

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66016-8 - A Short History of Germany
S. H. Steinberg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

A SHORT HISTORY
OF
GERMANY

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66016-8 - A Short History of Germany
S. H. Steinberg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66016-8 - A Short History of Germany
S. H. Steinberg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

A SHORT HISTORY
OF
GERMANY

BY
S. H. STEINBERG

εἰ τις αὐτοὺς ξυνηλῶν φαίη πε-
φυκέναι ἐπὶ τῷ μῆτι αὐτοὺς
ἔχειν ἡσυχίαν μῆτι τοὺς ἄλλους
ἀνθρώπους ἔαν, ὀρθῶς ἂν εἴποι.

THUCYDIDES I, 70

The sober teaching of history is
the foundation of sound politics.

H. A. L. FISHER

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1944

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66016-8 - A Short History of Germany
S. H. Steinberg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

To

GEORGE P. GOOCH

C.H., D.LITT., F.B.A.

and

T. S. R. BOASE

DIRECTOR OF THE COURTAULD INSTITUTE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

in gratitude and
friendship

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107660168

© Cambridge University Press 1944

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1944

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-66016-8 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

CONTENTS

<i>Prefatory Note</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Introduction: Centralism and Federalism in German History</i>	vii
<i>Chap. I. The Empire as champion of the Christian world (900–1050)</i>	I
II. The contest between Empire and Papacy (1056–1250)	27
III. The disintegration of the Empire (1250–1493)	52
IV. The contest between Empire and Territories (1493–1648)	76
V. The Empire in decay (1648–1786)	117
VI. The collapse of the Empire (1786–1815)	156
VII. The German Confederation (1815–1866)	177
VIII. The Bismarck Empire (1867–1890)	223
IX. The Empire of William II (1890–1918)	241
X. The Weimar Republic (1918–1933)	264
<i>Epilogue: The Nazi Dictatorship</i>	278
<i>Index</i>	286

Maps

1. Germany in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries	<i>page</i> 2
2. Europe about 1180	43
3. Germany in 1378	65
4. Germany in 1546	88
5. Europe in 1555	89
6. Germany in the second half of the 17th century	116
7. Germany in 1793	155
8. Germany in 1815	176
9. German Customs Union	193
10. Germany, 1867–1918	222
11. Bismarck's system of alliances	238
12. Germany, 1919–38	263

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66016-8 - A Short History of Germany
S. H. Steinberg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PREFATORY NOTE

This book aims at giving the English public a narrative, on a modest scale, which is, in fact, a history of Germany and not a history of Brandenburg-Prussia's expansion into Greater Prussia.

For a detailed study of events the reader is referred to the relevant chapters of the *Cambridge Medieval* and *Modern Histories*, and their comprehensive bibliographies. The present author's *Historical Tables* (Macmillan, 1939) may be found useful as a synoptic conspectus of facts and dates.

I am grateful to those friends who were good enough to read and criticise my manuscript and, in particular, to

Mr W. T. Gairdner, Mr J. D. Higham, Mr Stanley Morison,
Mr R. H. Samuel, Mr I. Scotland and Mr H. Thistlethwaite.

Mr D. E. Mende permitted me to make liberal use of his unpublished history of Germany from the accession of William II, and Mr R. M. Spencer helped me in drawing the maps.

S. H. S.

INTRODUCTION

CENTRALISM AND FEDERALISM IN GERMAN HISTORY

The outstanding fact in the history of Germany is the non-existence, up to 1871, of any political unit called Germany. When the Frankish Empire was partitioned among the grandsons of Charlemagne in 843, the parts east of the Rhine were called the East Frankish Kingdom as distinct from the West Frankish Kingdom, which was soon to be known as France. From 962, when Otto I was crowned emperor in Rome, the official title of his dominions was 'Holy Roman Empire'. At its head was the 'King of the Romans', who was elevated to the dignity of 'Roman Emperor' after his coronation by the Pope; when the coronation in Rome was discontinued the 'Roman King' assumed the title of 'Roman Emperor Elect' (from 1508). These titles remained in use until the dissolution of the Empire in 1806. The term 'German Lands', first used in an official document in 1442, occurs hereafter only at wide intervals. From 1486 it became the custom to speak of the 'German section of the Roman Empire' (*Römisches Reich deutscher Nation*) when referring to the regions north of the Alps. It was only after the Napoleonic wars that a 'German Confederation' was established (1815); and the empire of the Hohenzollerns was the first to be called officially the 'German Empire' (1871).

There was no 'Germany' for a thousand years because there was no German nation to which the term could be applied. The term 'Germans' comprises the West Teutonic tribes on the continent (the Anglo-Saxons forming the remaining part), just as the term 'Scandinavians' comprises the North Teutonic peoples. Saxons, Bavarians, Franks, Hessians, Swabians and Thuringians are not regional subdivisions of one nation, they are nations themselves. They stand in the same racial relation one to another as do the Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Icelanders. The description of early nineteenth-century Italy as a 'merely geographical expression' may be applied even more aptly to Germany. The Scandinavian peoples have been allowed to develop as independent nations throughout the centuries, apart from one or two short-lived attempts at a Scandinavian union under German princes. The

German nations, on the other hand, were forcibly welded together by the Frankish kings from Clovis (481–511) to Charlemagne (768–814), before they could fully develop their own institutions by themselves. Despite this handicap the racial, political and cultural differences remained strong enough to enable the Alemanni of Switzerland and Alsace, the Bavarians of Austria, and the Low Franks of the Netherlands and Luxemburg to establish and maintain their political independence with comparative ease.

The Frankish overlordship was established by brute force of arms; but it was given a spiritual justification when Charlemagne was crowned Roman Emperor on Christmas Day, 800. As the anointed protector and defender of the Christian Church, the Emperor was in theory the overlord of the *res publica Christiana*. As this Christian world was composed of various national units, none of which was willing to abandon the whole of its independence, the Roman Emperor may be described as the titular head of a worldwide Christian federation. Successive Emperors tried to extend their powers and thereby to transform the commonwealth of nations into a centralized monarchy. The Carolingians failed to amalgamate the whole of the Teutonic and Romance nations, which broke apart fifty years after Charlemagne's death. Would it be possible to establish a central power limited to the German tribes? Would the German tribes each go their own way, and thus further disintegrate the West? Or might a compromise be found on a federal basis? These were the questions with which German rulers and peoples of each successive generation were confronted. Upon their solution depended the future of the Germanies, indeed of Central Europe.

Writing under the influence of the idea of the Nation State, one of the products of the French Revolution, German historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rashly considered the centralized monarchy (or republic) to be the only natural solution, and condemned the opposition of the tribes as an obstinate deviation from the predestined course of German history. In actual fact, the German tribes were far from wishing to obstruct a reasonable federal union. What they resented was the imposition of a centralized rule that would have stifled their natural growth. The strength, and, one may add, the justification of the tribal spirit can be gauged by the fact that it has survived the break-up of the old tribal organizations. From the twelfth century onward, these gave way to the growth of territorial states which were based on merely dynastic principles. Even then, the rulers of Bavaria and Hesse retained the old tribal

names, and those of Hanover and Württemberg kept the tribal arms and colours, although their territories were no longer identical with those of the medieval Bavarians, Hessians, Saxons and Swabians respectively. It is noteworthy that the one state which pursued the scheme of forcibly subduing the other German territories, and eventually succeeded in doing so, was Prussia, i.e. the only German territory of importance that has grown up outside the old tribal boundaries. The march of Brandenburg and the dukedoms of Prussia and Pomerania, the strongholds of the Prussian monarchy and Prussian spirit, were originally inhabited by Slavs and Balts. German settlers from every tribe poured in from the twelfth century onward, and mixed with the aboriginal population. This mixture of every German, West Slavonic and Baltic tribe developed into a new race whose mentality was entirely different from that of any of its components. It was this Prussia that scorned the idea of a free federal union of the German tribes, and did not rest until it had forced upon Germany that unity which was the reverse of a thousand years of German history.

The way for the unification of Germany has been prepared by two men who were certainly far from envisaging the results of their exertions: Luther and Napoleon; the former, by creating the national language; the latter, by creating the national consciousness. Luther's translation of the Bible bridged the gulf which up to that time separated the High and Low German languages, by choosing a vocabulary and syntax derived from and intelligible to both regions. Even the section of Germany that remained faithful to the Roman creed adopted the 'Lutheran German' because of its obvious advantages; and the 'classical' writers and poets—Lessing, Klopstock, Wieland, Herder, Goethe and Schiller—finally based German literature on Luther's vocabulary and grammar. It is, however, remarkable that up to the present day, the German 'dialects' have preserved the main features of 'languages', namely that they are spoken by every national regardless of social position; and 'pure' German is in fact relegated to the stage. There is no standard German comparable with the King's English and considered the natural mode of expression by every German from whatever district he may hail.

Napoleon I, Emperor of the French, was the man who instilled the vision of a free, great and united Germany in the hearts of nations so different in their political and intellectual outlook as were the Prussians, Saxons, Austrians and all the other Germans of his

age. He did away with literally hundreds of petty states, arbitrarily altered the frontiers of the remaining ones without regard to historical and racial boundaries, and thus forced the peoples of the newly created states to forget their age-old differences. Moreover, the pitiful and subservient role which the monarchs of the Rhenish Confederation played in the Emperor's wake was hardly calculated to satisfy the spirit of a generation which had learned from the French Revolutionaries the value of nationhood, if nothing else. Thus Napoleon, by radically destroying the historical bonds, became the involuntary promoter of German nationalism.

The 'German Confederation' as created by the Congress of Vienna (1815) was a half-hearted attempt at a solution of the German question on federal lines. The rivalry of the two great powers, Austria and Prussia, was the main obstacle to its development. Prussia was not interested in being *primus*, much less *secundus inter pares*, but aimed at a hegemony over the middle and small states, and at the exclusion of Austria. Nor were liberalism and nationalism, the two great intellectual and political movements of the nineteenth century, willing to compromise with an institution which was conservative and supra-national in its very structure. Thus Bismarck might feel in accord with the spirit of the age when he overthrew the German Confederation (1866) and established the Hohenzollern Empire (1871). It was a skilful blend of the Prussian blood-and-iron creed with the national-liberal ideology of the middle classes. But right from the beginning Bismarck had to wage bitter feuds against the 'enemies of the Empire' as he chose to describe the adversaries of Prussian hegemony. He also called 'peevish grumpiness' (*Reichsverdrossenheit*) what was, in fact, mere unwillingness to acquiesce in his solution of the German question; and this dissatisfaction was, though for different reasons, to be found amongst the Prussian Junkers, the Bavarian, Rhenish and Silesian Catholics, the adherents of the dethroned Guelph and Hessian dynasties, not less than amongst progressive and socialist politicians in every part of the Empire. Bismarck's solution was not the final one; so much was clear even before its downfall in 1918.

The creators of the Weimar Constitution envisaged a federal organization of the Republic: Prussia was to be dismembered and the other states reshaped according to their historical, racial, economic and cultural needs. This tendency found its expression in the preamble of the Weimar Constitution, which referred to 'the German people, united in its tribes, and animated by the desire to renew

INTRODUCTION

xi

and consolidate its Empire in freedom and justice'. These words remained, however, a dead letter. No serious attempt was ever made to develop the constitution on federal lines, for Prussia remained an insuperable stumbling-block. When Hitler came to power in 1933, he proclaimed himself the fulfiller of German unity, and made some violent efforts to eradicate traditional divisions, the most curious among them being the introduction of a uniform German passport. (Up to 1935 there had in fact been no German passport nationality; the individual German had continued to be described as a Saxon, Badener, or Hamburger.) On the other hand, the National Socialists have created further confusion by establishing their party districts as additional administrative units. They frequently overlap other frontiers; the very word 'Gau' has a medieval ring to German ears: in view of the avowed centralism of the Nazi administration, it is an indirect proof of the underlying strength of the old federal divisions. In short, the structure of Germany has remained what it appeared to a seventeenth-century political theorist, namely 'a rather irregular body, like unto a monster' (*irregulare aliquod corpus et monstro simile*).

The history of the Germanies is the history of the unending struggle of the continental Teutons for a working compromise between uniformity and disruption. Uniformity was and is contrary to the racial, cultural and political divergency of the Germanic tribes; the complete independence of each part would have been and will be contrary to the economic, cultural and political interests of those very parts. At no time was one central power strong enough to crush the centrifugal tendencies of the component elements. At no time were the component sections weak enough to let themselves be merged into one body politic. The main problem of German history is very similar to that with which the League of Nations was confronted, namely, to find a working compromise between centralism and anarchy. What the League failed to achieve in twenty years, the Germanies have not been able to achieve in a millennium.