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978-0-521-32686-5 - Rudolf Vierhaus: Germany in the Age of Absolutism

Jonathan B. Knudsen

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Rudolf Vierhaus

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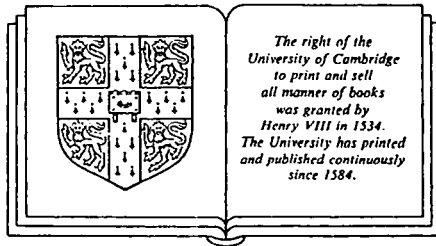
*Germany in the  
Age of Absolutism*

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*Translated by*

JONATHAN B. KNUDSEN

WELLESLEY COLLEGE



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## CONTENTS

Preface	page vii
Introduction: Germany after the Thirty Years War	1
Socioeconomic Consequences: Collapse and Delayed Development	1
Sociocultural Consequences: Exhaustion, Stagnation, Provincialization	4
Political Consequences: The Particularization of Public Life, The Time of Government	8
1. Economic Development	12
Preliminary Remarks: Stagnation and Restoration	12
Demography	13
Agriculture	16
The Industrial Economy and Trade	20
Mercantilism	28
2. Society	31
Preliminary Remarks: Encrustation and Dynamic Elements	31
Princes and Courts	33
Old and New Nobility	39
Clergy	43
The Rural Population	45
Rural Artisanal and Manufacturing Labor	48
The Urban Population	50

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Jonathan B. Knudsen

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
	Exceptional and Marginal Groups, Outsiders, Lowest Orders	52
	New Urban Orders	55
3.	Cultural Life	58
	Preliminary Remarks: From Baroque to Enlightenment: Estrangement and Independence	58
	Confessional Coexistence	60
	Religious and Secular Baroque, Courtly Culture	65
	Science, Culture, Education	68
	Pietism	75
	Enlightenment	79
	The Worldview and Values of the Burgher Class	84
4.	Political Organization	87
	Preliminary Remarks: The Estates and Absolute Monarchy	87
	Emperor and Empire	90
	Princes and Territorial Estates	97
	Imperial Church, Cities, and Nobility	103
	Government, Administration, and Bureaucratic Organization under the Sign of Absolutism	108
	Absolutism and Enlightened Absolutism	113
5.	Wars, Crises, and Conflicts	116
	Preliminary Remarks: Germany and Europe	116
	The Preeminence of France and the Rise of the House of Austria	118
	The Empire in the European Wars of the Early Eighteenth Century	127
	The Rise of Prussia and German Dualism	135
	The Seven Years War	141
	Conclusion: Germany at the End of the Seven Years War	144
	Chronology	147
	Bibliography	155
	Index	165

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE

## DIMENSIONS AND CHARACTER OF THE AGE

*Germany in the Age of Absolutism* – the title appears problematic in almost all its terms. It is difficult to ascertain what constituted “Germany” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For European diplomats and German imperial jurists it was undoubtedly the empire that still was called Roman; and many contemporaries agreed with them. Yet the empire encompassed many non-German peoples – especially in the lands of the House of Habsburg in the northwest, south, and southeast. In addition, Germans were excluded in the north and northeast. Moreover, certain German-speaking areas had once belonged to the empire and had since become independent or seceded, such as the northern Netherlands, Switzerland, and Alsatia. There was no German capital city; no common foreign policy affecting all Germans; and very little common history, but rather boundless local, regional, confessional, and cultural variation. Hence we cannot delimit precisely in geographical and political terms what belongs to German history in the period before us.

To accept this point, however, only means to be even more aware that the histories of the individual European peoples, states, and nations cannot be viewed or understood in isolation. If we still seek to write German history – even though Europe and its particular regions have both become much more sharply the focus of historical interest in recent decades – we must also integrate the gains of these two perspectives into our account. Nonetheless, it is also true that the individual cultural and political nations have been such fundamental factors in the development of Europe – and remain so today – that we must continue to explore and explain their historical development. “Germany” thus encompasses the empire and the German states, the cultural and political terrain, in which those matters occurred that were understood then to be part of German history.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

*Preface*

Even more problematical, however, is the epochal term “Age of Absolutism.” Here I adopt the conventional usage only because no other term of comparable appeal is available. Absolutism emphasizes a system of government and a principle of political organization that was not aspired to in all German states and was only partly achieved in others. It is certainly true that the policies of those princes who sought to gather absolute power about themselves represented the most dynamic political force in their day. The exercise of such power can be found before the middle of the seventeenth century, but this objection is not as critical to our use of the term as the other fact that monarchical absolutism had not come to an end by 1763. Indeed, in many states it only then acquired its sharpest features, albeit in an enlightened version. In this sense it does not seem justified to use the term as the signature of the era. With these limitations in mind, we can use the term Absolutism to encompass the one hundred and fifteen years between the end of the Thirty Years War and that of the Seven Years War.

That I use two wars to bound this account does not mean that I understand history to be the consequence of great “political” events, the course of which can be presented to us in narrative form, or that I presume great wars to be special caesurae in the historical development. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, we can recognize an altered historical constellation at the end of each of these great wars, which was only partly due to the wars themselves. Particular historical forms and possibilities either had come to an end or had lost significantly in importance; others, on the other hand, were set free and now acquired formative power. The forces of continuity proved to be more significant than those of change, even as they were experienced differently in the various states of Germany and among the various sectors of the population. But there remains a clear difference in the overall historical shape of Germany after 1648 and then again after 1763. The era of confessional struggle and war came to an end with the Thirty Years War: At the center of the struggle within and among the states was the struggle for political power, its acquisition, exercise, and triumph. With the end of the Seven Years War it was not only decided that Germany would henceforth be divided into two rival political camps but also that economic, social, and cultural reform must become the agenda of the new epoch and that only political systems adapting to the new agenda would be able to assert themselves.

The character of an epoch cannot be determined from its temporal boundaries. We must ask instead after its special imprint. This is never a single individual, institution or idea, never a single event. An epoch is characterized by the particular way many forces interact. It is the intention of this book to reveal to the reader both their extreme complexity and their relative homogeneity. In order to achieve this – anything else would be an impermissible oversimplification – I have chosen a narrative form that reveals the great structures of historical life and thereby also makes visible their continuity.

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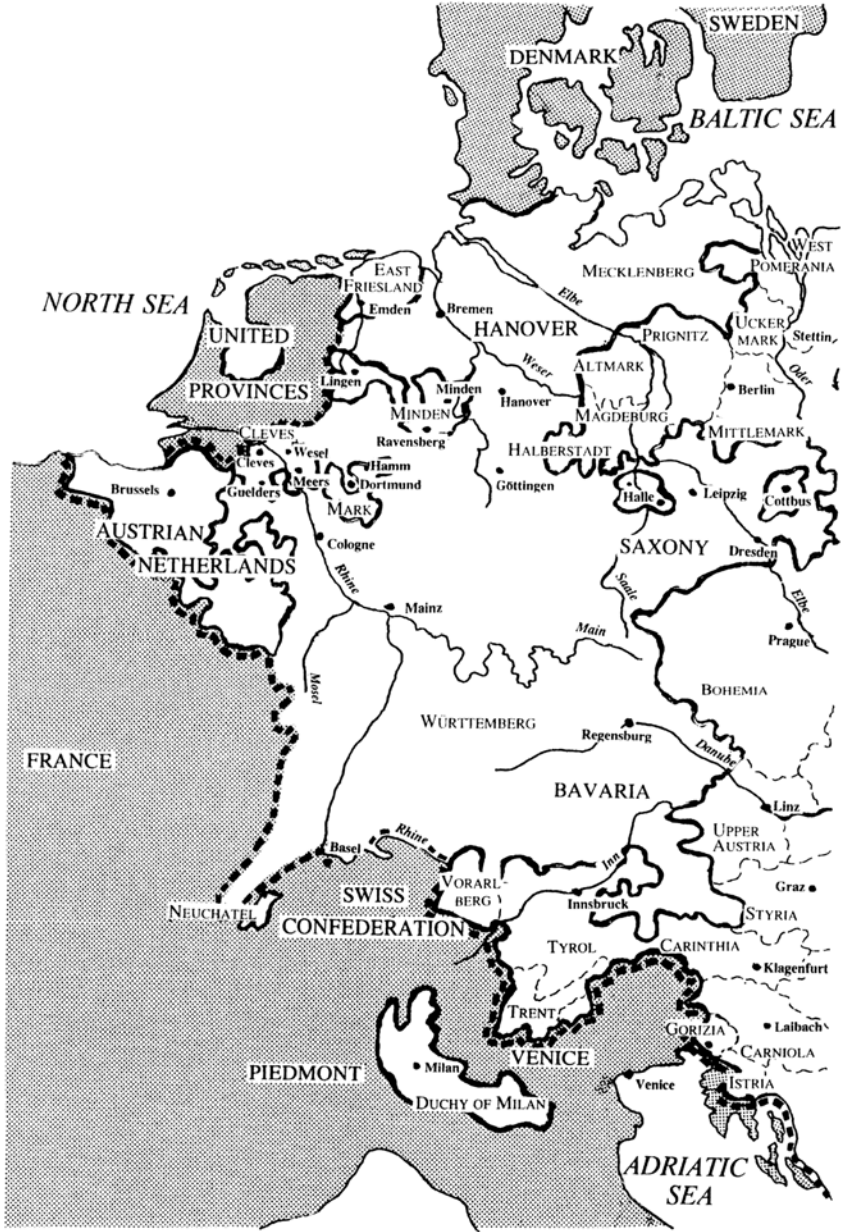
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