

## The Holy Roman Empire (1648-1815)

### Introduction

*When the devastating Thirty Years' War finally drew to a close, the survivors faced the difficult task of rebuilding and restoring order. As they recovered from this crisis, they gradually remade German society. During the long eighteenth century, the period 1648–1815, the German-speaking people experienced myriad changes, changes that eventually brought about the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, the rise of ambitious dynastic states ruled by absolutist monarchs vying for dominance, and the transformation of the German economy and society with the appearance of proto-industry in the region. The period also witnessed dramatic intellectual and cultural changes, with the exuberance of the late Baroque, the religious revival of Pietism, the spread of the Enlightenment's reforming rationality, and the potent emotional resonance of the Romantic movement. By 1815, the German-speaking lands had undergone a startling transformation, but traditional forms of understanding the world and confronting hardship—through Christian faith, deference to royal authority, and magical belief—also proved durable.*

*Historians of the German-speaking lands have long portrayed the long eighteenth century as a time of progress. Employing historical hindsight and relying on the teleological perspective inherent in notions of modernization, they have focused their attentions on the origins of the modern German nation-state, the development of enlightened reason, and the cultural efflorescence of the age. Recent scholarship, however, has complicated this picture in several respects. In the area of politics, scholars have questioned the inevitability of the Holy Roman Empire's dissolution, arguing that its demise was caused by the disruption of the Napoleonic Wars rather than some inherent flaw in the imperial system or the dynamism of Prussia. Instead, they emphasize the role the Holy Roman Empire played in fostering cooperation and mediating disputes among its constituent polities throughout the long eighteenth century. In the realm of ideas, the traditional picture of the Enlightenment as a largely conservative intellectual movement that transformed Germany through the application of reason has been revised by scholars who have explored the radical dimensions of these intellectual changes as well as the conservative backlash they prompted. Finally, in the cultural arena, recent scholarship has explored how the Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement embodied by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller unleashed powerful nationalist impulses and liberal political aspirations during the period of the Napoleonic Wars, forces that shaped Germany later in the nineteenth century.*

### Politics and Diplomacy

The calamitous Thirty Years' War, and the dual treaties of Münster and Osnabrück that ended it, did not bring an end to the Holy Roman Empire. The Empire, a diverse collection of several hundred de facto independent states, ranging from powerful kingdoms to free cities to ecclesiastical polities to tiny microstates ruled by minor princes or imperial knights, continued to frame German political life until its dissolution in 1806. Despite the dismal retrospective appraisals of the nationalist scholars of the nineteenth century (and many noted contemporaries like the French *philosophe* Voltaire, who famously quipped that it was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an empire), the Empire continued to provide a political and legal framework for relations among territorial princes, ecclesiastical prelates, city councils, and the emperor. Although the archaic laws that governed these relations often proved bewildering, and the imperial courts experienced an embarrassing backlog of cases that often dragged on for decades or even

---

centuries, these institutions also proved largely successful in keeping the peace between the various states that comprised the Empire. They also succeeded in guaranteeing the rights of smaller polities as well as those of religious and ethnic minorities within the Empire's sprawling diversity. Recent studies have emphasized the Holy Roman Empire's positive attributes and presented it as a sort of federal precursor to the European Union rather than as an outmoded, failed nation-state.

The Thirty Years' War marked the culmination—and the ultimate failure—of the Austrian Habsburg dynasty's attempt to impose Catholicism on the Holy Roman Empire and to transform it into a centralized dynastic state. The Protestant princes who thwarted the Habsburgs, with crucial support from Protestant Sweden and Catholic France, not only fought to preserve their religious freedoms, but also fought to defend their legal rights against the emperor. The Peace of Westphalia reflected these new religious and political realities. Thus, it recognized the religious diversity of the Empire, guaranteeing the rights of Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, so that princes (who determined the official religion of their realm through the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, or “whose realm, his religion”) were precluded from arbitrarily expelling religious minorities from these three confessions. Likewise, religious parity was mandated in all the major organs of the imperial government so that neither Catholics nor Protestants could impose their will on the other confession. The treaty also strictly limited the emperor's unilateral political authority and precluded any further attempts to impose religious uniformity in the Empire. The emperor's ability to enact new legislation was curtailed sharply, with any new measures subject to the approval of a majority of the delegates at the Imperial Diet. The Imperial Diet, which met in Regensburg from 1663 until the Empire was dissolved in 1806, thus provided delegates a forum for discussing major issues and gave the smaller states a place to air their grievances.

Despite these stark new limitations on his power, and the increasing autonomy of ambitious rulers of states like Brandenburg-Prussia, Saxony, Hanover, and Bavaria, the Holy Roman Emperor still played an important role in mediating disputes among the smaller polities of the Empire, since he presided over the imperial courts. These courts included the *Reichskammergericht*, or high imperial court, controlled by the estates of the Empire, and the *Reichshofrat*, which met in Vienna and was created by the emperor. Thus, the Empire had a bifurcated system of justice, with one court run by the estates and the other by the emperor, which together helped settle disputes between rulers and subjects and allowed for conflicts between polities to be settled in court rather than on the battlefield. Although the subjects of the Empire enjoyed certain rights according to the religious provisions of the postwar settlement and the protection provided by the imperial courts, religious intolerance and persecution of religious minorities was still the norm long after the Peace of Westphalia. The most notorious example was the case of some 21,000 Protestants who were expelled from Catholic Salzburg in 1731, in spite of their desperate appeals to the Imperial Diet, and then resettled in Prussia after a harrowing trek. The diminution of the emperor's political authority also had important diplomatic and military implications. While these new limits on the emperor's power may have preserved the liberties of the Empire's powerful princes, it also hampered him from defending the Empire from outside aggression or from preventing internal conflict. Unable to coordinate effective military power within the Empire, emperors proved powerless to prevent conflicts among powerful German polities or to prevent France, under both Louis XIV and Napoleon, from launching devastating invasions of the Empire's western regions.

The end of the Thirty Years' War did not bring peace to the Empire for long, and within decades of the end of the conflict Germany faced another dire threat from King Louis XIV of France (r. 1643–1715). Eager to seize the Rhineland, the French monarch invaded in 1688. In what came to be known as the Nine Years' War, French troops occupied the Rhineland and pillaged much of Alsace and the Palatinate, while the Habsburgs struggled to build an effective coalition of German princes to repel the invaders. In fact, fearing the power of the Habsburg emperor as much as that of Louis XIV, many powerful German princes, including Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg-Prussia (r. 1640–1688), even allied themselves with the French. Ultimately, the beleaguered Emperor Leopold I (r. 1658–1705) was compelled to sign a peace

---

treaty ceding Strasbourg and much of the Rhineland to the French king (Treaty of Rijswijk, 1697). Meanwhile, the Empire faced a dire new threat from an old enemy. In 1683, the Ottoman Turks besieged Vienna itself for a second time, and the city was only saved in the nick of time by the arrival of an Imperial-Polish relief army. In the wake of the Ottoman defeat, Emperor Leopold I launched the Turkish War (1683–1699), and the Habsburgs reclaimed huge swaths of Eastern Europe for Austria. In these heady times, the Habsburgs, their power within the Empire strictly curtailed by the Peace of Westphalia, began to focus more intently on gaining new territories in the East and consolidating power in their own Crown Lands, centered on their glittering Baroque capital of Vienna. These hereditary lands, including Austria and various holdings scattered across southwest Germany as well as Bohemia and Hungary, made the Habsburgs the most powerful, prestigious, and prosperous princely house in the Empire in the early eighteenth century.

To the north, however, a new power was rising within the Empire to challenge Habsburg supremacy: Hohenzollern Prussia. At the close of the Thirty Years' War, Brandenburg-Prussia was composed of a series of scattered dynastic territories cobbled together across northern and central Germany. Decimated during the war, it seemed an unlikely candidate to become a major European power. Indeed, Prussia's rise had an inauspicious start, with Elector Frederick III (r. 1688–1713) assuming the title of "King in Prussia" in 1701 (since he was the monarch of a territory that lay outside the Empire's borders), an act that drew ridicule from the Habsburgs. In the decades to come, however, Prussia embarked on an ambitious course of militarization, building a standing army supported by crushing taxation and an efficient bureaucracy staffed by the service nobility. Through ruthless regimentation and ambitious economic development activities, Prussia gradually forged itself into a barracks state that could field one of the mightiest armies in Europe. By 1740, Frederick's successor, Frederick William I (r. 1713–40), had 80,000 men under arms, while Austria, its population twice that of Prussia, had just 110,000 soldiers. The young Prussian monarch Frederick II (r. 1740–1786), who came to be known as Frederick the Great, was ready to put this powerful army to the test. Prussian troops mobilized to seize Silesia from Austria, pursuing a dubious dynastic claim to the rich province after the death of Emperor Charles VI (r. 1711–1740), who had died without a male heir. In the ensuing War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748), Maria Theresa, Charles VI's chosen successor, fought to defend her realm from Prussia and other powers eager to seize Habsburg territories. In the settlement negotiated after the conflict, Austria surrendered Silesia to Prussia, in exchange for Hohenzollern recognition of Maria Theresa as Austrian monarch and her consort as Holy Roman Emperor. Henceforth, until the dissolution of the Empire, German political life would be dominated by the rivalry between these two powers: Hohenzollern Prussia, the Protestant power in the north, and Habsburg Austria, the Catholic one in the south. In 1756, war broke out again between these two rival states, as Austria tried to regain its lost province of Silesia and to reclaim its status as the supreme power in the Empire. In the ensuing Seven Years' War (1756–1763), Prussia, backed only by Hanover-Great Britain, managed to hold out against Austria and its powerful allies France, Russia, and Sweden, not to mention most of the leading German princes. Frederick the Great's triumph came at great cost, however. Over 500,000 soldiers died in the course of the Seven Years' War, 180,000 of them Prussians.

In the wake of these embarrassing defeats at the hands of the Hohenzollerns, a reeling Austria took measures to shore up its position in the Empire. The Habsburgs immediately began to reorganize their once-vaunted military along Prussian lines in expectation of another clash with their Hohenzollern rivals. Austria adopted Prussian-style bureaucratic innovations, aimed at augmenting the state's ability to raise revenue and to recruit more soldiers. Most importantly, they reorganized the High Command to provide more effective battlefield leadership. These measures, aimed at fielding an army that could compete with the Prussians, ultimately failed to halt the Habsburgs' decline. The rapid introduction of the reforms, under the rubric of "enlightened absolutism," aroused substantial resistance from their subjects, as ecclesiastical and aristocratic elites within Austria joined Hungarian patriots in their efforts to safeguard their hereditary rights. Meanwhile, Austria's recent humiliations at the hands of the

---

Prussians severely damaged the prestige of the emperor and began to diminish the cohesion of the Empire itself.

By the time Maria Theresa's son, Joseph II (r. 1765–1790), was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1765, the era's cynical power politics and the bitter rivalry between Austria and Prussia dominated imperial politics. Major states within the Empire, not just Austria and Prussia, but also Bavaria, Saxony, Hanover, and Württemberg, maneuvered as independent actors, and the Empire began to function as little more than a quaint idea and as an arena for arcane legal disputes. Ruthlessly pursuing his own dynastic aims, Joseph II took part in the First Partition of Poland in 1772 and plunged Austria into the War of Bavarian Succession in 1778, in which Prussia and Saxony thwarted his attempts to add Bavaria to his patrimony. In concert with his Russian ally, Joseph spent the next decade embroiled in expensive and ultimately fruitless campaigning against the Ottoman Turks on the Habsburgs' eastern frontier. Another reckless attempt to acquire Bavarian territory led to the formation of the so-called *Fürstenbund*, a league of German princes formed by Frederick the Great of Prussia, united by their shared opposition to Austrian territorial expansion. Meant to check Joseph II's ambition, the short-lived *Fürstenbund* demonstrated the growing might of Prussia, the state that eventually unified Germany in 1871, and the emperor's waning prestige. By 1790, rebellions against Joseph's centralizing initiatives and sweeping reforms had begun to break out on the fringes of the Habsburg realm, to the west in Belgium and to the east in Hungary. Fearing the fragmentation of his domain, Emperor Joseph, disillusioned, was forced to repeal many of his reforms and died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-eight in February 1790. His successor, Emperor Leopold II (r. 1790–1792), proved to be a more cautious and careful reformer. With the outbreak of the French Revolution, Prussia and Austria again found common ground. The traumas of the Napoleonic Wars form a bookend to the period. Thousands of Germans lost their lives on both sides of the conflict, and enduring political structures like the Holy Roman Empire were swept away in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleon's ambitious redrawing of the map of Europe.

## Economy and Demography

The catastrophic depopulation and devastation wrought by the Thirty Years' War hampered economic recovery in the German-speaking areas in the wake of the conflict. During the calamitous war years, the population of entire regions of German-speaking Europe plummeted by as much as fifty percent, with villages depopulated and farmland abandoned. Although some areas of Germany, including Westphalia, Lower Saxony, the lower Rhine, Schleswig-Holstein, the North Sea coast, and the Habsburg Crown Lands, remained relatively unscathed, it took decades for the Empire as a whole to recover from the war. Thus, a lingering demographic and economic malaise affected many areas of central Europe until the eighteenth century, worsened by global economic shifts that rendered much of the Empire an economic backwater. As the Atlantic economy brought new wealth to Europe's ambitious colonial powers, allowing them to profit from an increasingly globalized economy, much of Germany was left behind. For centuries Germany had linked the wealthy cities of Italy, entrepôts of the Mediterranean trade with the East, to the mercantile cities of the Low Countries, but with the shift of economic power to Europe's Atlantic seaboard, Germany increasingly became a stagnant periphery. There were a few notable exceptions. Some German seaports, like Hamburg, were able to engage in long-distance overseas trade, shipping textiles, grain, and timber. Likewise, in the south, German cities plied their trade with Eastern Europe by means of barges on the Danube. Most of Germany's economic activity, however, remained focused on the internal market. Given the difficulties of overland transport, most of this economic activity remained quite local, a situation exacerbated by outmoded economic regulations and onerous toll barriers that hampered trade between the hundreds of polities that comprised the Empire.

By the 1720s, the population of the Empire had fully recovered from the demographic effects of the Thirty Years' War, and population growth was steady in the German-speaking lands, especially after 1750, and by the eighteenth century the German landscape was dotted with bustling villages and market towns. This demographic expansion promoted economic growth and agricultural intensification, marked

---

by state-sponsored efforts to drain marshes, bring new farmland under the plow, and introduce new farming techniques and crops (most famously, the potato, a South American crop well suited to Germany's conditions). Germany remained a predominantly agrarian society throughout the eighteenth century, with the vast majority of the population living in rural areas and laboring in agriculture or the mills, forestry, and animal husbandry concerns that flourished in the countryside. At least eighty percent of Germany's population lived in the countryside during the period, and among the urban populace more people lived in small or medium-sized regional towns than in larger cities like Hamburg, Frankfurt, Leipzig, or Vienna. Although the region experienced periods of crop failure and dearth, like the bitter winters and wet springs of 1705, 1742, 1770, and 1771, or the great floods of 1682 and 1784, the population continued to expand throughout the eighteenth century. The rapid growth of the population put pressure on the available land holdings of rural families and produced large numbers of land-poor and landless villagers (making up some forty percent of the rural population). Without enough land to sustain their families, these smallholders either emigrated or worked as day laborers or in cottage industry. Many others were pushed out onto the roads, subject to harsh laws against vagrants and beggars.

In Prussia and Austria, absolute monarchs pursued mercantilist policies throughout the period, promoting the internal production of war materials and luxury goods in an attempt to prevent wealth from flowing out of their realms to pay for expensive foreign goods from Italy, France, and the Low Countries. In Prussia, these efforts led to a number of ambitious projects. In the 1660s, the "Great Elector," Frederick William, engineered an impressive canal linking the Oder and the Spree and providing the Prussian capital, Berlin, with access to the sea. A mercantilist, Frederick William also supported the domestic production of luxury goods like silk, lace, carpets, tobacco, and sugar. These ambitious economic development efforts, given a boost by the arrival of skilled Huguenots (French Protestants exiled by Louis XIV) in 1685 ultimately foundered against the archaic customs barriers that choked the German economic system and the crippling expense of maintaining a large standing army. Both Austria and Prussia, facing dangerous external threats from France, Sweden, and the Ottomans, as well as an intensifying rivalry with each other, struggled to provide enough funds for economic development as more and more of their state budgets went to the military.

The coming of mass industrialization, which transformed Germany in the nineteenth century, was presaged by the appearance of proto-industry in the German countryside during the long eighteenth century. Employing the putting-out system or establishing rural workshops (known as manufactories) to engage the rural population in textile production, glassmaking, wood crafts, and metalwork, this sort of cottage industry provided textile entrepreneurs with cheap rural labor, allowed them to avoid the inefficiencies of urban, guild-based production, and enhanced productivity by concentrating weavers close to their raw materials. Such proto-industry expanded rapidly, and by 1800, around 6,000 looms for weaving linen were operating in Hesse and a staggering 400,000 in Prussian Silesia and Lusatia. Proto-industry on this scale set the stage for the coming Industrial Revolution by creating a large workforce of wage laborers in individual cottages or manufactories, well before Prussian officials brought coal-powered, steam-driven factories to Germany in the mid-1800s.

## **Cultural Life: The German Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*)**

In the area of intellectual life, the long eighteenth century in Europe has long been synonymous with the Enlightenment, traditionally understood as a comprehensive intellectual and aesthetic movement that sought to use human reason to reform human society and government. According to this traditional view, the intellectuals who personified it posited that God had created the universe according to a series of immutable laws. It followed that scientists could discover and understand these laws of nature using their God-given faculty of reason, as recent discoveries by famous "natural philosophers" like Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz made manifest. Likewise, for Enlightenment reformers, human reason also provided the key to perfecting human society. According to the influential English theorist

---

John Locke, like nature, human societies were governed by inherent “natural laws” that guaranteed certain inalienable personal freedoms. The Enlightenment era also provided the backdrop to a range of artistic movements, prominent in traditional accounts of the period. Poets like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, playwrights like Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and musicians like Johann Sebastian Bach, Joseph Haydn, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart made German-speaking Europe a center of aesthetic innovation during the long eighteenth century.

Recent scholarship on the Enlightenment, which portrays it as a diffuse cultural phenomenon rather than a coherent intellectual movement, has greatly complicated our understanding of the era. This new view of the German *Aufklärung* emphasizes that it in fact encompassed a wide range of divergent ideas and goals, many of them expressed as mutually exclusive intellectual positions. This lack of intellectual unity was coupled with the *Aufklärung*'s polycentricity. The Holy Roman Empire's political fragmentation, with its multiplicity of princely courts, episcopal seats, imperial cities, and universities, provided patronage for enlightened thinkers, authors, and artists who pursued a plethora of intellectual and aesthetic programs. Likewise, the multi-confessional nature of the Empire fostered diverse strains of enlightened thought within distinct Lutheran, Pietist, Calvinist, Catholic, and Jewish confessional cultures.

Having spread to Germany from France and Britain in the late seventeenth century, the German *Aufklärung* began with the work of a pair of contemporaneous intellectuals. The first, Christian Thomasius (1655–1728), became a professor of law at the University of Leipzig in 1681 and, with the support of the Brandenburg-Prussian Elector Frederick III, helped found the University of Halle in 1694. Throughout his career as a jurist and academic, Thomasius emphasized the capacity of human reason, a hallmark of the Enlightenment project. Working at roughly the same time as Thomasius, the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716) was instrumental in spreading the spirit of *Aufklärung* throughout German intellectual circles. An innovative thinker, Leibniz left his mark in mathematics and is credited alongside Newton with inventing infinitesimal calculus. In philosophy, he developed the approach known as optimism, the idea that the universe, created by an omniscient God, is the best possible one. Although this philosophical position was savagely ridiculed by Voltaire in *Candide*, Leibniz in his day was considered one of the giants of rationalism, along with René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza.

Born in the East Prussian city of Königsberg (today Kaliningrad), the eminent German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was perhaps the greatest and most influential contributor to the *Aufklärung*. Pushing the Enlightenment to its very limits, Kant's monumental *Critique of Pure Reason* challenged traditional epistemology by investigating the limits and meaning of reason itself. He also provided what is perhaps the motto of Enlightenment thinking in his 1784 essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” when he urged readers to simply “Dare to know!” In his philosophical works, Kant sought a compromise between empiricists, who believed that all knowledge was derived from experience, and rationalists, who thought that all knowledge was the product of human reason. He posited that both experience and reason are essential for humans to arrive at knowledge that is both valid and objective. Kantian thought was tremendously influential in German philosophy in his day and has continued to influence philosophic thought in the centuries since his death. In the 1770s and 1780s, Kant contributed a series of monumental works on rational knowledge (“pure reason”), morality (“practical reason”), and aesthetics (“judgment”). Refuting the position of philosophical skeptics like David Hume, who questioned the rationality of nature, Kant sought in these works to situate rationality in the human mind itself. He argued that the human mind, through its capacity to organize perception in rational patterns, brought order to nature. Thus, Kant articulated the central tenets of German idealism: without the individual human mind, there would be no thought, and without thought, there would be no objects, indeed no world at all. Likewise, Kant argued that morality was not situated externally, in the laws of nature or in pre-existing conditions, but rather internally. For Kant, human moral reasoning could

---

be developed, presenting the possibility for independent ethical judgment outside established religion. Likewise, in the realm of aesthetics, Kant reasoned that great art was the product of the artist's individual creativity, rather than a product of external aesthetic principles. On politics and the economy, Kant's progressive stance prefigured nineteenth-century German liberalism, since he advocated for government through the rule of law, a role for representative bodies in politics, and the development of free-market capitalism.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) took Kant's emphasis on the primacy of the human mind as the seat of reason to a radical position that placed thought (spirit or *Geist*) above the physical world. For Hegel, Kantian reason was the author of the material world and the driving force in human history, especially through the invention of religion, philosophy, and art. Fascinated by the radical changes unleashed by the French Revolution, Hegel also emphasized the role of the state and the nation. The state, in his view, existed to promote and safeguard these cultural forms, and to promote human society and individual morality. Hegel's ideas about the nation were influenced by the writings of Kant's contemporary, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), who saw history as the story of various national cultures or peoples (*Völker*). Herder saw individual character as an expression of one's national culture and viewed nations in an almost organic sense, as collectives that developed over centuries. Herder called for modern nations to embrace their collective cultural identity and to awaken to their distinctive destiny through the genius of their intellectuals, artists, and poets, inspiring some of the earliest stirrings of cultural nationalism in Germany.

The spread of the *Aufklärung* in Germany was a reflection of the growing power of the bourgeoisie in the Empire, the educated class of civil servants, jurists, and businessmen who formed a ready audience for the progressive ideas of philosophers like Thomasius and Kant, the literary creations of authors like Goethe and Schiller, and the musical works of composers like Bach and Haydn. The growing wealth and influence of the middle classes, which became more apparent over the course of the eighteenth century, helped foster the spread of the cult of reason in Germany. In German coffeehouses and on the pages of enlightened gazettes, the reading public eagerly debated progressive notions of social reform. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals, the educated bureaucrats and technocrats who staffed the administrations of the German states likewise worked to enact the "enlightened" reforms of the absolutist rulers who employed them.

From its earliest beginnings in the late seventeenth century, the German *Aufklärung* retained a strong religious element compared with the Enlightenment in Britain or France, where it generally displayed a more rationalist, secular character. This religious bent can be seen in the emergence not only of the Hebrew Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*, but also of German Pietism and its contributions to *Aufklärung*. This religious revival emerged in the late seventeenth century and sparked a resurgence of piety among Protestants in many areas of Germany. It began in the 1670s when the Lutheran pastor and theologian Philipp Jakob Spener organized Bible-study groups in Frankfurt and published *Pia desideria* (1675), an influential work that advocated the rejuvenation of the faith through enhanced seminary training for clergy and intensified social reforms within communities, and pious Bible study for parishioners. Spener aroused the opposition of his Lutheran superiors and was forced out of his pastorate in Frankfurt and a subsequent appointment as Saxon court chaplain in Dresden, before winding up in a prominent pastorate in Berlin. His call for spiritual renewal struck a chord with the laity, however, and circles of Pietists sprang up throughout Lutheran areas of Germany, and many Lutheran pastors gravitated to his intense, personal form of piety. One such pastor, August Hermann Francke, who had also been driven out of several posts due to his Pietist leanings, joined Spener in Brandenburg-Prussia, joining the newly established university in Halle. The University of Halle soon established Germany's leading Protestant theological faculty, and its graduates, schooled in Pietist religiosity, went on to establish important social-welfare, missionary, and educational institutions. Graduates of Halle were the first Protestants to pursue missionary opportunities abroad, even sending missionaries to India in the early 1700s. Pietism

---

also made crucial contributions to the early *Aufklärung*, especially through its progressive educational and social-welfare activities.

## Cultural Life: Enlightened Absolutism

Compared to its European neighbors, eighteenth-century Germany was marked by the prominence of “enlightened absolutism.” This political ideology, with roots in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, posited that a primordial “social contract” between rulers and subjects gave monarchs absolute authority over their subjects, but that these rulers were in turn obligated to rule to the benefit of their subjects through the application of reason. Responding to this emerging bourgeois public, and influenced by Enlightenment thinkers in their own right, German rulers enacted reforms within their realms. Eventually, in the course of the eighteenth century the efforts of rulers to modernize their governments and to ameliorate the effects of monarchical rule by enacting “enlightened” reforms changed the nature of political life in the Empire, paving the way for the liberal reforms of the next century. Rulers influenced by enlightened principles enacted reforms, including the proclamation of religious toleration, the abolition of judicial torture, the application of scientific principles to agriculture, and the establishment of compulsory education. Enlightened despots also fostered advances in philosophy and the arts through generous patronage, sometimes even inviting leading Enlightenment thinkers to live at their courts. While these “enlightened” despots proved willing to extend new rights to their subjects, they remained despots nonetheless and fervently believed in their own right to rule as absolute monarchs. While they introduced a variety of progressive reforms meant to improve the lives of their subjects, they always did so with an eye towards enhancing their own power and expanding their own revenue. Thus, the progressive reforms realized by Prussian and Austrian rulers in the eighteenth century often met with dogged resistance from the nobility and commoners alike, due to their autocratic nature and their reckless disregard for established custom and traditional liberties.

The theory of enlightened absolutism found perhaps its greatest expression during the reign of Frederick II of Prussia, who enacted a series of reforms based upon Enlightenment principles, published philosophical texts in French, and self-consciously represented himself to an Enlightenment public as a “philosopher king.” Frederick corresponded with many of the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment and provided generous support to progressive writers and artists. In return, famous Enlightenment writers like Voltaire proclaimed him to be “Frederick the Great.” He cultivated the arts and literature, making Berlin into a cultural capital and attracting many luminous artists, musicians, and intellectuals to his court, including Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Maupertuis, and Voltaire. He even became a Freemason in 1738, as a sign of his enlightened sensibilities. Frederick continued the Hohenzollerns’ patronage of university-educated reformers who were steeped in the ethos of the Enlightenment by appointing them to staff positions in the Prussian civil service and the clergy. Thus, the Prussian state presented itself as a driving force of enlightened reform, and many of Frederick’s policies can indeed be viewed as enlightened, including the abolition of judicial torture, the establishment of a state-sponsored system of secondary education, and the modernization of the Prussian civil service. Despite these enlightened policies, it must be remembered that his reign was marked above all by autocratic rule, ardent militarism, and aggressive expansionism.

While Maria Theresa was technically “empress consort,” there is little doubt that she was the real power behind the throne. Ruling as *de facto* empress, Maria Theresa enacted a variety of enlightened reforms in her realms, including educational, economic, and agricultural initiatives. She also reformed the Austrian military, which was locked in an ongoing power struggle with Prussia throughout her reign. During her reign, Maria Theresa helped restore Austrian power and ensured the future of the ruling dynasty, bearing sixteen children. After the death of her husband in 1765, Maria Theresa became dowager empress, helping her son, crowned Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, to administer the Empire. Joseph II, who reigned as Holy Roman Emperor from 1765 to 1790 and as archduke of Austria from 1780 to 1790, was an avid fan of Frederick the Great and perhaps the German ruler most dedicated to the principles of

---

enlightened absolutism. He was untiring in his attempts to modernize the administration of the Habsburgs' Crown Lands and to bring rational reforms to society. Influenced by his admiration for Voltaire and the French Enlightenment, he sought to extend religious toleration, to reduce the exactions of the Church and the vestiges of feudalism, and to enhance both free trade and free thinking in his domain. Guided by reason and unfettered by law, Joseph II pursued his reform program with reckless abandon, issuing thousands of new edicts. Exerting autocratic control over the state, he reformed the entire legal system, revamped the state's financial institutions, abolished serfdom, secularized numerous Church properties, and established compulsory elementary education. In 1781, he issued the Patent of Toleration, which guaranteed limited freedom of worship. The following year he issued another Patent of Toleration, which lessened restrictions on Jews. He even abolished capital punishment in 1787, although like most of his enlightened reforms, this did not last long after his reign.

## Religion

Religious belief remained central to the lives of most of the Empire's inhabitants throughout the long eighteenth century. Most people, from educated elites to impoverished villagers, embraced the comforting certainties of Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, amid the era's dramatic changes. Accordingly, hymnals and devotional works remained the most popular printed works of the period. Among Protestants, and especially among Pietists, the practice of composing pious confessional narratives became widespread among the literate. Likewise, the religious practices and observances of orthodox Christianity still provided a daily rhythm to life for most eighteenth-century Germans.

One aspect of traditional religious belief that proved surprisingly durable in the so-called Age of Reason was the continued belief in the existence of the "invisible world" of witchcraft and magic. Despite their prominence in the popular imagination of the eighteenth century, the intellectual changes of the Enlightenment era were slow to take root beyond a narrow circle of educated elites. In fact, until the late seventeenth century, many learned jurists and theologians eschewed these intellectual innovations and retained a fervent belief in witchcraft and magic. Thus, witch-hunting persisted longer in Germany than in other areas in Europe, and sporadic witchcraft prosecutions continued in the region into the early eighteenth century. In fact, most of the judges and jurists who cast doubt on the methods of witchcraft prosecution during this period did not do so because they doubted the reality of witches, but rather because they feared that innocent victims were being sent to the flames. Many of the critics of the brutal methods of witch-hunting retained a staunch belief in the reality of witchcraft and diabolism.

A few skeptics offered a more radical challenge to traditional demonological beliefs. The Calvinist theologian and pastor, Balthasar Bekker, writing in Amsterdam in the early 1690s, argued on the basis of Cartesian philosophy and scriptural exegesis that witchcraft and magic were impossible. For Bekker, learned demonology and popular belief alike represented vestiges of pagan error and refuted the true sovereignty of God. In Germany, the aforementioned work of Christian Thomasius, influenced by Bekker, was crucial to this process of reappraisal. In 1701, he published *Dissertatio de Crimine magiae* (*Dissertation on the Crime of Magic*), a scholarly work that called witchcraft prosecution into question by attacking the overzealous use of torture. A moving indictment of coerced confessions, the work was translated into German two years later and circulated widely, arousing substantial controversy. Although he had given a legal opinion that favored the torture of a suspected witch in 1694, upon reflection Thomasius eventually came to doubt many of the central beliefs of early modern demonology. He denied the earthly power of the devil and hence the reality of the Witches' Sabbath, night flight, and the demonic pact.

The intellectual changes of the early Enlightenment were long credited with bringing an end to the witch-hunts, with reason overcoming ignorance and superstition. Whig historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argued that educated elites' abandonment of supposedly "superstitious" magical beliefs after 1650 was a key development in the eventual triumph of Western rationalism.

---

Scholars now refute this positivist modernization narrative. They have demonstrated that skeptics struggled to convince jurists and magistrates, most of whom remained fervent believers in witchcraft and magic until well into the eighteenth century (and beyond). In the early 1700s attacks on traditional demonological beliefs by skeptics met with furious opposition from many of their contemporaries. In Germany, Thomasius's work aroused heated debate. In 1722, a Rostock theologian contradicted Thomasius, asserting that witches could indeed fly with the aid of the devil. Likewise, the famous Halle medical professor Friedrich Hoffmann asserted in 1725 that witches could bewitch victims through the aid of the devil. A decade later, in 1738, another professor at the University of Halle defended traditional witchcraft beliefs on the basis of biblical evidence. For ardent defenders of traditional demonology, continued belief in witchcraft provided a valuable bulwark against the materialism of radical thinkers like Hobbes, Spinoza, and Descartes. They viewed such "Sadducism" as a creeping form of atheism and sought to maintain traditional beliefs in the "invisible world" in order to shore up Christian theology in the face of early Enlightenment materialism. Given such ardent defense of traditional demonology, there is an emerging realization among scholars that in the area of magical beliefs, the early Enlightenment was somewhat less "enlightened" than has often been supposed.

## Literature and the Arts

The political fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire provided the ideal environment for Germany's cultural efflorescence during the long eighteenth century, with the multiplicity of princely states all vying with each other for prestige, offering patronage for intellectuals and artists and a ready audience for their works. During the Enlightenment era, German gradually came to be recognized as a literary language, and brilliant authors, poets, and playwrights penned many of the enduring classics of German literature. Many of the great luminaries of classical music also worked in the German lands during this period, and the region became a leading center of musical culture. In both literature and music, the long eighteenth century witnessed a cultural shift from the restrained, ordered aesthetic of the Enlightenment to the emotional, passionate expression of the *Sturm und Drang* movement and Romanticism.

In the early eighteenth century, the French language dominated cultural and intellectual life in the German-speaking lands, and German was not considered a proper literary language by most educated elites. Frederick the Great, a noted Francophile, famously despised German as a coarse language, using it for military administration but corresponding with Voltaire and other leading French *philosophes* in French. By the time he took the throne, however, leading German intellectuals had begun to champion German in hopes of elevating it to a literary language suitable for poetry, literature, and opera. In 1741, Frederick the Great founded the *Königliche Deutsche Gesellschaft* (Royal German Society), which was charged with promoting and developing the use of the German language in the realm of arts and letters. While these efforts got off to a slow start, in the second half of the eighteenth century German literature reached new heights. In 1773, for example, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock published his magisterial epic poem, *Der Messias*, in German, a major milestone in German letters. The following year, he published *Die Deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* (*The German Republic of Letters*), a manifesto calling for the rejuvenation of literature in the German language. The rapid growth of the educated middle class—the *Bildungsbürgertum* of jurists, clergymen, physicians, teachers, and government officials—in Germany during this period provided an eager audience for literary works in German.

Many of the greatest literary and dramatic works of the era explored the central principles of Enlightenment thought. Thus, the playwright and philosopher, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, grappled with central issues of enlightened thought in his works. His most famous play, *Nathan the Wise* (1779), for example, considers the problem of religious ecumenicism and toleration, presenting the teachings of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam as complementary faiths that shared the same basic moral insights. The titular character was based on Lessing's friend, the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn.

The patronage of princely courts was perhaps most visible in architecture, and German princes and

---

prince-bishops spent enormous sums on dazzling palaces in emulation of Louis XIV's Versailles. The Habsburgs' impressive Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna and the sumptuous Augustusburg, palace of the Prince-Bishops of Cologne, provide useful examples. These Rococo masterpieces dating from the early 1700s illustrate the lengths that ambitious monarchs would go to enhance their dynastic prestige through building projects.

German princes also sought to display their wealth—and their refined tastes—by employing famous composers and musicians at their courts. The wealthy burghers of important German cities also employed leading composers to write music to accompany their services. Thus, the Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach had held a position as cantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, where he composed the famous *St. Matthew Passion* in 1727. His son, composer Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, was employed at the court of Frederick the Great in Berlin from 1738 until 1768, when he replaced his mentor, Georg Philipp Telemann, as *Kapellmeister* in Hamburg, directing the musical program at the city's five largest churches. The great classical composer Joseph Haydn spent his career in the employ of the Esterházy, a wealthy Hungarian noble family. During the long eighteenth century, German musical culture shifted from Bach's Baroque style, marked by contrapuntal, mathematical precision, but also staggering emotional depth, to Haydn and Mozart's more restrained classical style, which emphasized a single melody line with accompaniment.

By the 1760s, a new cultural movement began to emerge in Germany, one that sought to challenge the cool rationality of the Enlightenment. The writers and artists of this new *Sturm und Drang* movement turned from rationality to emotionality, from reason to passion. This cultural movement, championed by the philosopher Johann Georg Hamann and the author, poet, and playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, flourished from the 1760s to the 1780s, paving the way for the rise of Romanticism and foreshadowing the revolutionary passions and anxieties of the next quarter century. The literature, drama, and music of these artists explored extremes of human emotion, seeking to elicit terror or unease in audiences through evocations of primal passion and violence. In this vein, Goethe's celebrated 1774 novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, provides a painful depiction of unrequited love and suicide. Meanwhile, works like Friedrich Schiller's play, *The Robbers* (1781), made appeals for sweeping reforms and demands for liberty that took the Enlightenment into new, more radical territory. Likewise, author and philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder championed passionate expressions of German culture over the restrained classicism emanating from France, stirring proto-nationalist feeling. While Goethe and his closest associate, Schiller, eventually abandoned the *Sturm und Drang* movement in favor of a renewed classicism, the radical rejection of Enlightenment rationality they initiated helped foster later Romantic aspirations for German nationalism and liberalism. Goethe's *Faust*, for example, which he began working on in the early 1770s, became a masterpiece of Romanticism and arguably German literature's greatest work.

In the eighteenth century, Weimar became a leading center of the German Enlightenment. It rose to cultural primacy in Germany during the regency of Anna Amalia, who ruled the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar until her son Karl August reached majority. Educated by the noted poet and author Christoph Martin Wieland, young Karl August was deeply interested in literature, art, and scientific investigation. In 1775, he invited Goethe to Weimar and placed him on his privy council. The famous author soon made Weimar a leading center of intellectual activity, drawing other giants of the German Enlightenment to the new "Athens on the Ilm." With Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schiller, Goethe launched a neo-classical philosophic and literary movement, one that idealized the culture of ancient Greece and fused the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason with the *Sturm und Drang* movement's fascination with emotion. Lasting from the mid-1780s until Schiller's death in 1805, Weimar Classicism had an enormous influence on German culture.

At the same time that Goethe and Schiller were making Weimar one of Germany's cultural capitals, Saxe-

---

Weimar was also becoming associated with Early Romanticism, a movement that focused on human emotion and the irrational in response to the excessive rationalism of Enlightenment thought. In the late 1790s, a circle of influential Romantic authors and playwrights emerged in the city of Jena, powered by the literary journal *Athenaeum*, which was edited by the brothers August and Friedrich Schlegel. The circle of Romantic thinkers and artists centered on the city of Jena and its university came to exert a wide influence. Beyond Goethe and Schiller, the group included a younger generation of Germans excited by the passions liberated by the French Revolution: the poet Georg Phillip Friedrich von Hardenberg (known as Novalis), Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Friedrich Wilhelm Josef Schelling. Even Hegel passed through the group as a young professor. At the center of the circle, and arguably its sharpest mind, was Caroline Michaelis, who married (and divorced) August Wilhelm Schlegel before marrying Schelling. The works of these Jena Romantics explored human passions and the supernatural, often drawing on the medieval past and German folktales for inspiration. Romanticism also had a tremendous influence on German music, especially the work of Ludwig van Beethoven, who drove the transition from the classical tradition to the Romantic in symphonic music. His Third Symphony, known as the *Eroica*, written in 1803–04 and originally entitled “Bonaparte,” is the epitome of this stirring new “heroic” style of music.

## Proto-Nationalism and the Napoleonic Wars

After 1789, the French Revolution swept away monarchy in France and transformed life there forever. Fostered by discontent with social inequality and inspired by Enlightenment principles, this dynamic outburst of revolutionary zeal not only changed life for the French but also for the rest of Europe and especially the German-speaking lands. The Age of Revolution transformed the Continent, bringing radical political, social, and economic changes. It also brought a generation of warfare and bloodshed as Napoleon’s armies marched across Europe. Much of this violence and unrest played out on German soil. Hundreds of thousands of German soldiers fought on both sides of these conflicts, and Napoleon’s invasions ultimately destroyed a political system that had stood for a millennium: the Holy Roman Empire. In the early years of the French Revolution, France’s neighbors, including the German powers Austria and Prussia, proved reluctant to intervene. Despite his aristocratic distaste for insurrection, Emperor Leopold II took a cautious approach, hoping to turn the domestic disorder within France to his advantage in the old struggle between the Habsburgs and the French crown. By 1791, however, Leopold was growing increasingly concerned about the situation in France, not least because he was the brother of the French queen, Marie Antoinette. In August of that year Leopold approached Austria’s rival, Prussia, and the two German powers jointly issued the Declaration of Pillnitz. In this decree, Leopold and Friedrich Wilhelm II warned the revolutionaries in France of serious repercussions if they harmed the royal family. The Pillnitz decree, along with the agitation of aristocratic refugees from France within Germany, raised tensions between Austria and the revolutionary government in France to the boiling point. The revolutionaries struck first, and in April 1792 the Revolutionary Assembly voted to declare war on Austria and began preparing for an invasion of the Austrian Netherlands (roughly equivalent to modern Belgium and Luxembourg). The French revolutionaries expected the Dutch to rise against their Habsburg overlords and embrace the spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The armies of the revolution did not prove up to the task, however, since the radicals in France had purged its aristocratic officer corps and discipline had broken down among the rank and file. Soon after taking the field, most of the French soldiers deserted. As the revolutionary government scrambled to rebuild its forces, an allied army commanded by the Duke of Brunswick and made up mostly of crack Prussian infantry invaded France in June 1792. Quickly taking a series of French fortresses, including Verdun, the duke delivered the so-called Brunswick Manifesto to the revolutionary government. Instead of breaking the will of the revolutionaries, this ill-considered document, declaring that the allied forces intended to restore the French king and execute any rebels who resisted, actually endangered the royal family and rallied the French populace around the fragile revolutionary government. On January 21, 1793, the revolutionary authorities executed Louis XVI, and a rejuvenated revolutionary army took the field. Marie Antoinette

---

followed her husband to the guillotine in October. The desperate French government relied upon mass conscription to raise a massive army, hoping to overwhelm the relatively small professional armies of its German adversaries. The execution of the French monarch prompted Spain and Portugal to join the alliance against France, and in February 1793, France declared war on Britain and the Dutch Republic. The stage was now set for a cataclysmic struggle that would transform Europe, known as the French Revolutionary Wars. The rag-tag French revolutionary armies found themselves outclassed again by their professional adversaries in the early campaigns of 1793, taking heavy losses and sparking revolts against the revolutionary government in the French countryside. By the end of the year, having learned from these initial defeats, their massive conscript armies began to turn the tide, beating the allied armies, expelling them from French territory, and suppressing counter-revolutionary revolts in restive French provinces. In 1794 the French went on the offensive; their troops invaded Italy and Spain and overran the Austrian Netherlands and the Rhineland. The following year, French armies conquered the Netherlands, installing a revolutionary regime called the Batavian Republic. The establishment of this puppet government prefigured their intrusion into German politics a decade later, under Napoleon. On the heels of this dramatic French victory, Portugal and Prussia withdrew from the alliance: the revolutionary government had averted collapse and safeguarded the borders of its new nation-state.

In 1796 the revolutionary armies launched a daring triple assault on Austria, which had been abandoned by its erstwhile Portuguese and Prussian allies. Two French armies marched on the Rhine, and a third—under a young Corsican officer named Napoleon Bonaparte—moved through Italy. All three of these great armies had a single goal: to meet on Austrian soil and take Vienna. After a string of victories in Germany, French forces advanced through Bavaria and into the Tyrol before being defeated by an Austrian army commanded by the able Archduke Charles. While these French armies had to withdraw back over the Rhine, Napoleon's forces fared much better in Italy, defeating Austrian armies there and besieging the city of Mantua. After the fall of Mantua and the surrender of 18,000 Austrian soldiers, the Tyrol was open to Napoleon's troops, and the Austrians sued for peace, signing a humiliating settlement. In the resulting Treaty of Campo Formio, signed in October 1797, Austria handed over its possessions in the Low Countries to the revolutionary government and recognized the French occupation of the Rhineland and northern Italy. Furthermore, France and Austria partitioned the territories of the Republic of Venice. This settlement sealed French supremacy in Europe and had dramatic effects within Germany. Several leading German principalities—Bavaria, Hesse-Kassel, Württemberg, and Baden—having lost territories to the French in the Rhineland, decided to make good on these losses by gobbling up their weaker neighbors. This meant the end of the political autonomy of the hundreds of small territories that composed the Holy Roman Empire, princely microstates, ecclesiastical polities, and free imperial cities alike. Powerless to stop this predation, Austria acquiesced. This cynical move spelled the beginning of the end of the Holy Roman Empire, which had defended the rights and autonomy of these small states for a millennium, and signaled the new dominance of the centralized dynastic state in Europe.

While the Treaty of Campo Formio marked the collapse of the First Coalition against France, it did not end hostilities for long, and the Austrians began gearing up for war again. In 1798 Napoleon launched his quixotic Egyptian campaign, to the relief of the revolutionary government, which was happy to have the ambitious general far from the seat of power. In his absence, the French intervened in Switzerland and established another puppet government, the Helvetic Republic. The French annexed Geneva and turned on Rome, daring to depose Pope Pius VI before erecting a pro-French republic in the Eternal City. Anxiously watching these developments and fearing similar French intrusion into Germany, the Austrians joined a powerful Second Coalition against the revolutionary government in June 1798. The alliance included former allies Austria and Britain, joined by a new partner, imperial Russia. These allies attacked the French on several fronts in 1799. In Italy, the Russians won several important victories, pushing the French forces back to the Alps. While the revolutionary armies fared better against the British in the Netherlands and Russians in Switzerland, in Germany Archduke Charles's Austrian forces quickly drove the French back across the Rhine. Things looked bleak for the revolutionary government of France, until

---

internal squabbling among the allies caused the Russians to pull out of the Second Coalition. Meanwhile, at the end of 1799, Napoleon returned from his Egyptian debacle and launched a military coup, seizing power in France. Declaring himself First Consul, head of the French government, Napoleon immediately went on the offensive. In 1800, French troops commanded by Napoleon himself reversed Austrian fortunes in Italy, defeating them at the Battle of Marengo and driving them back to the Austrian Alps. After another major French victory over the Austrians in Germany, at Hohenlinden near Munich, Napoleon marched on Vienna. This reversal shattered the Second Coalition and forced the Habsburgs to capitulate once again. In the Treaty of Lunéville, signed in February 1801, the Austrians recognized French control of the left bank of the Rhine and accepted the French client republics in the Netherlands and Italy.

Flushed with victory, Napoleon subverted the revolutionary government and was proclaimed emperor of the French by the Senate in May 1804. In December of that year he crowned himself, becoming a new Caesar. Rather than pacify Europe, however, the new emperor's ambition brought an intensification of violence that devastated Europe in the following decade. These conflicts, known collectively as the Napoleonic Wars, would transform Germany. In the preceding year, 1803, the map of Germany was redrawn as the Holy Roman Empire passed one of its last comprehensive pieces of legislation, the Final Recess of the Imperial Deputation. This legislation represented an attempt to deal with the harsh realities dictated by the Treaty of Lunéville in 1801, which had ceded German territories west of the Rhine to the French. Emperor Francis II, the last Holy Roman Emperor, who had taken the imperial throne after the death of Leopold II in 1792, commissioned the Imperial Deputation to arrange compensation for the Rhineland princes deposed when they lost their hereditary lands to the French. In February 1803, the commission compensated secular princes at the expense of the imperial cities and ecclesiastical rulers. While most secular rulers were thus restored, only six of the Empire's forty-eight imperial cities remained and all but three ecclesiastical rulers were dispossessed. In effect, the Imperial Deputation effected a massive transfer of territory, political allegiance, and economic resources within the borders of the Empire. A debacle for the emperor, the Deputation upset the status quo and stirred up anxieties within the teetering Empire. In the following year, 1804, several German states, including Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden, threw in their lot with France to protect their gains, making separate alliances with the French, and further eroding the prestige and viability of the empire. The Holy Roman Empire was quickly unraveling. Alarmed by France's growing power, Austria, Portugal, and Russia joined Britain in a third alliance against the French in 1805. This coalition proved no more successful than its predecessors, suffering a series of crushing defeats at the hands of Napoleon and his generals. While Britain averted a French invasion with its naval victory at Trafalgar, in Germany the French proved their dominance on the battlefield. In a series of rapid actions near the south German city of Ulm Napoleon's forces outmaneuvered and captured an entire Austrian army before crushing the main Russo-Austrian force at Austerlitz in December 1805. The defeat at Austerlitz knocked the Austrians out of the war, and the Habsburgs were forced to sign the costly Treaty of Pressburg. This capitulation reaffirmed the earlier Lunéville settlement, forcing Austria to cede territory to Napoleon's German allies and to pay ruinous reparations to France. Austerlitz also sounded the death knell of the Holy Roman Empire.

The first blow came on July 12, 1806, when Napoleon signed a treaty with sixteen of his German allies, including the major states of Baden, Bavaria, Hesse-Darmstadt, Saxony, and Württemberg. By signing this agreement, these German principalities formally withdrew from the Holy Roman Empire and formed a buffer state known as the Confederation of the Rhine (*Rheinbund*), intended to secure France's eastern frontier. Primarily intended as a military alliance, the Confederation formally allied itself with the French emperor. In return, the member states were permitted to expand by gobbling up the many small territories that the Empire had long protected, and the great princes, including the rulers of Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg, were proclaimed kings.

In the wake of these traumatic developments, and faced with an ultimatum from Napoleon, Francis II

---

formally abdicated as Holy Roman Emperor on August 6, 1806, and proclaimed the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. With the breakdown of the Empire, and the dubious protection it had afforded to its constituents, a score of other German states flocked to join the Confederation of the Rhine. In the end, only Austria (now ruled by Francis II as the Austrian Empire), Prussia, Danish Holstein, and Swedish Pomerania remained outside its orbit and continued to defy Napoleon. Napoleon defeated the Fourth Coalition formed to thwart his domination of Europe between 1806 and 1807. This time Prussia joined Britain, Russia, Saxony, and Sweden. The Hohenzollerns feared the growing might of France and resented the formation of the Confederation of the Rhine, which threatened their power within Germany. In the end, even the formidable military might of the Prussians made little difference, as Napoleon won a series of crushing victories over the coalition. His forces humiliated the Prussians at the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt in October 1806, took Berlin, and occupied East Prussia. Launching an attack on Russia from Prussian territory, Napoleon forced the Russians to capitulate in June 1807. The subsequent settlement, the Treaty of Tilsit, had major ramifications for Germany. According to the terms of the treaty, Prussia lost half its territory to France and her allies. Napoleon created a new principality, the Kingdom of Westphalia, from ceded Prussian lands in Germany. It was a French puppet state, and his brother, Jérôme Bonaparte, was named king. The new ruler immediately joined the Confederation of the Rhine and enacted a series of social, economic, and legal reforms modeled on Napoleonic France. In 1809, in the War of the Fifth Coalition, the Austrian Empire, its armies newly reorganized and its tactics and equipment modernized by Archduke Charles, joined Britain against Napoleon and his imperial allies. Napoleon received his most significant support from the Kingdom of Bavaria, a demonstration of the growing divisions within Germany during the Napoleonic period. After a series of bloody campaigns against the Austrians in Central Europe and the British in Iberia, the French gained the upper hand with their victory at the Battle of Wagram outside Vienna, where some 300,000 troops clashed. In the wake of this defeat, with the French again on their doorstep, the Austrians were forced to sign yet another humiliating capitulation, the Treaty of Schönbrunn. In return for the preservation of the Habsburg Empire, the Austrians ceded a host of valuable territories to France and her allies, including Carinthia, Carniola, her Adriatic ports, and Galicia. Bavaria received much of the Tyrol. Humbled, Austria lost over 3,000,000 subjects with the transfer of these territories. Furthermore, Austrian Emperor Francis II was forced to pay a crushing indemnity to the French, to recognize Joseph Bonaparte as king of Spain, and to adhere to Napoleon's embargo on British goods.

While German troops from Prussia, Austria, and Bavaria had fought on opposite sides of the Napoleonic Wars, the era's revolutionary upheavals and military struggles, as well the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, also helped foster a growing sense of German nationalism. As French troops triumphed on the battlefields of Germany, they also had to waste resources suppressing revolts in the puppet state, the Kingdom of Westphalia, and in the former Austrian territory of the Tyrol, as their German subjects chafed under French domination. By the time the allies formed their victorious Sixth Coalition in 1812, the German populace was increasingly united in its opposition to French intrusion. The patriotic writings of ardent nationalists like Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Ernst Moritz Arndt, and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, calling on Germans to unite in resistance against France, found an eager audience. Napoleon faced this Sixth Coalition, which eventually included both Austria and Prussia, on the heels of his disastrous invasion of Russia. With the bulk of his armies destroyed, the French emperor faced the coalition in Germany in October 1813. The ensuing Battle of Leipzig, also known as the Battle of the Nations (*Völkerschlacht*), proved to be the largest battle on European soil before the First World War, involving over half a million troops. Napoleon's armies, including troops supplied by his German allies from the Confederation of the Rhine, won a few minor victories in the lead-up to the major action, but he suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the allied armies at Leipzig. The allied victory pushed the French back over the Rhine and prompted the leading German states of the Confederation of the Rhine, including Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg, to switch sides and join the coalition. Having broken the French military, in 1814 the coalition invaded France, deposed Napoleon, exiled him to the Mediterranean island of Elba, and restored the Bourbon monarchy in France. Meanwhile, Russian forces overran and dissolved the French

---

puppet state in northern Germany, the Kingdom of Westphalia, restoring the political map to how it stood in 1806. Finally, without French support, the Confederation of the Rhine collapsed, most of its members having joined the victorious allies after the Battle of the Nations.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the conservative Congress of Vienna redrew the map of Europe. For the Germans, this meant restoring prewar rulers and the creation, in June 1815, of the German Confederation (*Deutscher Bund*), a loose organization of German polities that replaced the defunct Confederation of the Rhine. A week later, hundreds of patriotic students gathered at the Wartburg for a demonstration, waving a new red, black, and gold national flag. At this 1815 Wartburg Festival, the students railed against the conservative reaction of the Congress of Vienna, calling for a German nation-state and a liberal constitution and thereby initiating the long process of national unification that would culminate in the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership in 1871.

Jason Coy and Jared Poley

Recommended Citation: Jason Coy, Jared Poley: The Holy Roman Empire (1648-1815). Introduction, published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:introduction-2>> [March 10, 2026].