

From Reich to Revolution

German History,
1558–1806

Peter H. Wilson

EUROPEAN HISTORY IN PERSPECTIVE

From Reich to Revolution

European History in Perspective

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German History, 1558–1806

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Preface

German history after the Reformation is often passed over quickly as a confusing period of political failures before the emergence of powerful states like Prussia give some coherence to the national narrative. Emperor Charles V's failure to solve Germany's political and religious problems by 1558 seems to condemn the country to an inevitable descent into the chaos of the Thirty Years War and the subsequent partition of the Reich, or Holy Roman Empire, into virtually independent states until its final collapse in 1806.

This book treats the period 1558–1806 as something more than a precursor to the Napoleonic era and the rise of Bismarck's second Reich. It weaves insights from new research into a comprehensive account of German social, political, economic and cultural development, addressing fundamental questions such as how the apparently fragile structure of the Reich survived the trauma of the Thirty Years War and why, despite gross social inequality, Germany did not experience a mass French-style revolution.

The first chapter explains the importance of this period to the broader debate on Germany's historical development. The second examines the country's complex political and religious structure, including the key institutions developed between 1480 and 1550 that shaped German life until the end of the Reich. The material and social conditions affecting ordinary Germans are explained in Chapter 3, which also addresses issues of gender, home and community. The next two chapters examine the causes, conduct and consequences of political and religious strife in the century after 1550, and indicate the continued flexibility and vitality of imperial institutions after 1648. The interaction between ordinary people and wider political, social and economic change forms the subject

of the next two chapters, before the last examines major developments of the century preceding the Reich's dissolution in 1806.

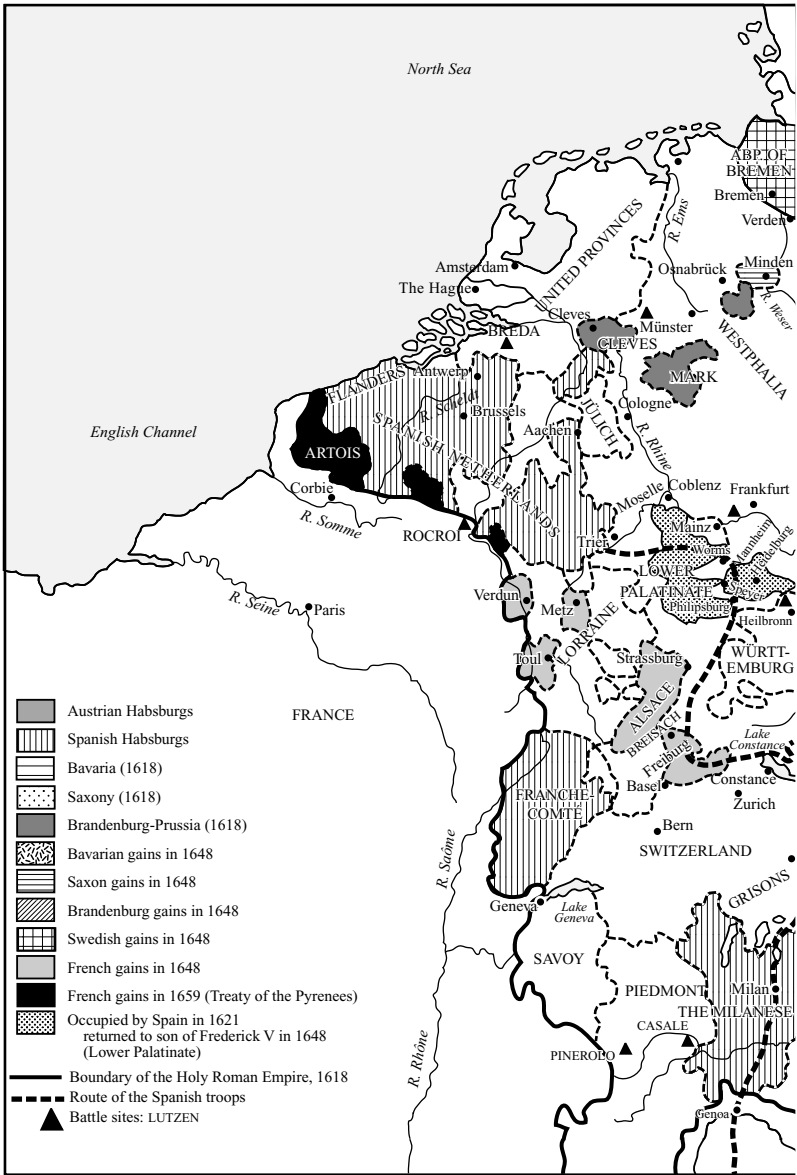
While the Reich provided a measure of political unity to central Europe, it was not synonymous with Germany, and many of its inhabitants spoke other languages. It is hoped that the following pages acknowledge this diversity by paying proper attention to these other cultures and lands both within the Reich and associated with German rulers, including Hungary, Switzerland, the Netherlands and parts of Italy. Where place names have different forms, the German version has generally been used, simply because this is usually the one most familiar to Anglophone readers. Individuals are referred to by their original German names, except where Anglicised versions have been established in the wider literature. Technical terms are italicised and explained when first mentioned in the text, and the more important are also included in a glossary. Notes have been kept to a minimum, concentrating on important recent works and those that guide the general reader to the more specialist literature. Additional material can be accessed through the suggested further reading.

This book has taken shape over several years, during which I have benefited from the advice of many good people. I would particularly like to thank Karin Friedrich and an unnamed American reader for helpful comments on the entire typescript, as well as the participants of conferences and symposia at Birmingham, Essen, and Oxford Universities and the Institute for Historical Research, London, where parts of the argument were rehearsed. Cohorts of students at both Newcastle and Sunderland have posed searching questions, forcing me to rethink my presentation of German history. Staff at Sunderland's Murray Library have performed their customary miracles in locating obscure material. Series editor Jeremy Black, together with Terka Acton and her colleagues at Palgrave Macmillan, have stuck with this project and provided constant encouragement. Finally, Eliane, Alec, Tom and now Nina have tolerated my prolonged absences in front of the word processor with more than their fair share of good humour.

List of Abbreviations

<i>BDLG</i>	<i>Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte</i>
<i>CEH</i>	<i>Central European History</i>
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>FBPG</i>	<i>Forschungen zur brandenburgisch- und preußischen Geschichte</i>
fl.	florin, or Gulden
<i>GH</i>	<i>German History</i>
<i>HJ</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
<i>HJb</i>	<i>Historisches Jahrbuch</i>
<i>HZ</i>	<i>Historische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>IHR</i>	<i>International History Review</i>
<i>IPM</i>	<i>Instrumentum Pacis Monasteriense</i> – Peace of Münster, 1648
<i>IPO</i>	<i>Instrumentum Pacis Osnabrugense</i> – Peace of Osnabrück, 1648
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Modern History</i>
<i>JGMOD</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands</i>
<i>MIÖG</i>	<i>Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung</i>
<i>MÖSA</i>	<i>Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
tlr	taler
<i>VSWG</i>	<i>Vierteljahreshefte für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte</i>
<i>ZBLG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte</i>
<i>ZGO</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins</i>
<i>ZHF</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für historische Forschung</i>
<i>ZNRG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für neuere Rechtsgeschichte</i>

<i>ZSRG GA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte Germanistische Abteilung</i>
<i>ZWLG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für württembergische Landesgeschichte</i>
<i>ZSRG KA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte Kanonistische Abteilung</i>

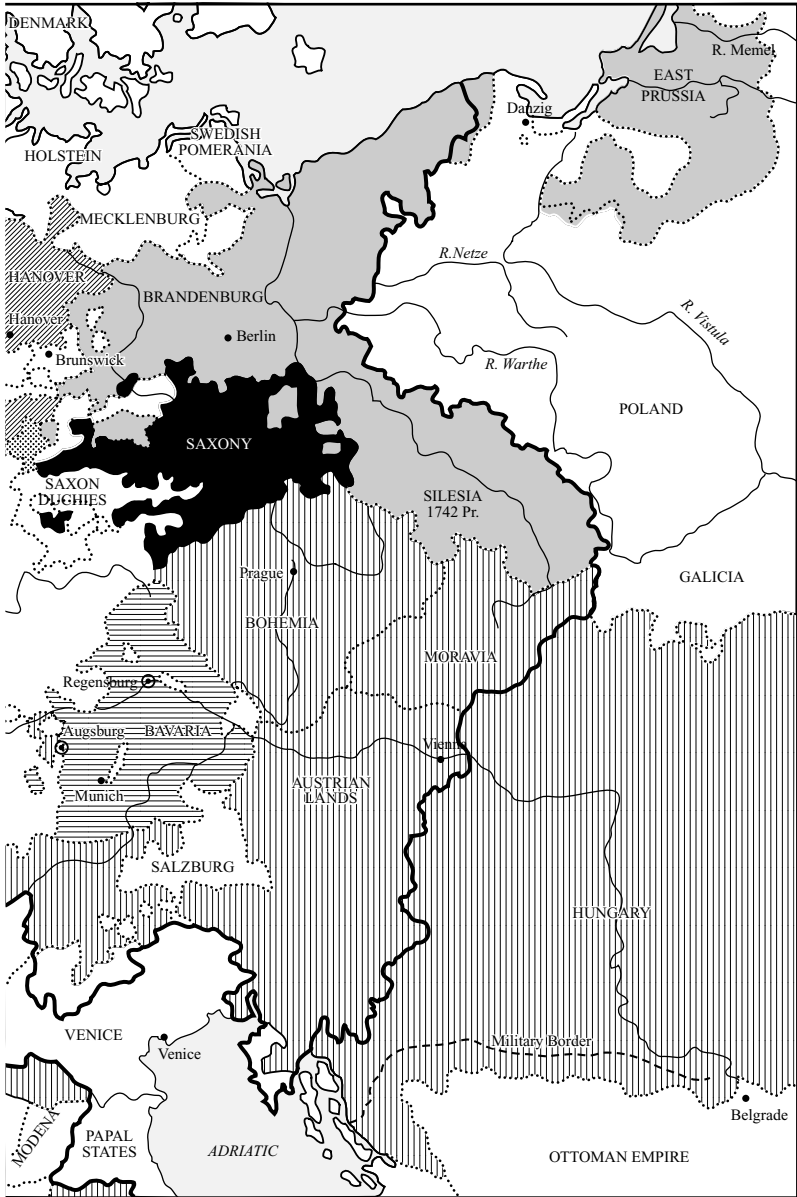


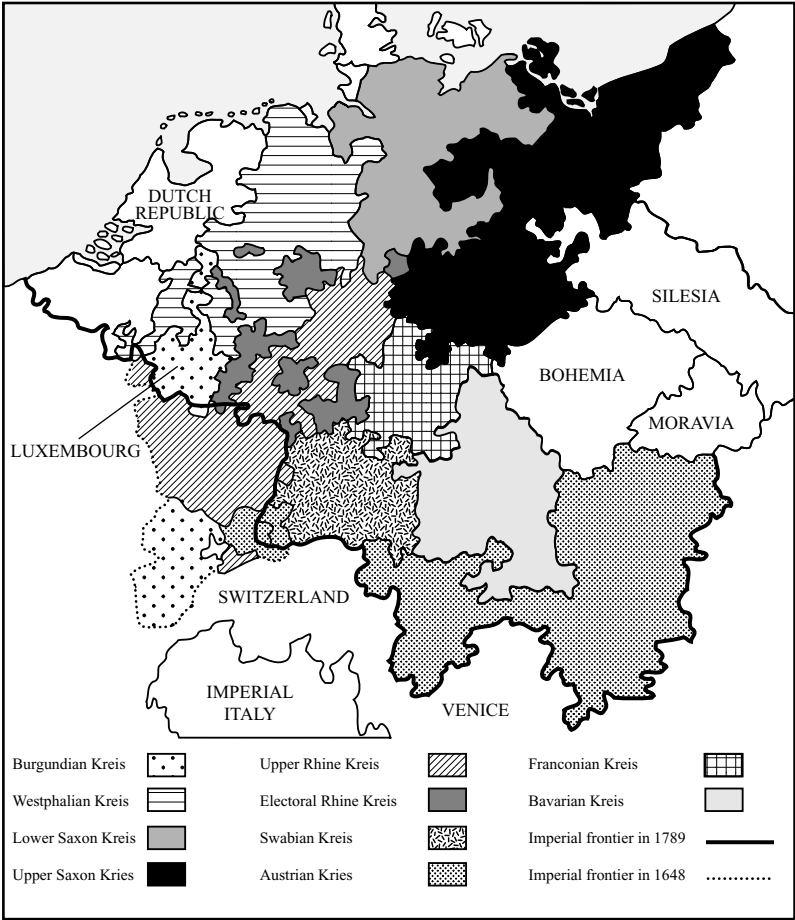
Map 1 The Reich in the Thirty Years War





Map 2 The Reich in 1745 (from Peter H. Wilson, *German Armies: War and German Politics, 1648–1806* (1998; reproduced by permission of UCL Press))





Map 3 The Kreise (from Peter H. Wilson, *German Armies: War and German Politics, 1648–1806* (1998; reproduced by kind permission of UCL Press))

Chapter 1: The Peculiarities of German History

1.1 Writing the German Past

Germany's special path?

Hitler cast a long shadow over German history. The horrors of the Holocaust demanded an explanation and subsequent generations have reached deep into the German past to find one. While they concentrated primarily on Germany's involvement in the two world wars, their writing shaped interpretations of that country's earlier development. Since the reunification of the two post-war German states in 1991, there has been an understandable impatience within Germany to close this page of history and move on. Those born before Hitler's seizure of power are now well into their seventies at least and it is largely their grandchildren who have the main say in government, business and culture. History has also changed as an academic discipline. New approaches, together with further research, have opened other questions that require answers.

It is entirely appropriate that current research should reflect these changes. Yet, the legacy of the recent past cannot be easily dismissed by someone wishing to understand early modern German history. First, the reader is confronted by a large body of literature published since the 1940s that reflects the concerns of those decades. This literature in turn drew on existing debates about German development in the nineteenth century, particularly the process of unification that produced the Prussian-dominated Second Reich in 1871. The nature of the Holy Roman Empire, or first Reich, which ended in 1806, was addressed at least indirectly in these discussions. Secondly, the debate on the course

of German history cannot be dissociated from the more general explanations of European development, particularly as it is used as a prominent example by historical sociologists and political scientists. The purpose of this chapter is to outline these different approaches to the German past and to explain their significance for our understanding of the period 1558–1806.

Explanations for the rise of Nazism took two broad directions after 1945. One line of argument was rapidly subsumed by the Cold War division of Europe after Hitler's defeat and interpreted the recent German past through the lens of post-war ideological struggles. Those on the left generally saw Nazism as a product of the crisis affecting western capitalism in the late 1920s. Their liberal critics defined it as another variant of the 'totalitarianism' they saw gripping Soviet-dominated eastern Europe beyond the Iron Curtain. The other approach focused more narrowly on the German experience and questioned whether Hitler was simply a short-term aberration, or a sign that Germany had deviated from the 'normal' pattern of European development and headed down its own 'special path' (*Sonderweg*). It is this latter interpretation that concerns us most, because it raised the question of when this fatal step was first made. Most historians concentrated on the mid-nineteenth century, arguing that the origins of later problems were to be found in the process of unification in the 1860s and 1870s. The political structure created by Bismarck in 1871 was criticised as a sham that allowed an essentially feudal aristocracy and their upper-middle-class collaborators to dominate the country. This structure came under increasing strain as Germany rapidly industrialised in the later nineteenth century, forcing the controlling elite to adopt a series of increasingly reckless measures to hold on to power, including plunging the country into the First World War in 1914, and later, assisting Hitler's rise to power in the mistaken belief they could manipulate him.¹

These arguments naturally affected how the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries were interpreted, since this period saw both the rise of Prussia as the leading German state, and the consolidation of a significant landowning aristocracy. Historians wanted to know why this group survived in Germany, whereas elsewhere in Europe it was swept away by revolution or gradually replaced by liberal parliamentary democracy after 1789. The answer appeared to lie in the nature of earlier German political development, which fostered a peculiar subservience to authoritarian rule. This seemed entirely plausible because it accorded with what many nineteenth-century Germans themselves had

written, and also matched more general explanations of European political development.

The authoritarian state

Most political science and historical writing assumes that state structure, military organisation, political culture and economic activity are closely related. It is believed that certain types of state will be dominated by particular kinds of people with definite attitudes about political organisation, social life and other activity. As there are only a finite number of basic different forms of political organisation, there are only a limited number of paths from the past to modernity. German history is regarded as exemplifying one of these routes, based on the creation of an authoritarian, centralised 'power state' (*Machtstaat*). In this form of organisation, political authority rests on a strong coercive power, usually a large and efficient permanent army that can be deployed to enforce domestic obedience as well as defending against external attack. Political culture is characterised by subservience to this authority, as both state and society are dominated by men of violence who lead by martial example and expect obedience to their commands. Most people are only partly integrated within this system, which offers few avenues for popular political participation, but none the less fulfils minimum essential functions.

Some Germans regarded this type of state as positively desirable, while others merely saw it as an unavoidable necessity. They pointed to their country's central European location, noting how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Prussia was threatened by powerful neighbours and only survived a series of violent international struggles by intensifying its mobilisation of war-making resources. Unlike Britain or other maritime nations, Prussia derived little benefit from the first phase of European colonisation after the sixteenth century. Its economy remained predominantly agrarian and under-developed in comparison. Political power and military muscle developed as substitutes for economic strength to ensure the country's survival.

It became customary well before 1900 to contrast the authoritarian model of Prussia's development with what was generally labelled a liberal, constitutional alternative, apparently exemplified by Britain, the United States and, to a lesser extent, France. These countries seemed to have representative forms of government with high levels of popular participation. They were led by men of dialogue who governed by

debate, persuasion and compromise. Their military structures were more decentralised, relying on navies, militias or citizens-in-arms who were ill-suited to repressing their own people. Geography and economics were likewise used to explain these advantages. Located in splendid isolation far from immediate danger and with good access to world markets, these countries had developed more advanced, commercialised economies that sustained their vibrant political cultures.

The national question

Many nineteenth-century Germans rejected this positive gloss on the western, liberal model of political development, arguing that the Prussian-led unification heralded a unique solution to the unsettling aspects of modernisation, like the social alienation stemming from rapid industrialisation and urban growth. Influenced by a conservative reading of Hegelianism and other contemporary philosophies emphasising the state, historians like Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–86), Heinrich von Sybel (1817–95) and Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–96) presented German history as exemplifying the benefits of strong, centralised government. They interpreted European history in Darwinian terms as a struggle in a hostile international environment in which only the fittest nations could survive. A strong central government was essential to provide leadership, mobilise resources and prevent internal conflict that could open the country to foreign attack. Culture and economics would benefit too as the government channelled creative and entrepreneurial energies towards greater achievements.

This present-minded use of the past was common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was not restricted to Germany. Nor were all German historians conservative apologists for authoritarianism. Some singled out liberal elements in Prussian development, such as municipal self-government and a respect for the rule of law. However, all those who reflected on their country's long-term development had to confront the question of German political unity and national identity. The more strident, like Treitschke, became active participants in the process of mid-nineteenth-century political unification, advocating Bismarck's 'Little German' (*Kleindeutsch*) solution to the national problem, which involved the defeat and ejection of the multi-ethnic Habsburg Austro-Hungarian monarchy from what became the German Second Reich by 1871. They sought historical foundation from this process, contributing to what has become known as the Borussian, or Prusso-centric,

school of German history. Prussia's emergence after 1640 was interpreted as the first stage in its mission to unite Germans in a single state. This process frequently acquired religious overtones as Prussia's victory over Austria seemed to confirm the cultural and economic superiority of Protestants over Catholics.

The chief victim in this approach was the old Reich, which was condemned for failing to provide the strong leadership Prussia seemed destined to give. To most nineteenth-century historians, the first Reich symbolised national disunity and international impotence. Germany's historical 'wrong turn' was not a rejection of liberalism in the nineteenth century, but its much earlier 'failure' to create a single national monarchy like those that had united the English, French and Spanish. Some medieval German emperors were portrayed as struggling valiantly to do this, but all were defeated by the practical problems of distance and too few resources, together with unwelcome external interference and the perpetual feuding between the local lords and princes who ruled the individual territories. Further attempts at centralisation became compromised when the imperial title passed to the Habsburg dynasty in the fifteenth century, because this family allegedly put their own cosmopolitan interests before their national duty as German rulers.

Internal disputes between the emperor and princes became overlaid by confessional strife between Protestants and Catholics after 1517, creating constitutional paralysis by 1618. The subsequent Thirty Years War was treated as a general disaster that reduced the German population by a third or more, and left the Reich an empty shell by 1648. The concluding Peace of Westphalia froze the imperial constitution, emasculating the emperor in an intricate web of legal restrictions that reduced him to little more than an ineffectual figurehead. The political vacuum was filled by a host of competing secular lords, each ruling their own dukedoms and counties, alongside other fossilised relics of the medieval past like the prince-bishops and prelates governing the ecclesiastical territories still associated with the Catholic Church, or the numerous, but tiny, urban republics of the imperial cities. Few of these 300 or so governments could see beyond their own immediate frontiers. Mired in the myopia of this petty particularism (*Kleinstaaterei*), national interests were neglected and Germany became a battleground for France, Russia and other powers. As Habsburg Austria became a distinct European power, it fell to Prussia to pick up the vacant mantle of German leadership. Austria used its remaining powers in the Reich to confront Prussia, notably summoning the imperial army against Frederick the

Great during the Seven Years War (1756–63). As a barrier to national unity, the Reich had to be destroyed. The onset of the Revolutionary Wars against France after 1792 exposed the weakness of the arthritic imperial structure, which was finally swept away by Napoleon's victory over Austria in 1805–6. The French triumph represented another national humiliation, not least since it also involved Napoleon's defeat of old Prussia later in 1806. None the less, it was broadly welcomed by German nationalists as an essential step in clearing the way for unification later in the nineteenth century.

The experience of National Socialism between 1933 and 1945 discredited the earlier approval of the authoritarian state, but did little to change this basic interpretation of the old Reich. Instead of representing it as a unique solution to the problems of modernity, many historians now depicted the nineteenth-century Second Reich as a device for perpetuating the economic and political pre-eminence of an essentially early modern social elite. The old Reich remained condemned as both the birthplace of this elite and of the Prussian state they controlled, as well as the main reason why national unity was fatally delayed into the nineteenth century. Unable to develop 'naturally' over several centuries, national unification had to be forced artificially by Bismarck and others, pushing German development down the wrong path towards the horrors of two world wars.

New views of the old Reich

This interpretation of German history never found universal acceptance. The Second Reich was not as illiberal or 'feudalised' as it was sometimes depicted in the 1960s and 1970s, nor were Britain, France and other western states as progressive as often thought. More importantly, new research reconsidered the Borussian approach to the era before 1806. The imperial framework re-emerged as a flawed, but none the less functioning system that provided a measure of security and political coordination to the numerous German territories prior to the creation of a more centralised state. The individual histories of these territories were woven back into the narrative of German history. Given that Prussia had contained less than a ninth of all German-speakers prior to the later eighteenth century, it no longer seemed appropriate to write all German history from the Prussian perspective alone. A better appreciation of social and economic history also widened the focus beyond

royal courts and central governments to examine the experience from below. It was recognised that there were other ways that ordinary people could contribute to political development than just violent protest or through the ballot box. This new research has gathered pace since the 1970s, producing a vast range of specialist literature. Opinion remains divided on the character of early modern German state and society. Yet, most scholars now present the old Reich as a relatively viable, flexible and resilient structure, that continued to develop after 1648 having survived the traumas of the Reformation and the Thirty Years War.

These findings inform this book, but there are signs that the recent revisionism now risks replacing an unduly negative interpretation with an overly positive one. The petty particularism that was once condemned has been celebrated recently by one historian as evidence of the 'multi-ethnic' character of the old Reich, which constituted a 'central Europe of the regions' where the multitude of territorial governments embodied the 'principle of subsidiarity' alongside coordinating imperial institutions.² Such language deliberately adopts that of the European Commission in Brussels, transforming what was once dismissed as a medieval anachronism into a state that looks more progressive than its European neighbours. Taking a different approach, another recent writer reclaims a positive national past, presenting the Reich as the first German nation state, because it bound the different German-speaking regions within a single political framework.³ Others have detected parallels between imperial institutions and the federal government of modern Germany, or between local popular representative assemblies in some of the German territories and modern republicanism. These historians are careful not to present early modern Germany as a utopian society, yet their conclusions contrast sharply with earlier findings, indicating some confusion as to how this period should be presented.

1.2 Three Directions in German Politics

The dualist model

The lack of consensus is not surprising given the complexity of the subject matter. Political history is generally used as a framework to relate other aspects of human development within a common chronology. We are used to having history built around the stories of states and

nations, kings and revolutionaries. These things are not easily identifiable for early modern Germany. Political power was shared between the emperor and a multitude of minor princes and governments. Their combined territory stretched well beyond the borders of the modern Federal Republic and included millions of people speaking languages other than German.

The usual solution is to see German political development as a set of two overlapping struggles between centralisers and those who resist them. One conflict affected the entire Reich as the princes contested the emperor's authority. The general conclusion is that this contest ended in the failure of national monarchy. The emperor was unable to create an infrastructure to make his formal authority effective across the entire Reich. The Habsburgs were the last imperial dynasty to attempt this, but their efforts were compromised by their partisan support for Catholicism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by the distraction of their other interests elsewhere in Europe. Moves to more direct rule by Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–58) and particularly by Ferdinand II (r. 1619–37) were criticised as the imposition of an alien, Catholic-Habsburg 'imperial absolutism'. As the emperor's authority crumbled, the initiative passed to the princes, who were able to widen their own powers at his expense. The Reich was eaten away from within as real power passed to those princes who ruled the larger, more compact territories like Brandenburg-Prussia, Saxony and Bavaria.

The second struggle occurred inside these territories, with the opposite result. Whereas the emperor's authority was devolved to the princes, the trend within the larger territories was towards the centralisation of power at the expense of the local nobility, clergy and leading towns. Here the princes consolidated their authority as absolutism by the mid-seventeenth century, enabling them to develop their own fiscal and military infrastructures and play a growing part in international affairs. Many general accounts treat these territories as independent states after 1648 and trace their individual development as a distinct 'territorial history' (*Landesgeschichte*) with little further reference to imperial institutions.

This perspective has been labelled the dualist model since it reduces political development to a two-way struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces and portrays the centralised state as the only possible outcome: either the emperor would be successful and create a single superstate, or the princes would triumph and divide Germany into a series of mini-states. Such arguments allow German history to be written

as a single narrative, but oversimplify what was a more complex process. As the Reich was never a centralised national monarchy, the emperor's problems cannot be interpreted as a 'decline' of central authority. Equally, the territorial states did not emerge simply through the transfer of former imperial rights to the princes, nor as a perpetual struggle against entrenched local interests. Instead of the Reich declining while the territories rose, political development moved forward at both levels simultaneously, creating common imperial institutions that acquired their own internal dynamic.

The imperial hierarchy

This process appears so confusing because it contained three parallel, partially contradictory trends, which evolved concurrently. Overall, political developments since the fifteenth century consolidated the Reich as a hierarchical structure under the emperor's overlordship, but not his direct control. This interlocking framework of territories and imperial institutions existed during the middle ages, but assumed a more definite shape in the four decades after 1480. It was consolidated by constitutional changes in the mid-sixteenth century, enabling it to survive the Thirty Years War. Rather than freezing the existing structure, the Peace of Westphalia left many areas still ill-defined and capable of further development (see Chapters 2 and 5). As new institutions were developed and old ones revived, the hierarchy became more complex, assigning the emperor, rulers and peoples of the Reich different positions within a web of corporate rights, legal immunities and overlapping jurisdictions (see Figure 1.1). This structure came under increasing strain during the eighteenth century with the onset of Austro-Prussian rivalry.

This struggle is also generally viewed in dualist terms, ignoring the continued role of imperial institutions and consigning the other territories to the role of a passive 'Third Germany' that was being fought over by the two giants. While the disproportionate growth of Austria and Prussia as European powers loosened the imperial hierarchy, it did not demolish it altogether and the Reich remained the preferred framework for the political organisation of central Europe. However, in the longer term it proved impossible to contain these tensions, particularly when they coincided with new international crises in the west with the onset of the French Revolutionary Wars after 1792 and the implosion of Poland in the east and its partition between Austria, Prussia and

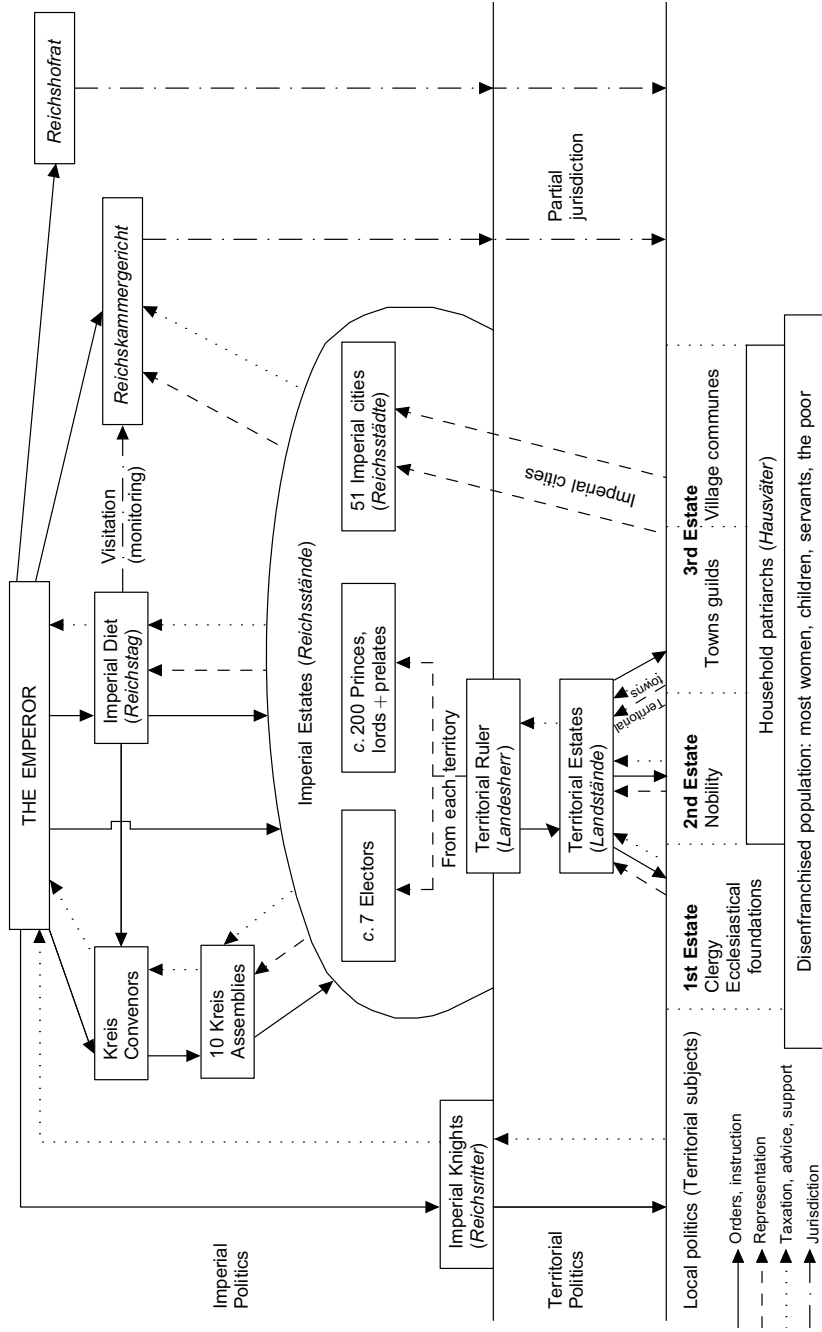


Figure 1.1 The imperial constitution.

Russia (see Chapter 8). The Reich was dismantled between 1801 and 1806 as the medium-sized German territories joined Austria and Prussia in seizing the lands of the lesser territories.

Monarchism

Attempts to strengthen imperial authority represent a second, monarchical trend, which was generally more latent than active. The spectre of 'imperial absolutism' remained a propaganda device of the emperor's opponents, rather than his actual objective. No emperor tried to transform the Reich into a centralised national monarchy. Instead, they periodically tried adjusting its constitution to enhance their personal authority and make the complex hierarchy easier to manage. They were least successful when their own dynastic interests diverged from the broader imperial interests of the Reich's constituent territories and their rulers. Few princes were prepared to risk their subjects' lives and money in external wars of aggression intended to extend the personal possessions of the imperial family. Such reluctance reduced political consensus to the lowest common denominator of defence against foreign attack, reinforcing the Reich's largely passive role in European affairs, in pointed contrast to the aggressive stance of subsequent German states (see section 8.1).

Federalism

The third trend can be labelled federalism and is rather more complex. The foundation of the western, Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 revived interest in earlier forms of federalism and led some writers to describe the Reich or its institutions in these terms.⁴ In some respects this is appropriate. The Confederation of the Rhine grew out of the Reich in 1806 as a federation of the larger states that had annexed their neighbours. Following Napoleon's defeat in 1814–15, central Europe was reorganised as the German Confederation, grouping the surviving 35 or so states within a common framework. Austria was ejected from this organisation following its defeat by Prussia in 1866. The Prussian-dominated northern states were briefly regrouped in another, smaller confederation, before being merged with their remaining southern neighbours in the Second Reich, founded in 1871. While Prussia annexed

much of the north and had a controlling stake in the new empire's institutions, the Second Reich retained some federal elements by leaving the surviving states with considerable autonomy over their own affairs. The subsequent Weimar Republic, which replaced the Second Reich in 1919, embodied a strongly federal structure and Germany was only subjected to truly centralised rule with the Nazi seizure of power in 1933.

Unfortunately, attempts to depict the early modern Reich in federal terms rather underestimate the levelling tendency within federalism, which was inimical to the basic hierarchical imperial structure. A federation is a state composed of regions sharing equal rights, some of which they surrender to a central government charged with general oversight, especially of foreign relations. While this is an appropriate definition of what came after 1806, it cannot be applied before then. Moreover, interest in the later federal structure often implies a false continuity, across the centuries, between imperial and modern institutions, and between the old territories and the *Bundesländer* that comprise the present Federal Republic.

Princely federalism

Early modern federalism had its origins in the medieval principle of association between corporate social groups, communities or territories. This could range from simple agreements to cooperate over immediate goals, towards more integrated structures capable of lasting institutional development. Rather than constituting a federation itself, the complex imperial hierarchy offered three levels of subsidiary federal development. Princely federalism proved ultimately the most corrosive form since it pushed the Reich towards a genuine federation of sovereign states. Cooperation amongst the princes was encouraged by imperial law, which required them to uphold the internal public peace (*Landfrieden*) and defend the Reich against invasion. In addition to formal collaboration through imperial institutions, the princes were free to make alliances amongst themselves or with other Christian rulers long before the Peace of Westphalia confirmed these rights in 1648.⁵ However, they were not yet independent sovereigns for they remained under the emperor's overall authority and they were forbidden from conspiring against the common good. Many princes broke these laws and took up arms against the emperor, particularly at times of religious tension during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, none of these anti-imperial alliances represented a viable alternative to the Reich.

The Protestant princes faced particular problems in the sixteenth century when they claimed that loyalty to the 'true religion' overrode that to the emperor. When this was put to the test in the Schmalkaldic War (1546–7) against Charles V, many Protestants remained loyal to the emperor, even though he clearly favoured the Catholics. The same problem arose during the Thirty Years War when the dissident Protestant Union opposed the Habsburgs (see Chapter 4). Catholics did not face the same conflict of religious and political loyalties, but still suffered from the more general problem of competing princely dynastic interests. Doubt over the legitimacy of princely leagues fostered uncertainty whether their decisions were legally binding on all members. The more hesitant princes frequently abandoned their allies in times of crisis. All were reluctant to invest time and money in developing their leagues into more permanent federations, restricting most alliances to loose agreements on collaboration within existing imperial institutions. This tended to reinforce the traditional hierarchy since the Reich retained its relevance as a convenient forum in which to advance dynastic interests.

The corrosive element of princely federalism was not the loose cooperation between principalities, but the political developments within them. The hierarchical structure of the Reich fostered competition amongst the princes for titles and influence. Each princely dynasty sought to improve its relative position within the Reich, whilst keeping its rivals firmly in their place. Those holding more prestigious lands and titles also tried to join the ranks of European royalty and play a role in affairs beyond the Reich. Such ambitions required considerable resources, encouraging rulers to develop political, military and fiscal infrastructures within their own territories. Christian theology and various secular philosophies gave this additional impetus, transforming personal princely rule into more abstract state authority (see Chapter 7). As these material and intellectual foundations solidified, they lessened each territory's dependence on the wider imperial structure. This process varied across the Reich with only Austria and Prussia becoming truly viable states in their own right before the late eighteenth century, while most of the others still relied on imperial institutions to resolve conflicts, and to provide external security and other vital functions. Between these two extremes lay a group of middling territories like Bavaria, Saxony, Württemberg, Hessen-Kassel and the Palatinate. While none of these sought to leave the Reich, their rulers none the less often chafed against the hierarchical imperial framework that prevented them from improving their dynastic position at the expense of their

neighbours. The Reich's collapse during the Revolutionary Wars cast these territories adrift, enabling those that were better placed to emerge as fully sovereign states by 1806.

Aristocratic federalism

The emergence of these sovereign states has obscured the presence of two other federal traditions with the potential to create more decentralised forms of government through combinations of aristocratic corporations or more direct popular action. The aristocratic federal tradition took two forms, depending on whether its main sphere of activity was within imperial or territorial institutions. Federal cooperation through imperial institutions was restricted to those aristocrats who aspired to join the princes as rulers of territories with a clearly defined place in the Reich's hierarchy. These lords formed regional alliances from the late fifteenth century that secured them a position as the princes' junior partners by the mid-seventeenth century (see section 2.1). This type of aristocratic federalism strengthened the imperial hierarchy by inserting additional strata of lesser rulers holding small counties and ecclesiastical lordships which thereby escaped incorporation within the larger duchies and principalities. By contrast, collaboration through territorial institutions offered a route to new types of state formation from below.

Estates as social and political institutions

Such collaboration drew on a distinctly late medieval form of political representation that differed fundamentally from modern democracy. Modern democracy rests on the principle of equality, irrespective of whether elections are decided by direct votes for individual candidates, or proportional representation. People either elect leaders to act on their behalf in a national parliament, or decide matters more directly by voting in a plebiscite. Most modern states use some combination of these methods. All enfranchised citizens can participate and constituencies are determined proportionately by the size of their populations. Late medieval representation followed different principles in deciding who could sit in an assembly to negotiate with a monarch, or represent that country if the assembly itself constituted the government, as in the case of the imperial cities, or republics elsewhere in Europe. Representation was

guided primarily by social status, not by the size or distribution of the population. Society was composed not of equal citizens, but of distinct orders, or 'Estates' (*Stände*), each distinguished by corporate privileges based on their original function (see section 3.2).

Estates-based representation in Germany originated in the twelfth century with the growth of cathedral and abbey chapters in the ecclesiastical territories (see section 5.4). Other representative institutions developed in many secular lordships by the fifteenth century. Unlike the chapters, these institutions, called territorial Estates (*Landstände*), were rarely involved in choosing their immediate lord, who ruled instead by hereditary right. Only those in Bohemia and Hungary claimed the right to choose their own king, whereas the others merely asked to participate in regencies for under-age or incapacitated rulers. None the less, the Estates assumed growing importance because of the lords' inability to cope with the mounting social, economic and political problems from the resources of their own direct possessions. Increasingly they were obliged to ask their subjects to provide additional assistance in the form of taxes and soldiers. The Estates emerged during the fifteenth century as the forum for these requests to be debated. As the ecclesiastical lords encountered similar difficulties, Estates often emerged alongside the existing chapters in their territories (see section 6.3).

While the exact composition of the Estates varied between the territories, all represented corporate social groups rather than individuals. Representatives were selected not by popular vote, but by virtue of the special privileges they shared with others of similar backgrounds. When assembled, they sat segregated by corporate status rather than party affiliation and adhered to a strict order of precedence when speaking or voting. Nobles generally predominated, representing their peers and, indirectly, their dependent peasant tenants. Abbots, priors and the heads of major ecclesiastical foundations usually represented the clergy, while those speaking for the townsfolk were mainly limited to the mayors of the important territorial towns. More popular representation remained sealed off at local, communal level in the widespread self-management of villages and small towns by peasants and citizens possessing at least modest property. Here people could elect town councillors and other municipal officials, or decided matters themselves by attending meetings in their village hall.

The formation of the Estates followed that of German lordship in that it was territorial. Each territory in the Reich developed its own Estates to represent its population in negotiations with its ruler in an assembly

known as a 'diet' (*Landtag*). Each of the Estates tended to preserve its own unique identity even when its lord acquired new land elsewhere. Major dynasties like the Habsburgs, who accumulated land across the Reich, thus found themselves confronted by different assemblies in each of their provinces. This reinforced the composite character of German rule. Territories were patched together from different lands both within the Reich and beyond, each of which preserved its own laws and identity.

Princely centralisation offered one way to forge these elements into a single state. Estates-based aristocratic federalism provided another, developing through a network of alliances between territorial diets. Since princes almost invariably opposed such alliances, aristocratic federalism was generally a protest movement directed at preserving or extending local autonomy by forcing rulers to confirm or extend Estates' privileges in return for taxes and other cooperation. This severely restricted its political potential, because each diet was reluctant to submerge its own historic identity within a wider framework. The spread of religious tension partially counteracted this from the early sixteenth century, since it could place rulers in opposition to their subjects if each embraced different faiths. Linguistic divisions could also create common bonds between nobles in different provinces, whilst distancing them from their ruler. Both these factors worked in the Habsburg monarchy to produce major revolts, particularly in the Netherlands against the Spanish branch of the family after 1568, and in Bohemia against the Austrian line in 1618. In both cases, Habsburg rule was opposed by federations between different provincial diets, dominated by the local aristocracy and drawn together by a common Protestant faith and resentment against a dynasty associated with an alien language and culture. Such federations had the potential to develop into independent states where they could create common institutions, as occurred in the Netherlands, where the northern parts broke away to form the United Provinces, or Dutch Republic, by the early seventeenth century. As we shall see, the Bohemian and Austrian provinces failed to achieve the same degree of cohesion and were defeated during the Thirty Years War (see Chapter 4).

Popular federalism

Communal representative institutions in towns and villages offered a third, broader form of federalism within German politics. Like the Estates, the strength of communal representation varied greatly between

the territories and tended to be most pronounced in the south and west, particularly Switzerland, which was part of the medieval Reich and had been governed by the Habsburgs. Swiss opposition to Habsburg rule rested on a pact between three mountain valleys, in 1291, that spread into a network of alliances binding rural and urban communities into a single Confederation. Repeated military incursions failed to reverse this process and the Habsburgs were forced to accept defeat by 1499. The Confederation remained nominally part of the Reich, but suspicions of Habsburg intentions deterred the Swiss from participating in the imperial institutions that were then assuming permanent shape. Like the Dutch they opted out of the Reich and secured international recognition for their independence by 1648. The progressive consolidation of the imperial hierarchy discouraged other southern and western communities from 'turning Swiss' by the mid-sixteenth century, but communal institutions continued to offer other ways in which ordinary people could shape politics into the eighteenth century.⁶

Chapter 2: Reich and Territories

2.1 The Political Geography of Central Europe

The Reich and Europe

Sixteenth-century Germans lived under political institutions that had existed for up to seven centuries and which claimed a direct descent from those of ancient Rome. Many looked back with pride to this earlier imperial heritage, which shaped political activity and identity till the very end of the Reich. The Reich emerged during the Frankish conquests of the Germanic tribes after 774. Charlemagne, the greatest of the Frankish kings, decided to revive the ancient Roman imperial title and was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day 800, with papal blessing.¹ Though Frankish rule lasted only a few generations, the Reich retained key elements of its early medieval foundation throughout its existence.

The political organisation of medieval Europe was characterised by the universal and the particular. Christianity and the legacy of ancient Rome fostered a sense of a single Christendom under papal spiritual guidance and imperial secular leadership. There was a general acceptance of a common religion, some agreement on law, and the limited use of Latin as a means of intellectual and political communication. Yet these universal sentiments failed to translate into firm political structures, because of the considerable practical difficulties of coordinating human activity across the vast, under-populated expanse of Europe. Political organisation and, for the most part, identity as well, remained localised in small counties, lordships and kingdoms. The modern concept of the nation state emerged as an intermediary level between the vague notion of a single Christendom and the vast patchwork of localised rule. Some

modern states developed from below, either through the alliance of smaller communities, as in Switzerland, or by the gradual accumulation of power by one authority at its rivals' expense, as in the case of the great western monarchies of England, France and Spain. Other states emerged from the fragmentation of more widely flung authority, such as the Spanish Habsburg monarchy, which lost control of large parts of western and southern Europe in the seventeenth century.

The creation of this new, intermediary level of political organisation eroded both the universal and the particular, pushing Europe towards the system of independent, sovereign states. The Peace of Westphalia is generally regarded as a milestone in this process, not least because it restricted the emperor's power. In fact, it only gave qualified support to the new principle of sovereignty and it remained unclear whether European states would interact as equals, regardless of size, or be arranged in some kind of hierarchy according to military potential and the status of their rulers. The numerous wars, between the mid-1650s and 1815, were waged primarily to determine this, and particularly to defeat repeated French attempts to assert hegemony over other states.

The gradual transition towards a system of sovereign states had profound repercussions for the Reich, because it undermined the emperor's international position. Just as religious schisms restricted papal influence by dividing Europeans into different confessional groups, political coalescence around more distinct national states confined the emperor increasingly to central Europe. This also raised important questions about the position of the German princes who were his direct vassals. If German politics followed the monarchical trend, the princes would be firmly confined to the sphere of domestic politics, like the aristocracies of France, Spain and other kingdoms. If federalism became more pronounced, the better placed princes would emerge as sovereigns over their own distinct states. Both of these possibilities threatened the traditional imperial hierarchy, which still combined the medieval characteristics of the universal and the particular.

The great imperial dynasties

Early medieval German history was dominated by three great royal dynasties after the demise of the Franks in 911: the Ottonians (919–1024), Salians (1024–1125) and Staufer (1138–1254).² The collapse of the Staufer was followed by a prolonged interregnum till 1273, during

which rival royal claimants fought for supremacy. The situation was exacerbated by the absence of clear rules governing the succession. Initially, little distinction was made between hereditary and elective monarchy, since all new kings had to seek homage from their vassals after their accession. It remained open whether this implied an active element of choice, or the simple acceptance of a rightful ruler. Even election could be reconciled with hereditary right, since it was possible to choose a king's son as his direct successor. However, the principle of election became entrenched after 1273, because the leading German lords chose each new king from a different dynasty until 1347. The Luxembourg family then secured re-election on two occasions thereafter, to rule until 1437 as the last medieval dynasty. The Luxembourgs consolidated their position by defining electoral procedure in the famous Golden Bull of 1356, restricting it to seven leading princes, now called electors (*Kurfürsten*), who were partly chosen from their own immediate supporters. The choice of Archduke Albrecht to succeed the last of the Luxembourgs in 1438 heralded the start of Habsburg imperial rule, since all future emperors were chosen from this dynasty, with the single exception of the Bavarian Wittelsbach, Charles VII (1742–5).

A Holy Roman Empire

Charlemagne's original resurrection of the ancient imperial title was reaffirmed in 962 and continued thereafter by all future emperors. It imparted unique characteristics, setting the emperor above other European kings. Medieval emperors fostered a belief in the 'imperial translation' (*translatio imperii*), interpreting world history according to the Book of Daniel in the Bible. This prophesied that the ancient Roman Empire would be the last of four great world civilisations before the Day of Judgement. Far from creating a new title, they argued that Charlemagne had simply assumed the existing Roman one, implying an unbroken continuity between the Reich and the ancient empire. By exercising this imperial title, the German kings placed themselves at the head of a divinely sanctioned European order. The German word for emperor, *Kaiser*, derived directly from the ancient title *Caesar*.

Papal participation in the imperial coronation imparted another important universal element as the emperor was anointed as defender of the faith and the secular protector of all Christendom. Many medieval emperors clashed with the papacy over this role, forcing a greater

distinction between the imperial title and that of German king.³ The royal title was clearly associated with those lands inhabited by peoples that already called themselves Teutons (*Teutonici*). The German king only needed the approval of his own vassals to assume office, whereas he had to be crowned by the pope before he could call himself emperor. Growing resentment at papal interference prompted Maximilian I (r.1493–1519) to assume the new title of ‘elected emperor’ in 1508. His successor, Charles V, was the last emperor to be crowned personally by the pope and thereafter papal involvement lost much of its significance, with future coronations being conducted in Germany by the archbishop of Cologne.

This made the old royal title effectively redundant since the emperor could assume his imperial prerogatives immediately. The title of king was now associated with the position of successor designate, formally called King of the Romans (*Römischer König*). This title could be conferred by the electors during an emperor’s lifetime to ensure the smooth transition of power on his death. If an emperor died before these arrangements had been made, his prerogatives devolved temporarily to the rulers of Saxony and the Palatinate as the two leading secular electors. They exercised these powers as imperial vicars (*Reichsvikare*), with Saxony having responsibility for northern Germany and Westphalia, and the elector Palatine overseeing the south and Rhineland. Though not an elector himself, the duke of Savoy assumed imperial authority over the parts of northern Italy that still fell under the emperor’s jurisdiction. The archbishop of Mainz, as the most senior elector, held important powers to prevent the three vicars from becoming too independent. Mainz was to summon his colleagues to the city of Frankfurt within three months of an emperor’s death and give them no more than thirty days to decide on a successor.⁴

The imperial title was initially associated with both land and prerogatives. Whoever became German king had direct access to the crown lands, as well as political and legal jurisdiction over all the other feudal lords. Over time, these lords evolved into the electors, princes and other rulers governing the individual territories. Most of these lands became the hereditary possessions of the German princely and aristocratic families, but a significant proportion remained the lands of the ‘imperial church’ (*Reichskirche*), governed by ecclesiastical rulers elected by their cathedral and abbey chapters. The actual crown lands were never very extensive and were dissipated, especially in the thirteenth century, as individual emperors mortgaged them to their creditors or supporters.

The emperor's real power lay in his prerogatives, the most important of which allowed him to act as supreme judge and to summon the other lords to assist in military campaigns. Other powers included the right to confer titles, including those of nobility and university degrees, as well as to mint coin, grant economic concessions and levy certain taxes.

Early medieval emperors relied heavily on the support of key lords, particularly those controlling church lands. This became more difficult with papal interference, forcing emperors after 1273 to exploit their imperial prerogatives, many of which were transferred as rewards to relations and other supporters. The Luxembourg dynasty shifted the basis of imperial authority back to land, but instead of trying to recover the earlier crown lands, they enlarged their own dynastic possessions within the Reich, particularly Bohemia, as well as acquiring the separate Hungarian royal title. They continued to see their imperial mission in largely traditional terms, as defenders of Christendom against the Ottoman Turks, and as guardians of order within the Reich. However, they created new institutions to extract the necessary resources from their hereditary power base. A permanent royal court and administrative chancery were established in Prague, distinct from the old imperial court that followed the emperor on his personal travels around the Reich. The Habsburgs continued this practice when they acquired the title in 1438, using their own expanding hereditary possessions to support a reinvigorated imperial mission to bring peace to Europe and defeat the Ottomans. The growing distinction between the emperor's hereditary power base and his elective title became a fundamental structural feature of imperial politics, establishing tensions between the centralising drive inherent in the monarchical tendency and the Reich's traditional hierarchical character.

Overall size

Though the Reich lost considerable land during the middle ages, more was gained by eastward expansion after 1147 across the river Elbe into the lands of the Slavs. By 1600 the emperor's jurisdiction extended over 750,000 km², an area that was about 40 per cent larger than Bismarck's Second Reich and which took thirty days to cross on horseback. The original Frankish empire had been partitioned into three kingdoms in the ninth century. The western part eventually became France, while the central area split into a collection of smaller territories stretching

from the North Sea, through modern Belgium, Luxembourg, Lorraine, Alsace and into Savoy and Piedmont in what was then loosely known as Italy. The imperial title remained associated with the third, Germanic kingdom, which lay largely east of the Rhine. The medieval struggles with the papacy were partly to determine the southern extent of this kingdom and resulted in the emperor establishing jurisdiction over northern 'imperial Italy' (*Reichsitalien*), which stretched for 65,000 km² and included Savoy, Milan, Parma and Tuscany, but not Venice which became an independent republic.

The central European core

The mid-sixteenth-century Reich is best considered as a central core in southern and western Germany surrounded by a series of more peripheral regions. The core had been settled first, and remained the most heavily populated part of the Reich throughout the middle ages. It was characterised by a greater degree of territorial fragmentation than the peripheral regions that were incorporated later and contained fewer, more compact territories (see Map 1).

The western part lay along the Rhine and was subdivided into three regions. The Upper, or southern, Rhine extended west into Alsace and the duchy of Lorraine, as well as eastwards into the central part of Germany around the city of Frankfurt. This eastern area contained the relatively compact territories of Hessen and Nassau, as well as numerous, much smaller counties such as Solms, Königstein, Isenburg, Leiningen, Wittgenstein and Falkenstein. These territories were frequently partitioned into even smaller parcels by their ruling families, particularly the counties in the Wetterau region north and west of Frankfurt. The heart of the Upper Rhine was controlled by a series of prince bishops based in Speyer, Worms and Strasbourg, whose lands straddled the river.⁵ The Middle Rhine lay immediately to the north and was dominated by the three ecclesiastical electors of Mainz, Cologne and Trier, and their secular colleague governing the Palatinate around the modern towns of Heidelberg and Mannheim. The presence of these important princes lent the area its other name of Electoral Rhine. The Lower Rhine stretched from Cologne to the exit of the river in the North Sea. Much of this region lay more on the Reich's periphery since it fell under the control of the dukes of Burgundy, who succeeded to the old Frankish middle kingdom in the later middle ages. The bishopric of

Liège remained firmly part of the Reich, as did the numerous small territories covering Westphalia stretching north from the Rhine and east of what is now the modern Netherlands. Westphalia contained the relatively large secular duchies of Cleves, Mark, Jülich and Berg clustered around the Rhine near Cologne, as well as the principalities of Oldenburg and East Frisia to the north-east. Between them lay the important bishoprics of Münster, Paderborn, Osnabrück and Verden, as well as numerous smaller counties and abbeys.⁶

The south was also divided into three regions by 1550. Swabia in the south-west contained only one substantial territory, the duchy of Württemberg, which covered a third of the entire region. The area between it and the Rhine was split between the Austrian Habsburgs, who ruled the Breisgau, and the two margraves of Baden, based respectively in Baden, and Durlach. The remainder of Swabia was divided into around 90 different spiritual and secular lordships, including the majority of the imperial cities.⁷ Franconia to the north-east was only slightly less fragmented, with the bulk of its land shared between the secular margraves of Ansbach and Bayreuth, the bishops of Bamberg and Würzburg, and the city of Nuremberg, while the remainder was split between various lordships and lesser cities. The third southern region was called Bavaria and lay immediately east of Swabia and south of Franconia. Bavaria was dominated by the duchy (later electorate) of that name, but contained a number of other distinct territories, including the large archbishopric of Salzburg and the important city of Regensburg.⁸

The northern periphery

Between these southern and western core regions, lay a third, smaller and more central zone called Thuringia. This heavily forested region between the rivers Werta and Saale had been conquered relatively early by the Franks and played an important part in the medieval Reich. Like the other core areas, it was also split into numerous, small territories, including Gotha, Weimar, Jena, Anhalt, Schwarzenberg, Stolberg and Reuss. These were frequently partitioned by their ruling families into still smaller units, complicated by a quirk of history in the case of Reuss, which broke into five branches, each of which insisted on choosing the name Heinrich for every prince between 1132 and 1918. Thuringia was subsumed within the Saxon lands along the northern periphery, which were only incorporated within the Reich with the Germanic expansion

across the river Elbe in the twelfth century. As a region, Saxony had evolved into two halves by 1550. Upper Saxony lay to the east, between Bavaria and Bohemia to the south and the Baltic Sea to the north. Apart from Thuringia, Upper Saxony retained its later medieval characteristics of large, compact territories. The two secular electorates of Saxony and Brandenburg covered most of the region. Their rulers converted to Protestantism during the sixteenth century and incorporated most of the Upper Saxon church lands into their territories. However, Brandenburg's access to the Baltic Sea was blocked by the smaller duchies of Pomerania and Mecklenburg.⁹

The latter belonged to the Lower Saxon region, which stretched from Brandenburg in the east to Westphalia in the west, and from the Upper Rhine in the south to Denmark in the north. Its principal lands had been controlled since the twelfth century by the Guelph (*Welf*) family, who rose to prominence thanks to the patronage of medieval emperors. Their main territory of Brunswick (*Braunschweig*) had split into three duchies by the later sixteenth century. The two northern ones of Lüneburg and Calenberg were often known after their respective capitals of Celle and Hanover, and were combined under the latter name in 1705. The technically senior line ruled the other, smaller duchy of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. The rest of Lower Saxony was composed of modest-sized territories, like the bishoprics of Magdeburg, Halberstadt, Hildesheim and Bremen, and the duchies of Holstein and Schleswig, as well as smaller counties and the five cities of Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck, Goslar and Nordhausen.

The Habsburg lands

Bohemia and Austria were incorporated in the Reich during the tenth and eleventh centuries, but grew more distinct through their long association with the Habsburg dynasty. Bohemia included the dependencies of Moravia, the Lausitz (Lusatia) and (from 1335) Silesia, and was confirmed as a separate kingdom in 1158, buttressed by a vibrant economy and distinct language and culture. Its king enjoyed considerable privileges, including an electoral vote, but was largely exempt from imperial jurisdiction and required to provide relatively few soldiers or taxes. The Habsburgs were keen to preserve this autonomy when they inherited the kingdom in 1526, since it prevented the other German princes from interfering in its affairs.¹⁰ They also kept Bohemia's internal administration separate from that of their Austrian lands, which they acquired

much earlier in 1278. Like Bohemia, Austria was another composite territory composed of different provinces held together by common allegiance to the same lord. Knitting these parts together took several centuries and was far from complete by 1550, when Austria still consisted of three distinct regions. Lower Austria contained two provinces called Upper and Lower Austria, as well as the dynastic capital of Vienna. Inner Austria comprised the provinces of Styria, Carinthia and Carniola and was governed from the town of Graz. Further Austria, governed from Innsbruck, consisted of the Tirol and the area known as Outer Austria (*Vorderösterreich*), composed of enclaves in Swabia, including the Breisgau, as well as most of Alsace. Collectively, these regions provided the Habsburg monarchy with its own core, since these were hereditary possessions independent of the imperial title.¹¹

In addition to these lands within the Reich, the Habsburgs inherited the kingdom of Hungary immediately to the east, in 1526. Unfortunately, this coincided with the Ottoman invasion, resulting in the partition of the country by 1541 into three, roughly equal parts. The Ottomans held the south and east, restricting Habsburg rule to a narrow western strip that included the autonomous kingdom of Croatia. Northeastern Hungary maintained a precarious existence as an independent principality of Transylvania, which was a constant flash-point for Habsburg–Ottoman tension. Habsburg Hungary remained a narrow buffer between the Reich and the Ottomans until the Great Turkish War of 1683–99 when Emperor Leopold I (1658–1705) conquered the entire kingdom (see section 8.1). The combination of Hungary and Austria survived till the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy in 1918, whereas ties to Spain proved less durable. Spain was also acquired by inheritance and came with both European dependencies in Naples, Sicily and Sardinia, as well as a growing collection of New World colonies. It was joined to the other Habsburg possessions by the personal rule of Emperor Charles V, who became king of Spain in 1516. Management of this far-flung empire proved too much and Charles partitioned his lands in 1556, creating separate Spanish and Austrian branches. The former only survived until 1700, but was initially more powerful since it had access to Spain's considerable resources and colonial wealth.

The Habsburgs also ruled much of the land along the western and southern periphery of the Reich, where their authority was often disputed by entrenched local interests and jealous foreign powers. The western periphery, known as Burgundy, remained a constant source of tension between France and the Reich until the Napoleonic era. France

seized the actual duchy of Burgundy early on, splitting the region into two parts. The northern area encompassed modern Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands and was separated by Alsace and Lorraine from the more southerly Franche Comté, immediately west of Switzerland. The entire area formally remained part of the Reich, but was granted considerable autonomy in 1548. This increased when Charles V partitioned his possessions in 1556, assigning the Burgundian lands to the Spanish branch, which governed them through a viceroy based in Brussels. Opposition to these arrangements was one factor behind the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648), which resulted in a new republic in the northern Netherlands.¹² The other Burgundian lands remained part of the Reich, but were eaten away by France, which seized the border areas in the long wars of the later seventeenth century. The remnants, together with most of the Italian possessions, passed to Austria on the extinction of the Spanish Habsburgs in 1700.

The Hohenzollern lands

The Habsburg's great rivals, the Hohenzollerns, originated in the Swabian and Franconian heartlands of the Reich. They remained a comparatively minor German dynasty, even after one branch acquired the electorate of Brandenburg in 1415. Their association with Prussia stems from the collapse of the Teutonic Order in early sixteenth century. The Order had established an aristocratic religious state in Prussia and the surrounding region during the thirteenth century. This collapsed following a series of defeats by the Poles, who seized control of western, Royal Prussia by 1466. Eastern Prussia only escaped this when the Order's grand master, Albrecht von Hohenzollern, secularised it as a hereditary duchy under Polish overlordship in 1525. In 1618 Prussia passed to the Brandenburg branch, who joined the Habsburgs in the select group of German princes ruling land outside imperial jurisdiction (see section 8.2).

German dynasties and European politics

The rest of the Order's lands, in Livonia, Courland and Estonia, passed to Polish, Swedish and ultimately Russian control. Despite the claims of later German nationalists, these had little connection to the Reich or