The Strength of a Weak State

Heart of Europe
By Peter H. Wilson
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By MARK MOLNIK

ON AUG. 6, 1906, an imperial herald decked out in full court regalia gal- loped purposefully through the streets of Vienna to a magnificent medieval church at the center of the city. Once there, he ascended to the balcony, blew his silver trumpet and declared that the Holy Roman Empire, an institution that had lasted for more than 1,000 years, was no more. The news was hardly unexpected ("as when an old friend is very sick," recalled Goethe's mother). Yet grown men—and at least one king—were as awed as Dead Sea scrolls ripped across the continent. The empire was many things over its long history, but for a great number of its subjects it was above all, a defender of the weak against the strong. It is curious, then, that our modern view of the Holy Roman Empire has been so aurally depicted by its detrac- tors. Voltaire's quip that it was "in no way holy, nor Roman, nor an empire" is the most memorable, though not the most vicious, put-down. In 1783, James Madison derided it as "a nervous body, incapable of regulating its own members; insecure against external dangers, and agitated with storming fermentation in its own bowels." Hegel dismissed the imperial constitution as little more than a "great wall of stones that might roll away if nudged. Even the Nazis sought to dissociate themselves from it. The Russian prelate C. H. Hering had once comprised most of German-speaking Europe and had for centuries been a butt of the Western world's ridicule. In Hitler's mind, the Holy Roman Empire was a "radiant comic" image, a "joke," a "laughable" state. It had failed to achieve true German unity. On June 30, 1938, Nazi Party or- ganizations were banned from using the name and style. "Thus," when referring to the Reich, it is difficult to understand why Peter H. Wilson, in his history essay at Oxford, has written "Heart of Eu- rope," an ambitious, sprawling tome that seeks to rehabilitate the Holy Ro- man Empire's reputation by re-exam- ining its place within the larger sweep of European history. This is no easy task, as Mr. Wilson is well aware, for though the empire lasted more than twice as long as Imperial Rome, it had no standing army and no centralized institutions of government; nor was it defined by a single ethnic group. It was also immensely, encompassing at least a portion of 12 present-day coun- tries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Rep- ublic, Denmark, France, Germany, It- aly, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland. "This" empire was born with great fanfare on Christmas Day 800, when the Frankish King Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in a ceremony at St. Peter's in Rome. The plan was adua- cium: to resurrect the crown of the Roman Empire in the west, which has been vacant since the Goths ousted the last Roman emperor. To the Illi- cure warrior Charlemagne, the coronation conferred religious and moral authority. For Leo, it meant protection, for among their many oaths, the emperors swore to defend and safeguard the bishop of Rome. Over the next millennium, 45 Holy Roman Emperors, in addition to de facto emperors (kings who were never crowned by the pope), would claim allegiance over a patchwork of king- doms, duchies, bishoprics, countis and imperial cities. Their duties were clear: protect the church, maintain the peace, and ensure that Holy pro- tections were provided to states and subjects within the imperial purview.

What they did to create was not to "rule" in the modern sense. "Moral leadership and guardianship of the church were the emperor's tasks," explains Mr. Wilson, "not hegemonic, direct control over the continent. But because the empire never evolved into a viable nation-state, many scholars and politicians regarded it as a failure. The Germans in particu- lar (including the great 19th-century historian Leopold von Ranke) blamed the empire for the fact that Germany remained a "delayed nation" that was only unified (through Prussian machi- nations) in 1871.

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Dachau, Belz and dozens of smaller but equally barbaric camps that were revealed as the Allies swept into Germany in 1945. No one who wit- nessed these sights could ever forget them or fail to demand justice for these crimes. Mr. Nagorski recounts with brio and satisfaction how within a few months of the war's end most of the Nazi leadership, as well as individ- ual commanders of death and labor camps, were hunted down, rounded up and held to account.

The Dachau trials, conducted within the precincts of theformer concentration camp in late 1945, were probably the most quickly and ef- ficiently pursued of all the postwar persecutions. The case against the De- chaugh guards was brought not on the basis of specific acts of brutality but on the premise that the defendants shared a "common design" to op- erate a "machinery of extermination"—a principle some military historians call "extermination camps". The overwhelming urge to punish soon began to fade. After all, 70 million Ger- mans had to be fed and administered, put back to work, and led as rapidly as possible toward some kind of function- ing political and economic order—for the majority of the war-won- aged country but of Europe as a whole. They couldn't all be investigated and purged. Meanwhile, a freeze had set in between the Western occupiers and their erstwhile Soviet allies. Divided Britain, Italy and China were in no mood to seek vengeance.

In the Holy Roman Empire, individual rulers and states were largely left to govern as they wished. England, with its single capital and monarch, the Holy Roman Empire had numerous kings, courts and centers of patronage. The result was a remark- ably widespread distribution of educational and cultural institutions, one that is still observed in the former imperial lands. It was probably no coincidence that both the printing press and Europe's first universities were launched within the fragmented em- pire or that the imperial territories experienced higher levels of economic growth than regions of Europe with more centralized powers. Overall, "Heart of Europe" suc- ceeds splendidly in rescuing the empire from its historical misfortune. The book's thematic, rather than chronological, structure will make it tough going for the non-specialist reader. When, in the penultimate chapter, the last Holy Roman Emperor (Francis I) chooses to discuss the various empires that ever sought to rival it and by which it had been surpassed, it is not only unifying (though Prussian machi- nations) in 1871.

Yet it was precisely this lack of po- litical centralisation, Mr. Wilson ar- gues, that provided the empire with its greatest strength. Imperial passivity meant that individual rulers and states were largely left alone to govern as they wished. And all subjects had the right to appeal to the emperor if they believed their rights had been tram- melled upon. Jews, for example, were given imperial protection as early as 1090; and though forced to live as sec- ond-class citizens during most of the empire's history, many viewed its dis- solution as a catastrophe. Politics, economic power and cultural institutions. Unlike France and

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Until 1815 and 1848, millions of civilians died from violence, famine and pestilence as armies ranged across Central Europe in a savage conflict about power and religion. When the treaty was signed that ended the "Thirty Years War," one famous clause granted perpetual oblivio et amnestia (eternal forgetting and forgiving) to all the forces involved. It represented true- nal recognition that each side had committed equally unseemly acts.

At first punishment was meted swiftly. But those who could delay their day in court got off lightly.