

Part II

Reflections, Reckonings, Revelations

Central European History and the Holy Roman Empire

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Central European History (CEH) began to appear at a crucial juncture in the historiography of the Holy Roman Empire. Of course its remit was much broader. Founded sixteen years before the British journal *German History*, *Central European History*, together with the *Austrian History Yearbook* (founded in 1965) and the *East European Quarterly* (founded in 1967), took over the role occupied between 1941 and 1964 by the *Journal of Central European Affairs*. Each of these US journals shared an openness to new approaches and to work on all periods since the Middle Ages, as well as a desire—in the words of CEH's inaugural editor, Douglas Unfug—to keep “readers abreast of new literature in the field ...,” with “reflective, critical reviews or review articles dealing with works of central importance ... [and] bibliographical articles dealing with limited periods or themes...”¹

This was an ambitious programme but the journal was, remarkably, as good as its word in relation to medieval and early modern studies. The second issue of the first volume published William J. McGill on Kaunitz's Italian policy; the second volume brought Theodor Brodek's “Lay Community and Church Institutions of the Lahngau in the Late Middle Ages” and Mack Walker's “Napoleonic Germany and the Hometown Communities.” Successive volumes included important essays by Leon Stein (vol. 4), Otakar Odložilík and Carl C. Christensen (vol. 6), Marlene Jahss LeGates and James Allen Vann (vol. 7), Bodo Nischan (vol. 9), Stephen W. Rowan (vol. 10), Thomas J. Glas-Hochstettler (vol. 11), R. J. W. Evans (vol. 18), and others. The first major review articles on premodern subjects appeared in 1978 with Erik Midelfort's fine survey, “The Revolution of 1525? Recent Studies of the Peasants' War,” and Gerald Strauss's essay, “The Holy Roman Empire Revisited” (both in vol. 11). This work continues today, of course, most recently with the forum discussion of Peter Wilson's 2016 study, *The Holy Roman Empire: A Thousand Years of Europe's History* (vol. 50).

It is difficult now to imagine how important this was for English-language scholarship on early modern, German-speaking Europe. In the 1960s, as work on virtually every period in German history after 1800 flourished in the English-speaking world, almost no attention was paid to the Holy Roman Empire. When Tim Blanning became interested in German history before 1800 as a student at Cambridge in the 1960s, there was, he recently recalled, no significant body of English-language research on the subject—and little interest in creating one.² That was true particularly of the early modern period, but medieval German history fared little better.

¹“From the Editors” [Douglas Unfug], *Central European History (CEH)* 1, no. 1 (1968): 3. Reprinted in this commemorative issue.

²T. C. W. Blanning, “The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation past and present,” *Historical Research* 85, no. 227 (2012): 57–70.

The most popular surveys of German history, A. J. P. Taylor's *The Course of German History* (1945) and Geoffrey Barraclough's *The Origins of Modern Germany* (1947), painted a bleak picture of the German past.³ Hajo Holborn's survey of the Reformation era and the period from 1648 to 1840, the first two volumes of his three-volume *History of Modern Germany*, appeared in 1959 and 1964. Frederick Hertz published his first two volumes on *The Development of the German Public Mind*, covering the period from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, in 1957 and 1962. Both works had their merits, yet both were marked by their authors' experience of persecution and exile during the Third Reich. In many ways each perpetuated a familiar narrative of backwardness and an inexorable journey toward disaster in the twentieth century. These had a long pedigree.

Almost everyone who has worked on the empire is wearily familiar with Voltaire's sardonic quip that it was "Neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire." Quite frequently this is the only thing that non-historians, and even many historians of modern Germany, "know" about the Holy Roman Empire. Yet, the statement is, in fact, invariably misquoted. These words in Voltaire's essay on the customs and spirit of nations, published in 1756, referred specifically to the empire at the end of the reign of Charles IV. Voltaire meant simply that once it had largely shed its concern with Italy and the papacy, its title was no longer accurate. On the whole, his view of the empire as a German polity was rather positive, and his view was similar to that of many French writers of the eighteenth century, who admired the German empire as a kind of republic or limited monarchy.⁴

Voltaire's characterization nevertheless later became popular because it could be cited, even if wrongly, in support of the negative views that had prevailed for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century German and Austrian historians despised it for not being a nation-state, and blamed it for delaying the "development" of the Germans. They often praised the territories for their cultural achievements, but refused to recognize the ways in which the empire had made them possible. Critics of Germany before and after 1945 often sought to establish the continuity from the first Reich to the Third Reich, which cast sombre shadows over the centuries before 1806.⁵

The views of scholars working outside Germany generally reflected those of their German-speaking colleagues, though the tone was often influenced by concerns about the growing power of the new German Empire after 1871 or, later, by Nazism, the Third Reich, and the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II. Even the fundamentally pro-German James Bryce was negative: he was interested in the potential of the empire for the exercise of supranational authority. His history of the empire, first published in 1864 and still in print today, made it clear, however, that it had failed in this mission.⁶

³A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History since 1815* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945); Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Origins of Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).

⁴Voltaire, "Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations," in *Les oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 24, ed. Bruno Bernard et al. (Oxford, 2011), 41. See also Guido Braun, *La connaissance du Saint-Empire en France 1643–1756* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010), 584–87.

⁵There is a good overview of the historiography in Matthias Schnettger, ed., *Imperium Romanum—Irregulare corpus—Teutscher Reichs-Staat. Das Alte Reich im Verständnis der Zeitgenossen und der Historiographie* (Mainz: Philip von Zabern, 2003).

⁶John T. Seaman, Jr., *A Citizen of the World: The Life of James Bryce* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 41–44, 128–30.

From around 1500 at the latest, Bryce argued, the empire had simply become a German kingdom. This created the framework for a remarkable diversity of culture, but the empire's international mission had dissipated. In Germany itself, the Reformation brought bitter internal divisions and, "while the princes became shamelessly selfish, justifying their resistance to the throne as the defence of their own liberty—liberty to oppress the subject—and ready on the least occasion to throw themselves into the arms of France, the body of the people were deprived of all political training, and have found the lack of such experience impede their efforts to our own time."⁷ The Germans, he concluded, now live "submissive to paternal government, and given to the quiet enjoyments of art, music, and meditation, they delight themselves with memories of the time when their conquering chivalry was the terror of the Gaul and the Slav, the Lombard and the Saracen."⁸ Others were less charitable. The US literary and cultural historian Edwin Hermann Zeydel wrote in 1918 that the empire "had no history at all" after 1648, and that "it continued for a while longer to lead a miserable, meaningless existence because its patient, slow-moving subjects lacked the initiative and in many cases the intelligence to effect its actual dissolution."⁹

After 1914–1918, developments in Germany prompted much more urgent and more negative views. Edmond Vermeil warned the French public of the danger posed by Adolf Hitler and Nazism, placing contemporary events in historical perspective in his *Germany's Three Reichs: Their History and Culture*.¹⁰ In the United States, William Montgomery McGovern's *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* undertook a similar task.¹¹ In the United Kingdom, the most successful work of this kind was Taylor's *The Course of German History*, which argued that the whole of German history had predisposed the Germans to Nazism and that Hitler had fulfilled the imperialist fantasies that had gripped the Germans since the days of Charlemagne.¹² After 1945 historians continued to work with an interpretative framework that was unfavorable to the development of significant popular interest in the empire. Until the 1980s, the most widely read history of Germany was Johannes Haller's *Epochen der deutschen Geschichte*.¹³ First published in 1923, Haller frequently adapted, updated, and amended his work until his death in 1947; others took on that task thereafter and perpetuated Haller's narrative of decline from promising early medieval foundations.

Alongside this evergreen "classic" and others like it, historians of modern Germany developed the *Sonderweg* myth, which cast shadows over the whole of German history. This was the negative counterpoint to the positive "besonderer deutscher Weg" that so many German historians had extolled before 1945.¹⁴ In both the positive and the new negative views, the

⁷James Bryce, *The Holy Roman Empire*, 6th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1922), 425.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Edwin Hermann Zeydel, *The Holy Roman Empire in German Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1918 [republ. 1966 and 2009]), 15.

¹⁰Edmond Vermeil, *Germany's Three Reichs: Their History and Culture* (London: Dakers, 1944).

¹¹William Montgomery McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (New York: George G. Harrap, 1941).

¹²Taylor, *Course of German History*, 13–33.

¹³Benjamin Hasselhorn, *Johannes Haller: Eine politische Gelehrtenbiographie. Mit einer Edition des unveröffentlichten Teils der Lebenserinnerungen Johannes Hallers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 166–82.

¹⁴Bernd Faulenbach, *Ideologie des deutschen Weges: Die deutsche Geschichte in der Historiographie zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980); Dieter Langewiesche, "Der 'deutsche Sonderweg'. Defizitgeschichte als geschichtspolitische Zukunftskonstruktion nach dem Ersten und

empire had served simply as a dismal backdrop to the developments of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. It was an entity that had failed to become a state. Its medieval period ended in chaos in the thirteenth century, and its early modern period was characterized by religious division, fragmentation, civil war, and foreign domination. Nothing in its thousand-year history had prepared the Germans for the modern world. Precisely because the Germans had had no long prehistory of nationhood, statehood, or democratic struggle, the argument generally continued, they had plunged themselves willingly into the disasters of German nationhood and statehood that unfolded after 1871.

At the same time, however, new approaches to the history of the empire now also gradually developed, ultimately resulting in the more positive views that are prevalent today. Perhaps inevitably, the empire's sheer longevity impeded the emergence of any overall view. Research activity was organized either around chairs of medieval history or around chairs of early modern history. For a long time, there was little dialogue between the two areas of study. It was only in the 1970s that scholars such as Peter Moraw began to illuminate the transition from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period, though the initial result of that endeavor was simply that the later medieval period became "reassigned" to the early modern period.¹⁵ Only recently have scholars who advocate a new "cultural" approach to the Holy Roman Empire engaged more seriously with ideas originally developed by medieval historians.¹⁶

In East Germany, the materialist conception of history initially focused scholarship on the "two paths theory," which traced the interaction between a progressive path and a reactionary path in German history. The triumph of the "anti-national class of the German territorial princes," the establishment of the repressive absolutist state, and the emergence of Brandenburg-Prussia supposedly characterized the reactionary path of the early modern period. The progressive path comprised the "early bourgeois revolution" and the failed revolutionary mass movement of 1525. In the 1970s, a more inclusive approach developed when the two paths were redefined as "heritage" or *Erbe* (reactionary), and "tradition" or *Tradition* (progressive), both being essential to the development of German society. Overall, however, East German historians still presented the triumph of reactionary forces over the popular mass movement of 1525 as the point after which Germany was cast into darkness and the revolutionary impetus passed to the Netherlands and England.¹⁷

Work on the Holy Roman Empire in western Germany after 1945 was shaped, first, by the realization that the old national historiography had no future and, second, by the interest of Catholic historians in a corporatist and federal alternative to the Prussian-German nation-

Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *Zeitwende: Geschichtsdenken heute*, ed. Ute Planert and Nikolaus Buschmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 164–71. Also see Jürgen Kocka's essay on the *Sonderweg* in this commemorative issue.

¹⁵Moraw synthesized the research he had published primarily in numerous essays in the 1970s and early 1980s in his magisterial survey, *Von offener Verfassung zu gestalteter Verdichtung: Das Reich im späten Mittelalter, 1250 bis 1490* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1985).

¹⁶See, e.g., Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Des Kaisers alte Kleider. Verfassungsgeschichte und Symbolsprache des Alten Reiches* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008). See also Andre Krischer, "Conclusion: New Directions in the Study of the Holy Roman Empire—A Cultural Approach," in *The Holy Roman Empire*, ed. Jason Coy et al. (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 265–70.

¹⁷See Andreas Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1985).

state. Traditions of diversity, peaceful integration, and commitment to a higher moral law were preferable to the nightmare of Prussian militarism. The empire was attractive precisely because it was not a nation-state but rather something supranational and European. The real post-1945 pioneers in historical scholarship on the early modern Holy Roman Empire also tended to be Catholics from the Rhineland, Bavaria, or Austria, e.g., Konrad Repgen, Heinrich Lutz, and Karl Otmar von Aretin. The outcome of their work on Charles V (Lutz), on the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia (Repgen), and on the empire in the eighteenth century (von Aretin) was to foster a much more positive view of the empire.¹⁸ While still convinced that its demise was inevitable, they showed that the empire had functioned well and endured far longer than any subsequent German polity.

These scholars rejected the idea that the empire's early modern history was a protracted period of steady decline punctuated by spectacular episodes of failure. But they viewed the centuries before that as a period characterized by constitutional innovation and by the development of the empire into a *Rechts-, Verteidigungs-, und Friedensordnung* by 1648. The empire's very existence guaranteed the peace and stability of Europe as a whole. It could not alone wage unprovoked war on any external power or territory. One of its main functions was to organize the collective defense of its members against foreign attack. It also devised mechanisms that served to maintain the peace and to defend the existence and rights of all its members against domestic aggression. Furthermore, the empire's legal and judicial system guaranteed the rights not only of territorial rulers and urban magistrates but also of the inhabitants of territories and cities against their rulers. The empire saw the development of a legal culture that had no parallel in Europe, and the "juridification" of social and political conflict distinguished the German territories from neighboring countries. These new insights all helped to revise the traditional view, inspired by Samuel Pufendorf's characterization of the empire as a "monstrosity," i.e., as an incoherent and dysfunctional polity. In fact, as in the case of Voltaire's famous quip, the citation of Pufendorf—the other "fact" that most people know about the Holy Roman Empire—is a distortion of what he actually said. His point was that the empire could not be characterized straightforwardly, according to Aristotle's classification scheme, as a monarchy, as an aristocracy, or as a democracy. It was a hybrid and, in this sense, a "*monstro simile*."¹⁹

Since the 1970s, research on the Holy Roman Empire has proliferated in almost every direction. Key institutions such as the Reichstag, the Reichskammergericht, the Reichshofrat, and the *Kreise* have been the subject of major research projects. Since the early 1990s, the non-national or pre-national character of the empire has been challenged by scholars such as Georg Schmidt and Johannes Burkhardt, generating often heated controversies that have attracted the attention of doctoral students and stimulated further work.²⁰

¹⁸Repgen died in April 2017; his key work, first published in 1957, was *Dreißigjähriger Krieg und Westfälischer Friede. Studien und Quellen*, rev. and extended ed., ed. Franz Bosbach and Christoph Kampmann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2015). On Lutz and von Aretin, see Karl Otmar von Aretin, "Heinrich Lutz," *Historische Zeitschrift* 244, no. 2 (1987): 487–93; Heinz Duchhardt, "Nekrolog: Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin (1923–2014)," *Historische Zeitschrift* 299, no. 1 (2014): 285–90.

¹⁹Severinus de Monzambano [i.e., Samuel Pufendorf], *De statu imperii Germanici* (Verona [in fact Amsterdam], 1667), ch. 6 § 9.

²⁰Joachim Whaley, "The Old Reich in Modern Memory: Recent Controversies Concerning the 'Relevance' of Early Modern German History," in *German History, Literature and the Nation (Selected Papers from the Conference "The Fragile Tradition,"* vol. 2, ed. David Midgley and Christian Emden

Equally stimulating have been the debates provoked by Schmidt's work on the concept of "German liberty," which has suggested lines of continuity to the modern era that no longer rely on any kind of *Sonderweg*. The next logical step would be to challenge the still prevalent view that the empire *had* to fail in 1806: without Napoleon's decisive intervention it might well have adapted and survived.

Most recently, a new cultural approach to the history of the old empire, building on the work of medievalists such as Gerd Althoff, has explored early modern modes of symbolic communication. Often in opposition to those that underscore the new structures developed in the empire after 1495, this approach emphasises that the empire was first and foremost a feudal structure, held together not by a legal framework or a constitution but rather by the performance of the bonds of loyalty formed between the emperor and the individual estates.²¹ André Krischer has even suggested that the empire was essentially fictive in nature, existing only in the discourse of symbolic communication and the imagined realm of performance.²²

At every stage of this remarkable historiographical revolution, developments in German historiography have stimulated work in the English-speaking world. Tim Blanning's study of Mainz in the eighteenth century was a pioneering work in English when it appeared in 1974, but it also reflected his encounter with Karl Otmar von Aretin at the Institut für Europäische Geschichte in Mainz.²³ Many other academic biographies reveal similar encounters. The dramatic increase in the amount of German-language work on the Holy Roman Empire is now more than matched in the United Kingdom and North America. The publication since 2012 of three major works on the empire by historians working in the United Kingdom forcefully underlines the significance of the Holy Roman Empire as a topic of research in the English-speaking world.²⁴ Though rarely explicitly acknowledged, *Central European History*, especially in its review articles, has made an indispensable contribution to this research over half a century. It is fitting that we should celebrate the first fifty years—and hope for many more to come.

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25–49; Peter H. Wilson, "Still a Monstrosity? Some Reflections on Early Modern German Statehood," *Historical Journal* 49, no. 2 (2006): 565–76.

²¹Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Des Kaisers alte Kleider*. This appeared in translation as *The Emperor's Old Clothes: Constitutional History and the Symbolic Language of the Holy Roman Empire*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Berghahn, 2015).

²²Krischer, "Conclusion," 267.

²³T. C. W. Blanning, *Reform and Revolution in Mainz, 1743–1803* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

²⁴Len Scales, *The Shaping of German Identity: Authority and Crisis, 1245–1414* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire, 1493–1806*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire: A Thousand Years of Europe's History* (London: Allen Lane, 2016); also see the forum dedicated to the Wilson volume in *CEH* 50, no. 4 (2017): 547–72.