

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after American troops entered Nuremberg on April 20, 1945, they seized the medieval crown of the Holy Roman Emperor, which had been transferred to Nuremberg from Vienna seven years earlier at the personal order of Adolf Hitler. The rapidly approaching victory of the Allies over Nazi Germany could hardly have found a more powerful symbolic expression. What the soldiers seized that day was an object that symbolized perfectly the tortuous course of German history. For twelve years, the Nazis had appropriated the history of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation for their own purposes, using it to propagate the myth of Germany's supposed "historical mission" to expand beyond its existing political boundaries and reach world domination. Hitler's "Thousand Year Empire," however, lasted only twelve years—a stark contrast to the first empire whose name it invoked. When American GIs played with the medieval crown, jestingly putting it on their heads, they couldn't have made that fact any clearer.

The consequences of the Nazi appropriation of the history of the Holy Roman Empire are present even today. *Reich*, the German word for "empire," immediately invokes the Third Reich—the Nazi dictatorship of 1933 to 1945. The Third Reich overshadows the two other German empires that came before it: the Second Empire, or Imperial Germany (Kaiserreich), founded by Otto von Bismarck under Prussian hegemony in 1871 and lasting until 1918; and especially the first



Figure 1. The crown of the Holy Roman Emperor. *Source:* National Archives, Washington, DC.



Figure 2. Private First Class Ivan Babcock tries on the crown of the Holy Roman Emperor. The gold and pearl crown was stored with other treasures in a cave captured by US First Army troops in Germany in April 1945. *Source:* US Army, photo 111-SC-205728.

empire, the medieval and early modern Holy Roman Empire, which lasted (depending on one's point of view) anywhere between eight hundred and close to a thousand years. This first empire has hardly left any imprint at all on the collective memory of Germans (let alone other Europeans), although it undoubtedly shaped important aspects of modern German political history. If we want to understand what this first or "Old Empire" was, we consequently must begin with the history of its reception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This history has shaped the Holy Roman Empire's modern image to such an extent that any attempt to simply ignore it is doomed to fail.

The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had a clear ending. On August 6, 1806, Emperor Francis II abdicated the Imperial throne under pressure from Napoleon and solemnly dissolved "the bond, which has hitherto tied Us to the body politic of the German Empire." Five days earlier, on August 1, sixteen Imperial members had declared their secession from the Empire, basing their decision on the fact that "the ties, which in the past had united the different members of the German body politic to one another, have in fact already been dissolved." Thus, at the very same time that national unity became a central political goal across Europe, German political unity ceased to exist. In the following decades, with the Holy Roman Empire no longer a political reality, it increasingly became an object for historical research, political mythology, and sometimes a combination of both.

During the nineteenth century, the recently dissolved Empire did not become a common reference point for the nationalistic-romantic aspirations for German unity. Far from it. Nineteenth-century Germans viewed the early modern Empire as a ramshackle, ridiculous, and even monstrous polity. It was rather the history of the medieval Empire, beginning with the pope's coronation of the Saxon prince Otto I as "German king" in 962, that appealed to nineteenth-century German nationalists. The latter claimed to have found in the distant

past, during the early and High Middle Ages, a glorious empire under whose aegis German kings ruled as emperors with supposedly supreme power over all of Western Christianity. Everything that happened after the time of the great kings and emperors of the Saxon, Salian, and Hohenstaufen dynasties seemed, on the other hand, to resemble a decline-and-fall story of the medieval Imperial power and German political unity. The erstwhile powerful universal Empire continuously fragmented into its constituting parts—the princely territories—as individual German princes expanded their powers at the expense of the emperor by usurping his prerogatives one by one.

The common nineteenth-century depiction of a great and powerful medieval German state was a backward projection of modern nationalistic wishful thinking, an anachronistic image that had little to do with historical reality. The power and authority so often ascribed to medieval emperors by nineteenth-century historians had never in fact really been theirs. In the Middle Ages, political power and authority were generated through the interaction of three institutions—kingship, aristocracy, and the Church—and in this interaction the king played primarily the role of moderator. The medieval Empire was never a state in the modern sense of the term. If it ever developed any kind of formal institutions (which is debatable), these appeared only after the year 1500, during the transition from the Middle Ages to what historians now call the early modern period. For proponents of the idea of a great medieval empire, however, the Holy Roman Empire's decline was already under way by 1500, a process that gained further momentum after the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648. According to this line of thinking, after Westphalia the Empire fell under the auspices of the "French archenemy," became merely "a pawn in Great Powers politics," and disintegrated into a multitude of small states—a supposedly linear development that led to the inevitable dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire during the Napoleonic Wars.

Finally, it was not the Empire in its entirety but rather its two most prominent former members—Austria and Prussia—that formed the nuclei of powerful modern states in the nineteenth century: Austria-Hungary, on the one hand, and Imperial Germany (the Second Empire), on the other hand. This fact split the German national movement into two camps. The first camp strove to reestablish the Old Empire as a predominantly Catholic polity, including Austria. This political solution was known as “large Germany.” The other camp sought to create a principally Protestant nation-state, led by Prussia and excluding Austria. Its political solution was consequently known as “small Germany.” Both camps failed to reach their goals during the decades following the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. Only with Bismarck’s establishment of the Second Empire in 1871 did the “small German” solution become reality, and this Bismarckian empire had admittedly very little to do with the Holy Roman Empire.

Nineteenth-century German historians, who reached the peak of their influence and prestige in the middle decades of the century, viewed themselves as the practitioners of a specifically national scholarly endeavor. Two different states—the Prussian-dominated Kaiserreich, on the one hand, and Austria-Hungary, on the other hand—claimed to be the true heirs of the Old Empire, and both employed historians to provide them with the necessary political genealogy to bolster their authority and legitimacy. Integrating the old Imperial history into Austria’s new national history proved a relatively easy task. From 1452 until the dissolution of the Empire in 1806, almost all Holy Roman Emperors had belonged to the Habsburg dynasty. The last Holy Roman Emperor, Francis II, crowned himself Austrian emperor in 1804, and during the nineteenth century the Habsburg monarchy continued to be a transnational polity, just as the Old Empire had been throughout its existence. The situation was quite different in the Kaiserreich to the north, where, in contrast to Austria-Hungary, historians faced the

much trickier task of constructing a historical narrative that would connect the medieval Empire, the rise of Prussia in the early modern period, and the creation of a predominantly Protestant, Prussian-led Kaiserreich in 1871. Proponents of the “small German” solution began their story with the decline of the late medieval Empire. Out of the debris of this empire, new national energies emerged in the form of Martin Luther’s Reformation and the actions of Germany’s Protestant princes, chief among them the electors of Brandenburg (later to become the kings of Prussia). According to nineteenth-century German historians, these Brandenburg-Prussian rulers were the ones who took over the national mission from the declining Empire and turned Prussia into the nucleus around which a new German nation-state could finally crystallize.

Whether in the Austrian or the Prussian-German historiographical traditions, the story of the early modern Holy Roman Empire and its institutions went largely by the wayside. Historians of both traditions wrote primarily from the perspective of their ruling dynasties—the Habsburgs in Austria, the Hohenzollerns in the Kaiserreich. Only in 1938, after Hitler supposedly “brought Austria back home” by annexing it to his Third Reich, did the two separate story lines seem to finally converge. Hitler’s decision to transfer the Imperial crown from Vienna to Nuremberg that same year symbolized this historical convergence by way of the two national story lines’ supposed origins in a common medieval past. German and Austrian historians were all too eager to help Hitler in sustaining this historical myth, and their efforts continued to influence the popular historical imagination (at least in West Germany) even after the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945. Indeed, in many ways this account continues to influence the German historical imagination to the present day. To give just one example: in textbooks about their national history, German schoolchildren still read much more about the rise of early modern Prussia than about the institutions of the Holy Roman Empire during the same period.

Only in the 1960s did historians begin to look at the Old Empire with fresh eyes. It was a time of a major generational shift in German academe, and a younger generation of historians finally began to break away from the value system of the old nationalistic historiography. Further contributing to the reevaluation of the Holy Roman Empire was the fact that the territory of West Germany, founded in 1949, encompassed the same regions in western and southwestern Germany where the structures of the Old Empire had once exerted their greatest influence. A western and southwestern Catholic perspective slowly pushed aside the old Protestant-Prussian point of view of previous generations of historians. A final push for the reevaluation of the early modern Empire came when German universities started institutionalizing the field of early modern history (the period between 1500 and 1800). Following the emergence of this field, historians began to investigate the constitutional history of the early modern Empire, researching the political, legal, and social structures characteristic of its core lands in contradistinction to the nation-building processes that took place in Austria and Prussia around the same time. The pendulum now swung starkly the other way. What previous historians had considered the Empire's main weaknesses now seemed to be its primary strengths. The structural deficits of the Holy Roman Empire—especially its lack of a common military defense—appeared to be, in the postwar context, its virtues. Before the German reunification of 1991, and even more so thereafter, the early modern Empire offered historians a new, morally neutral object for national identification: a large, peaceful, defense-oriented, and federative community in the middle of Europe that Germany's neighbors had had no reason to fear in the past and of which modern Germans could be proud in the present with a good conscience and without raising alarm.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the Old Empire also began to appear in discussions about European integration. At least at first glance, there are indeed some interesting parallels between

the Old Empire and the European Union, including the large autonomy enjoyed by the two polities' respective individual members, the weakness of their central institutions, and the constant need for consensus in the political processes characteristic of both. Such seeming parallels led some German historians and politicians to view the early modern Holy Roman Empire as a positive model for a new Europe, a kind of ready-made predecessor for a European Union that lacked common historical symbols or legitimizing traditions. After all, just like the Holy Roman Empire, the European Union too is a supra-regional, non-expansionist, peaceful legal framework. Of course, not all European politicians showed enthusiasm for such a comparison between a quintessentially *German* empire and a distinctly *European* union.

The historical reception of the Holy Roman Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which I have sketched here with only very broad brushstrokes, had one final and very important consequence. The fact that the Empire was not a homogeneous polity and that it contained many internal contradictions has lent its history to different interpretations and various deployments by a wide spectrum of political actors. This fact often obstructs our path to a proper understanding of the Empire's history. In writing the following pages, I have attempted to refrain from using the Empire's history in order to make a political statement about the present. Instead, I have chosen to highlight the Empire's specific premodern and alien nature, its ambiguities, and its many overlapping layers. I have attempted, in other words, to historicize it. I am very much aware that even such an attempt can be interpreted as a political move. Highlighting the strange and alien character of the Empire (or of any other object of historical study, for that matter) could be ascribed to a supposedly "postmodern" stance that emphasizes values such as cultural diversity, a sensitivity to the kaleidoscopic nature of all historical realities, and a deep suspicion of any attempt to

reach one single, unquestionable truth. I believe nonetheless that it is exactly this kind of approach that allows us to be even-handed when investigating the past. Only thus can we concentrate not on what the past means in the present, but on what the past was when it was not yet the past.