



The image above shows the crown of the Holy Roman Emperor, late tenth century, currently held in the Schatzkammer in Vienna, Austria. For more on the crown's origins and symbology, see the article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Crown_of_the_Holy_Roman_Empire.

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

Essay Module

The Holy Roman Empire

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Unit Goals

After reading this essay, you should be able to:

- 1) Outline the origins and course of the development of the Holy Roman Empire in the postclassical era.
- 2) Trace the role of the HRE in shaping postclassical Europe, both politically, culturally, and socially.
- 3) Explain the relationship between the HRE and the Papacy over the long term.
- 4) Understand the modern legacy and significance of the Holy Roman Empire.

Introduction

The Holy Roman Empire (**HRE**) was a political formation unifying a conglomerate of minor central European principalities and feudal states from 911 to 1802. While its borders fluctuated over time, it loosely unified the regions of modern Germany, eastern France, western Poland, and north-central Italy. Known formally as the *Imperium Romanum Sacrum* (“Sacred Roman Authority”), it laid claim to the prestige of the ancient Roman Empire that ruled the European and Mediterranean world from England to Palestine (c. 30 B.C.—410 AD). It was the model institutional successor state that emerged from the transformation in the western provinces of the Roman Empire during its migration age (c. 180-550) when Germanic speaking peoples took power in the west. Although not nearly as powerful as the older Roman Empire, the HRE was the key political authority in many of Medieval Europe’s most significant institutional developments concerning separations between church and state powers. These include the Investiture Controversy, the Great Schism, and the Reformation. Ultimately, the HRE was the political arbiter of early Europe’s most defining periods, establishing the importance of centralized rule in Western Europe. It inspired and provided many in Europe with a sense of continuity and political stability of an illustrious Roman imperial past during chaotic and volatile periods. In modern European history, the HRE inspired German nationalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to forge their own versions of a nation state based upon an imagined illustrious past—a vision with devastating consequences.

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Foundations

The origins of the HRE lay in the third century Roman Empire when its northern borders along the Rhine and Danube Rivers were unable to sustain the pressure of migrating tribes moving from Eastern Europe. The precise identity of these groups has been lost to time but many spoke, among other Asiatic and Turkish languages, Germanic dialects. Roman historians recorded these Germanic groups as the Marcomanni, Allemanni, Western Goths (Visigoths), Eastern Goths (Ostrogoths), Vandals, Burgundians, Merovingians and Franks. The initial influx was catastrophic for Roman imperial governance when the western province of Gaul (modern France) collapsed in anarchy for just over a hundred year period that historians have dubbed the **'Third Century Crisis'** (180-284). Roman imperial authorities initially sought to thwart tribes from entering, but eventually assimilation policies were developed to incorporate and settle tribes under Roman taxation and military service. The Roman emperor Diocletian (r. 284-303) accomplished this task by reorganizing the empire whereby four emperors—two senior heads of state called the *Augusti*, and two junior officials the *Caesari*) divided the empire into four states. This **'tetrarchy'** ("four man rule") brought the 'Third Century Crisis' to an end. One key aspect to Diocletian's reforms incorporated the tribes into the Roman military at a time when manpower shortages had plagued the state. However, Roman officials did not always respect or address the concerns and needs of the tribes to disastrous consequences. When the Roman emperor Valens (r. 373-378) ignored pleas for aid from the Visigoths, an auxiliary military force that had recently migrated across the Danube River and were suffering from famine, they rebelled and destroyed Valens, his general staff, and the entire eastern Roman army at the battle of Adrianople in 378. The emperor Theodosius I (r. 379-395) was more accommodating. Under his reign, tribes were allowed to form quasi political groups called *foederati*, or **"federates."** Organized along tribal lines, the federates became a vital part of Roman government in the provinces and military power defending the empire. Theodosius promoted the Vandal chieftain Stilicho to the position of *magister militum*, "general of the army," the second most powerful position in the Roman state next to the emperor himself. It is a testament to how Roman citizenship and assimilation policies had worked to incorporate diverse peoples into its fold since Roman power moved out of the Italian peninsula in 300-200 B.C. It was the Germanic tribes who were vital to defending the Roman Empire against other groups like the Huns and Merovingians in the middle fifth century.

From Kings to Emperors

Eventually, Germanic kings began to take more control of governance in Rome's western provinces. In North Africa, the Vandal king Gaiseric established rule in Carthage (modern Tunis)

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in 420. In Gaul (modern France), a Merovingian king named Clovis took control. The Visigoths established a kingdom in Spain. In Italy, the Ostrogothic king Odovacar (Odoacer), who served as *magister militum* of the western empire, overthrew imperial rule in the West, by dethroning the last emperor in the west, Romulus Augustulus, in 476. Odovacar ruled Italy but did not claim the traditional Latin titles—*Augustus*, *Imperator* (“emperor”), *dominus* (“lord”), or *pontifex maximus* (“chief priest”)—that were customarily bestowed to Roman rulers. Similarly, his successor the Ostrogoth king Theodoric rejected imperial titles and called himself *Pius Princis* (“Pius Prince”), referencing his subservience to the Roman emperor in Constantinople as his ‘father.’ On the one hand, such distinction reveals Germanic sensitivities not to upset Roman imperial authorities who might feel it necessary to take back power in the west. It was in effect a signal to the emperors in Constantinople that Germanic kings understood their place in the pecking order. On the other hand, Germanic kings recognized that their source of legitimacy among themselves lay with the Roman emperors who selectively bestowed recognition, honors, and gifts to individual kings. Imperial recognition from Constantinople was a key component to the delicate dance of politics that the western barbarian kings needed to maintain power within their own ranks. It was thus that the Western Empire transformed into decentralized rule among local military units ruled by ‘barbarian’ kings. Yet despite these developments, Roman imperial authority continued on in the Eastern Empire centered in Constantinople. As a result power emanated from the eastern imperial throne to the west as all barbarian kings looked eagerly to the east for it remained that the Germanic kings of Ostrogothic Italy, Visigothic Spain, Vandal North Africa and Merovingian France ruled as client kingdoms of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Events that led to independence from Constantinople to the creation of a European political identity began under Merovingian rule in Gaul. Clovis (r. 481-511) established a unique relationship with the pope in Rome. The position of Christian bishops had always been one of tension and competition with Roman imperial authority. After Christianity’s legalization under Constantine I (r. 313-337) in 313 and favored state status under Theodosius I (r. 379-395) in 380, bishops inevitably contended with emperors over their sovereignty. The bishops of Rome in particular believed that their position in the Christian Roman Empire warranted special recognition. Often called the reverent term *papa* (“father”) by the local congregation of Italy, the bishop of Rome, or ‘pope’ gained increasing importance as people looked to the office of the papacy in times of crisis. When Attila, king of the Huns, invaded Italy in 450, Pope Leo I led a delegation to confront the barbarian king; Attila left Italy untouched. The prestige and political clout gained by Leo and, in turn by the papacy, was enshrined by church historians. Odovacar’s deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476 further enhanced papal power because imperial authority in the west ceased to exist thereafter leaving the popes of Rome as the single

source of religious and administrative authority aside from the rule of the Germanic kings of Italy.

Once Clovis converted to Christianity and was baptized by Catholic bishops in 496, he established a new precedent among barbarian kings and their relationship with Roman power. Before Clovis, Germanic kings had been traditional supporters of **Arianism**, a Christological controversy begun by the Egyptian priest Arius (c. 315) who argued that the Jesus was 'not of the same substance' as God and therefore not fully divine. The orthodox 'Trinitarian' theology—which argued for the co-equal status of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—was established under Constantine in 325 and reinforced under Theodosius in 390 as *catholicus*, or “universal” Christianity. By choosing the Catholicism of the Roman pope and not Arianism, Clovis departed from Germanic tradition, which had been in opposition to the papacy of Rome. He thereby forming an important connection with Roman institutional power and prestige—the Church. He even went so far as to declare that the Merovingians were descendants of a lost tribe of Israel and related to Jesus' family. This had the effect of realigning Germanic attention that had been fixed on Constantinople to Rome by laying direct claim to a Judeo-Christian tradition. As theological differences and disagreements between Rome and Constantinople developed in later centuries, Roman popes would feel more confident having gained loyal support from Germanic nobility in the west.

The emergence of the Franks further developed an independent western political authority. Under the leadership of Charles Martel, “the Hammer,” Germanic-Roman western forces defeated advancing Muslim armies at the Battle of Tours in 732. Charles was the chief palace official (“**major of the palace**”) of the Merovingian monarchy. His grandson, Pepin III “the Short” (751-768), who occupied the same palace position, orchestrated a coup d'état over his Merovingian king after writing a letter to Pope Zacharius I, in which Pepin asked the question: “Is it just for a weak king to rule?” Zacharius knew an opening when he saw it and responded that it is not just for a weak king to rule. Pepin overthrew the last Merovingian king Childeric III in 753 and established the Carolingian dynasty for the Franks with strong papal support. This began the unique relationship between French monarchies and the papacy in what historians have christened the '**Franco-Papal Alliance**' which lasted 1,000 years.

Under Carolus the Great, or “Charlemagne” (r. 771-814), the Carolingian kingdom receives its moniker and became an empire in name and in actuality. Charlemagne took measures that foreshadowed his ambition. His successful military campaigns united France and Western Germany and parts of modern Austria. Like his father Pepin before him, he understood the benefits of papal recognition. In 789 he had issued a decree called the *Admonitio Generalis* (“General Admonition”) which declared the Frankish kingdom a “new Israel.” As leader of the

chosen people, the *Admonitio* stated his responsibility to ensure the proper education and salvation of his subjects. To accomplish this, Charlemagne commanded cathedral schools to be built and teach basic reading and writing. In accordance with Roman methods of governance, Charlemagne was instrumental for implementing new methods of imperial administration for the Franks. Imperial agents called the *missi* (“those sent”) were dispatched to the Carolingian provinces and responsible for communicating with Frankish nobility. They ensured that Charlemagne’s nobles were loyal and complied with his decrees. Armed with the power of writing, the *missi* communicated the commands of the emperor himself and recorded the nobles’ response. This method of indirect authority through representatives was a departure from traditional Germanic governing styles which favored personal contact between a king and his warriors and the ‘face to face’ relationship of tribal communities. The effect was an abstraction of government more illustrative of a Roman system which relied upon layers of bureaucracy.

In 800, the Carolingian army invaded Italy to relieve the papacy from the pressure of another Germanic people that had settled in northern Italy a century earlier called the Lombards. After Charlemagne destroyed the Lombard threat, he visited Rome and did what no Germanic king had done before him—he was crowned *Imperator Romanum* (“Roman Emperor”). By gaining the legitimate support of the Catholic Church like Clovis before him, Charlemagne added North-Central Italy to his kingdom and

Birth of The Holy Roman Empire

Charlemagne’s empire fragmented when the **Treaty of Verdun** (843) divided his kingdom between his sons in order to address the severe military crises of the early ninth century. Since the early 800s, Viking raids plagued Carolingian Western Europe from the North Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. Muslim seaborne attacks targeted Southern France and Italy, and nomadic horsemen called the Magyars pressed the eastern borders of the realm. Eventually, Carolingian authorities were unable to respond effectively to the sporadic raids and the **Capitulary of Meerssen** (847) was issued, commanding all free peoples to seek protection from a local lord and forbidding them to leave that lord. Centralized authority under the Carolingian Empire came to an end and the decentralized feudal age had begun.

During the chaos of the ninth century, powerful military contingents of the Carolingian army that resided in the four Carolingian strongholds of Franconia, Saxony, Swabia, and Bavaria (North-Central Germany) acted to preserve their holdings against repeated Magyar attacks. In 911 they formed a confederation and elected Conrad of Franconia (r. 911-919), as “Emperor of Rome,” establishing the official beginning of the HRE. The selection of the emperor was controlled by various princes representing the four states. In later periods, these influential

nobles assumed the title “**electors**” due to their roles in selecting the emperor. By 1270, the electors were comprised of a group of seven that resided in various imperial cities in the HRE: three ecclesiastical princes made up of the archbishops of Mainz, Trier, Cologne; four secular princes consisting of the count Palatine of the Rhine, the duke of Saxony, margrave of Brandenburg, king of Bohemia). In the ninth century, the balance of power among the four states was tenuous and foreshadowed the loose confederation of the HRE in later periods. In reality Conrad’s power was limited due to the competitive nature of politics between rival noble families and local lords of the HRE. Rivals to Conrad’s authority soon emerged and each state established their own hereditary kingdoms and ruled over local churches and their estates by appointing their own bishops. Conrad’s successor Henry I of Saxony (r. 919-936) began to centralize power among the four states through marriage alliances, warfare, and support from the papacy. Henry relied upon church authorities from Rome to help run his administration, often granting huge estates to the church, abbeys, and monasteries in newly conquered lands to the east. The church continued to allow the HRE to appoint local bishops, a practice that had been existed since the beginning of the ninth century crisis. Otto I (r. 936-973) continued the theme of centralized authority, reconnecting with Rome by constructing churches and buildings in the city and conferring Roman imperial titles on Italian nobility. Otto gained considerable power and prestige when he crushed the last of the Magyars at the Battle of Lechfeld in 955, thereby extending the boundaries of the HRE eastward into Bohemia. As the millennium approached, increasing imperial authority of the HRE placed it on a trajectory that was bound to contend with papal efforts to consolidate authority in Christendom.



Map of the Holy Roman Empire (features are in German) around the year 1000. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Holy_Roman_Empire_in_the_10th_century.png.

The Character and Culture of the HRE

The HRE represented an attempt by the noble families of north central Europe to stabilize society by creating a continuation of the Roman state in the west. Much of its bureaucratic apparatus mimicked the great institutions of Roman imperial governance. As a successor state to Rome, aristocratic families incorporated important elements of Roman imperial rule. The title “**Kaiser**,” a Germanic pronunciation for “Caesar,” was adopted. While emperors relied upon their imagined connection to the ancient Roman state, imperial prestige and power was more often than not in name only. The nature of electing emperors from among the various HRE states virtually ensured a weak central government. Old Germanic tribal traditions favored an egalitarian dynamic among ruling elites. Generally, kings were considered first among equals; they were leaders in war who nevertheless required the support and advice of their warriors.

They invited counsel and warriors had direct access to the king. The ancient Roman imperial system stifled the personal bonds of the old tribal system with layers of bureaucracy and decorum. As the HRE formed, aristocratic elites, perhaps seeking to preserve ancient customs, and in part to ensure no one family could dominate other powerful families, worked to elect weaker emperors.

Other factors hindered a strong central government in the HRE. Distance between the imperial court and the provinces also made it difficult to control nobility. Mountainous terrain and winter snows virtually isolated entire regions from each other for long periods of the year. The nature of medieval warfare also contributed to the weak imperial court. In the feudal age, no standing armies existed. Local lords and nobility often raised their own personal armies of warriors beholden to them due the nature of patronage and vassalage. While the emperor did have a military force, he was at the mercy of nobility who had the duty to muster forces necessary for extended engagements. Despite this, Roman culture formed the connective tissue of society. Latin continued to be the official language of the state and learning. Roman law influenced the great Germanic codices of Salic, Burgundian, and Visigothic law.

The North Central location of the empire made it well situated for shifting global trade patterns in the thirteenth century. **The Hansa** was an economic conglomerate of trading merchants and shipping companies that emerged to circumvent the Ottoman Empire's trade monopoly along the old Silk Road routes that terminated in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The Hansa created a maritime economic monopoly that controlled all northern trade routes that spanned from the coast of Denmark to the Baltic States.

The Crusades formed a foundation of HRE society. Charged with liberating the Holy Land, crusaders trekked through the HRE, often violently disrupting communities. In Leipzig, crusaders terrorized and murdered thousands of Jews, making no distinction between them and Muslims. The Emperor **Fredrick Barbarossa I** led a crusade, but drowned crossing a river.

The HRE supported many of Europe's postclassical artistic movements, laying the foundation for centuries of artistic culture.

Church and State in the HRE

As imperial efforts of the HRE established political authority in the wake of the ninth century invasions, papal authority had also developed a sense of independence and purpose in the post-Roman world. Since Pope Gelasius I (r. 492-496) first argued for **papal supremacy** under the idea of "two swords" of authority in Rome—the secular power of emperors was separate from the spiritual authority of bishops—papal reformers had set to address long-standing issues

of decentralized religious authority in the West. The **Investiture Controversy** emerged as the issue which tested papal religious authority against the imperial power of the HRE.

Investiture involved a ceremony in which a new bishop was sanctified with his office over the local jurisdiction called a diocese. Under the tradition of the Church, bishops were ‘invested’ with the power and authority of St. Peter, with whom, papal tradition claimed, resided the exclusive spiritual power of God. This notion was derived from the principle known as the “**Petrine Doctrine**”, which was based upon a reading of Matthew 16:18-19 that claimed Peter the “rock” of the church of Jesus. Peter’s martyrdom in Rome further buttressed papal claims for spiritual supremacy because his relics remained in Rome. As a part of papal tradition, a bishop’s election to his office was valid only when the pope, through the authority of bishops, sanctified the episcopal candidate by laying their hands upon him and presenting him with a ring and a stylized pastoral staff called a crosier. The **Investiture Controversy** (1048-1122) refers to the issue of bishops being chosen and sanctioned by lay authorities without the consent of the papacy. It had become a key issue for the papacy when centralized authority collapsed during the ninth century invasions, and kings and local lords had taken upon themselves to appoint bishops within their justification unbeknownst to the pope.

The first state of the controversy was first led by the HRE emperor Henry III, who took a deep interest in reforming church corruption. Henry was inspired by the reform efforts of the Benedictine monks of Cluny in eastern France. The **Clunian reforms** entailed maintaining strict standards of clerical celibacy and preaching against keeping concubines, the buying and selling of church offices called **simony**, and appointing unqualified friends and family members to church offices called **nepotism**. Enforcing celibacy and restricting concubinage in particular helped to protect and control church lands from inheritance claims from children of such unions. When Henry went to Rome in 1046, he found the city in turmoil with three factions fighting over electing three popes. Henry deposed all rival popes and appointed to the papacy the like-minded reformer Pope Leo IX (r. 1049-1054). Leo’s reforms included enforcing clerical celibacy and organizing the **College of the Cardinals** into an administrative and judicial body. Cardinals—from the Latin *cardo* (“hinge”)—had served more as imperial ornaments of tradition than real officials of church power. Leo appointed cardinals as papal advisors and jurist to establish church canon law. Eventually, canon law gave the College of the Cardinals the exclusive right to elect popes, thereby removing such authority from the emperor of the HRE. Cardinals also served as legates with papal authority to lead inquiries and enforce papal orders and canon law throughout the HRE and Western Europe. One of Leo’s reforming monks became Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085).

Emperor Henry IV was not the reformer his father was. Henry IV continued to invest his own bishops on HRE lands. Gregory VII took issue with this and issued the *Dictatus Papae* (“Dictate of the Pope”) which outlined the supremacy of the papal authority over all, even the emperor of the HRE. Among the most striking pronouncements were “that the Roman church was founded by God alone; the pope alone can be called universal in authority; the pope alone can depose or reinstate bishops; that all princes shall kiss the pope’s feet; that the pope may be permitted to depose emperors.” While popes may have believed these sentiments in private, none was so bold to have declared them in public. Gregory officially outlawed the practice of lay investiture in 1075. Henry IV responded by declaring Gregory a false pope, deposed him, and claimed the earlier authority enjoyed by his father Henry III. Gregory retorted proclaiming Henry deposed as emperor and excommunicated from the church, a punishment that officially denied him entrance into heaven and forbade anyone from communicating with him. Rivals to Henry’s authority in the HRE saw an opportunity to seize power for themselves and joined the pope’s call for deposing the emperor. Under the threat of wide-scale revolt in the HRE, Henry journeyed to Italy and met Gregory at the castle of Canossa in January 1077, and after three days of waiting in the snow Henry submitted to Gregory’s supremacy. Both sides seemed to have mended the rift. However, Henry’s act of contrition did not ensure his political survival as nobles from the HRE elected another emperor in his stead. In a reversal of his reconciliation at Canossa, Pope Gregory sided with the new emperor, Rudolf of Swabia, and deposed and excommunicated Henry a second time. This would have longstanding consequences for the political unity of the HRE as many nobles did not recognize the legitimacy of Henry’s descendants because of his deposition and excommunication. Henry defeated and killed Rudolf and his supporters and turned his attention to Rome. Henry had his bishops declare Pope Gregory deposed and laid siege to Rome for three years in 1084. Henry deposed Gregory and installed his own pope. Gregory died in exile.

The Investiture Controversy was brought to a close by Henry IV’s son Emperor Henry V (r. 1106-1125). Having convened the **Concordat of Worms** in 1122, Henry negotiated a compromise with the papacy. The emperor relinquished investing the bishop with the traditional symbols of spiritual authority—the ring and the crosier. In exchange, episcopal candidates were selected by the imperial officials and given a spear or a small amount of soil to signify the terrestrial authority of the emperor.

The Great Schism & Reformation

The HRE was a key player in political movements that influenced the monumental events that eventually led to the Reformation. The origins of popular dissatisfaction with papal authority has its roots in a referred to as the **Avignon Papacy** (1309-1377) and the **Great Schism** (1378-

1417). The history of the Franco-Papal Alliance relied upon the close relationship between the French monarchy and the papacy. In 1305, the powerful French monarch Philip “the Fair” (r. 1268-1314) was highly influential in getting Pope Clement V (r. 1305-1314) to relocate the papal government from Rome to Avignon in southern France. Clement was a fellow Frenchman struck many as a brazen attempt by the French king to control the papacy. The move to Avignon also was a symbolic blow to Christendom because Rome had served as the traditional center of Christian Europe. Some Avignon popes were unpopular because of their perceived opulence Pope John XXIII received particular criticism for his expenditures of the papal government. Vocal criticism was led by the Franciscan monk William Occam. He referred to the Avignon papacy famously as the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Church. Fearing for his life, Occam retreated to HRE lands and lived in self-imposed exile under the protection of the emperor of the HRE. No doubt the Holy Roman Emperor would not pass up an opportunity to cause the French monarchy trouble. Occam’s writings and criticisms stressed that the true authority of the church lay with the local bishops and their congregations and not the pope. This went against the Petrine Doctrine that had supported papal claims for supremacy. So began what historians have called the **conciliarism** because of Occam’s call for local councils to determine church policies. Conciliarism was supported by the HRE in part as a counter balance to the French monarchy which was influential in papal politics and due to its own adversarial history with Rome. As a popular form of resistance to perceived abuses by the papacy, conciliarism gave rise to a new tradition in the HRE where by local regional voices criticized the papacy as never before.

When Pope Gregory XI moved the papacy back to Rome in 1377, he died soon after in 1378. The **Great Schism** began. Powerful nobles and vocal Roman factions coerced a small group of the College of the Cardinals to elect an Italian successor to Gregory. When many French cardinals left the city of Rome, they repudiated their Italian selection and elected a Frenchman as pope. The Italian was still considered the true pontiff in Rome and a second College of Cardinals was appointed by him and supported by the Roman population. With two rival popes, Christendom was in a state of schism, or divide. To make matters worse, the Council of Pisa (1409) was convened by church delegates and university theologians in an attempt to reconcile the divide. They repudiated the rival French and Italian popes and elected a third. The French and Italian popes refused to acknowledge the authority of the Pisa council and continued on as popes in their own regard for nearly a decade to great anguish and dismay of Christians. Critics like the Czech consiliarist Han Hus (d. 1415) organized and agitated for reform of church doctrine regarding papal supremacy. Emperor Sigismund (r. 1411-1437) was powerful enough to take action and convened the **Council of Constance** (1414-1417). The council’s chief concern was reconciliation of the schism and reforming theological positions. All

three popes were deposed and Martin V (r. 1417-1431) was elected pope. Jan Hus was condemned and burned at the stake, and the Great Schism came to an end.

A century later the HRE was a key player on both sides of the Reformation. When the Augustinian monk Martin Luther (1483-1546) published his *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517) criticizing papal theology and governance, the Protestant Reformation began. In 1521 Luther was summoned before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r. 1519-1556) to recant his works which stressed that only faith was necessary for Christian salvation, but he refused. Fearing that he would be arrested and put on trial for heresy, his friends arranged for his protection under the prince of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. For over a year Luther was out of reach from papal legates and inquisition and wrote and preached freely on reformation issues. Protestantism spread slowly and irregularly throughout the HRE. The common pattern for conversion was through the leadership; if a prince or lord converted, the city or region followed suit. In 1530, Charles V ordered all Protestants in the HRE to renounce their Protestant faith and reconvert to Catholicism. Protestant cities refused and formed the **League of Schmalkalden** to resist the emperor with force. After several years of war and negotiation, Charles conceded and signed the **Peace of Augsburg** (1555) which recognized Protestant rights of faith. The Peace also set up the governing formula for Catholicism and Protestantism in the HRE under the maxim: "Whoever rules the realm, his religion shall also prevail." In political terms, nobles saw an opportunity to break from papal influence in their own principalities and chose Protestantism. Such was the nature of politics and authority in the history of the HRE. The emperor was only as strong as the elector states would allow, and religious conversion was impossible to separate from the local politics of the nobles. In the case of the Reformation, princes and nobles exercised their power over the imperial court and the papacy.

The Wars of Religion

The HRE fragmented into Protestant and Catholic regions in the wake of the Reformation. As the Catholic monarchies of Italy, France, and Spain faced off against Protestant principalities of the HRE, Denmark, and Sweden, Western Europe erupted in a century of war. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died, millions were dislocated in the decades of warfare known as the Wars of Religion. While the Peace of Augsburg settled the conflict between the united Protestant groups of the Schmalkalden League against Emperor Charles V, religious violence erupted in the HRE region of Bohemia in 1609 over succession of the regional monarchy there. In the Netherlands, Dutch Protestants rebelled against the ruling Catholic Spanish monarchy. As a result, **The Thirty Years' War** (1609-1648) was a defining period for the HRE. Danish and Swedish forces invaded the HRE under the pretext of supporting Protestant allies, but in reality these monarchies had designs on increasing their borders onto the European continent. With

warfare ravaging the heartland of the HRE, terrific human losses were sustained by local populations as central Europe plunged into anarchy. In the aftermath, the HRE lost territorial unification when the region of Switzerland and the Netherlands declared and successfully fought for their independence. Conflict finally came to an end with the **Treaty of Westphalia** (1648).

The complexity of the Wars of Religion is noteworthy. While belligerent monarchies and independent armies fought against each other for their declared faith of Catholicism or Protestantism, war was also used as a means of maintaining a geo-political balance as well as gaining advantage among competitive European powers. For instance, the Catholic Louis XIV often sided with Protestants in the HRE in an attempt to keep the Hapsburgs, a powerful HRE dynasty, from gaining too much power. Louis even allied himself with the Muslim Ottoman Empire on the HRE's southeastern borders to keep the Hapsburgs off balance. On the northern front, Protestant Swedish intervention was often aimed against Protestant HRE nobility who resisted outside forces regardless of religious affiliation. As a result, Catholic communities supported Protestant Swedish forces against their own Protestant overlords. By the end of the seventeenth century, the exhaustive nature of that century left its mark on the HRE. The balance of power in Europe shifted to the French monarchy of Louis XIV who was able to capitalize on the political instability and turmoil in the HRE. Protracted fighting had drained the HRE regions of treasury, crippling its economy and the ability for states to collect tax revenues due to population loss and destroyed lands.

The Holy Roman Empire in the Modern Age

In the modern age, the HRE was reduced to complete fragmentation after the exhaustive seventeenth-century wars. When **Napoleon Bonaparte** led French revolutionary armies across Europe into Russia, HRE nobles were concerned about the imperial title of the Holy Roman Empire falling to the forces of the French Republic. In an attempt to thwart Napoleon from gaining the title, Emperor Francis II disbanded the HRE in 1806. However, the traditions and prestige of the HRE continued to inspire new monarchies. When Francis II abdicated his role as emperor of the HRE, he crowned himself "Kaiser" of the new Austrian Empire (1806-1918). **Wilhelm I** was crowned "Kaiser" of the German Empire when it was created in 1871. As European imperial competition gained steam, the German nationalist leader **Otto von Bismarck** invoked the historical past of The Hansa as a means of to justify and legitimate German economic policies in Africa. In the twentieth century, **Adolf Hitler** claimed to be reinstating a "**Third Reich**," or Third Kingdom of the Germanic peoples. Nazi propagandists promoted the Nazi Empire as the successor to a "First Reich" which was supposed to be the HRE (911-1802) and a "Second Reich" that was the short lived German Empire (1871-1918).



This propaganda painting by Nazi painter Herbert Lanzinger entitled *Der Bannerträger* (The Flag Bearer) depicts Nazi Party leader Adolf Hitler as a Teutonic Knight. This image, as well as Hitler's emphatic insistence on understanding the Nazi Empire as the Third Reich, indicate the continuing usefulness and power of Holy Roman Empire imagery and rhetoric in the twentieth century. Source: <http://www.ww2incolor.com/d/580764-2/HubertLanzingerHitler>.

successors of empire. The influential prestige that the Roman world provided Europeans throughout the history of the Middle Ages was used and abused, and can serve as a lesson as to how history, or the imagination of it, can be invoked in the modern age.

The Holy Roman Empire's significance for modern European, and by extension world, history cannot be understated. It served as the connective institutional, political, cultural, and

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religious tissue between the Roman Empire and the birth of early modern Europe. Its imagery and traditions eventually inspired German nationalists with dreams of creating an imperial age. Ultimately, the HRE serves as an example of how history is both used and abused to validate and legitimate political aims in the present.