, stating that after 1635 "not only was there no longer war among the states of the

empire, there was also no longer any reason for it.” As comical as it may sound, he argued, the Thirty Years War lasted only seventeen years, with the succeeding thirteen years being fought between the great powers for their own ends, though admittedly on German soil. Yet to argue that the reasons for internal strife had been extinguished is patently untrue, and to argue that the German civil war had ended while Hesse-Cassel and other German rulers still fought, the problems of the Palatinate and the emperor’s hereditary lands remained unresolved, and the place of Calvinism within the empire was still vague, is ridiculous. And even though no serious scholar would go quite as far as Milger, most studies of the Thirty Years War lose interest in internal German conflicts after the year 1635 and turn instead to the larger French-Swedish-Spanish-imperial contest. This interpretation has colored scholarship for well over a century, with everyone from Friedrich Schiller to Michael Roberts arguing that, as Roberts stated, “the peace of May 1635 reconciled the emperor with so many of his enemies, opposition to the Habsburgs thereby fell almost exclusively into the hands of the foreigners.” Well, yes and no. Yes, there is no doubt that the 1635 Peace of Prague did bring most of the German princes to the side of the emperor. But no, the exceptions were significant enough to disprove the rule. Contemporaries were fully aware of the danger to peace posed by such exceptions, with the elector of Saxony himself warning the emperor that the war in Germany would continue as long as Hesse-Cassel and other German princes were excluded from the peace. The disinterest of many historians in the decade stretching from 1635 to 1644 (the beginning of the Congress of Westphalia) is caused, I believe, by an underappreciation of the role of the smaller states in the war. So even though a handful of German states continued to fight the Habsburg emperors, and even though the war might well have ended soon after 1638 had the emperor agreed to satisfy Amalia Elisabeth’s demand for religious security, the full significance of these facts has as yet failed to affect many historians’ views.⁵

In order to overcome these twin problems—impossibly numerous sources and a subsequent neglect among historians to incorporate the actions of the smaller states into the larger historiography—this study does not attempt to survey the entire war or the motivations of every individual who fought it. Instead, this study covers only the last third of the war, and that from the viewpoint of one key participant. Such a narrowing of focus has allowed me to limit the overwhelming number of sources neces-

sary while simultaneously permitting a much more extensive range of documentation. The foundation of this project has been the Hessische Staatsarchiv Marburg with its wealth of unpublished personal and diplomatic correspondence (especially Amalia Elisabeth's own), documents and letters of Hessian councilors, and documents relating directly to Hesse-Cassel's prosecution of the war. But in order to use this investigation to make a larger argument about the Thirty Years War, I have also incorporated numerous documents from the other key parties involved in the war and in the peace negotiations, especially the instructions and correspondence of the French, Swedish, and imperial sides, and of other smaller German states. These additional sources from across Europe have not only provided valuable insights into the goals and policies of the landgravine and of those in her employ, they have also allowed a more complete analysis of the interplay among states and the impact these interactions had on the course of the war.

The precipitating moment for this study occurred in the autumn of 1637, when at the death of her husband, Wilhelm V, Amalia Elisabeth suddenly became regent to their young son and heir. The landgravine also deftly stepped into her husband's place as protector of Hesse-Cassel's political, religious, dynastic, and diplomatic interests, despite the considerable opposition of her own nobility and advisors and the initial disdain of the international community. With astonishing skill she continued and forwarded a long and bloody war against half of Europe while playing off against each other such major powers as Sweden, France, and the emperor. In the end, she managed not only to save Hesse-Cassel from destruction, but even enlarged its boundaries. Furthermore, her considerable influence with the larger powers meant that her war aims significantly affected both the nature and the outcome of the war, and thus the very face of Europe. For example, her stubborn championship of the rights of the smaller German states played a key role in shaping the future constitutional structure of Germany, while her powerful defense of Calvinism ensured its acceptance with Lutheranism as a tolerated, and legitimate, religion within the empire, an outcome of immense importance for the future of both Germany and Europe.

In this, Amalia Elisabeth was quite different from most female leaders of the time. As the ubiquity of war and the ravages of disease killed numerous male leaders at an early age, many women became regents or, less often, rulers in their own right. And while there are certainly examples of

strong-willed and powerful regents or queens, many such women lost, or delegated, their power to male relatives or councilors. Queen Christina of Sweden, for example, depended utterly on her prime minister, Oxenstierna, while the French queen regent, Anne of Austria, allowed her government to be controlled by Cardinal Mazarin. Amalia Elisabeth, however, both firmly rejected the assistance of well-meaning male rescuers and withstood the furious legal and military attacks on her regency by her enemies. That she would desire to do such a thing is interesting, but that she could succeed is astounding.⁶

Amalia Elisabeth's motivations in taking on the gargantuan task of ruling in her husband's place are tied to her conception of her role. First and foremost, she saw her role as that of mother and protector of her children. Thus her principal duty as regent, she told her estates, was to "perform and administer such a high and difficult office" in order to ensure the "well-being of our beloved children" and the "restoration of their dear fatherland." In this, the preservation of the honor and standing of the house of Hesse-Cassel was as important as the preservation of lands, peoples, and rights. Even when offered a peace that might have maintained most of her territory intact, for example, she refused partially on the grounds that any concession, however minor, would irreparably harm her children by forever demeaning the honor of their house. This role of mother-protector was one that she stressed frequently in her correspondence, and one that seemed to make the most sense to contemporary observers. "Her only plan and intention," a French diplomat wrote, "is to conserve and advance her children. This is where all her cares and worries go." Motherhood and its requirements thus served to justify her actions to those who might otherwise deplore them.⁷

Amalia Elisabeth's war aims stemmed not only from her desire to support and maintain the inheritance, rights, and honor of her children, but also from her belief that she must accept her husband's charge to take up his roles along with her own. So in addition to her responsibility toward her children, she also agreed to uphold her husband's legacy, take responsibility for his state, serve as military and political leader to his people, and become protector of the state church and head of the Hessian dynasty. She must be both mother and prince. This was a heavy burden, as her husband's death had left her stranded with her two sons in the Hessian military quarters in East Frisia, surrounded by an army that would quickly mutiny at the least suggestion of their ruler's weakness or inability to pay.

Her infant daughters, along with the greatest part of her husband's governing council, were besieged in the landgrave's resident city of Cassel. Imperial armies roamed the Hessian countryside, burning and looting, and Landgrave Georg of Hesse-Darmstadt, head of a rival branch of the family, waited less than a week after the death of his cousin Wilhelm V to inform the panicked councilmen that they must either immediately surrender the country and the administration of Hesse-Cassel to him or die a slow and painful death.

Amalia Elisabeth told her councilors that she would gladly renounce her burden if she could, but this was not possible. She had a responsibility to God, the world, her husband's memory, and above all her "beloved children along with their land and people," to take up the regency and administration. To set her duty aside would violate everything she believed in. "I would rather take the most extreme measures," she wrote, "than to agree to anything that is so against my honor and reputation, against the love and devotion that I owe to my beloved husband who now rests with God and to the dear children he has left behind, and also against my own conscience."⁸

Amalia Elisabeth's conscience and deep belief in her responsibilities toward God are further keys in understanding her actions. Her militant Calvinism, with its stress on humankind's absolute duty to obey God's commands and to struggle always to safeguard the true church, was intertwined with all of her decisions. She saw herself as one of those singular women "raised up by divine authority," in Calvin's words (paraphrasing Isaiah 49:23), to be "the nursing mothers of the church." Thus by taking up the Hessian administration and continuing the war she was doing God's work, fulfilling her destiny as chosen by God. In other matters, however, God's will was unclear, and she could only follow her conscience. "I have no other means," she wrote,

than humbly to beg God from my heart that He give me and others inspiration for what we should do. For things are very difficult, and it is particularly hard to make a decision. But when one should choose the better of two evils, in my small opinion if the one is somewhat better than the other, and one might emerge from it maintaining so much the better faithfulness, then there is nothing left to say. For God's counsel, which is known only to Him, is still hidden from our eyes.

Yet while she firmly believed that God would “not abandon such a righteous affair or all honest hearts who depend on and support Him,” but rather would “gloriously succor, bless, and rescue them,” she also believed that life on earth was a painful struggle and that God required her personal sacrifice. “I am, and will remain,” she wrote, “a poor martyr in this world as long as it shall please God.” For God had given her a heavy cross to bear. He had placed onto her frail shoulders the duty not only to preserve and even to extend the true church in her own time, but also to ensure that this church would be safe for generations to come. She could thus not abandon such a weighty responsibility, or the fate of her state or her sons, to any man, but instead meekly submitted to God’s awesome power and put all her hopes and trust in the irresistible force of Providence.⁹

In this effort Amalia Elisabeth pursued a strategy different from many of her German coreligionists. For while the principal strategy of the Reformed (as German Calvinists, influenced greatly by not just John Calvin, but also Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, called themselves) had been to argue that the Reformed faith was merely a variant of Lutheranism—which enjoyed legal recognition and protection under imperial law—Amalia Elisabeth believed this gave the emperor a dangerous loophole for future persecution. He could merely declare that the German Reformed were not, in fact, Lutherans, and all protections and rights would disappear. Both the present and future liberty of her church, therefore, depended entirely on the good will and word of the Catholic emperor—something she thought extremely dubious. Given the clear and continuing enmity of both Catholics and Lutherans to Calvinists, she argued, an unwritten or even stated toleration would not be nearly enough. Only by forcing the emperor to grant specific recognition of Calvinism as a separate, distinct, and legal religion of the empire would she and her church gain lasting security. By stubbornly refusing to allow her such religious satisfaction, the emperor ensured that she would keep fighting, and so lost a priceless opportunity to end the war in his favor a full decade before its actual conclusion. While some scholars have downplayed the larger significance of religion in the war, the Hessians had no doubt of it. “We see clearly,” the Cassel secret council wrote the landgravine in 1638, “that the entire peace project rests almost entirely and solely on the point of religion.”¹⁰

The legal recognition of Calvinism was an issue not just of faith, however, but of internal territorial control and princely sovereignty—“the German liberties,” as Amalia Elisabeth and her allies termed them—the