

CHAPTER I

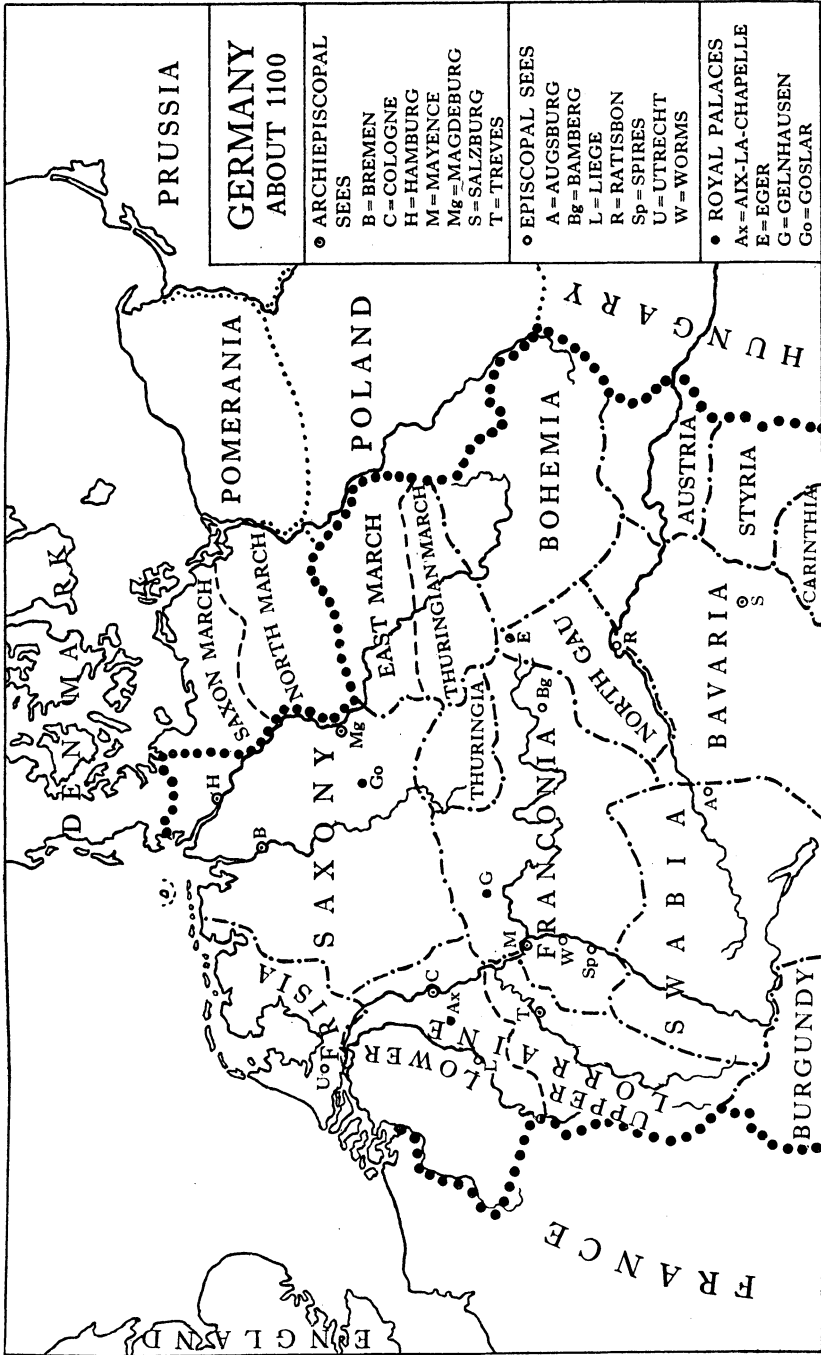
THE EMPIRE AS CHAMPION OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD (900–1050)

ALMOST every German historian makes German history begin with the inroad into the Roman orbit of the Cimbri and Teutones (112 B.C.). The history of any Germanic tribe which at one time or another settled within the boundaries of present Germany is considered part and parcel of German history, without further questioning. Now, every Germanic tribe, with the exception of the Scandinavian peoples, has, in fact, migrated through, and stayed for some period in, the country between the Meuse and Memel. German history becomes thus identified with Germanic history; and the claim to the leadership of all Germanic peoples put forth by German nationalists receives thereby a seemingly historical justification.

The origin of this identification of German with Germanic history can be traced back to the humanistic historiographers of the time of the Emperor Maximilian I (1493–1519). It was these forefathers of our contemporary journalists who supplied the 'copy' for Maximilian's anti-French propaganda. The French and, in fact, every other nation were, so they argued, inferior to the Germans because of the latter's pride of place in the pedigree of the Western nations: had they not for ancestors the Cimbri who made Rome tremble, the Cherusci who annihilated three Augustan legions, the Ostrogoths who conquered Italy, the Visigoths who subdued Spain, and the Vandals who ruled North Africa and the Mediterranean? Were the Germans of Maximilian not the sons and heirs of the Lombards who gave their name to Upper Italy, the Franks who established their rule over Gaul, the Angles and Saxons who made themselves masters of Britain?

It is not surprising that German nationalists should have accepted this noble pedigree which implied the inherited claim to the dominion of the then known world. What is amazing is that this German nationalistic conception, born of political propaganda, has not only survived the feeble French counter-propaganda of the time, but has been taken ever since for an historical truth inside and outside Germany.

MAP I



Germany in the tenth and eleventh centuries

There should be no doubt that the history of the East Teutonic tribes, i.e. Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, has no more to do with the history of Germany than with that of England or Norway. Nor is the history of the West Germanic tribes in any way identical with the early history of Germany. The Lombards and Anglo-Saxons, for instance, were part of that racial group: so were the Franks who made themselves masters of Gaul in 486. In the following centuries these Franks succeeded in subduing all the other West Germanic tribes on the continent. But the Frankish kingdom of the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties was not 'German'. Its centre was Northern France, and it comprised not only the German tribes proper, but also the Romanized Kelts of Gaul, the West Germanic Lombards and the Romanic Italians of Italy, and the East Germanic Visigoths and Romanized Iberians of Spain north of the Ebro. It was a conglomerate of many races and regions: German it was not. Only when the Carolingian Empire broke into its component parts, the German tribes, as distinguished from the Germanic tribes, made their entry into European history.

The attempt of Charlemagne to unite the Teutonic and Romanic nations of Western Europe in one body politic finally broke down in the reign of his grandson. After the treaty of Verdun (843) the three main parts of the Empire began to shape themselves into what were later to be known as France, Italy and Germany. A hundred years after the death of the great Charles their separation had become irrevocable. Not so, however, the principles of unity underlying the Carolingian Empire. The idea that there should always be one flock and one shepherd was one of the fundamental tenets of Christianity; that the *civitas terrena* was to be the earthly counterpart of the *civitas Dei* had been established once and for all by St Augustine; that the final form of the earthly monarchy was given in the Roman Empire and its legitimate successor followed clearly from the prophecies of Daniel. The theocratic monarchy as established by Charlemagne was based on the identity of interest of the heads of the spiritual and temporal powers, the Pope and the Emperor; it was thus the utmost perfection that Christians could expect in this world of imperfection.

The weakness of this conception is evident; it presupposed that there would be no change in the conditions prevailing at the time when an all-powerful monarch wielded the secular sword over the undivided *res publica Christiana* in complete harmony with, or rather in hardly disputed ascendancy over, the spiritual forces of Papacy

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and Church. The history of the following centuries took an exactly opposite course: the unity of the Western nations gave way to a number of independent national states sharply divided against one another; and the harmonious co-operation of Empire and Papacy was replaced by a life-and-death struggle which eventually resulted in the utter ruin of both.

When in 911 the East Frankish line of the Carolingian dynasty died out, the political situation was widely different in the various parts of the former Empire. In Italy, a number of petty princes had established feeble sovereignties over all those parts of the peninsula not in the possession of the Byzantines or the Arabs, the latter having just finished the conquest of Sicily (902). The kings of Burgundy and the dukes of Swabia and Bavaria made frequent inroads into the Lombardic plain. The empty title of king of Italy, sometimes combined with the even emptier one of emperor, fell to the rulers of Friuli, Spoleto and Lower Burgundy without giving any of them the power to consolidate Italy. The Papacy had sunk into that 'era of pornocracy', when an unscrupulous Roman noblewoman and her daughters freely handed the keys of St Peter to their paramours and sons as an appendage to the rule over the Eternal City.

In France, the degenerate descendants of Charlemagne still held nominal sway over the whole of the country from the mouth of the Scheldt to the Pyrenees. In fact, however, the great vassals of the crown had become independent rulers in their own right. The Midi went its own way which, for three centuries, led it farther and farther from the Île de France. In 911, Hrolf, a Norman chieftain, forced the weak French king to cede the mouth of the Seine and the territory adjacent to the English Channel, and to recognize him as duke of Normandy. The counts of Paris, or dukes of Francia, were the true regents of the country as far as it still obeyed the shadow king; before the close of the tenth century they were even to become the legitimate occupants of the throne.

The old Teutonic tribes east of the Meuse had preserved their tribal constitution even under the centralistic system of Charlemagne. The weakness of the central administration under the later Carolingians freed the dukes of Bavaria, Swabia, Franconia, Saxony and Lorraine of the fetters imposed upon their independence. These dukedoms constituted as many independent states; they were held loosely together by the political reminiscence of the Carolingian monarchy and the racial bond of their common Teutonic descent.

Whilst the French kingdom was opposed by the centrifugal forces of regionalism, any bearer of the German crown was confronted by the double hostility of regionalism and tribalism; which, moreover, found much common ground and were therefore the more formidable. As the king had perforce to be chosen from one tribe, he had invariably to face the opposition of all the others.

When the East Frankish line of the Carolingians died out in 911, the German tribes had regained enough of their old spirit of independence to scorn the idea of returning into the old fold. They set up a king of their own choice without regard to the still existing Carolingian kingdom of France. Conrad I, formerly duke of Franconia, was, however, unable to master the problem of tribalism. The first effect of his election was the defection of Lorraine, comprising the territories between the rivers Rhine, Scheldt and Meuse. The Lorrainers, half-German and half-French, transferred their allegiance to Charles the Simple, king of France. Nor did the other German tribes submit to the Franconian duke. Their principal leader, Duke Henry of Saxony, openly defied the king, who proved powerless against him. Faced by the open hostility of the entire nobility, Conrad tried to support his tottering authority by leaning on the ecclesiastical powers; he even conceded the presidency of an imperial synod to a papal legate. That was of no avail, however, and Germany continued to be a prey to civil strife and lawlessness.

Conrad was fully alive to this impossible state of affairs. On his death-bed he designated his strongest adversary, Henry of Saxony, as his successor, and sent him the regalia by the hand of his brother, who had been his heir apparent.

Henry's dukedom of Saxony comprised the territories between the lower Elbe and the lower Rhine, the North Sea and the Hartz mountains. The country had never formed part of the Roman Empire; it was the last to accept the Frankish rule and the Christian religion. It was the homeland of the strongest, most ferocious and least civilized German tribe. The Saxons boasted of their undiluted Nordic blood and their near kinship with the Scandinavians and with the Anglo-Saxons who had emigrated from those very parts which had now become the core of the German kingdom. Henry I, learning from his own past and the mistakes of Conrad, judiciously refrained from imposing the royal prerogatives upon the unwilling dukes, and thus secured at least their tacit compliance with his nominal overlordship. Sober, cautious and realistic, he devoted his reign to laying the foundations on which his more brilliant and

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ambitious son afterwards revived the splendour of the imperial edifice.

At the beginning of his reign Henry was confronted with the recurrent invasions of the Magyars, Asiatic horsemen whose plundering expeditions into Germany and Italy succeeded those of the Vikings of the ninth century. Favoured by an unexpected stroke of good fortune, Henry concluded a nine-year truce with these raiders (924); when it expired he was strong enough to meet them in battle. He crushed the Magyars near the river Saale, so that they never again extended their forays to Northern Germany. Henry used the respite gained by that truce to consolidate his power. He took advantage of the internal troubles of France, where one pretender after another opposed the weak Charles the Simple, and recovered Lorraine (925). By marrying his eldest son Otto to Edith, sister of King Aethelstan of England, in 929, he gained an ally across the sea who was labouring for the consolidation of the English monarchy on similar lines and with similar success as himself. King Edward the Elder had introduced a system of fortified and self-supporting boroughs to secure England against the Danes and Kelts: Henry took over the scheme in order to combat the recurring raids of Magyars and Slavs, and a number of these fortified camps developed afterwards into flourishing towns.

It was the Western Slav tribes on the right banks of the rivers Saale and Elbe which were the main obstacles to the expansion of the Saxons. Now space and expansion were of vital necessity to every nation in the Middle Ages. The agricultural structure of society, the exhaustion of the overworked soil and the lack of settled industry resulted in a comparative over-population of each country. The scarcity of precious metal made enfeoffment with arable land the only possible reward for military and civil services. All these motives made necessary the acquisition of more and more territory, even if a nation and its ruler only wished to maintain their standard of living; much more so if they desired to improve it.

The fight against the pagan Slavs was moreover a missionary task imposed upon every Christian people. For centuries, the German expansion eastward was deemed necessary from religious as well as political and economic motives. Nationalistic conceptions were, however, absent, as nationalism was altogether alien to the medieval way of thinking. On many occasions German settlers were called in by Slav princes themselves to populate the wide and empty spaces and make them yield better crops. For the iron plough

of the German peasants was infinitely superior to the primitive wooden plough of the Slavs and it had a greater and certainly more honourable share than the sword in Germanizing the East Elbian and Baltic countries.

During the truce with the Magyars Henry led a successful expedition across the middle Elbe and took Brandenburg, the central encampment of the Slavs of the Havel district (928–9), which was afterwards to become the cradle of the Prussian state. Farther south he forced his overlordship upon the recently Christianized Bohemia, whose duke, Wenceslaus I, was, however, speedily overthrown by a pagan reaction; he was murdered and became the first of the Czech martyrs (929).

At the end of his reign Henry seems to have felt secure enough to think of even more far-reaching schemes. He acquired the march of Slesvig from a petty Danish ruler. The port of Slesvig was the main emporium of the Baltic trade in the ninth and tenth centuries; and the territory across the Cimbric peninsula was then as afterwards a suitable jumping-off ground for a ruler wishing to interfere in Nordic affairs. Henry also made a treaty with the king of Upper Burgundy who, in exchange for some territorial acquisitions near Basle, gave the German king the Holy Lance of St Constantine, thereby bestowing on him a symbolic claim to the crown of Italy. Possibilities of further expansion north, east and south were thus left at his death to his son and successor, Otto I (936).

Otto (936–73) showed at the outset of his reign the course he meant to pursue. He had himself crowned by the archbishop of Mayence as 'King of the Franks' on the model of Charlemagne in the minster of Aix-la-Chapelle, Charlemagne's favourite foundation. He thus added a spiritual consecration to the popular election, and raised the kingship above tribal disputes. The coronation at Aix-la-Chapelle by the primate of the German Church was henceforth essential: only after it did the elected king become entitled to the homage and fealty of the tribes. At the coronation banquet Otto made the tribal dukes attend him as chamberlain, steward, or marshal, with intent to reduce them to the status of officers of the crown. Their independence, however, was not to be overcome so easily. It is characteristic that even the Saxon court historiographer, Widukind of Corvey, did not accept the official version of a united Germany: to him Otto remained the Saxon duke who had subdued the Frankish, Bavarian and other nations by force of arms. With the greatest misgivings the Franks saw themselves ousted from their old position

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as the royal tribe; the Lorrainers still cherished the memory of their virtual independence between the Eastern and Western parts of the Carolingian Empire; and the Bavarians, from time immemorial to the present day the most self-willed and refractory of all the Germans, did not yield without struggle to the Saxon dominion. The combination of all the non-Saxon tribes against Otto's centralizing policy was the more formidable as it was headed by his younger brother Henry, who pretended to have better claims to the crown as being born after their father's accession to the throne. It took Otto almost four years (938–41) to master these opponents, by which time his power was sufficiently established to allow him to tackle several problems left unsolved by Henry I. The Christianization of the East was a matter of real concern to the king, deeply conscious as he was of the obligation his coronation had laid upon him as a Christian ruler. The Bavarian bishopric of Passau undertook the hard task of converting the savage Magyars, who by this time had settled in the central plain of the Danube basin, yet without entirely abandoning their pillaging raids. Adalag, archbishop of Hamburg, one of the closest political advisers of Otto, set up the ecclesiastical organization of Jutland, while Otto himself consolidated the march of Slesvig. At the same time the bishoprics of Brandenburg and Havelberg were established; they gave the 'North March', the eastern outpost of Saxony, a glacis across the middle Elbe, and secured the safety of Magdeburg, which soon afterwards became the see of a new metropolitan organization.

The unstable conditions still prevailing in France gave Otto an opportunity to interfere in the West. A French invasion of Lorraine, arranged and coinciding with the rebellion of 938, was repelled without difficulty. When a few years later King Louis IV fell into the hands of his most powerful vassal, Duke Hugo of Francia, Otto sided with the king as the weaker party, and advanced as far as Rouen and the outskirts of Paris (946). The peace he mediated between the rivals in 950 left him enough influence over France to render her incapable of interfering with his own designs upon Italy.

The fates of Germany and Italy were interwoven in a very strange pattern, from the moment when Berengar of Ivrea, one of the contesting princelings of Upper Italy, having taken temporary refuge at the German court (941), turned the eyes of the German king to the unsettled conditions of Italy, up to the occupation of Rome by the dynasty of Savoy in 1870, which was made possible by the German victory over Napoleon III. Nominally the two countries

formed part of the Holy Roman Empire, the secular lordship of which soon became almost an appurtenance of the German crown, whereas the spiritual guidance of the West was fixed at the Italian capital even when the Vicar of Christ was not of Italian nationality. The overthrow of the theocratical dyarchy, brought about by the downfall of the Hohenstaufen dynasty through papal agency (1250), and the humiliation of the Papacy at the hands of Philip le Bel of France (1303), resulted in the political ruin of both nations. Their lands became the battle-grounds of European armies and diplomatists for many centuries. Both eventually gained political unity through the exertions of their least centrally situated and least genuinely national parts, namely the half-Slavonic Prussia and the half-French Savoy. In concerted actions Prussia and Savoy defeated the lawful heirs of the Holy Empire, namely the house of Austria and the Papacy (1866–70).

A fierce controversy has raged among German historians over the Italian policy of the German kings from Otto I onward. Instead of pursuing idealistic dreams of a theocratical world monarchy, one school of thought argues, the kings should have concentrated on *Realpolitik* nearer home, i.e. the consolidation of the royal power over the great vassals of the crown. Instead of trying to subjugate the Italians, who never willingly suffered the foreign yoke, they should have directed their efforts towards the thinly populated Eastern regions; the Slav tribes, lacking political organization, economic power and an historic tradition, would have fallen an easy prey to a resolute conqueror. A compact German empire might thus have been established as far as the gulf of Bothnia and the waters of the Dnieper. An impartial study of Central Europe in the middle of the tenth century, and of the motives which led Otto to his Italian expeditions and the revival of the Roman Empire (962), will, however, lead to conclusions very different from those inspired by the ideology of nineteenth-century nationalism.

When, in 951, Otto set out against his former protégé Berengar, now king of Italy, he was still following the established policy of the Bavarians and Swabians, who had seized every opportunity to advance their tribal frontiers across the Alps into the region of the Upper Italian lakes. Italy, torn between rival pretenders who lacked the power necessary to support their ambitions, was a political vacuum which necessarily attracted every powerful neighbour. The physical law that does not allow vacant spaces has an exact counterpart in politics; a political vacuum has the same tendency to be filled

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as has an air-pocket. It was not a question whether Otto should make himself predominant in Italy or no; but whether he himself should tackle the task or leave it to somebody else—the French, the Byzantines, or the Arabs. Otto, who considered himself the lawful heir of Charlemagne and the champion of Western and Christian civilization, could not well abandon the head of the Church to schismatics and infidels, nor leave the tempting spoils to an inept ruler of France. He easily reduced the tyrannical rule of Berengar, assumed, again on the model of Charlemagne, the title of ‘King of the Franks and Lombards’, and legalized his rule over Italy by marrying Adelaide of Burgundy, the widow of Berengar’s predecessor. The eastern approaches to Upper Italy were given to Duke Henry of Bavaria, Otto’s youngest brother, who had become his firm supporter. This increase of the Bavarian power, however, stirred up the old antagonism of Swabia. Its duke was Otto’s eldest son, Liudolf; and personal feelings exacerbated the issue. Soon Otto had to face a fresh rebellion, headed by Liudolf and the king’s son-in-law, Conrad of Lorraine. The Magyars were not slow to take advantage of the civil war that raged for three years, and invaded South Germany as far as Augsburg. The onslaught of this foreign enemy, however, retrieved Otto’s almost hopeless situation. The rebels joined the royal standard to combat the Magyars, and a united German army crushed their hordes near Augsburg so effectively that the Mongol horsemen never again crossed the frontier of the Empire (955). It was a victory of Western and Christian civilization over Asiatic barbarism that may be compared with the victory over the Turks before Vienna, in 1683. A general rising of the Slavs came too late to imperil Otto’s position; a few weeks afterwards he inflicted a major defeat on them in Mecklenburg.

Otto’s position and reputation were now firmly established throughout the Western world and beyond it. Envoys not only of France and England, but of Byzantium, Kiev and Cordoba, appeared at his court. It became the custom to call him ‘the Great’. It was only a natural consequence that he followed his venerated model in obeying the call for aid which Pope John XII sent to him in 962. Berengar, wholly unaware of his precarious position after the first expedition of Otto, continued to pursue his independent policy and even encroached upon the Patrimonium Petri. John XII, one of the most worthless successors of St Peter and remarkable only as the first Pope to change his name (Octavian) on his accession, promised Otto the imperial crown as reward. Otto did not hesitate. He over-