

Introduction

In May 1608, several Protestant rulers in the Holy Roman Empire convened an emergency summit in the Swabian town of Auhausen. Weeks earlier, they had walked out of the Imperial Diet, the Empire's main legislative assembly, to protest what they deemed Catholic attempts to undermine the Empire's constitution. Speaking in one voice, those gathered in Auhausen condemned their opponents' "hostile and violent actions" as a threat to the Empire and its members, known as Imperial Estates. If left unchecked, rogue actors would "create one disturbance after another in the beloved Fatherland, thereby wreaking havoc with the entire ancient and praiseworthy imperial constitution. The result will be nothing less than the destruction of all good order, law, and prosperity." Only by uniting "in a loyal understanding and association" could peace-loving authorities prevent this catastrophe. Accordingly, the Estates assembled in Auhausen formed an alliance, set to last for ten years, which became known as the Protestant Union. By pooling their resources through this corporate framework, the Union's founders argued they acted as the Empire's saviors. Their collective endeavor did not seek "the collapse of the holy Empire's constitution, but much more to strengthen the same and to better preserve peace and unity in the Empire."¹

The framers of the Protestant Union were not the only political authorities in the Empire to highlight the symbiotic relationship between individual leagues and their wider political system. Similar statements abound in the sources produced by dozens of alliances among Imperial Estates during the early modern period. Nor were such dynamics limited to the Empire, as the experience of the neighboring United Provinces of the Netherlands shows. Also known as the Dutch Republic, the United Provinces came into being through the 1579 creation of an alliance, the Union of Utrecht, which unified the seven northernmost provinces of the

¹ "Unionsakte," 350–2. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

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Low Countries against the Netherlands' Spanish rulers and their allied provinces. Over the ensuing decades, the Union of Utrecht remained the bedrock of the developing Dutch state, serving, as one pamphleteer noted in the 1650s, "as the compass that has sailed the ship of our Republic now for seventy years through so many storms."² As another author argued, the Union was the only reason a Dutch state existed at all. By facilitating the sharing of sovereignty among allied provinces, the Union created a "supreme sovereign" that united disparate provincial authorities to achieve common goals. Indeed, "what could be more natural than that all provinces join their sovereignties together . . . in order to maintain the Republic."³

The language employed by the Protestant Union in the Empire and by supporters of the Union of Utrecht in the Dutch Republic highlights the importance of alliances for the development of both political systems. Leagues that joined together multiple authorities were ubiquitous in the Empire and Low Countries during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as individual states frequently united to create alliances that possessed their own shared sovereignty. The activity of these leagues altered legal structures and produced overlapping spheres of sovereignty that simultaneously supported and constrained central and territorial authorities. The pervasiveness of this phenomenon meant that the legacy of past alliances hung over every corporate endeavor, with each league seeking to emulate the successes and avoid the pitfalls of predecessor alliances. In the process, the politics of alliance created boundaries and opportunities that fundamentally shaped the evolution of individual states and the German and Netherlandish political systems writ large. By binding authorities of differing stature together, leagues offered territorial states and larger provinces leadership positions and resources to consolidate power that they could not muster on their own. In exchange, the collaborative policy-making inherent to alliances gave increased political agency to smaller state actors such as cities, minor ecclesiastical territories, and less powerful provinces. The politics of alliance therefore helped ensure the survival of smaller states by empowering them to oppose and even reverse the actions of larger states. Comparative analysis of the interdependencies bred by the politics of alliance exposes processes undergirding state formation in the Empire, the Low Countries, and their territories that can expand how scholars conceptualize the development of states across early modern Europe.

The historiography on European state formation cannot adequately account for how the politics of alliances and shared sovereignty shaped

² *Bickerse Beroerten*, fol. Cr. ³ *Het Recht*, fol. C1r–C1v.

states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For decades, arguments about early modern state formation operated in the shadow of Max Weber, who claimed that modern states emerged when central authority triumphed over regional interests through the establishment of strong “rational” institutions such as state militaries and bureaucracies.⁴ This process of bureaucratization explained the rise of nation-states as well as the seemingly ad hoc nature of early modern composite states. Over the last several decades, Weber’s model of center-region conflict has lost credibility, as numerous scholars have shown that negotiation and compromise between central and local authorities drove state formation in many contexts. This scholarship has revealed a variety of solutions that early modern Europeans employed to mediate relations between different levels of sovereignty. Nevertheless, Weber’s teleological approach continues to influence the study of early modern Europe. Current historiography tends to examine state formation either very broadly through meta-historical studies⁵ or very narrowly by restricting itself to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in one state or territory.⁶ This focus means most studies ignore the period before the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, even as they argue that centralization of bureaucratic states and the marginalization of smaller actors began during the sixteenth century.

This chronological focus imparts an air of inevitability to state formation that assumes certain preordained outcomes and oversimplifies the array of forces affecting early modern states. It causes much of the historiography to characterize state formation as an internal process dominated by territorial states operating as discrete independent actors. Even works that examine the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often follow this model by portraying the Reformation era as a key phase in the rise of territorial states at the expense of smaller polities. According to this line of thought, the conditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially the rising cost of war, marginalized smaller state actors in ways that allowed princely bureaucratic states to dominate.⁷ This view is particularly noticeable in studies of the so-called fiscal military state, some of the few state formation works to include serious consideration

⁴ Weber, “Politics.”

⁵ Anderson, *Lineages*; Bagge, *State Formation*; Bahlcke, *Landesherrschaft*; Ertman, *Leviathan*; Kennedy, *Great Powers*; Reinhard, *Staatsgewalt*; Spruyt, *Sovereign State*; Tilly, *Coercion*.

⁶ Brewer, *Sineus*; Brewer and Hellmuth, eds., *Rethinking Leviathan*; Collins, *France*; Hart, *Bourgeois State*; Reinhard, “Frühmoderner Staat”; Tilly and Blockmans, eds., *Cities*; Vann, *Württemberg*; Vierhaus, *Staaten*; Paul Warde, *Ecology*.

⁷ Dilcher, “Rechtsgeschichte”; Press, “Reichsstadt,”; Schilling, *Staatsinteressen*; Schilling, “Stadtrepublikanismus”; Tracy, ed., *Modern State*.

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of eras preceding the Peace of Westphalia.⁸ Regardless of the time period they study, almost all scholars remain wedded to an understanding of early modern state formation as a process of building central institutions. This widespread concentration on bureaucratic institutions as the main vehicle for state formation obscures how other factors such as the politics of alliance molded the development of early modern states, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

While enlightening in many respects, therefore, an approach to European state formation that excludes the Reformation era and restricts itself to institution and bureaucracy building cannot explain all the long-term processes that shaped early modern states. The current paradigm of territoriality and bureaucracy starts from a presupposition about the most important characteristics of modern states and privileges those features in analyzing the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This perspective struggles to explain the activity of alliances such as the Protestant Union and Union of Utrecht, which possessed nebulous relationships to central state institutions and operated as important political and legal actors in their own right. The pooling of sovereignty through alliances in service of common goals forged interdependencies between states of all sizes, especially in the German and Dutch lands. The pivotal place of alliances in these regions has encouraged scholars to produce excellent studies of individual leagues, but these works almost universally examine one, sometimes two alliances.⁹ While useful as specific case studies, their lack of a comparative framework limits their ability to chart how the politics of alliance functioned across centuries. Their narrow focus means they miss how individual leagues sought to learn from the experiences of their predecessors, a key dynamic with major ramifications for how each alliance framed its scope of action and understood its place in the political systems of the Empire and Low Countries. Conversely, those studies that do examine the broad history of alliance either focus exclusively on the late Middle Ages or lack sufficient detail on individual leagues to explore how later alliances reacted to previous ones, or how the practice of alliance evolved over time. Such works also tend to be proscriptive, focusing more on the theoretical and legal structures of alliances and less on how they functioned in reality.¹⁰

⁸ Brewer, *Sinevs*; Dunning and Smith, “Beyond Absolutism”; Ertman, *Leviathan*; Glete, *War*; Storrs, ed., *Fiscal-Military State*.

⁹ See, for example, Carl, *Bund*; Gotthard, *Konfession*; Groenveld and Leeuwenberg, eds., *De Unie*; Haug-Moritz, *Bund*; Hölz, *Krummstab*. For a work that examines two alliances, see Ernst and Schindling, eds., *Union und Liga*.

¹⁰ See Hardy, *Political Culture*; Lanzinner, “Sicherheitssystem”; Press, ed., *Alternativen?*

This monograph offers a more comprehensive and comparative view of early modern leagues than any previous study. It links the operation of specific alliances over time to state formation at the local, regional, and national levels. It does so by analyzing a formative period in the history of the Empire and the Low Countries: the late fifteenth century through the decades following the Peace of Westphalia. The persistent claim in state formation scholarship that this era began the marginalization of smaller state actors in favor of territorial bureaucratic states makes it well suited for reconsidering the forces that shaped the Empire and the Low Countries. Contrary to the assumptions of most state formation historiography, the comparative study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century alliances demonstrates that the territorial state's ascendancy did not occur as swiftly or as easily as many scholars believe. Nor was state formation in the Dutch and German regions guided exclusively by the growth of individual bureaucratic institutions. Instead, interactions among states of varying sizes facilitated by alliances helped determine the course of state formation in the Empire and the Low Countries at all levels. At the heart of these two political systems sat a web of alliance. Analysis of this web produces a new perspective on early modern state formation that moves beyond a myopic focus on bureaucratic institutions within discrete independent states to reveal how interdependencies forged through alliances shaped states both large and small.

The Holy Roman Empire and Dutch Republic in Historiography

State formation historiography has traditionally viewed the Empire and Dutch Republic as aberrations from the supposed normal course of development that resulted in European nation-states. Already in the seventeenth century, some writers portrayed the Empire as a “monstrosity” that fit no standard category of government. Historians continue to debate the extent of its uniqueness today.¹¹ Similar tendencies mark scholarship on the United Provinces, whose nature as a decentralized mercantile republic seems to set it apart from other European states.¹² Somewhat paradoxically, however, at the same time that scholars argue the Empire and Dutch Republic followed unorthodox developmental tracks, state formation historiography contends that some of the classic examples of territorial state building emerged from within

¹¹ See, for example, Schröder, “Saint-Pierre”; Whaley, “Old Reich”; Wilson, “Monstrosity?,” 566–8.

¹² For overviews of the Low Countries during this period, see Israel, *Dutch Republic*; Koenigsberger, *Monarchies*.

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the Empire's ranks: Habsburg Austria, Bavaria, and the developing state par excellence, Prussia, to name but a few. Meanwhile, scholars often hold up the Dutch Republic as a paragon of early modern capitalism that helped create the economic systems that undergird modern Western states. These hybrid characterizations put the Empire and United Provinces on unusual developmental paths that nonetheless gave birth to some of the leading paradigms for modern bureaucratic states. This apparent contradiction makes the Dutch and German lands particularly well suited for a comparative study of the politics of alliances. The parallels in their historiographical treatments and the prominence of leagues in both political systems offer opportunities to move past narratives grounded in arbitrary normative models to expose how the politics of alliance and shared sovereignty influenced state formation across northern Europe.

Over the last 150 years, the historiography on state formation in the Empire and its regions has undergone significant shifts. Until the mid-twentieth century, most historians characterized the Empire's development as a struggle between the emperor and individual territories resulting in the victory of "particularism" over central authority, language echoed in scholarship on the Low Countries. For many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars, this conflict inhibited the growth of a German nation-state and resulted in the ascendancy of the Empire's most modern territorial state, Prussia.¹³ This vision saw the Empire as a dysfunctional, archaic conglomeration of feudal bonds that held Germany back for centuries.

Since the end of World War II, and especially in the wake of German reunification, alternative interpretations have emerged that characterize the predominance of particular interests as a positive. One school of thought portrays the Empire as an innovative "proto-constitutional" system that established basic rights that persist to this day in modern constitutions.¹⁴ Other scholars emphasize the flexible, representative nature of the "imperial state," attributes that made the Empire a prototype not just for how early modern states could have developed, but for how contemporary entities such as the European Union should evolve in the future. For these scholars, the interplay between regional interests and the imperial center created what Georg Schmidt has termed a vibrant "federal complementary constitution" that benefited all Estates. These characteristics provide a model that could have averted the horrors of the mid-twentieth century and offer hope for European integration in the twenty-first century.¹⁵ In response to this rosy view, several historians

¹³ Bryce, *Empire*; Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*; Treitschke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 1.

¹⁴ Burgdorf, "Proto-constitutionalism"; Burgdorf, *Protokonstitutionalismus*.

¹⁵ Burkhardt, "Europäischer Nachzügler"; Burkhardt, "Über das Recht"; Hartmann, *Kulturgeschichte*; Schmidt, *Geschichte*; Schmidt, "Komplementärer Staat."

have portrayed the Empire as a primarily symbolic system lacking statehood. Ritual interactions created the imperial identity that bound Estates together, but the centrality of ritual also meant that the “character of the Holy Roman Empire was essentially fictive.”¹⁶ Another group of scholars strikes a balance between these sides by portraying the Empire as “partially modernized” but not a state.¹⁷ At its core, this debate remains polarized between opposing assessments of the relationship between center and region, unity and disunity in the Empire.

As tempting as it is to view state formation in the Empire in these terms, much of this historiography suffers from a desire to read the present into the past, particularly in efforts to define how “modern” the Empire was. Such approaches transpose an arbitrary opposition between central and regional authorities into the early modern past, when in reality their relationship was much more complex. Recent research on the late medieval Empire has highlighted the plethora of “horizontal” associations among its members.¹⁸ These patterns continued into the early modern period and intertwined with impulses unleashed by religious reform. The study of alliances, therefore, can move scholarship beyond debates over whether or not the Empire was a state to focus on the practical strategies Imperial Estates used to create interdependencies among themselves and with the Empire’s governing apparatus. As Tom Brady has observed, “the political actors of the German Reformation era were confronted . . . with a fact, centralism *and* particularism. The critical point was *whose* centralism and *whose* particularism.”¹⁹

Recognition of this fact has in the last decade produced several excellent surveys of the Empire’s history from the late Middle Ages until its dissolution.²⁰ Stunning achievements in their own right, these studies acknowledge the many alliances that existed throughout the Empire’s history. Nonetheless, they downplay the importance of leagues for state formation, in one case arguing that the consolidation of the Empire’s central institutions “rendered redundant” the practice of corporate alliance as early as the 1520s. This offhand dismissal of alliances leads to misinterpretations of individual leagues and overlooks the broader significance alliances held for the Empire’s operation.²¹ Such an approach, moreover, cannot explain why leagues persisted in popularity if they were so

¹⁶ Krischer, “Conclusion,” 267. See also Rudolph, *Reich*; Stollberg-Rilinger, *Alte Kleider*.

¹⁷ Reinhard, “Frühmoderner Staat”; Reinhard, *Staatsgewalt*, 52–9; Schilling, *Staatsinteressen*; Schilling, “Reichssystem.”

¹⁸ Hardy, *Political Culture*, 3; Wilson, *Heart*, 547–602.

¹⁹ Brady, *Protestant Politics*, 11. Emphasis in original.

²⁰ See especially Whaley, *Germany*; Wilson, *Heart*.

²¹ Wilson, *Heart*, 562–5, quote at 563.

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superfluous, and it ignores how later alliances sought to learn from earlier leagues in order to reform the Empire. Rather than wither into irrelevance, corporate alliances thrived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, serving as vehicles of protest against and support for the Empire's central organs. The collective security they offered through the pooling of sovereignty made alliances a key tool for states of all sizes, and debates over alliances sat at the core of many constitutional developments in the Empire that reshaped how its members interacted. Ultimately, it took the Thirty Years' War to upend attitudes toward the politics of alliance, and even then the ideals of leagues lived on in various forms well into the eighteenth century. Far from being redundant, alliances embodied in microcosm the challenges confronting the Empire in macrocosm at any given moment. In order to understand the Empire's development during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one must account for the triumphs, tribulations, and significance of its many alliances.

Comparative analysis of multiple leagues across two centuries therefore sheds new light on how the Empire functioned and what it meant in the daily life of its members. The Empire was a very real entity for its Estates, who constantly framed the politics of alliance as a means to strengthen and reinvigorate the Empire. Conflict between its regions and the imperial center did not drive the Empire's development during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nor was the Empire dominated by a process of inexorable imperial consolidation that made the politics of alliance unnecessary and meant that leagues failed to "[add] to the range of institutional forms" in the Empire.²² Rather, at the Empire's core during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries sat an ongoing debate about how its regions could best support the center and vice versa. Corporate alliances formed one of the chief nexus points around which this debate revolved through the Peace of Westphalia and beyond.

Similar approaches to those taken toward the Empire mark the historiography of the United Provinces. Once seen as an oddity that suffered from debilitating particularism, recent research on the Dutch political system in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has highlighted its political and economic dynamism.²³ At the core of the United Provinces sat an alliance: the 1579 Union of Utrecht. Most historians acknowledge the Union's place as "the constitutional cornerstone of the Dutch Republic," to use James Tracy's words.²⁴ Nevertheless, few

²² Wilson, *Heart*, 565.

²³ See Brandon, *Dutch State*; de Vries and Woude, *Economy*; Holenstein et al., eds., *Republican Alternative*; Israel, *Dutch Republic*; Mörke, "Stadtholder"; Price, *Holland*; Tracy, *Founding*.

²⁴ Tracy, *Founding*, 1.

scholars take a long-term view of how its member provinces conceptualized the Union, focusing instead on one specific time period.²⁵ This limited chronological focus inhibits analysis of how the Union and ideas about it affected the Dutch state over the course of decades. It also obscures how understandings of the Union evolved over time, overlooking how later generations of Union members scrutinized the experience of earlier decades as inspiration for their own arguments about the alliance's purpose. Moreover, scholars almost never consider the Union alongside the Empire's alliances, even though important connections linked the political cultures of the Empire and Low Countries. This lack of a comparative framework prevents scholars from seeing how the politics of alliance affected the development of Dutch and German territories in parallel ways. Analyzing both together reveals the pervasiveness of corporate alliances as tools for mediating sovereignty during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, providing a new view of why state formation took the course it did at all levels within the Empire and Dutch Republic.

The Empire, the Low Countries, and Corporate Alliances

Corporate political activity occurred across all of early modern Europe. Almost every region of the continent housed some form of corporate politics, which allowed members of various political systems to band together to influence how and for whom those systems operated. The most famous examples from southern Europe are the urban leagues of northern Italy, which reached their zenith in the late Middle Ages.²⁶ The Swiss Confederation offers another well-known case study for the ability of corporate politics to link nonaristocratic polities.²⁷ In the east, meanwhile, a series of unions and confederations undergirded the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, one of the largest states in early modern Europe.²⁸ Even the great kingdoms of western Europe, traditionally seen as the standard bearers for bureaucratic state formation, experienced the lure of corporate alliances. In France, for example, the Catholic League bound various authorities together during the second half of the sixteenth century.²⁹ In Spain, the Comuneros Revolt of the 1520s marked one attempt to use corporate politics to reshape the Spanish monarchial

²⁵ An exception is Price, *Holland*, which nonetheless uses almost exclusively secondary sources with little primary source evidence.

²⁶ Martoccio, "Neighbor"; Maurer, ed., *Kommunale Bündnisse*; Scott, *City-State*.

²⁷ Holenstein et al., eds., *Republican Alternative*; Marquardt, *Eidgenossenschaft*; Scott, *The Swiss*; Würzler, *Tagsatzung*.

²⁸ For overviews of Poland-Lithuania in English, see Davies, *God's Playground*; Stone, *Polish-Lithuanian State*.

²⁹ See "A New Look"; Konnert, *Politics*.

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system.³⁰ These examples show the pervasive nature of the politics of alliance, which achieved perhaps their greatest prominence in the Empire and Low Countries. The longevity, ubiquity, and constitutional importance of leagues in these two political systems make them perfect laboratories for comparative analysis of how the politics of alliance affected the process of European state formation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

At their core, corporate alliances represented cooperative legal associations among multiple authorities for their mutual benefit.³¹ In the Empire and Low Countries, the majority of alliances united members of differing political stature through legally binding charters that necessitated collaborative policy-making. Leagues often sought to include a diverse array of members, since only by building a broad coalition could they claim representative authority to act. The activity of alliances helps explain why both small and large territories survived in the Empire and Low Countries, while the practical impact of leagues shows why rulers found them attractive tools for political action. Leagues offered advantages – like the maintenance of public peace, the pooling of military resources, or the protection of religious convictions – that their cooperative structure often achieved more effectively than individual institutions could. The ability of alliances to provide collective security formed another essential part of their appeal, as did their flexibility. Rather than continue indefinitely, most alliance treaties usually lasted for a set number of years with the possibility of renewal. This limited duration enabled participants to renegotiate the responsibilities of membership every time an alliance neared expiration, which permitted the constant reinterpretation of a league's purpose. Members therefore faced frequent choices about each alliance's mission that allowed alliances to address what participants saw as the most pressing issues of any given historical moment. These dynamics affected the development of German and Dutch states throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in ways that only become visible when viewed comparatively over large swaths of time.

These characteristics set corporate alliances apart from other collective associations like hereditary agreements between aristocratic houses or the north German Hanse, which lacked the diverse membership that typified the most influential cross-status alliances in the Empire and Low Countries.³² The Hanse's focus on economic issues separated it even

³⁰ See Pelizaeus, *Dynamik*, with citations to older literature.

³¹ On definitions of alliances, see Angermeier, "Funktion der Einung"; Koselleck, "Bund"; Moraw, "Funktion von Einungen."

³² On the Hanse, see Harreld, ed., *Companion*; Jenks and North, eds., *Sonderweg?*; Jenks and Wubs-Mrozewicz, eds., *Hanse*; Münger, "Hanse und Eidgenossenschaft." On *Erbeinungen*, see Müller, *Besiegelte Freundschaft*; Müller et al., eds., *Erbeinungen*.