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## Prologue

In the beginning was Bismarck, in a manner of speaking. The Great Man was born seventy-one days before the Congress of Vienna issued its Final Act in June 1815. This document configured the central European landscape in which Bismarck's long career was subsequently set and the problem of a German nation-state given an initial resolution. But like all beginnings, this one also marked an end. The Congress of Vienna sought to bring institutional stability to central Europe after a quarter-century of upheaval and war, which had followed the outbreak of revolution in France in the summer of 1789. The settlement that was reached in Vienna in June 1815 reflected the determination of Europe's leaders to restore the old prerevolutionary regime in Europe to the extent feasible, but also to accommodate, to the extent necessary, the convulsions of the intervening years. It was a measure of their success that despite Bismarck's great achievement – the establishment of a German nation-state in 1871 – central Europe remained free from revolutionary convulsions for another century.

### The Old Regime in Central Europe

The men who presided over the reconfiguration of European affairs in 1815 represented the elite of the Old Regime which had been largely overturned after 1789. They were distinguished members of the European aristocracy, united in the consciousness of their own entitlement. They were men of learning, urbanity, and great landed wealth. Many had pursued careers in princely courts. Before the French Revolution they had stood atop a comprehensive system of human relations that was at once social, cultural, and political. Its origins were feudal. Its basis was the legal segregation of society into closed corporations, called estates (*Stände*). These were hereditary social orders that prescribed common patterns of privilege, authority, dependence, and obligation – principally along the social axis that divided people who belonged to the aristocracy from those who did not. Aristocrats accordingly could lay claim to tax exemptions, special judicial treatment, hereditary privileges that attached to the land, access to princely courts, elite positions in the armed forces and civilian bureaucracies, and representation in territorial parliaments.

In central Europe – an area bounded roughly by the Rhine and Vistula Rivers in the west and east, by the Alps in the south, and by the North and Baltic Seas in the north – resided some thirty-five million people who belonged to this system of orders on the eve of the French Revolution. More than 99 percent of them were not aristocrats. Most lived in poverty, able to provide for their families' subsistence but little more. About 80 percent of them lived off the land, to which most of them were tethered by a variety of hereditary legal obligations, by rents or services that they owed to noble landlords, or by personal bondage to these lords. The most onerous form of bonded servitude was serfdom, which was prevalent in the northeast.

The rural populace found the horizon of its common experience confined to the village and parish. Broader communication was blocked by insuperable obstacles, whether these were material (like miserable roads) or cultural (like illiteracy and the dialectical cacophonies of language). Beyond this narrow geographical radius, religious ties provided the only significant basis of broader collective identities or loyalties.

Under the Old Regime, most of the people in central Europe who did not live off the land inhabited some 2,000 legally chartered, more or less autonomous cities. These cities represented, as Tom Brady has noted, “a safer, more comfortable version of the countryside.”<sup>1</sup> The comparative safety was due to secure city walls, although these did not free cities from dependency on the surrounding countryside for food and other essential materials, as well as for markets. The walls marked out realms in which residents were as a rule legally free from aristocratic authority and privilege, where schools were more common, and a collective sense of local patriotism or civic loyalty could take shape. Urban forms of corporate power and identity were wed not to noble birth or landownership, but instead to trade and manufacture. Still, urban corporate power was pronounced and pervasive, too. The city itself constituted a corporation, in which membership (called citizenship) was a legal privilege that normally required at least modest wealth, as well as the proper religious affiliation. Production was comprehensively organized and regulated within urban guilds, which were themselves closed corporations that regulated all aspects of production, including quotas, prices and wages, and the number, qualifications, and training of producers. The (usually male) membership of the guilds was restricted to master craftsmen, whose political power was institutionalized in their control of the municipal council. The political power of the urban merchant elite was similarly institutionalized and often

<sup>1</sup> Thomas A. Brady, Jr., *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650* (Cambridge, 2009), 38. On cities see Mack Walker, *German Home Towns: Community, State, and General Estate, 1648–1871* (Ithaca, NY, 1971). For a lucid general survey of social relations in the eighteenth century see James J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989), 73–143.



**Map 1** The Holy Roman Empire on the eve of the French Revolution. Source: Map by David McCutcheon FBCart.S [www.dvdmaps.co.uk](http://www.dvdmaps.co.uk).

inherited. The exclusivity of urban patrician elites was fortified by sumptuary laws and the elaborate rituals of daily life, which were legally or practically inaccessible to all but a small proportion of the urban population. The majority of urban dwellers were not citizens; they comprised apprentices and journey-men workers, casual laborers, domestic servants, paupers, and other people of little if any means and no privilege.

Whether in the cities or the countryside, the corporate social order was designed to discriminate, differentiate, separate, and exclude. It thus compounded the fragmenting effects of poverty and poor communications. The political consequences found fruition in the Holy Roman Empire, which in the eighteenth century represented the most fragmented polity anywhere in Europe. It is not easy to characterize. The “Reich” was not a state. Instead, it represented, as one of its leading students has written, “a personal association, a complex, hierarchical system of persons and corporations, at the top of which the emperor stood and lent symbolic unity to the whole.”<sup>2</sup> This once great feudal monarchy had sprawled for centuries over most of central Europe, linking territories from northern Italy to the shores of the North and Baltic

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Stollberg-Rillinger, *Das Heilige Römische Reich deutscher Nation: Vom Ende des Mittelalters bis 1806* (Munich, 2006), 17; Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495–1806* (Oxford, 2011).

Seas, and from Ghent to Bratislava, in fealty to the emperor (Kaiser). The empire owed its longevity to the functions that it played in regulating the corporate estates that composed it – in the first instance, the noble rulers of its constituent secular and ecclesiastical territories. It also survived because of its own complex fragmentation, flexibility, and weakness, which gave most of its estates, as well as its many foreign rivals, a vital interest in its preservation.

The main fragmenting force at work in the Holy Roman Empire was religion. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the rupture of western Christianity played out immediately and catastrophically in central Europe. The imperial estates, the multitude of principalities that composed the empire, fractured by confession, as Protestant princes and their European allies mobilized against Catholic emperors and their allies. Central Europe thereupon became the central theater of war for most of the next century. The culmination of hostilities came in the terrible Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), in which armed bodies of men, mobile companies of destruction who spoke many different languages and fought in many degrees of organization and discipline, laid waste to great swaths of land in the name of religion, dynastic loyalty, and plunder.

The Peace of Westphalia, which brought this ordeal to a close in 1648, ratified the political results and sealed the major issues that had erupted into war. It legitimized the religious fragmentation of the Reich into Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist (or Reformed) territories according to the confessional preferences of their princes. The peace also ratified the political fragmentation of the Reich, ending hopes for a consolidated, centralized imperial monarchy on the model of contemporary developments in France, Spain, and Russia, where hereditary monarchs were securing powers to raise permanent royal armies, to tax their estates, and regulate religious affairs. In central Europe, the office of emperor remained elective, so it was hostage to the eight princes who served as imperial electors. The Peace of Westphalia thus acknowledged the constitutional legitimacy of the hundreds of territories that made up the imperial estates, as well as the right of many of their rulers to representation in the imperial parliament, or Reichstag.

In the eyes of subsequent German nationalist historians, this peace settlement counted as the nadir of German history, the formal warrant for the Holy Roman Empire's enduring impotence. More recently, historians have taken note of the settlement's virtues, particularly the fact that it laid the legal foundation for a century and a half of comparative stability in central Europe.<sup>3</sup> In recognizing religious parity within the Reich, it reduced the intensity of confessional animosity. In recognizing political fragmentation, it

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2012); Georg Schmidt, *Geschichte des Alten Reiches: Staat und Nation in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 1999).

thwarted the emergence of a hegemonic state in central Europe – an outcome that looked less unfortunate after 1945 than before. The weight of the Reich had shifted northward after the Reformation into the German-speaking territories, which now dominated the imperial parliament and the imperial legal institutions. And at least among the literate elites who made up the body of imperial officials, an inchoate sense of civic identity began to attach to what had by now become known generally as the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

However, despite the recovery of imperial institutions after 1648, it was hardly an exaggeration to describe the Thirty Years' War as one of German history's great catastrophes. Its shadow in popular memory was long.<sup>4</sup> Although the destruction it wrought was not uniform, in many parts of central Europe it bore comparison to 1945.<sup>5</sup> Both material and demographic, the devastation traced the vast areas through which Protestant and Catholic armies had marched, killed, pillaged, and carried disease. The total demographic loss was perhaps 20 to 40 percent of the entire population; in some areas, such as parts of the Mark Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, and Württemberg, the figure was much higher. The war thus accelerated the long-term economic decline of central Europe, encouraging the migration of trade routes toward the Atlantic Ocean and turning much of the Reich into an economic backwater.

The political fragmentation of central Europe took on grotesque proportions. The Holy Roman Empire now comprised more than 2,000 entities, whose autonomy was limited alone by the fact that their rulers owed fealty to the emperor and were subject, in theory and varying degrees of practice, to his power. Some sixty of these territories were ruled by major princes. Another fifty were chartered imperial cities. Another 1,500 represented the estates of imperial nobles in southern and western Germany, many of which comprised no more than a square kilometer or two of land. In this respect, they resembled hundreds of abbeys and other small ecclesiastical territories in the south and west. As a result, a multitude of tariff barriers throttled commercial traffic in central Europe, as did hundreds of separate currencies, orders of weights and measures, and legal systems. Shipping along the upper Rhine River faced political frontiers, hence toll stations, on average every ten kilometers.

The principal disadvantage of both economic and political fragmentation was the absence of a standing imperial army to provide durable domestic and external security. So, the inability of the Reich to establish a monopoly on the

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln, NE, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> John Theibault, "The Demography of the Thirty Years' War: Günter Franz and His Critics," *GH*, 15 (1997), 1–21; John Theibault, *German Villages in Crisis: Rural Life in Hesse-Kassel and the Thirty Years' War, 1580–1720* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1995).

legitimate use of force encouraged the consolidation of power within the separate territories. The Reformation itself had already contributed to this process, insofar as it had put the power to regulate religious affairs in the hands of the territorial princes. The ensuing process, often called “confessionalization,” took institutional shape in the founding of schools, universities, and a set of territorial agencies to police religious life and ensure religious peace within the separate territories.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War, some territorial princes moved further in the same direction, establishing their claims to extract regular tax revenues from their own estates – cities, ecclesiastical institutions, and the vassals of nobles within the princes’ territories. With these revenues, they raised and maintained their own standing professional armies, whose officers were drawn from the aristocracy and whose common soldiers comprised mercenaries, serfs, and others who had been lured or forced into long-term service. At the same time, the princes expanded bureaucratic institutions to administer spiritual and secular affairs, territorial justice, and police. These bureaucracies were staffed by increasing numbers of non-noble administrators, judges, other jurists, and clergymen, who had trained in the territorial universities.

The term “absolutism” is commonly used to describe this process of territorial consolidation, but it is in many ways misleading. Administrative and confessional centralization in the territories involved lengthy negotiations, compromise, collaboration, and conflict. It limited but by no means eliminated the power of either the territorial or imperial estates. These corporate bodies remained in existence; they could still appeal to the protection of the empire’s legal courts, while the territorial estates, particularly the nobility, retained their powers over their own vassals. Still, the emergence of more robust institutions of princely rule in the territories described the direction of institutional developments in significant parts of German-speaking Europe, such as Saxony, Hanover, and Bavaria.

This was particularly true of the two most powerful states in the Holy Roman Empire. One of these comprised the Habsburg territories.<sup>7</sup> With a single brief interruption, Catholic princes of the Habsburg dynasty occupied the imperial throne from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. The real basis of Habsburg power lay less, however, in this throne than in the dynasty’s extensive landholdings in Austria, Bohemia, and northern Italy. With an effective centralized administration, an efficient system of public finances, and a standing army, the Habsburg domains in central Europe represented

<sup>6</sup> Heinz Schilling, “Die Konfessionalisierung im Reich: Religiöser und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Deutschland zwischen 1555 und 1600,” *HZ*, 246 (1988), 1–45; Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer and Victoria Christman, eds., *Topographies of Tolerance and Intolerance: Responses to Religious Pluralism in Reformation Europe* (Leiden, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1550–1700: An Interpretation* (Oxford, 1979).

a much more coherent structure than the Reich, and it offered a model to ambitious princes elsewhere. The dynasty's power then culminated in the spectacular expansion of its territories southward, westward, and eastward, chiefly in the trail of retreating Ottoman power at the turn of the eighteenth century. The result, though, was increasingly to anchor Habsburg power outside the Reich and German-speaking Europe, as its financial and administrative challenges became more far-flung, diverse, and onerous.

To the north, the other major state in central Europe faced different challenges. The transformation of Brandenburg-Prussia from several islands of ill-endowed territory on the north German plain into one of Europe's great powers was the stuff of legend, much of it cultivated by the ruling Hohenzollern dynasty.<sup>8</sup> The feat reflected the single-minded conviction that the external and internal survival of the realm depended on the cultivation of military power. Both on the battlefield and off, fortune played a significant part in what transpired. Brandenburg-Prussia was ruled by a succession of able Protestant princes, shrewd students of administrative and military affairs, who were obsessed with mobilizing the resources of their lands into the service of their army. They compelled their estates to accept the wisdom of this project, to provide the army with regular contributions of wealth and – in the case of landed aristocrats – noble officers and enserfed peasants. The institutions of Prussian absolutism reflected this logic. They included an effective system of military recruitment, which provided the state, whose population was the tenth largest in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century, with Europe's fourth largest army.<sup>9</sup> With this army, the reigning Prussian king, Friedrich II (the Great), turned on his Habsburg rival in 1740 and, in an exhausting series of campaigns, seized coveted territories in Saxony and Silesia from Austria. The ensuing antagonism between the two German powers endured for more than a century, and it increasingly shaped the political dynamics of the Holy Roman Empire. The rivalry spared no imperial institution, polarizing imperial politics in a way that recalled the seventeenth century. Issues of confession were never far from the surface, as the rivalry mocked the idea that the empire could resolve the hostility among its members short of war.

If military violence was less a scourge in central Europe during the late eighteenth century, the reasons lay not in the absence of war but in the success of rulers in confining its destruction and dislocation.<sup>10</sup> Standing armies of

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 183–246; Francis L. Carsten, *The Origins of Prussia* (New York, 1954).

<sup>9</sup> Otto Büsch, *Military System and Social Life in Old Regime Prussia, 1713–1807: The Beginnings of the Social Militarization of Prusso-German Society*, trans. John G. Gagliardo (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (London, 1996); Christopher Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (New York, 1988).

long-serving professional soldiers brought military violence under greater political control and discipline. Regular pay to these soldiers and the establishment of formal logistical networks reduced the marauding.

The benefits of these arrangements were evident in the multiplying signs of economic recovery in central Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century. It was signaled in population growth, which fed demand for agricultural production and manufacture. Imported from Britain, innovative farming techniques boosted food production, particularly in northern Germany, where aristocrats turned to the commercial farming of grains. The demand for manufactured goods – textiles, tools, and utensils – rose in response, above all in rural areas where production could be “put out” by contractors to individual households. This emerging “protoindustrial” system evaded the comprehensive controls exercised by the urban guilds. Growing trade in manufactured goods, as well as in foodstuffs, registered in increased commercial traffic overseas, along the Rhine and other central European rivers, and an expanding network of roads and canals. The growth of commerce registered, too, in the revival of central European urban centers of commerce, such as Leipzig, Hamburg, Lübeck, Cologne, Frankfurt am Main, Königsberg, and Breslau.

These developments provided the material bases of social, cultural, and political ferment in the late eighteenth century. The commercial centers joined courtly residences and other administrative hubs as home to a growing, articulate, non-noble class of burghers, who, along with their families, made up perhaps 3 percent of the population in German-speaking Europe during this era. This *Bürgertum*, as it became known, encompassed both the business elites and the expanding corps of public officials who trained in the territorial universities and staffed the imperial and territorial bureaucracies. This social alliance, which included interested nobles in the residential cities, took form in hundreds of clubs, fraternities, and other voluntary associations – Masonic lodges, patriotic societies, and reading circles that devoted themselves to supporting museums, theaters, and orchestral ensembles, as well as promoting civic improvement, sociability, self-cultivation, and mutual harmony among their male members. In clubs that endowed themselves with names like “Harmony,” “Casino,” or “Museum Club,” they constituted a literate public realm, a readership for proliferating literature of German language books, journals, and newspapers, an audience for German language drama and German music, a forum for discussing public issues.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Geselligkeit und Demokratie: Vereine und zivile Gesellschaft im transnationalen Vergleich 1750–1914* (Göttingen, 2003), 21–34; W. H. Bruford, *Germany in the Eighteenth Century: The Social Background of the Literary Revival* (London, 1965).



eighteenth century, reading circles alone counted almost 300 in the German-speaking lands.<sup>12</sup>

In these new associations, the urban elites of the propertied and educated middle classes promoted enlightened reform and pursued common cultural, social, and civic interests. This urban public space also provided the principal social foundation for the German Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*. The intellectual ferment suggested by this term was itself a product of increasing material prosperity. It reflected the belief that social, cultural, and political institutions could be made as reasonable as the natural world was thought to be, that human happiness would improve in the measure that scientific thinking governed human affairs. Its advocates thus advocated “rational” reforms, such as the uniform rule of law, religious toleration, education, and measures to increase agricultural production and manufacture.

The German Enlightenment resembled its French and British counterparts, from which it drew liberally, but conditions in central Europe colored its politicization in characteristic ways. The prominence of public officials among the proponents of the German Enlightenment corresponded to a remarkable situation. Because it was blanketed with hundreds of autonomous principalities – kingdoms, electorates, duchies and archduchies, bishoprics and archbishoprics, abbeys, margravates, landgraviates, and imperial cities – central Europe represented the most intensively ruled place on earth. Discussions of rational reform, particularly as they touched on education and confessional affairs, necessarily involved public authority and its many bureaucratic agents. As a result, a characteristic feature of German thinking in the eighteenth century was an emphasis on enlightened absolutism, an animus against the petty territorial estates, and a belief that the proper agents of rational reform were the major princes. Monarchical power was to observe the laws of reason and to serve the happiness and security of its subjects. Princes themselves were happy to encourage this understanding of their mission as a rational enterprise. Emperor Joseph II in Austria, Duke Karl Friedrich in Baden, Duke Karl August of Saxe-Weimar (who had Goethe as an advisor), and particularly King Friedrich the Great in Prussia did in fact foster agriculture, industry, religious toleration, the rule of law, and (above all) the administrative centralization of their lands in the name of reason. In the universities of their territories, they encouraged instruction in the science of statecraft and public management, which was known as “cameralism.” Because public management extended to religious affairs, the *Aufklärung* tended to be less secularizing or anti-clerical than the French Enlightenment. In both Protestant and Catholic territories, it featured instead a critique of high church

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, “Verein als soziale Struktur in Deutschland im späten 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert: Eine Fallstudie zur Modernisierung I,” in *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur neueren Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1976), 175.

orthodoxy and pomp, an emphasis on personal piety and inner spirituality, as well as literacy via scriptural readings in the parishes.<sup>13</sup>

The most frequent objects of enlightened criticism included the Reich itself, which could only with difficulty be portrayed as a rational phenomenon. Another object of criticism was the hereditary system of noble privilege, which anchored the corporate power of the territorial estates and, not incidentally, reserved the highest levels of bureaucratic office for aristocrats. The criticism was thus directed more commonly at the weight of tradition and institutional clutter in the Reich than at absolute rule in the larger territories.

The criticism did speak to the question of collective loyalty within the Reich and whether it could in any sense be described by the inclusive term “national.”<sup>14</sup> Because the social and political landscape remained fragmented by law, tradition, and material circumstance, questions of popular allegiance, identity, or common understandings of “nation” or “fatherland” remained difficult to define. Outside the cities, most German speakers remained barely literate, if they could read at all. The parishes remained the principal sites of communication (and schooling), and the collective allegiances fostered here were confessionally bound, oriented toward the territorial prince, who served as the secular leader of the territory’s Church, whether he (or occasionally she) was Catholic or Protestant. Collective sentiment of this sort was captured in the term “territorial patriotism.” It was useful insofar as it encouraged confessional peace, but the loyalties of rural commoners were largely irrelevant to issues of governance, either in the territories or the Reich. Common people were legally excluded from political participation. Among people who were not commoners, attachment to the Reich, sometimes called *Reichspatriotismus*, was more in evidence, for such loyalties could invoke tradition and a common German cultural heritage. These loyalties, too, represented an elite phenomenon, however. They were confined to people such as the imperial nobles or leaders of the imperial cities, who had direct contact with imperial institutions or an interest in the vitality of these institutions. Such sentiments were inchoate within another elite group, the propertied and educated middle class in the cities. Literacy and cultural conversancy suggested the German language itself as a vehicle and symbol of collective identity, but experiences were also conducive to territorial patriotism and an animus against the institutional sclerosis of the Reich. Nevertheless, the term “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation” could hardly disguise the fundamental ambiguities of

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Marschke, “Halle Pietism and the Prussian State: Infiltration, Dissent, and Subversion,” in Jonathan Strom, Hartmut Lehmann, and James Van Horn Melton, eds., *Pietism in Germany and North America, 1650–1820* (Farnham, 2009), 217–28.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Martin Blitz, *Aus Liebe zum Vaterland: Die deutsche Nation im 18. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg, 2000).