Iron and Blood
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A Military History of the German-Speaking Peoples since 1500

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For Rosie
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Introduction

IRON AND BLOOD

‘Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided – that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849 – but by iron and blood [Eisen und Blut].’¹ These words come from Otto von Bismarck’s famous address to the budget committee of the Prussian diet on 30 September 1862 as he sought to persuade the deputies to increase military spending. The final section was swiftly reversed as ‘blood and iron’ in contemporary and subsequent misquotation and became synonymous with German militarism, while Bismarck was known as the Iron Chancellor who advocated war as the only way to unify Germany. Closer inspection reveals this to be a caricature of a more complex and interesting story.

Bismarck’s speech was carefully phrased to appeal to the deputies, most of whom were liberals favouring Germany’s transformation into a national state governed by parliamentary democracy. He sought to remind the deputies of the realities of power; that Prussia’s influence depended on sustaining its military capacity, not on providing ideological leadership. He was referring to the poem ‘The Iron Cross’ by Max von Schenkendorf, a volunteer in the 1813 War of Liberation against Napoleonic France, who wrote that ‘only iron can save us, only blood can redeem us from the sins of heavy chains, from the pride of evil doers’.²

Like other poets from that era, Schenkendorf’s works were later misappropriated by the Nazis to provide a cultural underpinning for their ideology. The poem’s title refers to the new public service medal created by Prussia’s king, Frederick William III, who had been pushed by liberal-minded officers into breaking his alliance with France. While careful to acknowledge the king’s leadership, Schenkendorf’s lyrics reference Prussia’s Teutonic heritage, Christianity, and landscape. His other works are typical of the Romantic youthful idealism of his age.
and are sufficiently ambiguous to have been used by Christians, social democrats, and even modern advertisements for cars and clothes.

Bismarck’s career was on the line. He had only been in office for a week and was required by Prussia’s king to break the deadlock over the military budget. His reference to 1848–9 was a pointed attack on German liberals who had dominated the national parliament which met in Frankfurt at that time and yet had proved incapable of creating a unified state. His words failed to have their desired effect. The deputies rejected his call to increase military spending, plunging Prussia into a constitutional crisis from which it only escaped after fighting two successful wars in 1864 and 1866. Known as part of the ‘Wars of German Unification’, these conflicts partitioned the German Confederation by violently ejecting Austria and leaving a legacy that troubled central Europe for another century. Bismarck’s speech had initially alarmed his political master, King Wilhelm I, who feared that he proposed settling Germany’s problems by force. Although the king subsequently enjoyed his status as nominal leader of the victory over France in 1870–1, many Germans remained ambivalent about going to war.

The speech and its reception exemplify the core argument of this book: that militarism has indeed been integral to the German past and has shaped how Germans have conducted wars, but that it was neither an end destination nor a single trajectory of development. The following intends to offer an accessible account of the military history of German-speaking Europe across the last five centuries within the wider story of developments in warfare, including on sea and in the air. It will highlight what made the German experience of war distinctive, as well as what it shared with that elsewhere in Europe and, where appropriate, with the rest of the world. Throughout, military history will be integrated with the wider political, social, economic, and cultural development of what are now Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

**A UNIQUE WAY OF WAR?**

German military history is hugely popular and there is no shortage of books on Germany’s wars, campaigns, generals, weapons, and militarism. Most of these works relate only to the period 1914–45, with the preceding fifty years of Imperial Germany coming a poor second. If treated at
all, the period before the 1860s is usually reduced to the character of an introduction to the ‘rise of Prussia’, rather than an integral part of a much longer story. Most books are specialist studies, and are often highly technical, especially those covering weaponry, uniforms, and tactics. Many succeed superbly on their own terms, but a considerable number recycle well-worn interpretations and (often inaccurate) factual detail.

The preoccupation with the era of the two world wars has stunted debate and frozen German military history within an anachronistic and teleological framework originating in the later nineteenth century and crystallizing in the aftermath of 1945. This approach projects a myth of a specifically ‘German’ way of war, supposedly predetermined by that country’s geopolitical situation in the heart of Europe which left it surrounded by hostile neighbours. Germans, it is widely believed, were somehow naturally predisposed to aggressive wars from fear of encirclement and from a desire to expand their ‘living space’. This in turn supposedly fostered a uniquely authoritarian form of politics, because only a ‘power state’ could mobilize the resources necessary to develop and maintain the required ‘first strike’ capacity. Operationally, German wars had to be Blitzkriege (lightning wars) to win quick and decisive victories before their enemies could combine their superior numbers against them. German armed forces allegedly strove for technical proficiency and technological superiority to gain a comparative advantage over their more numerous foes. To achieve this, it is widely believed that the armed forces were entrusted to professionals operating largely beyond political control, all with fatal consequences for German society and wider European peace.4

This interpretation has become an almost unshakable orthodoxy, not least because German military institutions, like the General Staff, were widely emulated models from the 1870s. German developments have been used as yardsticks to measure the performance and efficiency of other countries’ armed forces. Germany’s example has profoundly influenced debates since the 1970s on whether there is (or should be) an American way of war. Dazzled by the illusion of the Blitzkrieg, the Bush administration in the 1990s promoted a hi-tech form of scientifically precise ‘modern war’ intended to secure a permanent advantage over opponents. The Chinese military, by contrast, has dropped its former admiration for German methods and now sees their failure in 1914 as a warning not to go to war with only an opening gambit rather than a strategic plan.5
More critical, left-leaning historians have done little to challenge this interpretation, because it reinforces widely held views about the supposed militarization and ‘feudalization’ of German society during the nineteenth century as preparing the ground for the First World War and, ultimately, Hitler and the Holocaust. Frequently, authors adopt a cultural explanation, rooting German militarism in Prussia’s ‘blood and soil’ in an inversion of how nineteenth-century nationalists celebrated those same characteristics. Depending on perspective, Prussian aristocrats are variously subservient or independently minded, but always ruthless, while their soldiers are somehow ‘natural’ warriors – a controversial view which has recently been endorsed again from the political right as a potential source of inspiration for today’s German armed forces.6 The army supposedly remained an isolated, ‘closed system’, yet at the same time its martial ethos permeated the rest of society, warping its values.7

It is time to defrost German military history and to bring it in line with the way that the rest of the German past is being written about. Many decades of research have produced a far more nuanced and sophisticated view of German-speaking Europe. Much of this work has been explicitly comparative and questions whether German development can really be written as following a uniquely belligerent and authoritarian Special Path (Sonderweg) deviating from that of the rest of Europe.8 If anything is ‘special’ then it is the fact that German development was characterized by military and political decentralization far longer than most other European countries. The customary links between political structures and military organization dissolve when we recognize that countries associated with liberal democracy, like Britain and France, established state monopolies of violence early on, while German development remained characterized by decentralized politics and collective security into the 1870s.

Above all, recent interest in global history and transnational developments raises valid questions about whether it is still appropriate to write ‘national’ military history. This is a particularly important issue for the German past, given modern Germany’s very recent origins. There is no compelling reason why German military history should be framed by a political geography emerging only after 1866, any more than should German social, economic, religious, or cultural history. To that end, this book will cover the military history of those parts of central Europe that have been politically dominated by German-speakers throughout all or part of
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the timeframe, namely, roughly the area covered by modern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

The broad geographical approach will also address a major deficiency present in the few general military histories of Germany, all of which write German history teleologically as the rise and fall of Prussia. Some works purport to trace even longer continuities from Arminius, who vanquished the ancient Roman legions, all the way to Hitler. Most, however, truncate German history by starting only in the 1640s, which are commonly, if not accurately, identified as the decade of the ‘birth’ of the Prussian army. The entire German military past is read through the lens of Prussia’s experience, while much of that experience is poorly understood because it is not set in its wider German and European context.

Institutional development is presented as the story of a single Prussian-German army, yet prior to its violent destruction of the German Confederation, Prussia only fought two wars (the Düsseldorf ‘Cow War’ of 1651 against the Palatinate, and its intervention in the Dutch Patriot Revolt of 1787) without the collaboration of at least one other German territory, and even in 1866, it was assisted by six small principalities. Far from being projected by a centralized state, military power remained decentralized for most of German history, with war-making being a collective activity through the Holy Roman Empire, and its more federal replacements of 1806–13 and 1815–66. Even the German Empire of 1871–1918 retained a contingent system with separate armies in Bavaria, Württemberg, and other states.

Perhaps more importantly, Prussia was not the leading ‘German’ military power until the later nineteenth century. Until then, the Austrian Habsburg monarchy always had a larger army and was still seen as a more desirable model by many, both within the German-speaking political world and elsewhere in Europe. As a proportion of population, more Swiss served as soldiers than did Prussians, yet it is ‘Prussian militarism’ that history generally remembers. By contrast, the military dimension to Swiss and especially Austrian history has been unduly neglected. By freeing military history from anachronistic nationalist frameworks, we can explore these stories from fresh perspectives. The broader approach will reveal how ideas, practices, institutions, and technology transferred not only across German-speaking central Europe, but between that region and elsewhere in Europe and the world.

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Only then can we determine how far there was a German way of war and what its broader historical significance may have been.

OUTLINE

The book combines chronology and theme. Chronology is important to the task of tracing long-term developments, while theme allows key aspects to be explored in greater depth. The chronology employed here is deliberately intended to disrupt the standard narrative based around Prussia’s rise and then descent into two world wars. These conflicts are indeed important and will feature prominently, but the full picture only becomes apparent when the timeframe is extended not merely into the deeper past earlier than the 1640s, but also forward after 1945. The post-1990 reunified Germany has now existed for almost three times as long as the Third Reich, while the entire, largely peaceful era since 1945 is longer than that between 1870 and 1945. Yet, the military history of the Western Federal Republic, and its Eastern communist rival between 1949 and 1990, has yet to be integrated with that preceding the Second World War.

A major advantage of the longer view is that it allows a fuller appraisal of those events which appear as ‘turning points’ in German history, such as the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the accession of Frederick the Great in 1740, Prussia’s defeat to France at Jena in 1806, its victory over France at Sedan in 1870, a massive defeat in 1918 and the ‘zero hour’ of 1945, all of which are conventionally selected through a narrow focus on high politics. A key task will be to assess how far victories and defeats really ‘made’ German history, and thus to place war in the wider context of the German past.

Too often, existing accounts concentrate on successes, usually by emphasizing real or alleged greater aggressiveness or superior organization, especially the German General Staff and methods of command and control supposedly representing a unique ‘genius for war’. While this approach has disappeared from most German-language scholarship, it remains deeply embedded in anglophone works, many of which are openly celebratory of Prusso-German methods. There is a tendency for narratives to break off at the point when initial successes unravelled into costly wars of attrition ending in either stalemate (for
example, Prussia in the Seven Years War) or total disaster (both world wars). Paying more attention to defeat reveals that the distinctiveness of Prusso-German methods between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries was an obsessive focus on how to achieve a quick victory, rather than what to do either with such a success or if it remained elusive. Moreover, this approach generally stemmed from an anxiety that the country could not afford a long conflict, rather than a self-assured belief in the utility of force to achieve political goals. In fact, there was almost invariably a fatal disconnect between military planning and any wider national strategy leading to the neglect of other, possibly more fruitful, courses of action.

For this reason, the book’s chronology is structured in five parts determined partly by the forms of military organization and practice which predominated during each century, as well as their relationship to social, economic, and political structures. Starting in the sixteenth century allows us to follow Germany, Austria, and Switzerland from their common origins in the Holy Roman Empire at a point when European warfare changed profoundly. Although medieval Europe was not short on conflict, wars were usually intermittent and localized. The later fifteenth century saw the emergence of mechanisms for mobilizing and directing resources in a more sustained and coordinated manner. Importantly for German history, this was not achieved by the creation of a single, national state, but through collective, multilateral structures. Autonomy, not centralization, remained the primary political characteristic into the twentieth century and re-emerged from the two world wars in modernized form as the federalism enshrined in the German, Austrian, and Swiss republics.

The institutional consolidation of the Empire accelerated between about 1480 and 1520, creating new mechanisms for raising men and money for war, as well as for resolving disputes between the multiple political authorities. All used a variation on a common three-tier mobilization system with a select levy of younger men, backed by two categories of reserves. Although much modified, this remained the way in which soldiers were recruited into the twentieth century. These structures, and the political culture they fostered, powerfully influenced subsequent developments, not least by sanctioning the existence of numerous ‘war-lords’ (Kriegsherren) with legal possession of armed force.

At the other end of the book’s timespan, we gain new perspectives on
the two world wars if we view them as part of the broader sweep of the twentieth century, rather than as the supposedly inevitable outcome of botched attempts at unification under Imperial Germany between 1871 and 1914. A further major advantage of this structure is that it encompasses peace as well as war. To date, discussions of the ‘German way of war’ have focused almost exclusively on how war was conducted once hostilities were commenced, rather than the often-long periods of relative peace such as those in 1553–1618, 1815–48, 1871–1914, or 1945 to the present. The German states, including Prussia, were far from uniquely prepared for war. All European countries planned for future conflicts, and it is only when the German experience is properly contextualized that we can see how many of the claims for a uniquely militaristic past are exaggerated.

These arguments will be controversial, and it must be made clear from the outset that the book does not intend to whitewash German history or underestimate the destruction wrought by German forces, notably during the Second World War. As Federal President Joachim Gauck stated on 26 January 2015, ‘There is no German identity without Auschwitz.’ Likewise, the comparative approach is intended to contextualize the German experience rather than relativize it through any kind of crude head count of victims – such as that criticized in the 1980s ‘historians’ dispute’ over comparisons between Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot. Furthermore, the adjective ‘German’ is used for convenience to cover those parts of Europe which were within states ruled by German-speakers. The book explicitly rejects claims that Germans possess particular ‘martial qualities’ thanks to their relationship to their ‘blood and soil’. In fact, ‘German’ military history makes no sense without including the experience of millions who spoke other languages. This is not only true for Switzerland and the Austrian Habsburg monarchy, but also for Prussia, which always had numerous Polish- and Lithuanian-speaking inhabitants.

Each of the book’s five chronological parts is subdivided into three chapters to follow key themes across time while still providing a narrative. The opening chapter in each part deals chronologically with the relationship between war and politics, focusing on why wars were fought and how far German history was ‘made on the battlefield’. Each part’s middle chapter examines the exercise of command, planning, and intelligence, as well as how forces were recruited, organized, equipped,
and trained. The final section of these chapters covers naval warfare with an additional section for that on the twentieth century (Chapter 14) discussing airpower. Each part’s third chapter examines attitudes to war, soldiers’ motivation, legal status, and their relationship to society, as well as the demographic and economic impacts of warfare.
PART I

Balancing War and Peace
Warlords

MILITARY POWER AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The Holy Roman Empire

The authority to use force was widely dispersed throughout late medieval Europe. To those writing in the nineteenth century, such authority appeared to lie with a dangerous jumble of robber barons and petty tyrants. Progress seemed to be represented by the emergence of powerful monarchs who consolidated states defined by a ‘monopoly of legitimate violence’. Such figures include France’s Louis XI, England’s Henry VII, Hungary’s Matthias Corvinus, and Spain’s Ferdinand and Isabella, all of whom acceded to their thrones in the wake of prolonged civil wars and are associated with creating powerful ‘new monarchies’. Nineteenth-century cartography marked this by showing these countries as solid blocks of colour, in contrast to the colourful patchwork of the Holy Roman Empire sprawling across the heart of Europe.

The differences were not as stark as the maps or grand narratives suggest, but the established view does point to the considerable diffusion of military power in the late medieval German lands where there were multiple warlords ranging from the emperor down to municipal councils. In German, the term Kriegsherr identifies a legitimate political authority wielding military power. It largely lacks the pejorative associations of its English counterpart ‘warlord’, which implies the personal use of military power to assert and exercise political authority. The presence of so many warlords was distinctive, but it was not necessarily a weakness. Instead, it represented a different way to conduct war, which
in turn reflected the Empire’s character as a polity where power was dispersed and shared rather than monopolized centrally.

All late medieval European states encountered three forms of violence: the problems of enforcing the domestic peace, providing for external defence, and regulating the martial activities of their own subjects operating beyond the frontiers.¹ The peculiar character of German and Swiss political structures ensured these issues were handled differently from the western monarchies. France, Spain, and the Italian states were unusual in later fifteenth-century Europe in possessing permanent armies maintained in peacetime as well as war. The acquisition of such forces, together with the building of the institutions and tax systems required to maintain them, has been interpreted as a necessary step towards the modern state.²

In fact, there was considerable hostility to Christian rulers preparing for war during peace. War was considered a last resort, except against Ottomans and unbelievers. It was accepted that some inhabitants might be required to train and own weapons, but the expense of paying professional soldiers was expected to be exceptional. Provided forces could be raised when needed, it seemed both extravagant and an affront to God to remain armed in peacetime. The real difference between the Empire, and indeed also Switzerland, and many other European states, was not that they failed to develop permanent, centrally controlled forces, but that they succeeded in making the late medieval ideal work sufficiently well for their needs.

The Empire provided the political framework for German central Europe for three of the five centuries covered by this book, and the subsequent states of Austria, Switzerland, and Germany all sprang from it. It was ‘Holy’ thanks to its origins as the papacy’s secular protector since 800, as well as the presence of Catholic ecclesiastical lords who were collectively known as the ‘imperial church’ and controlled around a seventh of its territory. It was ‘Roman’ through the claim that it was a direct continuation of ancient Imperial Rome, and it inherited that empire’s pretensions to provide a pan-European order.³

Having expanded significantly eastwards in the high Middle Ages, the Empire contracted somewhat in the west and south after 1250, becoming more obviously ‘German’, though this was always defined more politically than either linguistically or culturally. The addition of the words ‘of the German Nation’ after Holy Roman Empire appeared
in the late fifteenth century, but never became part of a formal title, and it was always accepted that many of the Empire’s inhabitants spoke other languages. Other than some intellectuals, few found this problematic before the Empire ended in 1806.

It had never been a centralized kingdom, but instead evolved through several phases defined by differing relationships among its lordly elite. The distinction between hereditary and elective rule was blurred in many monarchies, and most European kingdoms suffered their share of instability and changes of dynasty. The elective character of the Empire’s monarchy nonetheless grew more pronounced. After 1356, the franchise was restricted to seven princes, appropriately titled ‘electors’, while the number of potential candidates was generally even fewer and the provision of choosing a ‘king of the Romans’ enabled an incumbent emperor to secure recognition of his son as successor designate.

Imperial politics always contained both vertical relations of lord and vassal, and collective, horizontal associative elements. The two elements were not necessarily contradictory, and we should not oversimplify matters merely to a dualism between emperor and princes. Both were interdependent. The princes were not trying to reduce the emperor to a figurehead or escape imperial authority. Not only were their territories generally too small to make independent existence viable, but their own self-worth rested on their status as imperial princes, giving them rights and privileges within the much larger Empire. They might disagree violently with the emperor or their neighbours, but they did not contest the Empire’s existence until just before its end. Moreover, the imperial legacy retained moral and legal authority well beyond its formal demise in 1806.

The emperor’s power depended on circumstances and how well each ruler managed the varied challenges. The fifteenth century saw a consolidation of an internal hierarchy that became more rigid as it was recorded more precisely in constitutional documents which demarcated four levels of authority. The emperor was supreme overlord and the only European monarch with an imperial title. He shared key prerogatives with the principal lords and cities, which were distinguished by their ‘immediate’ status, meaning there was no intervening level of authority between them and the emperor. They collectively constituted the ‘imperial Estates’ (Reichsstände) entitled to meet in the Reichstag (imperial diet) when summoned by their overlord. The emperor was simultaneously monarch and an imperial Estate thanks to his own hereditary possessions. A new
intermediary level was created in 1500–12 when most imperial Estates were incorporated regionally into ten *Kreise* (imperial Circles), establishing an additional arena to debate and coordinate policy and to raise troops and money for common action.\(^4\)

While active at both the imperial and Kreis levels, the imperial Estates also collectively constituted the third ‘territorial’ level as rulers of the immediate imperial fiefs. Although usually labelled ‘the princes’, they were divided hierarchically into three status groups of electors, princes (who in fact also included counts and some lesser lords), and the cities governed by magistrates elected by their enfranchised burghers. The need to raise money and troops to counter common threats like the Hussite insurgency in Bohemia (1419–34) obliged the Reichstag to meet more regularly across the fifteenth century.

Those immediate vassals and cities that accepted these new responsibilities secured their status as imperial Estates by 1521, whereas those who were either unable or refused, slipped into the fourth political layer of mediate authorities. These included well over 50,000 noble families, numerous ecclesiastical institutions, and around 1,500 towns within the jurisdictions of the imperial Estates. In a process mirroring that at the imperial level, many of these lesser authorities secured representation in territorial or provincial Estates (*Landstände*), which debated how to meet common burdens, including the growing demands for troops and taxes from the Empire.

**The Development of Collective Security**

How the Empire apportioned these burdens proved a key factor in preserving this complex late medieval structure and ensuring it did not become a centralized monarchy. In an age when it was difficult to assess wealth, it seemed expedient to allocate fixed quotas to each imperial Estate and leave it up to them to find their own ways of raising what had been demanded. The quotas were recorded in ‘matricular’ lists, of which that from 1521 provided the benchmark for all subsequent calculations.\(^5\) This apportioned 4,000 cavalry and 20,000 infantry among the imperial Estates to be provided either in kind or as cash set as equivalent to one month’s wages of this force. Given the original intention of this force as the emperor’s escort to Rome, the traditional location for imperial coronations, taxes raised using this system were known as ‘Roman Months’.
The main drawback was that the quotas only approximated to each territory’s actual potential and once fixed, it proved very hard to persuade anyone to accept revised levels – unless, of course, that meant a reduction! Nonetheless, the quota could be called up in fractions or multiples as required and the system suited the Empire’s political culture and, moreover, it generally worked well enough.

Military authority was therefore fragmented rather than monopolized. The emperor and imperial Estates were all warlords, while the Empire and its Kreise could also act collectively in this capacity. From 1519, the emperor was obliged to consult the imperial Estates before making war in the Empire’s name, but he could still do this in his own capacity using the resources of his own very extensive lands. The imperial Estates could also raise and maintain troops, while further legislation by 1555 empowered the Kreise to act on their own initiative to coordinate responses to immediate threats without first having to seek permission from the emperor or Reichstag.

Alliances offered an additional vehicle for military and security cooperation. Imperial Estates could combine for common purposes, but unlike their Polish or Hungarian counterparts, German lords lacked a constitutional right of resistance and, to be legal, any agreement between them had to be directed towards sustaining the Empire. The most important was the Swabian League, founded in 1488, which became a model for later alliances. Emperor Frederick III promoted the League to check the power of the Wittelsbach family in southern Germany, but it also served its stated purpose of sustaining the public peace, and its organization and practices contributed significantly to the development of imperial collective security. The Kreise could also establish alliances, known since the seventeenth century as ‘associations’, which were formal defence pacts. The Habsburg lands were segregated into the Austrian and Burgundian Kreise, both of which consisted almost exclusively of the family’s possessions with virtually no other members and they enabled the Habsburgs to use this structure as it suited them.

The internal use of force was curtailed by the perpetual public peace agreed at the Reichstag in 1495, which prohibited the imperial Estates from using force to settle their disputes. Similar legislation had been issued before, but this time it proved much more effective, because a new supreme court was established to adjudicate conflicts. The new judicial and institutional structures were not fully embedded when the
Reformation emerged as a permanent schism in western Christianity after 1517. Since his famous disputation with Luther in 1521, Emperor Charles V’s policy was guided by his understanding of his imperial role to safeguard the secular order and he left the theological issues to the pope. Lutherans were targeted, not as heretics, but because they seized lands and revenues from the Catholic Church to fund the establishment of their own ecclesiastical structures. Thus, from the outset, the struggle was shaped by the rivalry among the imperial Estates over access to church resources, including the still substantial lands of the ecclesiastical princes. The princes and urban magistrates who embraced the new faith were swift to impose their authority on those who espoused it, and more grassroots movements, like those of the Anabaptists, were ruthlessly persecuted. This pushed religious conflicts upwards through the Empire’s political levels to where theology mattered less than proving entitlement to exercise specific jurisdictions.

The ‘Execution’, or enforcement of court mandates, was entrusted to commissioners nominated by the emperor or Kreise. The ultimate sanction was the imperial ban that entailed the emperor declaring a malefactor an outlaw beyond the Empire’s protection. Those enforcing these sanctions could expect recompense at the culprit’s expense, giving the procedure real weight, though also adding potential political complications in its use. Understandably, the ban was employed sparingly and the usual response to violence was to escalate from formal warnings, through court injunctions, verdicts, and ultimately commissioning one or more imperial Estates to enforce the public peace. Negotiation remained an option at all stages, reflecting the general desire for peace and consensus that guided the Empire’s political culture.

Despite these enforcement mechanisms, the Empire always suffered from the free-rider problem. Imperial Estates dodged common burdens by claiming, sometimes with good reason, that more immediate threats required them to retain their contingent. The Habsburgs regularly argued that their forces, regardless of where they were deployed, represented the contingents of the Austrian and Burgundian Kreise. Others complained they had been over-assessed, or given special exemptions, but few objected directly on political grounds and overall compliance generally compared well with the percentage of taxes collected in more centralized monarchies.7

It was left to the imperial Estates to devise how they raised the men
and money demanded. Sixteenth-century authorities generally relied on vassalage to summon cavalry and non-combatant pioneers, with militia infantry recruited through other feudal obligations. Both forms were increasingly supplemented by paid professionals, some of whom were kept on retainer, but most were hired when needed through contractors. Each method had benefits and drawbacks and it was not a simple process of professionals replacing the feudal levy (see pp. 47–57).

Austria

Austria was already the pre-eminent power in the Empire by the mid-fifteenth century when the Habsburgs succeeded the Luxembourgs as the premier dynasty. Originally from Switzerland, the Habsburgs had ruled Austria since 1279, fashioning the unique, semi-regal status of ‘archdukes’ to elevate themselves above the other princes around 1358. Their extensive possessions were large enough to virtually guarantee continued re-election as emperor, but insufficient to sustain management of the Empire without the cooperation of the imperial Estates. The balance shifted significantly after the web of marriage alliances negotiated by Maximilian I bore fruit as the Habsburgs acquired Spain, Bohemia and a third of Hungary between 1516 and 1526. These gains added to Maximilian’s acquisition of most of Burgundy by 1493 and gave the Habsburgs over a third of the Empire as direct possessions, as well as even more land beyond imperial frontiers. The expansion of resources was more than offset by the accumulation of additional threats, which were heightened by France’s recovery after a long period of internal and international wars, as well as a resumption of Ottoman Turkish expansion in the Balkans that triggered Hungary’s collapse.

Keen to pursue a more prominent European role, the Habsburgs compromised within the Empire, accepting greater integration within the new institutions developing since the 1490s, in return for continued recognition of their imperial status and modest support for their activities outside the Empire, especially against the Ottomans. The new balance was formalized in the agreement between Charles V and the electors in 1519, which was renewed, with minor modifications, in all subsequent imperial elections. Charles’s Spanish possessions were not integrated within the Empire (except those in Burgundy and Italy that were already part of it), leaving him free to use their resources as he pleased, but he
was required to consult the electors and Reichstag if he wanted assistance from the imperial Estates.

The difficulties of managing this vast dynastic empire were immediately apparent in an age where political success still depended greatly on personal relations between a ruler and local elites. Recognizing he could not be everywhere at once, Charles devolved management of his dominions to his relations as viceroys. Austria was entrusted after 1521 to his younger brother Archduke Ferdinand, who increasingly substituted for his often-absent brother in managing the Empire.9

Germany

Austria, Burgundy, and Bohemia each qualified as only a single imperial Estate, despite being very large and each being subdivided into provinces. The 1521 register lists 402 imperial Estates, comprising 7 electors, 83 principalities, 226 counties, priories, and other lordships, and 86 cities. Additionally, there were around 1,500 knights’ fiefs with the status of imperial immediacy. These figures are widely cited to convey the Empire as hopelessly fragmented. Many of the smaller entities had already disappeared during the sixteenth century as they were suppressed by higher lords who disputed their claims to autonomy or, in the case of around half of the 136 ecclesiastical Estates, were secularized by their neighbours, which included some Catholic lands like Austria. The overall number of political units was smaller still, because territories could be accumulated and held together by the same family.

It is thus more helpful to think in terms of family conglomerates, relatively few of which were of more than local significance. The most important after the Habsburgs were the Wittelsbachs, who held the Palatinate, Bavaria, Zweibrücken and various associated lands. Wittelsbach influence was undermined by their split into rival branches. The same affected the Saxon Wettins after 1485 as well as the Brandenburg Hohenzollerns, who came a distant fourth in the power ranking, even after 1618 when they inherited East Prussia, the former Teutonic Order land that had been secularized as a separate duchy outside the Empire under Polish overlordship in 1525. All four families, including the Habsburgs, had various junior branches who acted as a dynastic reserve, ready to inherit if the main line died out, but who could prove difficult to manage.
WARLORDS

The Guelph (Welf) family in northern Germany was even more disparate, though the Hanoverian line would eventually rise to prominence at the end of the seventeenth century. The families ruling Hessen, Württemberg, Baden, and Nassau collectively occupied a sixth rank from which they would slowly climb as the hierarchy shifted in the eighteenth century when Austria and Prussia pulled ahead as distinct great powers, leaving Bavaria leading a pack of middling principalities, above a larger number of minor princes and counts, such as those of Sayn-Wittgenstein in the Rhineland whose various branches collectively ruled 467 square kilometres with just 16,000 subjects at the end of the eighteenth century. Together, these middling and smaller principalities came to constitute a Third Germany alongside Austria and Prussia. From this discussion, it is apparent that those principalities that would survive the Empire’s demise in 1806 and become independent states were already leading political players at the end of the middle ages. While the subtleties in the shifting relations between these princely families contribute to the richness of this period of German history, the broad underlying continuities are nonetheless striking.

Switzerland

Switzerland’s gradual coalescence demonstrated the powerful potential of the associative element in imperial politics compensating for the country’s lack of a common heritage. The French-speaking region originated in the old Carolingian kingdom of Burgundy, while the German areas had once been part of the duchy of Swabia. Linguistic divisions were complicated by the impact of geography and trade, which split Switzerland along north–south and east–west axes. However, there were few lords and most of these lived elsewhere, devolving local administration to village and town councils. The pressure of common tasks, such as maintaining roads and passes, pushed the villages to form incorporated valleys in the mountainous western and central areas. The other areas were organized in the more conventional late medieval pattern of rural lordships dependent on nobles or free towns.

Switzerland’s origins are usually traced to the famous ‘oath comradeship’ (Eidgenossenschaft) between the three incorporated valleys of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden in 1291. This expanded to include other areas that collectively took its name, and the terms ‘confederation’ and ‘canton’
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