

Joachim Whaley

Germany and the Holy Roman Empire (1493-1806), 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

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Europe is in crisis and its future is said to depend on Germany. Yet how much do we really know about Germany? Our knowledge of German history is too often focused on the Nazi period. The preceding centuries, in which the institutional structures, mental attitudes, and political culture of modern Germany were formed, are neglected. This week sees the publication of a major work on early modern German history by Joachim Whaley of the University of Cambridge. Published in two volumes by Oxford University Press, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire 1493-1806* is the first in-depth single-author account of this subject since the 1950s and the most comprehensive ever written in any language.

Joachim Whaley's work offers a new interpretation of the development of German-speaking central Europe and the German Reich from the great reforms of 1495-1500 to its dissolution in 1806. Rejecting the notion that this was a long period of decline, Whaley argues that imperial institutions developed in response to the crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There was a perennial tension between Habsburg aspirations to create a German monarchy and the desire of the German princes and cities to maintain their traditional rights. Despite this, however, the Reich both assumed many of the functions of a state and fostered a growing sense of German national identity during this period.

Whaley also illuminates the evolution of the several hundred German territories within the Reich and of the smaller entities, numbering well over a thousand, such as the Imperial Cities, Imperial Abbeys, and the lands of the Imperial Knights. He explores the implications of religious and intellectual movements for the government of both secular and ecclesiastical principalities, the minor territories of counts and knights and the cities. The Reich and the territories formed a coherent and workable system and the Reich developed its own distinctive political culture.

Whaley's narrative offers a new interpretation of the Reformation and the post-Reformation development of Protestantism and Catholicism in relation to the political and constitutional development of the Reich and its territories. Its middle point is the Thirty Years War, which, though triggered by the problems of the Habsburg dynasty and prolonged by the intervention of foreign powers, was an essentially German constitutional conflict. The Peace of Westphalia which ended the war both reflected the development of the German polity since the late fifteenth century and created the framework for its evolution over the next hundred and fifty years. Whaley emphasises the remarkable resurgence of the Reich after the Thirty Years War, which saw the Habsburg emperors achieve a new position of power and influence and which enabled the Reich to withstand the military threats posed by France and the Turks in the later seventeenth century. His book also gives a rich account of topics such as Pietism and baroque Catholicism, the German Enlightenment and the impact on the Empire and its territories of the French Revolution and Napoleon. He concludes that the Reich's institutions remained viable to the end. The work underlines the vitality of a political culture of compromise and negotiation, of consensus and cooperation, and of liberty and unity in diversity that has been routinely underestimated by historians of modern Germany.

Joachim Whaley's striking new interpretation of this period emphasises the many ways in which the early modern Holy Roman Empire shaped the development of modern Germany and the identity of the Germans. While he is sceptical about attempts to claim the Holy Roman Empire as a model for the EU in the twenty-first century, he argues that it represents an important chapter of the pre-national history of Europe that should interest those who live in Europe's post-national era today. His work places the early modern Holy Roman Empire in a new light and will stimulate a new debate on the continuities in German history from the later Middle Ages to the present.