**The General Crisis of 17th Century Europe**

The General Crisis is a term used by some historians to describe the period of widespread global conflict and instability that occurred from the early 17th century to the early 18th century in [Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe) and in more recent historiography in the world at large.

The term was coined by [Eric Hobsbawm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Hobsbawm) in his pair of 1954 articles, "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century", published in [*Past and Present*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Past_and_Present_%28journal%29).

**Definition**

As a historiographic concept, the place of the general crisis was cemented by [Hugh Trevor-Roper](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Trevor-Roper) in a 1959 article entitled "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century" published in the same journal. Hobsbawm discussed an economic crisis in Europe; Trevor-Roper saw a wider crisis, "a crisis in the relations between society and the State".[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_General_Crisis#cite_note-FOOTNOTEAston196567-2) Trevor-Roper argued that the middle years of the 17th century in Western Europe saw a widespread breakdown in politics, economics and society caused by a complex series of demographic, religious, economic and political problems. In the "general crisis", various events such as the [English Civil War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Civil_War), the [Fronde](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fronde%22%20%5Co%20%22Fronde) in [France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_France), the climax of the [Thirty Years' War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years%27_War) in the [Holy Roman Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Roman_Empire) and revolts against the [Spanish Crown](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Spanish_monarchs) in [Portugal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Portugal), [Naples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naples) and [Catalonia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catalonia) were all manifestations of the same problem. The most important cause of the "general crisis",[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_General_Crisis#cite_note-3) in Trevor-Roper’s opinion, was the conflict between "Court" and "Country"; that is between the increasingly powerful centralising, bureaucratic, sovereign princely states represented by the court, and the traditional, regional, land-based aristocracy and gentry representing the country. He saw the intellectual and religious changes introduced by the [Renaissance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance) and the [Protestant Reformation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_Reformation) as important secondary causes of the "general crisis".

There were various controversies regarding the "general crisis" thesis between historians. Some simply denied the existence of any such crisis. For instance, Hobsbawm saw the problems of 17th-century Europe as being social and economic in origin, an emphasis that Trevor-Roper would not concede. Instead, he theorised that the 'General Crisis' was a crisis of state and society, precipitated by the expansion of bureaucratic offices in the Sixteenth century.

Subsequent historians interested in the General Crisis include [Geoffrey Parker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Parker_%28historian%29), who has authored multiple books on the subject.

**Global patterns**

Many historians have argued the 17th century was an era of crisis. Today there are historians who promote the crisis model, arguing it provides an invaluable insight into the warfare, politics, economics] and even art of the seventeenth century. The [Thirty Years' War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years%27_War) (1618–1648) focused attention on the massive horrors that wars could bring to entire populations. The 1640s in particular saw more state breakdowns around the world than any previous or subsequent period. The [Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish%E2%80%93Lithuanian_Commonwealth), the largest state in Europe, [temporarily disappeared](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Deluge_%28history%29). In addition, there were secessions and upheavals in several parts of the [Spanish Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Empire). In Britain there were rebellions in every part of the [Stuart monarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Stuart) ([Kingdom of England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_England), [Kingdom of Scotland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Scotland), [Kingdom of Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Ireland), and [British America](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_America)). Political insurgency and a spate of popular revolts seldom shook the foundations of most states in Europe and Asia. More wars took place around the world in the mid-17th century than in almost any other period of recorded history. The crises spread far beyond Europe—for example [Ming China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ming_China), the most populous state in the world, collapsed.

China's Ming dynasty and Japan's [Tokugawa shogunate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokugawa_shogunate) had radically different economic, social, and political systems. However, they experienced a series of crises during the mid-17th century that were at once interrelated and strikingly similar to those occurring in other parts of the world at the same time. [Frederic Wakeman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederic_Wakeman) argues that the crisis which destroyed the Ming dynasty was partly a result of the climatic change as well as China's already significant involvement in the developing world economy. Bureaucratic dishonesty worsened the problem. Moreover, the [Qing dynasty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qing_dynasty)'s success in dealing with the crisis made it more difficult for it to consider alternative responses when confronted with severe challenges from the West in the 19th century.

**Climate change**

The General Crisis overlaps fairly neatly with the [Little Ice Age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Ice_Age) whose peak some authorities locate in the 17th century. Of particular interest is the overlap with the [Maunder Minimum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maunder_Minimum), [El Niño](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Ni%C3%B1o%E2%80%93Southern_Oscillation) events and an abnormal spate of volcanic activity. Climatologists such as David Rind and Jonathan Overpeck have hypothesised that these three events are interlinked.[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_General_Crisis#cite_note-17) Across the Northern Hemisphere, the mid-17th century experienced almost unprecedented death rates. Geoffrey Parker has suggested that environmental factors may have been in part to blame, especially the global cooling trend of this period.[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_General_Crisis#cite_note-FOOTNOTEParkerSmith2008-18) David D. Zhang et al provide a detailed analysis here.

**Demographic decline**

During this period there was a significant decline in populations particularly in Europe and China. The cause for this demographic decline is complicated and significantly unproven; but, war, climate change and migration are the main factors that contributed to this population crisis. War ravaged Europe for almost the entirety of the century with no major state avoiding war in the 1640s. Some states saw very few years of peace; for example Poland only saw 27 years of peace, the [Dutch Republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_Republic) 14, France 11, and Spain only 3. An example of the impact of war on demography in Europe is Germany, whose population was reduced by approximately 15% to 30% in the [Thirty Years' War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years%27_War). Another factor for the demographic decline in Europe was the spate of climatic events that dramatically affected the food supply and caused major crop failure in the marginal farmland of Europe. During this period there was a drop of 1–2 °C, which coincides with the [Maunder Minimum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maunder_Minimum) and frequent, large spates of volcanism which acted to drop temperatures enough to cause crop failures in Europe. Crop failures were met with a wave of urban migration that perpetuated unsustainable urban populations and caused in some areas a [Malthusian crisis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malthusian_catastrophe). Although in some areas the early stages of the subsistence crises were not necessarily Malthusian in nature, the result usually followed this model of agricultural deficit in relation to population.