**CRISIS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

Echoing contemporary diarists and chroniclers, recent historians have depicted the seventeenth century as particularly troubled. Two essays that appeared in the British journal*Past and Present* during the 1950s have proved particularly influential. Though based on different premises and propounding distinct interpretations, both portrayed a systemic [Europe](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/oceans-continents-and-polar-regions/oceans-and-continents/europe)-wide "general crisis" rooted in common economic distress and political unrest but producing a variety of outcomes.

Eric J. Hobsbawm's essay (printed in two parts in 1954, as "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the Seventeenth Century" and "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century, II") addressed the then heated debate on the transition to capitalism. Whereas many participants held that the feudal economy had collapsed at the time of the [Black Death](https://www.encyclopedia.com/medicine/diseases-and-conditions/pathology/black-death), Hobsbawm argued that much of the old socioeconomic order had been perpetuated during the booming "long sixteenth century." By the end of that period, however, the feudal elements fatally obstructed growth. The ensuing broad and deep "retrogression" created opportunities for structural change, a possibility realized most completely in [England](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/british-and-irish-political-geography/england), where political revolution removed obstacles to profound economic transformation.

Hugh Trevor-Roper (1959; "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century") instead focused on confrontations that pitted the [Renaissance](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/renaissance) fiscal, political, intellectual, and moral system ("court") against reform-minded opponents ("country"). This "crisis in the relations between society and the State" eventually spawned both the [Enlightenment](https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/philosophy/philosophy-terms-and-concepts/enlightenment) and a range of radical, stabilizing, and indecisive political initiatives.

Both articles inspired searching critiques as well as widespread approval. Early modernists have questioned the generality, severity, and duration of crisis proposed in each hypothesis. The Soviet historian A. D. Lublinskaya contended that the heterogeneity of economic structures and trends across Europe (or even within individual states) precluded the appearance of general crisis on any level. Like Roger B. Merriman, whose earlier*Six Contemporaneous Revolutions* (1938) found that only chronology linked mid-seventeenth-century revolts, more recent scholars posit discrete clusters of movements generated by highly specific conflicts and following diverse trajectories. Rather than a general seventeenth-century movement drawing on common sources and exhibiting similar patterns, they suggest, a multiplicity of crises occurred in numerous places at different times. Nor did all social groups experience crisis: wage-earners, for example, saw their living standards improve. The gravity of the purported crisis has also been disputed. Immanuel Wallerstein maintains that economic downturn represented only a phase of contraction and consolidation within a capitalist world-system that had already substantially come into existence during the sixteenth century. Many Dutch historians minimize the extent of distress faced by the Dutch Republic during its "[Golden Age](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/classical-literature-mythology-and-folklore/folklore-and-mythology/golden-age)," and England's economic—as opposed to political—problems have been presented as relatively mild and short-lived.

A period of difficulties extending across a century or more strikes some scholars as too protracted to be usefully characterized as a crisis (usually understood as an abrupt and dramatic turning point), especially when stagnation and instability rather than deep depression typified much of the time, with open revolt grouped in just a few decades. John Elliott has claimed that the sixteenth century saw more rebellions than the seventeenth century, and that those occurring in the 1560s were more severe than in any subsequent decade. Taking a longer view has convinced some historians, in fact, that crisis was endemic to the early modern period as a whole rather than uniquely defining any single century.

More prevalent are amplifications and refinements of the crisis idea. Drawing on Paul Hazard's description of intellectual ferment in the years around 1700 and Roland Mousnier's identification of a broad "century of crisis," Theodore Rabb outlines an era of turmoil, insecurity, and uncertainty extending from the early sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century that was resolved by institutional transformation and intellectual reorientation exemplified by the "scientific revolution." Scholars of central Europe have reassessed the Thirty Years' War, previously regarded as an aggravating rather than basic causal factor of seventeenth-century troubles. They have reinstated that conflagration as both a principal agent of crisis throughout Europe, due to the enormous growth of taxes it provoked in all states involved, and—thanks to its severity, duration, and expense—the fulcrum for far-reaching institutional innovation.

The crisis theory has also helped illuminate critical aspects of seventeenth-century history in places slighted in the original essays. Some of these have been European peripheries—for example, [Scotland](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/british-and-irish-political-geography/scotland) and Muscovy—while others have been areas, such as Italy and Iberia, usually regarded as especially hard hit yet little altered by seventeenth-century developments. Still others have been located outside Europe. Hobsbawm proposed that overseas colonies participated in a Europe-centered crisis and considered the creation of fresh plantations and settlements one of its crucial effects. But he discussed this "new form of colonialism" only in terms of markets for manufactures that provided dynamism for metropolitan European economic growth. Nevertheless, historians of [New Spain](https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/latin-america-and-caribbean/mexican-history/new-spain) have employed the idea of crisis to illuminate Latin American economic history, though no consensus yet obtains among them. Elsewhere, Jack Goldstone holds that a concatenation of government bankruptcies, elite discontent, and popular rebellions against a background of long-term demographic pressure and price inflation culminated in "state breakdown" in absolutist states across Eurasia—including the [Ottoman Empire](https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/modern-europe/turkish-and-ottoman-history/ottoman-empire) and China as well as [France](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/french-political-geography/france). In contrast, while acknowledging a 1630s–1640s subsistence crisis that stretched from Atlantic to Pacific, Niels Steensgaard claims that the location, course, and consequences of the larger and longer crisis signaled a European "new departure."

Numerous empirical and theoretical aspects of the seventeenth-century crisis therefore remain subject to debate. Moreover, neither Hobsbawm's Marxist teleological stage theory of economic development nor Trevor-Roper's court/country distinction command much assent today. But the concept has been widely if selectively appropriated and—like all intellectually fecund theorizations—continues to stimulate new research and new explanations of existing data. As a result, the outlines of a new interpretation are beginning to appear. It emphasizes continuities—for example, the acceleration of previously initiated regional differentiation, agrarian specialization and commercialization, and ruralization of industry. And, while not denying that significant retrenchment was forced on states and economies, it highlights concomitant opportunities, adjustments, and adaptations to new conditions. Thereby it contributes to a more discriminating understanding of both the significance of the seventeenth century and the nature of crisis in the early modern world.