

The Holy Roman Empire in the Eighteenth Century

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The Holy Roman Empire was eighteenth century Europe's largest state, not counting Russia, which many Europeans still regarded as entirely separate.^[1] The Empire was founded in 800, ostensibly as a direct continuation of the ancient Roman empire in its final, Christian form. The ideal of Empire and papacy as twin pillars of a common Christian order had long faded, but the emperor was still formally recognised as Europe's pre-eminent monarch, even after the tsar's assumption of an imperial title in 1721.

Since the early sixteenth century, emperors assumed full imperial dignity and prerogatives immediately from their election as German king, and longer required coronation by the pope. By the eighteenth century, the Italian lands associated with the Empire, known as 'imperial Italy', had contracted to Lombardy, Genoa, Tuscany and a few smaller northern principalities, with Savoy (raised to a kingdom through possession of Sardinia by 1720) formally being part of Germany. Burgundy had long ceased to be considered a kingdom, and had contracted to the area occupied by modern Luxembourg and Belgium, known at the time as the Netherlands, or 'Flanders' to British diplomats. The suffix 'of the German nation' was sometimes attached to the words 'Holy Roman Empire' after the late fifteenth century, but this was never an official title. Outsiders increasingly regarded the Empire as 'Germany' by the eighteenth century. Definitions of what it meant to be 'German' changed significantly, especially from the 1770s, but remained largely related to politics, not culture or language prior to the nineteenth century. To most of its inhabitants, 'Germany' remained the Empire which provided a political and legal framework for a dense and diverse

network of different communities, religious and cultural groups.

The Austrian Habsburg dynasty held the position of emperor continuously between 1438 and the Empire's dissolution in 1806, except for the brief rule of Charles VII 1742-5 who came from the Bavarian branch of the Wittelsbachs.^[2] The Habsburgs acquired Spain and its overseas empire in 1516, but split into Spanish and Austrian branches after 1558. Hereditary possession of Austria, Bohemia and some enclaves in southwest Germany gave the Habsburgs direct control of one-third of the Empire. They acquired further lands beyond imperial frontiers, largely through the reconquest of Hungary from the Ottoman Turks 1683-99. The extinction of their Spanish cousins in 1700 precipitated the War of Spanish Succession (1701-14), in which Austrian attempts to obtain the entire inheritance were thwarted by a combination of French opposition and Anglo-Dutch reluctance to see a recreation of the sixteenth century global Habsburg empire. Nonetheless, the Austrian Habsburgs acquired the Netherlands (Burgundy), which, while remaining formally part of the Empire, had been ruled by Spain since 1548. Austria also obtained Lombardy (Milan), which had been Spanish since 1536, as well as Spain's possessions in Naples and (by 1720) Sicily. The extinction of the Medici family in 1737 allowed the Habsburgs to claim this too, as an escheated fief. Though Naples and Sicily were lost in 1735, Austria made considerable gains at Poland's expense after 1772. Already by 1773, the Habsburgs had more than twice as much land outside imperial frontiers as within them, while their total possessions were roughly the same size as the entire Empire. This material power

lessened their reliance on the imperial title to sustain their international prestige.

The Habsburgs had already consolidated the legal and political autonomy of their Hereditary Lands in Austria and Bohemia during the first half of the seventeenth century, placing them almost entirely beyond the reach of imperial institutions. They continued the privileges already granted to Spain's possessions, once they obtained these following the War of Spanish Succession. However, their dealings with the rest of the Empire remained bound by the imperial constitution which had been formalised around 1500. The constitution rested on a feudal network of around 220 larger imperial fiefs and many more smaller ones, all ranked in a complex and increasingly rigid hierarchy. All larger fiefs were formally directly subordinate to the emperor, and each change of ownership (including sons succeeding fathers in hereditary principalities) required imperial permission for the new owner to exercise legal and political powers. Though the emperor could not dispute actual possession, his feudal powers helped the Habsburgs influence imperial politics.

There were always far more fiefs than political units, because the leading princes each owned many fiefs. Alongside the Habsburgs, four other families dominated imperial politics. The Brandenburg Hohenzollerns were the most important, as their possession of Prussia beyond imperial jurisdiction gave them a separate kingdom. Whereas the centre of Hohenzollern power remained in Brandenburg, the attention of their rivals, the Hanoverian Guelphs, switched to Britain after their succession there in 1714. The Saxon Wettin family also acquired a royal title, thanks to their successive election as Polish kings between 1697 and 1714. By contrast, neither the

Palatine nor the Bavarian branch of the Wittelsbachs had managed to obtain one, despite heavy involvement (on opposing sides) in the War of Spanish Succession. Wittelsbach resentment was a major source of tension within the Empire into the 1740s.

Beneath this power elite was a middling rank of around ten secular principalities, of which Hessen-Kassel, Württemberg and Brunswick were the most important. Together with the big four, these possessed the majority of the Empire's secular fiefs, with the remainder held (mostly individually) by around 50 minor princes and counts. The remaining 60 or so fiefs belonged to the imperial church as ecclesiastical territories ruled by prince-bishops, abbots and priors, each elected by their cathedral or abbey chapter. These churchmen held the same political powers as secular rulers in their own territories, as well as spiritual jurisdiction over their own inhabitants and those of neighbouring Catholic territories. The Protestant secular principalities controlled their own state churches, including deciding theological matters. Their Catholic counterparts also controlled their own clergy, but accepted varying degrees of spiritual jurisdiction from the imperial bishops within the wider framework of what still claimed to be a universal church. Thus, ecclesiastical authority was as decentralised as political power throughout the Empire. Finally, there were around 50 self-governing imperial cities, most of which had fewer than 10,000 inhabitants and often very little territory outside their walls.

Politics were simplified in one sense by Austria and Prussia's clear preponderance, with the two monarchies together directly controlling nearly half the Empire, in addition to their substantial lands outside it. Another 18 per cent was held by Hanover, Saxony,

Bavaria and the Palatinate, meaning that the majority of the Empire's autonomous units were squeezed into only a third of its surface area, principally along the Rhine and Main rivers. Politics were characterised by a tension between the formal constitutional hierarchy and the actual distribution of power and resources. Though individually small, the middling and smaller principalities mattered, because they held the bulk of the formal representation in the common institutions established around 1500 to resolve internal problems and organise collective defence. These institutions included the Reichstag, or Imperial Diet, which remained permanently in session after 1663 in the imperial city of Regensburg, as well as the ten Kreise, or imperial circles, which grouped virtually all the Empire's German and Burgundian lands on a regional basis and which also had their own assemblies. Representation in the Kreis assemblies did not always match that in the Reichstag, as many smaller fiefs were excluded from the latter, or only possessed partial rights. Nonetheless, representation made the fiefs (or more directly, their owners) 'imperial Estates', or constituent members of the Empire, sharing important powers with the emperor. The Empire was thus a mixed monarchy, with the emperor as sovereign overlord, but obliged to negotiate with the imperial Estates through imperial institutions to reach binding decisions in key matters, including military mobilisation.

Formally, the leading imperial Estates were the six secular and three ecclesiastical electors who alone were entitled to choose who should be emperor.^[3] They could wait until an existing incumbent died, as in 1740, or they could chose a successor designate, known as the king of the Romans, during an emperor's lifetime, as in 1764. The Habsburgs were the natural choice as

the richest of all the Empire's families, since the imperial Estates expected the emperor to discharge his responsibilities largely from his own resources. The concentration of Habsburg possessions in the Empire's south-eastern corner was another factor, because this gave them a direct interest in opposing the Ottomans who remained a potent threat into the mid-eighteenth century.

The Habsburgs saw the imperial title as essential to their international standing and useful in competing for the military support of the German princes. The latter had established their own permanent armies during the late seventeenth century, partly to discharge their responsibilities under the Empire's system of collective defence which had been reformed in 1681-2.^[4] However, their militarisation was also a direct consequence of their ambiguous international status. The peace settlement ending the War of Spanish Succession confirmed that Europe was composed of independent states, though it remained disputed whether these could interact as equals. German princes were not independent. They could make international alliances and even engage in foreign wars on their own account, but such activity was subject to constitutional restrictions not to harm the Empire or emperor. This was no mere formality. Emperor Joseph I sequestered Mantua, Bavaria and Cologne for backing France during the War of Spanish Succession. Though Bavaria and Cologne were eventually restored as part of the peace settlement in 1714, Austria kept Mantua for itself. Even Brandenburg-Prussia deferred to the legal order until 1740 and the Empire continued to matter to the Hohenzollerns long after that.^[5]

The princes' uncertain status made imperial politics highly competitive. Since the sixteenth century, internal

conflicts (including the Thirty Years War 1618-48) repeatedly exposed the risks of trying to seize land and influence by force. The Empire consolidated internal checks, greatly circumscribing princely action. Only Prussia managed to expand through violence, conquering Silesia 1740-5, but only then at the cost of lasting Habsburg enmity. The emergence of this open Austro-Prussian rivalry increased the interest of other European powers in preserving the Empire's internal order to prevent either German great power from controlling the resources of the remaining principalities. Consequently, imperial politics focused on minor adjustments to status, often considered irrelevant by outsider observers (and many historians), but crucial to those involved.

Britain's relations with the Empire ran through the secretary of state for the Northern Department which oversaw the appointment of envoys and diplomatic correspondence.^[6] British secretaries of state and diplomats varied considerably in their knowledge of imperial politics and their sympathy for German princely goals. Their papers remain an understudied source for the articulation of national prejudices and identities. Britain's diplomatic relations reflected both the Empire's decentralised structure and the tensions between material power and the formal constitutional order. The Empire lacked a single 'national' capital, necessitating the presence of several British diplomatic missions simultaneously. The envoy to the Habsburg court in Vienna was the most important and responsible for the bulk of the surviving paperwork (SP80/31-240). The presence of a separate envoy in Antwerp or Brussels was a consequence of the historic connections of the Netherlands to Spain before 1700, as well as their strategic and commercial significance

(SP77/63-112). Envoys were also initially maintained in Regensburg where they were accredited to the Reichstag (SP81/143), 170-6; SP105/33-47), while others were despatched to individual princely courts when required, such as to negotiate George III's marriage to Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in 1761 (SP81/178). Outside these high-political missions, Britain maintained an envoy in Hamburg which was the main conduit for trade between Germany, Britain and its colonies (SP82/32-103). As Hamburg was also a centre for news across northern Germany and the Baltic, this correspondence is useful for other topics too. Envoys were also present in imperial Italy, notably in Tuscany after 1737 (SP105/281-329).

The correspondence with envoys in Vienna and Brussels reflect Britain's dealings with Austria as a great power, more than the Habsburgs' capacity as emperors, though reports from Vienna do contain valuable information about imperial politics. Correspondence into the early 1720s is dominated by efforts to secure the settlement ending the War of Spanish Succession, notably the Barrier Treaty which allowed the Dutch to garrison fortresses in the Austrian Netherlands at Habsburg expense. Here, students should consult the papers of Britain's envoy in The Hague (SP84; SP101/130-5) as well as those in 'Flanders' (SP77) and Vienna (SP80).^[7] A key element in these negotiations from Britain's perspective was the recognition of Hanover's acquisition of much of Sweden's former German possessions at the end of the Great Northern War (1700-21), as well as that electorate's general security. To this end, Britain paid Hessen-Kassel to keep its army ready to defend Hanover in case of war (SP81/118-24).^[8] Religion played a prominent role at this point, with Britain supporting

Hanover's efforts to defend perceived Protestant interests during a crisis triggered by pro-Catholic policies in the Palatinate (SP81/120-1, 179; SP82/36).^[9]

Anglo-Austrian relations deteriorated with the mutual expulsion of ambassadors in 1727 (SP80/60-1).^[10] Britain also failed to back Austria against France during the War of Polish Succession (1733-5), though its diplomats' correspondence includes useful material on the Habsburg war effort (e.g. SP80/227). Britain did, however, support efforts to preserve the Austrian possessions intact for Charles VI's daughter, Maria Theresa. This was contested by France, Spain, Bavaria and Prussia during the War of Austrian Succession (1740-8) for which there is a wealth of diplomatic and military material (see esp. SP81/158 parts 1 and 3 SP87/8-26). A key element was Britain's support for the election of Maria Theresa's husband, Francis Stephen, as emperor in 1745 (SP81/92-3; SP105/24-5). This led to the establishment of what became a permanent envoy to Cologne (SP81/125-42, 144-57). Subsequently, British diplomats sought to persuade the electors to choose Maria Theresa's son, Joseph, as king of the Romans to ensure continuity of Habsburg rule (SP81/158 part 2, SP105/33-8).^[11] These efforts were accompanied by further treaties for German troops to protect Hanover in case of war, necessitating, among other things, negotiations with Ansbach-Bayreuth (SP 81/180).^[12]

This policy changed dramatically in 1756 with the collapse of the so-called Old System of Anglo-Dutch support for Austria against France. Austria secured French backing against Prussia which meanwhile allied with Britain. The result was the Seven Years War (1756-63) which saw the despatch of a substantial British contingent to support German auxiliaries in defending

Hanover (SP87/27-48). The Franco-Austrian alliance persisted for nearly thirty years after the war, reducing British interest in imperial institutions, since there was little point in assisting Habsburg imperial management. Most British diplomats now believed the Empire was in decline and incapable of reform.^[13] One sign of this was that Britain's representative to the Reichstag generally combined this role with envoy to the Bavarian court in Munich, where he generally stayed rather than visiting Regensburg (SP81/94-116, SP105/39-47). Interest in the Empire temporarily revived with the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in 1775, but was entirely dominated by British efforts to recruit auxiliaries from Hessen-Kassel and other middling principalities (SP81/181-97).^[14]

NOTES

^[1] For an overview of historical debates on the Empire and how it functioned, see P.H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire 1495-1806* (2nd ed., Basingstoke, 2011). More detailed coverage in J. Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire* (2 vols., Oxford, 2012).

^[2] C.W. Ingrao, *The Habsburg monarchy 1618-1815* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 2000).

^[3] The three (Catholic) ecclesiastical electorates of Mainz, Cologne and Trier, three secular Protestant electorates of Saxony, Brandenburg and Hanover, plus their Catholic counterparts in Bohemia, Bavaria and the Palatinate.

^[4] For this see P.H. Wilson, *German armies. War and German politics 1648-1806* (London, 1998).

^[5] P.H. Wilson, 'Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire 1700-40', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, 36 (2014), 3-48, and 'Prussia's relations with the Holy Roman Empire, 1740-86', *The Historical Journal*, 51 (2008), 337- 71.

^[6] Though dated, chapters 5-7 of D.B. Horn, *Great Britain and Europe in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1967) essentially offer a précis of the correspondence with the Empire contained in the SP series.

^[7] D. McKay, *Allies of convenience. Diplomatic relations between Great Britain and Austria 1714-1719*(New York, 1986); R. Hatton, *Diplomatic relations between Great Britain and the Dutch Republic 1714-1721* (London, 1950).

^[8] See also J. Black, 'Parliament and foreign policy in the age of Walpole. The case of the Hessians', in idem (ed.), *Knights errant and true Englishmen* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp.41-54.

^[9] A.C. Thompson, *Britain, Hanover and the Protestant interest, 1688-1756* (Woodbridge, 2006).

^[10] J. Black, 'When "natural allies" fall out. Anglo-Austrian relations 1725-1740', *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchiv*, 36 (1983), 120-49.

^[11] J. Black, 'The British attempt to preserve the peace in Europe 1748-1755', in H. Duchhardt (ed.), *Zwischenstaatliche Friedenswahrung un Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Cologne, 1991), pp.227-44.

^[12] C.W. Eldon, *England's subsidy policy towards the continent during the Seven Years War*(Philadelphia, 1938), and 'The Hanoverian subsidy treaty with Ansbach (1755)', *Journal of Modern History*, 12 (1940), 59-68.

^[13] P.H. Wilson, 'The old Reich', in William Doyle (ed.), *The Ancien Regime* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.540- 55.

^[14] R. Atwood, *The Hessians. Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1980).

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