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**The Holy Roman Empire in Conservative Political Thought**

Federico Ottavio Reho

St Antony's College

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Federico Ottavio Reho

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# The Holy Roman Empire in Conservative Political Thought

*Abstract*

*Federico Ottavio Reho*

*St Antony's College, University of Oxford*

This thesis examines the place of the Holy Roman Empire (henceforth 'Empire') in conservative political thought from the Enlightenment to European integration. It shows that the Empire remained a key conservative ideal of German and European order into the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It traces the formation, development, and influence of five distinct strands of conservative thought on the Empire: cosmopolitan, Romantic, national, Borussian and supranational conservatism. It details how they gradually coalesced into a cosmopolitan-supranational strand on the one hand and a national-imperialist strand on the other.

Supranational conservatives cherished the early modern Empire of the Habsburgs as the heart of a European federacy that protected and nurtured national individualities while remaining open to political universality. National conservatives celebrated the medieval Empire of the Hohenstaufen as the archetype of a united and powerful Germany that embraced its role as the continent's hegemon. The former were influential in early conservative defences of the Empire's constitution, in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century plans to build up the German *Bund* into a multinational Central European federacy and in 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic conservative and Christian democratic Europeanism. The latter was central to nationalist plans from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, furnished the historical underpinning of *Weltpolitik* and *Mitteleuropa* at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and inspired the revolutionary conservative *Reichsideologie* of the interwar period as well as the neo-imperial prefigurations of the various 'New Rights' after the Second World War.

Mainly an exercise in the transnational history of ideologies over the *longue durée*, the thesis nuances our understanding of the genesis and development of German conservatism and of the Empire's influence on it, traditionally seen as a contributing factor to Germany's *Sonderweg*, culminating in the Nazi *Reich*. By outlining a supranational strand of conservatism and distinguishing it from the more nationalist one, which has so far received more attention and seems increasingly dominant in contemporary conservatism, it also helps define more precisely the intellectual boundaries between mainstream conservatism and the radical right.

# The Holy Roman Empire in Conservative Political Thought

*Extended Abstract*

*Federico Ottavio Reho*

*St Antony's College, University of Oxford*

This thesis examines the place of the Holy Roman Empire (henceforth 'Empire'), including interpretations and memories of it, in conservative political thought from the age of Enlightenment to that of European integration. It represents the first synoptic scholarly treatment of the topic and aims to offer a synthetic view of the problem that also takes the new historiographical trends on the early modern Empire into account. It shows that the Empire remained a key conservative ideal of German and European order long after its formal demise in 1806 and into the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A 'morphological' approach is adopted to map conservative political uses of the Empire across a long time span. On this basis, five distinct strands of conservative thought on the Empire are identified in their chronological order of appearance and traced in their historical development. First, cosmopolitan conservatives celebrated the Empire, especially in its early modern phase, as an 'order of peace and justice' and the centre of a European federacy based on European public law and a continental balance of power. Second, Romantic conservatives viewed it as the neomedieval, organic, Christian-Germanic nucleus of a European commonwealth of Christian nations. Third, national conservatives saw it, especially at the height of its power, typically identified with the medieval Hohenstaufen dynasty, as the empire of the German 'nation', the epitome of a German *Machtstaat* uniting all culturally Germanic populations and the historical manifestation of Germany's calling to imperial pre-eminence in Europe. Fourth, Borussian conservatives condemned it as a universalist distraction from the all-important task of constructing a Protestant German national state centred on Prussia, excluding Austria and curbing

the influence of Catholicism and particularism. Finally, supranational conservatives saw the Empire, since Charlemagne, as the archetype of a supranational and decentralised European order that tamed political power through a comprehensive legal system, held nationalism in check and protected cultural minorities.

Though conceptually distinct, these strands exercised considerable mutual influence and were variously combined in different authors. The first three already emerged by the Congress of Vienna, while the other two ripened in subsequent decades and were clearly recognisable by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Gradually, modern conservative thinking on the Empire solidified into a cosmopolitan-supranational strand on the one hand and a Borussian-national conservative one on the other, with Romantic conservatism variously influencing both.

Supranational conservatives saw the Holy Roman *Reichsidee*, especially that embodied by the medieval pre-Hohenstaufen Emperors and by the early modern Habsburgs, as the traditional ideal of a federation of European peoples that protected and nurtured national individualities while remaining open to political universality. Already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, conservative defences of the Empire's constitution, then still extant but increasingly frail, took on a distinctively cosmopolitan character. *Reichspublizisten* ('imperial publicists') such as Johann Jacob Moser, Johannes von Müller, Arnold Ludwig Heeren, Nikolaus Vogt and Karl von Dalberg stressed its nature as a decentralised legal order that tamed political power, protected the autonomy of even the smallest polities and guaranteed the continental balance upon which the freedom of all states within what they referred to as the European 'republic', 'federation' or 'commonwealth' rested. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, with German nationalism raging and Slavic nationalisms awakening, this constellation of conservative ideas associated with the memory of the Old *Reich* became programmatically supranational in the thought of such authors as Constantin Frantz, Joseph Edmund Jörg, Julius Ficker and Onno Klopp. It fed into defences of the

Germans' universalist vocation and plans to build up the German *Bund* into a polycentric and multinational Central European federacy. The revolutionary events and politico-constitutional discussions of 1848-50 were an important catalyst, as they highlighted the Central European entanglement of nationalities and its bearing on the German problem.

Despite suffering a massive setback in the wake of Austria's 1866 defeat, Prussia's annexation of important swaths of the old 'Third Germany' and the creation of Bismarck's 'Little German' Empire, the supranational conservative Empire ideal experienced a powerful renaissance from the middle of the First World War to the 1950s, when it contributed to moulding Catholic conservative and Christian democratic Europeanism, one of the decisive drivers of continental integration in the post-war era. Promoted by such publicists as Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster, Hermann Platz, Theodor Haecker and Alfred Missonig, it influenced the *Abendland* movement and political Catholicism in both the interwar and the early post-war period. In the new geopolitical context of the Cold War and especially after the social and cultural transformations of the 1960s, however, the traditional supranational conservative Empire ideal experienced a backlash, as it appeared increasingly out of phase with prevailing political realities. Although the experiences of order underpinning it partly lived on within the Paneuropean movement of Richard von Coudenhove-Karlergi and Otto von Habsburg, overall, Christian democrats and Catholic conservatives were unable to successfully modernise the concepts through which they had traditionally expressed their 'third way' vision of European unity – hostile to both European centralisation and nationalism.

This supranational stream was profoundly different from the national conservatism that first emerged to overcome the divisions and humiliations of Germany during the Napoleonic period. The early national conservatism of figures such as Karl vom Stein and Ernst Moritz Arndt drew on the imperial patriotism associated with the early modern Empire but aimed to reconnect with the unity, prominence

and glory of the medieval Empire of the Hohenstaufen, which became a key ideal of order in the long German 19<sup>th</sup> century, prominently present in historical works as much as in political pamphlets, poetry, literature and the arts. It sustained the influential scholarly patriotism of figures such as Friedrich von Raumer, Gustav Adolf Stenzel and Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, inspiring plans for a Germany united as a modern national Empire with some Slavic dependencies in the East. After the birth of Bismarck's 'Little German' empire, Prussia and the Hohenzollern dynasty were incorporated into this imperial mythology as German Protestant continuators of the Hohenstaufens' alleged national and anti-Papal policy, in opposition to Habsburg supranationalism and Catholicism.

This nationalist interpretation of the medieval Empire underpinned German hegemonic ambitions in the form of *Weltpolitik* and *Mitteleuropa*. In a radicalised form, it went on to inspire the revolutionary conservative *Reichsideologie* of such interwar figures as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Edgar Julius Jung, morphologically distinct from but practically contiguous to the Nazi one. After the Second World War, it influenced the neo-imperial prefigurations of authors affiliated with the 'European New Right', such as Julius Evola in Italy, Alain de Benoist in France, Bernhard Willms and Hans-Dietrich Sander in Germany. Its influence is still detectable in the intellectual surroundings of some contemporary radical-right authors and movements. The thesis primarily traces how the conservative cosmopolitan ideals originally nurtured within the Empire evolved after 1806, and what influence they wielded across the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. More nationalist and imperialist strands of conservatism, to which the memory and legacy of the Empire was equally central, are treated as analytical counterpoints to supranational and cosmopolitan ones. The research strategy is therefore to make the long time span manageable by choosing a relatively narrow entry point into the sources.

The thesis is mainly an exercise in the transnational history of ideologies, intellectual history and the cultural history of politics over the *longue durée*. Its methodology is primarily inspired by what Michael

Freedden called a 'conceptual' or 'morphological' approach to the study of political ideologies, seen as 'configurations of political concepts' 'oriented to *praxis*'. This justifies the long timespan – often frowned upon in other strands of contemporary intellectual history – and allows tracing the long-term continuities and discontinuities of the various conservative patterns of concepts associated with the Empire. It also explains the broad pool of diverse conservative sources and authors, including thinkers but also politicians of various importance, as the purpose is not retrieving the nuances of individual agents' political thought, but reconstructing the broader ideological constellations within which they fit. Political thought is thus meant to primarily refer to works and utterances on the Empire by conservative thinkers, publicists, statesmen and historians of higher or lesser renown who were aiming to participate in a political conversation or anyway influenced political conversations among their contemporaries or later in time. Other expressions of the human spirit relevant to reconstructing conservative interpretations of the Empire (e.g. poetry, literature or architecture) are given some attention, but only as reinforcing evidence.

This approach is usefully complemented by some borrowings from Eric Voegelin's methodology. The first is his invitation to trace what he terms political 'symbols' expressed in texts back to their engendering experiences of order and disorder in the concrete context whence they arose. This allows one to determine to what extent seemingly different conceptions of German and European order, such as *Reich*, *Sacrum Imperium*, *Abendland* or *PanEuropa*, belonged together as evocations of the same engendering experience rooted in the Empire's memory. The second is his interpretation of the totalitarian way of thinking as a form of 'immanentisation of the Christian eschaton'. This allows the analyst to explain how the same historical materials could be deployed by different authors as evocations of radically incompatible political projects, some of which possessed a strong anti-totalitarian intent, while others displayed a clear totalitarian predisposition. The thesis adopts a

transnational approach, with the inclusion of the Habsburg Empire and later of its main successor states. This is necessitated by the ill-defined and porous borders of German-speaking and German-influenced Central Europe, within which ideas circulated with considerable ease, especially before the foundation of the *Kaiserreich* and in the interwar period. It is also the best way to capture the cosmopolitan conservative dimension that constitutes the thesis' focus. For this same reason, Swiss, Italian, French and occasionally British authors are also woven into the narrative whenever they seem to belong there.

The thesis' primary findings are fourfold. First, it contributes to the old debate on the genesis and development of German conservatism, shedding new light on the continuity of cosmopolitan and supranational forms of conservatism over the *longue durée* of central European history. It counters what has long been the overarching narrative of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century German history: that of a gradual and inevitable transition from 'cosmopolitanism' to the 'national state', most influentially put forward by Friedrich Meinecke for the field of intellectual history. From its specific vantage point, the thesis shows how every step of that transition was far from inevitable and bitterly contested in the name of competing notions of 'Germanness' that never completely died out. It thus complements, in the field of intellectual history, recent revisionist works that problematised our understanding of modern German history, emphasising its open-ended and contested nature. It also contributes to recent scholarship that corrects the traditional identification of German conservatism with the most extreme Prussian Protestant national authoritarianism, rediscovering alternative strands, more typical of southern, western and Catholic Germany, but also present in sectors of Protestant conservatism.

Second, the thesis' results revise our understanding of the Empire's influence on subsequent German history and political thought. The survival of the Empire's outmoded feudal structure until so late has been blamed for delaying Germany's national and democratic development, for obstructing popular

participation and perpetuating the power of conservative elites, favouring the emergence of an aggressive authoritarian – as opposed to liberal democratic – national state that culminated in Nazism. In the sphere of political ideas, the survival of the *Reich's* myth after the Empire's demise was similarly faulted as the source of that sense of imperial exceptionalism that engendered Germany's and Europe's 20<sup>th</sup> century catastrophes, not least by facilitating a convergence between traditional conservatives and national socialists around a shared political concept. On the contrary, the thesis elucidates the fault lines between conservative and Nazi uses of the *Reichsidee* and qualifies such claims by showing that the Empire's memory also fostered and legitimised into the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a federalist and cosmopolitan conservatism that represented one of the main opponents to these developments. This was arguably the dominant strand of conservatism in the German-speaking lands until 1866, lived on in various political and intellectual ecosystems until the Second World War, and in many ways re-acquired a role through the Christian democratic and conservative forces that dominated both the German Federal Republic and the second Austrian Republic in their first decades.

Third, this thesis brings the new understanding of the Empire pioneered by Karl Otmar von Aretin since the 1960s to bear on the field of political thought, shedding light on a strand of modern conservatism that had expounded it all along. It also casts fresh light upon the intellectual context of the Empire's scholarly reappraisal, connecting it with Aretin's Catholic conservative and cosmopolitan milieu. This reappraisal corrected many distortions of the previous nationalist historiography, which had treated the Empire as a byword for national disunity and political impotence. It taught us to assess the Empire not against the benchmark of the centralised national state, but in its own terms, as a polity that evolved to protect diversity and organise polycentricity, thus anticipating constitutional problems and solutions that acquired new relevance in the twenty-first century.

Finally, the thesis makes some contributions to political thought as such. To begin with, it outlines the contours of a supranational strand of conservatism that has until recently received scant attention in scholarly literature. Indeed, the historiography, political science and prevailing political views of the last decades have tended to associate internationalism and cosmopolitanism with progressive ideals related with the Enlightenment, primarily advanced by the liberal and socialist movements and countered by a Romantic and conservative nationalism. Moreover, by carefully distinguishing the conceptual morphology of this supranational strand from that of the more nationalist and revolutionary strand of conservatism, to which the Empire was equally central, the thesis helps define more precisely the intellectual boundaries between mainstream conservatism and the radical right, contributing to ongoing debates on the subject in both history and political science. National conservatism in its various incarnations appears as a disturbance of and a deviation from the mainline of conservative political thought. Apart from an emphasis on 'limited politics' and a rejection of cultural despair and millenarian exaltation, the latter is found to entail a specific conception of the relationship between ethics and power, a preference for compound political orders and a notion of the ultimate unity of mankind, which are typically absent in national conservative thought. Its ideal of European order is identified as an anti-totalitarian subsidiary federacy that protects religious, cultural, national, ethnic, social, personal and other differences in a tolerant spirit of rooted cosmopolitanism, a polity that can neither become a fully consolidated federal state nor decay into a mere league of sovereign nations.

# Contents

List of Abbreviations .....	1
Introduction .....	3
I. Foundations (c.1765-c.1814).....	35
II. Possibilities (c.1815-c.1866).....	88
III. Retreat (c.1867-c.1915).....	132
IV. Detours (c.1915-c.1955) .....	175
V. Back to the future (c.1955-).....	236
Conclusion .....	279
Bibliography .....	291

# List of Abbreviations

<b>BDR</b>	Bundesrepublik Deutschland
<b>CDU</b>	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands
<b>CEDI</b>	Centre Européen de Documentation et d'Information
<b>CEH</b>	Central European History
<b>CSU</b>	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern
<b>DDR</b>	Deutsche Demokratische Republik
<b>DHP</b>	Deutsch-Hannoversche Partei
<b>EEC</b>	European Economic Community
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FPÖ</b>	Freiheitliche Partei Österreich
<b>GRECE</b>	Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne
<b>HJ</b>	The Historical Journal
<b>HPB</b>	Historisch-Politische Blätter für das Katholische Deutschland
<b>HZ</b>	Historische Zeitschrift
<b>JMH</b>	The Journal of Modern History
<b>ÖVP</b>	Österreichische Volkspartei
<b>SS</b>	Schutzstaffel

**USA** United States of America

**USSR** Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

# Introduction

## Subject and Relevance

This thesis examines the place of the Holy Roman Empire<sup>1</sup> in conservative political thought from the late Enlightenment to European integration, with a focus on German-speaking and German-influenced Central Europe. It explores how the multi-national and universalist tradition of the Empire inspired a 'supranational conservatism' that remained influential in Central Europe well beyond the Old *Reich*'s demise and can be traced across the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It also shows that this tradition was profoundly different from the nationalist and imperialist conservatism coming to prominence after 1871 and most typically associated with the *Reichsideologie* of conservatives and reactionaries in the interwar period and during the Second World War. The thesis primarily studies how the conservative cosmopolitan ideals originally nurtured within the Empire evolved after 1806, and what influence they wielded across the following centuries. More nationalist strands of conservatism are analysed mainly as counterpoints to supranational ones, and with greater reliance on secondary sources. This is the first synoptic scholarly treatment of the subject and the first to take the new historiographical trends on the early modern Empire into account.

Long treated as a byword for national disunity and political impotence, the Empire has been radically reappraised since the work of Karl Otmar von Aretin began to appear in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> This work taught us to assess the Empire not against the benchmark of the centralised national state, treated as the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis, the historic Holy Roman Empire is sometimes also indicated, from the vantage point of post-1806 and especially post-1815 commentators, by the expression Old *Reich*, already common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unless otherwise specified or clearly inferable from the context, the short form 'the Empire' always refers to it too. On the contrary, the term *Reich*, though typically implying some reference to the Holy Roman Empire, could have a murkier meaning, and is therefore not used as a shortcut for the Empire as such. For a discussion of the transformation of the term 'empire' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see pp.113-15 below.

<sup>2</sup> By K.O. von Aretin, see: *Heiliges Römisches Reich 1776-1806*, (2 vols, Wiesbaden, 1967); *Das Alte Reich 1648-1806*, (4 vols, Stuttgart, 1993-2000); *Das Reich. Friedensgarantie und europäisches Gleichgewicht 1648-1806*, (Stuttgart, 1992).

crowning achievement of mankind's political progress, but in its own terms, those of a polity that evolved to protect diversity and organise polycentricity, not to concentrate resources and wield power. From this novel perspective, imperial institutions suddenly appeared to have remained vital into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and to have even anticipated constitutional problems and solutions whose importance we have only begun to appreciate in the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> This has even stimulated a more recent literature that openly stresses the alleged liberal and national features of the early modern Empire, seen as the ancestor of the Federal Republic.<sup>4</sup> The thesis brings this new understanding of the Empire to bear on the field of political thought, revealing the existence of a strand of modern conservatism to which it remained central all along. It also casts fresh light upon the intellectual context of the Empire's scholarly reappraisal, connecting it with Aretin's Catholic conservative and cosmopolitan milieu.

Moreover, the thesis nuances our understanding of the trajectory of German conservatism. Long influenced by the arguments of *Sonderweg* historians, until recently the scholarly literature interpreted German conservatism as deviant compared with the allegedly more moderate and evolutionary Anglo-American one. The traditional focus was Prussian Protestant conservatism, with 1933 seen as the terminal point of a conservative hegemony beginning in 1848 and ending with the failure of the authoritarian conservative governments of the 1930-1933 period, which opened the gates to Nazism. Accordingly, liberal modernity could only re-emerge after 1945 under the shadow of foreign occupation

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<sup>3</sup> J. Burkhardt, 'Über das Recht der frühen Neuzeit, politisch interessant zu sein', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 50/12 (1999), pp.748-56; P.C. Hartmann, 'Bereits erprobt: Ein Mitteleuropa der Regionen', *Das Parlament*, 49-50 (3/10 December 1993), p.21. For an author whose approach to the Empire's history is more critical of present-mindedness, see the following by J. Whaley: "'Hier existiert noch das alte heilige deutsche Reich": The Legacy of the Holy Roman Empire and the Unity of Germany', *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 83/1 (2014), pp.1-21; 'The Old Reich in Modern Memory: Recent Controversies Concerning the "Relevance" of Early Modern German History', in C. Emden and D.R. Midgley (eds), *German Literature, History and the Nation: Papers from the Conference 'The Fragile Tradition'*, (Oxford, 2004), pp.25-49; 'Federal Habits: The Holy Roman Empire and the Continuity of German Federalism', in M. Umbach (ed), *German Federalism. Past, Present and Future*, (Basingstoke, 2002), pp.15-41.

<sup>4</sup> By G. Schmidt, see: *Geschichte des alten Reiches. Staat und Nation in der frühen Neuzeit*, (Munich, 1999); 'Das frühneuzeitliche Reich – komplementärer Staat und föderative Nation', *HZ*, 273/1 (2001), pp.371-99.

and was institutionalised in the 1949 Federal Republic.<sup>5</sup> The Empire as traditionally interpreted was an essential part of this narrative. The survival of its outmoded feudal structure until so late was blamed for delaying Germany's national and democratic development, for obstructing popular participation and perpetuating the power of conservative elites, favouring the emergence of an aggressive authoritarian – as opposed to liberal democratic – national state that culminated in Nazism. In the sphere of political ideas, the survival of the *Reich's* myth after the Empire's demise in 1806 was similarly faulted as the source of that sense of imperial exceptionalism that engendered Germany's and Europe's 20th century catastrophes, not least by facilitating a convergence between traditional conservatives and national socialists around a shared political concept. Unsurprisingly, then, Heinrich August Winkler opened his two-volume history of Germany with the words '[i]n the beginning was the Reich. Everything that divides German history from the history of the great European nations had its origin in the Holy Roman Empire.'<sup>6</sup>

The thesis qualifies such claims showing that, into the later twentieth century, the Empire's memory also fostered and legitimised a federalist, cosmopolitan and predominantly Catholic conservatism that represented one of the main opponents to these developments. This was arguably the dominant strand of conservatism in the German-speaking lands until 1866, lived on in various political and intellectual ecosystems until the Second World War, and in many ways re-acquired a role through the Christian democratic and conservative forces that dominated both the German Federal Republic and the second Austrian Republic in their first decades. The thesis also contributes to the old debate on the genesis and development of German conservatism, shedding new light on the continuity of cosmopolitan and

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<sup>5</sup> L.E. Jones and J.N. Retallack, 'German Conservatism Reconsidered: Old Problems and New Directions', in L.E. Jones and J.N. Retallack (eds), *Between Reform, Reaction, and Resistance. Studies in the History of German Conservatism from 1789 to 1945*, (Oxford, 1993), pp.3-4. For an exception, see H. Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke. Beiträge zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, (Munich, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> H.A. Winkler, *Germany. The Long Road West*, (2 vols, Oxford, 2006), vol.1, p.4.

supranational forms of conservatism over the *longue durée* of central European history.<sup>7</sup> It counters what has long been the overarching narrative of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century German political and intellectual history: that of a gradual and inevitable transition from ‘cosmopolitanism’ to the ‘national state’, as most influentially put forward by Friedrich Meinecke in his classic contribution.<sup>8</sup> In truth, as the thesis shows from its specific vantage point, every step of that transition was far from inevitable and bitterly contested in the name of competing notions of ‘Germanness’ that never completely died out. The following chapters, then, primarily tell the story of one such notion, harboured by those conservatives who, claiming to follow in the footsteps of the Old *Reich*, never accepted the inevitability of Germany’s and Central Europe’s ‘nationalisation’, defending a supranational conception of the central European space and of the Germans’ vocation within it. This is why the thesis’ chronological division of chapters consciously goes beyond well-worn period markers – such as 1806, 1871, 1914 and 1945 – to emphasise that, in some fields, the established periodisation risks concealing more than it reveals.

Finally, by outlining the contours of a supranational strand of conservatism that received but scant attention in the literature, the thesis contributes to political thought as such. Attempting to define ‘conservative internationalism’ in the early twenty-first century, a scholar had to admit that it ‘barely has a name by which it is recognized’ and spoke of its ‘relative obscurity’.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the historiography, political science and prevailing political views of the last decades have tended to associate internationalism and cosmopolitanism with progressive ideals related with the Enlightenment, primarily advanced by the liberal and socialist movements and countered by a Romantic and conservative nationalism. The latter, some have argued, recently re-emerged in the form of a populist nativism

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<sup>7</sup> F. Valjavec, *Die Entstehung der politischen Strömungen in Deutschland 1770-1815*, (Munich, 1951); K. Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism*, (Princeton, 1966); K. Mannheim, *Conservatism. A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. and tr. D. Kettler, V. Meja, N. Stehr (London, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> F. Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, tr. R.B. Kimber, (Princeton, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> C. Holbraad, *Internationalism and Nationalism in European Political Thought*, (Basingstoke, 2003), p.11.

opposing globalisation and European integration.<sup>10</sup> The nationalist overtones of most contemporary conservatism seem to confirm this narrative.<sup>11</sup> Rediscovering more cosmopolitan and supranational forms of conservatism, then, may possess both scholarly and practical relevance. Recent works clarifying how, in the German-speaking world, a supranational *Reichsidee* remained important to early Catholic conservative and Christian democratic visions of European integration are therefore long overdue;<sup>12</sup> as are novel studies of conservatism from a transnational perspective, one of which even adopted ‘cosmopolitan conservatisms’ as its main analytical category, to my knowledge for the first time in a rigorous academic context.<sup>13</sup> My research contributes to this emerging trend. However, it goes beyond the attention to transnational networks, movements and transfers typical of transnational history by tracing a body of ideas, largely developed in connection with the Old *Reich*’s institutions and memory, which can be legitimately treated as a continuous, albeit loose, tradition of cosmopolitan and supranational conservatism. Understanding in what sense that is so requires a closer illustration of the thesis’ methodology and sources.

## Methodology and Sources

Examining the place of the Holy Roman Empire in conservative political thought from the late Enlightenment to European integration poses several methodological challenges. The most basic

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<sup>10</sup> J. Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution. Liberal Europe in Retreat*, (Oxford, 2018); P. Mishra, *Age of Anger. A History of the Present*, (London, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Y. Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, (New York, 2018); W. Chamberlain, C. DeMuth, R. Dreher, Y. Hazony, D. McCarthy, J. Mitchell, N.S. Lyons, J. O’Sullivan, and R.R. Reno, ‘National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles’, <https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/> (7 April 2024).

<sup>12</sup> R. Forlenza, ‘The Politics of the Abendland: Christian Democracy and the Idea of Europe after the Second World War’, *Contemporary European History*, 26/2 (2017), pp.261-86; V. Conze, ‘Facing the Future Backwards: “Abendland” as an Anti-liberal Idea of Europe in Germany between the First World War and the 1960s’, in D. Gosewinkel (ed), *Anti-Liberal Europe. A Neglected Story of Europeanization*, (London, 2014), pp.72-89; V. Conze, *Das Europa der Deutschen. Ideen von Europa in Deutschland zwischen Reichstradition und Westorientierung (1920-1970)*, (Munich, 2005), pp.25-206.

<sup>13</sup> F. Pestel, J. Reboul and M. Lok, *Cosmopolitan Conservatisms. Countering Revolution in Transnational Networks, Ideas and Movements (c.1700-1930)*, (Leiden, 2021); J. Großmann, *Die Internationale der Konservativen. Transnationale Elitenzirkel und private Außenpolitik in Westeuropa seit 1945*, (Munich, 2014); M. Lok, *Europe Against Revolution. Conservatism, Enlightenment, and the Making of the Past*, (Oxford, 2023).

concerns the identity of the Empire as a historical object for this thesis' purpose. Following the most common periodisation, the Empire refers to the political entity established with Charlemagne's coronation as Roman Emperor in the eternal city at the hand of Pope Leo III on Christmas day 800 AD, and which collapsed just over a millennium later in 1806, when the last Emperor Francis II abdicated and effectively dissolved the Empire for fear that Napoleon might take it over. During its millennium-long history, the Empire naturally experienced profound transformations. A separate section of this introduction will be devoted to outlining those aspects of the Empire's long history that have proved relevant for its legacy within conservative thought. Because of the Empire's changing character throughout, after its demise a rich menu of political models embodying conflicting values and meanings could be produced based on its history, simply by emphasising different aspects, periods and spaces. Therefore, the thesis will not treat the Empire as an unchanging historical object but acknowledge its complexity. Tracing how different periods and aspects of the Empire's history were used at different times for different aims – but also reflecting on what drove such evolving uses – will be one of its concerns. We will be dealing with instances of what Michael Freeden called 'decontestation', 'through which specific meanings, selected from among the spectrum of inevitably contested and contestable conceptions that a concept can and does hold, are conferred on a political discourse.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the malleability and polysemic nature of the Empire as a political ideal, which ensured its enduring relevance after its formal demise, can be considered one of the thesis' key findings. This was, in a way, an Empire for all seasons that could and did serve competing intellectual and political agendas.

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<sup>14</sup> M. Freeden, 'The Morphological Analysis of Ideology', in M. Freeden and M. Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199585977.013.0034> (25 July 2023).

The method I have employed for my inquiry is primarily inspired by what Michael Freeden called a 'conceptual' or 'morphological' approach to the study of political ideologies.<sup>15</sup> He defines ideologies as 'systems of political thinking [...] through which individuals and groups construct an understanding of the political world they, or those who preoccupy their thoughts, inhabit, and then act on that understanding.' Such systems are best studied as 'configurations of political concepts' that 'acquire meaning not only through accumulative traditions of discourse, and not only through diverse cultural contexts, but also by means of their particular structural position within a configuration of other political concepts'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, each ideology is characterised by a specific 'morphology' of concepts, some of which the interpreter will empirically ascertain as 'core' concepts, i.e. running through all known cases of a given ideological pattern, while others will be revealed as more 'peripheral'. From this 'morphological perspective', then, the interpreter's task will primarily be 'identifying, describing, and analysing the building blocks that constitute' a given ideological pattern, as well as 'the relationships among them'.<sup>17</sup> This approach seems particularly suited for four reasons.

First, it clarifies that studying the Empire's *place* in conservative political thought means identifying its exact position within the morphology of *some* strands of conservatism for which it appears particularly important. Its centrality to some of them is such that their stance towards the Empire can be treated as a litmus test of where each of them stood on historically crucial issues, from their preferred model of federalism to the nature of nationalism. This is why the thesis begins by outlining in general terms, in a later section of this introduction, the key strands of conservative thought on the Empire that have historically emerged. Each of its five chapters then traces their development over time, emphasising their morphological and conceptual patterns as well as the evolving contexts that shaped them and

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<sup>15</sup> M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory. A Conceptual Approach*, (Oxford, 1996); M. Freeden, 'Morphological Analysis'.

<sup>16</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp.3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p.48.

which they in turn aimed to shape. Some might find it puzzling to treat thinkers' idea – or, more precisely, their ideological morphology – of the Empire as legitimate ground for defining competing strands of conservatism. It may hopefully appear less so once the evidence proving the centrality of the battle over the Empire's meaning at all the critical junctures of German history until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is produced. This was particularly true for conservatives, whose worldview began to take shape in the Empire's final decades also as a reaction to the new forces that were wreaking havoc upon it. Naturally looking to the past as a source of legitimacy, later generations of conservatives were confronted with the task of coming to terms with the imperial legacy and what previous generations had made of it.

Second, a morphological approach allows tracing the long-term continuities and discontinuities of the various conservative patterns of concepts associated with the Empire. As Freedden explains, 'the continuity of an ideological tradition [...] can only be put to the test by examining multiple synchronic states, over time and space.'<sup>18</sup> This is exactly what the thesis' transnational perspective and very long time span – from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – allow. Long frowned upon as methodologically sloppy – not least due to the dominant influence of the Cambridge School<sup>19</sup> –, the study of ideas from a temporally longer perspective is making a comeback – also thanks to the spread of Reinhart Koselleck's 'conceptual history'.<sup>20</sup> My own method is compatible with what David Armitage

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<sup>18</sup> Freedden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p.52.

<sup>19</sup> Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 8/1 (1969), pp.3-53; Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Regarding Method*, (Cambridge, 2002). For criticisms of the Cambridge School, see J. Tully, *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, (Princeton, 1988); Freedden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp.100-11; I. Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences*, (Princeton, 2005), pp.6-7, 31-7; J. Bowman, 'Ideologies and Symbols. A Voegelinian Critique of Quentin Skinner's Approach to the History of Political Thought', paper delivered at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 1-4, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, (Stanford, 2002). For recent defences of *long durée* approaches to intellectual history, see D. Armitage, 'What's the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée', *History of European Ideas*, 38/4 (2012), pp.493-507; D. McMahon, 'The Return of the History of Ideas,' in D. McMahon and S. Moyn, *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, (Oxford, 2014), pp.13-31, <https://doi.org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199769230.001.0001>, (25 July 2023).

recently called 'serial contextualism'. While rejecting the naïve tendency to treat ideas as 'hypostatized entities', justly demolished by modern contextualism à la Cambridge School, this approach does not renounce the insights that can be gained by studying 'episodes of contestation over meaning [...] over a span of time extending over decades, if not centuries.' It enables 'joining diachronically reconstructed contexts across time – transtemporally'.<sup>21</sup> I am of course aware that this methodological choice is far from costless and riskless. As Darrin McMahon observed, 'to write history over the *longue durée*, in multiple contexts, and in different "provinces" is necessarily to abandon the noble dream of exhaustive inquiry in the hope that we may gain in broad perspective what is lost in fine-grain detail.'<sup>22</sup> The sheer length of time and number of authors covered meant that a close and extensive reading of their writings was only possible for the most interesting and seminal among them. In most other instances, my engagement with the sources was very targeted, and I relied on the extensive secondary literature for better contextualisation. While the thesis' *long durée* approach may be unusual, its transnational scope, including all the territories that had once belonged to the Empire and even going beyond them whenever justified by the sources, appears more in line with current trends in intellectual history. In this specific case, it is necessitated by the porous borders of German-speaking and German-influenced Central Europe, within which ideas circulated widely, especially before the foundation of the *Kaiserreich* and in the interwar period. It also seemed the best way to capture the cosmopolitan conservative dimension that constitutes the thesis' focus. For this same reason, Swiss, Italian, French and British authors are occasionally woven into the narrative whenever they seem to be participating in the same '(de-)contestations' over the meaning of the Empire as their German-speaking contemporaries.

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<sup>21</sup> Armitage, 'What's the Big Idea?', pp.498-9.

<sup>22</sup> McMahon, 'History of Ideas'.

Third, the conceptual approach to political ideologies emphasises the latter's nature as 'forms of group thinking' that are 'oriented to *praxis*'.<sup>23</sup> This implies that the study of political doctrines cannot be focused on a single author, let alone on a handful of authors. Reliable research into them requires a broad and heterogeneous range of authors and sources, including not only the major thinkers of each period but also enough lesser thinkers to illustrate the breadth and variety of a certain idea of political order: '[o]ptimally [...] the investigation of ideologies ought to examine mass, or at least large-scale, social thinking, and therefore must depend on the collation of a large number of personally expressed individual ideologies examined in a relational framework. Out of that examination the contours of ideological families will begin to emerge, not as an essentialist view but as a reflection, to the best of the analyst's interpretative ability, of discoverable ideological patterns.'<sup>24</sup> This is why the thesis touches upon a relatively broad pool of diverse conservative figures who engaged meaningfully with the Empire.<sup>25</sup> Given the action-oriented nature of political ideologies, those also include politicians and statesmen of various importance whose deeds and words bore upon my subject. While a closer engagement with a smaller gallery of figures over a shorter time period might have been preferred by some intellectual historians, I contend, with Michael Freeden, that the history of political ideologies is a very special province in the realm of intellectual history, subject to its specific rules: 'the individual agent per se is not the optimal unit for advancing such analysis'. Individual thinkers 'may be the effective channels that give expression to more widely held beliefs', but 'their articulated thoughts are meaningless without an understanding of the conceptual and ideational environments which fashion them'.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the thesis' emphasis is not on retrieving the nuances of individual agents' political

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<sup>23</sup> C. Invernizzi Accetti, *What Is Christian Democracy? Politics, Religion and Ideology*, (Cambridge, 2019), p.11.

<sup>24</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p.106.

<sup>25</sup> The broad base of sources is also a feature of Koselleck's conceptual history, while the attention to lesser thinkers is also typical of the Cambridge School, being important for contextualising the political thought and language of a certain period.

<sup>26</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p.106.

thought but on reconstructing the spatially and temporally broader ideological constellations within which they fit. This also has a bearing upon my choice of sources and my understanding of political thought. The interpreter's attention cannot be solely focused on important scholarly treatises, but must also encompass pamphlets, press organs and speeches and publications by political figures.<sup>27</sup> The boundaries of political thought must be traced far enough afield to include, at the very least, works and utterances on the Empire by conservative thinkers, publicists, statesmen and historians of higher or lesser renown who were aiming to participate in a political conversation or anyway influenced political conversations among their contemporaries or later in time. Other expressions of the human spirit relevant to understanding conservative interpretations of the Empire (e.g. poetry, literature or architecture) will be given some attention, but only as reinforcing evidence.

Finally, the morphological approach to the study of political ideologies is attractive because it combines a rigorous contextualism aiming to retrieve meaning through a close reading of the historical sources with a concern for systematising and rationalising the retrieved meanings into more abstract constellations of concepts that can perform an action-orienting function independently from their original sources. In other words, while being a rigorous method for studying the history of political thought, the conceptual approach also enables the interpreters, if they wish, to move beyond it towards a form of historically grounded political science, in ways that recent intellectual history adamantly refuses to allow for fear of anachronisms. The thesis' main body consciously stops short of this move, remaining firmly within the realm of the history of political thought. Its concluding chapter, however, begins to explore, organise and systematise findings 'into a more general model that [could] be used to make sense of other specific situations too.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p.119.

<sup>28</sup> Invernizzi Accetti, *What Is Christian Democracy?*, p.15.

There remain to acknowledge some selective borrowings from Eric Voegelin's approach to intellectual history, which usefully complement the toolkit introduced so far. The first is Voegelin's insistence that the ultimate object of the history of political thought is not merely political ideas, but 'the history of experiences and their symbolisation'.<sup>29</sup> Somewhat similarly to Freedman, Voegelin argued that '[t]he political idea is only to a limited extent descriptive of any reality; its primary function is not a cognitive but a formative one. The political idea is not an instrument of description of a political unit but an instrument of its creation'.<sup>30</sup> He also contended that the formative acts political thought aims to perform never exist and can be studied in a void, but are rooted in concrete experiences of reality and receive linguistic articulations by means of what he terms 'symbols', a concept he employs in a broader sense than the common one, to indicate all forms of self-understanding produced by organised human groups. To make sense of them, the interpreter must immerse himself in the cultural context whence they arose and retrieve the concrete experiences of order that shaped them.<sup>31</sup> He must also be aware that, once produced, 'symbols' can take on a life of their own detached from the experiences they originally aimed to convey and continue to influence political reality in ways quite apart, when not utterly opposed, to them. Voegelin called this phenomenon 'literalisation', capturing its similarity with instances of religious fundamentalism, when holy texts are no longer seen as a gateway to retrieving certain spiritual experiences but hardened into literal descriptions and orderings of the world. I found all this valuable because it allowed me to determine to what extent seemingly different conceptions of

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<sup>29</sup> E. Voegelin, *Collected Works. Vol.15: Order and History. The World of the Polis*, ed. A. Moulakis (Columbia, 2000), p.229.

<sup>30</sup> E. Voegelin, *Collected Works. Vol.19: History of Political Ideas. Hellenism, Rome and Early Christianity*, ed. A. Moulakis (Columbia, 1997), pp.227-8.

<sup>31</sup> For this reason, it can be argued that Voegelin anticipated modern contextualism in intellectual history, although his method for recovering texts' historical context was not the same as the Cambridge School's. See Bowman, 'Ideologies and Symbols'. It is therefore mistaken to treat Voegelin's methodology as a 'textual' approach to the study of political thought, as in W. Richter (ed), *Approaches to Political Thought*, (Lanham, 2009), pp.97-125.

German and European order, such as *Reich*, *Sacrum Imperium*, *Abendland*<sup>32</sup> or *PanEuropa*, belong together as evocations of the same engendering experiences rooted in the memory of the Empire, even when their promoters did not openly refer to it. Similarly, it made me more alert to authors whose Empire ideal had become detached from the experiences of order it had emerged to convey, acting instead as a vehicle for quite different impulses, such as those engendered by modern nationalism. Finally, it helped me identify the numerous instances of 'literalisation' that characterised conservative uses of the Empire, whenever authors, instead of focusing on the underlying experiences, became fixated on reproducing the Empire's concrete institutional forms in new contexts that made them quite untenable, bending their conservative thought in a decidedly reactionary direction. I only borrow and occasionally use these Voegelinian technical terms in this very narrow sense, without attributing to them the deeper implications that, in Voegelin's thought, turned them into key pillars of a grand philosophy of history. Whenever I do employ them in this technical sense drawn from Voegelin's methodology, which may strike the reader as somewhat distant from common linguistic usage, I signal it by placing the relevant terms in single inverted commas (e.g. 'symbol', 'symbolisation', 'literalisation').

My second debt to Eric Voegelin lies in his interpretation of totalitarianism, which however I use more modestly as a theory of the totalitarian predisposition of political thought.<sup>33</sup> When studying conservative uses of the Empire, one of the most difficult problems facing the interpreter is the ease with which the same historical materials are deployed as evocations of radically incompatible political projects, some

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<sup>32</sup> This term is difficult to translate into English. It does not possess the liberal connotation that the term 'West' acquired during the Cold War. It usually indicates a Christian conservative and anti-materialist conception of a supranational 'Occident' inspired by the model of medieval Christendom.

<sup>33</sup> I agree with Eric Voegelin that 'totalitarian movements ought to be placed in the context of the decline of a Christian civilization' and can only be understood with reference to that context. However, I am equally persuaded by Hannah Arendt's rejoinder that '[t]he decline of Christian civilization is, as it were, the framework within which the whole of modern history is played out, both good and evil [...] [T]he context of this decline would be too comprehensive to "explain" a phenomenon as specific as the totalitarian movements.' See P. Baehr and G.C. Wells, 'Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters Between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin', *History and Theory. Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 51/3 (2012), pp.372, 376.

of which possess a strong anti-totalitarian intent, while others display a clear totalitarian bent.<sup>34</sup> This is what led some prominent students of the matter to one-sidedly treat the legacy of the Empire as a key contributor to Germany's 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian experiences.<sup>35</sup> The gap between a cosmopolitan and tolerant political universe and an oppressing totalitarian one can at times appear so puzzlingly close that the interpreter needs a reliable way of tracing the boundary between them and of describing the patterns of transitioning from one to the other. As far as conservative thought is concerned, it seemed to me that the most typical such pattern involved at least some degree of 'immanentisation of the Christian eschaton', to use Voegelin's terminology.<sup>36</sup> This meant undermining, when not discarding altogether, the distinction between transcendence and immanence that structurally relativised the importance and limited the reach of the political in Western Christian thought in order to embrace, to various degrees, the pursuit of the millennium in the political here and now. At the biographical and sociological level, this could originate, as the thesis' substantive chapters show, in a variety of experiences – from an embittered alienation from current political reality to outright cultural despair – but it almost invariably ate away at the ethical and religious foundations of conservatism, which are the ultimate underpinnings of its conceptual core as I understand it for the purpose of this thesis.

Conservatism is a notoriously elusive ideology. Attempts at defining it have proved exceedingly arduous, to the point that a sceptical recent assessment denied the existence of an enduring conservative outlook and treated the very idea of a conservative ideological tradition as a belated construction.<sup>37</sup> While suggesting a satisfactory answer to this challenge lies beyond the scope of this thesis, I have adopted a working understanding of conservatism's ideological core inspired by the

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<sup>34</sup> See chapter 4 below, where these two possibilities confront themselves at their starkest in the conservative thought of the interwar period.

<sup>35</sup> H.A. Winkler, *The Long Shadow of the Reich. Weighing up German History*, (London, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> E. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*, (Chicago, 1952).

<sup>37</sup> R. Bourke, 'What is conservatism? History, Ideology and Party', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 17/4 (2018), pp.449-75.

existing literature as one of several criteria to identify relevant authors as 'conservative'. I acknowledge Karl Mannheim's fundamental distinction between 'traditionalism', a general and often unconscious psychological aversion to change, and 'conservatism', a conscious ideological 'counter-movement' that only awakened in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup> Like Fritz Valjavec and Klaus Epstein in their seminal works, however, I consider this to have already emerged in the Old *Reich* in the decades preceding 1789 as a reaction to the more radical tendencies of the Enlightenment, and not only as a rejection of the Great Revolution, as Mannheim and other recent authors do.<sup>39</sup> In accordance with a number of prominent interpreters, I identify the minimal core of the conservative outlook with a general aversion to radical political, social and cultural change, whose desirability began to be propagated in Europe during the Enlightenment and gained increasing dominance over the next two centuries, coming to constitute 'the progressive orthodoxy of our age.'<sup>40</sup> This resistance to radical ruptures and embrace of organic change is then combined with 'a belief in the extra-human origins of the social order, i.e. as independent of human will.'<sup>41</sup> At its core, then, conservatism is at once a philosophy of organic change based on growth and tradition and a 'philosophy of acceptance': 'acceptance of a higher order' or 'faith in the firmness of the created order', whose ultimate source, at least for most authors considered in this thesis, was the religious tradition of European Christianity, with its capital distinction between transcendence and immanence.<sup>42</sup> Thence stemmed the conservative 'defence of limited politics'<sup>43</sup>, its admitting 'no perfection in this world. No human effort, no politics could ultimately

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<sup>38</sup> Mannheim, *Conservatism*, pp.72-7.

<sup>39</sup> Valjavec, *Die Entstehung*; Epstein, *Genesis*. For a recent work advancing this claim, see K. von Beyme, *Konservatismus. Theorien des Konservatismus und Rechtsextremismus im Zeitalter der Ideologien 1789-1945*, (Wiesbaden, 2013), pp.7-18.

<sup>40</sup> N. O'Sullivan, 'Conservatism', in Freeden and Stears, *Handbook of Political Ideologies*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199585977.013.0005> (27 July 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p.334.

<sup>42</sup> K. von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism. Its History and Dilemma in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton, 2015), p.20.

<sup>43</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Conservatism'.

remedy the ills of the world. [...] The conservative, to be sure, also had a Utopia, but it was not of this world.<sup>44</sup> Thence, in fact, stemmed many more features of conservative thought than we can delve into here. Some of them will be touched upon in the thesis' chapters and feature in its conclusion. Suffice to say now that the more conservatives, consciously or not, departed from it, the more they opened themselves up to various radical influences and impulses, such as those that characterised some national conservatives already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'revolutionary conservatives' in the interwar period and the 'New Right' in the post-Second World War period.

While my substantive understanding of conservatism was a weighty criterion for selecting relevant authors, it was not the only one. As Freedden explained, '[s]elf-definition and other-definition, through recourse to accumulated evidence, bounce off each other in establishing the reach of an ideological family'.<sup>45</sup> Both the authors' self-understanding as conservative and others' perception of them as such were therefore considered relevant criteria, though always subject to the interpreter's analytical control. Moreover, covering such a long time span, my understanding of 'other-definition' had to be broad enough to allow for a strong diachronic dimension. Authors who in their lifetime might not have been considered 'conservative' had to be included whenever they came to be seen as such by later conservatives, or anyway influenced them. It is also worth stressing that, especially in the first periods covered, ideological families were far from fully solidified. Tracing a hard border, for example, between some moderate Enlightenment thinkers and early conservatism is highly questionable, as the never-ending dispute over Edmund Burke confirms.<sup>46</sup> Finally, I have selected and labelled authors in constant dialogue with the literature on conservatism, especially in German and English, and followed established classifications unless strong grounds counselled otherwise. This combination of criteria

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<sup>44</sup> Klemperer, *New Conservatism*, pp.29-30.

<sup>45</sup> Freedden, 'Morphological Analysis'.

<sup>46</sup> For a recent contribution, see R. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution. The Political Life of Edmund Burke*, (Princeton, 2015).

will hopefully allow the reader to comprehend the rationale of my choice of authors even when it might at first sight appear unusual.

### **Selective outline of the Empire's history**

It is impossible to recount the history of the Empire with any depth here.<sup>47</sup> The purpose of this section will only be outlining those aspects of imperial history that constitute relevant background information to understand the thesis' contents.

The Empire founded by Charlemagne's coronation in 800 AD was not construed as a new entity but as the continuation of the old Western Roman Empire, meant to have survived continuously under its Byzantine leadership, which was then temporarily and conveniently vacant. It already divided into three parts shortly after the founder's death. The western part eventually became France, whose kings and first emperor did not hesitate to draw on the Carolingian heritage to bolster their hegemonic claims into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> The central part had various incarnations, the most important of which went by the name of Burgundy (kingdom and later duchy), a shifting conglomerate of diverse territories that intermittently had major bonds with the Empire and took on cultural and strategic significance in late medieval and early modern Europe. The eastern part was designated as 'German Kingdom' (*regnum Teutonicorum*) already in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and became symbiotically associated with the imperial title ever since the Saxon prince Otto I was crowned Emperor by the pope in 962. From the perspective of modern and contemporary history, this association was fateful because it combined the Empire's 'Roman' dimension – which made it into the supreme secular overlord of Western Christendom and

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<sup>47</sup> For a recent comprehensive yet accessible history, see P.H. Wilson, *Heart of Europe. A History of the Holy Roman Empire*, (Cambridge, 2016). Shorter overviews (the first two focusing on the early modern period) can be found in P.H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire 1495-1806*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke, 2011); B. Stollberg-Rilinger, *The Holy Roman Empire. A Short History*, tr. M. Yair (Princeton, 2018); J. Whaley, *The Holy Roman Empire. A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> R. Morrissey, *Charlemagne and France. A Thousand Years of Mythology*, (Notre Dame, 2003), pp.108-11, pp.250-65.

the bearer of a theoretically universal principle of order – with a ‘German’ realm, to which 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalists could easily attribute an anachronistic meaning inspired by their own creed. In the eyes of modern beholders, this ambiguity was compounded by the occasional attachment of the words ‘of the German nation’ to the imperial title since the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Though often interpreted as an early assertion of German national ownership of the Empire, it never became its official denomination, it was used seldom and certainly never with the exclusionary ethno-linguistic connotations of modern nationalist jargon.<sup>49</sup> During the Middle Ages, it was understood that the Empire did not only comprise Germany, but also Burgundy and Italy. The latter was all important because the original imperial capital – where the coronation of Emperors-elect at the hand of the Pope, necessary to their full legitimacy, had to take place until the early modern period – lay there. This justified the recurrent ‘Italian expeditions’ of even the most allegedly ‘German’ Holy Roman Emperors – such as the Ottonians, conventionally seen as more ‘German’ than the Carolingians –, which so infuriated modern nationalists. Although by the early modern period imperial institutions were indeed most relevant for the Empire’s German-speaking parts, non-German-speaking lands such as Bohemia, Silesia and the remnants of imperial Italy (Lombardy, Tuscany, Genoa) were understood to belong to the Empire into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while Savoy was even part of the German Kingdom and had a vote in the *Reichstag*, last exercised in 1714.<sup>50</sup>

After the Carolingian founding and Otto’s reassertion, the medieval Empire was dominated by three dynasties: the Ottonians, Salians and Hohenstaufen. Two major historical developments they all faced

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<sup>49</sup> On the late medieval and early modern understanding of the Empire’s ‘Germanness’, see: L. Scales, *The Shaping of German Identity. Authority and Crisis 1245-1414*, (Cambridge, 2012); A. Schmidt, *Vaterlandsliebe und Religionskonflikt. Politische Diskurse im Alten Reich (1555-1648)*, (Leiden, 2007); A. Schmidt, ‘Irenic Patriotism in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century German Political Discourse’, *HJ*, 53/2 (2010), pp.243-69.

<sup>50</sup> M. Schnettger, ‘Impero romano - Impero germanico. Italienische Perspektiven auf das Reich in der Frühen Neuzeit’, in M. Schnettger (ed), *Imperium Romanum, irregulare corpus, deutscher Reichs-Staat. Das Alte Reich im Verständnis der Zeitgenossen und der Historiographie*, (Mainz, 2002), pp.53-75; M. Schnettger, ‘Das Alte Reich und Italien in der frühen Neuzeit. Ein institutionengeschichtlicher Überblick’, *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, 79 (1999), pp.344-420.

must be mentioned here, as they would in different ways become crucial for conservative thought on the Empire. The first is the spread, since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, of German-speaking settlers east of the Saale and Elbe rivers, to the Baltic shore, the Bohemian basin and further south-eastwards, a process favoured by several Emperors with the intent of converting to Christianity originally heathen Slavic peoples such as Poles and Lithuanians. The second is the Emperors' struggle against the Papacy for control over the Imperial Church and, more broadly, Imperial Italy known as 'Investiture Controversy'. The former, which in some cases resulted in military expeditions historians have not hesitated to dub 'Northern crusades', meant that, by the early modern period, the entire eastern half of Europe became interspersed with German language islands, whose history only really ended with the ethnic cleansing of the 1940s.<sup>51</sup> Thus, German and Slavic national problems appeared inevitably entwined to modern conservative observers, whose approaches to solving them widely differed, as the thesis shows. The latter sapped the energies of both Papacy and Empire in the Middle Ages. More importantly for us, it lent itself to being anachronistically interpreted by modern thinkers as a first instance of the struggle between the secular state and religious (Catholic) authorities that reached its apex in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when not as an episode revealing the limits of secular political action in the face of the transcendent horizon of human life institutionalised in the Church.

The failure of the Hohenstaufen's grand ambitions led to a period of weakness and disorder within the Empire, which later nationalist historians retrospectively elevated to a defining moment of German loss, a dreadful *Interregnum* from which the Empire never recovered. We now rather understand it as a

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<sup>51</sup> W. Schlesinger, *Die deutsche Ostsiedlung des Mittelalters als Problem der europäischen Geschichte*, (Sigmaringen, 1975); W. Fischer and M.G. Müller (eds), *Klaus Zernack. Preußen - Deutschland - Polen. Aufsätze zur Geschichte der deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Berlin, 2001). During the Cold War, older nationalist ideas about Germany as a civilisational bulwark were, to an extent, simply transposed onto the new western hostility to the Soviet Union. Since the 1990s, interpretations have changed rapidly and there have been several waves of revisionism that reappraised the fruitfulness of exchanges between Germans and their Eastern neighbours. See, for example, M. North, *The Baltic. A History*, tr. K. Kronenberg, (Cambridge, 2015).

moment of transition that changed the nature of imperial power, making it more reliant on the hereditary lands of the ruling dynasty, on more modern systems of resource mobilisation and on a more cooperative and inclusive governance.<sup>52</sup> It resulted first in the emergence of the Luxemburg dynasty, which lasted until 1437, and right after in the accession of the Habsburgs, who dominated the early modern period and supplied all Emperors but one until the Empire's end. The centre of gravity of the Empire gradually shifted eastwards from its Carolingian heartland on the Rhine, the Luxembourgs attributing a central role to Bohemia and the Habsburgs relying heavily on their Danubian lands on the Empire's south-eastern flank, even more so after the extinction of their senior Spanish branch in 1700. German eastern settlements and these shifting geographical axes would be overlaid with symbolic meanings after the Empire's downfall and valued to varying degrees by different strands of conservative thought. In the early modern period, the Habsburgs' accumulation of a gigantic dynastic empire stretching across three continents – alongside their tight grip on the Holy Roman imperial title and their resort, especially under Charles V, to a universalist rhetoric – even offered fertile ground for later accusations that they had depleted German resources for their selfish dynastic interests. Recent literature demonstrated that the Habsburgs' own resources actually played a key stabilising role in imperial politics, as did their spearheading a new era of 'imperial reform' to gradually solidify the Empire's institutions since the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>53</sup> Together with the effects of the contemporary Reformation, these institutional changes gave the Empire the distinct set-up that it would retain, with relatively little change, to its end, and with which the first generations of conservatives we will be dealing with were directly acquainted.

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<sup>52</sup> Works by the influential medievalist Peter Moraw helped propel this reinterpretation: *Von offener Verfassung zu gestalteter Verdichtung. Das Reich im späten Mittelalter, 1250 bis 1490*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1989); 'Versuch über die Entstehung des Reichstags', in H. Weber (ed), *Politische Ordnungen und soziale Kräfte im alten Reich*, (Wiesbaden, 1980), pp.1-36.

<sup>53</sup> H. Angermeier, *Die Reichsreform 1410-1555. Die Staatsproblematik in Deutschland zwischen Mittelalter und Gegenwart* (Munich, 1984); H. Angermeier, 'Der Wormser Reichstag 1495 – ein europäisches Ereignis', *HZ*, 261/1 (1995), pp.739-68.

The Empire was never a state in the modern sense, not even at the height of medieval imperial power, which so enthralled modern German nationalists.<sup>54</sup> It never had defined territorial boundaries, a supreme sovereign authority, a central executive or a standing army. Stronger monarchical rule on the pattern of Western states was certainly something many Emperors strove for and remained a possibility into the early modern period, periodically provoking princely alliances to thwart it. All in all, it failed, with power relationships continuing to be shaped by a complex feudal hierarchy comprising thousands of nobles, as well as by the growing territorial status of a few leading German vassals, to which imperial free cities governed by enfranchised burghers were added in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By 1356, the Golden Bull entrenched the power of electing the Emperor with seven – in some later periods eight or even nine – of them (three ecclesiastical and the other secular), with the importance of papal anointing gradually fading and finally disappearing. The chief imperial fiefs – more technically ‘imperial estates’ (*Reichsstände*), more colloquially ‘princes’ – soon gained the right to be consulted and met for this purpose in imperial assemblies (*Reichstage*), opening the way to the institutionalisation of a consensus-driven political culture during the period of imperial reform, which would be retrospectively condemned as a disaster by some conservatives and extolled as a blessing by others in disputes over the meaning of German federalism. The *Reichstag* became a permanent body established at Regensburg from 1663 and was composed of three colleges, respectively comprising the Emperor’s electors, the other princes and the imperial free cities.<sup>55</sup> Instead, imperial knights – members of the landed gentry who theoretically enjoyed the same status of ‘imperial immediacy’ as the bigger princes, meaning that they held their (generally small) possessions and privileges directly from the Emperor –

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<sup>54</sup> The question of the Empire’s statehood dominated the historiography of the 2000s after Schmidt, *Geschichte des Alten Reiches*. Insightful stocktaking of this debate includes Schnettger, *Imperium Romanum*, and especially R.J.W. Evans, M. Schaich and P.H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495-1806*, (Oxford, 2011). The prevailing opinion now is that there were several possible types of state in the early modern period. However, some still see the Empire as a loose confederal order, see A. Gotthard, *Das Alte Reich 1495-1806*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Darmstadt, 2006).

<sup>55</sup> A. Schindling, *Die Anfänge des immerwährenden Reichstags zu Regensburg. Ständevertretung und Staatskunst nach dem Westfälischen Frieden*, (Mainz, 1991).

lost any representation in the *Reichstag* in the early modern period. By then, most of them had anyway succumbed to the ongoing process of 'territorialisation', the German version of state-building, which however was not happening at the central level of the Empire but at the level of the biggest individual territories. Imperial reform endowed the Empire with a basic financial administration, a system for mobilising a common army based on a matrix that apportioned due contributions among the imperial estates, and ten imperial circles (*Kreise*), administrative subunits comprising imperial estates from the Empire's different regions. The imperial chancellery, an embryonic secretariat for the Empire headed by the Prince-Archbishop Elector of Mainz in his function as Imperial Archchancellor, also developed further. Moreover, two new imperial courts were established: the Imperial Cameral Tribunal (*Reichskammergericht*) at Wetzlar and the Imperial Aulic Council (*Reichshofrat*) at Vienna, more closely influenced by the Emperor. They heard complaints regarding violations of the Empire's laws and of its component entities' internal constitutions, which could be brought by all subjects against all rulers regardless of rank. They continued to function reasonably well till the Empire's end, contributing to the development of a very sophisticated legal system that made the Empire 'real' for many of its ordinary inhabitants, and to which only recent revisionist literature did justice.<sup>56</sup>

Not even the long-term religious, political, economic and social earthquakes caused by the Reformation since the late 1510s managed to entirely derail imperial reform, let alone to wreck the Empire. Imperial institutions proved sturdy and flexible enough to accommodate them, and survived for almost three more centuries. The Empire's complex relationship with Catholicism, however, changed once again. Since its Carolingian founding through the coronation by the Holy Pontiff, the Empire had possessed a sacred aura reinforced by the influential politico-theological idea of *translatio*

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<sup>56</sup> W. Sellert (ed), *Reichshofrat und Reichskammergericht. Ein Konkurrenzverhältnis*, (Cologne, 1999); B. Diestelkamp (ed), *Die politische Funktion des Reichskammergerichts*, (Cologne, 1993); B. Diestelkamp (ed), *Das Reichskammergericht in der deutschen Geschichte, Stand der Forschung, Forschungsperspektiven*, (Cologne, 1990).

*imperii*. Based on the interpretation of a passage in the Book of Daniel, this held that the Roman empire would be the last of the four worldly empires, at the fall of which the Antichrist would appear and the Last Judgment take place. It implied that the medieval Empire had to be seen as the continuation of the old Roman empire, by way of a 'translation' of rulership from the Romans to the Franks and their successors. Although this founding myth had been largely set aside as fictional by the early modern period, the bonds between the Empire and the Catholic Church remained intimate due to the Emperor's position as the Church's secular guardian and the fact that an important number of imperial estates, including three electors, were spiritual princes down to the Empire's end. The way the Empire managed to find a new confessional balance – provisionally with the 1555 'Religious Peace of Augsburg' and then more stably with the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, to the point of being seen by all sides as a neutral framework guaranteeing everybody's rights – is, therefore, all the more remarkable. This balance did not take religion out of politics (no longer exclusively 'Catholic', the Empire remained 'Christian') and did not create modern toleration (the achieved equality between Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism excluded other Christian sects and faiths, though Jews received special protection based on a different legal basis, more dependent on imperial prerogatives). However, it did prevent confessional disputes from causing serious havoc, though not from stirring emotions.<sup>57</sup>

An older historiographical view saw imperial reforms as a failed attempt to modernise (i.e. centralise) the Empire, written off as essentially irrelevant by the Peace of Westphalia, which was also deemed to have created the modern international system based on sovereign states. This latter myth was demolished by recent historiography, though many political scientists still cling to it.<sup>58</sup> As to imperial reforms, we now rather believe them to have successfully sketched an alternative route to

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<sup>57</sup> J. Whaley, 'The Theory and Practice of Tolerance in Eighteenth-Century Germany', in H. Reinitzer and W. Sparr (eds), *Verspätete Orthodoxie. Über D. Johann Melchior Goeze (1717-1786)*, (Wolfenbüttel, 1989), pp.9-26.

<sup>58</sup> D. Croxton, *Westphalia. The Last Christian Peace*, (New York, 2013); A. Osiander, 'Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth', *International Organization*, 55/2 (2001), pp.251-87.

modernisation, achieving a more rational administration of the Empire while leveraging on – as opposed to getting rid of – its multi-layered political structure and without completely shedding its medieval universalism. We also know that the Empire remained vital after the upheavals brought about by the Reformation and the Thirty Years War. Recent literature even identified a process of ‘imperial recovery’ post-Westphalia, demonstrating that the Empire was still able to defend itself after 1648<sup>59</sup> and highlighting the strategies that enabled Habsburg Emperors to still wield considerable power and influence within the Empire and through the Empire into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, not least by posing as the protector of weaker elements.<sup>60</sup> It just did so by standards and values different from those of modern nationalists, who overwhelmingly shaped the historiographical orthodoxy prevalent until the 1960s, and still largely prevalent today in the Empire’s public perception. Despite the sea change of views determined by its reappraisal, there is still no academic consensus on whether the Empire could have survived and evolved further, had it not been overwhelmed by the advance of the most consequential warlord in centuries. According to some, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the process of ‘territorialisation’ and the parallel rise of Austria and Prussia as autonomous great powers had eroded the Empire’s constitution and traditional status hierarchy beyond repair. It was only a matter of time until its tendency to dissolve into a confederation of sovereign states hegemonised by either France or the two German great powers came to fruition, as it in fact did with the Confederation of the Rhine and then the German Confederation respectively. Others have argued that the Empire, if left to its own devices, could have evolved into a modern federation, a kind of gigantic Switzerland at the continent’s heart, in which the German national problem would have been solved peacefully, without bringing tragedy upon Europe

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<sup>59</sup> P.H. Wilson, *German Armies. War and German Politics, 1648-1806*, (London, 1998).

<sup>60</sup> V. Press, ‘Österreichische Großmachtbildung und Reichsverfassung: Zur kaiserlichen Stellung nach 1648’, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 98 (1990), pp.131-54; P.H. Wilson, *From Reich to Revolution. German History 1558-1806*, (Basingstoke, 2004), pp.305-19.

and the world.<sup>61</sup> Although this thesis cannot settle the matter, it will show that conservatives voiced the same ambivalent views on the Empire, some even believing that restoring it at the Congress of Vienna could have changed the course of German and European history for the better.<sup>62</sup>

### **Strands of Conservative Thought on the Empire**

I have identified and mapped the different strands of conservative thinking on the Empire based on the morphological criteria outlined above. The sources justify the identification of five core strands. I have named them cosmopolitan, Romantic, national, Borussian and supranational conservative. In what follows, they are outlined for the reader's convenience in their chronological order of appearance, but they have not merely succeeded one another on the scene of history. After their emergence, they existed alongside each other, exercising considerable mutual influence and being variously combined in different authors.

#### *Cosmopolitan conservatism*

This strand celebrated the Empire, especially the early modern Empire, as an order of peace and justice, both in internal German affairs and in its broader continental role.<sup>63</sup> For its upholders, the Empire's – and later Central Europe's – mission was to serve as the centre of equipoise of the continental balance of power that guaranteed the freedom of all European states within a common 'federative' system.<sup>64</sup> After the peace of Westphalia, its internal constitution had also become the

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<sup>61</sup> Recent works arguing that the Empire could have adapted include Schmidt, *Geschichte des Alten Reiches*, and J. Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire. The Peace of Westphalia to the Dissolution of the Reich 1648-1806*, (2 vols, Oxford, 2012), while Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, and B. Stollberg-Rilinger, *The Emperor's Old Clothes. Constitutional History and the Symbolic Language of the Holy Roman Empire*, tr. T. Dunlap (New York, 2015) emphasise the imperial constitution's increasing rigidity.

<sup>62</sup> O. von Habsburg, *Die Reichsidee. Geschichte und Zukunft einer übernationalen Ordnung*, (Vienna, 1986), pp.7-8.

<sup>63</sup> K.O. von Aretin, 'Die Reichsidee um 1800', in F. Bosbach, H. Hiery and C. Kampmann (eds), *Imperium, Empire, Reich. Ein Konzept politischer Herrschaft im deutsch-britischen Vergleich*, (Munich, 1999), pp.109-17.

<sup>64</sup> See pp.53-9 below.

centrepiece of European public law.<sup>65</sup> The Empire also meant a legal order and a system of justice that protected the rights of all subjects as well as the autonomy of all legitimate princes regardless of their size, wealth and military prowess.<sup>66</sup> This implied an ideal of religious toleration that de-emphasised earlier – and subsequent – conceptualisations of the Empire as the preeminent political form of Christianity and, most specifically, of Catholicism. A love for particularism and diversity also came to be associated with the *Reichsidee* of cosmopolitan conservatives. The Empire was seen as a specific polity alternative and superior to the bureaucratic, centralised, internally homogenous and militarily aggressive national state forged by royal absolutism and perfected by the French Revolution.<sup>67</sup>

### *Romantic conservatism*

The Romantic conservative view of the Empire was essentially neo-medieval, with imperial history after Charles V largely seen as one of decadence. Unlike national conservatives, however, for which decadence had been the consequence of declining national unity, they primarily imputed it to the fallout of spiritual disintegration after the Reformation. Through the influence of this strand Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, became once again associated with many conservative variations of the *Reichsidee*. For Romantics, the Empire was not primarily a legal and institutional system protecting historical rights. It was a commonwealth of Christian nations living in harmony under an imperial protectorate that enabled them to develop and express their national individualities.<sup>68</sup> The universalism of the Romantic *Reichsidee* had little to do with the ‘artificial’ operation of a ‘mechanical’ system of balances, and much with the bonding of Christian charity and reciprocity; and its neo-feudal

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<sup>65</sup> J. Robertson, ‘Empire and Union: Two Concepts of the Early Modern European Political Order’, in D. Armitage (ed), *Theories of Empire, 1450-1800*, (Aldershot, 1998), pp.11-44.

<sup>66</sup> J. Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation. The Holy Roman Empire as Idea and Reality 1763-1806*, (Bloomington, 1980); M. Walker, *Johann Jakob Moser and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation*, (Chapel Hill, 1981); J. Whitman, *The Legacy of Roman Law in the German Romantic Era. Historical Vision and Legal Change*, (Princeton, 1990).

<sup>67</sup> See pp.43-7 below.

<sup>68</sup> H.C. Kraus, ‘Politisches Denken der deutschen Spätromantik’, in B. Heidenreich (ed), *Politische Theorien des 19. Jahrhunderts. Konservatismus, Liberalismus, Sozialismus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Wiesbaden, 2002), pp.33-69.

particularism had an unmistakable national tinge about it – i.e. it was also a particularism of nations.<sup>69</sup> ‘The empire was conceived by the Romantics to be supranational but also to belong to the German nation’, which in turn was seen as a ‘universal nation’ representative of humanity as a whole, much like the Greeks and Romans had been.<sup>70</sup> However, the national Empire of the Romantics was never, unlike that of nationalists, a manifestation of modern imperialism. It conferred a distinction and a Christian mission to federate Europe upon the titular nation, not a calling to subjugate others.

### *National conservatism*

National conservatives saw the Empire as the historical manifestation of the German nation’s calling to imperial pre-eminence in Europe. Their Empire was neither the universalist polity of Charles V nor the cosmopolitan commonwealth of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was the epitome of a German *Machtstaat*, uniting all culturally Germanic populations. All peoples of German language and culture having been, at one time or another, part of the Holy Roman Empire ‘of the German nation’ – much was made of this qualification – were called to be part of a new *Grossdeutsch* and later *Gesamtdeutsch* national empire.<sup>71</sup> In no other strand of conservative thinking the Empire became the source of inspiration for a modern imperial project of national supremacy and, at times, of aggressive expansionism. The Empire of nationalists had to depart from the alleged fragmentation and powerlessness of the early modern Empire and be instead united under a strong Emperor, the guarantor of internal unity and external power. National conservatives longed for restoring the much-romanticised medieval Empire, identified

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<sup>69</sup> Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism*, chapters 4-5, 7.

<sup>70</sup> U.S. Allers, *The Concept of Empire in German Romanticism and Its Influence on the National Assembly at Frankfurt, 1848-1849*, (Washington, 1948), p.25.

<sup>71</sup> G. Wollstein, *Das ‘Grossdeutschland’ der Paulskirche. Nationale Ziele in der Bürgerlichen Revolution 1848/49*, (Düsseldorf, 1977).

with the peak of German power in Europe and thought to have been followed by endless centuries of national division and decline.<sup>72</sup>

### *Borussian conservatism*

This strand of conservative thinking about the Empire is closely associated with the influential Prusso-centric historiography that interpreted Bismarck's *kleindeutsch* national empire as the fulfilment of Germany's historical destiny.<sup>73</sup> It is the only strand of conservative thought in which the Empire does not represent a source of inspiration but an object of loathing. Its upholders worshipped, apart from the God of the Protestant tradition, a shiny idol: the Nation. They hated above all else the two things long responsible, in their historical understanding, for slowing down its forward march: universalism and particularism. They identified the carriers of both diseases with Catholicism and the Habsburg dynasty, and found them combined in the decadent Gothic edifice of the Empire.<sup>74</sup> The new 'Prussian Empire of the German Nation'<sup>75</sup> was the providential fulfilment of a long historical process of emancipation from these 'alien' influences initiated by the Protestant Reformation, to which Borussian conservatives, like most national conservatives and unlike Romantics, attributed an overwhelmingly positive meaning. While national conservatives looked back to the medieval Hohenstaufen Empire as the model of a new *Reich* that would obviously include Austro-Germans, for Borussian conservatives the Catholic, Habsburg and imperial influences over Austro-Germans disqualified them from membership in the new national empire.

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<sup>72</sup> See the many references to this effect scattered in E.M. Arndt, *Life and Adventures of Ernst Moritz Arndt. The Singer of the German Fatherland*, (Boston, 1879), as well as John Robert Seeley's preface. See also E. Fehrenbach, 'Reich', in O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, (8 vols, Stuttgart, 1972-97), vol.5, pp.488-97.

<sup>73</sup> R. Southard, *Droysen and the Prussian School of History*, (Lexington, 1995).

<sup>74</sup> E. Wolgast, 'Die Sicht des Alten Reiches bei Treitschke und Erdmannsdörffer', in Schnettger, *Imperium Romanum*, pp.169-88.

<sup>75</sup> The expression appeared in Anonymous, *Das preußische Reich deutscher Nation. Ein Beitrag zum Aufbau*, (Brunswick, 1866). It was then popularised by Heinrich von Treitschke after 1871, see E. Fehrenbach, 'Reich', pp.498-505.

### *Supranational conservatism*

For authors sharing this sensitivity, the Holy Roman *Reichsidee* had been, since Charlemagne, the ideal of a 'supranational order' encompassing the entire Christian Occident.<sup>76</sup> Modern history had largely been defined by a contest for supremacy between two political forms: the national state and the supranational *Reich*. The epitome of the national state was Bourbon and later revolutionary France, while the utmost bearers of imperial supranationalism since Charles V had been the Habsburg dynasty. Supranational conservatives believed that the Germans' true calling was to act as the federator of European civilisation.<sup>77</sup> By insisting on the supranational ideal of the Empire, they aimed to neutralise the exclusionary tendencies of the various nationalisms and to maintain a multinational, federal and decentralised political order in Central Europe. There are important continuities between cosmopolitan and supranational conservatism, starting with the emphasis placed on the Empire as primarily a legal system taming political power. The Emperor himself was seen as a supranational arbiter performing a quasi-judicial function. The old particularistic insistence on the historical rights of all legitimate rulers was gradually transferred to the collective rights of historical peoples and cultural minorities, threatened by modern nationalism.<sup>78</sup> Like Romantic conservatives, however, supranational conservatives were dissatisfied with the cosmopolitan reduction of the old imperial universalism to a balance of power, and defended a multinational commonwealth protecting the integrity and nurturing the development of its individualities.

### **Thesis outline**

The purpose of the thesis' substantive chapters is to adequately historicise, i.e. trace throughout a changing temporal and, to an extent, spatial context, the ideological patterns from which the five strands

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<sup>76</sup> Habsburg, *Reichsidee*.

<sup>77</sup> E. von Kuehnelt-Leddin, *The Menace of the Herd or Procustes at Large*, (Milwaukee, 1943), pp.163-216.

<sup>78</sup> O. von Habsburg, 'The Divine Rights of Minorities', *Modern Age*, 2/3 (1958), pp.273-84.

outlined above emerged. Five distinct periods of development, all but one lasting about five decades, have been identified, with each chapter covering one of them.

Chapter 1 traces the emergence of the first three core strands of conservative thought on the Empire, in the period when the foundations for most subsequent political reflections on it were laid (c.1765-c.1814). It shows that reflections on the Empire's constitution, and later its possible restoration, were central to the development of German conservatism in its formative period. They gave rise to three very different ideological morphologies: the cosmopolitan conservative Empire of *Reichspublizisten* such as Nikolaus Vogt and Karl von Dalberg; the neo-medieval Romano-Germanic Empire of Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schlegel; and the early national conservative Empire of figures such as Karl vom Stein and Ernst Moritz Arndt. The chapter begins after the Seven Years' War, when the corrosive impact of absolutism, the Enlightenment and the new Austria-Prussia rivalry on the imperial constitution became evident, and the Empire's future began to be intensely discussed. It ends after the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period at the Congress of Vienna, when it was decided that the Empire would not be restored and there would be the *Bund* instead.

Chapter 2 shows that the Empire remained central to conservative political thought from the beginning of the Restoration to Austria's expulsion from Germany after Königgrätz/Sadowa (c.1815-c.1866). It traces the ripening of two key Empire concepts: the supranational conservative, striving for a multinational central European federacy structured around a reformed *Bund* and advocated by the likes of Constantin Frantz and Joseph Edmund Jörg; and the national conservative and national liberal, centred on the memory of the medieval Empire and forged by the likes of Friedrich von Raumer and Wilhelm von Giesebrecht. It also recounts the development of a new Borussia conservative conception in authors such as Johann Gustav Droysen and Heinrich von Sybel. The chapter explains how these positions corresponded to real political possibilities at the time, deepening our

understanding of the open-endedness of German history in the eyes of contemporaries. It also reflects on the centrality of the 1848-50 revolutionary events as a catalyst.

Chapter 3 (c.1867-c.1915) begins after Königgrätz/Sadowa, widely perceived by all sides as an epoch-making breakthrough. It traces the eclipse of the supranational conservative Empire ideal in the official discourse of its upholders, on the defensive throughout the now fragmented German-speaking Central Europe. However, it also documents its resilience in the intellectual underpinning of political Catholicism in both the *Kaiserreich* and the Habsburg Empire, its links with particularist politics and its evolution in thinkers such as Constantin Frantz and Onno Klopp. Finally, the chapter traces the achievement of a new Borussian-national conservative synthesis based on a Ghibelline (i.e. pro-imperial and anti-papal) interpretation of the medieval Hohenstaufen Empire as the predecessor of the Second *Reich* and the historical model of its imperial ambitions. The chapter ends in the middle of the First World War, when the debate about the historical foundations of the Dual Alliance conferred renewed centrality to the Empire ideal.

Chapter 4 recounts the pervasiveness and influence of radically diverging *Reichsideen* on conservative political thinking from the First World War to the mid-1950s (c.1916-c.1955), when West-German political culture began to experience a wave of 'Americanisation/Westernisation' that made them appear increasingly anachronistic. The chapter traces the revival of a supranational conservative *Reichsidee* in publicists such as Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster and Hermann Platz, and its influence on the *Abendland* movement and political Catholicism in both the interwar and the early post-war period. It also traces the revival of the nationalist Empire myth within the 'conservative revolution' of authors such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Edgard Julius Jung, distinguishing it from the Nazi *Reich* concept.

Finally, chapter 5 traces the decline of the conservative Empire ideal in the new geopolitical context of the Cold War and especially after the social and cultural transformations of the 1960s. It shows that the experiences of order underpinning the supranational conservative Empire partly lived on within the Paneuropean movement of Otto von Habsburg. It also demonstrates the influence of the 'revolutionary conservative' Empire ideology on the post-war French *Nouvelle Droite*, German *Neue Rechte* and on sectors of the Italian far-right. Finally, it reflects on the impact of the revisionist historiography pioneered by Karl Otmar von Aretin and on the significance of the Empire as an anti-totalitarian political order in Eric Voegelin's philosophy of history.

A concluding chapter briefly recaps the contribution of the thesis to historical scholarship. It also takes a step further, reflecting on the persistent normative value, if any, of supranational conservatism in today's Europe, and on the broader implications of the thesis' findings for political thought and for elucidating the distinction between conservatism and right-wing radicalism.

# I. Foundations (c.1765-c.1814)

## Context and authors

The emergence of the Empire as a conservative ideal of order is entwined with the genesis of German conservatism itself. One can only understand it in the light of the experiences of turmoil and disorder that lurked below the shiny surface of Enlightened Europe since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, exploded in the upheavals of the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, and were only temporarily sedated by the settlement of 1815.<sup>1</sup> In this restless age, 'progressive' critics often aimed 'at the deliberate overthrow of the entire *Ancien Régime*', prompting an 'age-old, inert traditionalism' to develop 'into an alert and self-conscious Conservatism'.<sup>2</sup> Fritz Valjavec and Klaus Epstein convincingly demonstrated that this shift occurred as a reaction to the radical phase of the Enlightenment in defence of political, economic and religious continuity, predating the French Revolution by several decades.<sup>3</sup> The Empire constituted a central part of the German *Ancien Régime*, and its difficulties and final disappearance in 1806 'marked a milestone' in the latter's collapse.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that questions concerning the meaning of the imperial constitution, the reasons of its eventual downfall and the desirability of its restoration animated German conservative thought in its formative decades.

The forms of political order typical of the post-Westphalian Empire had become disrupted before the middle of the century. Frederick II's invasion of Silesia in 1740 triggered a chain of events – including the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), the disastrous Wittelsbach emperors of Charles VII (1742-1745) and the Seven Years War (1749-1763) – that prompted what would turn out to be the

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<sup>1</sup> E. Voegelin, *Collected Works. Vol. 24: History of Political Ideas. Revolution and the New Science*, ed. B. Cooper (Columbia, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Epstein, *Genesis*, pp.22-3; Mannheim, *Conservatism*, pp.72-7.

<sup>3</sup> Valjavec, *Die Entstehung*; Epstein, *Genesis*.

<sup>4</sup> Epstein, *Genesis*, p.22.

final cycle of crisis and reform in the millennium-old history of the Empire.<sup>5</sup> This chapter concentrates on this final cycle, which arguably lasted about five decades, starting around the mid-1760s and extending beyond Francis II's abdication of the imperial crown in 1806 until the Congress of Vienna, when it became clear that, contrary to widespread expectations, the Empire would not be restored.<sup>6</sup>

In the first part of this period, Frederick's Prussia came to embody the model of an enlightened, absolutist, bureaucratic state that curbed the traditional powers of the estates<sup>7</sup> to better extract resources needed for power competition on the international level. It inspired mimicry across the bigger imperial estates, encouraging their particularistic absolutism corrosive of common institutions and laws.<sup>8</sup> Austria reacted with the reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, inaugurating that Austro-Prussian 'rivalry' and that 'struggle for supremacy' which have been recognised as crucial contributors to the enfeeblement of the imperial nexus in the Empire's last decades and drivers of Central European history until 1866.<sup>9</sup> The pervasiveness of this new style of power politics was later confirmed by the first partition of Poland in 1772 and by Joseph II's long-standing ploy to exchange the Habsburg Low Countries for Bavaria in order to consolidate the imperial house's grip on Germany. The latter resulted in the War of the Bavarian Succession (1778-1779) and prompted the smaller imperial estates to create

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<sup>5</sup> Aretin, *Alte Reich*, vol.3: *Das Reich und der österreichisch-preußische Dualismus*, (Stuttgart, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> G. Walter, *Der Zusammenbruch des Heiligen Römischen Reichs Deutscher Nation und die Problematik seiner Restauration in den Jahren 1814/15*, (Heidelberg, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> The Estates were hierarchically arranged social groups with 'a prescribed function and corresponding degree of honour and privileges', typically the clergy, the nobility and the common people. They structured society and enabled it to actively wield political power in cooperation with the sovereign. See G. Bossenga, 'Estates, Orders and Corps', in W. Doyle (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Régime*, (Oxford, 2011), <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199291205.013.0009>, (9 September 2023).

<sup>8</sup> R. Vierhaus, 'Ständewesen und Staatsverwaltung in Deutschland im späteren 18. Jahrhundert', in K. von Raumer, R. Vierhaus and M. Botzenhart, *Dauer und Wandel der Geschichte. Aspekte europäischer Vergangenheit. Festgabe für Kurt von Raumer zum 15. Dezember 1965*, (Münster, 1966), pp.337-60. On absolutism in the geographical area relevant to this thesis, see P.H. Wilson, *Absolutism in Central Europe*, (London, 2000). For a succinct intellectual history of the concept, see M. Goldie, 'Absolutism', in G. Klosko (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*, (Oxford, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238804.003.0017> (9 September 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Aretin, *Alte Reich*, vol.3, chapter 2; Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.49-53; J. Whaley, 'Die Habsburgermonarchie und das Heilige Römische Reich im 18. Jahrhundert', in W. Brauneder and L. Höbelt (eds), *Sacrum Imperium. Das Reich und Österreich 996-1806*, (Vienna, 1996), pp.288-318; H. Friedjung, *The Struggle for Supremacy in Germany 1859-1866*, tr. A.J.P. Taylor and W. McElwee (London, 1935).

a 'League of Princes' (*Fürstenbund*) in defence of the Empire's constitution.<sup>10</sup> This trend was only reinforced during the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, climaxing in the secularisations, dispossessions and territorial adjustments forced upon the most vulnerable imperial estates in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to implement the Treaty of Lunéville. These events destroyed the Imperial Church, the legal order of the Empire and the moral leadership of the Habsburgs within it.<sup>11</sup> They revealed that the imperial nexus guaranteed neither the weak nor the strong anymore, increasing the attractiveness of full sovereignty as an alternative and paving the way to its dissolution.<sup>12</sup> After these changes were consolidated and full sovereignty granted within the Napoleonic Confederation of the Rhine (1806-1813) and confirmed in the 1813-1815 period to reassure the states that had profited from them, restoring the Empire appeared chimeric and the political options available to those who cherished its traditional understanding drastically reduced.<sup>13</sup> The way to modern federalism was open.<sup>14</sup>

The principles and practices of this new 'modern' epoch seemed a direct assault on the Empire's constitution to a substantial group of proto-conservative and conservative defenders who stood up first to justify and protect it, later to mourn and restore it as an antidote to the disorder of the age. They defended the Empire as a guarantor of internal freedoms and diversity but also of continental peace and balance, fashioning in the process a peculiar 'cosmopolitan conservatism'. These

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<sup>10</sup> Aretin, *Alte Reich*, vol.3, chapter 5; W. Burgdorf, *Reichskonstitution und Nation. Verfassungsreformprojekte für das Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation im politischen Schrifttum von 1648 bis 1806*, (Mainz, 1998), chapter 6; D. Stievermann, 'Der Fürstenbund von 1785 und das Reich', in V. Press and D. Stievermann, *Alternativen zur Reichsverfassung in der Frühen Neuzeit?*, (Munich, 1995), pp.209-26.

<sup>11</sup> Aretin, *Alte Reich*, vol.3, chapters 6-7; H. Angermeier, *Das alte Reich in der deutschen Geschichte. Studien über Kontinuitäten und Zäsuren*, (Munich, 1991), p.449. See also W.D. Gruner, 'Österreich zwischen Altem Reich und deutschem Bund (1789-1816)', in Brauneder and Höbelt, *Sacrum Imperium*, pp.319-60.

<sup>12</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.192-6; J. Whaley, 'Austria, "Germany", and the Dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire', in R. Robertson, and E. Timms, *The Habsburg Legacy. National Identity in Historical Perspective*, (Edinburgh, 1994), pp.3-12.

<sup>13</sup> The short-lived Napoleonic Kingdom of Westphalia typified the widespread critique of French-sponsored innovations as artificial, though many of them were not reversed. See A. Bethan, *Napoleons Königreich Westphalen. Lokale, deutsche und europäische Erinnerungen*, (Paderborn, 2012); S.A. Mustafa, *Napoleon's Paper Kingdom. The Life and Death of Westphalia, 1807-1813*, (Lanham, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> K.O. von Aretin: *Vom Deutschen Reich zum Deutschen Bund*, (Göttingen, 1980), pp.110-63; 'The Old Reich: A Federation or Hierarchical System?', in Evans, Schaich and Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, pp.27-42.

*Reichspublizisten* ('imperial publicists') must be seen as refined apologists of the imperial constitution. Almost entirely deprived of reactionary fantasies, they were not always sworn enemies of the Enlightenment, but certainly rejected its most radical and rationalistic aspects as inapplicable to the Empire, pursuing a broadly conservative political and social agenda aimed at the defence – or, at most, the evolutionary reform – of the status quo.<sup>15</sup> An exhaustive presentation of them goes beyond the thesis' remit, a few mentions will have to suffice.<sup>16</sup> They included prominent imperial lawyers such as Johann Jacob Moser (1701-1785), his son Friedrich Karl von Moser (1723-1798) and Johann Stephan Pütter (1725-1807), founder, at the University of Göttingen in Hannover, of a school of imperial law that would influence generations of ruling Germans well beyond 1806.<sup>17</sup> Important historians must also be counted among them, including Arnold Ludwig Heeren (1760-1842), the Swiss-born Johannes von Müller (1752-1809) and Nikolaus Vogt (1756-1836). Müller was the leading advocate for the League of Princes in the 1780s and an influence over many powerful contemporaries, including the publicist and politician Friedrich Gentz (1764-1832).<sup>18</sup> While Vogt's conception of European unity based on a

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<sup>15</sup> The relationship between this period's conservatism and the Enlightenment is more complex than commonly understood. Many thinkers considered in this chapter creatively reframed Enlightenment ideas in a conservative fashion, which shows how the Enlightenment's 'progressivism' could contain more conservative and repressive elements, see: Lok, *Europe against Revolution*; J. Knudsen, *Justus Möser and the German Enlightenment*, (Cambridge, 1986); J.G.A. Pocock, 'Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: The American and French Cases in British Perspective', *Government and Opposition*, 24/1 (1989), pp.81-105.

<sup>16</sup> Burgdorf, *Reichskonstitution und Nation*, chapters 5-11; Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*; H. Gross, *Empire and Sovereignty. A History of the Public Law Literature in the Holy Roman Empire 1599-1804*, (Chicago, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Walker, Moser; R. Rürup, *Johann Jacob Moser. Pietismus und Reform*, (Wiesbaden, 1965); A. Laufs, 'Johann Jacob Moser', in M. Stolleis (ed), *Staatsdenker im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert. Reichspublizistik, Politik, Naturrecht*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1987), pp.284-93; N. Hammerstein, 'Das politische Denken Friedrich Carl von Mosers', *HZ*, 212/1 (1971), pp.316-38; W. Ebel, *Der Göttinger Professor Johann Stephan Pütter aus Iserlohn*, (Göttingen, 1975); J. Meier, 'Johann Stephan Pütter (1725 - 1807)', *Aufklärung*, 20/20 (2008), pp.267-70; C. Link, 'Johann Stephan Pütter', in Stolleis, *Staatsdenker*, pp.310-31.

<sup>18</sup> G. Mann, *Secretary of Europe. The Life of Friedrich Gentz, Enemy of Napoleon*, tr. W.H. Woglom (New Haven, 1946); P. Stauffer, *Die Idee des europäischen Gleichgewichts im politischen Denken J. von Müllers*, (Basel, 1960); J. von Müller, 'In kleinen Staaten ersterben grosse Gedanken aus Mangel grosser Leidenschaften': *Begegnungen mit Johannes von Müller: Ein Lesebuch*, eds S. Howald, D. Walser-Wilhelm and P. Walser-Wilhelm, (Göttingen, 2003); P. Celms, 'A.H.L. Heeren: his Life and his Idea of History', (PhD, Northwestern University, 1967).

balance of power with the imperial constitution at its heart lastingly shaped the political outlook of Clemens von Metternich (1773-1859), the leading statesman of his generation.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, numerous members of the imperial nobility – often politically prominent in the small German principalities – contributed to the *Reichspublizistik*, most importantly Karl von Dalberg (1744-1817), the Empire's last Arch-chancellor and later Prince-Primate of the Napoleonic Confederation of the Rhine. In fact, the clearest continuity of this cosmopolitan conservative strand in the Napoleonic period is represented by the Prince-Primate's court in Regensburg and Frankfurt, where key publicists of the old imperial reform movement were still active.<sup>20</sup> From a sociological viewpoint, therefore, champions of the movement for imperial reform and revival were largely to be found among the imperial nobility and the smaller princes, whose existence depended on the imperial constitution, as well as in the ranks of imperial lawyers, who came from the educated bourgeoisie, were often in the service of such princes and similarly depended on the Empire for their sustenance and rank.<sup>21</sup> From a confessional viewpoint, the *Reichspublizistik* was predominantly, though not exclusively, Protestant in inspiration. Even Catholic authors in this strand, such as Dalberg and Vogt, tended to have a positive take on Protestantism's contribution to German history. They were also influenced by Febronianism, the anti-papal movement within the 18<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Church, and therefore weary of papal interventions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> U. Berg, *Niklas Vogt (1756-1836)*, (Stuttgart, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> W. Burgdorf, 'Imperial Reform and Visions of a European Constitution in Germany around 1800', *History of European Ideas*, 19/1 (1994), pp.404-6.

<sup>21</sup> K.O. von Aretin, 'Das Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation', in O. Büsch, J. Sheehan and K.O. von Aretin, *Die Rolle der Nation in der deutschen Geschichte und Gegenwart. Beiträge zu einer internationalen Konferenz in Berlin (West) vom 16. bis 18. Juni 1983*, (Berlin, 1985), pp.78-9.

<sup>22</sup> S. Fletcher, 'Febronianism', in A. Louth (ed), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, (Oxford, 2022), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199642465.001.0001/acref-9780199642465-e-2640> (24 May 2024); M. O'Neill Printy, *Enlightenment and the Creation of German Catholicism*, (Cambridge, 2009), chapter 2.

The *Reichspublizisten's* writings were often voluminous handbook-like descriptions of the Empire, which could be conveniently mined by others for a variety of purposes.<sup>23</sup> Their vindications of the imperial constitution must be considered seminal as they set out some of the *topoi* that would reappear in conservative interpretations of the Empire over the next two centuries. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, two novel ways of looking at the Empire were emerging that would largely eclipse cosmopolitan conservatism in subsequent periods: the Romantic conservative and the national conservative ones. Both were often acquainted with and influenced by the *Reichspublizisten*, but their Empire concepts captured radically different experiences.

Romantic conservative authors such as Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known by his pen name Novalis (1772-1801), Adam Müller (1779-1829),<sup>24</sup> Joseph Görres (1776-1848) and especially Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) had little nostalgia for the actual early modern Empire that had passed in 1806. Several of them only came to embrace a politically and socially conservative outlook after a period of enthusiasm for the French Revolution, inaugurating a pattern of transitioning from revolutionary to conservative radicalism that would become common in certain strands of the radical right down to our time. At a time of crisis and convulsions, they longed for the imagined harmony of the medieval Empire pacified by the serenity of Christian love and brotherhood in a united Europe. Unlike cosmopolitan conservatives, who were animated by eminently practical concerns, Romantics moved in more rarefied heights of intellectual exaltation, and many of them were fervent Catholic converts from Protestantism.<sup>25</sup> They were mostly minor aristocrats or publicists from the intellectual middle class – some of which received minor noble titles for their services later in life – and experienced all the

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<sup>23</sup> The best example is J.J. Moser, *Neues Teutsches Staats-Recht*, (19 vols, Stuttgart and Frankfurt a.M, 1766-74). See also J.S. Pütter, *Historische Entwicklung der heutigen Staatsverfassung des Teutschen Reichs*, (3 vols, Göttingen, 1786-88).

<sup>24</sup> J. Baxa, *Adam Müllers Philosophie, Ästhetik und Staatswissenschaft. Eine Gedächtnisschrift zu seinem 100. Todestage*, (Berlin, 1929).

<sup>25</sup> So, for example, Friedrich Schlegel and Adam Müller.

professional and financial insecurities of people in this station. On their way down to Rome, they stumbled upon Habsburg Vienna and staked all their hopes for German and European renewal on it, becoming useful aids to Metternich's policy, despite the distance of their conceptions from his.<sup>26</sup>

Separately from this Romantic conservative strand but sometimes in close interaction with it, a more genuinely 'national' re-interpretation of the imperial constitution was slowly taking hold, in parallel with the Empire's growing difficulties and final nadir. Its first awakening arguably occurred during the important debate on imperial patriotism triggered in the 1760s by Moser Jr., who saw a revitalisation of the Emperor's office and of other central imperial institutions as a necessary answer to the Empire's crisis.<sup>27</sup> However, only the frustrating experience of defeat at the hand of the new popular national armies of revolutionary France in the 1790s and 1800s led many to regard the old imperial institutions as deficient and to demand the patriotic refoundation of the Empire as a national polity capable of claiming its place among the European great powers. In those years, the alleged medieval glories of the 'German' Empire began to surface in the works and political correspondence of Baron Karl vom Stein (1757-1831), like Metternich originally an imperial knight from the Rhineland, and later a leading Prussian reformer and one-time advisor to Czar Alexander I. They also appeared in the writings of his secretary Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860), a leading German nationalist historian born in what was then Swedish Pomerania, and in the poetry of the latter's associate Max von Schenkendorf (1783-1817), born in Tilsit, educated in Königsberg and whose verses brimmed with patriotic passion for a German Empire that already bore little resemblance to that defended by cosmopolitan conservatives around the same time.<sup>28</sup> The longing for restoring this imagined national *Reich* as a strong German polity

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<sup>26</sup> Novalis was a minor Protestant aristocrat from Lower Saxony, Schlegel hailed from the non-commercial bourgeoisie, while Müller was a commoner knighted late in life. For a study of Romantic conservatism with a sociological sweep, see Mannheim, *Conservatism*.

<sup>27</sup> F.C. von Moser, *Von dem Deutschen National-Geist*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1765); Burgdorf, *Reichskonstitution und Nation*, chapter 5.

<sup>28</sup> H. Tiedemann, *Der deutsche Kaisergedanke vor und nach dem Wiener Kongress*, (Breslau, 1932), pp.73-4.

spread with particular vigour among the families of imperial knights and counts, whose once rich estates on the right and left banks of the Rhine had been mediatised after the Treaty of Lunéville, incorporated either into the new French national empire or into the territories of its German satellites. Sectors of this mediatised high imperial nobility played a crucial role in inflaming anti-Napoleonic and anti-French hatred in Vienna, Berlin and St. Petersburg and continued to loudly demand the restoration of a national German Empire under the Habsburgs in the run-up to and during the Congress of Vienna.<sup>29</sup>

### **The imperial constitution and the origins of cosmopolitan conservatism**

The imperial constitution was a venerable edifice gradually adapted to tackle specific challenges, a patchwork evolved into its current shape over many centuries and populated by particularities and exceptions sanctified by tradition. It was, according to its last Arch-chancellor Dalberg, 'a permanent Gothic structure that might not conform to all the building regulations, but in which one lives securely'.<sup>30</sup> In the words of its greatest twentieth century historian, 'a consideration of this constitution was only possible from the point of view of history, that is, from a way of thinking that was quite contrary to that of the Enlightenment'.<sup>31</sup> The last thing it could withstand was the dissolving power of abstract reason championed first by enlightened despots and later by revolutionaries for the reconstruction of Central Europe.

Distant heir to the universalist claims of medieval Christendom, the Empire had nurtured a peculiar political culture that was at once 'structurally conservative' and cosmopolitan, or at least discovered

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<sup>29</sup> E.E. Kraehe, *Metternich's German Policy. Volume I: The Contest with Napoleon, 1799-1814*, (Princeton, 1963), pp.70-2.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p.280.

<sup>31</sup> Aretin, *Friedensgarantie und europäisches Gleichgewicht*, p.12.

itself as such when threatened by modernisation and revolutionary nationalism.<sup>32</sup> In answer to progressive attacks against the imperial constitution and the most seemingly anachronistic forms of rule it protected – the ecclesiastical states, the imperial free cities and the territories of the Imperial Counts and Knights, so fragmented and numerous in the Empire’s predominantly Catholic southern and western flank – conservative defenders construed the Empire as a more humane and ethical order than that pursued by their adversaries.<sup>33</sup> Instead of wiping out cultural diversity, concentrating power, and waging war, to them the chief occupations of modern absolutist and later revolutionary states, the Empire stood for an order of German and European peace and justice that sanctioned the primacy of law over might, dispersed power preventing absolutist despotism and protected everybody’s rights and diversity.

#### *German freedom and Kleinstaaterei*

The Empire’s apologists argued that its purpose was defending ‘German freedom’. This, Moser Sr explained, ‘is set forth in the very laws of the Empire, and consists in this: that the Emperor should leave to the estates what is theirs, that the stronger should not oppress the weaker nor the ruler his subjects, but rather the Emperor shall give protection against this. This freedom is a common good; it is the bond of unity among members of the empire so unequal in power, and it is the means of maintaining our quite particular imperial constitution’.<sup>34</sup> Johannes von Müller concurred: ‘this freedom, which the noblest Romans envied to the coarse Germania, [...] is still alive in the constitution of the Empire.’<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I owe the useful analytical category of ‘structural conservatism’ to J.C. Allmayer-Beck, *Der Konservatismus in Österreich*, (Munich, 1959), pp.11-24.

<sup>33</sup> Epstein, *Genesis*, chapter 5.

<sup>34</sup> Walker, *Moser*, p.285. For a historical examination of what this freedom meant in practice, see G. Schmidt, ‘Die “deutsche Freiheit” und der Westfälische Friede’, in R.G. Asch, W.E. Voss, and M. Wrede (eds), *Frieden und Krieg in der Frühen Neuzeit. Die europäische Staatenordnung und die Außereuropäische Welt*, (Munich, 2001), pp.323-47.

<sup>35</sup> Müller, *Lesebuch*, p.413.

By balancing Emperor against Imperial Estates, Protestants against Catholics, Electors against princes, local estates against territorial rulers, large against small territories, ecclesiastical against secular states, mediate against immediate subjects, imperial institutions subtly perpetuated a hierarchical and aristocratic form of rule that was appealing to conservatives.<sup>36</sup> The *Reichstag* defended the 'liberties' of territorial rulers represented in it, while other imperial institutions, particularly the imperial courts, defended local 'liberties' against territorial rulers. This fostered 'a deep-rooted, conservative ideal of freedom as local and particular, shared by members of corporate groups and incorporated communities. These were local and particular liberties, not abstract Liberty shared equally by all inhabitants'.<sup>37</sup> German freedom entailed the protection of all imperial citizens' civil rights from the depredation of the princes, including the important constitutional guarantees to religious toleration and confessional balances, and the presence of judicial remedies against illicit invasions of life and property at all levels.<sup>38</sup> Incorporating the protection of local liberties in the imperial constitution also discouraged the rationalisation of the administration based on enlightened ideas, thus playing a structurally conservative role. All in all, it served the cause of the status quo or at most of moderate and gradual improvement over it, fostering an inborn traditionalism and aversion to radical revolutionary changes.<sup>39</sup> Together with the role of electoral capitulations, the prerogatives of the Imperial Counts and Knights and the peculiar structure of the ecclesiastical states with their Cathedral Chapters, all this had the virtue of preserving an independent nobility in ways that were unthinkable outside the Empire.<sup>40</sup> Both in Mecklenburg in 1755 and in Württemberg in 1770, to quote only the two most spectacular 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, p.44.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p.12. '[T]he system', similarly concludes Whaley, 'was inherently conservative', see his *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, vol.2, p.648.

<sup>38</sup> J.J. Moser, *Von der Staats-Justiz, besonders in Absicht auf Teutschland*, (Regensburg, 1773); J.S. Pütter, *Patriotische Abbildung des heutigen Zustandes beyder höchsten Reichsgerichte*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1756).

<sup>39</sup> C.M. Rose, 'Empire and Territories at the End of the Old Reich', in J. Allen, and S.W. Rowan (eds), *The Old Reich. Essays on German Political Institutions, 1495-1806*, (Brussels, 1974), pp.59-76.

<sup>40</sup> P.H. Wilson, 'The Nobility of the Early Modern Reich, 1495-1806', in H.M. Scott (ed), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (2 vols, Basingstoke, 2007), vol.2, pp.74-117.

century cases, the local estates managed to secure their traditional privileges menaced by absolutist princes by leveraging on imperial law.<sup>41</sup> Johannes von Müller proudly emphasised that the common business of the Empire was settled by 'a Senate of Emperor, princes and cities', while individual estates had their own unique constitution going from 'the most spontaneous democracy to strict autocracy', and decided on their own local affairs.<sup>42</sup>

German freedom, therefore, naturally entailed *Kleinstaaterei*, the existing pattern of extreme political fragmentation within a common institutional framework. It was captured in the almost mystical formula '*Kaiser und Reich*', which conveyed the co-equal partnership of head and members and their shared responsibility for preserving the harmony of the imperial nexus.<sup>43</sup> Without it, warned Christian Ernst Weisse, a student of Pütter, Germany would probably be the most glorious of all European states, but the freedom Germans had enjoyed in comparison with other Europeans would be threatened. The imperial Knight, later Count, Julius von Soden similarly argued that the happiest states were seldom the mightiest, as the pursuit of power consumed energies and resources that could be dedicated to more humane endeavours. True well-being resulted from the freedom and cultural variety maintained through the peaceful competition among the many German states.<sup>44</sup> This offered protection against an overbearing Emperor that might oppress freedom. Big size and power encouraged rulers' adventurism and the development of bloated bureaucracies and military establishments, which meant more taxes and governmental supervision of citizens' lives, all dangerous steps towards despotism.<sup>45</sup> Political fragmentation, competition and cultural diversity also reinforced the structurally conservative character

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<sup>41</sup> G. Haug-Moritz, *Württembergischer Ständekonflikt und deutscher Dualismus. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Reichsverbands in der Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, (Stuttgart, 1992); M. Hughes, *Law and Politics in Eighteenth Century Germany. The Imperial Aulic Council in the Reign of Charles VI*, (Woodbridge, 1988). Müller commented, with reference to the Empire, that 'where monarchy and freedom flourish side by side, there must exist the solid middle power of an independent aristocracy.' See Müller, *Lesebuch*, p.414.

<sup>42</sup> Müller, *Lesebuch*, p.413.

<sup>43</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, p.21.

<sup>44</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.121, 101-2.

<sup>45</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.203-4.

of the imperial constitution, acting as an obstacle to the spread of revolutionary ideas and encouraging a prudent and evolutionary approach over the pursuit of democratic homogeneity and equality. This is essentially the body of experiences conveyed by the young Johann Wolfgang Goethe in his 1773 play *Götz von Berlichingen*, a sympathetic portrayal of an Imperial Knight who, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, fought to defend his traditional rights and independence from a powerful and corrupt prince oblivious to historical tradition and to the value of diversity. Goethe conveyed the image of an Empire worth preserving to protect the weak, encourage cultural flourishing and allow the moral development of the human personality. This was best achieved in the microcosm of small states – like the Free Imperial City of Frankfurt, where he was born, and the small Duchy of Saxe-Weimer, whose rulers he long served – and menaced by a princely absolutism reminiscent of Frederick II's and Joseph II's in his own time.<sup>46</sup>

All in all, as argued by Maiken Umbach, confronted with a new idea and practice of the 'state', the 18<sup>th</sup> century imperial reform movement redefined the idea and practice of 'empire' as a counterpoint.<sup>47</sup> The Empire came to represent an anti-centralist, 'non-hierarchical federation of different types of small states' that organised 'politics as an ongoing process of negotiation' and suggested that regional diversity and small political units were more conducive to progress than standardisation and centralisation. Improvement was meant to happen bottom-up and evolutionary, inspired by competition, experimentation and spontaneous emulation, 'not by dirigiste state intervention' and

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<sup>46</sup> H. Reiss, 'Goethe, Möser and the Aufklärung: the Holy Roman Empire in *Götz von Berlichingen* and *Egmont*', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 60/4 (1986), pp.609-44; W. Burgdorf, "Das Reich geht mich nichts an". Goethes *Götz von Berlichingen*, das Reich und die Reichspublizistik', in Schnettger, *Imperium Romanum*, pp.27–52. Johann Wolfgang Goethe was steeped in the political and legal conceptions propagated by the *Reichspublizisten*. Trained as an imperial lawyer, he was acquainted with and influenced by such apologists of the imperial constitution as Moser Jr. and August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735-1809). One finds fond recollections of imperial traditions and institutions in his autobiography, see J.W. Goethe, *The Autobiography of Goethe. Truth and Fiction: Relating to My Life*, tr. J. Oxenford (2 vols, Boston, 1882-3), vol.1, pp.17-21, 146-71 and vol.2, pp.114-20, 215-16, 266-8.

<sup>47</sup> M. Umbach, *Federalism and Enlightenment in Germany, 1740-1806*, (London, 2000), pp.7-8.

bureaucratic commands.<sup>48</sup> This 'diversitarian' trait attributed to the late Empire was destined to stably enter the *Reichsidee* of cosmopolitan and later supranational conservatives, down to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Primacy of law*

For the *Reichspublizisten*, then, the Empire was essentially 'an association founded on law'.<sup>49</sup> Müller defined it as 'a great confederacy [*Eidgenossenschaft*] of diverse members, which [...] reach agreement on a common law and common remedies, not on conquests'.<sup>50</sup> It was a 'webby complex of conditioned rights that muffled violence' and resisted any notion of personal mastery.<sup>51</sup> There could be no personal 'sovereign' in an empire where the public law was the closest equivalent to sovereign majesty. The very notion of sovereignty, which lured the biggest imperial estates into their efforts to emancipate themselves from the Empire's legal shackles, was deemed incompatible with the imperial constitution.<sup>52</sup> Moser Sr can be considered representative of a whole strand of thought in his harsh condemnation of a 'sovereignty-makers guild' of rationalist thinkers and jurists.<sup>53</sup>

To the abstract concept of sovereignty, defenders of the Empire opposed the reality of *Landeshoheit* as recognised under imperial public law, a key concept which protected the prerogatives of territorial rulers vis-à-vis common imperial institutions, while also recognising their obligations towards them and the local estates. This operationalised an order in which sovereignty was scattered if not dissolved.<sup>54</sup> Even European monarchs could not be treated as sovereign in their capacity as imperial estates, as the position of the 'King in Prussia' since 1701 showed: 'more and more the urge to be "sovereign" is

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<sup>48</sup> Umbach, *Federalism and Enlightenment*, pp.65-67, 192.

<sup>49</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.27, 40-46. See, for example, Pütter, *Patriotische Abbildung*.

<sup>50</sup> Müller, *Lesebuch*, pp.414-15.

<sup>51</sup> Walker, *Moser*, p.153.

<sup>52</sup> Walker, *Moser*, pp.66-7.

<sup>53</sup> J.J. Moser, *Neues Teutsches Staats-Recht*, vol.14: *Von der Landeshoheit derer Teutschen Reichsstände überhaupt*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1973), p.256; Walker, *Moser*, p.261.

<sup>54</sup> Walker, *Moser*, pp.295-309.

mastering electoral and princely courts: how many soldiers does one have? *as many as one wants*; how many taxes does one order? *as many as one wants*; [...] in short: one does what one wants, and the territorial estates and subjects can howl'.<sup>55</sup> For the leading imperial lawyers, the quest for sovereignty, if successful, was bound to result in petty tyrannies where rulers would do what they pleased and destroy the Empire. They condemned the grand experiments of legal codification of their time and the doctrines that inspired them, mainly the deductive methods common to both natural law in the tradition of Samuel Pufendorf and rationalism in the tradition of Christian Wolff.

In opposition to this abstract and systematic approach to law, seen as a tool in the hands of absolutist rulers inspired by French traditions and bent on seceding from the Empire's legal order, defenders of the imperial constitution championed a historical and evolutionary approach that became more and more consciously conservative in the period under consideration: 'rather than build a constitution on prescription', a scholar aptly commented, 'the German jurists sought to comprehend within a framework of principles the peculiar institutions of their polity'.<sup>56</sup> Moser Sr's method remained to the end a mere compilation of existing legal materials ordered based on convenience. Imperial law was for him the result of a historical accretion of rules, to which, however, he did not attach any inherently positive value by the fact of their historicity.<sup>57</sup> His mindset was not yet a conservative one. However, he did associate the application of systematic reason to public law with the desire of enlightened despots to violate 'contracted and established right in the name of freedom and the common weal'. By using

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<sup>55</sup> Moser Sr quoted in Whitman, *Roman Law*, p.73. In 1701, Frederick I of Hohenzollern had convinced Emperor Leopold I to upgrade his Dukedom of Prussia, which lay outside the Empire, to a Kingdom. To underline that he possessed no sovereignty in his capacity as Elector of Brandenburg, which lay within the Empire, he was granted the title of King *in*, as opposed to *of*, Prussia. See C.M. Clark, *Iron Kingdom. The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600-1947*, (London, 2007), pp.67-77.

<sup>56</sup> H. Gross, 'The Holy Roman Empire in Modern Times: Constitutional Reality and Legal Theory', in Allen and Rowan, *The Old Reich*, p.20. On claims that the Empire's limited monarchy protected rights better than absolutist France both before and after the Revolution, see H. Dreitzel, *Monarchiebegriffe in der Fürstengesellschaft. Semantik und Theorie der Einherrschaft in Deutschland von der Reformation bis zum Vormärz*, (Cologne, 1991), pp.99-116.

<sup>57</sup> Walker, Moser, pp.130-1. See Moser, *Neues Teutsches Staats-Recht*.

'reason' in such a way, he argued, one could demonstrate that old rights were not really meant as thought or even outdated, which in practice meant that '*le plus fort* has and keeps the right', the use of French in the original denouncing the provenance of the phenomenon and its foreignness to the Empire in the writer's opinion.<sup>58</sup>

Reinforced by the influential Göttingen school of Pütter and his followers, this conception of imperial law became a centrepiece of the historical school of German law between the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this time at the service of an openly conservative agenda. Chiefly associated with Gustav Hugo (1764-1844) and especially Friedrich Carl von Savigny (1779-1861), the historical school certainly bathed in the Romantic and national streams of German intellectual life in ways that always remained alien to the mainstream of the *Reichspublicisten*.<sup>59</sup> However, Savigny's basic understanding of the Empire as a system of justice rather than power, his rejection of abstract natural law leading to absolutist and revolutionary codifications, as well as his longing for the pre-absolutist, corporate constitution of the Empire clearly place him and his followers in their wake and continuity.<sup>60</sup> He praised the protection that imperial justice accorded to everybody's rights, advocating its revival as a guarantee of social peace against revolutionary upheavals of the French type. In an 1814 dispute, he famously argued against the need for a unified civil code of all the German states in the post-Napoleonic period. As in the Old *Reich*, he claimed, the recognition of Roman law as a subsidiary source of law would be sufficient.<sup>61</sup> He essentially advocated a subtle resurrection of the Empire through its legal system, short of a formal political restoration. Also thanks to his school's wide-

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<sup>58</sup> Walker, *Moser*, pp.283-6.

<sup>59</sup> Savigny's Romantic connections were also profound at a personal level, not least through his wife Kunigunde, born Brentano. He was a friend of Joseph Görres and close to the Grimm brothers. Friedrich Schlegel was also an influence. See G. Marini, *Friedrich Carl von Savigny*, (Naples, 1978), pp.47-9, 75.

<sup>60</sup> Whitman, *Roman Law*, pp.54-5. Savigny was also an influential teacher of the Prussian Crown Prince, the future Frederick William IV, and later served as his Minister of Legal Revision from 1840 to 1848, see D.E. Barclay, *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy 1840-1861*, (Oxford, 1995), p.27.

<sup>61</sup> Walter, *Zusammenbruch*, p.107.

ranging clout – still in the 1840s, Karl Marx fustigated it as a pernicious conservative influence over the German states<sup>62</sup> – important elements of the Empire's legal order lived on in the Restoration period, and the memory of its constitution as defended by the *Reichspublizisten* continued to shape the idea and practice of the *Rechtstaat* harboured by many German conservatives and even liberals in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>63</sup>

### *Anti-Machiavellianism*

Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, cosmopolitan conservative defenders of the imperial constitution appeared increasingly distraught over the loosening of traditional checks on power. 'When Poland is completely partitioned', the by then elderly Moser Jr anxiously predicted in 1794, 'then the queue of devourers will also get to us. Then goodbye Jus publikum! Goodbye Moser [...]. The devourers from the North attract the devourers from the South et sic porro in saecula saeculorum amen!'.<sup>64</sup> Witnessing its destabilising effects on the imperial constitution, those authors grasped that the 'modern' divorce between morality and politics, law and power, would be the midwife of a rougher age of concentrated and unchecked might. They did not see their time as one of Enlightenment and human rights, as we often do, but as marked by the 'Machiavellianism' of absolutist sovereigns, the French Revolution and Napoleon.<sup>65</sup>

Recent historiography corrected the previously dominant orthodoxy that had depicted a decrepit Empire overrun with France's revolutionary dynamism. It showed that, prior to 1795, when Prussia withdrew into neutrality, taking with it most of northern Germany, militarily the Empire did not actually

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<sup>62</sup> Whitman, *Roman Law*, pp.xi-xii.

<sup>63</sup> Umbach, *Federalism and Enlightenment*, pp.3-4.

<sup>64</sup> W. Burgdorf, *Reichskonstitution und Nation*, p.343 n.473.

<sup>65</sup> For a contemporary opinion, see F. Mazères, *De Machiavel et de l'influence de sa doctrine sur les opinions, les moeurs et la politique de la France pendant la Révolution*, (Paris, 1816). See also K.O. von Aretin, 'Deutschland und die Französische Revolution', in K.O. von Aretin and K. Härter (eds), *Revolution und konservatives Beharren. Das alte Reich und die Französische Revolution*, (Mainz, 1990), pp.9-20.

perform so badly against French invaders.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, the 1790s and early 1800s were punctuated with painful soul-searching on how the imperial constitution could be reconciled with the necessities of modern war, which seemed to require precisely the rapid mobilisation and centralised decision-making that the Empire had evolved to prevent.<sup>67</sup> The Empire's difficulties did convince many Germans of the importance of the power-state for national self-preservation. Largely as a reaction to them, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century a strange synthesis between philosophical Idealism and Machiavellianism began to emerge.<sup>68</sup> In 1802, in the short interval of peace that followed the treaties of Lunéville and Amiens, no lesser thinker than the young Hegel castigated the imperial constitution as a shadowy system of rights and laws, 'forms whose inner life has [now] departed'. Its present condition could only be described as 'anarchy', and its motto really should have been 'Fiat Justitia, pereat Germania': 'this [system of] justice, whereby each part is maintained in separation from the state, stands in absolute contradiction to the necessary claims of the state on its individual members. The state requires a universal centre [...] which [...] has the necessary power to assert itself and its resolutions and to keep the individual parts in [a state of] dependence on itself.' The war with the French Republic had proven that Germany was 'no longer a state', as the particularistic German conception of freedom did not allow the Germans 'to discover freedom in common, free subjection to a supreme political authority'. Hegel attacked contemporary imperial lawyers for abandoning the earlier quest for the 'concept' of the German constitution, resigning themselves to a mere empirical description of it, which in itself proved its

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<sup>66</sup> Wilson, *German Armies*, chapter 8.

<sup>67</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, chapters 9-10.

<sup>68</sup> F. Meinecke, *Machiavellism. The Doctrine of Raison d'État and its Place in Modern History*, tr. D. Scott (Boulder, 1984), chapters 13-14.

insubstantial nature: 'what can no longer be related to a concept [begriffen]', he sentenced revealingly, 'no longer exists'.<sup>69</sup>

The contours of the later Hegelian conception of the state, which leading twentieth century fascist scholars would readily exploit to achieve its 'divinisation', are clearly recognisable in this youthful critique of the imperial constitution.<sup>70</sup> It could not have been further from the conception of the good polity harboured by conservative defenders of the Empire. The fact that the imperial order could not be grasped in the light of a fully rational Idea was for them its chief merit: the eagerness to achieve complete rational comprehension went hand in hand with a lust for unchecked power and manipulation.<sup>71</sup> Unlike Hegel's state, the Empire did not maximise the dependence of its individual parts on itself. Quite the opposite: it protected and nurtured their autonomy according to their differing need for support, which was stronger the weaker and smaller they were. This background helps us see how, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the cosmopolitan – and later supranational – Empire would come to represent an anti-Machiavellian order that civilised power through law and resisted the complete separation between morality and politics sought by modern *Realpolitik*. While still relatively a-confessional in the writings of cosmopolitan conservatives in this period, this conception was easily Christianised by Romantic authors.<sup>72</sup> They connected it with the Christian damning of unfettered *raison d'état*, and with what they saw as the unique combination of Germanic jurisprudence and Christian ethics that had allegedly transfigured political power during the Middle Ages. This conception continued

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<sup>69</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel. Political Writings*, ed. and tr. L.W. Dickey and H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1999), pp.6-7, 9-10, 12-13. It is worth noting that Hegel's scathing criticism of the Empire is not accompanied by any radically new suggestions for its reform. He merely offers the same kind of tinkering with the existing structure advocated by those he was criticising.

<sup>70</sup> H. Kieseewetter, *Von Hegel zu Hitler. Die politische Verwirklichung einer totalitären Machtstaatstheorie in Deutschland, 1815-1945*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Frankfurt a.M., 1995).

<sup>71</sup> Walker, *Moser*, pp.ix. The connection between the modern state, rationalisation and monopolisation of violence is well understood since Max Weber elucidated it. Recent research on the modern state's rise confirmed that the exaltation of rationality was functional to making societies 'legible' and controllable. See M. van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State*, (Cambridge, 1999) and J.C. Scott, *Seeing like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven, 1998).

<sup>72</sup> See pp.64-70 below.

to animate cosmopolitan conservative opponents of German nationalism and *Realpolitik*, which, especially after 1848, would become associated with the struggle for national unification and with authors that were, unsurprisingly, openly dismissive of the Empire.<sup>73</sup> Metternich's conservatism was also marked by this way of thinking, emphasising the transcendence of law and the ultimate authority of ethics even in the Prince's motto: *Kraft im Recht*, force within law, as opposed to force-politics.<sup>74</sup>

#### *The 'European Republic' and the early modern Empire*

The *Reichspublizisten's* political thought always embedded the imperial constitution in a continental framework of power and law, which brings us closer to its cosmopolitan dimension. Structural factors conferred a cosmopolitan character to the conservatism fostered by the imperial constitution. Despite attempts, in this and later historical periods, to 'nationalise' the Empire, the experiences of order underpinning it always proved irreducible to a narrow nationalism. It had never shed a sense of responsibility for the European commonwealth inherited from medieval and Renaissance universalism and, in its final centuries, had been 'a form of political association that constituted an evolving, highly differentiated, federal union' among all or part of ten modern European countries.<sup>75</sup> It was never a purely German affair, so much so that France and Sweden had acted as guarantors of its constitution since the treaties of Westphalia, as had Russia since the 1779 peace of Teschen.<sup>76</sup> In Central Europe, it had shaped a geo-cultural and political landscape that connected Liège to Bamberg, Mainz to Prague and Koblenz to Vienna, and was inhabited by a cosmopolitan aristocracy with multinational pedigrees and connections, of which figures such as Count Metternich and Baron Stein were quintessential

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<sup>73</sup> See chapters 2-3 below.

<sup>74</sup> P. Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited*, revised edn (New York, 1962), pp.55-6.

<sup>75</sup> M. Burgess and A. Gagnon (eds), *Federal Democracies*, (London, 2010), p.93; see also K.O. von Aretin, 'Das deutsche Problem im alten Reich', in H. Möller, K.O. von Aretin and J. Bariety, *Das deutsche Problem in der neueren Geschichte*, (Berlin, 2015), pp.3-14. The countries are Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland.

<sup>76</sup> On the Empire's European embeddedness, see Aretin, *Friedensgarantie und europäisches Gleichgewicht*.

products, despite the different paths they took.<sup>77</sup> The Empire's intimate association with the House of Habsburg since the late 15th century, and the latter's consolidation of a central European realm encompassing, apart from imperial Austria and Bohemia, also Hungary and parts of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that lay outside the Empire, further stretched the borders of this integrated geo-cultural and political space. The sway of foreign patrons – the Dutch, English, French, or the Catholic Church – was intensely felt in the numberless princely courts, opening the Empire even further to the most diverse cultural influences.<sup>78</sup>

Cosmopolitan conservatives valued the universal character that the fragmented and porous nature of the imperial constitution conferred upon the Germans, making them open to all manifestations of human creativity regardless of their place of origin.<sup>79</sup> Politically, the Empire was seen as the backbone of a European 'republic' or 'federation'.<sup>80</sup> Its decentralised constitution guaranteed a broader European balance of forces, while, at the latest by the Peace of Westphalia, imperial law had become the fulcrum of 'European public law'.<sup>81</sup> The German constitution's internal balances were explicitly connected to European freedom and unity. Moser Sr argued that the concept of 'German balance' had become part of the imperial constitution, emphasising that any exchange of territories that risked upsetting this balance – and, with it, the repose of Europe – had to be considered illegal, even if legitimate from a purely dynastic viewpoint.<sup>82</sup> Two publicists who were also historians and politicians went furthest and

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<sup>77</sup> W.D. Godsey, *Nobles and Nation in Central Europe. Free Imperial Knights in the Age of Revolution 1750-1850*, (Cambridge, 2004), pp.13-14.

<sup>78</sup> Knudsen, *Möser*, p.6.

<sup>79</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.137-9.

<sup>80</sup> M. Lok, 'The European Republic from the Enlightenment to the Counter-Revolution', in J. Oddens, M. Rutjes and A. Weststeijn (eds), *Discourses of Decline. Essays on Republicanism in Honor of Wyger R.E. Velema*, (Leiden, 2022), pp.200-15.

<sup>81</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.53; Burgdorf, *Reichskonstitution und Nation*, pp.273-85. The Empire had already inspired the 18<sup>th</sup> century's most important project for continental peace, see P. Schröder, 'The Holy Roman Empire as Model for Saint-Pierre's *Projet pour rendre la paix perpétuelle en Europe*', in R.J.W. Evans and P.H. Wilson, (eds), *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495-1806. A European perspective*, (Leiden, 2012), pp.35-50.

<sup>82</sup> J.J. Moser, *Betrachtungen über das Gleichgewicht von Europa und Teutschland in Rücksicht auf den Umtausch von Bayern*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1785); Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.82-5.

deepest in connecting the imperial constitution with European peace and unity: the Swiss Johannes von Müller and the *Rheinländer* Nikolaus Vogt.

Müller considered 'German freedom' and the balance of power principles introduced by the Peace of Westphalia as the surest guarantee against despotism and centralism in the Empire and beyond. He was an ardent supporter of small states as inherently freer and more peaceful than larger ones, and a denouncer of 'universal monarchy'. He eloquently advocated for the League of Princes as an initiative to thwart Joseph II's hegemonic plans in Germany and uphold the imperial constitution, 'a body politic worthy of preservation for the general freedom of Europe'.<sup>83</sup> So heartfelt was to him the connection with the European balance that he did not hesitate to celebrate the initiators as 'saviours of mankind against returning despotism'.<sup>84</sup>

As to Vogt, his *magnum opus*, first published in five volumes between 1787 and 1792, traced the origins and history of 'the European republic' back to the Germanies (*Allemannie*), warning Europeans that its maintenance required the right balance between egoism, patriotism and cosmopolitanism.<sup>85</sup> Although, unlike most of the *Reichspublizisten*, he bemoaned the excessive fragmentation of Germany as historically a source of instability and violence, he placed a solid German Empire at the heart of a stable continental state system that balanced forces with counterforces.<sup>86</sup> Since the time of the barbarian invasions, 'Germany became the mother and the unifying element (*Vereinigungspunkt*) of the European nations; still today, it is the mother of most European rulers and the centre of the European republic and equilibrium.' Throughout history, the condition for preserving this continental

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<sup>83</sup> R. Vierhaus, 'Überstaat und Staatenbund', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 43/Jg (1961), p.332. See J. von Müller, *Darstellung des Fürstenbundes*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1787) and J. von Müller, *Teutschlands Erwartungen vom Fürstenbund*, (n.p., 1788).

<sup>84</sup> Burgdorf, *Reichskonstitution und Nation*, p.345 n.480.

<sup>85</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.82. See N. Vogt, *Historische Darstellung des europäischen Völkerbundes*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1808).

<sup>86</sup> K. Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century*, (Lincoln, 2007), pp.60-1.

republic of Germanic descent had been protecting an equilibrium that would prevent the return of a 'despotic, ancient roman monarchy', which according to him was being pursued in his own time by the two eastern sovereigns Joseph II and Catherine the Great. Against that, Vogt supported a wide-ranging autonomy for the members of the European republic and for their constituent provinces and smaller communities. He incorporated into his system the arguments of Müller and other defenders of the League of Princes, seeing the Empire as Europe's centre of equipoise.<sup>87</sup> It is worth mentioning that Edmund Burke had a similar view of the Empire and also placed it at the heart of his conception of a 'commonwealth of Europe'.<sup>88</sup> For him too German liberties and European balances depended on the Empire's loose confederate structure containing Prussia and Austria and preserving the smaller states.<sup>89</sup>

Although authors such as Vogt and Müller valued the Christian Middle Ages, the focal point of cosmopolitan conservatives' historical narratives was the early modern Empire, with its European embeddedness, confessional tolerance, institutionalisation of diversity and comprehensive legal system. Emperor Maximilian I, the ruler most associated with the imperial reforms of the Renaissance period, was especially praised, while opinions on his grandson Charles V were more divided.<sup>90</sup> According to some, such as Vogt, he had amassed more power than was desirable for German and Europe's freedom.

Cosmopolitan conservatives saw the system of balances guaranteed by the imperial constitution as a form of unity in diversity, unlike later historians, who looked at it from the vantage point of modernity's penchant for fully consolidated forms of political unity and often interpreted it as a factor of division and

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<sup>87</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.82-4.

<sup>88</sup> J.M. Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations. The Commonwealth of Europe and the Crusade Against the French Revolution*, (Basingstoke, 1995), pp.70-88.

<sup>89</sup> Umbach, *Federalism and Enlightenment*, pp.130-1; B. Simms, *Europe. The Struggle for Supremacy, 1453 to the Present*, (London, 2013), pp.125, 144.

<sup>90</sup> Umbach, *Federalism and Enlightenment*, chapter 5.

strife. Thus, Müller enthusiastically supported the formation of leagues, seen as articulations of the Empire's internal diversity and instruments to protect the weak and maintain the equilibrium: 'in all crises, the Germans have helped one another through associations. [...] The Public Peace, the religious agreements, the Westphalian treaties were achieved through associations [*assoziationsweise*]. The armies of Louis XIV were averted through these means. No measure is more compliant with the constitution.'<sup>91</sup> This peculiar concept of unity through leagues and balances that accorded special status to small states is important. It would become typical of the strong notion of polycentricity favoured by subsequent generations of supranational conservatives. It also shows that by this period the Empire ideal had transitioned from a notion of universal monarchy to a system of German and European equilibrium, a loose continental federacy. In this paler form, it survived in the thinking of Metternich and Gentz: as 'the legal community of the conservative states [...] rather than the superstate at the apex of the Universalist political doctrine.'<sup>92</sup>

The Napoleonic period saw the appearance of an important bifurcation in the European outlook of cosmopolitan conservatives that would periodically re-emerge in later periods. Resorting to a later terminology, we might call it the bifurcation between *Abendländer* and *Mitteleuropäer*. The former's outlook became 'occidental', seeing the fulfilment of German history in a neo-Carolingian imperial unity that included France and the North of Italy under Napoleon and his heirs. This position came to be championed by the likes of Dalberg and his close associates Müller and Vogt, who convinced themselves that there was no contradiction between their earlier defence of a reformed Empire as guarantor of German and European freedom and their later acceptance of Napoleon's universal monarchy. Their position was indeed more coherent than it might look at first sight: it could be seen as

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<sup>91</sup> Müller, *Lesebuch*, p.248, 415.

<sup>92</sup> R. Kann, *A study in Austrian Intellectual History. From Late Baroque to Romanticism*, (New York, 1960), p.269.

the evolution of a tendency, widespread among the *Reichspublizisten* ever since the rise of the Austro-Prussian rivalry in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, to identify the Empire with its smaller estates, whose existence depended on the Empire's constitution and which were therefore genuinely committed to it, unlike the two German great powers, who seemed increasingly 'foreign', 'despotic' and 'eastern'. Proposals to organise this 'Third Germany' of the smaller estates as the repository of imperial patriotism and the backbone of the constitution, some of which had been put forward by Dalberg himself, had abounded in the last decades of the Empire, and even the League of Princes in its original conception had had this purpose.<sup>93</sup> The dynastic selfishness shown by Austria and Prussia in the Empire's last decade confirmed that resorting to an external protector like France in the pursuit of a reformed Empire empowering the smaller estates could be seen as a lesser evil. Thus, Dalberg openly presented Napoleon as a new Charlemagne and appointed his uncle, Cardinal Fesch, as his coadjutor, an initiative that ambassadors to the Imperial Diet in Regensburg interpreted as a step towards the re-establishment of the Western, Carolingian Empire. The Arch-chancellor and later Prince Primate himself made no mystery of his intentions: in an 1805 memorandum, for example, he proposed that Italy, Switzerland and the Netherlands should also be represented in the Imperial Diet, who would take the role of an 'Aeropag' for the continent. And Vogt openly advocated the application of the Imperial constitution to a Europe unified under Bonaparte.<sup>94</sup> He dedicated his 1810 book on the history and destiny of the German nation to Empress Marie Louise, explaining that her Habsburg ancestors had borne for so long the crown of Charlemagne, whose glory Napoleon's victories had now restored, sealing a new entente between the German and the French nations from which peace and a brighter

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<sup>93</sup> K.T. von Dalberg, 'Vom Erhaltung der Staatsverfassung', in K.T. von Dalberg, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. H.B. Spies (Aschaffenburg, 1997), pp.685-712; P. Burg, *Die deutsche Trias in Idee und Wirklichkeit. Vom Alten Reich zum Deutschen Zollverein*, (Stuttgart, 1989), pp.8-20.

<sup>94</sup> W. Burgdorf, 'Imperial Reform', pp.404-6. See also K.T. von Dalberg, *Betrachtungen über den Charakter Karls des Großen*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1806), which started life in French and was then translated into German and prefaced by Vogt.

future could be expected.<sup>95</sup> While *Abendländer* looked to a rapprochement between the Empire, primarily identified with the Third Germany, on the one hand and Western and Southern Europe, primarily identified with France, on the other hand, *Mitteleuropär*, even when culturally Francophile, believed that Europe's unity and stability required an independent centre, and typically looked to Austria and the Habsburgs to maintain it. Apart from cosmopolitan conservatives such as Metternich and Gentz, this stance was predominantly shared by Romantic conservatives, to which we must now turn.

### **Ambiguities of the Romantic Conservative Empire**

Romanticism was not an inherently conservative movement. In its early phase, typically identified with the second half of the 1790s and the first years of the new century, it shared some of the Enlightenment's social criticism and displayed enthusiasm for the goals and achievements of the French Revolution. Its conservative credentials were famously questioned by Carl Schmitt.<sup>96</sup> However, in the years immediately preceding and following the formal dissolution of the imperial nexus, the main Romantic authors fell out with revolutionary and Napoleonic France and became firmly anchored within the conservative constellation.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, their writings influenced German-speaking Catholic conservatives for generations, until at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This is why they will be considered at some length here.

Contrary to a once widespread opinion, the abrupt end of the Empire was perceived by many contemporaries as a catastrophic break in a millennium-old continuity and a fundamental wound to the

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<sup>95</sup> N. Vogt, *Die Deutsche Nation und ihre Schicksale*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1810), p.439.

<sup>96</sup> C. Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, tr. G. Oakes (Cambridge, 1986). On early political romanticism, see F.C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism. The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800*, (Cambridge, 2013), pp.189-280.

<sup>97</sup> Epstein, *Genesis*, pp.44-7; F.C. Beiser, *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, (Cambridge, 1996), pp.xi-xxix.

German mode of existence in history.<sup>98</sup> Romantics were amongst those. Their quest for a new conception of order stemmed from an intense experience of revolutionary disorder. In their political and historical writings, which always pursued '[t]he historical explanation of our own age by the study of the past' based on Friedrich Schlegel's idea of 'the historian [a]s a prophet facing backwards', the Empire took centre stage as a symbol of stability, historical continuity and organic growth.<sup>99</sup> Cosmopolitan conservatives were satisfied with the functioning of the multi-confessional post-Westphalian Empire and its place within the European political system. Even when sincerely Catholic like Dalberg and Vogt, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century they valued the Empire's confessional balance, an approach that had been more typical of Protestants in the post-Reformation period. Not so Romantic conservatives, whose thought aspired to be Catholic through and through, and who typically blamed the 'great and general convulsion' of their age on the Reformation's mortal blow to the Empire's and Europe's unity.<sup>100</sup> Far from the Febronian influences of cosmopolitan conservatives, they exhibited a rather 'papist' attitude, which would develop into the ultramontanism of later periods.

#### *Between universality and nationalism*

Novalis' writings implanted some key tenets of political Romanticism in the conceptual vicinity of the medieval Empire. His well-known 1799 essay suggested medieval Christendom's spiritual, as opposed to merely historical, truth as the chief ideal capturing the experiences of order that Romantics were striving to resurrect.<sup>101</sup> Although this essay insists on Christianity as the universal bond of Europe and on the Church as its supranational arbiter, the unfinished second part of Novalis' 1800 novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* was already supposed to present the universal Church's necessary complement: the

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<sup>98</sup> W. Burgdorf, *Ein Weltbild Verliert seine Welt. Der Untergang des Alten Reiches und die Generation 1806*, (Munich, 2009).

<sup>99</sup> F. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Modern History*, tr. L. Purcell and R.H. Whitelock (London, 1849), p.159; F. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. P.E. Firchow (Minneapolis, 1991), p.27.

<sup>100</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, p.159.

<sup>101</sup> Novalis, 'Christianity or Europe: A Fragment', in Beiser, *Early Political Writings*, pp.59-79.

universal Empire.<sup>102</sup> In parallel with the crisis and collapse of the imperial order and the advance of the Napoleonic counter-Empire from France, the focal point of Romantic conceptions tended to narrow down from medieval Christendom to the Empire as a Christian Romano-Germanic synthesis that could once again pacify Europe and restore the Germans to their pre-eminent rank within it. Cosmopolitan conservatives had tended to reduce imperial universalism to a system of equilibrium, and to be content with the Germans' role as its passive centre of equipoise. Romantic conservatives breathed a different atmosphere of national awakening and displayed a more exalted notion of their nation, heir to Christian Rome and federator of Europe. Novalis wrote that '[t]he instinctive tendency of the Romans toward political universality exists in the German people too', and that '[n]o nation can compete with us in vigorous universalism'.<sup>103</sup>

In 1807, Görres argued that 'just as only one Church should encompass all of Christendom, so only one emperorship should enclose the entire political world, and this dignity was intended for the Germans'.<sup>104</sup> A similar Romano-Germanic universality is called back to life in Schlegel's important 1810 Vienna lectures on modern history. This is evident even in the narrative structure, which centres on key figures of imperial history such as Charlemagne, Emperor Maximilian and especially Charles V. The migration of the Germanic nations into the Roman empire was here seen as the trigger of European history, creating the 'manifoldness' that made Europe 'the chief seat of all human civilization'. Had the free Germans been subjugated, 'instead of a Europe, thus free and richly diversified, there would then have been but one Rome, [...] where, instead of the rich variety of European history, the

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<sup>102</sup> Allers, *Concept of Empire*, p.38.

<sup>103</sup> Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism*, p.55; Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, p.284.

<sup>104</sup> D.J. Weiß, 'Joseph von Görres (1776-1848)', in Heidenreich, *Politische Theorien*, p.146.

annals of the single Roman empire would have presented us with a counterpart to the dull monotony of the Chinese year-books.<sup>105</sup>

Every time Schlegel and other Romantic conservatives slammed the 'dull monotony' of a despotic and mechanistic imperialism, they were actually speaking by proxy about the Corsican ogre's rule over contemporary Europe, and their readers and listeners knew it. In France, despotism had become 'an established principle of government', making this nation 'a dangerous neighbour for Germany' and 'a source of disquiet' for all of Europe. The alternative to France's travesties of European federation from Henry IV's to Napoleon's could only be 'the idea of a moral bond of union and an alliance between all Christian states and nations, which had for centuries been the basis of all public relations and proceedings in Germany and Italy, and whose fuller realization had been chiefly prevented by the selfish policy of the kings of France alone'.<sup>106</sup> It was the 'morally and politically great' imperial idea of a 'free confederacy of all civilized states and peoples' founded by Charlemagne and championed by 'the better German emperors, from Otho the Great to Rodolph of Hapsburg'. It should embrace all European nations 'without sacrificing the unity, the free and peculiar national development of any individual people.'<sup>107</sup>

The Romantic conservative enthusiasm for the imperial ideal was not confined to the medieval empire but extended into the early modern period, celebrating the chivalric and universalist ideals of Renaissance emperors Maximilian and Charles V. The latter is the most celebrated figure of Schlegel's lectures, an honourable emperor with a lofty notion of his high office. He is portrayed fighting – and losing, but that only increased his charm to Romantic eyes – with almost superhuman energies against the spirit of his age, in which rulers had begun to care only for their absolute power at home and

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<sup>105</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.5-6.

<sup>106</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.190, 230-1.

<sup>107</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.85, 89.

glorious conquests abroad. His restraint and toleration shielded Germany from religious wars 'while in France and England blood was flowing in torrents'. And he acted as the last dam against the flooding of disruptive energies that subsequently led to wars and to a general restriction of civil liberties and freedom of thought.<sup>108</sup>

While defending the right of historic nations to their individual development, Romantic conservatives never approved the unconditional autonomy of single states sought by modern nationalists. Novalis argued that '[s]tates must finally realize that the achievement of all their goals is only possible through collective measures', and he described Europe as a 'state of states'.<sup>109</sup> Some cosmopolitan conservatives had seen Charles V's rule over the greater part of Europe as repugnant to the ideal of a Christian commonwealth of free nations based upon justice, an inverted pyramid, as Vogt called it to emphasise its unsustainable nature.<sup>110</sup> Schlegel's reply introduced a distinct Romantic approach to the problem of European order, one intermediary between the equilibrium among equals proposed by cosmopolitan conservatives and the imperial hegemony later sought by national conservatives. He observed that 'some central point is necessary in an aggregate of states and nations [...] like those of Europe, [...] some central point, whence a supreme directing influence may radiate over the whole body.' Romantic, unlike cosmopolitan, conservatives, therefore, did not believe that an abstract balance of equal forces guaranteed by a passive centre would suffice to maintain the subtle equilibrium between unity and diversity at the heart of the 'European federation'. An ordering force had to radiate from a recognised centre. The freedom of Europe hinged not on its absence but on its nature. True 'imperial supremacy' had nothing to do with the universal monarchy dreaded by so many, which was based 'upon the dead mechanism of mere selfish despotism', again a not so oblique reference to the

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<sup>108</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.173, 202-3.

<sup>109</sup> Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism*, pp.56, 58.

<sup>110</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.83.

situation of Europe at that time. It was 'a high moral idea' moulded 'by religious and moral principles and objects', 'a just, mild European influence, calculated to protect freedom', 'bound by public law', 'based on justice' and 'naturally disposed to peace'.<sup>111</sup>

### *Catholic Christianity and organicism*

Like cosmopolitan conservatives but in a novel way, therefore, Romantics went beyond a mere 'realist' appraisal of the conditions of European order, perceiving the need for a higher moral legitimation which they often connected with the Empire's tradition and function. In their writings, this legitimation took over a markedly Christian character that it had not previously possessed. Novalis had already argued that 'it is impossible for secular powers to bring themselves into balance.... Only religion can waken Europe again and reconcile its nations.'<sup>112</sup> A few years later, Adam Müller went furthest in incorporating Christian precepts in a conservative political philosophy, seeing the acknowledgment that 'Christ died not only for individual human beings but also for states' as the foundation of a viable European commonwealth of nations. Although Müller, like Novalis, resorted to Christendom more often than to the Empire, a resurrection of the imperial order in a new form was clearly foreshadowed in his concept of European reorganisation. He dreamed of a European 'Council' (*Konzilium*) as a supreme secular authority bringing 'the national and state legal form of the individual European legislations into connection and harmony with the general or international legal form of the whole of Christendom' and forming 'the genuinely diplomatic, apostolic element that mediates between the states' and constitutes 'the real guarantor of international law, of the living equilibrium', all tasks that conservatives with Romantic influences would continue to attribute to the Empire into the 20th century.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.190-3.

<sup>112</sup> Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism*, p.58.

<sup>113</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.154.

The reason for the Romantic conservative dissatisfaction with the balance of Germany and Europe so central to the cosmopolitan conservative Empire should by now appear understandable. For Schlegel, it 'contained in itself the germ of its own destruction', resulting in 'perpetual wars, namely, because the scales of the artificial balance never stand altogether motionless, but ever incline towards one side, or at least appear so to do'.<sup>114</sup> While Müller explained that 'if one understands equilibrium to mean equal growth, mutual upgrade and elevation of states, if one conceives as the result of this equilibrium a great, powerful and growing legal idea and not [...] a mere, pure, mutual restraining, an abolition and nullification of power by power: then I fully agree with it'. For him, 'European international law, equilibrium are expressions which are intended to adumbrate the great idea...' that alone could offer a 'common basis of law and belief': Christianity.<sup>115</sup>

Given those premises, while welcoming the Peace of Westphalia as a necessary pacification, Romantic conservatives also believed that it had enfeebled the Empire too much, opening it to external manipulation and making it unable to actively stabilise the continent. Therefore, unlike cosmopolitan conservatives, they did not celebrate the Renaissance Empire as a positive evolution towards a community of law and a system of equilibrium, but extolled it as the last flare of medieval universality, after which the vital force that animated even its system of justice became spent. Schlegel showed no enthusiasm for the legal system that, after the treaties of Westphalia, had become 'the basis of the entire German constitution', conferring 'this stamp and character of a cumbrous, slow, legal formality', in which petty states prospered by stunting the national pride and commitment of the nobility.<sup>116</sup> Romantic conservatives could actually be as damning as cosmopolitan conservatives of the 18th century 'new political science', 'which calculated not upon the undefined working of moral springs of

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<sup>114</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.10, 281.

<sup>115</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.153.

<sup>116</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.252, 273.

action, but altogether upon the development of material resources'.<sup>117</sup> The language could be strikingly similar, not least because most political Romantics were intimately acquainted with the *Reichspublizistik*.<sup>118</sup> Thus Schlegel wrote that '[t]he period of stern, exclusive, all-ruling military power had now arrived; a system which often paid but little attention to the rights and claims of the less powerful nations, and could not be brought to maturity without occasioning much harshness and manifold oppression'. First championed by Frederick II of Prussia, the new system quickly infected other European rulers: '[i]n their home policy, unbroken uniformity was the object, even where law, and custom, morals, and moral considerations and restraints, stood in the way. Abroad, to attain the rounding off and isolation of the state, none of the sacrifices or exertions would be considered too great'.<sup>119</sup>

However, they always denied that legal forms alone could be the constitutive bond of a political community. Their Empire ideal was not meant to merely transmit direct experiences of ordered life under a secure legal system that protected everybody's rights, like that of cosmopolitan conservatives. It also aimed to revive the practice of an organic and structured political community, of which they themselves had only a limited direct experience, and which concretely took the form of a recovery of medieval and early modern conceptions of order for contemporary use. This operation obviously entailed the danger of a flight from the real conditions of central European order in the early 19th century. The connecting element of the organic political community sought by the Romantics was meant to be Christian love, and its structuring element a neo-feudal hierarchy reviving the corporations and estates under attack ever since the age of absolutism. In the words of Frederick Beiser, 'the romantics believed that the foundation of all true community is an ethics of love, and that love should

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<sup>117</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.300-1.

<sup>118</sup> For an example, see A.H. Müller, 'Ueber die politische Meinung in Deutschland', in *Adam Müllers vermischte Schriften über Staat, Philosophie und Kunst*, (Vienna, 1812), pp.35-47.

<sup>119</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.296, 300.

replace law as the chief bond of social life'.<sup>120</sup> Thus medieval Christendom and the Empire also represented an order based on the concrete connectedness of human beings to each other engendered, in the words of Novalis, by 'faith and love', not by 'having and knowing', the creed of the cold, modern, enlightened state.<sup>121</sup> Schlegel's commentary on Pufendorf's famous doubts about the nature of the imperial constitution is, in this regard, revealing. He argued that Germany was 'an aristocracy of a very special kind: a Christian one. The peculiarly Christian state has not developed so fully anywhere else than in the German Empire. Hence its strangeness and incomprehensibility for all pagans, which is already very visible in Mozambano.' The fading of the 'Christian element' had left the 'Germanic federal principle' unsupported, 'a great revolution' entailing 'the greatest dangers'.<sup>122</sup> We see here the beginning of a long and influential identification of the Empire with the archetypal Christian-Catholic polity achievable in history.

Especially in their early phase, Romantics displayed a strong appreciation for the creative freedom of individuals, but always remained hostile to liberal social contract approaches to the justification of state authority, looking for alternative ways that would express the embeddedness of individuals within their communities.<sup>123</sup> Novalis asserted that 'the state does not consist of individual humans, but of couples and societies', while Friedrich Schlegel wrote that 'there should be as many families and churches as possible as in the Middle Ages not fewer corporations, associations, states within states'.<sup>124</sup> And Adam

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<sup>120</sup> Beiser, *Early Political Writings*, p.xxviii.

<sup>121</sup> P. Kleingeld, 'Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis' "Christianity or Europe"', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46/2 (2008), pp.269-84.

<sup>122</sup> H.C. Kraus, 'Die Politische Romantik in Wien. Friedrich Schlegel und Adam Müller', in R. Rill and U.E. Zellenberg, *Konservativismus in Österreich. Strömungen, Ideen, Personen und Vereinigungen von den Anfängen bis heute*, (Graz, 1999), p.65 n.65. Writing in 1667 under the pseudonym of Severini di Monzambano, Pufendorf, who was influenced by Bodin and Hobbes, had famously reached the conclusion that 'Germany is an Irregular Body, and like some mis-shapen Monster'. See P. Schröder, 'The Constitution of the Holy Roman Empire after 1648: Samuel Pufendorf's Assessment in his Mozambano', *HJ*, 42/4 (1999), pp.961-83; B. Roeck, *Reichssystem und Reichsherkommen. Die Diskussion über die Staatlichkeit des Reiches in der politischen Publizistik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, (Stuttgart, 1984), pp.24-64.

<sup>123</sup> Beiser, *Early Political Writings*, pp.xxiii-xxvi.

<sup>124</sup> Kleingeld, 'Romantic Cosmopolitanism', p.282; Beiser, *Early Political Writings*, pp.164-5.

Müller criticised, among others, the purely institutional conception of the state embraced by the cosmopolitan *Reichpublizist* August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735-1809), to which he opposed his grand vision of the 'organic' state, destined to a long and fortunate life among central European conservatives as an integral part of their Empire ideal.<sup>125</sup> While the cosmopolitan conservative Empire had primarily been a complex legal system legitimated by a venerable history and a moral disposition, the Romantic conservative Empire re-discovered itself as a historically grown, living organism, a spiritual community and a feudal hierarchy. Already before the turn of the century, Schlegel celebrated 'the greatness of the feudal constitution' as 'the idea that everyone should be king', and argued that 'never was there more freedom, equality and fraternity than in the Middle Ages – and these were their best in Germany.'<sup>126</sup> In subsequent years, the constitution of the German kingdom increasingly appeared to him as paradigmatic of this ideal as that of the Empire, within which it lived symbiotically, was of the ideal of a European commonwealth of nations. 'German history, from the oldest to the most modern times', he wrote, 'is a natural and most instructive theory of the true state; that is, of the constitution of the three estates.' Its essence 'consisted in the combination of the highest individual freedom with the closest corporate union', a balancing act that he identified as 'the most difficult problem in statesmanship'.<sup>127</sup>

Romantic conservatives praised the medieval German constitution as a positive third way between the two modern evils of absolutist despotism and revolutionary anarchy, somewhat similarly to how cosmopolitan conservatives had praised the early modern imperial constitution for the same purpose. Schlegel fustigated 'modern writers' who did not do justice to it. To them, 'this variety and free co-operation of powers, as manifested in the institutions of the several estates, and their mutual relations,

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<sup>125</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.150-1.

<sup>126</sup> Beiser, *Early Political Writings*, pp.165, 167.

<sup>127</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.29-32.

appears too complex, and as a mere state of anarchy. These historians desire but one thing in a state, have that alone before their eyes in writing its history, namely, the progressive increase and consolidation of unlimited power and sovereignty.<sup>128</sup> Adam Müller went furthest in theorising the superiority of a neo-feudal Christian constitution of estates as an 'organic' state, a 'community' (*Gemeinwesen*) that rejected the emerging distinction between state and civil society, whose definitive formulation would be offered by Hegel's political theory in subsequent decades and was already adumbrated in his early-19th century critique of the *Reichspublizistik*. Müller's definition of the state as the 'totality of human affairs' must be seen as a sharp anti-absolutist manifesto, not as the prefiguration of a totalitarian order.<sup>129</sup> He saw the state as 'the intimate connection of the entire physical and spiritual needs, the entire physical and spiritual wealth, the entire inner and outer life of a nation into one great, energetic, infinitely moving and living whole', a definition that he readily extended to Europe too.<sup>130</sup> This did not indicate the subjection of all areas of life to a unique political power centre, but the free striving of all human societies and corporations in their mutual relatedness to overcome conflicts and reach a higher form of unity within a structured organic whole. It was, in other words, a principle of 'unity in diversity'.<sup>131</sup> This helps one understand Müller's statement that 'a living or organic state is that which strives for totality, not for a bigger total', another stab at the allegedly artificial nature of the Napoleonic empire.<sup>132</sup> It also sheds more light on how the endless particular societies in which individuals partook, and among which national communities stood out in Romantic conservative thought, could be endowed with their own dignity while also being mere echelons of an endless hierarchy that pointed towards universal totality. The universalism of this concrete hierarchy of being, which Adam Müller placed in

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<sup>128</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, p.95.

<sup>129</sup> A.H. Müller, *Die Elemente der Staatskunst*, (3 vols, Berlin, 1809), Vol.1, p.66.

<sup>130</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.150-1.

<sup>131</sup> P.P. Müller-Schmid, 'Adam Müller (1779-1829)', in Heidenreich, *Politische Theorien*, pp.125-6.

<sup>132</sup> Müller, *Elemente*, vol.1, p.293; Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', p.41.

the conceptual vicinity of the medieval Empire and Friedrich Schlegel already identified with it, was different from the abstract cosmopolitanism of the previous generation and would later become an integral part of the Romantic and supranational conservative *Reichsidee*, which is why it was considered at some length here.

### *Habsburg Austria and the Holy Alliance*

All these ideas inclined Romantic conservatives to pin their hopes on Habsburg Austria as the representative of the Romano-Germanic tradition and on the Holy Alliance as the re-awakener of Christendom. Though not all of them were as damning as Schlegel towards Prussia and Frederick II, none accorded to the Hohenzollern Kingdom the special status it enjoyed in national conservatism (and indeed, later, in Borussian conservatism and much of national liberalism), reserving it instead to the Habsburgs' realm.<sup>133</sup> It must be seen as another feature distinguishing this strand from the other two treated in this chapter, as it also contradicts the cosmopolitan conservatives' emphasis on the 'Third Germany'. Already in 1807 Schlegel argued that 'Austria's only appropriate purpose is to maintain and restore the Christian-German Empire. That is why it must encompass the world and have a policy higher than the merely mechanical, a moral policy, the old Catholic one'. The Austrian constitution was ideally suited for it because it had stayed truest to German freedom as 'a noble alliance of peoples, where each remains what it is and should be'.<sup>134</sup> Still in 1816, Müller echoed him expressing the view that the preservation of true German freedom rested solely on Austria.<sup>135</sup> Schlegel's Vienna lectures celebrated '[t]he idea of Austria' as 'that of a power, whose mission above all it was – in close union with all other states [...] – to be the centre of all civilized European states, to protect the ancient

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<sup>133</sup> Beiser, *Early Political Writings*, p.xxiv. For a more positive appraisal of Prussia, see A.H. Müller, *Ueber König Friedrich II und die Natur, Würde und Bestimmung der preussischen Monarchie*, (Berlin, 1810).

<sup>134</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', pp.37-8.

<sup>135</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', p.49.

dignity and freedom of Germany and Italy, and in general to uphold universal justice throughout Europe.<sup>136</sup> This was intended as a final *translatio imperii* from the dissolved Empire to the newly born Austrian empire that would profoundly shape the latter's self-perception and self-legitimation to the very end, marking that of its once ruling dynasty to our own days.<sup>137</sup>

Schlegel believed that Europe needed a 'Christian universal monarchy based on German freedom and an estates-based legal system', a 'restoration of the Empire and of the hierarchy, only in larger dimensions' at the hand of Germans and Italians, as opposed to French.<sup>138</sup> His transfer of the emperorship to the European level could not have been clearer: 'everything in world history is now evidently aiming at a European empire. The striving for it is unmistakable and also inevitable.' In the crucial 1813-15 period, when it became possible to imagine a post-Napoleonic Germany and Europe, Schlegel succinctly listed the four possible forms of a German federal order: a joint directorate of powers would mean extending into peacetime the tensions of war; the protectorate of a preponderant power would either, if it was too weak, come to nothing, or result, like Napoleon's, in despotic rule; a free federation could not be maintained and would lead to dissolution; finally, 'emperorship, the only one possible'. In October 1814, at the very beginning of the Congress of Vienna, he still expressed the hope that 'the good old days and the legally still in force old constitution will return'. However, the following year, possibly adapting to a political trend that had clearly turned against restoring the Empire, he pertinently observed that the rise of the Austro-Prussian rivalry since the 18<sup>th</sup> century made a formal restoration difficult for the time being: 'because the Empire now hovers in a limbo between Austria and Prussia, there can be no formal emperorship at first, but only a confederation and a balance of power'.

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<sup>136</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Modern History*, pp.282, 147-8.

<sup>137</sup> See chapters 4-5 below. On the concept of *translatio imperii*, see pp.24-5 above and W. Goetz, *Translatio imperii. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschichtsdenkens und der politischen Theorien im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, (Tübingen, 1958).

<sup>138</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', p.62 n.16

He pragmatically offered Metternich his thoughts on the organisation of the *Bund*, suggesting the abolition of serfdom, the restoration of the German Catholic Church and the recognition of full rights to Jews.<sup>139</sup>

Rather less pragmatic were the numerous perorations for restoring the Empire approximately within the boundaries of 1789, which in those same years Joseph Görres published in his influential *Reinischer Merkur*, finally outlawed in January 1816. In this phase of his turbulent and variegated life, Görres' vision of German and European order overlapped with that of other Romantic conservatives. He too supported a return to the universalism of the Middle Ages with its estates-based freedoms and, at its heart, Germany as the titular nation of a reconstituted Occidental Empire, as well as the Church, the other power that united peoples. This new European order should have also remedied the injustice of Poland's partitions. The restored Empire was supposed to have a federal structure, but the powers of individual states had to be limited by a strong emperorship hereditary within the Habsburg family, the only one that had sufficient legitimacy to bear the imperial crown.<sup>140</sup> In those years, however, his vision of the Empire had a remarkably more national flavour than that of, say, Schlegel. In the dedication to Clemens Brentano of his 1807 first truly Romantic work, Görres already displayed a certain delight in the glories of German national history by imagining a visit to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa surrounded by the great German heroes of the past, including Charlemagne. In light of Barbarossa's subsequent fortune as a national conservative imperial icon, his centrality in Görres' early historical imagination is notable.<sup>141</sup>

His German sentimentality centred on the Rhein – where he was born and which he was among the first to treat as a national symbol – and he had reservations not only towards Prussia but also towards

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<sup>139</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', pp.44-5.

<sup>140</sup> J. Görres, *Politische Schriften*, ed. M. Görres (6 vols, Munich, 1854-60), vols.1-3.

<sup>141</sup> J. Görres, *Die deutschen Volksbücher*, (Heidelberg, 1807).

Austria, finding disturbing Slavic and eastern influences in it. After the expulsion of the French occupation forces from his native Rhineland, the restless Görres became, perhaps unsurprisingly, a herald of German national unity, to the point of suggesting that the Netherlands, Lorraine, Switzerland and other areas of historically German culture in the East and North should be included in the restored Empire he sought, a proposal that would be ever present in national conservative thought.<sup>142</sup> Such ideas, in which Romantic and early national conservative *topoi* combined, put Görres on a collision course with the powers of the Restoration, which, unlike other Romantic conservatives, he condemned as a continuation of Revolutionary and Napoleonic despotism.

#### *Notable antinomies*

Görres' thought underlines the first of several important ambiguities, if not antinomies, in the Romantic conservative conception of the Empire, which were pregnant with future developments. The first is its aiming to be at the same time universal in the medieval sense and national in the modern one. Although it was never national in the exclusionary ethnic meaning that national conservatives assigned to the word, it had already moved away from the purely cultural German patriotism of cosmopolitan conservatives. With the deepening of nationalist feelings throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, tensions between the national and the universal aspects of the Romantic conservative *Reichsidee* arose, which were then solved in one or the other direction according to the specific sensibilities of individual authors. In some figures influenced by Romanticism like Baron Stein or usually treated as Romantic like Görres, this already bordered on national conservatism during the period under consideration. Neither cosmopolitan – and later supranational – conservatives nor national conservatives experienced such tensions: for the former, the true interests of Europe could never

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<sup>142</sup> Weiß, 'Görres', p.151.

conflict with those of individual nations, while the latter were completely closed to the notion of a universal mankind to even become aware of the problem.

The second ambiguity is that between the medieval and the early modern Empire. Romantic conservatives anachronistically projected onto the medieval Empire some of the arguments that the leading *Reichspublizisten* had developed in defence of the early modern imperial constitution. As John Breuilly put it, '[o]lder political idioms drawing upon imperial traditions' were 'newly flavoured with Romantic or Catholic ingredients'.<sup>143</sup> Therefore, although the peculiar cosmopolitan proto-conservatism produced by the 18<sup>th</sup> century *Reichspublizistik* was to be gradually forgotten as such, it did not disappear. It was romanticised and absorbed in the neo-medieval Catholic Empire ideal, surviving in it all along, until, as we will see, in the second half of the twentieth century, the new historiography on the Empire pioneered by Aretin liberated it from its Romantic crust and restored it to where it properly belonged, meaning with the history of the early modern *Reich*, with major revisionist implications. This is remarkable, given that the leading *Reichspublizisten* were Protestants. Romantic conservatives, many of which had been raised in the Reformed faith and educated in leading Protestant centres such as the University of Göttingen, successfully 'Catholicised' ideas that had originally been developed in a predominantly Protestant milieu. They paved the way to their further systematisation in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by another Protestant loved by Catholics: Constantin Frantz.

The most important ambiguity of the Romantic conservative Empire ideal, however, is the third one. On the one hand, Romantic conservatism marked the beginning of modern Catholic political thought in German-speaking Central Europe. It strove to revive traditional Christian conceptions of order and to adapt them to modern challenges. It resisted the depersonalising and dehumanising risks of the

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<sup>143</sup> J. Breuilly, 'The National Idea in Modern German History', in J. Breuilly (ed), *The State of Germany. The National Idea in the Making, Unmaking and Remaking of a Modern Nation-State*, (London, 1992), p.10.

enlightened bureaucratic state by resorting to the conception of the organic Christian state, from which the even more modern conception of the 'subsidiary state' would in due course evolve.<sup>144</sup> It even countered the narrow closure of the purely national mode of existence by pointing to the reality of a hierarchy of being that embraced the entire – European – mankind and needed some political expression beyond the individual nations. On the other hand, however, Romantic conservative thought politicised the Christian faith as a counterrevolutionary 'symbol', representing the beginning of Christian identity politics, of an identitarianism with Catholic trappings that already contained anticipations of revolutionary conservatism. In other words, the Romantic conservative Empire could serve both as a Catholic 'symbol' of 'existential openness' that enjoined acceptance of the limits of political and earthly action and as the 'symbol' of an immanentised Christian eschaton that promised the successful pursuit of the millennium on earth.<sup>145</sup>

After all, outbursts of popular chiliasm connected to the Empire had been common among Germans in the decades of turmoil opened by the Revolution and the French invasion of Central Europe. Old sectarian images such as that of the 'Third Realm' (*Reich*) and of the 'Third Friedrich' – the 'secret emperor' who would return to rally a salvation army and rescue the wretched people – resurfaced.<sup>146</sup> No lesser figure than Friedrich Schelling recovered and actualised the archetype of all chiliastic Empire conceptions: the philosophy of history of medieval sectarian Joachim of Fiore based on the 'Three Realms' – that of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit –, though he stopped short of politicising the Third *Reich* as a new 'symbol' of salvific national and universal imperialism.<sup>147</sup> Among Romantic conservatives, Müller came closest to developing a political theology, for example arguing that, just as

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<sup>144</sup> C. Delsol, *L'état subsidiaire. Ingérence et non-ingérence de l'État: le principe de subsidiarité aux fondements de l'histoire européenne*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Paris, 2015).

<sup>145</sup> On Eric Voegelin's concept of 'existential openness', see D. Germino, *Political Philosophy and the Open Society*, (Baton Rouge, 1982), pp.1-26.

<sup>146</sup> F. Heer, *Europa. Mutter der Revolutionen*, (Stuttgart, 1964), p.83. Also see pp.109-12 below.

<sup>147</sup> Heer, *Europa*, p.178.

the Prussian state represented the embodiment of the persona of Frederick II, so Europe had to be understood as the embodiment of the persona of Christ.<sup>148</sup> Whenever realised, this second, 'immanentist' potentiality made the Romantic conservative Empire conception prone to totalitarian distortions. This same ambiguity is reflected in Romantic conservative organicism: on the one hand, it offered a way to reconcile individual freedom and community belonging alternative to the atomistic tendencies of revolutionary liberalism; on the other hand, it foreshadowed the possibility of achieving a reconciliation of all conflicts within the existing body politic, which in practice had to mean a readiness, if needed, to uproot them using violence.

Overall, during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, the Empire 'symbol' (in Voegelin's sense) underwent a process of 'corruption' that was met with different coping strategies. As Eugene Webb argued, 'symbolization, by its very nature, is always ambiguous. The interpreter may trace his way back through the symbol to the experience [...] that engendered it; or [...] he may go astray and attach the symbol to some other real or imaginary experience'.<sup>149</sup> This is exactly what was happening to the Empire 'symbol'. Under the pressure of the pragmatic necessity of effective government and military defence, the 'symbol' was subtly acquiring a new content that mirrored the reduced and more closed form of political existence of French nationalism. A 'loss of reality' occurred, meaning in practice the impairment of its ability to continue to serve for the construction of order in Central Europe, which was impossible on nationalist grounds. Metternich and Gentz, direct heirs to the cosmopolitan conservative tradition, and Romantic conservatives were differently aware of this problem. The former discarded the Empire 'symbol' altogether and concentrated instead on the *Bund* and the 'Austrian idea' as surrogates to recapture the correct experiences, which they deemed irremediably corrupted within the old

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<sup>148</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.154.

<sup>149</sup> E. Webb, *Eric Voegelin. Philosopher of History*, (Seattle, 1981), p.181.

'symbolisation'. The latter retained the Empire 'symbol', but attempted to swim against the tide of history, return to its medieval sources and revive its most authentic meaning. Their endeavour was further complicated by the ambivalence and corruption of their own thought. The most serious corruption of the 'symbol', however, was happening at the hand of nationalists, to which we must now turn.

### **Corruption of a 'symbol': the *Reich* as a national Empire**

The scholarly literature on the emergence of nationalism is immense, and a systematic engagement with it goes beyond our inquiry.<sup>150</sup> Suffice to signal how in Germany, alongside a cosmopolitan and a Romantic conservative strand – and often still intricately bound up with them – a nascent national conservatism was deforming the Empire ideal and appropriating it for its own use, with major future implications. Far from an inherently conservative doctrine, in the German and Central European context nationalism had an even more explosive revolutionary charge than elsewhere. It was precisely by identifying with a return to the German imperial tradition that it managed to acquire a respectable veneer and was for a while incorporated within the conservative movement that defeated Napoleon and re-established European order. A long tradition of German imperial patriotism carried beyond 1806 by the former immediate nobility of the Empire – whose exiled members attained positions of power in many successor states, including Austria and Prussia, and beyond – gave it secure access to the highest echelons.<sup>151</sup> Their early nationalism was different from the liberal and middle-class one of later generations, taking the form of an aristocratic local patriotism combined with a Romantic nostalgia for

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<sup>150</sup> Key scholarly works include: H. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in Its Origins and Background*, (New York, 1944); E. Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Oxford, 1993); J. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, (Manchester, 1982); E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Ithaca, 2008); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edn (London, 2016); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge, 1992). Despite their differences, all these contributions treat nations and nationalism as constructed and modern rather than natural and long-standing, which was instead typical of older studies. This was the view of supranational conservatives all along.

<sup>151</sup> Kraehe, *Contest with Napoleon*, pp.70-1; Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.127.

the all-German framework of the Old *Reich*.<sup>152</sup> Here lay the roots of what would later become national conservatism. The 'patriotic' war of 1809, which both Napoleon and Archduke Carl blamed on the machinations of the emigres imperial aristocrats in Austria's service, served as a catalyst. The latter included such dispossessed imperial counts and knights as Karl vom Stein and Philipp Stadion, the then foreign minister, whose aim certainly was the restoration of the dissolved *Reich*.<sup>153</sup> However, the *Reich* of which they and their ideologues dreamt had strangely altered traits, though not yet beyond recognition. It had primarily become an ideal of national unity and might and, as such, detached from the radically different experiences of order traditionally associated with it. By dressing up their traditional imperial patriotism in the new clothes of nationalist fervour, they were cutting it off from its engendering experience, which was that of a polycentric, cosmopolitan federal and legal order based on strong estates. Paradoxically, by insisting on the restoration of the Empire as a German national polity, Stein and Arndt were subtly abandoning its legacy, while, by refusing to restore it, Metternich and Gentz attempted to at least partially salvage it.

#### *National unity and strength*

Despite nationalist historians claiming, before and after 1933, that he was a precursor of their *völkisch Reichsidee*,<sup>154</sup> Stein's conception of the imperial order was profoundly indebted to that of the *Reichspublizisten*, and especially of his Göttingen teachers Schlötzer and Pütter.<sup>155</sup> His first positive mention of the Empire as a polity appeared in an 1804 letter to the Prince of Nassau, which he fittingly published in Karl Friedrich Häberlin's journal *Staatsarchiv*, whose contributors often lamented the

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<sup>152</sup> Aretin, 'Heilige Römische Reich', pp.80-3.

<sup>153</sup> Kraehe, *Contest with Napoleon*, pp.80-81.

<sup>154</sup> In the 1930s, Erich Botzenhart presented Stein as a forerunner of Nazism, see K. Epstein, 'Stein in German Historiography', *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 5/3 (1966), p.271. Another example is G. Buchheit, *Kämpfer für das Reich. Von Stein bis Hitler*, (Stuttgart, 1934).

<sup>155</sup> W. Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck. Ein Beitrag zur politischen und sozialen Bewegung des 19. Jahrhunderts*, (Munich, 1954), p.18; Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.144-5.

growing disregard for imperial laws and institutions. The letter still showed a conception of *Kaiser und Reich* as the protector of everyone's liberties – especially those of the smallest estates – against the despotism of the big princes that was typical of the imperial knighthood.<sup>156</sup>

However, in subsequent years his view of the Empire did undergo a process of subtle 'nationalisation'. In 1809, he used for the first time the expression *Deutsches Reich* to signify opposition to Napoleon and the obligation of the states of the Confederation of the Rhine to return to their duties of fealty to the Empire, which he deemed legally still extant.<sup>157</sup> From then to early 1815, the *Reich* regularly appeared in his political memoranda to some of the leading European sovereigns and statesmen as the best solution for Germany's future. In October 1811, he recommended a German Constitution 'founded upon nationality, unity and strength', while his March 1813 Kalish Declaration promised the princes and peoples of Germany liberty and independence through 'the revival of the venerable *Reich*'.<sup>158</sup> Promoting the cause of the mediatised imperial knights, whose official representative Count Solms-Laubach was a close associate, remained a key goal of Stein throughout this period.<sup>159</sup> It found expression in his insistence – for example in an August 1813 memorandum to the Prussian minister Hardenberg – that the old German constitution guaranteed 'each of its inhabitants security of person and property' and restricted the 'arbitrariness of the princes' through the estates and imperial courts.<sup>160</sup> He recommended that such devices be adopted within the renewed *Reich* too, which in practice could also mean the re-installation of some knights, or at least adequate compensation for their losses.<sup>161</sup> Even this seemingly traditional identity was being subtly nationalised though: later in life, he repeatedly

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<sup>156</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, pp.18-9; Walter, *Zusammenbruch*, p.37.

<sup>157</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.57

<sup>158</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.49; J. Brand, 'Die Idee des Reiches seit 1806 oder: ein deutscher Wiedergänger zwischen Traum und Trauma', *Der Staat*, 58/1 (2019), p.108; Winkler, *Germany*, vol. 1, pp.54-5.

<sup>159</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, pp.51, 55.

<sup>160</sup> Brand, 'Die Idee des Reiches', p.108.

<sup>161</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.55.

traced his German national commitment back to his origins as an imperial knight, particularly to the immediate status towards *Kaiser und Reich* that his birth conferred upon him, which taught him to have no particular fatherland, but only the general one.<sup>162</sup> Yet, despite his birth and awareness that only a Habsburg could bear the imperial crown, he did have a particular fatherland, as he became a committed Prussian patriot, not least on the ground that 'in Prussia the German spirit is able to keep itself freer and purer than in Austria, where Slavs and Hungarians also intermingle and which is surrounded by Turks and the Slavic nations.'<sup>163</sup>

Stein's secretary Ernst Moritz Arndt was another key figure in the early 'nationalisation' of the Empire. He referred to 'the Holy Roman German Empire, a venerable ruin of antiquity, with a certain magnificence of its own',<sup>164</sup> and had a reverential awe for the imperial idea and mission as the indispensable underpinning of the German unity he so ardently sought: '[i]n all states and peoples', he wrote, 'there is something obscure and secret, that is equivalent to its innermost life, and by which the whole is maintained as with invisible bonds [...]. [...] In Germany, this ultimate common religion bore the name *Kaiser und Reich*.'<sup>165</sup> Like many nationalists, Arndt had begun to love Germany when, after the disastrous Treaty of Lunéville, he started hating Napoleon and 'the French – the deceitful, the insolent, covetous French – for centuries the cunning and faithless enemies of the empire. I hated them with entire hatred, and recognised my Fatherland, and loved it with entire love. [...] When Germany, through its discords, had fallen to nothing, I recognised its true unity'.<sup>166</sup>

Stein's writings too offer evidence of how the new German 'nation' was constituting itself in part through images of the 'alien' that were nowhere to be found – and, in fact, quite unthinkable – in cosmopolitan

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<sup>162</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.70.

<sup>163</sup> Godsey, *Nobles and Nation*, p.242. Relevant information can also be found in: Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.65; Angermeier, *Das alte Reich*, pp.449-521.

<sup>164</sup> Arndt, *Life and Adventures*, p.56.

<sup>165</sup> Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, pp.288-9.

<sup>166</sup> Arndt, *Life and Adventures*, p.116.

conservative literature.<sup>167</sup> At several junctures from the summer of 1808, he worked tirelessly to incite the hatred against the French and provoke popular uprisings against them and their German lackeys that would liberate the fatherland. He saw them as an all-German national act and recommended that local flags be used together with the gold and black colours of 'the old imperial coat of arms'.<sup>168</sup> Arndt, however, could not be satisfied with the mere restoration of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Empire, as his was, in the words of his famous 1813 poem, a mighty Empire uniting all Germans 'as far as the German tongue sounds'. When visiting Strasbourg in 1814, he was overwhelmed by emotions at the fact that, after over a century and a half of union with France, 'the Teutonic language and Teutonic manners' still prevailed among the inhabitants: 'What a country it is! What a town! And yet, alas! We did not take it back and keep it. [...] The magnificent town and its inhabitants, how German still! [...] What a fine strong race they are in this splendid valley of the Rhine. They are Alemanni'.<sup>169</sup> In 1810, 'Turnvater' Friedrich Jahn had connected similar experiences of national identity and exaltation with the Empire: 'wherever the German tongue speaks, people long for a German *Reich*. That is why we want to pray with joyful courage: our *Reich* come!'.<sup>170</sup>

Arndt ridiculed the conclusion of the Congress of Vienna that the peace of Europe required a strong France, comparing this opinion to what seemed to him their wilful neglect of Germany's strength and greatness.<sup>171</sup> In a pamphlet published in the summer of 1815 and significantly titled 'The German *Bund* against the German *Reich*', he contrasted these two political forms exclusively on the ground of the latter's better ability to guarantee German sovereignty and power against foreign influences. He associated the *Bund* with powerlessness and national suppression, lamenting that the Congress'

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<sup>167</sup> Godsey, *Nobles and Nation*, p.225.

<sup>168</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.48.

<sup>169</sup> Arndt, *Life and Adventures*, pp.301-2.

<sup>170</sup> Brand, 'Die Idee des Reiches', p.1.

<sup>171</sup> Arndt, *Life and Adventures*, pp.342-3.

inability to give the Germans back their *Kaiser und Reich* would make Germany into 'grub for foreigners' (*Frass für die Fremden*) and arguing that only war could satisfactorily solve the problem of German sovereignty now. The worst German emperor would have been a thousand times better than 'the most perfect Confederation of Quarrels (*Zankbund*)'.<sup>172</sup> Only a few months earlier, in February that year, Stein's key memorandum on the re-introduction of the emperorship had been written out of a similar disappointment with what he saw as the failure of the Congress of Vienna to adequately rein in the powers of Germany's 'middle states', which he loathed as Napoleon's artificial creation lacking any all-German patriotism, through a sufficiently strong federal centre.<sup>173</sup>

Therefore, unlike cosmopolitan conservatives and differently from Romantic conservatives, national conservatives could not be happy with a constitution so loose that it exposed the German nation to foreign influence and internal divisions. Indeed, Stein's proposals, including those that openly foresaw the Empire's restoration, always pursued three main objectives: securing the primarily German character of the new constitution (he recognised that Austria and Prussia were only partly Germanic, but considered them still preferable to 'foreign' France as protectors); curbing the powers of the 'middle states' through a strong emperorship or at least a strong federal authority that would see Austria and Prussia closely cooperating, a goal that he effectively summarised by stating that despotism and sovereignty should become *Landeshoheit*; securing Germany's autonomy from foreign powers and ability to uphold its status on the European scene.<sup>174</sup> Stein's *Reich*, therefore, was not yet the imperialist *Maachtstaat* of later national conservatives and no longer the somewhat disembodied legal order of cosmopolitan conservatives. It was a rationalised national Empire with a strong central authority that, while respecting their existence, significantly limited the prerogatives of individual

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<sup>172</sup> Tiedemann, *Kaisergedanke*, p.126.

<sup>173</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.55-6.

<sup>174</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, pp.54-5.

German states. The anti-centralist dimension of the old formulation *Kaiser und Reich* was attenuated, while the Emperor appeared more as a wielder of power and enforcer of unity than as a guarantor of justice and diversity.

#### *The Hohenstaufen and Protestantism*

Already in this early stage of its development, this new conception conjured up historical evocations other than the universalist Middle Ages of Romantic conservatives or the balanced Renaissance of cosmopolitan conservatives. The unattainable ideal of Stein's memoranda was that of Germany under the glorious emperors of the 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century, which allegedly held the German nation together by their strength and offered 'protection and laws to many foreign nations'.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Arndt's only criterion for constructing historical meaning was Germany's national unity and power in various contexts and epochs, and he had little doubt thereupon: 'the political strength of Germany has been decreasing ever since the fall of the imperial family of Hohenstaufen.' Ever since, it 'has not been coerced by the genius of some great man, or by common calamity, to unite into one nation.'<sup>176</sup> Compared to the more richly stratified historical judgements of cosmopolitan and especially Romantic conservatives, this was a drastically reduced conception of mankind's historical existence.

Arndt also put forward interpretations that would be greatly developed by later nationalist historians and become integral to the national conservative *Reichsidee*. He blamed 'that singular thing of a constitution which now makes such a *ridiculous and lamentable figure*' on the harassment of the Roman Popes against the German Emperors and on the latter's incomprehensible fixation with Italy: '[h]ad the emperors of the Saxon, Salic and Hohenstaufen dynasties bestowed upon Germany the exertions and labours which they vainly employed for the subjugation of Italy, Germany would now be

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<sup>175</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, pp.49, 57; Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.144-5.

<sup>176</sup> E.M. Arndt, *Arndt's Spirit of the Times*, tr. Rev. P.W. (London, 1808), pp.38-9.

one powerful monarchy instead of being divided into many'.<sup>177</sup> The same emotional involvement with the glorious emperors of Germany's past – together with a good dose of Prusso-German patriotism – is one of the defining features of Schenkendorf's poetry, designed to awaken the national pride of the Germans in their anti-Napoleonic struggle. In an April 1813 poem, the German people invoked the spirit of Emperor Frederick's good, old time of German victory and honour from the 'holy stones' and ruins of the Hohenstaufen castle.<sup>178</sup> In another one that same fateful year, the Germans beseeched their greatest Emperors to come to their rescue in their holy armour at the battle of the nations, loosen the people's chains and give an Emperor back to the Holy *Reich* by taking the holy crown meant for them, 'the star of Christendom'.<sup>179</sup> A third one described the throne of Charlemagne in the Aachen cathedral still mourning the passing of the greatest German Emperor's power. The poet wondered whether it would still be empty for long, whether no Emperor would again sit on it, despite the growing longing of Germany, the abandoned bride, for a chivalrous Emperor that would take her home.<sup>180</sup>

*Kaiser* and *Reich* were here beginning to acquire some of the sinister attributes that, in due course, would have made them into the cult objects of an immanentist political religion of the German nation. The time when the other great European countries were divided and Germany 'really was the most powerful country' became history's focal point and centre of meaning, taking on an emotional quality and a directing function for contemporary nationalists.<sup>181</sup> However, although German history seemed to them of greater import to European mankind than that of the continent's other peoples, they stopped short of calling for a continental supremacy of the renewed German Empire, which was not intended to be aggressive outwards. On the contrary, Stein deemed a strong Germany between France and

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<sup>177</sup> Arndt, *Spirit of the Times*, pp.40-1.

<sup>178</sup> M. von Schenkendorf, *Gedichte*, (Stuttgart, 1815), pp.16-8.

<sup>179</sup> Schenkendorf, *Gedichte*, pp.35-7.

<sup>180</sup> Schenkendorf, *Gedichte*, pp.184-5.

<sup>181</sup> Arndt, *Spirit of the Times*, p.45.

Russia necessary to guarantee an appropriate balance with the other great powers, stabilise the continent and protect the freedom of Europe as a community of Christian nations.<sup>182</sup> The Habsburg Emperors, perfect embodiment of the Romantic conservative Empire, began to fade away in this narrative. They could be celebrated, but only as a thoroughly nationalised 'German dynasty', as in an 1814 poem of Schenckendorf.<sup>183</sup> They could also be praised for their contribution to preserving a modicum of German unity in the modern era and repulsing the Turks, but they were also attacked for their Catholic bigotry and reliance on 'confessors and Jesuitical counsellors' that 'divided the rulers and the nation'.<sup>184</sup>

While cosmopolitan conservatism had been mildly Protestant and Romantic conservatism powerfully Catholic, early national conservatism was virulently Protestant in spirit, although both Stein and Arndt admitted that the Reformation had contributed to Germany's division. During his most radical phase, which lasted roughly between 1809 and 1813, Stein went as far as condemning the defunct imperial constitution as a product of papist and foreign machinations. He combined a fervent Protestant Christianity with a nationalised *Reichsidee*.<sup>185</sup> Arndt too was profoundly marked by the culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Northern Renaissance. His trajectory was even more notable for following a pattern that would later recur in 20<sup>th</sup> century 'revolutionary conservatism'. Only later in life did he develop a patriotism that combined relatively conventional Christian conservative and national liberal elements. In this early period, he was not immune from a neo-pagan fascination for pre-Christian Hellenic and Germanic culture. He sought a renewal of European education based on a concoction of Germanic-Hellenic traditions and a territorial reorganisation of Europe based on a 'natural' order that

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<sup>182</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.144-5.

<sup>183</sup> Schenckendorf, *Gedichte*, pp.156-8.

<sup>184</sup> Arndt, *Spirit of the Times*, pp.45-6.

<sup>185</sup> Godsey, *Nobles and Nation*, p.240.

would follow national languages and 'natural' frontiers.<sup>186</sup> His hatred for France was very different from the intense dislike of its 'mechanical' and 'despotic' form of rule exhibited by Romantic conservatives. It was not limited to the French regime of the moment but expressed a revolt against the Roman and Catholic elements in European culture, combined with an exaltation of its Germanic and Protestant ones.

Already in 1803, in one of his earliest books, Arndt sought to destroy the connections between German and Roman culture while strengthening those with Greek culture and saw Christianity as a product of the declining phase of the Roman Empire.<sup>187</sup> Even after finding his way back to Christianity later in life, he remained virulently anti-Roman. Finally, Arndt already displayed the lust for national uniformity and the hatred for cultural diversity that later cosmopolitan conservatives would attribute to 'frontier Germandom', in which, after all, he – like his associate Schenkendorf – was born and raised. While the geo-cultural horizon of cosmopolitan and Romantic conservatives was firmly 'Occidental' – either in the 'neo-Carolingian' form of Dalberg's circle or in the Central European one of the Romantics, the nascent national conservative *Reich* ideal already rejected the Roman Catholic legacy in favour of a Protestant nativism, at times even distractedly turning its sight towards that neo-Pagan 'Orient' where so much of its future triumphs and tragedies would unfold.

## Conclusion

By 1815, the Empire was definitely history. Its long and multifaced afterlife, however, had only just begun.<sup>188</sup> From the uprisings of its last decades, three distinct imperial conceptions of German order had emerged. None of them confined itself to a merely antiquarian dimension. They all looked forward at least as intensely as they drew backwards. Each could, in some sense, be construed as expressing

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<sup>186</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, p.174.

<sup>187</sup> E.M. Arndt, *Germanien und Europa. Ein Buch an der Schwelle unseres Zeitalters*, (Stuttgart, 1941).

<sup>188</sup> Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, pp.655-86.

a different set of conservative impulses. Yet, none of them aligned completely with the settlement that was emerging from the conclusion of revolutionary convulsions. Each possessed, therefore, a potential variously subversive of the established order, which would manifest itself in subsequent decades.

## II. Possibilities (c.1815-c.1866)

### Context and authors

The five decades between the Congress of Vienna and the end of Austro-Prussian dualism at Königgrätz/Sadowa constitute a conventional periodisation in German and Central European history.<sup>1</sup>

The Vienna settlement defined for the Germans a specific mode of existence in the Middle European space, which the showdown between the two German great powers irretrievably disrupted. This period has long been teleologically interpreted as a march towards the inevitable fulfilment of German unity at the hand of Prussia, reducing the German Confederation (*Bund*) to the status of a constitutional stopgap, supposedly destined to be replaced. Recent historiography is correcting this one-sided narrative in a variety of fields, rehabilitating the Confederation, emphasising the agency of the 'Third Germany' and stressing contingency and the relative openness of options, at least before 1848-50.<sup>2</sup> This chapter contributes to this revisionism in the so far neglected field of the history of political thought. The study of the Empire as a conservative ideal of order confirms the open-ended nature of this process in the eyes of contemporaries. This was a time of possibilities, when competing memories of the only common political framework the Germans had ever known coloured alternative blueprints for their present and future, shaping different conceptions of how they should relate to Central Europe's

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<sup>1</sup> H. Rumpler, *Deutscher Bund und deutsche Frage 1815-1866. Europäische Ordnung, deutsche Politik und gesellschaftlicher Wandel im Zeitalter der bürgerlich-nationalen Emanzipation*, (Vienna, 1990); M. Dermdarsky, 'Österreich und der Deutsche Bund 1815-1866. Anmerkungen zur deutschen Frage zwischen dem Wiener Kongreß und Königgrätz', in H. Lutz and H. Rumpler (eds), *Österreich und die deutsche Frage im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Probleme der politisch-staatlichen und soziokulturellen Differenzierung im deutschen Mitteleuropa*, (Vienna, 1982), pp.92-116; J. Sheehan, *German History 1770-1866*, (Oxford, 1989), parts 3-4; Friedjung, *The struggle for supremacy*; M. Hewitson, *Nationalism in Germany, 1848-1866. Revolutionary Nation*, (Basingstoke, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> N. Hope, *The Alternative to German Unification. The Anti-Prussian Party: Frankfurt, Nassau, and the Two Hesses, 1859-1867*, (Wiesbaden, 1973); J. Breuille, *Austria, Prussia and the Making of Germany 1806-1871*, (Harlow, 2011).

other peoples. While questioning the teleological interpretation of 1815-66, however, the analysis confirms that the period makes sense as an organic whole.

In its first decades, notably in the 1820s, police repression within the *Bund* drove political discussions underground. The debate moved to the historical sphere, with the medieval Empire acting as a proxy through which alternatives to the status quo could be discussed without openly challenging it.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Old *Reich* was still in living memory and represented an uncomfortable recollection for the German rulers that had profited from its dismemberment and were still on the throne. This made the last two decades of the Empire a taboo topic and reinforced widespread Romantic tendencies to flee from contemporary politics into medieval history.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore legitimate and even necessary to treat most works on imperial history from this period not merely as scholarly treatises but also as 'symbolisations' (in Voegelin's sense) of political order. This phenomenon was recognised by qualified contemporaries such as the German federalist thinker Constantin Frantz (1817-1891). In 1865, looking back at the many historiographical works of previous decades, he recognised that they 'have contributed the most to the understanding of the former *Reich*, and thereby also to some extent revived the idea of the *Reich* itself, which is why they are to be regarded as the most important preparation for today's tasks'.<sup>5</sup>

The revolutionary events and politico-constitutional discussions of 1848-50 were a pivotal moment.<sup>6</sup> The Central European entanglement of nationalities and its bearing on the German problem powerfully stood out.<sup>7</sup> The international context changed too, undermining commitment to the Vienna settlement,

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<sup>3</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, pp.11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Burgdorf, *Weltbild*, p.227; W. Burgdorf, "Once we were Trojans!" Contemporary Reactions to the Dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation', in Evans and Wilson, *European Perspective*, pp.74-6.

<sup>5</sup> C. Frantz, *Die Wiederherstellung Deutschlands*, (Berlin, 1865), p.397.

<sup>6</sup> F. Eyck, *The Frankfurt Parliament 1848-1849*, (London, 1968); D. Langewiesche, *Die Deutsche Revolution von 1848/49*, (Darmstadt, 1983); Allers, *Concept of Empire*.

<sup>7</sup> H.H. Brandt, 'The Revolution of 1848 and the Problem of Central European Nationalities', in H. Schulze (ed), *Nation-Building in Central Europe*, (Leamington, 1987), pp.107-134.

emboldening Italian nationalism and enabling the rise of a new Bonapartist imperialism in France. German conservative conceptions of order drawn from the Empire's tradition inevitably had to measure themselves against it, as they had done forty years earlier with the first Napoleonic empire.<sup>8</sup> Despite being a watershed moment in many ways, however, 1848 merely clarified the contours of various strands of thought on the Empire and set the stage for their open clash in the following two decades. The real breakthrough for conservative conceptions of order inspired by the Empire only came in 1866, when the experiences and possibilities connected with supranational conservatism suffered a decisive defeat with the Habsburgs' expulsion from Germany. The ground was prepared for a new German national state which would also break with the continuity of national conservative thought insofar as it excluded millions of ethnic Germans from its borders.

Another notable feature of this chapter is the evolution of Romantic conservatism. In the previous period, Romanticism was still a clearly delineated cultural force identifiable with specific personalities and battling to displace the rationalism and classicism of the Enlightenment. After 1815 until at least mid-century, it represented a pervasive influence on the most diverse disciplines and personalities. Romantic patriotism was present in national conservative celebrations of the Empire, as Romantic universalism was in supranational conservative interpretations. Thus, this chapter does not attempt to delineate the continuity of a specific Romantic conservative take on the Empire, although the thought patterns specifically identified as Romantic remain valid and will be detected in authors with Romantic influences for the remainder of the thesis.

In this period, the late Empire's German cosmopolitanism tended to develop in the direction of a supranational conservatism that valued the *Bund* while pursuing its reform, cherished decentralised federalism and defended the multinational polycentricity it made possible in Central Europe. The most

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter 1 above.

perceptive and systematic theoretician of this supranational conservative *Reichsidee* in the second half of the century was undoubtedly Frantz, who began his career as a Prussian official and diplomat but soon abandoned it to become a publicist. He will have a place of choice in this chapter, not least for his influence on important sectors of German Catholicism after World War I.<sup>9</sup> Although this conception of the *Reich* was already a prevalently Catholic one, Frantz was not the only Protestant to still harbour it. A similar Empire ideal was the political compass of such prominent Prussian Protestants as the Gerlach brothers Leopold (1790-1861), a general, and especially Ludwig (1795-1877), a judge, publicist and later politician. They were both members of the conservative 'Kamarilla' that shaped Frederick William IV of Prussia's (1795-1861) last decade of full rule, starting from his handling of the 1848 Revolution.<sup>10</sup> The Gerlachs' father had trained as an imperial lawyer and passed on to his children his life-long commitment to the political ideal of the 'German *Reich*', which he proclaimed 'closer to my heart than the Prussian state'.<sup>11</sup> This shows that, still in this period, there was a variety of Protestant views on the Empire, some of which were genuinely positive about it.

On the Catholic front, historians Arnold Ludwig Heeren (1760-1842) and Nikolaus Vogt (1756-1836) – who, in 1816, became a Senator in the free city of Frankfurt – were still active in the first decades of this period, as were the leading political Romantics Adam Müller (1779-1829) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), the former as Austrian Consul in Leipzig, the latter as a diplomat and later as a publicist.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> W. Becker, 'Der Föderalist Constantin Frantz. Zum Stand seiner Biographie, der Edition und der Rezeption seiner Schriften', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 117/1 (1997), pp.188-211; I. McDaniel, 'Constantin Frantz and the Intellectual History of Bonapartism and Caesarism: a Reassessment', *Intellectual History Review*, 28/2 (2018), pp.317-38. See also chapter 4 below.

<sup>10</sup> R. Berdahl, *The Politics of the Prussian Nobility. The Development of a Conservative Ideology 1770-1848*, (Princeton, 1988), pp.246-55; Barclay, *Frederick William IV*; W. Bußmann, *Zwischen Preußen und Deutschland. Friedrich Wilhelm IV. Eine Biographie*, (Berlin, 1990); F.L. Kroll and O. Büsch, *Friedrich Wilhelm IV. und das Staatsdenken der Deutschen Romantik*, (Berlin, 1990); H.K. Kraus, *Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach. Politisches Denken und Handeln eines preussischen Altkonservativen*, (Göttingen, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> H.K. Kraus, 'Leopold (1790-1861) und Ernst Ludwig (1795-1877) von Gerlach', in Heidenreich, *Politische Theorien*, p.159.

<sup>12</sup> For Romantic conservatism in Austria, see Allmayer-Beck, *Konservatismus*, pp.33-44.

Joseph Görres (1776-1848), the other prominent political Romantic, continued to be ambivalent. On the one hand, he remained an opponent of the order established by the Congress of Vienna, and his Empire ideal was a concoction of national liberal and conservative Catholic elements. On the other hand, his political thinking too evolved in a strongly confessional Catholic direction and from his circle in Munich, where he was called by the new Romantic King Ludwig I to a history chair in 1827, was born in 1838 the *Historisch-politische Blätter für das katholische Deutschland* (HPB), for over eighty years the leading Catholic conservative journal in the German language, and one in which the Empire was often resorted to as a German Catholic ideal of order.<sup>13</sup> The journal advocated a confederal-imperial German unity tied to Austria and the other central European peoples.<sup>14</sup> Since 1852, it was edited for almost 50 years by Joseph Edmund Jörg (1819-1901), a publicist and politician who served as a deputy to the Bavarian *Landtag* and later to the *Reichstag* of the second German Empire for the Catholic *Zentrum*. His declared political goal in the 1850s and 1860s was the restoration of the Old *Reich* in a new form.<sup>15</sup>

In the second part of this period, when the political debate on the future of Germany and Central Europe opened up again, a younger generation of historians, who had not necessarily known the Old *Reich* directly, took up the challenge of defending the relevance of its universalist and confederal traits in an increasingly hostile environment. They included Julius Ficker (1826-1903), a Catholic from Westphalia teaching in Innsbruck, and Onno Klopp (1822-1903), a Protestant journalist from Ostfriesland who edited Leibniz's papers, acted as court historian in Hanover until the latter's annexation to Prussia in

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<sup>13</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, p.29; D. Albrecht and B. Weber, *Die Mitarbeiter der Historisch-politischen Blätter für das katholische Deutschland 1838-1923. Ein Verzeichnis*, (Mainz, 1990); W. Becker, 'Der Lange Anlauf zur Christliche Demokratie. Joseph Görres und andere Interpreten im 19. Jahrhundert', in W. Becker and R. Morsey, *Christliche Demokratie in Europa. Grundlagen und Entwicklungen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, (Cologne, 1988), pp.1-27.

<sup>14</sup> F. Rhein, *Zehn Jahre 'Historisch-politische Blätter' 1838-1848. Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte des Zentrums*, (Obercassel, 1916).

<sup>15</sup> A. Wacker, 'Historisch-Politische Blätter für das katholische Deutschland', in H.D. Fischer (ed), *Deutsche Zeitschriften des 17. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, (Berlin, 2017), pp.141-54; K.H. Lucas, *Joseph Edmund Jörg: Konservative Publizistik zwischen Revolution und Reichsgründg (1852-1871)*, (PhD, University of Cologne, 1969).

1866, then converted to Catholicism and relocated to Austria. Friedrich Emanuel von Hurter (1787–1865), imperial historiographer in Vienna, August Friedrich Gfrörer (1803-1861), a Württemberg-born professor, deputy in the *Paulskirche* and later Catholic convert, and Constantin Höfler (1811-1897), a Bavarian-born scholar and politician especially active in Bohemia, also deserve to be mentioned.

A different nationalist longing for a renewed *Reich*, however, could also be found in at least two constituencies frustrated by the results of the Congress of Vienna. The first was the primarily aristocratic group of national conservatives from the former immediate nobility of the Empire such as Baron Stein, who had fought for the restoration of the Old *Reich* in a rationalised and nationalised form. Stein (1757-1831) lived long enough to lay the institutional foundations for the patriotic engagement with the German imperial past by creating in 1819 the *Gesellschaft für Deutschlands ältere Geschichtskunde* and the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.<sup>16</sup> By collecting and publishing critical editions of an immense number of scattered sources, over the next few decades the *Monumenta* enabled the extraordinary outpouring of historical scholarship on the medieval Empire that durably shaped the Germans' perception of themselves and the nationalist movement's goals.<sup>17</sup> His former secretary Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860) was active – when not forced into retirement by the governments of the Restoration – as a historian and politician, being a prominent member of the Frankfurt National Assembly.

The second constituency of disappointment was the primarily middle class one of German liberal nationalism, which would be clearly dominant by mid-century. These two constituencies came to overlap significantly in this period, showing how the Empire ideal could conjure up a polity that

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<sup>16</sup> H. Duchhardt, *Stein. Die späten Jahre des preußischen Reformers 1815-1831*, (Göttingen, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> G. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd edn (London, 1913), pp.64-75; H. Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung der mittelalterlichen Kaiserpolitik im 19. Jahrhundert', in Vierhaus and Botzenhart, *Dauer und Wandel der Geschichte*, pp.483-512.

combined national unity with the protection of rights and a lively urban life, thus being appealing to both patriotic conservatives and moderate liberals. Important examples of this overlap include Friedrich von Raumer (1781-1873), Gustav Adolf Harald Stenzel (1792-1854), Wilhelm von Giesebrecht (1814-1889) and Georg Waitz (1813-1886), all deputies at the *Paulskirche* but also eminent historians of the medieval Empire, who had published widely read and influential works on the Hohenstaufen, Franconian and Saxon Emperors.<sup>18</sup> For all those figures and their likes, reconnecting with the powerful medieval Empire was a way to reflect upon how a united Germany could be organised, what was its proper place in Europe and what it could achieve in the present. It was also a way of showing to their compatriots that an arrangement other than the *Bund* was possible and desirable.

Finally, the *Paulskirche's* experience of frustrated liberal idealism, which still had a nationalised conception of the medieval Empire as a central ordering principle, was also the tipping point after which 'kleindeutsch' voices started to gain considerable ground, advocating a total break with the universalist tradition of the medieval *Reich* – and therefore with Austria – and concentrating instead on the long-delayed construction of a Prussian-led German national state. While the thought of both national and supranational conservatives heavily drew on the imperial tradition for inspiration, this distinct strand, which we might call Borussian conservative for its close overlap with Borussian historiography and for the historic mission it attributed to Prussia, radically dismissed it. Those who embraced it were mostly Protestant, strongly nationalist and of a constitutionally liberal inclination. They included the influential historians Heinrich von Sybel (1817-1895), Johann Gustav von Droysen (1808-1886), and Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-1896), all politically active alongside their scholarly pursuits. Sybel was born in the Prussian Rhineland, became a prominent national liberal believing in constitutionalism and

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<sup>18</sup> F. von Raumer, *Geschichte der Hohenstaufen und ihrer Zeit*, (6 vols, Leipzig, 1823-25); G.A.H. Stenzel, *Geschichte Deutschlands unter den fränkischen Kaisern*, (2 vols, Leipzig, 1827-1828); W. von Giesebrecht, *Geschichte der deutschen Kaiserzeit*, (6 vols, Braunschweig, 1855-1895); G. Waitz, *Deutsche Kaiser von Karl dem Grossen bis Maximilian*, (Berlin, 1872); G. Waitz, *Jahrbücher des Deutschen Reichs unter König Heinrich I*, (Berlin, 1863).

Prussian hegemony, but was also lastingly influenced by Burke's conservatism.<sup>19</sup> Droysen, a native of Schleswig-Holstein, was drawn into active politics by Danish encroachments upon the Duchies and was a member of the *Paulskirche*.<sup>20</sup> Treitschke, the youngest, was born in Saxony, made his name as a historian and loather of particularism and later in life became an important national liberal member of the *Reichstag* and apologist of Bismarck's policies.<sup>21</sup> Each of the following three sections outlines one of the three distinct strands of thought on the Empire presented above.

### **The Empire ideal from cosmopolitan to supranational conservatism**

At the heart of the late Empire's conservative political culture there had been a 'rooted' or 'bounded'<sup>22</sup> cosmopolitanism that defended cultural diversity and decentralisation against absolutism and exclusionary identities. These latter tendencies, however, were boosted by a momentous historical force that had first raised its head in the previous period: German nationalism, complemented by mid-century by the awakening of Slavic and other nationalisms, with which it appeared intricately bound up. In the early decades of this period, it was still possible for the last imperial generation of cosmopolitan conservatives to defend the *Bund* as they had previously defended the post-Westphalian Empire: as the 'central state of Europe', as Heeren still called it in a famous 1816 essay. While being the opposite of a 'universal monarchy', it served a universal function by guarantying the balance and peace of the whole continent, and its internal constitution was naturally a matter of concern for all European states.<sup>23</sup> Even Romantic conservative thinkers, who could not warm to the *Bund* as too

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<sup>19</sup> Gooch, *History and Historians*, pp.127-9; H. Seier, *Die Staatsidee Heinrich von Sybels in den Wandlungen der Reichsgründungszeit 1862/71*, (Lübeck, 1961); Southard, *Droysen and the Prussian School of History*.

<sup>20</sup> G. Birtsch, *Die Nation als sittliche Idee. Der Nationalstaatsbegriff in Geschichtsschreibung und politischer Gedankenwelt Johann Gustav Droysens*, (Cologne, 1964).

<sup>21</sup> A. Dorpalen, *Heinrich von Treitschke*, (New Haven, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> On the concept of 'bounded cosmopolitanism', see L. Ward (ed), *Cosmopolitanism and Its Discontents. Rethinking Politics in the Age of Brexit and Trump*, (Lanham, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> A.H.L. Heeren, *Der Deutsche Bund in seinen Verhältnissen zu dem europäischen Staatensystem*, (Göttingen, 1816). See also Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism*, pp.149-51.

artificial an entity, acquiesced to the passive state of the German mass. They praised Austria as the structuring element of continental order, emphasising its Catholic and European vocation. In an 1826 letter, Müller celebrated Austria as the 'old protector (*'Schirmvogtey'*) of the Church and of European peace', while Schlegel's lectures on a philosophy of history in 1828 described it as 'the monarchy of freedom' and the land of Europe's spiritual restoration.<sup>24</sup> Influenced by Schlegel, in his early essays even the leading historian Leopold von Ranke, a Protestant, described Austria as 'the consummation of the German essence' and the head of the European Republic conceived by Charlemagne, which was far from an empty dream.<sup>25</sup>

#### *German patriotism and (Central) European supranationalism*

The 1815 settlement embedded central Europe's constitutional order even more firmly within the fabric of European international law (and hence, the infrastructure of continental peace) than the 1648 Westphalian treaties, in whose continuity it must be understood. Like the constitution of the Old *Reich*, the first ten articles of the *Bund's* Federal Act had become part of European public law with the leading powers as guarantors by being included in the Congress of Vienna's Final Act. And, like the Old *Reich*, the *Bund* was much more than a purely German entity in its political and demographic set-up. Three non-German monarchs were its members – the King of England as King of Hanover until 1837, the King of the Netherlands as Grand Duke of Luxembourg, and the King of Denmark as Duke of Holstein and Lauenburg –, while the ruling dynasties of its states had intimate family connections throughout the continent.<sup>26</sup> It also included substantial non-German minorities within its borders. Most importantly, Austria, its presiding power, remained a multiethnic empire that refused to lead a process of German

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<sup>24</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', p.61.

<sup>25</sup> A. Borst, 'Ranke und Karl der Grosse', in Raumer, Vierhaus and Botzenhart, *Dauer und Wandel der Geschichte*, p.452; Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, pp.83-4.

<sup>26</sup> Aretin, *Vom Deutschen Reich*, p.163. See also V. Press, *Altes Reich und Deutscher Bund. Kontinuität in der Diskontinuität*, (Munich, 1995).

national unification. This cosmopolitan set-up, of course, purposely tried to brush aside how radically the experience of 1789-1815 had changed ideas of nation and nationality. Basing political legitimacy on the ideal of national sovereignty had confronted the French revolutionaries with the problem of deciding who belonged to the nation, transforming traditional ideas of nationalisation and naturalisation.<sup>27</sup> The question of minorities had shifted from being largely one relating to different religions, to one based on ethnicity defined primarily by language and culture. While the religious angle remained relevant, this novel understanding of national identity could and would have a very unsettling impact on German constitutional order.

Indeed, the constitutional debates of 1848-9 made everybody aware that attempts to create a German 'national' empire in Central Europe entailed formidable complications. Some of the *Paulskirche's* most heated discussions concerned the status of Austria within the new *Reich* and the latter's relations with its non-German populations.<sup>28</sup> These included the Czechs, whose historic territories lay within the *Bund* as they had once lain within the Old *Reich*, but who refused, like the Slovenians in the Habsburg provinces of Carinthia, Carniola and Styria, to take part in the deliberations for fear of Germanisation. They also included the Italians of Austrian Tyrol and Trieste, who instead did send delegates. Even more explosive appeared the status of Schleswig – the cause of two international crises and short wars with Denmark in 1848 and 1864 – and that of the Grand Duchy of Posen, inhabited primarily by Poles, but annexed to the stillborn new *Reich* by the German National assembly in 1848. These events directly confronted the romanticised but still ethereal cosmopolitan conservatism of the Metternich era with the implications of modern exclusionary nationalism. They encouraged this cosmopolitan spirit's evolution into a heftier supranationalism that openly harked back to the German imperial tradition.

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<sup>27</sup> On the French case, see M. Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France. The Treatment of Foreigners 1789-1799*, (Oxford, 2000); P. Sahlins, *Unnaturally French. Foreign Citizens in the Old Regime and After*, (Ithaca, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> B. Vick, *Defining Germany. The 1848 Frankfurt Parliamentarians and National Identity*, (Cambridge, 2002).

Thus, in 1849 Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach attacked the ongoing national revolution as a betrayal of the German spirit, whose mission he saw as supranational and universal, in continuity with the Empire: 'the German nation, [...] in whose bosom has lived for a thousand years the idea of the *Reich*, which reached far beyond the narrow barriers of nationality [...], this nation cannot be merely national in the sense that the French and the English are so. The German as such is intrinsically not merely the member of a nation in contrast to other nations [...]. The Kingdom of God is his fatherland. This is the character that differentiates the German from all other nations, the character that God himself has imprinted on her through her history, the character in which her world-historical calling is contained and presaged'.<sup>29</sup> Similarly puzzled by the predominant germanising approach towards other nationalities, in the *Paulskirche* the more liberally inclined Austrian delegate Freiherr von Andrian-Werburg (1813-1858) was among those who demanded that the constitution of the new *Reich* include an advanced system for the protection of minority rights. The task of Germany, in accord with its tradition, was to nurture and elevate the nations of Central Europe, not to oppress and assimilate them.<sup>30</sup> As he had written in his influential 1843 pamphlet on 'Austria and its future', a manifesto of the aristocratic opposition to centralisation in the Habsburg monarchy, 'the Holy Roman Empire, though vanished from the political horizon, lives on in the minds and hearts of its former members, and still powerfully binds them together'.<sup>31</sup> Bureaucratic centralisation and exclusionary nationalism were two cognate evils to be avoided based on a model of unity that would grant autonomy to the various peoples

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<sup>29</sup> Kraus, 'Leopold und Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach', p.177. See also H.J. Schoeps, *Das andere Preußen. Konservative Gestalten und Probleme im Zeitalter Friedrich Wilhelms IV*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Berlin, 1964), pp.62-9.

<sup>30</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, pp.196-8.

<sup>31</sup> V.F. von Andrian-Werburg, *Oesterreich und dessen Zukunft*, (Hamburg, 1843), pp.127-8; Tiedemann, *Kaisergedanke*, pp.145-6. Andrian-Werburg's memoirs are an interesting source on this period and his worldview: V.F. von Andrian-Werburg, *Österreich wird meine Stimme erkennen lernen wie die Stimme Gottes in der Wüste. Tagebücher 1839-1858*, ed. F. Adlgasser (Vienna, 2011).

under the leadership of their traditional aristocracies, resulting in a 'European confederation of peoples'.<sup>32</sup>

A similar interpretation of the imperial tradition as a bond combining German patriotism and (Central) European supranationalism was developed in 1861 by Julius Ficker, for whom the Old *Reich* represented 'neither a Christian world empire coinciding with the unity of the Church nor a national empire in our sense', meaning in the modern sense of the exclusionary national state embraced by the national and Borussian conservatives with whom he was then openly polemicising, especially Heinrich von Sybel. 'The difficult task of doing justice to the purposes of the universal empire and to those of the national empire in one and the same state structure', he argued, 'was solved in the German Empire in a way that history offers us no other example of.'<sup>33</sup> Against Sybel, Höfler too argued that 'this German Empire was a great world-historical necessity, [...] and if [the old Roman Empire] was the grave of all nations, in the [German Empire] the most diverse peoples found great and wide scope next to each other.'<sup>34</sup> The Germans' duty to always incorporate a European vista within their own national plans was equally captured by Frantz, who thought that 'the German mission is the most difficult because [...] all European questions come together in it. It can therefore only be understood in the context of European conditions.'<sup>35</sup> He rejected Prussia's policy of germanising Poles, as much as Austria's half-hearted and unsteady attempts at germanising Slavs and Hungarians. Instead, he proposed a polycentric supranational federation with three distinct nodes: a Prusso-Polish node, which was expected to act as a magnet for the Scandinavian and Baltic lands; an Austrian node, which would organise a German-

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<sup>32</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.272.

<sup>33</sup> J. Ficker, 'Das deutsche Kaiserreich in seinen universalen und nationalen Beziehungen', in F. Schneider (ed), *Universalstaat oder Nationalstaat. Macht und Ende des ersten deutschen Reiches*, (Innsbruck, 1941), pp.78-9. Also quoted in T. Schieder, 'Idee und Gestalt des übernationalen Staates seit dem 19. Jahrhundert', *HZ*, 184/2 (1957), pp.338-9.

<sup>34</sup> K.A.C. Höfler, *Kaiserthum und Papstthum. Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie der Geschichte*, (Prague, 1862), p.50.

<sup>35</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, p.410. Frantz seems to have been one of the first to use the word 'supranational' (*übernational*) in a distinctively modern sense, fully conscious of the meaning and implications of the word 'national'.

Slavic federation in the Danubian basin; and a German node proper, centred on the old imperial city of Frankfurt, comprising the south and west German middle states and expected to act as a magnet for Alsace, Lorraine, Belgium and the Netherlands. This federalist 'trias' would have avoided the danger of a centralised German national state and effectively contained France in the West and Russia in the East.

Unlike the previous generation of cosmopolitans, these supranational conservatives took the challenge of German nationalism and unity seriously, but refused to take 'the path of modern education', which in 1849 the Austrian poet Frantz Grillparzer, whose work often captured the experiences of nascent supranational conservatism, memorably described as going 'from humanity through nationality to bestiality'.<sup>36</sup> Such stances offer a glimpse into the important transition from the traditional Empire ideal to more modern theories of the supranational state, which would have currency among Central Europe's German-speaking conservatives into the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Grappling with the ethnic challenges of German national unification and with the nationality problems of the Habsburg empire, they extended the Old *Reich's* federalist universalism to the protection of the smaller nations' particularity and diversity. The high calling of the German nation was not, as Frantz explained, whether 'to become more French or more English', but 'to understand, spread and assert the idea of the *Reich*', because 'it is of no value to the world that Germany represents a copy of France, England or North America', while 'the creation of a new *Reich* will have universal significance'.<sup>37</sup>

Even some leading British historians and politicians acquainted with German things gave a similarly positive interpretation of the supranational imperial tradition. The Catholic liberal John Dalberg-Acton,

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<sup>36</sup> F. Grillparzer, *Sämtliche Werke. Ausgewählte Briefe, Gespräche, Berichte*, ed. P. Frank and K. Pömbacher (4 vols, Munich, 1960-5), vol. 1, p.500. See also K. Arens, *Vienna's Dreams of Europe. Culture and Identity beyond the Nation-State*, (New York, 2015), pp.61-88.

<sup>37</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.290, 475-6.

better known as Lord Acton and a descendant of the Empire's last Archchancellor Karl von Dalberg, expounded ideas reminiscent of German supranational conservatism and appreciated many of its upholders, including Frantz.<sup>38</sup> He believed that 'those states are substantially the most perfect which, like the British and Austrian Empires, include various distinct nationalities without oppressing them'.<sup>39</sup> He also condemned the centralist tendencies of German and Italian national liberals, saw Bismarck as an evil character<sup>40</sup> and identified medieval Christendom with liberty, authority subservient to law and an organic state structured by corporations.<sup>41</sup> And James Bryce, the Empire's most accomplished 19<sup>th</sup> century historian in the English language and a leading liberal politician, emphasised in 1866 its nature as 'an international power' and 'the fountain of international law', although he dismissed the claim of some supranational conservatives that the Habsburg monarchy, 'the most sordid and ungenial of modern despotisms', could be considered 'the legitimate representative of the medieval Empire'.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Social and political polycentricity*

These conservatives' ideal was a polycentric supranational federation made up of autonomous communities that rejected the centralistic tendencies of the modern state and re-activated the agency of societal groups. Frantz explained that it represented a higher synthesis between state and society: 'it is the peculiarity of the *Reich* that it combines state and society, so that both elements remain independent in their particular sphere, but intertwine with each other in a complementary way [...]. '*Reich*' and '*Bund*' are therefore only two different sides of one and the same entity. We call the whole a *Reich* when we look at it as a totality resting in itself, and we call it a *Bund* when we consider the

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<sup>38</sup> J. Black, 'Lord Acton's Theory of the Supranational State and Today's Europe: Between the Tradition of the British Empire and of the Holy Roman Empire', *The European Legacy, Toward New Paradigms*, 3/6 (1998), pp.76-86; R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, (New Haven, 2000), pp.155-6.

<sup>39</sup> Black, 'Lord Acton's Theory', p.81.

<sup>40</sup> Black, 'Lord Acton's Theory', pp.79, 83.

<sup>41</sup> G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton. A Study in Conscience and Politics*, (London, 1952), pp.73-4.

<sup>42</sup> J. Bryce, *The Holy Roman Empire*, (Oxford, 1866), pp.262, 268, 421-3.

elements it encompasses in their liberty. But the perfected *Reich* is a *Bund*, and the perfected *Bund* is a *Reich*.<sup>43</sup>

He explicitly rejected the identification of the *Reich* with an empire in the mere sense of any big and powerful state. He considered it a distinct form of human organisation, whose essence lay in its ability to organically blend the statist and the societal elements. The Old *Reich* had been chiselled by a wealth of diverse corporative connections, from spiritual to knightly, from leagues of cities and princes to various territories. It had enabled such vitality and flourishing precisely because it was higher than a mere state, a centralist political form that limited the free development of societal forces. In the *Reich*, on the contrary, the vitality of societal forces had formed the most important cement holding the whole together. When the growth of the individual territories' central administration had undermined this cement, the *Reich* had tended to wither into a mere confederation of states; but this process of decay was far from complete even in the existing *Bund*, which had the potential to grow back into a *Reich* if societal forces were revitalised and became again a web that connected the states and overcame their particularism.<sup>44</sup> To succeed, therefore, all merely statist models of unity had to be abandoned, including those dominant in 1848-9, when the *Paulskirche*'s deputies had approved a 'constitution of the German federal state' and fraudulently called it a *Reich*.<sup>45</sup>

Frantz harboured a modern notion of what a vital society that would revive the *Reich* meant. He mentioned literary creations and trade exchanges, but especially industrial and commercial entities that grew beyond the borders of a single territory to stretch over the entire federal territory, such as banking, insurance, railway and stock companies, with members from all over Germany and

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<sup>43</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, p.357.

<sup>44</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.357-61.

<sup>45</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.375-6.

independent from territorial authorities.<sup>46</sup> His approach was to foster the national spirit bottom-up, by encouraging the creation of associations and leagues that would reach across the borders of the German states and make them porous to each other in all walks of life. He also criticised the subservience of evangelical churches to political power in the individual territories as 'the glaring expression of German division' and argued that the German Catholic Church should recreate a coherent whole with a primate at its helm, 'as was certainly the case at the time of the *Reich*'.<sup>47</sup> No other supranational conservative managed to rethink with such creativity the meaning of the Old *Reich*'s federalism for modern conditions. Although they all shared an opposition to centralisation, it typically meant little more than a defence of the *Bund*'s confederal set-up and an argument for restoring the pre-absolutist territorial estates in accordance with art.13 of the Federal Act, never implemented after the reaction of 1819. Early in this period, Schlegel praised the latter as 'the true and only means of restoring the original idea of ancient Germanic freedom in its purity'.<sup>48</sup> While in 1860 Jörg warned the two German great powers that they were nothing without the smaller states: 'Austria and Prussia are no world powers nor will they ever, each separately, become world powers [...]. But in the unification of Germany and amidst all the smaller local powers of the old world, they have a more beautiful and happier task: to make the old *Reich* rise again'.<sup>49</sup>

Clearly influenced by Adam Müller's definition of the state as 'the totality of human affairs', Frantz also creatively drew on Hegel's philosophy of the state to vindicate the distinctiveness and desirability of the *Reich* as a political form. He celebrated Leibniz as the only great thinker of the last centuries who understood the *Reich*, and also commended the *Reichspublizisten*'s contributions. However, he admitted that they were swimming against the tide, as the spirit of 'progress' was on the side of

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<sup>46</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.361-3

<sup>47</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.336-8.

<sup>48</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', pp.45-6.

<sup>49</sup> Wacker, 'Historisch-Politische Blätter', p.150.

rationalists.<sup>50</sup> While many conservatives saw the growth of trade among the German states, the construction of roads, railroads and canals, the spread of gazettes, books and the telegraph, higher university attendance and mobility of the middle classes as mortal threats to the old ideal of *Kleinstaaterei*, Frantz suggested that they could be harnessed to modernise German federalism and revitalise the *Reich's* tradition.<sup>51</sup> His understanding of the *Reich* was also highly perceptive. He grasped that the Empire owed its surprising longevity and resilience to the complex system of flexible networks, diversified bodies and multiple balances it had evolved throughout the centuries. Once these were destroyed and only a collection of well-rounded territorial states was left, it was an illusion to expect the Confederation of the Rhine or the German *Bund* to function like the Old *Reich*. His take on the perils of 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany's failure to overcome the separation between state and civil society was equally profound. The princes' inability to incorporate a participatory dimension in their notion of Germany as a 'federative nation', which the *Bund* embodied as the Old *Reich* had done before it, appears to us as one of the most fateful events of 19<sup>th</sup> century German history. This failure, rather than the more studied downfall of the *Paulskirche's* liberal nationalism, opened the way to the more centralist solution of Bismarck by determining a rupture between the federative tradition and the mounting national forces.<sup>52</sup>

Frantz also had detailed thoughts concerning the institutional and political reforms needed for the existing *Bund* to evolve into a 'tighter *Bund*' and then gradually into a *Reich*. At the helm he placed a

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<sup>50</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.379-81.

<sup>51</sup> J. Paulmann, 'Beginning and End? The Two German Unifications and the Epoch of Territoriality', in R. Speirs and J. Breuilly, *Germany's Two Unifications. Anticipations, Experiences, Responses*, (Basingstoke, 2005), pp.28-9; Breuilly, *Making of Germany*, pp.33-4; H. Kiesewetter, 'Economic Preconditions for Germany's Nation-Building in the Nineteenth Century', in Schulze, *Nation-Building*, pp.81-105. See also A. Green, *Fatherlands. State-Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> D. Langewiesche, 'Das Alte Reich nach seinem Ende. Die Reichsidee in der deutschen Politik des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts. Versuch einer nationalgeschichtlichen Neubewertung im welthistorischer Perspektive', in A. Schindling and G. Taddey, *1806, Souveränität für Baden und Württemberg. Beginn der Modernisierung?*, (Stuttgart, 2007), p.51. Aretin similarly writes that in Germany '[t]he real problem of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, overcoming the separation of state and society, remained unsolved'. See Aretin, *Vom Deutschen Reich*, p.182.

physical assembly of the sovereigns of the individual states, within which a Directory (*Directorium*) of three – representing Austria, Prussia and the remaining states of the ‘Third Germany’ collectively – should be selected. Only if the *Bund* succeeded in gradually acquiring sufficient robustness, a strictly elective – as opposed to hereditary – Emperor could once more preside over it. He then envisaged a permanent assembly of representatives openly modelled on the old *Reichstag*, the creation of a real federal army, a legal community guaranteed by a strong federal court, a cultural community in art and sciences embodied in a federal academy and an economic community organised internally as a free trade area and possessing a federal trade competence.<sup>53</sup> He even had a thought for the mediatised high imperial nobility, carriers of the *Reich*’s tradition who had become a ‘vegetative being’ in the German states and only at the federal level could rediscover their role.<sup>54</sup> This search for more effective federal institutions combined with a rejection of centralisation was also captured in Frantz’ institutional definition of the *Reich* as ‘an association of independent members, each with autonomous authority, but all under an elected head, as the supreme judge and protector. Therefore, the guarantee for the existence of the whole did not lie in the organisation of the central authority, but in the free impulses of the members themselves, and in the free connections that permeated the whole.’<sup>55</sup> In many of his ideas for the *Bund*’s institutional reforms, Frantz was not alone. In 1848-9, the King of Prussia himself fathered several reform plans for the *Bund* that essentially envisaged ‘a reconstituted Roman-German empire patterned on model lines’.<sup>56</sup> And the 1863 *Fürstentag*, a grand assembly of German princes called upon by Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph to work out a revamped *Bund* as a more solid national

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<sup>53</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.302-14, 320-34.

<sup>54</sup> K. Frantz, *Drei und dreissig Sätze vom Deutschen Bunde*, (Berlin, 1861), p.99. See H. Gollwitzer, *Die Standesherrn. Die politische und gesellschaftliche Stellung der Mediatisierten 1815-1918. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, (Stuttgart, 1957).

<sup>55</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.68-9.

<sup>56</sup> A. Schwarzenberg, *Prince Felix Zu Schwarzenberg. Prime Minister of Austria, 1848-1852*, (New York, 1946), pp.116-17.

polity, came up with a similar list of proposals, promptly sunk by Bismarck.<sup>57</sup> The event was openly choreographed to evoke the pre-1663 Imperial Diets, physically attended by sovereigns, not their ambassadors, and thus the federative tradition of the Old *Reich*.<sup>58</sup>

### *Anti-Realpolitik*

After 1848-9, a crude 'Realpolitik' came to be theorised and practiced, confirming the worst forebodings of cosmopolitan and supranational conservatives.<sup>59</sup> In 1866, this produced Bismarck's annexation of Schleswig-Holstein, Hannover, Hessen-Kassel, Nassau and Frankfurt to Prussia, widely perceived as an act of brutal unlawfulness and a paradigm-shift in the pattern of German and Central European politics.<sup>60</sup> The Frankfurt Catholic historian of the Empire Johannes Janssen qualified it as 'truly Sarmatian politics';<sup>61</sup> while Jörg wrote in the HPB that it was 'nothing but the sheer negation of every political form of existence of a German nation' that buried the *Reichsidee*.<sup>62</sup> For Frantz too, through the annexations Prussia had sacrificed the public law order for purely selfish goals. Bismarck's ancient sponsor Ludwig von Gerlach, by then on a collision road with Germany's new strongman, whose unprincipled ways in power he abhorred, also spoke out publicly against the annexations. In a vitriolic pamphlet, he thundered against the heresy according to which 'statesmen would have no higher law than patriotic egoism' and warned that God's moral law stood above whatever 'providential goal' revolutionary politicians invoked in justification of their misdeeds.<sup>63</sup> Even Ranke wrote that the 1866

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<sup>57</sup> E. Deuerlein, *Föderalismus. Die historischen und philosophischen Grundlagen des föderativen Prinzips*, (Munich, 1972), pp.125-7.

<sup>58</sup> B. Rowland and J.C. Easton, 'The Assembly of German Princes of 1863', *JMH*, 14/4 (1942), pp.480-99; M. Hughes, *Nationalism and Society. Germany 1800-1945*, (London, 1988), p.118.

<sup>59</sup> For the relationship between the rise of *Realpolitik* and the decline of the polycentricity linked to the Empire's tradition see J. Bew, *Realpolitik. A History*, (Oxford, 2016), p.65-6.

<sup>60</sup> K. Faber, 'Realpolitik als Ideologie. Die Bedeutung des Jahres 1866 für das politische Denken in Deutschland', *HZ*, 203/1 (1966), pp.1-45.

<sup>61</sup> H. Gräf, 'Reich, Nation und Kirche in der gross- und kleindeutschen Historiographie', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 116 (1996), p.383-4.

<sup>62</sup> Faber, 'Realpolitik', p.6; Winkler, *Germany*, vol. 1, pp.162-3.

<sup>63</sup> E.L. von Gerlach, *Die Annexionen und der Norddeutsche Bund*, (Berlin, 1866), pp.3-4.

peace of Prague was a labyrinth leading into an abyss that 'disavow the principles upon which we stand'.<sup>64</sup>

Like nationalism and centralisation, *Realpolitik* was yet another disturbance in the experiences of order conveyed by the supranational conservative Empire, which included a robust legal system taming and chaining politics. Already in 1817, Schlegel warned that 'the German has never been accustomed to the arbitrariness of the princes and, if old forms and institutions that granted protection have disappeared, their essence must be preserved [...] in some new form'.<sup>65</sup> In an 1831 essay, Franz von Baader (1765-1841), a conservative associate of Görres in Munich, reflected on the illegality and immorality unleashed upon Europe by Revolutionary and Napoleonic rule, while beforehand the German imperial constitution had kept alive 'the idea of and the faith in an international jury court both in Germany and in the world'.<sup>66</sup> The identification of the imperial tradition with a conservative legal order is ubiquitous in these authors' pages, a clear legacy of the previous generation's cosmopolitan conservative literature. In an ambitious treatise on the political systems of the Occident, Karl Friedrich Vollgraff (1794-1863) – a prominent jurist in the Göttingen tradition, who also championed granting a federal legal status in the *Bund* to the former immediate nobility of the Empire – argued that the Germanic peoples had no predisposition for the modern state, needing only a legal order.<sup>67</sup> While Jörg, both as a publicist and a politician, fought for the individual states to recollect their 'fateful togetherness' and to return to the 'primal German community of the *Rechtstaat*, which did not consider itself as the original spring of all rights, but conversely as the protector and embodiment of all well-apportioned entitlements'.<sup>68</sup> Frantz went furthest in critiquing what he saw as a modern neopagan absolutism with

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<sup>64</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.163.

<sup>65</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', p.46.

<sup>66</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.191-2.

<sup>67</sup> K. Vollgraff, *Die Systeme der praktischen Politik im Abendlande*, (3 vols, Heidelberg, 1828); K. Vollgraff, *Die teutschen Standesherrn. Ein historisch-publicistischer Versuch*, (Giessen, 1824). Also quoted in Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, p.398.

<sup>68</sup> Wacker, 'Historisch-Politische Blätter', p.150.

roots in Roman antiquity that placed one, variously defined power (be it the monarch or parliament) above the law. This recently culminated in the, for him, ridiculous provisions of modern liberal constitutions according to which modern constitutional princes could commit no crime, as if they were semi-gods. 'It is not a German idea', he thundered, 'that princes are above the law'. In the Old *Reich*, they could stand before the judgement of the imperial courts and even the Emperor, Christendom's worldly overlord, could be impeached and deposed.<sup>69</sup> Even a detached British observer like Bryce recalled approvingly that '[u]nder [the Empire's] protecting shade small principedoms and free cities lived, down to Napoleon's day, unmolested beside states like Saxony and Bavaria; each member of the Germanic body feeling that the rights of the weakest of his brethren were also his own.'<sup>70</sup>

### **The *Reich* as a *Machtstaat* between national liberalism and conservatism**

Supranational views of the Empire were firmly anchored within the conservative constellation, although more liberal figures, especially of Austro-Bohemian provenance such as Adrian-Werburg, occasionally gave their own twist. Things are less straightforward with nationalist views. In this period, they were in fact more often expressed by liberal figures than by strictly conservative ones. Since our focus is conservative political thought, the space and attention dedicated to such voices need some explanation. It seems justified on two grounds: the first is that many of these 'liberal' uses of the Empire were not quite as liberal as they may seem. At a closer glance, the fascination of sectors of German liberalism towards the *Reich* actually appears as an important manifestation of the generally 'conservative' leaning that the literature has recognised in it, its aversion to revolution and tendency to compromise with established powers.<sup>71</sup> The second is that the central elements of the nationalised

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<sup>69</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.363-7.

<sup>70</sup> Bryce, *Holy Roman Empire*, p.425.

<sup>71</sup> J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chicago, 1978); K.H. Jarausch, L.E. Jones and T.S. Hamerow (eds), *In Search of a Liberal Germany. Studies in the History of German Liberalism from 1789 to the Present*, (New York, 1990); D. Langewiesche, *Liberalism in Germany*, tr. C. Banerji (Basingstoke, 2000).

*Reich* ideal had come from a conservative milieu (the *Reichspatriotismus* of the mediatised imperial nobility, chiefly represented by Stein) and would return to a conservative environment later in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, when they propped up Wilhelmine Germany's imperialist evolution. They therefore represent a relevant 'tangent' to the problem at hand, without which its subsequent developments cannot be fully understood.

### *National unity and power*

The national conservative *Reich* was primarily an ideal of national rebirth, internal unity and external power. It attained a new historical ripeness and solidity in this period. With his 1817 poem 'Barbarossa', Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) solidified one of the most influential national conservative icons of the future: that of the eponymous Hohenstaufen Emperor, undead and asleep under the Kyffhäuser hills, seated in an ivory chair, with his head lying on a marble table and his beard growing all around. He took with him the splendour of the *Reich*, but will bring it back when he wakes on the promised day.<sup>72</sup> The poem powerfully expressed the nationalists' alienation from the cosmopolitan and decentralised *Bund*, and their longing for the Empire's return. The year after, Görres predicted a future of turmoil and revolution for Germany and Europe because a decision had been made not 'to extricate the Empire from its anarchy, and to restore order to its movements', contrary to his insistent demands in the *Rheinischer Merkur*: '[t]hat it is the province of the German to belong in beautiful universality to all nations, is the fashionable doctrine of the day. At once the Swiss, Jew, lackey, and prize-fighter of the whole world, he must never [...] bestow a moment's attention on his country which he sees torn to rags'.<sup>73</sup> In 1822, the German poet, literary scholar and south German liberal politician Ludwig Uhland

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<sup>72</sup> W. Schmidt, 'Der Barbarossamythos in der Revolution von 1848/49', *Sitzungsberichte der Leibniz-Sozietät*, 11/3 (1996), p.63.

<sup>73</sup> J. Görres, *Germany and the Revolution*, tr. J. Black (London, 1820), pp.26-7, 155-6. The original German version was published in 1818.

(1787-1862) published the first modern study on Walther von der Vogelweide, the great high German poet who sided with the unitary efforts of the medieval Emperors against papal claims and the princes' agitation.<sup>74</sup> Uhland explained that the challenges the long forgotten *Minnesänger* had faced in the medieval Empire were equivalent to those of contemporary Germany: nurturing the love of the fatherland, overcoming fragmentation and building a solid state unity.<sup>75</sup> His contribution rekindled Vogelweide's memory in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century imagination as a bard of the *Reichsidee*. A decade later, the poet Karl Simrock (1802-1876) re-edited Vogelweide's works as a contribution to the patriotic fervour triggered by the July Revolution in Paris, whose shockwaves had reached his native Rhineland.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, when the two volumes of his history of Germany under the Franconian Kaisers came out in 1827-8, Stenzel explained how the project had originated at the time of Germany's greatest humiliation: '[i]n 1810, when I began to teach, the idea seized me of writing the history of Germany from Charles the Great to Rudolf of Habsburg. I wanted to tell my fellow-countrymen how bold and free their fathers were and how they maintain their independence.'<sup>77</sup> The same spirit animated Raumer's effort to reconnect with the experiences of unity and pride of the Hohenstaufen Empire and to break the spell of impotence and disunity that had been casted on the Germans ever since its downfall. He presented his 1832 history of the Thirty Years War as a 'mirror in which we can recognize our sins' and concluded it with a quote from a seventeenth-century lament, 'Germany for Germans! Our scepter and eagle are no longer ours, our *Reich* is no longer ours'.<sup>78</sup> The elder Baron Stein rejoiced at this revival of historical

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<sup>74</sup> L. Uhland, *Walther von der Vogelweide, ein altdeutscher Dichter*, (Stuttgart, 1822). From 1820, Uhland was a member of the Württemberg *Landtag* and was later elected to the *Paulskirche*.

<sup>75</sup> R. Richter, *Wie Walther von der Vogelweide ein 'Sänger des Reiches' wurde. Eine sozial- und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Rezeption seiner 'Reichsidee' im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, (Göppingen, 1988), pp.67-70.

<sup>76</sup> Richter, *Vogelweide*, pp.76-8; J. Sperber, 'Echoes of the French Revolution in the Rhineland, 1830-1849', *CEH*, 22/2 (1989), pp.200-17.

<sup>77</sup> Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.75; Scales, *German Identity*, p.20.

<sup>78</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, p.222.

studies, praising Raumer's and Stenzel's achievements as works of scholarly patriotism. A systematic engagement with the early modern *Reich* that lay just a few decades back in time, still within living memory, was nowhere to be found. Instead, visions of the Empire appear very romanticised and usually centred on medieval history up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century crisis of imperial power. The 1846 '*Germanistentag*' – a gathering of politically engaged scholars of the German past in all its dimensions, many of which would be elected to the *Paulskirche* two years later – took place in the *Kaisersaal* in Frankfurt – where coronation banquets had been held in the last centuries of the Empire – amidst invocations to the Emperors on the walls that their past glory may descend upon contemporary Germans.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the influence of the American federal model<sup>80</sup>, references to the medieval Empire were common in the *Paulskirche* and went well beyond mere rhetoric, justifying the claim that its members partly saw themselves as continuators of the Hohenstaufen's work of national aggrandisement. They were at times perceived as such even by their supporters, such as the Austrian dramatist Otto Prechtler (1813-1881) in his 1848 poem 'The Awakening of Barbarossa. At the beginning of the German *Reich* Assembly'.<sup>81</sup> Even the democrat Robert Blum recognised from the left, not without a certain disapproval, the phenomenon's pervasiveness in a diary entry of August 1848: 'we know very well this idea of the old emperorship, one appearing in the heads of the Christian German youth, persecuted and thrown into jail'.<sup>82</sup> Austrian delegates seriously considered taking the imperial regalia with them from Vienna to Frankfurt, the city of the last imperial coronations; and Baron Stein's famous memoranda on the German question were promptly republished for the benefit of the National

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<sup>79</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, pp.31-2. See also L. Namier, 1848. *The revolution of the intellectuals*, (London, 1946).

<sup>80</sup> J. Auderset, *Transatlantischer Föderalismus. Zur politischen Sprache des Föderalismus im Zeitalter der Revolutionen, 1787-1848*, (Berlin, 2016).

<sup>81</sup> Schmidt, 'Der Barbarossamythos', pp.71-2.

<sup>82</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.323 n.38.

Assembly.<sup>83</sup> The historian and deputy Georg Waitz claimed that the *Paulskirche* was in the tradition of the German *Bund*, which in turn had taken over the tradition of the Old *Reich*; while in August 1848, upon assuming the function of minister to Paris of the new German entity, Raumer observed that 'I go to Paris to [...] announce [...] the rebirth of the German *Reich* and, if possible to initiate the rise of Germany as a European great power – is this not a dream?'.<sup>84</sup> And when, in 1855, after twenty years of research, Giesebrecht published the first volume of his celebrated history of the German imperial era, he explained that the term *Kaiserzeit* referred to the highest point in German history, when the nation was united and its emperors determined the destiny of Christendom. By studying it, he hoped to help overcome the current disunion from which the Germans suffered so grievously: '[t]he Empire made the Germans one people. In the tenth century the name of Germans was rare, in the eleventh it was common; and it betokened the people of might, the people by whom things were decided, the people of peoples.'<sup>85</sup>

#### *A Central European imperial zone*

Since their *Reich* ideal gave expression to powerful feelings of unfulfilled imperial nationalism, it is unsurprising that their solution to the nationality problems entailed by German unification was neither a supranational federation nor a comprehensive protection of minority rights. It was the Germanisation of minorities within a *Grossdeutsch Reich* at the heart of a Central European imperial zone. When Adrian-Werburg and others sketched within the National Assembly their vision of a Central European federation of peoples that would protect the cultures and languages of all, prominent members, including historians Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, Georg Gottfried Gervinus and Gustav Droysen,

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<sup>83</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.267; K. vom Stein, *Denkschriften des Ministers Freiherrn vom Stein über deutsche Verfassungen*, ed. G.H. Pertz (Berlin, 1848).

<sup>84</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.323 n.38.

<sup>85</sup> Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.123. Also see Scales, *German Identity*, p.21.

objected that German unity was more important than minority rights, that Czech delegates should speak German in the *Reichstag*, and that the German language should with time prevail everywhere in the *Reich*, including where other languages were now spoken. The most vehement of all was Anton von Schmerling, a leader of the *Grossdeutsch* faction in the *Paulskirche* and a future Austrian minister in the Josephinist tradition of centralisation and Germanisation, which shows how the divide between supranational and national stances could in no way be reduced to that between *Grossdeutsch* and *Kleindeutsch*.<sup>86</sup>

The nationalisation of the Empire – just like its ‘supranationalisation’ – must be understood in the context of a broader transformation of the idea and practice of Empire in Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic Europe, which in the German sphere was accelerated by the 1848 Revolution: from a single universal political order embracing diverse peoples to multiple independent structures of domination based on a centre-periphery relationship.<sup>87</sup> Because, in the German context, both the imperial and the national imagery were related to the Middle Ages, the Holy Roman legacy was increasingly interpreted, through the lenses of the new phenomena of nationalism, imperialism and later even colonialism, as a form of German tutelage over the Slavs. Thus, imperial history was plundered as a source of the German nation’s historical rights over a number of territories and peoples, from Schleswig and Posen to Northern Italy and Limburg, when not the entire Netherlands and Belgium, occasionally even Alsace, Lorraine and Switzerland. Historical revendications were blended with modern geopolitical imperatives and the language of *Realpolitik*, another symptom of the mutation traditional ideas of Empire were undergoing. Thus Arndt – who, as we saw, had made similar

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<sup>86</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, pp.197-8. On the surrender of German liberalism to nationalism, see also Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited*, pp.74-5. On the Germanising trend of Austrian policy under Felix von Schwarzenberg and Alexander von Bach, see Schwarzenberg, *Prince Felix*, pp.57-63.

<sup>87</sup> On the transformation of the concept of Empire since the Napoleonic period, see Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, pp.162-3; Bosbach, Hiery and Kampmann, *Imperium, Empire, Reich*.

arguments ever since the 1810s – proclaimed that the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland should rejoin the *Reich*, reconstituting its historic Burgundian circle. He stressed that the Dutch coast and the big Western rivers had to be German once again, as ‘the global dominance over the seas’ and Germany’s ability to maintain itself as a maritime power against England depended on it.<sup>88</sup> This logic dictated that the question of Limburg be treated unilaterally as an internal German issue, as the deputies duly did.<sup>89</sup> The same went for the Bohemians’ refusal to participate in the proceedings, famously expressed in a letter by the leading Czech historian and politician František Palacký.<sup>90</sup> Arndt’s spiteful reaction was that the land had belonged for millennia ‘to us’, and that one could not grant ‘the great-grandchildren of Marcomanni and Hermunduri’ a right of secession.<sup>91</sup>

The imperial tradition provided an even stronger historical justification for Germany’s overlordship of Italy, one that similarly accorded with modern geopolitical imperatives, such as the need for the new *Reich* to access the Mediterranean sea.<sup>92</sup> Raumer was selected as an expert and rapporteur on Northern Italy on the compelling ground that he was the leading authority on the Hohenstaufen period, and had declared himself against any cession of territory there.<sup>93</sup> Even a group of deputies led by Gfrörer insisted in this context on the ‘age-old’ rights of the German Empire over Northern Italy, demanding that these strategically crucial territory be maintained ‘in its old connection with Germany’.<sup>94</sup> All in all, in this period the need to address the consequences of the East German states’ historical development, which had resulted in the German nation’s lack of clear-cut ethnic boundaries, gave rise to competing imperial prefigurations that would have battled for Germany’s soul for at least another

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<sup>88</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.248.

<sup>89</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.251.

<sup>90</sup> F. Palacký, ‘Letter to Frankfurt, 11 April 1848’, in B. Trencsényi, M. Kopeček and M. Hroch (eds), *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945)*, (2 vols, Budapest, 2006-7), vol.2, pp.322-9.

<sup>91</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.209.

<sup>92</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, pp.223-4, 233-6.

<sup>93</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.232; Brandt, ‘Central European Nationalities’, p.124.

<sup>94</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, pp.239-40.

century. On the one hand, a nationalised *Reich* based on an exaggerated *Grossdeutsch* vision with a civilising mission in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe and an ambition to become once again the hegemonial power of the continent, containing Russia, France and Great Britain.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, a supranational and polycentric *Reich* modernising the German federalist tradition, taming nationalism and overcoming a mechanical balance of power with the ambition to become once again the nucleus of a European federacy. Thus, in an 1848 book Frantz advocated a Prusso-Polish union linked to Germany that would preserve both entities' constitutions, languages and cultures. He wrote that 'Germany is not a national state at all and can never become one. [...] [I]t will not harm the German nation to live in the same house with Slav peoples; and it can and must be just as little our intention to endanger the national feelings of those Slav people who enter into an alliance with us.'<sup>96</sup> Both prefigurations had an important conservative dimension but were also profoundly modern and in some ways visionary. The first foreshadowed possibilities that would only be fully pursued in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second envisaged paths that would not be taken until the second half of that same century, and even then, in rather tortuous ways and in a radically changed environment.

### *Beyond Kleinstaaterei*

These two ideals of order entailed not only different conceptions of the German nation and of its place in Europe, but also of its internal organisation. Central institutions were no longer meant as guarantors of *Kleinstaaterei* and federalism, but as manifestations of unity radiating the strength of the nation internally and externally, the representation of diversity being left exclusively to the individual entities. In a striking overturning of the traditional German wisdom on *Kleinstaaterei*, which had connected

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<sup>95</sup> Brandt, 'Central European Nationalities', pp.114-28; J. Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics. 1848 to the Present*, (New York, 1996), p.15.

<sup>96</sup> C. Frantz, *Polen, Preußen und Deutschland. Ein Beitrag zur Reorganisation Europas*, (Halberstadt, 1848), p.6. See also W.R.C. Chapman, 'Konstantin Frantz: Apostle of European Union', *The Contemporary Review*, 174 (1948), p.31.

liberty and small states, Dahlmann affirmed a link between freedom and power, both of which had been denied to the German nation.<sup>97</sup> Reflecting on his grand plans for a new continental order centred on the German *Reich*, Arndt argued that the new German polity would be attractive because it would combine a monarchical head capable of deploying great power with autonomous leadership in the constituent states.<sup>98</sup> A similar concept had been expressed by Görres when he had written that ‘this Empire was the only true protection and stronghold of Christendom, and a bulwark against internal and external foes, when, secure within itself, its active and animated multiplicity was held together under the unity of an emperor.’<sup>99</sup>

Although its upholders took liberties with traditional conservative principles and were in different degrees influenced by new liberal concepts, this emperorship remained a relatively conservative institution embedded in a traditional constitutional and social order that still assigned a role to the German princes and to the nobility. In a surprising twist, Görres presented the restoration of the *Reich* as a counterrevolution against the revolutionary deeds of the German princes, who had destroyed the immediate imperial nobility and the Empire’s unity, wiping away the ancient liberties of the Third Estate and attributing the name of ‘sovereignty’ to ‘the totality of these usurpations’. In Germany, therefore, the true Jacobins and ‘partisans of despotism’ were the princes, ‘while the friends of liberty defend, in part, the principles of the French Ultras.’<sup>100</sup> Despite his often obscure mythical and poetic language, Görres was well-aware that the estates constitutions of the German states referred to in art.13 of the Federal Act had been hollowed out by absolutism and were by then impossible to resurrect in their pristine form. He therefore suggested reviving the corporations of German society in new forms, recreating an organic structure that would become more monarchical towards the top and more

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<sup>97</sup> Bew, *Realpolitik*, p.47.

<sup>98</sup> Wollstein, *Grossdeutschland*, p.248.

<sup>99</sup> Görres, *Germany and the Revolution*, pp.14-15.

<sup>100</sup> Görres, *Germany and the Revolution*, pp.xvi-xvii.

democratic towards the bottom, where the German commune with autonomous functions should play a central role.<sup>101</sup> And Arndt was a vehement defender of monarchy and nobility against republican ideas, warning, with reference to the French experience, not to introduce ‘the monstrous new liberty which would ultimately subject them to a Dictator’.<sup>102</sup>

The conflict between two different conceptions of Empire and emperorship is perhaps best captured in a confidential exchange of letters between Arndt and Frederick William IV, who were old acquaintances bound by mutual esteem, concerning the acceptance of the German imperial crown that the National Assembly had just offered to the King of Prussia in 1849. ‘Your majesty has’, writes Arndt, ‘[...] declared yourself in favour of a strong, honourable, German federal state, in the place of the earlier unhonoured and decrepit confederation of states. [...] But now, at this moment, Austria, who for three centuries has been ruining the honour and power of Germany by fraud and intrigue, steps in with her old wiles [...] to bring back the old Confederation of States’. He later refers to ‘the poor German kings and princes’: ‘[i]f they do not help to strengthen the state, if they do not make a strong Emperor over them, they will be unavoidably swallowed up in the red abyss’.<sup>103</sup> It is worth quoting ample excerpts from the King’s answer: ‘[y]ou have written me [...] from Frankfort, once the election-place of the Roman Emperors. [...] The great assembly which calls itself the German Imperial or National Assembly [...] has neither a crown to give nor to offer. [...] Where is the Council of the kings and princes of Germany which, according to the practice of a thousand years, elected the king for the Roman empire, and then laid the choice before the people for ratification? [...] The thing of which we are speaking does not bear the sign of the holy cross, is not stamped with the words, “By the grace of God,” is no crown. [...] So long, therefore, as the German rulers have no place in the central power at Frankfort, do not take the

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<sup>101</sup> Görres, *Germany and the Revolution*, pp.194, 250-55.

<sup>102</sup> Arndt, *Life and Adventures*, p.427.

<sup>103</sup> Arndt, *Life and Adventures*, pp.433-4.

highest place in the council which is called to decide the fate of Germany, so long as this central power is the stream of the revolution, [...] so long it has nothing to offer which pure hands may touch'.<sup>104</sup>

Interestingly, in those same weeks, the great historian Leopold von Ranke was secretly advising the Prussian King to accept the imperial crown despite its revolutionary origins, because the German emperors by its very nature would always act as a conservative institution. Ranke argued that the emperors came 'as a beam of light in this chaos', would only deal with a few 'big common concerns' such as defence and customs and, on a Prussian head, would act as the guarantor of the German states' independence. Prussia should have accepted the imperial crown precisely to resist the centralist tendencies of the Frankfurt Assembly, as part of what Ranke saw as its historic mission of preserving the German nation's federative character against despotic centralism. At a time when Prussia was increasingly associated with national unification and Austria with the *Bund's* federalism, the Protestant Ranke seemed to be borrowing his narrative from the rather different period of the League of Princes, when Prussia's activism had indeed been similarly justified. This image of Emperor and Empire corresponds to that developed in Ranke's more historical writings. Ranke argued that, at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the universalist Christian Empire of the Middle Ages had given way to the Germanic federative Empire of the early modern period, essentially an aristocracy based on the community of the princes. This federative constitution still seemed to him the most attuned to the German character.<sup>105</sup>

A different national conservative reading of *Kaiser und Reich* that emphasised centralisation can be found, somewhat surprisingly, in Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861), a sworn enemy of Revolution and

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<sup>104</sup> Arndt, *Life and Adventures*, pp.435-7.

<sup>105</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, pp.148-50. Ranke was the first systematic historian of the League of Princes, see his *Die deutschen Mächte und der Fürstenbund. Deutsche Geschichte von 1780 bis 1790*, (2 vols, Leipzig, 1871).

a defender of a confederal Germany.<sup>106</sup> In an 1848 pamphlet attacking the constitutional proposals of the *Paulskirche*, he presented the *Reich* as a sovereign authoritarian monarchy that few of the *Reichspublizisten* would have recognised, but many national conservatives would come to embrace. Although Stahl criticised the overextension of federal imperial authority over the individual states in the new constitution and pleaded for preserving ‘many seats of independent life’ within Germany,<sup>107</sup> his tune changed when he moved to a legal dissection of *Kaiser und Reich* as defined by the new constitution. He attacked the imperial dignity resuscitated by the *Paulskirche* as little more than a hereditary presidency with none of the old emperorship’s majesty: ‘[t]he German imperial dignity is the visible bond of the unity of the German nation, it is the guarantee of the monarchy, it is the establishment of the relationship between German history and those times in which the German people stood above all others in respect and glory’.<sup>108</sup> The emperor’s task was ‘a unified representation and protection of [the *Reich*’s] interests abroad and an energetic handling of peace internally’, something that pale constitutional monarch on the English model would certainly not be capable of.<sup>109</sup>

Stahl’s most interesting contribution, however, was his distinction between the federal state and the *Reich*, two constitutional concepts that the liberal 1848 constitution had, he argued, mistakenly treated as synonyms. ‘The *Reich*’, he defined, ‘is the form of the original and complete unity [...], whereby the states, being one from the beginning, can have no reserved absolute autonomy [...] on any point. The federal state, on the other hand, is the form of unification [...] which only develops from originally separate states, which then also maintain a sphere of separation and absolute autonomy in this

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<sup>106</sup> A Bavarian convert to Lutheranism of Jewish origins called to Hegel’s chair in Berlin by Frederick William IV, Stahl became one of the leading Prussian conservative thinkers and politicians of the 1840s and 1850s. See W. Füssl, *Professor in der Politik: Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861). Das monarchische Prinzip und seine Umsetzung in die parlamentarische Praxis*, (Göttingen, 1988).

<sup>107</sup> F.J. Stahl, *Die deutsche Reichsverfassung nach den Beschlüssen der deutschen Nationalversammlung und nach dem Entwurf der drei königlichen Regierungen*, (Berlin, 1849), pp.14-22.

<sup>108</sup> Stahl, *Reichsverfassung*, p.33.

<sup>109</sup> Stahl, *Reichsverfassung*, p.43.

unification.<sup>110</sup> In other words, Stahl believed that in a *Reich*, unlike in a federal state, the states did not possess any reserved competences that could not be encroached upon, because the 'constituent power' of the political centre was unlimited. Nothing, not even the very existence of the individual states, was beyond its reach.<sup>111</sup> Stahl felt that the national goal pursued by the German people was certainly a *Reich*, but deemed a federal state more in line with current realities, as the original imperial unity had fallen to pieces and a new unity was now being forged out of a plurality of states that had been sovereign for several decades. This did not mean, of course, that one should not aim to progress in time from a federal state back to a *Reich*, a goal that, all in all, he did not regard unsympathetically. By carrying out a legal analysis of the *Reich* based on the Bodinian notion of sovereignty and on the concept of 'constituent power', Stahl proved that he had completely detached from the experiences connected with the early modern *Reich*.<sup>112</sup> The key achievement of Stahl's political thought in this period had been his ability to offer a conservative redefinition of constitutional monarchy that rendered it compatible with the authority of a monarch who – like the Prussian but unlike the English one – truly ruled. 'Authority, not majority' was the essence of his monarchical principle.<sup>113</sup> His conception of the *Reich* essentially superimposed these results of his constitutional thought on an object that was completely alien to them. Hence his paradoxical conclusion on how the *Bund* could grow back into a *Reich*, which was so different from Frantz'. The conservative federalist had argued that this required a collection of states to develop again into an organic synthesis of state and society. For the conservative

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<sup>110</sup> Stahl, *Reichsverfassung*, p.81.

<sup>111</sup> Stahl, *Reichsverfassung*, pp.79-81.

<sup>112</sup> As mentioned, Pufendorf, who had made a similar attempt centuries later, concluded that the Empire was a 'monstrosity', while Johannes Althusius' analysis, which captured the imperial order of his time quite successfully, was radically alternative to Bodin's. See J. Haas, *Die Reichstheorie in Pufendorfs 'Severinus de Monzambano'. Monstrositätsthese und Reichsdebatte im Spiegel der politisch-juristischen Literatur von 1667 bis heute*, (Berlin, 2006); T.O. Hueglin, *Early Modern Concepts for a Late Modern World. Althusius on Community and Federalism*, (Waterloo, 1999).

<sup>113</sup> Berdahl, *Conservative Ideology*, chapter 10.

jurist, instead, stripping the states of any residual sovereignty to the advantage of the *Reich's* reconstituted unity embodied by an Emperor with real authority was needed.

### **The 'Borussian' rejection of the Empire and the quest for a Prussian-led German national state**

The supranational and the nationalised Empire expressed radically different experiences and evoked incompatible orderings of human communities. But they did share a belief in German exceptionalism because they identified the German nation's calling with the *Reich*. As far as they are concerned, it is therefore accurate to state that 'the conception of a German nation-state was from the very beginning combined with supra-national imperialistic perspectives'<sup>114</sup> or, equivalently, that 'in the nineteenth century the idea of Germany had imperial connotations'.<sup>115</sup> Implicit in these conceptions of order was a belief in what historians would later term the German *Sonderweg*, Germany's exceptional historical pattern as the nation who had once been the structuring element of the Christian Occident. This is what Winkler meant when he opened his ambitious history of Germany with the words, '[i]n the beginning was the *Reich*', arguing that this was 'why Germany became a nation-state later than England and France – and a democracy later still'.<sup>116</sup>

#### *German kingdom vs universal empire*

Borussian conservatives would have concurred: by the mid-nineteenth century, witnessing the same nationality imbroglios that had stimulated supranational and nationalist approaches, they became convinced that the imperial legacy had been and remained the major stumbling block on the road towards Germany's normalisation and the construction of a German national state. Droysen was one of the most prominent professors in the *Paulskirche*, where he declared that Germany must rally behind

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<sup>114</sup> Brandt, 'Central European Nationalities', p.127.

<sup>115</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, p.23.

<sup>116</sup> Winkler, *Germany*, vol. 1, p.4. Winkler's opening was, of course, also a retort to Nipperdey's history of Germany, which opened with '[i]n the beginning was Napoleon', see T. Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck 1800-1866*, tr. D. Nolan (Princeton, 2014), p.1.

Prussia because the place vacant ever since the fall of the Hohenstaufen now belonged to the Hohenzollern. Since he believed that the first attempt to create a German national state had foundered on Prussia's forgetfulness of what he saw as her mission, he started work on his major 'History of Prussian Policy' to remind her of it. He painted the Hohenzollern as nationalist and loyal to the Empire as long as the latter appeared capable of embodying German interest. With the Reformation, however, Protestantism had become part of the German national idea and the Empire's bankruptcy had been revealed without appeal after the Thirty Years War.<sup>117</sup> His arguments were dubious and one-sided. They were criticised as such by authors with more supranational leanings. Constantin Frantz ridiculed *Kleindeutsch* historians like Droysen and Sybel for tampering the historical record: Prussia, far from having had a national vocation all along, had often been a centrifugal force, fostering particularism in the Empire and undermining common institutions.<sup>118</sup> Even Johann Friedrich Böhmer (1795-1863), a Protestant-born historian from Frankfurt and one of the greatest contributors to Stein's *Monumenta*, defined Prussia as a 'stake in the German flesh', historically the main obstacle to the achievement of that German imperial unity that his strong Romantic influences made him long for.<sup>119</sup> And Onno Klopp saw the cause of national unification as a fig leaf that hid Prussia's expansionist design, in the same way that the Protestant cause during the Thirty Years War had hidden petty despots' machinations against the Empire.<sup>120</sup>

Klopp's violent attacks against Prussia and especially Frederick II, themselves not immune from partisan one-sidedness, had become customary since the 1850s, so much that, in an 1862 speech in

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<sup>117</sup> Gooch, *History and Historians*, pp.134-40.

<sup>118</sup> Frantz, *Wiederherstellung*, pp.156-74.

<sup>119</sup> H. von Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte vom deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart*, (2 vols, Munich, 1950-51), vol.1, pp.236-7; Gooch, *History and Historians*, pp.68-71; Böhmer was a crucial figure as a collector of medieval imperial sources and a representative of the Romantic *Reichsidee*. However, he never wrote narrative history that could qualify as political thought, which is why he is not given more space here.

<sup>120</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, pp.32-3.

the Prussian chamber, Sybel whipped Klopp as the 'awkward judge of King Gustavus Adolphus' and the 'annihilator of Frederick II'.<sup>121</sup> In a famous 1859 address to the Bavarian Academy, Sybel attacked head-on the celebratory and nostalgic histories of the medieval Empire produced in previous decades and culminated in Giesebrecht's account. He observed that veneration for the Old *Reich* was only half a century old. Before, scorn had been the most common feeling, as 'under its desolate uselessness the German people felt with profound humiliation like the Cinderella of Europe.'<sup>122</sup> While celebrating the great German emperors for their personal qualities, he argued that their universalist goals had been detrimental to the German nation and that the Empire was a misleading model for the construction of a modern national state. Charlemagne's Empire 'had no national foundation' and attempted in fact to merge the nationalities.<sup>123</sup> The same went for Otto the Great, 'who soared above the narrowness of Germany to high political ideas, that is he preferred a theocratically-tinged world monarchy to a national German Kingdom'. Instead of concentrating on Germany and leaving France and Italy free to develop as national kingdoms, he and his successors sapped the nation's strength by insisting on the emperorship's claims and creating the conditions for the brutal showdown between popes and emperors that left Germany in ruin. Even if the emperors had prevailed, the German nation would have lost anyway, reduced to the role of Spain under Charles V or France under Napoleon I.<sup>124</sup>

Sybel's hero was Henry the Fowler, 'the first King of the German nation, the founder of the German Kingdom, the finest star in the broad firmament of our history', positively contrasted with Henry VI's conquering thrust in every direction, incompatible with the pursuit of a compact national body.<sup>125</sup> In

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<sup>121</sup> Gräf, 'Reich, Nation und Kirche', p.387; O. Klopp, *Der König Friedrich II von Preussen und die deutsche Nation*, (Schaffhausen, 1860). Also see A.F. Gröner, *Gustav Adolph, König von Schweden und seine Zeit*, (Stuttgart, 1837).

<sup>122</sup> H. von Sybel, 'Über die neueren Darstellungen der deutschen Kaiserzeit', in F. Schneider, *Universalstaat oder Nationalstaat*, p.4.

<sup>123</sup> Sybel, 'Über die neueren Darstellungen', p.11.

<sup>124</sup> Sybel, 'Über die neueren Darstellungen', pp.13-17.

<sup>125</sup> Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.125; Sybel, 'Über die neueren Darstellungen', pp.12-13.

1859, the speech was far from politically innocent: Sybel was actually telling the Wittelsbach rulers, whose contribution to the national cause throughout the centuries he celebrated in his conclusion, that it was foolish for Bavaria and the rest of Germany to support Austria's efforts against Piedmont in Italy, thus repeating the mistakes of the Middle Ages. All the exalted national conservative prefigurations of previous decades, including those of the *Paulskirche*, were implicitly condemned. If Sybel's dismissal of the Old *Reich* was still elegant and scholarly, Treitschke's was characteristically contemptuous, mocking nostalgics of the medieval Empire as '*Kyffhäuserdeutsche*'.<sup>126</sup> Even in his early youth, his damning opinion of the Empire was well-formed: '[t]he actions of the Hohenstaufens were self-defeating because they tried to subjugate alien peoples. The history of the German cities, on the other hand, is patriotic throughout; they never aimed at conquest, only at independence from alien rules', he wrote to his father already in 1853.<sup>127</sup>

While nationalists celebrated the Hohenstaufen's power and Borussian historians condemned their universalist aspirations, Catholics such as Höfler blamed their downfall – and the subsequent fragmentation of Germany and Italy – on their relentless opposition to the Church, which allegedly anticipated the Reformation, and on their replacing law with coercion.<sup>128</sup> And while Borussian authors saw the Thirty Years War as part of a longer struggle for German liberty and against 'foreign' potentates (the Habsburgs and the Catholic Church) rekindled by the Reformation, supranational conservatives (especially Catholic ones) interpreted it as a struggle to protect the imperial constitution against an unlawful rebellion and to modernise the Empire as a great central European confederation. Emperor Ferdinand II, to which Hurter dedicated a massive eleven-volume biography, naturally appeared to the ones as a bloody tyrant, to the others as the worthy successor of Charlemagne and Otto the Great.

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<sup>126</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.191.

<sup>127</sup> Dorpalen, *Treitschke*, p.24.

<sup>128</sup> C. Höfler, *Kaiser Friedrich II. Ein Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Ansichten über den Sturz der Hohenstaufen*, (Munich, 1844).

For Hurter, the 17<sup>th</sup> century German Protestantism that allied itself with France was the exact antecedent of the post-1789 alliance between Revolutionary France and some German princes, which in both cases justified a counter-revolution led by Austria.<sup>129</sup>

#### *German Protestantism vs syncretistic Christianity*

Although figures like Droysen, Sybel and Treitschke were *Kleindeutsch* liberal nationalists who opposed Bismarck's conservative policies until the mid-1860s, they became his key parliamentary support after Königgrätz/Sadowa, giving political and ideological shape to a national liberalism that had conservative traits and was coopted within the conservative establishment. They saw the Empire as the expression of an alien anti-national influence, while 1866 was 'the triumph of the real German spirit of 1517 and 1813 over the false Roman one', represented by Austria and Catholicism, as Droysen wrote.<sup>130</sup> Their works typically extolled the Protestant German princes as defenders of the German nation against the encroachment of a universalist Catholic monarchy, despite the obvious fact that they had divided the *Reich* in the process.<sup>131</sup> While Treitschke had already thundered in a youthful speech that 'Austria cannot give us what we want, for she is neither free nor German.'<sup>132</sup> And Sybel, following in Luther's footsteps, rejected the theory of a *translatio imperii* from the Romans to the Germans, insisting that the Roman empire had long fallen into ruin by the time of Charlemagne, so that the *Reich* of later times represented a break with the Roman imperial tradition and not an element of continuity with it.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, pp.30-2; F.E. von Hurter-Ammann, *Geschichte Kaiser Ferdinands II. und seiner Eltern*, (11 vols, Schaffhausen, 1850-1864).

<sup>130</sup> Faber, 'Realpolitik', p.35; A.M. Birke, 'German Catholics and the Quest for National Unity', in Schulze, *Nation-Building*, p.59. On Sybel's dislike of Austria and distaste for Catholicism as anti-national, see Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.143.

<sup>131</sup> Gräf, 'Reich, Nation und Kirche', p.374.

<sup>132</sup> Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.149.

<sup>133</sup> Winkler, *Germany*, vol.1, p.31.

The militant German Protestantism of Borussian authors contrasted with the ecumenical Christianity of supranational conservatives. In the previous period, cosmopolitan conservatives had been predominantly Protestant and Romantic conservatives decidedly Catholic. Since, as mentioned, supranational conservative authors combined elements of both strands, it is unsurprising that, in this period, especially before 1848, their thought cut across confessional divides and often exhibited a rather syncretistic Christianity. Schlegel thought that renewing the Christian foundation of European politics required overcoming confessional divisions in the spirit of the Holy Alliance, struck by a Catholic, a Protestant and an Orthodox sovereign;<sup>134</sup> so did Baader, who advocated a Christian European confederation based on the brotherhood between the three Christian confessions, an ideal that was reminiscent of Leibniz' imperial ecumenism.<sup>135</sup> The aged Vogt had a similarly positive opinion of the Holy Alliance and argued that the 'European-Christian Republic' owed its moral restoration to the Christian religion, while Germans had allowed it to discover true freedom and the best political order: 'Christ and Charlemagne', he summarised, clearly referring to the imperial tradition.<sup>136</sup> Even Ranke, for whom the early modern Empire represented a Germanic federative polity and the Reformation the true German religion, judged the Peace of Augsburg positively as a step towards the juridification of the Empire as a multi-confessional polity, while Droysen saw it as a national catastrophe.<sup>137</sup> And Frederick William IV, known for its policy of Church unity in Prussia, was animated by a burning desire for Austria to restore the imperial crown of Charlemagne, to which he would willingly submit, with a view to creating an alliance of all European states with the concurrence of the Pope.<sup>138</sup> In 1842, he famously presided over a solemn ceremony to mark the commencement of work to

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<sup>134</sup> Kraus, 'Politische Romantik', p.46.

<sup>135</sup> Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke*, pp.191-2.

<sup>136</sup> N. Vogt, *Geschichte des Verfalls und Untergangs der Rheinischen Staaten des alten Deutschen Reichs*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1833), pp.I-III.

<sup>137</sup> Gräf, 'Reich, Nation und Kirche', pp.376-8

<sup>138</sup> Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism*, p.192.

complete the great medieval cathedral of Cologne, a celebration of both German greatness and of the symbolic reconciliation of the confessions.<sup>139</sup> His intense German patriotism was indeed inseparable from the religious and historical traditions of the medieval Empire, the most illustrious victim of the Revolution he loathed.<sup>140</sup> And the King's close associate Ludwig von Gerlach, though profoundly marked by the neo-pietist movement of religious renewal known as the 'Awakening',<sup>141</sup> began his public career after the 1830 Paris revolution by founding an interconfessional conservative journal and ended it as a honorary member of the Catholic *Zentrumspartei* and sworn enemy of his old protégé Bismarck.<sup>142</sup>

#### *Centralisation, Realpolitik and Gnosticism*

While the Empire ideal of national conservatives still implied a federalist dimension that gave organised representation to the 'tribes' making up the German nation, Borussian thinkers advocated a much more homogenous national body and were even more contemptuous of *Kleinstaaterei*. Droysen declared that the age of small states was over for Germany. Centralisation appeared necessary to tackle the same security challenges, such as the rise of 'world powers' like England and Russia, that Frantz had argued could only be solved through polycentricity and (Central) European unity.<sup>143</sup> In the same spirit, Sybel argued that the Revolution, the destruction of Poland and the fall of the Empire 'are connected, for their foundation is the same. In each it is the Middle Ages which are crumbling away. Everywhere a new policy triumphs, the modern military monarchy, levelling and centralising.'<sup>144</sup> He did not lament it: he celebrated it. The most violent Borussian opponent of small states was the Saxon-born

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<sup>139</sup> Winkler, *Germany*, vol. 1, p.81.

<sup>140</sup> Barclay, *Frederick William IV*, pp.30-2.

<sup>141</sup> C.M. Clark, 'The Politics of Revival. Pietists, Aristocrats, and the State Church in Early Nineteenth-Century Prussia', in Jones and Retallack, *German Conservatism*, pp.31-60; Barclay, *Frederick William IV*, pp.33-4.

<sup>142</sup> Schoeps, *Andere Preußen*, pp.11-14, 69-76.

<sup>143</sup> Bew, *Realpolitik*, p.45.

<sup>144</sup> Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.143.

Treitschke, to the great dismay of his father, a traditional small-state conservative. Already in his dissertation on the 'science of society', which he wrote in his early twenties, he dismissed society as an abstraction and focused on the state, 'society in its uniformly ordered existence', which encompassed all manifestations of social activity and offered the only meaningful framework for national life. Those who inquired into society as an entity in its own right had resigned to Germany's weak pseudo-states. Like Hegel, Treitschke saw society as a shapeless jungle of conflicting interests, and the state as the embodiment of the nation's moral energies. His ideal German state was a monarchy limited by an elitist parliament made up of representatives from the aristocracy and the middle class.<sup>145</sup> It had nothing in common with Frantz' notion of the *Reich* as an organic synthesis of state and society, and it had to be forged with the sword through Prussia's annexation of the smaller states.

As mentioned, these annexations were an important turning point. They changed the constellation of powers on the ground, triggered a lively debate and marked a re-orientation of the German understanding of politics away from the law and tradition embodied by the Old *Reich*, which is why this chapter ends in 1866. In sharp contrast with the supranational conservative assessments reported above, the liberal Ludwig von Rochau (1810-73), inventor of the term and concept of *Realpolitik*, referred to the leaving conditions (*Lebensbedingungen*) of the nation to justify the annexations, dismissing the jurists' outmoded search for existing rights as a valid ground for conquest and proclaiming that 'success is the verdict of history, of the "world court" of highest instance, from which there is no appeal in human things'.<sup>146</sup> Already in 1864, one year after accepting a chair at Freiburg, Treitschke had published a famous essay in which he let loose his hatred of particularism, advocated

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<sup>145</sup> Dorpalen, *Treitschke*, pp.47-8.

<sup>146</sup> Faber, 'Realpolitik', p.22.

a unitary state and urged Prussia to attack the small states.<sup>147</sup> In a pamphlet right after Prussia's victory against Austria, he again demanded their annexation, as they were 'ripe and over-ripe for the annihilation they deserve'.<sup>148</sup> An avid reader of Rochau and unscrupulous supporter of *Realpolitik*, in 1862 he authored a best-selling history of the Teutonic Order that began to forge the Borussian and national conservative myth of the Teutonic Knights as the Nordic Great Power of the Middle Ages, which had then passed the baton to Prussia, preparing its national destiny. He openly celebrated the 'aggressive strength and haughty, pitiless hardness' of the knights towards the Slavs as a positive model for the present.<sup>149</sup> In a sense, he inaugurated the very German specialty of *Ostforschung*, which would study the Germans' medieval expansion eastwards as a source of modern imperial rights over Slavic nations.<sup>150</sup>

Well before Rochau and Treitschke, the way had been prepared by the towering figure of the mature Hegel, who had developed insights already contained in his early 19<sup>th</sup> century critique of the imperial constitution and justified existing reality, even when brought about by force, in the name of the identity between the ideal and the real. In fact, Hegel's very idea of the state as 'the way of God in the world' has been traced back to a distorted and immanentised memory of the *Holy Reich*, in which sacred kings and, next to them, the priests of 'reason', with Hegel himself at their helm, administered salvation.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, Borussian conservatism was often associated with a theology of national liberation centered on the Reformation. It cast the Germans as the chosen people to be delivered from bondage and Martin Luther as their liberator from the universalist clutches of the medieval Church. It

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<sup>147</sup> H. von Treitschke, *Bundesstaat und Einheitsstaat*, in *Historische und politische Aufsätze*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (3 vols, Leipzig, 1871), vol.2, pp.77-241.

<sup>148</sup> H. von Treitschke, *Die Zukunft der norddeutschen Mittelstaaten*, (Berlin, 1866), p.8; Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.150.

<sup>149</sup> Scales, *German Identity*, p.24.

<sup>150</sup> V. Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East. 1800 to the Present*, (Oxford, 2009), pp.90-3.

<sup>151</sup> Heer, *Europa*, p.210. See also Kieseewetter, *Von Hegel zu Hitler*.

was a 'secularized Old Testament narrative adapted to the needs of nineteenth-century nation building'.<sup>152</sup> The Protestant Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus was thus turned into a German national hero and 'saviour' who fought to liberate the German protestants from the foreign tyranny of the Catholic Habsburgs, dismantling the decrepit Empire and replacing it with a unified Protestant German *Reich* centred on the Northern Protestant states. Commemorative ceremonies were held in his honour, and he was associated in poems and proclamations to Charlemagne and Otto the Great.<sup>153</sup> 'The mystical bodies of the nations [...]', Voegelin wrote of this phenomenon more generally, 'began to substitute themselves for the mystical body of Christ. Nationalism [...] as a spiritual force, arrogating to itself the claims of absoluteness that formerly were the prerogatives of imperial Christianity.'<sup>154</sup>

## Conclusion

By 1866, the essential strands of conservative thought on the Empire were formed, ready to evolve and combine in creative ways in the following periods. Beforehand, each of them had aligned with political possibilities that numerous informed contemporaries thought perfectly realistic – and which therefore historians would be well advised to take seriously<sup>155</sup> –, though their relative likelihood shifted with events: developing the German Confederation into a great, peaceful, multinational commonwealth in Europe's heart; unifying Germany as a modern national Empire with some Slavic dependencies in the East; creating a Prussian-led German national state excluding Austria. The events of 1866-7 realised one such possibility and closed the others for the time being. They also interrupted ongoing quests – such as that for multinational coexistence as opposed to ethnic homogeneity – that might have resulted in alternative cultural and political arrangements.

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<sup>152</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, p.55. For an example, see G. Freytag, *Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit*, (4 vols, Leipzig, 1859-67).

<sup>153</sup> Cramer, *Thirty Years War*, chapter 2.

<sup>154</sup> Voegelin, *Revolution and the New Science*, p.72.

<sup>155</sup> N. Ferguson (ed), *Virtual History. Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, (London, 2011), pp.1-90.

By then, defenders of a cosmopolitan imperial ideal in Central Europe had an even harder task than the immediate post-1815 generation, which could at least build on the real-existing framework of the *Bund* as a potential basis from which to realise their goals. Their views had previously aligned with powerful constituencies, from the 'Third Germany', which wanted to maintain its autonomy, to Austria, which aimed to reconcile its role in German national affairs with its nature as a multinational empire. The exclusion of Austria, the aggrandisement of Prussia through the annexations and the destruction of an autonomous 'Third Germany' smashed that political basis and fostered an ultimately toxic legacy of militarism and shrill exclusionary nationalism that would develop and explode in subsequent German constitutional frameworks. While the cosmopolitan Empire was no longer within grasp, it still helped structure and articulate discontent with, and indeed opposition to, the new course imposed in 1866 and consolidated in 1871, as the next chapter will show.

### III. Retreat (c.1867-c.1915)

#### Context and authors

When looked at from the perspective of those who placed themselves in the continuity of the imperial tradition, the events of 1866-7 opened an uncertain phase of retreat. The pursuit of a multinational central European commonwealth with an all-German federation at its core, inspired in part by the Old *Reich's* ghost, was now definitely off the table and would remain so until the first years of the Great War, when new central European mirages would appear. Internally, the polycentric federalism of the *Bund* was replaced by what many saw as the sham federalism of the North German Confederation – a fig leaf for Prussia's hegemony –, whose institutional framework was largely carried over into the Second *Reich* from 1871, reinforcing the centrality of the mid-1860s, as opposed to the early 1870s, in my periodisation.<sup>1</sup>

Figures and forces variously associated with the supranational and *Grossdeutsch* conservatism that harked back to the Old *Reich* did show signs of vitality throughout this period, most intensely in its first decade. Between Königgrätz/Sadowa and Sedan, Austria actively cultivated the south German states, floating new versions of the traditional 'trias' scheme for a potential re-organisation of Germany after a victorious new war against Prussia, which of course never happened.<sup>2</sup> The deposed King of Hannover George V (1819-1878), a rigidly conservative and deeply religious man, also continued to intrigue

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<sup>1</sup> J. Breuille and R. Speirs, 'The Concept of National Unification', in Speirs and Breuille, *Germany's Two Unifications*, p.11. For a contemporary opinion, see C. Frantz, *Die Weltpolitik unter besonderer Bezugnahme auf Deutschland*, (2 vols, Chemnitz, 1882), vol.2, p.22. For recent histories of the *Kaiserreich*, see J.N. Retallack, *Imperial Germany 1871-1918*, (Oxford, 2008); E.J. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850-1918*, (London, 2001); W.J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867-1918. Politics, Culture, and Society in an Authoritarian State*, (London, 1995); V.R. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany 1871-1918. Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics*, revised edn (New York, 2005); T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918*, (2 vols, Munich, 1991-2).

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, p.124; H.A. Schmitt, 'Count Beust and Germany, 1866-1870: Reconquest, Realignment, or Resignation?', *CEH*, 1/1 (1968), pp.20-34.

against Prussia from his Austrian exile until his death.<sup>3</sup> More importantly for the long run, Prussia's successes acted as a rallying cry for *Grossdeutsch* movements, which scored important results in Württemberg, Hesse-Darmstadt and especially Bavaria at the 1868 first election for the parliament of the German *Zollverein* (*Zollparlament*).<sup>4</sup> Strong such movements also emerged in the annexed states, some of which remained a thorn in Bismarck's flesh until his downfall. This is certainly the case of the Deutsch-Hannoversche Partei (DHP), established in 1867 to represent Hanover's particularism and reverse Prussia's annexation of this ancient electorate, long connected with England and characterised by a vigorous attachment to the old, Holy Roman imperial constitution. The Hanoverian nobleman Heinrich Langweth von Simmern (1833-1914), one of its leading exponents and a member of the German *Reichstag* in the 1880s, voiced throughout this period the *Grossdeutsch*, federalist and legitimist approach that became typical of the DHP and the Guelphs more broadly, as supporters of the old regime were collectively known.

More to the south, the key founder and agitator of the new Bavarian Patriots Party (*Bayerische Patriotenpartei*) was none other than Joseph Edmund Jörg (1819-1901), who otherwise continued to advocate for his conservatism centred on the legacy of the Old *Reich* in influential pieces as editor of the HPB until the end of the century. From the late 1860s, the party mobilised conservative Catholic voters for the first time to oppose pro-Prussian and pro-unification stances. In 1887 it evolved into the Bavarian Centre and remained the strongest party in Bavaria until the First World War.<sup>5</sup> It represents the ancestor of all subsequent Bavarian Catholic and Christian Democratic parties, within which, as we will see, the Empire would be present as an ideal of order into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>3</sup> S.A. Stehlin, *Bismarck and the Guelph Problem 1866-1890. A Study in Particularist Opposition to National Unity*, (The Hague, 1973), pp.66-97.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, pp.122-5.

<sup>5</sup> E. Fink, 'For Country, Court and Church: The Bavarian Patriots' Party and Bavarian Regional Identity in the Era of German Unification', in Speirs and Breuilley, *Germany's Two Unifications*, pp.155-71.

In the first period of the new *Kaiserreich*, these conservative oppositional forces naturally gravitated towards the Catholic *Zentrum* of figures such as August Reichensperger (1808-1895) and especially Ludwig Windthorst (1812-1891), himself a Hanoverian loyal to the old dynasty who had twice served as George V's Minister of Justice before the annexation, and afterwards as the deposed sovereign's chief negotiator with Berlin.<sup>6</sup> It is as a joint candidate of the Catholic Centre and the Protestant DHP that a Protestant defender of the old *Reichsidee* like Ludwig von Gerlach (1795-1877) could be elected a member of the *Reichstag* from Osnabruck in 1877.<sup>7</sup>

The conventional historiographical teleology about this period too readily discounted the continued vitality of cosmopolitan and federalist (i.e. anti-centralist) voices after 1866/71, something this chapter tries to correct. The chapter also nuances the standard interpretation of the Second *Reich*'s first two decades as dominated by only two oppositional groups: Catholics and Socialists. The analysis underlines an interesting and often neglected link between conservative figures still thinking in the tradition of the Old *Reich* and those engaged in particularist politics, showing that the federalist and particularist Empire ideal was not immediately silenced by German unification. The enduring attraction of this politico-intellectual constellation to Austria is also emphasised.

Gradually, however, the supranational conservative Empire did become a residual conception of order with no political space and representation. The old Third Germany had been either wiped out or co-opted within the new system, while for politically active Catholics in the *Kaiserreich* continuing to advocate a path so radically alternative to the new regime was tantamount to confirming accusations that they were enemies of the fatherland answerable to foreign potentates.<sup>8</sup> Early on, Baron Wilhelm

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<sup>6</sup> H.G. Aschoff, *Ludwig Windthorst, ein Christlicher Politiker in einer Zeit des Umbruchs*, (Hannover, 1991). On Windthorst's closeness to the DHP and the Guelph cause more generally, see Stehlin, *Bismarck and the Guelph Problem*, pp.109-11.

<sup>7</sup> This collaboration represents yet another neglected episode in the prehistory of the policy of unity between Protestants and Catholics that finally resulted in the foundation of the *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* (CDU) in 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung', p.488; J. Breuilly, 'Nationalism and the First Unification', in Speirs and Breuilly, *Germany's Two Unifications*, pp.110-11.

Emmanuel von Ketteler (1811-1877) suggested a strategy of accommodation with and influence within the emerging new order that was largely embraced by German political Catholicism.<sup>9</sup> A prominent theologian, Roman Catholic Bishop of Mainz and politician, Ketteler had served as a deputy to the Frankfurt National Assembly and then shortly as a member of the new German Reichstag in 1871-2, wielding a formative influence on both the Catholic *Zentrum* and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup>

From 1879, the historic national rupture of 1866 appeared at least stitched up by Bismarck's skilful diplomacy, which managed to lure the Habsburg lands into a new alliance with the Hohenzollern state.<sup>11</sup> Around the same time, the resourceful chancellor also shifted to a more cooperative stance towards the Catholic *Zentrum*, blunting its anti-systemic potential. By the 1890s, the new German Empire seemed consolidated, its nationalisation and centralisation were advancing, while particularist and *Grossdeutsch* forces lost whatever residual steam they had still possessed in the *Reichsgründungszeit*. Even within the new Austro-Hungarian polity, the Old *Reich* appeared too German to remain a serviceable legitimising myth, while the non-German nationalities began to adamantly write themselves out of its history, in search for more reassuringly national accounts of their historical existence.<sup>12</sup>

Sensing early on that their fight was politically lost, some of the key apologists of the imperial tradition went either into internal exile – such as Constantin Frantz, who withdrew to Blasewitz, a suburb of

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<sup>9</sup> W.E. von Ketteler, *Deutschland nach dem Kriege von 1866*, (Mainz, 1867); W.E. von Ketteler, *Die Katholiken im Deutschen Reiche. Entwurf zu einem politischen Programm*, (Mainz, 1873).

<sup>10</sup> E.C. Bock, 'Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler: his Social and Political Philosophy', (PhD, University of Oklahoma, 1967); A.M. Birke, *Bischof Ketteler und der deutsche Liberalismus. Eine Untersuchung über das Verhältnis des liberalen Katholizismus zum bürgerlichen Liberalismus in der Reichsgründungszeit*, (Mainz, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> L. Höbelt, 'Österreich-Ungarn und das Deutsche Reich als Zweibundpartner', in Lutz and Rumpel, *Österreich und die deutsche Frage*, pp.256-81.

<sup>12</sup> For recent histories of the Habsburg monarchy, see P.M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History*, (Cambridge, 2016); A. Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815-1918*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 2013); R.J.W. Evans, *Austria, Hungary, and the Habsburgs. Central Europe c.1683-1867*, (Oxford, 2008).

Dresden – or emigrated to the more congenial Austria, like Onno Klopp, the historian and confidant of George V of Hannover. Frantz continued to warn his largely indifferent contemporaries against the dangers of the new situation, while Klopp became the private teacher of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863-1914), new heir presumptive to the Habsburg thrones after the suicide of Crown Prince Rudolf, and a man whose early 20<sup>th</sup> century plans to transform Austria-Hungary into a commonwealth of equal nationalities bore the mark of supranational conservative ideas.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the aftermath of Königgrätz/Sadowa saw a real exodus of *Grossdeutsch* figures to Austria, including the former Saxon Prime Minister and later Austrian foreign minister Ferdinand von Beust (1809-1886) and the former President of the 1848-9 German National Assembly and later Hessian envoy to Vienna Heinrich von Gagern (1799-1880). The influential jurist, publicist and later politician Karl Freiherr von Vogelsang (1818-1890) – a Mecklenburg noble convert to Catholicism born in Silesia and having Lichtenstein citizenship – had already settled in Austria shortly before that, became one of the fathers of the Christian Social movement and contributed to modernising a Romantic conservative Empire ideal destined to great influence in the subsequent period. Younger Catholic historians influenced by Klopp's approach and animated by a German consciousness of the old type, rooted in the memory of the Empire, include Johannes Janssen (1829-1891),<sup>14</sup> a Catholic priest and shortly a member of the Prussian House of Representatives for the *Zentrum*, and his pupil Ludwig Pastor (1854-1928), born in Aachen and professionally active in Innsbruck and Rome, who would also serve as Ambassador of the young Austrian Republic to the Vatican from 1920 to his death.<sup>15</sup> All in all, we are dealing here with the defeated, when not the persecuted, of the new order: Catholic universalists, Protestant particularists, legitimists and *Grossdeutsch* sympathisers of the Habsburgs, predominantly from the South, the

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<sup>13</sup> J. Vermeiren, *The First World War and German National Identity. The Dual Alliance at War*, (Cambridge, 2016), p.22.

<sup>14</sup> Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte*, vol.2, pp.57-63.

<sup>15</sup> Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte*, pp.68-71; Gräf, 'Reich, Nation und Kirche', pp.389-91.

Rhineland and the annexed states.<sup>16</sup> Living out the old cosmopolitan, conservative and particularist ideal of the Empire seems something most of these lives and careers had in common.

The other conservative approaches to the First *Reich*, however, did not fare much better among the victors, at least not as traditionally conceived. Although it was a variation of the Borussian conception of German unity that had vanquished supranational and national conservative prefigurations of it, the new regime resurrected the imperial, not the royal, German title. It thus played on the polysemic ambiguity of the imperial tradition to disarm and commit the defeated constituencies. It also cleverly avoided humiliating Austria and prepared the ground for the Dual Alliance of 1879, which, in a propagandistic stretch of the imagination, could and was presented as a reconstitution of the old imperial nexus in modern form. As long as Bismarck went out of his way to convince everyone that the new Germany was 'satiated', meaning that it had no further territorial ambitions, the old national conservative view that modern Germans should pick up from where the Hohenstaufen had left off was of little use. Already during Bismarck's last decade in office, however, and then increasingly after his dismissal in 1890, the new *Kaiserreich* became more and more assertive in international and colonial affairs, not least to find new export markets for its exuberant and increasingly cartelised capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Every step of the transition from the 'satiation' of the *Reichsgrundungszeit* to the honest brokering of the Berlin Congresses in the late 1870s and 1880s, and then especially from the *Weltpolitik* of the 1890s to the *Mitteleuropa* policy of the 1900s was underpinned by the reemergence of old national conservative *topoi* concerning the power and global claim to rule of the medieval Empire. The 1890s also saw the emergence of new political experiments such as the Pan-German League, which combined a radical nationalism with an interest in colonial expansion to address Germany's mounting

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<sup>16</sup> For an overview, see T. Schieder, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich von 1871 als Nationalstaat*, (Cologne, 1961), pp.13-21.

<sup>17</sup> M. Stürmer, *Bismarck und die preußisch-deutsche Politik, 1871-1890*, (Munich, 1970), pp.10-11; S. Conrad, *German Colonialism. A Short History*, tr. S. O'Hagan (Cambridge, 2012).

demographic and social challenges in a hierarchical and antisocialist framework.<sup>18</sup> The imperialist traits of the German national idea, which had already surfaced in the *Paulskirche*, were becoming plain for everybody to see, and the medieval Empire appeared once again to capture them appropriately.

In this new context, the previously distinct Borussian and national conservative strands increasingly overlapped, to the point of merging within a new 'Ghibelline' national conservative synthesis that traced the roots of the modern German imperialist national state back to the medieval Empire, reinterpreted as a proto-Protestant and anti-papal German polity. The influential historian Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-96), elected as a national liberal member of the *Reichstag* in 1871 but steadily shifting towards more conservative positions until his death, decisively contributed to shaping this new synthesis. The medieval Empire also featured prominently in the historical imagery and political conceptions of the 'liberal' Prussian Crown Prince Frederick William, who reigned for a few months as German Emperor Frederick III in 1888.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the prominent Silesian-born national liberal novelist Gustav Freytag (1816-1895), who shortly served as a member of the North German *Reichstag* and was for a while a close associate and advisor of the Crown Prince, remained dismissive of the Empire, while enthusiastically embracing an imperialist conception of the new German state's relation with Slavs.<sup>20</sup> Even the Pomeranian-born legal historian Otto von Gierke (1841-1921), a pioneering student of German federalism's social foundations but also a fervent nationalist, shared this reading of the new Empire.<sup>21</sup> The latter two figures point to the lasting importance of middle-class personalities socialised on the German-Slavic ethnic frontier for conservative nationalism, something that would be even more salient in the subsequent period. All these examples show how the encounter between national liberal

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<sup>18</sup> R. Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German. A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League 1886-1914*, (London, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> F.L. Müller, *Our Fritz. Emperor Frederick III and the Political Culture of Imperial Germany*, (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> L. Ping, *Gustav Freytag and the Prussian Gospel. Novels, Liberalism and History*, (Bern, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> H. Boldt, 'Otto von Gierke', in H.U. Wehler (ed), *Deutsche Historiker*, (9 vols, Göttingen, 1971-82), vol.8, pp.7-23.

and national conservative views of Germany's imperial destiny could be even more fruitful in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century than it had been in the *Paulskirche's* mid-19<sup>th</sup> century imperial nationalism. They problematise the simplistic view, propagated by *Sonderweg* historians, of a liberal Germany striving towards political democracy and economic freedom but constantly held back by evil conservative forces. They show how some liberal and conservative elements combined in thwarting tendencies conventionally seen as modernising, while other such elements stood aside or engaged in active opposition.<sup>22</sup>

### **Towards a 'Borussian-Ghibelline' national conservative synthesis**

Not only supranational conservatives interpreted the aftermath of Königgrätz/Sadowa as a radical discontinuity with the Old *Reich's* remnants. For example, a leading Berlin liberal newspaper celebrated it, in typical Borussian fashion, as the end of the German Middle Ages, arguing that '[b]y separating ourselves from the House of Habsburg, which could not divest itself of the ideas and pretensions of the Roman-German empire – only through this separation are we now able to become an independent nation and establish a German national state. We can be more German than our ancestors were permitted to be.'<sup>23</sup> Instead, echoes of national conservative interpretations of the Empire could be detected in Bismarck's speech at the opening of the parliament of the North German Confederation: 'once mighty, great and honoured because it was united and guided by strong hands, the German Reich sank, not without the complicity of head and limbs, into division and powerlessness.'<sup>24</sup> In 1870, German victories over the French provoked a nationalist frenzy and an expectation for Germany to be imminently unified as a militarily strong national state that would also take back Alsace-Lorraine.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, 'offshoots of the German liberal tradition were fundamental in the ideology of the Pan-German League', Chickering, *We Men*, p.80.

<sup>23</sup> Winkler, *Germany*, vol.1, p.162.

<sup>24</sup> Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.191 n.2.

Although the new framework would clearly exclude Austro-Germans, and therefore not correspond to traditional national conservative prefigurations, it quickly became clear that a purely Borussian approach to the new polity's constitution would be unsatisfactory, as it would have required a total break with the imperial tradition and a resurrection of German kingship instead. In the contemptuous 1871 words of Freytag, who warned profusely his patron the Crown Prince and the public at large against restoring it, the imperial dignity was 'arranged by priests, consecrated and botched up by priests, a creation of the falsest and most disastrous idealism, which had unsettled the mind and spoiled the life of princes and peoples. Our nation has suffered heavily for this inwardly untrue idea, centuries of disgrace and political decay have emerged from it'.<sup>25</sup> To avoid any association with the Old *Reich*, the popular writer suggested instead the titles 'King of the Germans' or 'Duke of Germany' for William I of Prussia, while Sybel, Droysen and Treitschke – the holy trinity of Borussianism – all publicly expressed their uneasiness about the imperial title.<sup>26</sup>

A middle course was chosen, one that mobilised national conservative imperial conceptions to found and legitimise the new polity, while gradually imbuing them with a Prusso-centric and anti-Catholic substance they had not always possessed, and which came straight out of Borussian political thought. The return of *Kaiser* and *Reich* was a nod to the nationalist energies mobilised by the Romantic memory of the medieval Empire, by the patriotism of the wars of liberation and by the general desire of the nationalist movement to overcome German fragmentation.<sup>27</sup> The Prussian Crown Prince, for example, welcomed the proposal to resurrect the imperial title as the end of 'the Interregnum of 65 years, the terrible Kaiser-less time', and wrote in his diary that 'the long-deferred hopes of our forefathers, the dreams of German poets, are fulfilled; freed from the dross of the "Holy Roman" failure,

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<sup>25</sup> Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung', p.499.

<sup>26</sup> Schieder, *Kaiserreich*, pp.78-79, 175 n.150.

<sup>27</sup> Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung', pp.501-2.

there now emerges from a night of sixty years, under the old name and insignia of ten centuries, an empire reformed in head and limbs.'<sup>28</sup> The very proclamation of the empire on 18 January 1871 referred to the 'German imperial title dormant for over sixty years' and expressed the hope that 'the German nation will be granted the ability to fashion a propitious future for the fatherland under the symbol of its ancient glory.'<sup>29</sup> An early unused draft prepared by the Crown Prince openly referred to William as 'a successor of those serene emperors who once bore the crown of Charlemagne.'<sup>30</sup> However, the return of *Kaiser* and *Reich* was at the same time a way to emasculate and restrain the nationalist movement within a structurally conservative federal framework still centred, especially in the first decades of the new polity, on the German princes and their states. It was arranged for the 'resurrection of a German Empire and of the German imperial dignity' to be suggested on behalf of the princes by the King of Bavaria Ludwig II, the strongest remaining political representative of German Catholicism and particularism.<sup>31</sup> Tellingly, Bismarck had assuaged Ludwig's understandable fears by pointing out how powerless the Emperor had been in the Old *Reich*.<sup>32</sup> The Iron Chancellor had also argued for the title of 'German Emperor' with his own King William I, on the grounds that it was the natural sequel of the *Imperator Romanus*, while Emperor of Germany implied a territorial power over the whole empire that he did not possess and that would scare away the rulers of the individual German states.<sup>33</sup> This illustrates how the imperial legacy was so multifarious that it could appeal to and facilitate the integration of both nationalists and particularists within a new conservative framework that subtly

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<sup>28</sup> 'The Suppressed Diary of the Late Emperor Frederick', *Pall Mall Gazette* "Extra" no. 43, (11 October 1888), pp.10, 12.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Imperial Proclamation, January 18, 1871', <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/germanunification.asp> (12 April 2024).

<sup>30</sup> Müller, *Our Fritz*, p.91.

<sup>31</sup> A. Dieter, 'König Ludwig II. von Bayern und Bismarck', *HZ*, 270/1 (2000), pp.39-64.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, pp.127-8.

<sup>33</sup> 'Suppressed Diary', p.11. See also Schieder, *Kaiserreich*, pp.77-8. Hughes observes that 'the Reich of 1871 was a perpetual alliance of sovereigns and governments, who devolved some of their powers upwards to a federal government consisting of the Emperor and the chancellor.' See his *Nationalism and Society*, p.128.

manipulated the aspirations of both to prop up the traditional elites, solidify Prussia's hegemony and tame the liberal movement.

Opening the new Reichstag in March 1871, Emperor William marked the discontinuity with the Prussian Kingdom by delivering his speech from the Ottonian Goslar throne – the Aachen treasure and imperial insignia being held by the Habsburgs.<sup>34</sup> That very first session of the new parliament, when nothing less than the *Reichstag's* address in response to the new German Emperor's first speech from the throne was at stake, conveyed once again that imperial history was not past, but current German politics. It also confirmed that the reality of a 'Small Germany' hegemonised by Prussia was encouraging the creation of a new 'Ghibelline' Empire ideal, which represented a synthesis of previously distinct Borussian and national conservative elements. The majority dominated by national liberals insisted on inserting in the resolution a 'non-intervention clause' that came straight out of the Sybel-Ficker controversy on the medieval Empire from a decade earlier: 'Germany once [...] picked up the germs of decay by interfering in the lives of other nations. The new Reich originated from the self-rising spirit of the people [...]. The days of meddling in the inner lives of other peoples will, we hope, not return under any pretence or in any form.' Supporting speeches redeployed well-known Borussian arguments to make clear that 'this is not the old Roman empire of the German nation; it is something completely different!'. They condemned the dreams of 'universal monarchy' – which had once made the Germans 'the terror of Europe' –, the 'old, false paths of German policy towards Italy and the Church' – which costed the lives of so many German youths and caused so much ruin to both Italians and Germans –, and Emperors such as Frederick II of Hohenstaufen – who held court in distant Palermo, estranged from Germany and caring nothing about it, with catastrophic consequences.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, (Cambridge, 2016), p.673.

<sup>35</sup> Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung', pp.485-8.

The minority dominated by the Catholic *Zentrum* was vehemently opposed to this formulation, as it run counter its entire conception of continental relations and Germany's European obligations. It also excluded any possibility of supporting the Holy See in its struggle against the new Kingdom of Italy, admittedly a hopeless cause, as the Italians had expropriated the Pope's state with Prussia as their ally, and the sympathies of the German national liberals lay squarely with the new state forged by the House of Savoy. Still, Windthorst did not hesitate to remind his honourable colleagues that the Pope's territorial sovereignty had been established by Charlemagne, the founder of the German *Reich*.<sup>36</sup> The most perceptive opposition politicians understood that the ultimate purpose of the majority's attacks on the first *Reich* was the official annihilation of Catholic Germany's self-understanding as it had developed throughout the previous century. However, they could not embark on any outspoken defence of traditional supranational conservative concepts, which would have only increased their isolation, and avoided a full battle on the subject of German imperial history. In answer to the statement that the new Empire was built 'on firmer foundations than ever' before, clearly another swipe at the Old *Reich* and at the identity of the Catholic minority, Ketteler limited himself to acidly observing in his intervention that it might be hasty to claim so, since after all one was comparing a newly founded polity with a *Reich* that had lasted a millennium. He also doubted that it was wise for a state to tie its hands so radically in foreign policy.<sup>37</sup> And Windthorst allowed himself to declare that if the notion of 'Kaiser und Reich' still struck a chord with the German people, it was due to the memory of that much disparaged polity still alive in them, and not to any fondness for the newly founded German *Reich*, which appeared so 'arid' and whose constitution had no space for 'any poetry – for the things that stimulate the spirit, and this is a deep side of the German character – but only for the most material things. That's why it is indeed impossible to accept a proposition like the given one; Professor Sybel

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<sup>36</sup> Schieder, *Kaiserreich*, p.81.

<sup>37</sup> Birke, *Ketteler*, pp.83-4.

will find it excellent, not me.'<sup>38</sup> The difficult task of legitimising the new imperial conceptions with reference to those of the German past while underlining the *Kaiserreich's* distance from the Holy Roman Empire was therefore incumbent upon the defenders of the new regime since the very beginning. To accomplish it, they tended to emphasise some key discontinuities with the Old *Reich* and, in doing so, they revealed a political and spiritual universe profoundly different from that of supranational conservatives.<sup>39</sup>

*The Reich as the German national state in monarchical form*

To begin with, the new *Reich* appeared to them more perfectly and successfully national than the old one. In Treitschke's thundering synthesis, 'the Holy Reich was the decaying German monarchy, the new Reich is the rising one.' The happy task of contemporary Germans was to equip it 'with all the power of a monarchical state authority' that had so eluded its predecessor.<sup>40</sup> In an 1873 lecture, the young Otto von Gierke identified 'the idea of a common state of the German people in monarchical form' as the 'perennial idea' underpinning both Empires, and claimed that 'the German Reich was and is the German state'. In case there should be any doubt concerning the very modern meaning he attributed to the concept of 'state', he wrote about it as the organisational form that enabled a nation 'to transform its inner striving into powerful deeds and to develop a political life as the highest earthly personality both outwardly and towards its members'. For him, the 'longing for the lost Reich' that had emerged in the period of the Confederation had to be understood precisely as a manifestation of the German people's quest for their own state, which could not be realised by the mere development of an

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<sup>38</sup> Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung', p.491. This explicit reference to Sybel's work in such a prominent parliamentary debate is proof enough of the self-evidently political meaning all contemporaries attributed to academic disputes on imperial history.

<sup>39</sup> On all this, also see E. Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen des deutschen Kaisergedankens 1871-1918*, (Munich, 1969), pp.52-88.

<sup>40</sup> H. von Treitschke, 'Bund und Reich', in *Zehn Jahre Deutsche Kämpfe, 1865-1874. Schriften zur Tagespolitik*, (Berlin, 1874), p.592. Another variation on this common theme is quoted in Schieder, *Kaiserreich*, p.80.

international organism like the *Bund*.<sup>41</sup> The *Reich*, therefore, appeared here simply as the national state towards which Germans had strived in vain throughout their history. This was a striking conclusion in a scholar so well acquainted with the Middle Ages, who was already pioneering an original conception of German law that emphasised the centrality of associations and the autonomy of local governments in the organic construction of federalism.<sup>42</sup> Like Treitschke, however, Gierke was first and foremost an ardent nationalist who saluted the incorporation of Schleswig, of the German eastern provinces (Prussia and Posen) and of the old German western marks (Alsace-Lorraine) into the new Empire. He equally approved the end of the pernicious 'hybrid relationship' (*Zwitterverhältnis*) that Prussia and Austria had had with the Old *Reich* and *Bund* (ruling territories both within and outside of them), and the severance of all bonds with non-German powers that had been embedded in the constitutional structure of previous German polities, such as Sweden, Denmark, Holland and England. All this meant that 'the new Reich is indisputably more German than the old one' and that 'in all its purposes and goals is there exclusively for Germany', while the Old *Reich* had had all sorts of disastrous foreign entanglements, not least those in Italy, which Gierke castigated in customary Borussian fashion.<sup>43</sup> The exact same concepts were succinctly expressed by Emanuel Geibel's 1871 poem marking the new Empire's foundation: 'the majesty of the Old Reich, which Rome's anointing oil consecrated to ruling the world, is forever gone, and we will not awaken what is buried. The Emperor we rejoice for today, [...] who wears Germany's crown, has a different aim than to erect his commanding throne on subjugated peoples. All his strength belongs to the fatherland'.<sup>44</sup> That the new Germany saw itself as a self-sufficient power exclusively focused on pursuing its interests is confirmed

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<sup>41</sup> O. von Gierke, *Das alte und das neue deutsche Reich*, (Berlin, 1874), pp.7-9.

<sup>42</sup> O. von Gierke, *Das deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, (4 vols, Berlin, 1868-1913); see also O. von Gierke, *Community in Historical Perspective. A Translation of Selections from Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht (The German Law of Fellowship)*, ed. A. Black, tr. Fischer, (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>43</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, pp.9-10.

<sup>44</sup> Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung', pp.489-90.

by its founder Bismarck's caustic remarks whenever the subject of 'Europe' was raised, from his sarcastic question 'Who is Europe?', to his peremptory statement 'those who speak of Europe are in error'.<sup>45</sup> All this, of course, was radically at odds with the supranational conservative distinction between *Reich* and state, and with the polycentricity and European embeddedness of the German constitution defended by thinkers like Frantz, for whom German interests had always to be formulated and pursued under a framework of continental unity.

### *Imperialism and military monarchy*

It also conveniently ignored that the new German imperial throne was actually erected on subjugated nationalities, as Lusatia, Silesia, Pomerania and the Prussian portions of historic Poland were all ethnically mixed areas. Indeed, the new *Reich's* adamant self-definition as a national state and its unwillingness to acknowledge the challenges of multinationalism encouraged its evolution in the direction of a modern 'imperial national state'.<sup>46</sup> This was reflected in a marked shift away from the Old *Reich's* tradition of political and institutional citizenship, still prevalent in the *Paulskirche* and also adopted until then by Prussia, in tune with its multinational reality. A much less inclusive ethnic definition of citizenship was adopted, which meant one could no longer be Prussian without being German. A new 1876 law confirmed this change by declaring German the official language of the Prussian state, the first in a long series of measures – such as the prohibition of the Polish language in the classroom and the encouragement of German settlement in predominantly Polish areas – that ushered in a new phase of Germanisation, gradually reducing Poles to second-class citizens subject to a German imperial nation. Apart from encouraging a full-fledged Polish nationalist movement, all

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<sup>45</sup> G. Barraclough, *European Unity in Thought and Action*, (Oxford, 1963), p.33.

<sup>46</sup> Schulze identifies the period 1871-1914 as that of the 'imperial national state', a specific phase preceded by the 'revolutionary national state' and followed by the 'total national state'. In this period, state, nation and empire tended to be deemed in harmony, while they will be in clear tension in the subsequent period. See H. Schulze, *Staat und Nation in der europäischen Geschichte*, (Munich, 1994), pp.243-78.

this also meant a subtle Germanisation of Prussia that would spell its doom in the long run.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, Frantz had warned that could the price of Prussia abandoning Germany's supranational imperial tradition to embrace nationalism: 'either the whole of Germany becomes Prussian, or Prussia becomes completely German, thus ceasing to be anything specific and dissolving itself in the German masses, which would then have to be shaped according to completely new forms.'<sup>48</sup> During the debate for the adoption of the new language law, the old supranational conservative Ludwig von Gerlach reminded everybody that emperorship and nationality were 'concepts effectively opposed to each other' and that therefore 'emperorship as a concept is only fully justified when it sways over a majority of nations or at least countenances and prepares the ground for such a sway', a universalist vocation the new Empire's ethnic nationalism obviously precluded.<sup>49</sup> No such opposition, of course, was perceived by 'Ghibelline' national conservative thinkers. Their Empire was not a mere legal order, standing in benign neutrality above nationalities and confessions, but 'the nation legally unified as a sovereign power', as per Treitschke's definition.<sup>50</sup> As Gierke explained, the new *Reich*, unlike the old one, 'will not just be a *Rechtstaat*, it will at the same time be a *Kulturstaat*', looking after the well-being of the German nation and nurturing national identity and culture.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most influential standard bearers of Prussia's embracing a German civilising mission in Poland was none other than Freytag, ever sensitive to the defence of German-speakers in the east

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<sup>47</sup> A. Green, 'Political Institutions and Nationhood in Germany, 1750-1914', in L. Scales and O. Zimmer, *Power and the Nation in European History*, (Cambridge, 2005), pp.327-9; P. Ther, 'Deutsche Geschichte als imperiale Geschichte. Polen, slawophone Minderheiten und das Kaiserreich als kontinentales Empire', in S. Conrad and J. Osterhammel, *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871-1914*, (Göttingen, 2004), pp.136-7. See also H.W. Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict. Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914*, (Princeton, 2014), chapter 6.

<sup>48</sup> C. Frantz, *Das neue Deutschland*, (Leipzig, 1871), p.455. In a way, this is what happened during the centralism of the Nazi period, quickly followed by the abolition of Prussia as a state and Germany's complete re-organisation. Ranke similarly thought that, in some sense, the imperial dignity did not strengthen but loosened the Prussian monarchy, see Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.167.

<sup>49</sup> Schieder, *Kaiserreich*, p.175 n.148.

<sup>50</sup> Treitschke, 'Bund und Reich', p.569.

<sup>51</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, pp.19-20.

from the perceived threat of Slavic nationalisms and pan-Slavism. He called himself a 'child of the border' who, as such, had become aware early on of his 'German nature in contrast to alien peoples' (*fremdem Volkstum*).<sup>52</sup> Like Frantz, he had recognised Prussia's condition as a German mark (*Markenland*) since the nationalist awakenings of the 1840s, but unlike him had interpreted this to mean not a calling to act as a bridge and a mediator between Germans and Slavs, but as 'a strong, energetic and martially agile organisation of German strength' necessary to counter 'Slavic, Scandinavian and French egoisms'.<sup>53</sup> Although, as we saw, he had vehemently rejected the imperial title's resurrection due to his loathing of the Empire, the nationalist and imperialist views he did so much to propagate naturally fitted within the new Ghibelline imperial narrative underpinning the *Kaiserreich*. To celebrate the German civilising mission in Poland, supposedly initiated by the Hohenstaufen and now inherited by the Hohenzollerns, for example, Emperor William II built in the middle of the new Posen the *Residenzschloß*, a palace openly inspired by Hohenstaufen architecture, whose tower chapel was consciously reminiscent of the Capella Palatina in Palermo.<sup>54</sup> In general, the architectural styles associated with Germany's imperial past were back in fashion, from the imposing Romanesque of the 11<sup>th</sup> century imperial palace (*Kaiserpfalz*) at Goslar, refurbished in 1879, to the Gothic and German renaissance that had lavishly decorated imperial free cities and were now a favourite with German municipalities.<sup>55</sup> In this period, the Gothic style, which still the generation of Frederick William IV had fondly associated with a Romantic *Reichsidee* combining German patriotism and universalism,

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<sup>52</sup> Ping, *Freitag*, p.21. Freitag's bestselling 1855 novel 'Debit and Credit' offered a justification of German imperialism as a harbinger of Liberal Protestant Progress to backward Catholic (Slavic) populations in the national liberal tradition.

<sup>53</sup> Ping, *Freitag*, p.22.

<sup>54</sup> M.A. Ruehl, "Imperium transcendat hominem": Reich and Rulership in Ernst Kantorowicz's Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite', in M.S. Lane and M.A. Ruehl (eds), *A Poet's Reich. Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, (Rochester, 2011), p.211.

<sup>55</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, p.152. On monuments symbolically connecting medieval and contemporary Emperors in a nationalist spirit, see Müller, *Our Fritz*, p.94. On the symbolic function of monuments in nationalist mass politics, see G.L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, (New York, 1975), chapter 3.

became increasingly connected with North German nationalism, and as such disliked, for example, by Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph.<sup>56</sup>

The new *Reich's* martial and imperialist dimension was pointed out since the very beginning as a key discontinuity with 'Holy Roman' emperorship, which in 'Ghibelline' jargon was a shortcut for the Empire's alleged weakness in the late medieval and early modern period, largely dominated by the Catholic Habsburgs. In the early months of the new polity, Freytag argued that 'our Hohenzollerns should only wear the imperial robe like an officer's overcoat, which they put on once on duty and then take off'.<sup>57</sup> Not long afterwards, Gierke underlined the new Empire's competence for war and navy matters and its ability to protect and represent German interests abroad as a key improvement over the Old *Reich's* matrix system for defence, dismissed as totally ineffective.<sup>58</sup> And Treitschke insisted that an active and powerful military policy was a key difference between a mere federation, like America and Switzerland, and an empire like Germany: 'deliberate caution befits the federal state, ready action the empire. [...] The difficult tasks of our foreign policy imperatively demand the full, unconditional unity of our army; only dynastic whims and vanities oppose this requirement, every war of the future will confirm its irrefutable necessity.'<sup>59</sup> If the German *Reich* was the German state in monarchical form, after all, war was quintessential to its life: 'the essence of the state is power', while 'warrior strength is the basis of all political virtues'.<sup>60</sup> By the turn of the century, then, 'Ghibelline' imperialism had become one of the central legitimising myths of Germany's global ambitions and of Pan-German ideas, whether in the shape of *Weltpolitik* or of *Mitteleuropa*. In an 1895 speech to a delegation of Austro-Germans, the old Bismarck himself placed the Triple Alliance he had done so much to forge in the continuity of

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<sup>56</sup> P. Fichtner, *The Habsburgs. Dynasty, Culture and Politics*, (London, 2014), pp.234-5.

<sup>57</sup> Schieder, *Kaiserreich*, p.79.

<sup>58</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, pp.30-1.

<sup>59</sup> Treitschke, 'Bund und Reich', p.587.

<sup>60</sup> C. Andler (ed), *Les origines du pangermanisme (1800 à 1888)*, (Paris, 1915), pp.220, 222.

imperial history: '[o]ur Triple Alliance covers roughly the empire of the successors of Charlemagne, except for Gaul, present-day France. This union, I am convinced, is proof of the imponderable bonds and relationships that exist across this immense expanse of territory.'<sup>61</sup>

William II's oriental visits of 1898, most strikingly his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, were openly choreographed to be reminiscent of medieval imperial iconography.<sup>62</sup> In July 1900, in his famous 'Hun Speech' delivered in the port of Bremen to German troops setting off to China to quash the Boxer rebellion, the Emperor proclaimed that 'the German Reich is able to accomplish the missions that the old Roman Empire of the German nation could not accomplish. The instrument that enables us to do so is our army'.<sup>63</sup> Debates surrounding this China expedition, including in the *Reichstag*, were a deliberate continuation of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Sybel-Ficker controversy on German foreign entanglements, with, among others, Imperial Chancellor Bülow awkwardly arguing, against accusations to the contrary, that the new *Reich* had learned the lessons of German history and would not repeat medieval mistakes.<sup>64</sup> In 1911, speaking in Hamburg, the German Empire's largest seaport, the Emperor declared that the problems the Hanse once faced but could not solve because the executive power of the Empire was too weak had now become the responsibility 'of the resurrected German Empire'.<sup>65</sup> This was an underlying theme of Dietrich Schäfer's (1845-1929) influential 1903 history of the Hanse, the necessity of a strong dominant state being central to his work more generally, in continuity with his teacher Treitschke.<sup>66</sup> Schäfer regretted the medieval Emperors' backward fixation with Europe's South for blinding them to the Northern seas' future potential, and he lent historical

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<sup>61</sup> Andler, *Pangermanisme*, p.173. See also Mommsen, *Stein, Ranke, Bismarck*, p.192.

<sup>62</sup> Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen*, pp.109-12.

<sup>63</sup> Heer, *Europa*, p.426.

<sup>64</sup> Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen*, p.160.

<sup>65</sup> Andler, *Pangermanisme*, p.XX; Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen*, pp.171-2.

<sup>66</sup> D. Schäfer, *Die deutsche Hanse*, (Bielefeld, 1903); Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte*, vol.2, pp.17-8.

legitimation to Admiral Tirpitz' naval re-armament programme.<sup>67</sup> It is therefore no wonder that, writing during the First World War in 1915, the Germanist Charles Andler, active in France but born in Strasbourg a few years before Sedan, identified the Pan-German evolution of 'Ghibelline' imperialism as the myth that best expressed the Central Powers' war aims: 'a double-headed, Austro-German Empire, extended from the North Sea to the Adriatic; ambitious in the Orient, holding Italy under its tutelage; ready to overflow on all borders to the confines where once reached the suzerainty of the Holy Empire; oppressive in Poland, like the Teutonic Order; militarised to the utmost like the old Prussia of Frederick II; but, moreover, dominating the seas, according to the Hanseatic method. It is the fusion of all these dreams that we will call *pan-Germanism*.'<sup>68</sup>

#### *Centralised and asymmetric federalism*

The combination of nationalism, Prusso-centrism, military monarchy and imperialism inherent to the 'Ghibelline' Empire ideal was typically associated with the preference for a centralised and asymmetric, as opposed to a polycentric, federalism.<sup>69</sup> This is scarcely surprising, as the achievement of cultural homogeneity inside and power projection outside generally requires centralisation. Thus, although it fell short of his radical unitarism, Treitschke welcomed the 1867 constitution of the North German Confederation as a step forward, which had the potential to develop with time in a more centralist direction: 'if we compare it with the forms that have hitherto enclosed the chaotic German state life, with the monstrosity of the Holy Empire or with that Confederation that called itself German and at times comprised four foreign powers, then we venture to assert that Germany never had such a clear,

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<sup>67</sup> Schäfer, *Hanse*, pp.7-8, 134-6.

<sup>68</sup> Andler, *Pangermanisme*, pp.XX-XI.

<sup>69</sup> Centralised federalism refers to federal orders possessing a strong federal centre clearly superordinate to the individual states for powers, prerogatives and resources; asymmetric federalism indicates federal orders characterised by an asymmetry of powers between the various states; polycentric federalism refers to federal orders characterised by a multiplicity of autonomous decision-making centres operating under a common framework of rules. For an introduction to some of these concepts, see M. Burgess, *Comparative Federalism. Theory and Practice*, (London, 2006).

simple constitution'.<sup>70</sup> Despite his initial disappointment at the imperial title's resurrection, he quickly made peace with it, and argued that 'the power of an Empire is stronger than the central power of a federal state, in the empire the political movement happens from top to bottom, the parts derive their rights from the concession of the empire.'<sup>71</sup> Unlike in a federation, in a monarchical Empire like the German one ultimate sovereignty lay with the centre, who could restrict the prerogatives of the individual states and even call their existence into question.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, for Frederick William, ruling in continuity with the medieval Emperors meant 'declar[ing] himself immediate emperor' before the German people, as his confidant Freytag put it. This is why he stubbornly wanted to accede the imperial throne as Frederick IV, until Bismarck forcefully shot down the peculiar idea that he could claim succession from the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III, as opposed to Frederick II 'the Great' of Prussia. The crown prince had nothing but contempt for the German princes, was a fierce opponent of federal diversity and a determined advocate of centralisation who intended to rule by directly relying on the army, the civil service and the nation.<sup>73</sup> His son Emperor William II expressed similar views, celebrating in Aachen in 1902 Charlemagne's emperorship<sup>74</sup> and attempting to forge a more direct link with the nation to the detriment of local dynasties.<sup>75</sup>

Although clearly valuing a more robust federalism than either Treitschke or Frederick William, Gierke similarly justified the new state's power to modify its own constitution through a simple imperial law, thus being in principle able to significantly restrict the autonomy of the individual states. He argued that it had thus acquired 'the ultimate characteristic of the perfect state: it is self-sufficient!', while hoping

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<sup>70</sup> Deuerlein, *Föderalismus*, p.133. 'Monstrosity' here is a clear reference to Pufendorf, whom Treitschke commended as the German thinker with the clearest understanding of sovereignty.

<sup>71</sup> Treitschke, 'Bund und Reich', p.579.

<sup>72</sup> Andler, *Pangermanisme*, pp.214-15. This argument is of course reminiscent of Stahl's decades earlier, see pp.119-21 above.

<sup>73</sup> Müller, *Our Fritz*, pp.95, 99-100, 102-3.

<sup>74</sup> Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen*, p.109. See also Müller, *Our Fritz*, p.87.

<sup>75</sup> Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen*, pp.143-57. On ideas about and steps towards a plebiscitarian emperorship under William II, see also Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen*, pp.179-220.

that it would not abuse this, because 'freedom and justice' were as essential to German life as 'unity and power'.<sup>76</sup> While supranational conservatives typically extolled the elective nature of the old imperial monarchy as both a manifestation and a safeguard of Germany's polycentric federalism, Gierke welcomed the hereditary nature of the new imperial crown within the Hohenzollern family, as it finally achieved what the Saxon, Frankish and Hohenstaufen dynasties had strived for in vain 'for the salvation of Germany'.<sup>77</sup> He also saluted the end of '*Kleinstaaterie*' through 'secularisations, mediatisations and annexations', which wiped away the 'countless internally dead state ruins' composing the Old *Reich* and left only 'viable individual states' standing.<sup>78</sup>

Both Treitschke and Gierke welcomed Prussia's hegemonic position within the new *Reich* as yet another centralist development. The former ventured to attribute it to the very essence of the *Reich*: 'the stability of the federal state lies in the equality, the strength of the German Reich in the inequality of its members'.<sup>79</sup> The latter wrote that Prussia represented 'the soul and core' of the new German state, 'the central living principle of the broader organism affiliated with it'.<sup>80</sup> Even the flamboyant Julius Fröbel (1805-1893), despite his past as a democrat and *Grossdeutsch* federalist advocate, finally embraced Bismarck's 'Small Germany' and argued that 'the "idea of empire" is that of a federative hegemony – of the federal state with an established supremacy – over this idea North and South must come together'.<sup>81</sup> Even the imperial heritage's most ardent opponents could not deny that, by resurrecting important symbols of German federalism only to turn them into powerful tools of centralisation, Bismarck had accomplished no mean political feat. Thus, the age-old dignity of Imperial Arch-chancellor, Treitschke reflected, was revived in the new office of Imperial Chancellor. While,

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<sup>76</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, pp.34-5.

<sup>77</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, p.20

<sup>78</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, p.22.

<sup>79</sup> Treitschke, 'Bund und Reich', p.582.

<sup>80</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, p.21.

<sup>81</sup> Deuerlein, *Föderalismus*, p.115.

however, the old one derived his influence from his *Landeshoheit* as Elector of Mainz and therefore naturally sided with federalist forces, the new one was merely an official, owing his power solely to his imperial sovereign: 'federalism sinks, the monarchy rises.' Compared to the old emperorship, he concluded enthusiastically, 'the imperial majesty of the new Germany always appears more modest in the forms but more powerful in substance'.<sup>82</sup> Decades later, the Iron chancellor himself confirmed this institutional logic in his memoirs, writing that the emperorship was meant as 'an element promoting unity and centralisation'.<sup>83</sup> The long transformation of *Kaiser* and *Reich* from symbols of diversity and federalism into symbols of identity and centralisation was already well advanced by 1871, while the *Bund* concept had taken over some of their original anti-centralist connotations. Federalism was not in fashion, being associated by the dominant opinion to the worst experiences of German history.<sup>84</sup>

### **The eclipse of supranational conservatism**

In August 1866, less than two months after the battle of Königgrätz/Sadowa, the Bishop of Mainz Baron Ketteler had been among the many German Catholics to bemoan recent events as an ominous break with the best German traditions. In a letter to Emperor Francis Joseph reaffirming his loyalty, he wrote that Austria's expulsion from Germany was to him 'more painful than words can express. Therewith the work is provisionally completed, which since Frederick the Great has been the guiding thought of all Prussian statesmen; therewith, everything that could still remind us of the old German *Reich* has been destroyed.' He saw 'a united Germany with the heirs of the old German imperial crown at its head' as the only arrangement corresponding to its 'true needs'.<sup>85</sup> This conviction, however, did not prevent him from recommending shortly thereafter in a famous pamphlet that Catholics accept the

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<sup>82</sup> Treitschke, 'Bund und Reich', pp.583-5.

<sup>83</sup> O. Dann, 'Der deutsche Weg zum Nationalstaat im Lichte des Föderalismus-Problems', in O. Janz, P. Schiera, and H. Siegrist, *Zentralismus und Föderalismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: Deutschland und Italien im Vergleich*, (Berlin, 2000), p.68.

<sup>84</sup> Dann, 'Der deutsche Weg', pp.66-8; Deuerlein, *Föderalismus*, p.148.

<sup>85</sup> Birke, *Ketteler*, p.74. Ketteler was familiar with Klopp's work, from which he drew his historical interpretation.

inevitable new reality and strive to find their place within the new Prussian-dominated 'Small Germany'. The programme he outlined appeared a pragmatic attempt to salvage at least some of the old principles in a new order that proved hostile to them.<sup>86</sup> This pragmatic approach became typical of the Catholic political posture towards the new *Kaiserreich* and did not countenance any extensive public use of the Empire ideal. As mentioned, those who could not leave with such pragmatism withdrew from public life or emigrated to the Habsburg empire.

Even conservatives in Austria-Hungary, however, did not quite know how to handle the Holy Roman Empire in the new context, and therefore fell largely silent on it. It reminded Austro-Germans of their painful exclusion from the German national state, the non-German nationalities of the imperial nexus that had long prevented their autonomous development and the Habsburg dynasty of its German origins, at the risk of undermining the emperor's credentials as the neutral shepherd of an increasingly quarrelsome multinational flock. The Habsburg dynasty had found the Holy Roman legacy convenient to legitimise its hegemonic claims over Germany.<sup>87</sup> Once those claims defeated, it found it equally convenient to de-emphasise it. In 1908, for example, to celebrate Francis Joseph's diamond jubilee, a drama at the Vienna Court Opera put on scene, in his presence, the dream of Rudolph, the first Habsburg Emperor, about the glorious imperial future of his house, emphasising dynastic continuity all the way down to the present, as opposed to the elective holy roman imperial dignity.<sup>88</sup> The Habsburg titularity of the Holy Roman tradition, however, continued to be affirmed to prop up the Empire's status as the world's leading Catholic power, with a special influence over the Holy See. Its last echo was

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<sup>86</sup> Ketteler, *Deutschland*; Ketteler, *Katholiken*.

<sup>87</sup> M. Stichler, 'Reichsvorstellungen in Preußen-Deutschland und der Habsburgermonarchie in der Bismarckzeit', in Bosbach, Hiery, and Kampmann, *Imperium, Empire, Reich*, pp.141-3.

<sup>88</sup> F. Lindström, *Empire and Identity. Biographies of the Austrian State Problem in the Late Habsburg Empire*, (West Lafayette, 2008), p.128. On the difficulties of Austrian historiography with the Empire's memory, see F. Fellner, 'Reichsgeschichte und Reichsidee als Problem der österreichischen Historiographie', in Brauneder and Höbelt, *Sacrum Imperium*, pp.361-74.

heard in the papal conclave of 1903, when Cardinal Puzyna of Cracow vetoed the election of Mariano Rampolla on behalf of the Habsburg Emperor.<sup>89</sup> It also perversely strengthened the Habsburg monarchy's credentials as a Catholic evangeliser when it came to embrace, in parallel with its Protestant German and Russian Orthodox counterparts, a modern form of imperialism, for example in Bosnia-Herzegovina after 1878.<sup>90</sup> The German nationalist insistence on a continuity between the medieval colonisation of Central Europe and a contemporary 'civilising mission' did encourage the association, particularly widespread among Poles, of the Empire with the Germans' '*Drang nach Osten*' that had destroyed their ancient state.<sup>91</sup> 'Imperial' references also irked the Czechs, reminding them of one Holy Roman Emperor who had suppressed their ancestors in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and of another who had attempted to Germanise them in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, something that could easily inflame contemporary debates on language policy in Bohemia.<sup>92</sup> In 1868, a Czech historian attacked Giesebrecht's national conservative account of imperial history for idealising the German race, which 'had to fulfil its destiny for its own honour and for the good of mankind.' He accused the author of having two different moral standards, one for Germans and another for the rest of mankind.<sup>93</sup> Individual Holy Roman Emperors could be represented positively as icons of national independence, such as the 14<sup>th</sup> century Emperor Charles IV<sup>94</sup> – who had based his imperial rule on being King of Bohemia and had been instrumental in the founding of Prague University – in the reconstruction of the Czech national theatre after a fire in the 1880s. Overall, however, Czech historical accounts typically celebrated the medieval royal house of the Premyslids and the anti-papal Bohemian Hussites and Protestants,

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<sup>89</sup> F. Heer, *The Holy Roman Empire*, tr. J. Sondheimer (London, 1968), pp.1-2.

<sup>90</sup> Stichler, 'Reichsvorstellungen', pp.139-40.

<sup>91</sup> Ther, 'Deutsche Geschichte', p.134.

<sup>92</sup> Emperors Ferdinand II and Joseph II respectively. See Fichtner, *Habsburgs*, pp.203-4, 232-3. As a 'germaniser', Joseph II enthused German nationalists, thus polarising Czech and German opinions in opposite directions.

<sup>93</sup> G. Gooch, *History and Historians*, p.126. See also Gollwitzer, 'Zur Auffassung', pp.492-8.

<sup>94</sup> F. Seibt, *Karl IV. Ein Kaiser in Europa 1346-1378*, (Munich, 1978).

associating the Empire with Catholic obscurantism and national oppression.<sup>95</sup> Hungarians were equally allergic to 'imperial' references because they saw themselves as a sovereign country, whose king happened to also rule over other territories. They were adamantly opposed to anything that might imply their membership in a common Habsburg polity and felt no connection to a long defunct Empire the Hungarian Kingdom had never been formally part of.<sup>96</sup> All this explains why, as we will see, Austrian conservatives mostly re-activated the Empire ideal in the subsequent period, when these existential constraints disappeared within the flagging Empire at war, and especially within the disoriented rump Austrian state that succeeded it.

### *Empire and internationalism*

Paradoxically, therefore, in Catholic Austria-Hungary as much as in the Protestant *Kaiserreich*, the Catholic idea of the German nation, so closely associated with the Empire, remained politically paralysed for almost half a century. Those who held it could not but bemoan the 1867 compromise as a denial of German supranationalism and a disastrous step towards the nationalisation of Central Europe. Until his death, Klopp longed for the return of Austria within the German political body, opposed nationalism, liberalism and the alliance with the German Empire, favouring an anti-Prussian one with France instead. He refused to accept that Austria should develop its own separate state idea based on a form of Catholic universalism embodied by the dynasty.<sup>97</sup> He, the Protestant convert exiled from the evangelical *Reich*, argued that the concept of a German emperor never existed before Bismarck fabricated it and would have been totally incomprehensible to a leading reformer like Philip

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<sup>95</sup> Fichtner, *Habsburgs*, pp.234-7.

<sup>96</sup> Hungary's distinctive status had, of course, been massively consolidated in the 1867 *Ausgleich*. Hungarians even strongly objected to the expression 'Austro-Hungarian Empire' being used to define the new dual monarchy, see R.J.W. Evans, 'Historians and the State in the Habsburg Lands', *Publications de l'École Française de Rome*, 171/1 (1993), p.210. This Hungarian attitude is also confirmed in I. Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, (Vienna, 1916), p.59 n.41. See also R.J.W. Evans, 'Austrian Identity in Hungarian Perspective: The Nineteenth Century', in Robertson and Timms, *The Habsburg Legacy*, pp.27-36.

<sup>97</sup> Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte*, vol.2, pp.71-3.

Melanchthon, who instead perfectly understood the continuity of the single supranational Empire from the Romans to the Germans. 'The contemporary German Reich', he explained, 'is national. The Old Reich, although actually limited to Germany and Italy, was universal in its idea, with equal rights for all nationalities, only with the preferential right of the German nation that the head belonged to it.'<sup>98</sup> Bismarck's empire, therefore, had usurped the Old *Reich's* name for a polity that rather followed Napoleon's early 19<sup>th</sup> century example, the first national empire.<sup>99</sup>

The exiled King George V was similarly struck by the historical ignorance that made people claim any continuity between the old and the new *Reich*, refused to utilise the 'erroneous' new title and always spoke of 'Roman emperors or Roman-German emperors.' In his last years, the meaning of Germany's imperial dignity became one of the key historical questions he pondered on.<sup>100</sup> The opinion that the *Kaiserreich* was a Bonapartist imposture grafting French nationalism, centralism and social atomisation on the German nation's federalist body was common in supranational conservative authors. Frantz damningly – from his perspective – defined the Iron Chancellor 'half Louis Napoleon, half Cavour'.<sup>101</sup> Janssen too emphasised that 'the imperial sovereignty', while symbiotically associated with German kingship since Otto I, meant 'the cosmopolitan idea of the union of nations.' In a clear rejoinder to the Borussian views that by then even shaped parliamentary deliberations, he explained that the emperorship in no way aimed 'at establishing a universal monarchy, destroying nationalities or

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<sup>98</sup> O. Klopp, *König George V*, (Hannover, 1878), pp.72, 75.

<sup>99</sup> Klopp, *George V*, pp.79-80. On Melanchthon's conception of the Empire, see Whitman, *Roman Law*, pp.3-40.

<sup>100</sup> Klopp, *George V*, pp.71-2.

<sup>101</sup> C. Frantz, *Der Föderalismus, als das leitende Princip für die sociale, staatliche und internationale Organisation, unter besonderer Bezugnahme auf Deutschland*, (Mainz, 1879), p.273. During his period as Prussian ambassador to France, Bismarck had certainly been influenced by Bonapartism's ability to combine a repressive conservative regime with universal male suffrage and a revisionist foreign policy, see Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, p.102.

subjecting all other nations', but rather 'to establish, among the nations of Christendom a system of organisation which might be of universal application.'<sup>102</sup>

Vogelsang shared this view: Charlemagne's empire, 'the most sublime political creation that mankind has ever given birth to' and 'whose last ruins were shuttered in 1866', he explained, was not built 'to form a national empire, to put the rich diversity of the peoples belonging to it under the hard yoke of centralisation, even of linguistic compulsion', but 'in order to create a secure and outwardly effective home for Christian or, as determined by the imperfect implementation, Occidental culture.' However, he revealed his Romantic influences by emphasising the role of Christian faith and love in maintaining the imperial order and then in ensuring peace between the various nationalities it had comprised even after its dismemberment. Only in parallel with the decline of Europe's Christian foundations, fanatical national hatreds flared up, later heightened in the epoch of 'enlightened absolutism', that 'driest, shallowest political rationalism', 'the mother of our contemporary liberalism', which tried with its 'infinitely narrow-minded schoolmaster wisdom to regulate nationalities and languages, that is, to rape them.'<sup>103</sup> Such statements obviously evoked the runaway national disputes and language policy discussions then taking place in the Habsburg Empire but also, on a much more modest scale, in the *Kaiserreich*.

In confirming that the new German 'Empire' was a tragic misnomer, Frantz similarly insisted on the necessary 'international meaning of the *Reich*'. Apart from entailing a higher synthesis of state and civil society, he restated, the *Reich* also naturally served 'as a bridge connecting constitutional and international law': Germany being itself 'a people of peoples', 'international legal relations belonged to the very foundation of the imperial constitution. This interplay of constitutional and international legal

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<sup>102</sup> J. Janssen, *History of the German People at the Close of the Middle Ages*, tr. M.A. Mitchell and A.M. Christie (16 vols, London, 1896-1910), vol.2, pp.112-13.

<sup>103</sup> K. von Vogelsang, *Die sozialen Lehren des Freiherrn Karl von Vogelsang*, ed. W. Klopp (St. Pölten, 1894), pp.185-6.

relationships is what characterises the *Reich*, in contrast to what is actually a state.<sup>104</sup> He underlined how far from this the new German Empire had strayed by expressly declaring in its constitutional documents that it focused solely on its own interests and renounced any international purpose.<sup>105</sup> Still in 1905, joining other particularist groups from Hesse, Schleswig, Brunswick, Mecklenburg-Strelitz and Bavaria to form the *Deutsche Rechtspartei*, the DHP called for the creation of a central European federative arrangement (*Friedensbund*) between Germany, Austria-Hungary, Holland and Switzerland.<sup>106</sup> And in 1916, when, during the First World War, *Mitteleuropa* ideas were again in fashion and the Central Powers proclaimed the restoration of an independent Polish Kingdom as an anti-Russian move, the DHP celebrated this rectification of an 'old injustice' not only because it nurtured hopes that the same could be done for Hannover, but also because their long-standing support for a central European confederation that would contain Russia seemed relevant again.<sup>107</sup>

The purely national self-definition of the new state was considered both a denial of its multiethnic reality and a contribution to continental disunity and insecurity. Frantz ridiculed the new *Reich's* claim to be a national state and to treat cities like Posen as purely German, pointing out its exclusion of Austro-Germans, which had been members of the *Bund*, and inclusion of three million Slavs that had not.<sup>108</sup> A German *Reich* could not be 'a self-contained national body', as it was 'essential for Germany to connect with Slavic elements.' Consequently, he regretted that the victory of national liberalism in 1866 had produced a growing estrangement between Germans and Western Slavs: 'from the very beginning the *Reich* was intertwined with the Roman element in the west, while in the east it had its marks,

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<sup>104</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, pp.401-2.

<sup>105</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, p.305.

<sup>106</sup> E.B. Bukey, 'The Guelph Party in Imperial Germany, 1866-1918', *The Historian*, 35/1 (1972), p.47 n.14. Also see Stehlin, *Bismarck*, pp.98-137; E.B. Bukey, 'The Guelph Movement in Imperial Germany 1866-1918', (PhD, Ohio State University, 1969); H.G. Aschoff, *Welfische Bewegung und politischer Katholizismus 1866-1918. Die Deutschhannoversche Partei und das Zentrum in der Provinz Hannover während des Kaiserreiches*, (Düsseldorf, 1987).

<sup>107</sup> Aschoff, *Welfische Bewegung*, pp.314-16.

<sup>108</sup> Frantz, *Weltpolitik*, vol.2, p.24.

through which it was linked to the Slavic world.<sup>109</sup> Frantz obviously valued the bundle of multinational and overlapping commitments whose discard national conservatives such as Gierke presented as a decisive advance. He also underlined that, as a Prusso-centric and Protestant entity, the new state subdued South and Catholic Germans, fuelling national division, not unity.<sup>110</sup> Janssen too commended the Old Empire because, being itself 'a nation of nations, it 'was particularly adapted for union with other races' and 'became the great peace-preserving Power in the interior of Europe'.<sup>111</sup> For Frantz, the very opposite was true of the new German Empire, whose acquisition of great external power was crudely mistaken by its cheerleaders as a clear measure of success. In reality, its position in Central Europe was more precarious than ever, as it was bound to foster the enmity of both France and Russia and to accelerate the continent's militarisation.<sup>112</sup> Frantz even condemned the new regime's decision to merge the two historically distinct regions of Alsace and Lorraine, treating them as military border regions. He explained that Lorraine's association with the Old *Reich* had always been looser than Alsace's, serving as a helpful bridge to France that could have been re-invented in modern form to reassure the French and strike a durable peace with them, as opposed to what amounted to a truce encouraging their revanchism.<sup>113</sup>

Instead of fulfilling the German calling (*Weltberuf*) to become 'the pivot of a European federation' and 'the keystone of European peace', the new Empire adopted the maxim *oderint dum metuant* and 'has become the cornerstone of the European war system'.<sup>114</sup> Whereas in the past the external security of Germany seemed hardly endangered, he believed the risk of war to have become permanent since

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<sup>109</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, pp.406-8.

<sup>110</sup> Frantz, *Weltpolitik*, vol.2, pp.26-30.

<sup>111</sup> Janssen, *History*, pp.187-8.

<sup>112</sup> Frantz, *Weltpolitik*, vol.2, pp.42-4.

<sup>113</sup> Frantz, *Weltpolitik*, vol.2, pp.44-51. On the difficulties experienced by Alsations and their shifting French and German overlords, see C.J. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsations? Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism 1870-1939*, (Oxford, 2010).

<sup>114</sup> Becker, 'Constantin Frantz', pp.192-3.

1866: 'as Germany made itself into a centralised military power, which now appears threatening to all its neighbours and therefore elicits everywhere corresponding counter-armaments, the whole continental political structure has since laid on gunpowder.'<sup>115</sup> 'This too', he concluded sarcastically, 'is one of the "great successes" of 66 and 70!'.<sup>116</sup> The new 'military emperorship' of the Hohenzollern, much vaunted by 'Ghibelline' authors, appeared here as the most ominous sign of the new state's break with the Old *Reich's* tradition. While the new German Emperor was above all a commander-in-chief and warlord, the old emperorship had been first and foremost 'the centre of all legal developments and the supreme judicial office. [...] The difference is like that between a Gothic cathedral and a Berlin barrack.'<sup>117</sup> The power amassed by the Hohenzollern emperorship dwarfed those once possessed by the Ottonians, the Salians and the Hohenstaufen.<sup>118</sup> These negative perceptions were not entirely unjustified: the new Germany did appear isolated and unhinged in its foreign policy, internally divided and repressive of minorities, be they national, confessional or ideological.<sup>119</sup>

### *Empire and justice*

Despite the enthusiasm of most liberal nationalists for it, the new Empire also left much to be desired in its dimension as a legal order and a justice system, where the Old *Reich* had achieved a widely acknowledged sophistication. Even the sympathetic Gierke had to admit that the new Germany was far less perfect a *Rechtstaat* than the Empire had been. Despite their malfunctioning towards the end of the Old *Reich*, he pondered, the imperial courts could pronounce themselves on all matters of private and constitutional law and were considered 'the palladium of German freedom', realising 'the truly Germanic idea' that 'even the highest earthly authority does not stand above the law'.<sup>120</sup> Legal

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<sup>115</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, pp.235-6.

<sup>116</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, p.304.

<sup>117</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, p.262; Frantz, *Weltpolitik*, vol.2, p.23.

<sup>118</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, p.426.

<sup>119</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, pp.153-63.

<sup>120</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, pp.18-19, 28.

protection was much more limited in the new *Reich* and largely left to the individual states. There were no established legal remedies for competence disputes between the *Reich* and the states, as well as for violations of rights by the imperial administration or by the individual states, something he admitted was a 'sensitive gap' in the new polity.<sup>121</sup> Frantz obviously agreed: the new Empire's legal dimension had an accidental and incomplete quality, so much so that there was not even a real imperial or federal court.<sup>122</sup>

Cosmopolitan and supranational conservatives had always stressed the centrality of law to the imperial ideal and continued to do so in this period, emphasising the connection between state and international law and how a deeper moral consensus necessarily underpinned both. With reference to the imperial tradition, Frantz explained how the existence of 'a composite body in the middle of Europe in which the weak member feels just as secure as the strong one is of the utmost importance for the preservation of the general legal order, just as, on the other hand, nothing must have so destructive an effect on the entire European legal system as when right in Germany the example of the rape of the weak is given and a power system is proclaimed on this basis.'<sup>123</sup> Klopp emphasised that since its founders Rudolf and Albrecht, the Habsburg imperial dynasty had particularly been capable of embodying 'the principle of law and contract (*Vertrag*)', so that 'the recognition of the right of the particular under the duty for the general' had become 'the binding force' for the Austrian 'conglomerate of many nationalities' and for Germany itself, corresponding 'like no other to the German character'. For this reason, Austria had operated as 'the eminently conservative power, first for Germany, then for Europe'.<sup>124</sup> The highest compliment he could bestow upon George V of Hannover was of being a 'man of justice' in the tradition

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<sup>121</sup> Gierke, *Deutsche Reich*, p.33.

<sup>122</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, p.427.

<sup>123</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, p.403.

<sup>124</sup> O. Klopp, *Deutschland und die Habsburger*, ed. L. König (Vienna, 1908), pp.71-3.

of the Old *Reich*.<sup>125</sup> Janssen confirmed that the emperorship embodied 'all idea of lawful possession and earthly justice'.<sup>126</sup> The limitations traditionally imposed by the princes to the Emperor and by the estates to the princes and all enshrined in the imperial constitution protected individual rights as stemming from God's moral law, which stood above all earthly authority. A justice system with courts limiting state power and protecting freedom was thus quintessential to the German character crystallised in the imperial constitution.<sup>127</sup>

Concrete matters for which such conceptions were important since the early years of the *Kaiserreich* were religious freedom and confessional relations. For the first time since the Augsburg Settlement and the Peace of Westphalia centuries earlier, the balance between Germany's Christian confessions was radically upset, to the point that the future Prussian court preacher Adolf Stoecker proclaimed that '[t]he holy, Protestant empire of the German nation is now completed.'<sup>128</sup> The new *Reichstag*'s 1871 first session, in which the history of the First *Reich* featured so prominently, also saw a dispute over the possible extension of Prussia's legal guarantees for religious freedom to the new imperial constitution. The minorities insisted on it, not least on the ground that those were hard-earned conquests since the last centuries of the Old *Reich*, whose legal order had protected the confessions' rights. The liberal Protestant majority, however, represented in the debate by Treitschke himself, by then saw the sovereign national state as the ultimate expression and protector of freedom, as opposed to the chief threat to it. Ketteler bitterly observed that liberalism, which until 1848 had justly fought to limit the absolutism of the state, had instead achieved its divinisation under the influence of Hegel's thought.<sup>129</sup> In rejecting some measures of the nascent *Kulturkampf* that came up for discussion in the

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<sup>125</sup> Klopp, *George V*, p.18.

<sup>126</sup> Janssen, *History*, p.114.

<sup>127</sup> Janssen, *History*, pp.135-44.

<sup>128</sup> A.J. Steinhoff, 'Christianity and the Creation of Germany', in S. Gilley and B. Stanley (eds), *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume 8: World Christianities c.1815-c.1914*, (Cambridge, 2005), p.282.

<sup>129</sup> Schieder, *Kaiserreich*, pp.81-2; Birke, *Ketteler*, pp.84-5.

imperial parliament in early 1873, the leading Catholic parliamentarian Mallinckrodt warned his colleagues that approving them would mean 'reversing the path of centuries, shelving what the Old *Reich* has gradually developed out of the conflict of opinions over the course of two centuries and arriving again at the *ius reformandi* of the state, i.e. at the compulsion, at the violence of the state against the holiest of man.'<sup>130</sup> The Protestant Frantz, while welcoming the rise of Prussia in the Old *Reich* as a Protestant counterweight to Catholic Austria that helped preserve confessional freedom, criticised the post-1866 imbalance for destroying it, resulting in the persecution of Catholics.<sup>131</sup> And Klopp, writing during the *Kulturkampf*, praised religious tolerance as another fundamental trait of the Guelph house since the time when they thrived in the religious diversity of the Old *Reich*.<sup>132</sup> In a letter to him, the exiled head of this house himself wrote that the so-called German *Reich* had been created with 'devilish' means and regarded the *Kulturkampf* as yet another example of the immorality dominating the new state, which he expected would result sooner or later in its collapse.<sup>133</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, in the 1870s, the DHP, despite being predominantly Protestant, aligned with the *Zentrum* in opposition to the *Kulturkampf*, another sign that Borussianism was far from the only option for Protestants.

#### *Federalism, subsidiarity and the social question*

The fear for the fate of the German *Rechtstaat* and what this would mean for minorities was accompanied by that for the consequences of the centralist turn in German federalism. The achievements of both the North German Confederation and the German Empire in pressing ahead towards a unified national state were notable. They were accompanied by the central government's

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<sup>130</sup> O. Pfülf, *Hermann von Mallinckrodt. Die Geschichte Seines Lebens*, (Freiburg, 1892), p.443.

<sup>131</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, p.261.

<sup>132</sup> Klopp, *George V*, pp.20-1.

<sup>133</sup> Stehlin, *Bismarck*, p.96 n.140.

steady empowerment in economic, fiscal and social matters, which shifted the centre of gravity away from the *Bundesrat* – where the individual states were represented – and accelerated towards the end of the century, in parallel with Germany's growing industrialisation, colonialism and naval re-armament.<sup>134</sup> The new *Reich*, however, appeared to Frantz 'in truth only an enlarged Prussia' that turned the German states into little more than Prussian provinces. A real *Reich*, on the contrary, had no provinces but only equal members, because it possessed no political centre and no single capital, but was structurally polycentric.<sup>135</sup> If Gierke and Treitschke argued that a hereditary monarchy was the *Reich's* most natural political form, Frantz countered that the imperial dignity had to be elective and that 'the old Reich was never a real monarchy', 'the imperial constitution was monarchical and republican at the same time', which is why the hated *Bund* had actually been closer to the *Reich* in its political structure than the new German state was: 'what a restoration of the German *Reich* is that', he asked sarcastically, 'which begins [with] a hitherto unheard-of hereditary emperorship, and by tying German national development to a material centre by founding a large capital city, which is so utterly irreconcilable with the free diversity (*Mannigfaltigkeit*) of the German character!'.<sup>136</sup> He even dismissed the *Bundesrat* as a centralist 'assembly of officials' that bore no real resemblance to the old *Reichstag* of the Empire, where the princes themselves with all their political weight could act as the *Reich's* organs.<sup>137</sup> The fiery words of Ludwig Grote, a pro-Guelph pastor, expressed similar concepts: '[i]t is the most un-German thing which can be imagined to slaughter the individual members of the German body-corporate or to let them die slowly and then still speak of Germany's splendour and glory. For

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<sup>134</sup> D. Blackbourn, *Class, Religion, and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany. The Centre Party in Württemberg before 1914*, (Wiesbaden, 1980), pp.8-9.

<sup>135</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, pp.396-7.

<sup>136</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, pp.398-401. On the absurdity of a German 'capital', see also Frantz, *Föderalismus*, pp.265-6.

<sup>137</sup> Frantz, *Neue Deutschland*, p.423.

Germany only exists through its member parts, its local ethnic groups (*Stämme*), its regions...with their individualities and peculiarities, estates, and rights'.<sup>138</sup>

Some of the defeated of 1866 did convene on several occasions to consider the formation of a new conservative political force that would connect the regional forces existing until then to advance an explicit *Grossdeutsch* and federalistic agenda inspired by Frantz' ideas. The political programme discussed included the restoration of a reformed *Bund*, which they held legally still in existence, reversing the annexations and protecting the autonomy of the individual German states.<sup>139</sup> The most articulate such attempt took place in the mid-1870s on a call from Frantz himself 'for the foundation of a federalist party'. As part of this plan, a proposal was also discussed to link with like-minded 'federalists' in the Habsburg empire.<sup>140</sup> The initiative, whose prospects would anyway have been dubious, foundered on the participants' particularism, which made them sceptical of any central party structure.

Consequently, the defence of 'state rights federalism' was largely left to the Catholic Centre. Indeed, the Centre's leading figures had essentially the same views on the matter, starting from Windthorst, who had developed since his Hanoverian period a cautious conservatism based on strict respect for constitutional forms, and experienced the annexation as a painful break with law and tradition. To him, the fight against the state's omnipotence and for the preservation of traditional freedoms became paramount, as did a robust federalism.<sup>141</sup> The Centre Party, however, had a large constituency to

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<sup>138</sup> Stehlin, *Bismarck*, p.100.

<sup>139</sup> This is reminiscent of projects to restore the Old *Reich* after 1806, especially around 1814-15. See chapter 1 above.

<sup>140</sup> These meetings happened in Hamburg (1868), Aschaffenburg (1868), Dresden (1869), Prague (1875) and Eisenach (1876). Participants came from Hannover and especially from Hesse, where a movement against the annexation and in favour of a *Grossdeutsch* federalism had emerged in the form of a '*Hessische Rechtspartei*'. See: Aschoff, *Welfische Bewegung*, pp.264-7; E. Knobel, *Die Hessische Rechtspartei. Konservative Opposition gegen das Bismarckreich*, (Marburg, 1975). In 1892 there was another attempt to revive a *Grossdeutsch* movement by creating a States' Rights party uniting anti-Prussian groups in various states and securing the admission of German Austria to the *Reich*, but that too came to nothing, see Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, p.156.

<sup>141</sup> H.G. Aschoff, 'Politische Alternative im Bismarck-Reich: Das Staats- und Verfassungsverständnis der deutschen Zentrumsparthei und die Rolle Ludwig Windthorst's', in Becker and Morsey, *Christliche Demokratie*, pp.59-68.

represent and could not afford to embrace doctrinaire positions that appeared not only openly subversive but also politically doomed. Thus, political Catholicism pragmatically set aside its *Grossdeutsch* tradition and the Central European vision associated with it, working for less ambitious but more realistic goals: states' rights and a limited central government, constitutional individual and minority rights, the independence of the Church from state control and the promotion of local autonomy and administrative decentralisation.<sup>142</sup>

These older conceptions were far from dead – they would indeed re-emerge under the changed conditions of the subsequent period. However, by the 1890s the old cleavage between *Gross-* and *Kleindeutsch* appeared superseded by concerns about concrete policies that took the existing constitutional framework for granted. Electoral support for the parties of the minorities (Danes, Alsatians, Poles, Hanoverian Guelphs) tellingly declined, while new nationalist associations and pressure groups sprung up.<sup>143</sup> Tensions between nationalism and particularism appeared on their way to being reconciled. While revivalist hopes for the *Bund* and the annexed states faded, however, older notions of federalism as a full-fledged principle of social organisation enabling the development of societal bodies autonomously from the state continued to circulate. Thus, Janssen extolled the Empire as a subsidiary order: 'it was the aim of the German constitution to accord to each individual all practicable independence. All authority was graduated: the head of the house regulated his own family; the families formed themselves into communities, parishes, districts, and provinces. According to this organization, each part rendered to the other only such fealty as was for the interest of the whole.'<sup>144</sup> And, in 1867, Vogelsang similarly explained that 'federalism is the self-determination which is assured

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<sup>142</sup> Breuilly, 'Nationalism and the First Unification', p.111; Aschoff, 'Politische Alternative'.

<sup>143</sup> Blackbourn, *Class, Religion, and Local Politics*, p.9. On the positions of Polish, Danish and Alsatian minorities' representatives in the *Reichstag* also see: Stehlin, *Bismarck*, pp.106-7; S. Berger, *Germany. Inventing the Nation*, (London, 2004), pp.92-4.

<sup>144</sup> Janssen, *History*, p.109.

to the family and onwards to the municipality, the district, then to the historically defined territories of each territorial unit and which finally leaves to higher units, ultimately to the Empire, only those tasks which the limited unit is unable to discharge'.<sup>145</sup> For Windhorst too federalism limited the encroachment of the state on society based on a subsidiary view of political order.<sup>146</sup> Similarly, Simmern's and the DHP's notion of federalism aimed to protect societal bodies' autonomy from bureaucratic encroachment and to limit the modern state's levelling thrust.<sup>147</sup> In 1884, for example, the party opposed state-control of education and tax increases as a further step towards centralisation, attacking 'the false opinion that the State can make everyone happy [...]. This desire for control [...] is sacrificing more and more personal freedom to a bureaucratic routine.'<sup>148</sup>

Moreover, in this period, a socially grounded federalism was increasingly put forward as a specifically Christian answer to the social and cultural dislocations provoked by the industrial revolution, then in full swing. Both Frantz and Vogelsang count among the pioneers of the Christian conservative approach to the burning social question of industrial societies, the latter widely recognised, the former largely unacknowledged. Both authors connected their approach with the subsidiary federalism and Christian corporatism associated with the Empire. Half of Frantz' key 1879 book on federalism – whose existential core he identified as 'replacing antagonism with cooperation'<sup>149</sup> – was devoted to a detailed analysis of the social question engendered by modern capitalism, and to a critique of the socialist and liberal solutions. Against both, Frantz developed his own third way solution, based on the organic structuration of human communities from families, their basic federalist cells, and then on to other 'organised corporations'.<sup>150</sup> In the book's second part, this naturally led to a discussion of the German

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<sup>145</sup> Deuerlein, *Föderalismus*, p.161.

<sup>146</sup> Aschoff, 'Politische Alternative', pp.62-3.

<sup>147</sup> Aschoff, *Welfische Bewegung*, pp.5-6.

<sup>148</sup> Stehlin, *Bismarck*, pp.101-4.

<sup>149</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, pp.140-1.

<sup>150</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, pp.1-203.

imperial tradition as the foremost example of a federalist order nurturing the vitality and autonomy of societal bodies, from which to draw inspiration.<sup>151</sup>

In his social teachings, Vogelsang was even more explicit. He reflected on the medieval Empire in the section treating 'fundamental ideas on social reform' and presented it as the ideal of a Christian corporatist socio-economic order that also inspired his own proposals on the matter. He underlined the re-appearance of two key medieval concepts of Christian social order in his own time: 'the notion of the corporatist organisation of society and the participation of such corporations in the authorities (*Ämtern*) of national labour'; and 'the notion of public, common, ideally divided property, opposed to the capitalist concept of private property'. Elaborating further on the latter notion in the Middle Ages, he explained that the earth was deemed to belong to the Lord, who assigned it to men only as a fief. All categories in society were meant to be its beneficiaries, and as such obliged to work in return in certain functions 'to build and maintain the Kingdom (*Reich*) of God on earth': 'the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation was to be this and nothing else, and even though it was never perfected, it is to our ancestors the greatest honour that they had set themselves such an ideal as the goal of their striving.' After many centuries, this ideal could still be a 'nourishing fruit' and protect modern men, technologically advanced but morally confused, from 'spiritual starvation'.<sup>152</sup> He connected the gravity of the modern social question to the historical decline of the artisan class and of all estates accompanying the downfall of the Empire, the framework that had enabled their 'expansive force' and 'vital development'.<sup>153</sup>

*A nationalised Catholic Holy Roman Empire?*

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<sup>151</sup> Frantz, *Föderalismus*, pp.220-415.

<sup>152</sup> Vogelsang, *Socialen Lehren*, pp.51-2.

<sup>153</sup> Vogelsang, *Socialen Lehren*, p.427.

All these authors clearly saw the Old *Reich* as a universalist and supranational order, but also as one to whose realisation the German nation was especially called, and which therefore contributed to defining its essence. Janssen overturned the Borussian argument that postulated an inverse relationship between Germany's internal cohesion and its cosmopolitan commitments. 'In proportion as Germany abandoned its cosmopolitan mission,' he argued, 'its internal politics became disturbed, and the unity which bound its various tribes was relaxed.' According to him, 'the power and progress of Middle Europe depended on the alliance of Germany and Italy. When the connection between these two countries was severed the period of unity and strength for the Empire, of internal freedom and civic welfare for Italy, was at an end.'<sup>154</sup> Klopp conveyed the same message when he stressed 'the importance of the Roman Empire for the cohesion and continued existence of the German nation [...]. If Germany had been like France or England, it would have collapsed long before.'<sup>155</sup>

In this period, however, the emphasis on the German nation's European mission went in parallel with the tendency to subtly 'germanise' the Empire. In the new Protestant Empire, underlining the Old *Reich*'s 'Germanness' was, after all, a way to defend the German Catholics' membership in the national community, fundamentally questioned by the *Kulturkampf*. If the *Kulturkampf* 'was in reality the attempt of the Prussian-German authoritarian state to nationally mediatise the political tendencies of German Catholicism with its transnational aspects',<sup>156</sup> an analysis of the Catholic Empire ideal in the historiography of the post-1866 period confirms that this strategy was at least partly successful upon sectors of German Catholicism. This is especially true of the more liberal ones, which grew further apart from conservative 'ultramontane' Catholics, and some of which broke with the Roman Church over the issue of papal infallibility after the First Vatican Council of 1869-70, supporting the schismatic

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<sup>154</sup> Janssen, *History*, pp.188, 193.

<sup>155</sup> Klopp, *Habsburger*, p.203.

<sup>156</sup> Schulze, *Staat und Nation*, p.259. See also Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict*.

Old Catholic Church.<sup>157</sup> Still, some broad interpretive lines set all conservative Catholic historians apart from prevailing Ghibelline national conservative views.

First, their assessment of the Hohenstaufen emperors tended to be rather negative. Thus Janssen blamed the 13<sup>th</sup> century downfall of the Empire on the Hohenstaufen's betrayal of its ideals, their striving for a caesaristic emperors of the oriental type that recognised neither the Church's nor the German tribes' rights.<sup>158</sup> And Klopp placed his master George V's struggle against the injustice of the Prussian Hohenzollerns in direct continuity with that of his illustrious Guelph ancestor Henry the Lion against the violence of his cousin, the Hohenstaufen Barbarossa. The latter's imperial house was 'rich in intellectual gifts but poor in justice' and therefore 'perished in blood and terror' after having tried and failed to pervert the imperial constitution by turning the *Reich* into a 'centralised unitary state'.<sup>159</sup> Klopp maliciously highlighted that those who found the actions of Prussia's philosopher king Frederick II praiseworthy typically also had a reverence for the Hohenstaufen dynasty, which had been 'deeply pernicious for Germany'.<sup>160</sup> Second, the Habsburg emperors usually appears as a positive force, whose plans for national consolidation were torpedoed by the German princes' selfishness. From Rudolf of Habsburg's attempt at re-establishing the imperial power, Janssen explains, the latter – far from the saviours of the German nation from Habsburg universalism depicted by Borussian historians – were chiefly to blame for Germany's failure to achieve unity.<sup>161</sup> And Klopp insisted on the Habsburg Emperors' German calling constantly frustrated by Germany's external and internal foes.

Third, the re-appraisal of the Habsburgs as dedicated servants of the German nation implied a more positive take on the prospects of the early modern Empire and cast in a very positive light several early

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<sup>157</sup> In this liberal and national Catholicism, one can perhaps detect faint echoes of the Febronianism widespread, in the last decades of the Old *Reich*, in important sectors of the German Imperial Church, see p.39 above.

<sup>158</sup> Janssen, *History*, pp.115-17.

<sup>159</sup> Klopp, *George V*, p.7; Klopp, *Habsburger*, p.15-16.

<sup>160</sup> Klopp, *Habsburger*, p.4.

<sup>161</sup> Janssen, *History*, pp.117-25.

modern Emperors, in particular Maximilian I and Charles V. Under Janssen's pen, even the outgoing Middle Ages appears not as an age of national ruin but as a blossoming one, cut short by the Reformation and the princes' pettiness, both agents of national division. He saw Maximilian as 'the protector of German unity and the redeemer of the Christian Germanic Empire'.<sup>162</sup> His reforms went in the right direction of consolidating the central imperial power, for example by establishing an imperial taxation and army, while 'the hydra-headed power of the princes [...] was the bane of the Empire'.<sup>163</sup> Klopp similarly praised Maximilian as the new founder of the *Reich* based on a federative principle solid enough to hold its ground against enemies from East (the Ottomans) and West (the French), and whose reforms foundered on princely particularism.<sup>164</sup> He also extolled Charles V as the perfect embodiment of Habsburg virtues and devotion to Germany, whose integrity he often defended at the cost of his own dynastic resources.<sup>165</sup> Occasionally, this nationalisation of the Habsburg Emperors to vindicate the historical contribution of German Catholics could express itself in awkward ways, as when Janssen questioned that a noted Belgian historian, 'he is, if I am not mistaken, a Walloon – has the full flair to appraise Charles V. Because the Habsburgs are German, eminently German.'<sup>166</sup> Overall, however, while compelled by the new circumstances to emphasise the Empire's national merits, these authors' arguments do not fundamentally differ from those of the previous generation of supranational conservatives who, confronted with the burning German national question, had overcome the *Reichspublizisten's* celebration of the Empire's fragmentation to demand a stronger national unity, though one with federal foundations and a European embeddedness. In this period, the competing genealogies in German imperial history developed in the previous phase were clearly being refined.

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<sup>162</sup> Janssen, *History*, p.205.

<sup>163</sup> Janssen, *History*, p.261.

<sup>164</sup> Klopp, *Habsburger*, pp.248-9.

<sup>165</sup> Klopp, *Habsburger*, pp.229, 254-5.

<sup>166</sup> Gräf, 'Reich, Nation und Kirche', p.388.

The victors of 1866 reconnected the Protestant Hohenzollerns with the Hohenstaufen's anti-papal and nationalised tradition, while the vanquished alleged a historical continuity from the latter's medieval adversaries to the confederal and legitimist view of German and Central European order represented by the Habsburgs and now in retreat.

## **Conclusion**

From the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until well into the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the supranational and federalist Empire fizzled out, while its upholders were busy fighting for their political and intellectual survival. Although the newly forged Ghibelline Empire appeared in the ascendant, however, its contradictions had already begun to destabilise it by the turn of the century.

Monarchy ranked among its essential features, but the dynastic structure of the German states hampered the unity of the German nation, which the Ghibelline Empire claimed to realise. Moreover, the more the Ghibelline Empire claimed a kinship with the medieval *Reich* of the national conservative tradition, the clearer it became that it fell far short of its aspirations: it was not the Empire of the entire German nation, but only a predominantly German state that excluded very significant portions of it; and it possessed no continental hegemony, being encircled by powerful enemies. Finally, under the surface of its official Protestantism and 'untroubled nationalism', a 'mixture of cultural despair and mystical nationalism' was taking hold, in parallel with the decline of Christianity and the rise of spiritual uncertainty and nihilism. Starting with the intellectual classes, this inclined growing numbers towards finding new, post-Christian avenues of collective redemption.<sup>167</sup> In short: the runaway nationalism that was supposed to be the new *Reich*'s animating principle ate away at its constitutional, international and spiritual foundations. These contradictions would all explode in the subsequent period.

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<sup>167</sup> F. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair. A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, (Berkeley, 1961), pp.xiii, xviii; Berger, *Germany*, pp.86-7, 98-101; Chickering, *We Men*, p.81.

## IV. Detours (c.1915-c.1955)

### Context and authors

The four decades between the mid-1910s and the mid-1950s were among the most eventful and transformative in modern European history. Therefore, the decision to treat them as a single historical period warrants a justification, not least because common historical periodisations privilege major rupture points in the flow of events, such as 1914, 1933 and 1945. Although the second and third were relevant turning points for conservative prefigurations of order inspired by the Old *Reich*, this chapter contends that continuities prevailed over discontinuities at these critical junctures. Instead, an important shift in conservative political uses of imperial history commenced in the middle of the First World War and, by the end of the 1920s, had determined the broad terms of a conservative debate that continued, with fainting echo and changing but always recognisable traits, until the closure of the Adenauer era and European integration's early steps. The shift occurred c.1915/16 because by then the exhaustion of the political and geopolitical forms in which the Germans had inhabited the Central European space for the past half century became evident. The political form was that of the dynastic state, the Hohenzollerns' predominantly national one and the Habsburgs' imperfectly supranational one. The geopolitical form was, since 1879, that of a Dual Alliance among them, guaranteed by their shared past and common German identity. Soon into the war, Germany appeared increasingly dominant, as it became evident that Austria-Hungary was incapable of fighting on without its help. The death of Franz Joseph in 1916 was also significant for the Habsburg empire as a symbolic break with the older era that heightened Austria's inferiority complexes. In this new context, there re-emerged a

debate on the shape, prospects and historical foundations of *Mitteleuropa*, a new Central European federation structured around the victorious Dual Alliance.<sup>1</sup>

Defeat changed the atmosphere – from exaltation to rancour – and terms – from dynastic states to the German *Volk*'s scattered members – of this debate, but only added to its urgency. A diminished Austria and Germany seemed readier to consummate their ancient communion than at any time since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in a Middle Europe once more in flux and searching for order. *Grossdeutschland* was in fashion again, and the Europe of Stein and Metternich seemed suddenly closer than that of Bismarck and William II. As in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when similar debates were occasioned by the *Paulskirche*'s determination to bring about a German national state, alternative interpretations of the Empire were promptly deployed. It is only from the late 1950s that various factors contributed to their gradual marginalisation as active political ideals. To begin with, by then the older generations acquainted with interwar debates died out; secondly, the Cold War bipolar international system became consolidated. It cut right across Middle Europe, whose unity conservative visions of the Empire had wanted to maintain or restore. Finally, a powerful movement of historical self-questioning and socio-political liberalisation had begun, rendering references to the Empire hopelessly reactionary.<sup>2</sup> The stakes of this long debate were high, as a choice – or a compromise – between competing notions of 'Germanness' and between alternative visions of the Germans' position within Central European and continental order depended on it.

This chapter is organised in four sections: the second identifies the core themes and concepts of revolutionary conservative views of the *Reich* as a myth of German national renewal; the third traces

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<sup>1</sup> H.C. Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action 1815-1945*, (The Hague, 1955), chapters 7-10; Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa*, chapter 4; Vermeiren, *Dual Alliance*, chapter 5. See also P. Stirk, *Mitteleuropa. History and Prospects*, (Edinburgh, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> A. Schildt, *Zwischen Abendland und Amerika. Studien zur westdeutschen Ideenlandschaft der 50er Jahre*, (Munich, 1999); Conze, *Europa*, pp.399-401.

the re-emergence of supranational conservative themes and concepts; a fourth section touches upon the peculiarity of fascist views of the Empire, which, while not being conservative, were influenced by revolutionary conservatism and subsequently became so tragically associated with the *Reich* concept as to make it politically unserviceable for all conservatives by the 1960s. The remainder of this opening section outlines the profile of each strand's core authors.

The more dominant conservative *Reichsidee* until 1945 placed itself in continuity with the national conservatism of the previous period, although it modernised its bourgeois conservative concepts for the age of mass authoritarian and totalitarian politics. Most authors of the so-called 'conservative revolution' – also known as 'new', 'young' or 'revolutionary' conservatives to their contemporaries and previous generations of scholars, in order to distinguish them from 'old', traditional conservatives – certainly shared it.<sup>3</sup> They tended to come from a Protestant background, and to be petit bourgeois with little sympathy for the German states' traditional aristocracies, seen as an agent of national division. They also tended to be part of a young age cohort influenced by post-Nietzschean nihilism and the experience of mass mobilisation and radicalisation during the First World War and in the aftermath of defeat. Authors such as Christoph Steding (1903-1938)<sup>4</sup>, Ernst Niekisch (1889-1967), Wilhelm Stapel (1882-1954) and Friedrich Hilscher (1902-1990) certainly fit this description. The two most pivotal names of this trend, however, are Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (1876-1925)<sup>5</sup> and Martin Spahn (1875-1945).<sup>6</sup> The former popularised the term Third *Reich*, ubiquitous in national conservative speculations between the late 1920s and the early 1930s and enjoying official favour in the first years of the Nazi

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<sup>3</sup> Klemperer, *New Conservatism*; S. Breuer, *Anatomie der konservativen Revolution*, (Darmstadt, 1993); A. Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Grundriss ihrer Weltanschauungen*, (Stuttgart, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> C. Steding, *Das Reich und die Krankheit der europäischen Kultur*, (Hamburg, 1942). The book was much liked by Carl Schmitt and Julius Evola, while Alfred Rosenberg detested it.

<sup>5</sup> V. Weiss, *Moderne Antimoderne. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck und der Wandel des Konservatismus*, (Paderborn, 2012); Stern, *Politics of Cultural Despair*, pp.181-266.

<sup>6</sup> G. Clemens, *Martin Spahn und der Rechtskatholizismus in der Weimarer Republik*, (Mainz, 1983).

regime. The latter was a Catholic historian and one time Member of Parliament for the *Zentrum*, who then defected first to the national conservative *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* in 1921 and became a member of the Nazi Party after 1933, advocating a Catholic embrace of Nazism. Another prominent figure in this strand was the Bavarian-born publicist Edgar Jung (1894-1934), who worked as an advisor and speechwriter to Franz von Papen during the latter's time as chancellor and then, shortly, vice-chancellor under Hitler, before being murdered by the SS during the Night of the Long Knives for his criticism of Nazi violence.<sup>7</sup>

In 1929, a contemporary concerned with the prospects of unity among the various factions of the conservative right in German-speaking Central Europe confirmed the crucial role of Martin Spahn's circle: 'the threads leading to the German South, most importantly to the Austrian *Heimatwehren* and to autochthonous Bavarian-ness, generally to the *Reich* traditions of the South, which only a conservative and never a liberal North can grasp, run through the Catholic new conservative circle.'<sup>8</sup> New conservative views, especially in foreign policy, were influenced by figures from the so called '*Grenz- und Auslanddeutschtum*', meaning Germans born outside the *Reich* who agitated in favour of a political order that would reconnect their communities of origin with the fatherland, often drawing inspiration from the medieval Empire, such as the Baltic German Max Hildebert Boehm (1891-1968) or the Romanian German Heinrich Zillich (1898-1988).<sup>9</sup> A similar though distinct agenda was pursued by national conservative figures from the so-called *Ostforschung* – such as the prominent historian

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<sup>7</sup> R. Magub, *Edgar Julius Jung, Right-wing Enemy of the Nazis. A Political Biography*, (Rochester, 2017); E. Forschbach, *Edgar J. Jung, ein konservativer Revolutionär 30. Juni 1934*, (Pfullingen, 1984). See also E.J. Jung, *Die Herrschaft der Minderwertigen, ihr Zerfall und ihre Ablösung durch ein neues Reich*, (Berlin, 1930).

<sup>8</sup> H. Port, 'Die deutsche Rechte', *Abendland. Deutsche Monatshefte für europäische Kultur, Politik und Wirtschaft*, 4/8 (May 1929), p.233.

<sup>9</sup> I. Knyazeva, *Europavorstellungen der Konservativen Revolution*, (Berlin, 2018).

Hermann Aubin (1885-1969)<sup>10</sup> – who retraced the eastwards expansion of the medieval *Reich* to justify contemporary hegemonic claims.<sup>11</sup>

Radically different was the *Reichsidee* of supranational conservatives such as the Prussian-born Catholic scholar and publicist Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster (1869-1966).<sup>12</sup> During the war, he had rediscovered the writings of Constantin Frantz, whose ideas he proceeded to re-publish, popularise and advocate over the next decades. Until the early 1930s, he was active in an international network of conservative Catholic personalities spanning Germany, Switzerland, Austria and even France. In wartime Austria, he was a member of Bishop Ignaz Seipel's circle of conservative pacifists in Salzburg.<sup>13</sup> This group directly inspired Emperor Charles I's belated plans to transform the empire into a Danubian federation of peoples, seen as the modern institutional form of the supranational *Reichsidee*, and Seipel emerged as the dominant figure of post-war Austrian politics until his death in 1932. Foerster was also a mentor to the Bavarian Catholic priest George Moenius (1890-1953), who similarly preached a return to the Old *Reich's* universalist tradition of European unity and purchased, in 1928, the *Allgemeine Rundschau*, the old journal of the Catholic *Zentrum*, from which he relentlessly attacked Nazism until the journal was banned in 1933.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Foerster was a close supporter of the German philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977) who, fleeing the Nazis to Austria,

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<sup>10</sup> H. Aubin, *Das erste Deutsche Reich als Versuch einer europäischen Staatsgestaltung*, (Breslau, 1941); H. Aubin, O. Brunner, W. Kohte, J. Papritz (eds), *Deutsche Ostforschung. Ergebnisse und Aufgaben seit dem ersten Weltkrieg*, (2 vols, Leipzig, 1942-3).

<sup>11</sup> M. Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich*, (Cambridge, 1988); Liulevicius, *German myth of the East*, chapters 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> H. Donat, 'Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster (1869-1966). Friedenssicherung als religiös-sittliches und ethisch-politisches Programm', in C. Rajewsky and D. Riesenberger (eds), *Wider den krieg. Grosse pazifisten von Kant bis Böll*, (Munich, 1987), pp.167-83.

<sup>13</sup> This group also included prominent writer Hermann Bahr (1863-1934) and international law professor Heinrich Lammasch (1853-1920), representative of Austria-Hungary to the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907, member of the International Court of Arbitration after 1900 and the last Prime Minister of Austria-Hungary in 1918. See K. von Klemperer, *Ignaz Seipel. Christian Statesman in a Time of Crisis*, (Princeton, 1972), p.51-2.

<sup>14</sup> G. Munro, 'The Holy Roman Empire in German Roman Catholic Thought, 1929-33: Georg Moenius' Revival of Reichsideologie', *Journal of Religious History*, 17/4 (1993), pp.439-64.

founded in 1934 the journal *Der Christliche Ständestaat* to propagate the same ideas.<sup>15</sup> A Protestant-born convert, Hildebrand would become one of the most refined Catholic philosophers of his time, admired by Popes from Pious XII to Benedict XVI.

In the interwar period and beyond, this form of predominantly, though by no means exclusively, Catholic supranational conservatism manifested itself in a variety of forms, avenues and figures, often intimately connected across the German-speaking world. It was at the heart of the so-called *Abendland* movement in both the Weimer Republic and the early Federal Republic, and remained important within Christian Democratic Europeanism until the 1960s, as convincingly demonstrated by recent scholarship.<sup>16</sup> Figures such as the *Rheinländer* Hermann Platz (1880-1945)<sup>17</sup>, a scholar, publicist and one time spokesperson of the Catholic *Zentrum*, medieval historians Alois Dempf (1891-1982) and Leopold Ziegler (1881-1958)<sup>18</sup>, classicist Theodor Haecker (1879-1945)<sup>19</sup> and publicist Karl Anton Rohan (1898-1975)<sup>20</sup> all contributed to defining this internally variegated standpoint. Authors and activists of the Austrian *Österreichische Aktion*, such as Alfred Missong (1902-1965), Ernst Karl Winter (1895-1959)<sup>21</sup> and August Maria Knoll (1900-1963) propagated a similar vision and enjoyed a certain

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<sup>15</sup> E. Seefried, "Reich" und "Ständestaat" als Anthithesen zum Nationalsozialismus. Die katolische Zeitschrift *Der Christliche Ständestaat*, in M. Grunewald and U. Puschner (eds), *Katholische Intellektuellenmilieu in Deutschland, seine Presse und seine Netzwerke (1871-1963)*, (Bern, 2006), pp.419-21; R. Ebner, *Die österreichische Wochenschrift 'Der Christliche Ständestaat'. Deutsche Emigration in Österreich 1933-1938*, (Mainz, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.25-206; Gosewinkel, *Anti-liberal Europe*; Fortenza, 'Politics of the Abendland'; V. Plichta, "Die Erneuerung des Abendland wird eine Erneuerung des Reiches sein". Europaideen in der Zeitschrift *Neues Abendland (1946-1958)*, in M. Grunewald and H. Bock (eds), *Der Europadiskurs in den deutschen Zeitschriften (1933-1939)*, (Bern, 1999), pp.319-43; Großmann, *Internationale*; D. Pöpping, *Abendland. Christliche Akademiker und die Utopie der Antimoderne 1900-1945*, (Berlin, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> H. Platz, *Deutschland, Frankreich und die Idee des Abendlandes*, (Cologne, 1924); H. Platz, *Um Rhein und Abendland*, (Burg Rothenfelds, 1924); V. Berning (ed), *Hermann Platz (1880-1945). Eine Gedenkschrift*, (Düsseldorf, 1980); H.M. Bock, 'Der Abendland-Kreis und das Wirken von Hermann Platz im katholischen Milieu der Weimarer Republik', in Grunewald and Puschner, *Katholische Intellektuellenmilieu*, pp.337-62.

<sup>18</sup> L. Ziegler, *Das Heilige Reich der Deutschen*, (Darmstadt, 1925); M. Schneider-Fassbaender, *Leopold Ziegler. Leben und Werk*, (Pfullingen, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> E. Blessing, *Theodor Haecker. Gestalt und Werk*, (Nuremberg, 1959).

<sup>20</sup> I.U. Paul, 'Konservative Milieus und die Europäische Revue (1925-1944)', in M. Grunewald, U. Puschner and H. Bock (eds), *Das Konservative Intellektuellen-Milieu in Deutschland: seine Presse und seine Netzwerke (1890-1960)*, (Bern, 2003), pp.509-55.

<sup>21</sup> E.K. Winter, *Austria erit in orbe ultima*, (Vienna, 1922).

influence before 1938. Missong even shortly emerged, after the Second World War, as the chief theoretician of the *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP), the new Austrian Christian democratic party that modernised the inheritance of the old Christian Social party, tainted by antisemitism and association with the authoritarian conservative turn of the 1930s.<sup>22</sup> Prominent conservative Austrian historians who offered noticeable interpretations of the Holy Roman or Habsburg *Reichsidee*, often treating them as essentially interchangeable, include Heinrich Benedikt (1886-1981) and Friedrich Heer (1916-1983), the latter belonging to a younger generation and counting amongst the foremost Catholic intellectuals of the Austrian Second Republic.<sup>23</sup> The older generation of Foerster and Seipel had a vivid and direct memory of Bismarckian Europe, against which they had defined their worldview, while the World War and its aftermath had been the main formative traumas of the younger generation born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both generations were essentially attempting to come to terms with the collapse of two empires – the *Kaiserreich* and the Habsburg empire – and with the long-term chaos that, in their view, this cataclysmic event had unleashed. They rediscovered the supranational *Reichsidee* associated with the Empire as a new conservative ordering principle for Germany, Austria, *Mitteleuropa* and Europe at large. The supranational aristocracy as a social group were particularly receptive to such ideas and active in their elaboration.<sup>24</sup> This is exemplified by such cases as Count Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894-1972), founder of the Paneuropean movement, and Otto von Habsburg

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<sup>22</sup> J. Wasserman, 'Österreichische Aktion: Monarchism, Authoritarianism, and the Unity of the Austrian Conservative Ideological Field during the First Republic', *CEH*, 47/1 (2014), pp.76-104; D.A. Binder, "Rescuing the Occident" and "Europe in Us". The People's Party in Austria', in M. Gehler and W. Kaiser (eds), *Christian Democracy in Europe since 1945. Volume 2*, (London, 2004), pp.139-54. More broadly on political Catholicism in this period, see: W. Kaiser and H. Wohnout, *Political Catholicism in Europe 1918-45*, (London, 2004); T. Buchanan and M. Conway (eds), *Political Catholicism in Europe, 1918-1965*, (Oxford, 1996); M. Conway, *Catholic Politics in Europe, 1918-1945*, (London, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> G. Hamann, 'Heinrich Benedikt (30. Dezember 1886-26. Dezember 1981) zum Gedenken', in Lutz and Rumpler, *Österreich und die deutsche Frage*, pp.9-21; R. Faber and S.P. Scheichl (eds), *Die geistige Welt des Friedrich Heer*, (Vienna, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Gusejnova, D., 'Noble Continent? German-Speaking Nobles as Theorists of European Identity in the Interwar Period', in M. Hewitson and M. D'Auria (eds), *Europe in Crisis. Intellectuals and the European Idea, 1917-1957*, (New York, 2012), pp.111-133; D. Gusejnova, *European Elites and Ideas of Empire, 1917-1957*, (Cambridge, 2016); E. Glassheim, *Noble Nationalists. The Transformation of the Bohemian Aristocracy*, (Cambridge, 2005).

(1912-2011), the last crown prince of Austria-Hungary, Coudenhove's successor at the helm of the Paneuropean Union and, in later decades, a leading politician of the Bavarian *Christlich-Soziale Union* (CSU).<sup>25</sup> Count Hermann von Keyserling (1880-1946), the Livonian-born scion of an old lineage of Baltic German nobility, and Prince Hubertus zu Löwenstein (1906-1984), an early anti-Nazi publicist and later historian and politician, also deserve to be mentioned here.<sup>26</sup> For about two decades after the Second World War, this strand of conservative thinking remained vital and reinforced widespread notions of a 'neo-Carolingian' path for Adenauer's Federal Republic in Europe.

There are solid justifications for classifying conservative authors in this period within two dominant strands, but one inevitably comes across a great many intermediate figures, who combined national and supranational elements, at times consciously trying to synthesise them. Those are assigned to a strand based on their self-identification, the dominant tone of their writings, their intellectual influences and their political positioning. Relevant examples include: some Austro-German historians, such as Heinrich von Srbik (1878-1951) and Karl Gottfried Hugelmann (1879-1959), who purported to combine national German unity and supranationalism; historian Ricarda Huch (1864-1947), a Protestant patriot influenced by Romantic conservatism but hostile to nationalism;<sup>27</sup> some members of Stefan George's Circle until the master's death in 1933, whose fascination for the Empire in the interwar period revealed a more nationalist sensitivity, such as Ernst Kantorowicz (1895-1963).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> M. Bond, *Hitler's Cosmopolitan Bastard. Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and his Vision of Europe*, (Montreal, 2021); V. Conze, *Richard Coudenhove Kalergi. Umstrittener Visionär Europas*, (Zurich, 2004); S. Baier and E. Demmerle, *Otto von Habsburg: die Biografie*, (Vienna, 2007); G. Brook-Shepherd, *Uncrowned emperor. The life and Times of Otto von Habsburg*, (London, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Gusejnova, *European Elites*, pp.140-72; E. Seefried, "A Noteworthy Contribution in the Fight against Nazism": Hubertus Prinz zu Löwenstein im Exil', in A. Grenville (ed), *Refugees from the Third Reich in Britain*, (Amsterdam, 2002), pp.1-26; H. Löwenstein, *Towards the Further Shore: An Autobiography*, (London, 1968); H. Löwenstein, *The Germans in History*, (New York, 1945); H. Löwenstein, *After Hitler's Fall. Germany's Coming Reich*, tr. Denis Waldock (London, 1934).

<sup>27</sup> R. Huch, *Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation*, (Berlin, 1934).

<sup>28</sup> Lane and Ruehl, *A Poet's Reich*. For a contemporary publication featuring various conceptions of the *Reichsidee*, see F. Büchner, *Was ist das Reich? Eine Aussprache unter Deutschen*, (Oldenburg, 1932).

## The *Reich* as a myth of national renewal

As long as victory seemed within reach for the armies of the Central Powers, political thinking remained well-anchored to the bright present. The leading liberal politician Friedrich Naumann (1869-1919), for example, stood firmly in the *Paulskirche*'s tradition of German liberal nationalism seeking European hegemony primarily on geopolitical and economic grounds, despite his belief that the foundations of the future *Mitteleuropa* could be traced back to the Hohenstaufen *Reich*: 'the German emperors of earlier times are Central European figures [...] and are therefore now again fully recognisable. [...] Today in the war from the North Sea to Anatolia, today Barbarossa rises high from the Selef river in the distant Turkey.'<sup>29</sup> It is only after the experience of crushing defeat and national humiliation at Versailles that, much as in the early romantic nationalism of the Napoleonic period, during a desperate flight into the German past, many stumbled upon the attractive image of the First *Reich* at the height of its glory, and turned it into the focal point of a mystique of national rebirth for their own time. The *Reich* appeared to many as a response to the ideas of 1789 (liberal parliamentarianism) as much as to those of 1917 (Marxist Bolshevism), both of which had powerfully manifested themselves on the German scene in the aftermath of defeat, and the former of which had taken over the state under the Weimar Republic. It also appeared as a response to both Versailles, 'that of 1919 and that of 1871'.<sup>30</sup> It was higher to the republic, alien and western, but also to Bismarck's incomplete *Kaiserreich*. A complete *Reich* had to be greater-German, and the collapse of the Habsburg empire made that prospect conceivable again. For a new generation of radical nationalists, then, and especially after the

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<sup>29</sup> F. Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, (Berlin, 1915), p.40. Also quoted in H.G. Meier-Stein, *Die Reichsidee 1918-1945. Das mittelalterliche Reich als Idee nationaler Erneuerung*, (Aschau, 1998), p.340. In 1190, while on the Third Crusade, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had drowned in the Selef river, then known by its Latin name Saleph and located within Cilician Armenia.

<sup>30</sup> Winkler, *Long Shadow*, p.14.

publication of Moeller van den Bruck's influential 1923 tract, the *Reich* quickly became a 'social myth' in the Sorelian sense, a grand mobilising ideal conducive to revolutionary action and renewal.<sup>31</sup>

### *Federative nationalism and Machtstaat*

The *Reich* was the political order proper to the Germans regardless of the contingent form it took throughout history, to the point that their very national consciousness was coterminous with it, as a 1933 commentary on Moeller's work observed: '[t]he German conception of the nation lacks the features of homogeneity and equality which determine French thinking. The national dimension here only became effective when subsumed into a higher realm, the *Reich* [...]. In a sense, Moeller's *Reichsidee* is the continuation of these historical conceptions [...]. Moeller's nationalism is a nationalism in the *Reich*, intended as the plurality of social and national forces, territories, religious denominations and professions integrated to form a political unity. A unity that works best through autonomy'.<sup>32</sup> This observation is important to understand conservative interpretations of the *Reich* well beyond Moeller. It refers to what modern scholarship has identified as the tradition of the 'federative nation' nurtured by the Empire.<sup>33</sup> National identity could find its unitary expression in the *Reich* as a federalistic entity and an element of cultural unity, without resorting to a centralised state that would level all historical differences and enforce an artificial equality. Thus, Hielscher imagined the future *Reich* as 'structured by tribes' on the medieval model: '[t]hereby it becomes possible to grant to each tribe the region where its people dwell for self-rule'.<sup>34</sup> And Spahn observed that what modern Germans have called federalism has its origins in the concepts of tribe and estate (*Stamm und Stand*) derived

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<sup>31</sup> A. Moeller van den Bruck, *Das Dritte Reich*, (Hamburg, 1923). See also J. Neurohr, *Der Mythos vom Dritten Reich. Zur Geistesgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, (Stuttgart, 1957), pp.13-26. On George Sorel's concept of 'social myth', see R. Vernon, *Commitment and Change. Georges Sorel and the Idea of Revolution*, (Toronto, 2019), pp.50-61.

<sup>32</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.154.

<sup>33</sup> D. Langewiesche and G. Schmidt (eds), *Föderative Nation. Deutschlandkonzepte von der Reformation bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Munich, 2000); Schmidt, 'Das frühneuzeitliche Reich'.

<sup>34</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.142. See F. Hielscher, *Das Reich*, (Berlin, 1931).

from the medieval Empire and characterising all German political orders: 'one can only find a model for Bismarck's constitutional creation in the early period of the medieval empire. The German people appeared a thousand years ago right away in the form of its tribes. Its need for unity was expressed in the kingdom, its disposition for diversity in the duchy'.<sup>35</sup>

In this period too national conservatives displayed a lower tolerance for differences and a stronger political organicism than their supranational counterparts, to the point that their demand for the parts to abandon themselves to the logic of the whole (the *Reich*) could reach unbearable extremes. Nonetheless, a federalistic disposition seems one hallmark of all conservative strands of the *Reichsidee*, and a crucial difference from Nazi appropriations of it. The association of the *Reich* with a federative and polycentric conception of German national identity, which also makes it compatible with life within a broader community of nations, is naturally more marked in supranational conservative authors. While Constantin Frantz' federalism often looms large in the latter's writings, however, national conservatives are mostly dismissive of it, as its extreme looseness seemed to them unfit for power politics: '[f]rom time immemorial, the federal form of government as practiced by our people had above all the weakness that the population understood the state as a legal order (*Rechtsordnung*) and not as a power structure (*Machtgebilde*). First in Prussia the *Reich* sustained the essential impact of power which a state, even if, like ours, it fundamentally aspires to be a legal order, cannot do without'.<sup>36</sup> The *Reich*, therefore, as a *Machtstaat* – as opposed to the anti-*Machtstaat* of the Frantzian tradition – organised as a 'federal system' whose remote models were medieval Switzerland and the Empire before Charles V, and whose modern examples included Bismarck's *Reich*, the USA and even the USSR.<sup>37</sup> In the 1920s, not unlike Hegel more than a century earlier, even the influential jurist and

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<sup>35</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.102.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Spahn quoted in Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.103.

<sup>37</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.103

political theorist Carl Schmitt faulted the Old *Reich* for being such a perfect legal system that it was incapable of exercising the real functions of a state: power and security.<sup>38</sup>

### *Borussianism and beyond*

The *Reich* that enthralled national and new conservatives in this period, then, was not really the historic First *Reich*, with which they had a deeply ambivalent relationship. They judged it against the standards of 20<sup>th</sup> century power politics and nationalism, predictably finding it wanting; and only few of them had any serious scholarly acquaintance with the subject, despite its obsessive presence in their writings. Although many did recognise its universal significance and aspiration, they seldom showed any doubt that these were qualities of the German nation itself. Thus, Stapel affirmed: '*Reich* means that the entire mankind, regardless of the variety of their differences, should be united under a single leadership.'<sup>39</sup> But he also wrote: 'the Roman empire was transferred to the Teutons by Charlemagne. The empire was transferred to the Germans by Otto the Great. Frederick I of Hohenstaufen renewed Charlemagne's claim. [...] After the Romans collapsed, it was assigned to the Germans by God. They are the imperial people (*Reichsvolk*). Since then, the name of the empire has been the Roman empire of the German nation.'<sup>40</sup>

Although, unlike Nazis, these authors do not share a racist theory of political forms assigning the *Reichsidee* to the German nation as some sort of biological property, they do see it as its spiritual property. For Hielscher, for example, the *Reich* is the eternal goal of the German soul independently of historical institutional forms, including, absurdly enough, the Empire. We are thus told that the *Reich* began with 'Ermin (Arminius the Cheruskian), the first great slayer of the Romans', and that Germans had to wait until emperor Henry VI, the hero of the Sicilian expeditions and another scourge of Rome,

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<sup>38</sup> Aretin, *Friedensgarantie und europäisches Gleichgewicht*, p.19.

<sup>39</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.130-1.

<sup>40</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.105.

for someone else to properly embody it. 'Inversely, Charles the Butcher made it a point of honour to be on good terms with his *Volk's* enemies'.<sup>41</sup> Hielscher's puzzling list of champions of the *Reich* throughout history includes Theodoric, Henry VI, Eckhart, Luther, Gustavus Adolphus, Frederick the Great, Goethe, Bismarck, and even Nietzsche, while excluding Charlemagne as a betrayer of the German soul, preserved instead in his enemies, the Saxons.<sup>42</sup> Imperial history is interpreted as a succession of surrenders to popery (e.g. Otto III and Henry IV) and reassertions of German independence (e.g. Henry VI, Barbarossa, Luther), with the historic Empire culminating in the Hohenstaufen and then entering a long period of stagnation until its de facto destruction in 1648, at Westphalia. The repudiation of Charlemagne is in no way unusual among national conservatives, although there are some exceptions, especially among Catholic authors.<sup>43</sup> His universalist Christian empire and the tradition that ensued from it was often frowned upon and dismissed as '*Roma aeterna*'.<sup>44</sup> For example, although Moeller could somehow warm up to the Hohenstaufen ('[o]nce, under the Hohenstaufen emperors, it seemed for a brief moment that the imperial idea, the notion of the Roman empire of the German nation, should actually find its majestic realisation from the North Sea to the Mediterranean Sea'<sup>45</sup>), he had nothing but contempt for their Italian expeditions and their claims to universal rule, illusions that distracted their energies from building a solid national power base, the only task that mattered. Naturally, then, for him 'the black-red-gold flag which once the romantics hailed as the flag of our first Empire [...] has long since lost the golden glory with which stormy and enthusiastic youth endowed it'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> A. Kolnai, *The War Against the West*, (New York, 1938), p.619. 'Charles the Butcher' is, of course, Charlemagne, seen as slayer of the pagan Saxons and thus a traitor to his people.

<sup>42</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.139.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Eibl is the example of a Catholic, Stapel of a Protestant national conservative with a more positive opinion of Charlemagne.

<sup>44</sup> Hielscher quoted in Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.138.

<sup>45</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.155.

<sup>46</sup> A. Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany's Third Empire*, ed. E.O. Lorimer, (London, 1934), p.242.

All in all, these ideas contain little that is truly novel and closely reproduce *topoi* from 19<sup>th</sup> century Borussian historiography in cruder form. The intellectual filiation of national and new conservatives of the interwar period from their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors is even more evident in their generally enthusiastic treatment of Prussia's historical contribution. Hielscher went as far as saluting the ravages of the Thirty Years War, as they prepared the ground for a true German rebirth in Prussia: 'the *Reich* alone provides the substance; Prussia, the principle of organisation: a body of men of all Germanic breeds, bound in discipline, who act as trustees of the *Reich*'s will-to-power.'<sup>47</sup> Apart from having lost any reference from outside the German nation, the *Reich*'s spirit is coterminous with Prussia's 'lifestyle' (*Lebensstil*), prescribing strength, discipline and an ethics of duty. This Prussian style will become the German style in the Third *Reich* and give Germany a new spiritual shape and internal cohesion.<sup>48</sup> While the political agenda of Borussian historians had been Germany's 'normalisation' as a consolidated national state engaged in contemporary power politics, however, in the interwar period their interpretations were reframed to underpin a renewed sense of imperialist exceptionalism, on which late-19<sup>th</sup> century European colonialism had also left its mark. Writing in 1928 about the idea of empire under the Hohenstaufen, no lesser authority than Marc Bloch observed that '*Weltpolitik* had aroused a fellow-feeling for the mediaeval *Weltherrschaft*', and that 'it might not be impossible even today to trace [the effects of the *Reichsidee*] in certain undercurrents of German patriotism that reveal a fundamental will to power.'<sup>49</sup>

Only the most sophisticated national conservative authors developed more innovative ideological constructions in relation to imperial history. Thus Spahn, who was an academic historian before becoming a new conservative intellectual and politician, reinterpreted imperial history through

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<sup>47</sup> Kolnai, *War*, p.536.

<sup>48</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.145; A. Moeller van den Bruck, *Der Preussische Stil*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Breslau, 1931).

<sup>49</sup> M. Bloch, *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*, tr. J.E. Anderson, (London, 1967), p.41. Also quoted in Ruehl, 'Reich and Rulership', p.216.

conservative *völkisch* categories relevant for contemporary political debates. The *Reich* had emerged in the Middle Ages through 'the advance of German peasants and knights in East Central Europe' and was the political form through which they had given organic unity to the continental space they were occupying and shaping: *Mitteleuropa*. In essence an agrarian order based on the relationship between the Emperor and the peasants, which he protected, the *Reich's* decline began when Charles V imported from the West alien theological and humanist notions of Graeco-Roman origin. A new ruling class imbued with Roman and humanist ideas was also imported, resulting in the separation between the rulers' and the *Volk's* spirit that provoked the peasant wars, plagued the entire Habsburg period and ultimately led to the *Reich's* downfall. These influences also opened the Empire to the nefarious infiltration of early capitalism.<sup>50</sup> For Spahn, restoring the *Reich* meant 'to re-establish a relationship between the soil of the state (*staatlichen Boden*) and the life of the people, to allow once again the play of their powers in *Mitteleuropa* to even out and complement one another, above all to open up a way to satisfaction to all greater-German longings [...]. By fulfilling this purpose, Europe will again lose its French imprint, and Bismarck's empire will become the Third *Reich*'.<sup>51</sup> Before the time of Charles V, therefore, the medieval Empire had already been more than a mere national state based on popular sovereignty in the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois sense: it had been a *Volksgemeinschaft*, whose restoration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century fitted within a conservative, as opposed to a revolutionary, programme.<sup>52</sup> In case there should be any doubt left about the distinctiveness of Spahn's, and, more generally, the national conservative conception of what could be salvaged in the history of the Empire, he proclaimed that the *Reich* should be understood 'not as the supranational structure of pacifist dreamers, nor as the Sacrum Imperium of Christian theologians [...], but as the state of the German people, finally rising solidly in

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<sup>50</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.100-2.

<sup>51</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.102.

<sup>52</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.104.

its space (*im Raum*) and living in accordance with its character only'.<sup>53</sup> The German-centric vision attributed to the Ottonians is here identified with the *Reich's* true nature, a fundamental difference in historical memory compared to supranational conservatives such as Friedrich Heer, who favourably compared the supranational spirit of Otto III with Otto I's programme to grant to the German (imperial) Church lordship over the Eastern Slavic bishoprics.<sup>54</sup>

The Empire's reinterpretation as an agrarian order founded upon a relationship between land and lordship was spectacularly fruitful in what has been called its 'New Constitutional History', developed by such scholars as Theodor Mayer, Walter Schlesinger and especially Otto Brunner.<sup>55</sup> The older constitutional history, of which Georg von Below had been the most illustrious representative into the 1920s, was animated by the bourgeois conservative preoccupation to prove 'that medieval German governments were true states', and that the roots of the modern liberal order, with its distinction between state and civil society, could be traced back to the Middle Ages.<sup>56</sup> This was the historiography that had exalted the state and discarded the *Reich* as a failed entity. The new approach of Otto Brunner and others, instead, like Spahn's, but with far more refined scholarly results, shifted the focus to the *Volk* and to the socio-political forms emanating from it, discarding the distinction between state and civil society, identifying a specifically Germanic model of socio-political organisation based on lordship, and implying a medieval precedent to contemporary ideas of *Volk* and *Führertum*.<sup>57</sup> Even Ernst

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<sup>53</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.104. See M. Spahn, *Für den Reichsgedanken. Historisch-politische Aufsätze, 1915-1934*, (Berlin, 1936).

<sup>54</sup> Heer, *Holy Roman Empire*, pp.46-7. Heer praises this emperor's conception of the Empire as a 'league of nations'.

<sup>55</sup> O. Brunner, *Land and Lordship. Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, tr. H. Kaminsky and J. Van Horn Melton (Philadelphia, 1992). See also his *Adeliges Landleben und europäischer Geist. Leben und Werk Wolf Helmhards von Hohberg, 1612-1688*, (Salzburg, 1949).

<sup>56</sup> H. Kaminsky and J. Van Horn Melton, 'Translators' Introduction', in Brunner, *Land and Lordship*, p.xxiii. Also see G. von Below, *Der deutsche Staat des Mittelalters. Ein Grundriss der deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, (Leipzig, 1914). In the 1920s, Below took up once more the old quarrel on the merits of the medieval Emperors' Italian interventions, decidedly siding with Sybel. See his *Die italienische Kaiserpolitik des deutschen Mittelalters mit besonderem Hinblick auf die Politik Friedrich Barbarossas*, (Munich, 1927).

<sup>57</sup> Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p.676.

Kantorowicz' phenomenally successful 1927 biography of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, which has often been considered a late bloom of the George Circle's cosmopolitan humanism insisting on a Roman Germany, can more accurately be interpreted as an outstanding expression of national conservative historiography on the Empire.<sup>58</sup> Kantorowicz portrayed Frederick II as a national hero who could inspire a new order with Germany as the Occident's leading power. It has been justly noticed that, 'as father of the German Reich, godfather of Prussia, and ingenious antagonist of the pope, the Hohenstaufen emperor emerged like a medieval Bismarck', in a treatment that clearly belonged in the 'Ghibelline' national conservative tradition.<sup>59</sup> In the concluding paragraph, Kantorowicz even alluded to the Iron Chancellor as the Reich's 'greatest vassal', although obviously he, like most national conservatives after the Great War, 'embraced a Reichsidee that was supra-national, but at the same time deeply germanocentric', longing for the resurrection of a much grander *Reich*.<sup>60</sup> This again reminds us of how the once distinctive Borussian and national conservative interpretations of the Empire had contaminated and merged based on a reappraisal of the medieval *Reich* as a German antipapal national empire, of which Prussia was the authentic heir. This reappraisal conveniently became a source of inspiration and legitimation for a modern policy of European supremacy, first in the form of Wilhelmine Germany's imperialist *Weltpolitik*, and later in the shape of the new conservatives' imperialist nationalism.

### *Imperial federalism*

Especially up to 1945, the various shades of 'imperial federalism' that national and new conservatives distilled out of their reflections on the Empire and then used to articulate a vision of European order

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<sup>58</sup> E.H. Kantorowicz, *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite*, (Berlin, 1927).

<sup>59</sup> Ruehl, 'Reich and Rulership', p.213.

<sup>60</sup> Ruehl, 'Reich and Rulership', pp.214-5.

were among the most distinctive and influential aspects of their thinking.<sup>61</sup> The fall of the Habsburg and Romanov empires, combined with the German *Reich's* territorial losses, not only encouraged hopes for an Austrian *Anschluss*, despite its being formally prohibited by the peace treaties, but also created the explosive problem of German minorities in East Central and Southeastern Europe. This was worsened by the impression that Wilsonian self-determination was applicable to everyone except Germans. To many, the experience of the medieval Empire as understood by national conservatives seemed to offer a solution.

Romanian German Heinrich Zillich, a leading voice of the German community in Southeastern Europe, who would go on to become a renowned writer in the Nazi *Reich*, argued so in a 1929 article that tried to answer the question 'What do minorities mean?'. The article shows how easily a critique of the national state in the name of the medieval *Reich's* supranational ideal, whose basic premises would have been shared by any cosmopolitan conservative à la Foerster, could take on imperialist traits not unworthy of the Nazis. History has shown, Zillich explained, that the national state is unsatisfactory for Germans, because they are a universal *Volk* scattered throughout fifteen states and cannot fulfil their national vocation by little adjustments of borders and displacements of population.<sup>62</sup> His solution, then, was resurrecting the German imperial idea that 'lies in those tombs [at Speier]', the divine mission of the Hohenstaufen emperors to federate nations. Attempts at European unification would fail if not sustained by the *Reich's* spiritual idea carried by the Germans, the only universal *Volk*. The fulfilment of Europe's vocation to be the leader of the world depended on it too. All this obviously cast a different light on the problem of national minorities: 'the Germans are the important minorities, which act

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<sup>61</sup> Although the term 'imperial federalism' was not widely used in the original sources, it was chosen as the title of a recent anthology collecting Julius Evola's writings on empire and European order. It adequately captures the conceptual building blocks of these authors' understanding of continental order, and its use in this context seems therefore justified. See J. Evola, *Federalismo imperiale. Scritti sull'idea di impero 1926-1953*, ed. G. Perez, (Naples, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> H. Zillich, 'Was bedeuten die Minderheiten?', in *Abendland*, 4/5 (February 1929), pp.144-6.

everywhere as the carrier of Europe'. These minorities 'in their diffused interconnectedness embody the mystery of the suprastate *Reich*'. It made no difference whether culturally 'weak' minorities like the Gypsies received protection as, after all, even the culture of Hungary or of Czechia was simply 'a dialect of the German, which equals the European'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Stapel dismissed any notion of 'protection' for German minorities, which were entitled to nothing less than primacy as members of the imperial nation: 'what does it matter whether we Germans are a "minority" or a "majority"? [...] Were only two Germans to live in all Poland, still, just for being *Germans* they would be more than all the millions of Poles.'<sup>64</sup> Even an Austrian catholic nationalist like Hans Eibl (1882-1958) believed that only within a framework modelled after the medieval empire the problem of minorities could be properly understood and solved. Otherwise, the world would have a Germany with eighty million Germans and thirty million minorities.<sup>65</sup>

Here we see again the tendency of German political organisation to break the sovereign national state's narrow boundaries and to experiment with more flexible forms. The basic material leading to this movement is similar in all strands of conservatism inspired by the Empire: German minorities are the scattered remnants of the Occident's old unity. The modern German national problem, therefore, can only be resolved by reconstituting that unity in a modern form, be it the supranational commonwealth or the imperial federation. National conservatives, of course, had too exalted a notion of the German nation to entertain anything but the latter. Thus, Moeller informs us that 'the German nationalist wants to preserve German nationhood; not to exchange it for the "supernational culture" of a Fr. W. Foerster – in whom the bastardisation of German idealism reached its zenith [...].'<sup>66</sup> One of the most curious aspects of their conception of Empire is the extent to which these authors believed that the triumph of

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<sup>63</sup> Zillich, 'Was bedeuten', pp.146-7.

<sup>64</sup> Kolnai, *War*, p.622.

<sup>65</sup> Kolnai, *War*, p.628.

<sup>66</sup> Moeller van den Bruck, *Third Empire*, p.244.

their extreme imperial nationalism would put an end to all nationalisms, originally aroused by the French Revolution: '[o]ne nation must tighten its authority over the others; one nation must set up an Imperial Law and establish a European Nomos. Nationalism, the offspring of the French Revolution, must be overcome by a new Imperialism. The German nation alone can be the bearer of that new Imperialism.'<sup>67</sup> For Moeller, then, once established the *gesamtddeutsch Reich* would naturally become the federal protector of the 'young nations' of *Mitteleuropa* from the imperialism of the old western powers, France and England.

Carl Schmitt's notorious 'contribution to the concept of *Reich* in international law', developed in the first years of the Second World War and later enlarged to become one of his most ambitious post-war publications, essentially attempted to express similar ideas in a legally rigorous way. He openly broke with any universalistic conception, 'the memories of the mix of nations in the declining Roman imperium, as well as the ideals of assimilation and melting pots of the imperia of Western democracies'. He embraced 'a nationally interpreted concept of *Reich*', defining it as 'the leading and bearing power whose political ideas radiate into a certain *Großraum*', a space organised by the imperial power and from which any foreign power's intervention had to be excluded. Within this space, which for the Germanic *Reich* was to be the entire continental Europe, 'the respect of every nation as a reality of life determined through species and origin, blood and soil' was to be the rule. The fiction that the actors of international law were all equal states had to give way to the new reality of a hierarchical system divided into imperial spaces.<sup>68</sup> The potential contradiction between nationalism and imperial federalism was more clearly seen from abroad, for example by the Italian revolutionary conservative Julius Evola, who

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<sup>67</sup> Stapel quoted in Kolnai, *War*, p.552.

<sup>68</sup> C. Schmitt, 'The Grossraum Order of International Law with a Ban on Intervention for Spatially Foreign Powers: A Contribution to the Concept of Reich in International Law (1941)', in C. Schmitt, *Writings on War*, tr. ed. T. Nunan (Cambridge, 2011), pp.75-124; C. Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum*, (Cologne, 1950). See also J.W. Müller, *A Dangerous Mind. Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought*, (New Haven, 2003), pp.43-6.

emphasised that nationalism was a positive phenomenon only as an affirmation of the principles of differentiation and hierarchy against the collectivist tendencies of egalitarian internationalism.<sup>69</sup> No nation, however, could elevate herself to the level of an empire unless it overcame its selfish nationalism and embraced superior universal values that drew other nations to cluster around it.<sup>70</sup> For Eibl, the German *Reichsidee* could solve the tension between close national unity and supra-national imperialism, and between Prussian and Austrian imperial conceptions through a threefold stratification: first, a compact German national state including Austria; second, a looser *Volksgemeinschaft* embracing all other German populations; third, 'the idea of a new legal order for all peoples'.<sup>71</sup> Karl Gottfried Hugelmann expressed the same idea with a direct reference to the medieval Empire: 'the concept of *Reich* in medieval history displays an internal dynamic, the national state and the notion of *Reich* find themselves in a state of tension, but are not mutually exclusive'.<sup>72</sup> Eibl and Hugelmann being Catholic and Austro-Germans, the preoccupation to reconcile the national with the supranational is understandably stronger in their work.

The scholar most closely associated with that effort, however, is the Austrian historian Heinrich Ritter von Srbik. By the late 1920s, his grand programme for a novel *gesamtdeutsch* historical narrative that would overcome the old opposition between *Grossdeutsch* (pro-Austrian) and *Kleindeutsch* (pro-Prussian) historiography was formed. He executed it over the next two decades in important works, many of which remain useful references to this day. Towering over them, *Deutsche Einheit*, a multivolume history of the German people's search for unity throughout the centuries, published

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<sup>69</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, pp.82-3. Although Evola called himself a 'traditionalist', his thinking represented a conscious break with the Western tradition as it had developed at least since the Roman Empire's Christianisation. He clearly fits within the movement of new or revolutionary conservatism. For an introduction to his thought in English, see P. Furlong, *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*, (Abingdon, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, pp.85-6.

<sup>71</sup> Kolnai, *War*, p.627.

<sup>72</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.108.

between 1935 and the height of the Second World War.<sup>73</sup> At the core of Srbik's historical narrative there was the belief that, early on, the German *Volk* had introjected the universalist *Reichsidee*. In pursuing it, it had scattered throughout *Mitteleuropa* and taken upon itself the task of defending the Occident and giving order to the European continent: 'in the soul of the simple German people lived the yearning for the World Emperor (*Weltkaiser*), who slumbered in the mountain, and a national faith in the *translatio Imperii Romani*, in the world mission of the Germans, in *Christianissima Germania*.<sup>74</sup> Srbik offered a synthesis in which the national German state built by Prussia in the second *Reich* and the supranational state idea embodied by Austria, heir to the first *Reich*'s universalism, are reconciled. His hope was to encourage a unified historical consciousness of all Germans, and the resumption of their path towards unity, with the *Reichsidee*, reawakened during the First World War as the *Volksidee*, 'as a guiding star before our eyes'.<sup>75</sup>

Such pleas for German unity were noticeable in the Austria of the mid-1930s, governed by a conservative authoritarian regime that, as we will see, was fighting for its independence from Nazi Germany in the name of the Empire's supranational *Reichsidee*. Srbik's ideas were music to Nazi ears in Berlin, and the new rulers covered him with honours after they finally annexed Austria in 1938. In 1942, at the height of Nazi power in Europe, Srbik concluded the fourth and last volume of *Deutsche Einheit* with these celebratory words: '[t]he Grossdeutsch national state, the third Reich, has been extended over the diminished frame of the second Reich to Austria, the last heir of the first Reich; it has thus regained the old sense of grandeur, spaciousness (*Grossräumigkeit*) and diversity in unity

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<sup>73</sup> H. von Srbik, *Deutsche Einheit. Idee und Wirklichkeit vom Heiligen Reich bis Königgrätz*, (4 vols, Munich, 1935-42).

<sup>74</sup> A. Sked, 'Re-imagining Empire: The Persistence of the Austrian Idea in the Historical Work of Heinrich Ritter von Srbik', *Radovi Zavoda Za Hrvatsku Povijest*, 50/1 (2018), p.46. See also P.R. Sweet, 'The Historical Writing of Heinrich von Srbik', *History and Theory*, 9/1 (1970), pp.37-58; M. Derndarsky, 'Zwischen "Idee" und "Wirklichkeit". Das Alte Reich in der Sicht Heinrich von Srbiks', in Schnettger, *Imperium Romanum*, pp.189-205.

<sup>75</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.123-4; Sked, 'Re-imagining Empire', p.47. This quote dates from 1927, but it is still representative of Srbik's thinking in the mid-30s.

[...]. Not as imperialism, and not on the basis of a humanitarian ideal (*Menschheitsidee*), but grounded rather in its own idea of Volkstum [...], this third Reich has taken over again the old mission of the first and second Reich to implement a new and healthier order in Mitteleuropa and the continent at large.<sup>76</sup>

Despite his virulent nationalism, however, Srbik always recognised universalist Christian ideals as the Reich's original foundation and refrained from assigning a driving force to race in history. In his last major work, published in 1950, he proclaimed his independence from Nazism and defended his *gesamtdeutsch* approach as 'rooted in the Austrian environment, with its tradition of the *Sacrum Imperium*, and in German universalistic thought'.<sup>77</sup> Although Srbik's conception of the Empire belongs with national conservatives, the German tradition of humanist universalism did play an important role in his conservative outlook, preserving him from the totalitarian tendencies of so many others. In fact, it is appropriate to briefly consider whether there is not something in the national conservative conception of the Reich that makes its upholders prone to the temptation of modern totalitarianism, as opposed to a mere authoritarianism, widespread in the interwar period in all strands of conservatism.

#### *Totalitarian predispositions*

There is, to begin with, their extreme *völkisch* organicism, which in some authors hollows out from within any meaningful federalism.<sup>78</sup> The First and Second Reich are faulted precisely for their inability to overcome German national divisions. For Moeller, the Old Reich was ultimately destroyed by the princes' separatism, which tragically turned German nationalists since the time of Ulrich von Hutten

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<sup>76</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.120-1. By H. von Srbik, see also: *Das grössere Reich. Grossdeutschland am Anfang des IX. Jahres Nationalsozialistischer Staatsführung: eine Vortragsreihe*, (Berlin, 1943); *Mitteleuropa. Das Problem und die Versuche seiner Lösung in der deutschen Geschichte*, (Weimar, 1937); 'Die Reichsidee und das Werden deutscher Einheit', in *HZ*, 164/1, 1941, pp.457-71.

<sup>77</sup> Sked, 'Re-imagining Empire', p.50.

<sup>78</sup> The most articulate and influential new conservative theoretician of organicism was the Austrian sociologist and economist Othmar Spann (1878-1950). His neo-romantic political thought and 'universalist' (i.e. anti-individualistic) sociology was directly inspired by Adam Müller. See O. Spann, *Der wahre Staat. Vorlesungen über Abbruch und Neubau der Gesellschaft*, (Leipzig, 1921); J. Haag, 'Othmar Spann and the Quest for a "True State"', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 12/1 (1976), pp.227-250.

into marginal outsiders.<sup>79</sup> Even more revealing is his analysis of the *Kaiserreich's* limits. Despite being a step forward over the loathed universalist Germany of the Habsburgs, Bismarck's creation failed because it remained a splintered feudal-dynastic order, unable to fully mobilise the *Volk's* energies. Moeller bemoans the lack of a dynamic myth igniting the imagination of the people, that stillness lacking perpetual movement that is the relish of the traditional conservative and the horror of the totalitarian doctrinaire. For him, the deep cause of the *Kaiserreich's* fall ultimately lay in its inability to overcome the division between the nation and the state.<sup>80</sup> This is revealing: while in the *Reichsidee* of revolutionary conservatives the *Staat* is absorbed within the *Volk*, the separation between *Volk* and *Staat* is key to the *Reichsidee* of supranational conservatism, and one of the sources of its strong internal and international federalism. As we will see, one could even argue that preventing the fusion of *Volk* and *Staat* through the *Reichsidee* was the essence of the supranational conservative response to the democratic nationalism awakened by the French Revolution. It made all the difference whether the *Reich* was seen as an organism in which all differences were ultimately to be overcome and reconciled, or whether it was instead conceived as the protector of diversity, whose purpose was precisely to prevent all differences from being reconciled, and therefore eradicated in the mould of a homogeneous national demos or *Volk*.

The deepest root of the predisposition to totalitarianism, however, lies in the nature of the Third *Reich* as a millenarian myth about the attainment of earthly perfection and salvation. In Moeller, as in many other extreme nationalists, one even finds a strange relief for the German disaster in the First World War and for the 'diktat' of Versailles. In their eyes, the revolution had destroyed the divisive dynastic structures of Bismarck's *Reich* and made possible a nationalist rebirth in their own German counter-

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<sup>79</sup> Moeller van den Bruck, *Third Empire*, p.246.

<sup>80</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.151.

revolution.<sup>81</sup> The Third *Reich* will be the final *Reich*, the fulfilment of the entire German national history. It will overcome all past divisions and values through a Nietzschean ‘transvaluation’, and attain a new harmonious synthesis that, as all spiritual realities, will find expression in a new form of art, analogous to the Gothic of the Hohenstaufen period.<sup>82</sup> While, all in all, the supranational conservative *Reichsidee* symbolised the Christian Occident’s traditional form of political order, firmly rooted in a transcendent conception of eschatology, the national and, especially, the revolutionary conservative *Reichsidee* – to say nothing of the Nazi – displayed a radically immanent eschatology.<sup>83</sup> It was a prime example of what Eric Voegelin named ‘gnosticism’, and the historian Norman Cohn characterised, in an important work on medieval sectarian movements, as ‘the pursuit of the millennium’, of which the thousand-year *Reich* of the Hohenstaufen was the modern German equivalent.<sup>84</sup> After all, as mentioned, the medieval prototype of all modern ‘Gnostics’ had been the Calabrian abbot and hermit Joachim of Fiore (1145-1202), whose prophecies had divided human history into three ages, the last and most blissful of which, the Age of the Spirit, was expected to start in 1260 and became closely associated with Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, variously seen as either a saviour or the Antichrist. The millenarian re-organisation of German history by national conservatives around three empires, the third of which would resurrect the *Reich* of the Hohenstaufen, is certainly part of this phenomenology, at times consciously so. In his influential 1918 book on ‘The Decline of the West’, for example, Oswald Spengler, a key influence over revolutionary conservatism, identified the medieval German *Reich* as the heyday of Occidental

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<sup>81</sup> Kolnai, *War*, p.525.

<sup>82</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.146-7.

<sup>83</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.11-12.

<sup>84</sup> Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*; E. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays*, (South Bend, 1968); N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, revised edn (New York, 1970).

civilisation and its perennial ideal: 'the Third Reich is the Germanic ideal, an eternal morrow to which all great men from Joachim of Fiore to Nietzsche and Ibsen [...] tie their lives'.<sup>85</sup>

An 'immanentised eschaton', to use again Voegelin's language, is evident even in authors whose *Reich* remains ostensibly Christian, such as Stapel, with his salvific Kaiser: 'the last and supreme Statesman will appear as the Christian Emperor of the One Christian Reich: the dream of history. Like the indomitable lion he will rise up powerfully at God's behest. Splendid in his force, high-minded and proud, terrible to rebels, gracious to his followers, a warrior beyond resistance, a father to his people, humble in the face of God, he will achieve terrestrial history, and lay the Crown at the feet of the Cross on Golgotha'.<sup>86</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz' portrait of Frederick II as a 'Messiaskaiser' was similar.<sup>87</sup> The Emperor's self-coronation as King of Jerusalem is gleefully seen as a conscious step towards the establishment of a secular '*Weltherrschaft*', and the prospect of a western caesaropapism, with a German national Church and a German Pope subordinated to the Emperor, is presented with delight. The total centralisation of Frederick's rule is greatly admired, and his figure sacralised as that of a *salvator*.<sup>88</sup> After all, members of the George Circle had always searched for a complete spiritual regeneration effected through art, in the Nietzschean tradition. They had also been associated with unchristian and esoteric forms of religiosity, culminating in the 1920s in the cult of the '*geheimes Deutschland*', the 'secret Germany' whose manifestation was messianically expected to take the form of a new sacralised empire replacing the Weimar Republic.<sup>89</sup>

Reflecting on why true imperialism and Christianity were irremediably incompatible, Evola stressed that the former rested on 'an immanentistic experience' and an 'intensive vision' by which the 'mystical

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<sup>85</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.282-3.

<sup>86</sup> Kolnai, *War*, pp.621-2.

<sup>87</sup> Ruehl, 'Reich and Rulership', p.218.

<sup>88</sup> Ruehl, 'Reich and Rulership', pp.210-11, 218.

<sup>89</sup> S. George, *Das Neue Reich*, (Berlin, 1928).

force of a tradition' concentrated in the accomplishments of a single superior individual, Leader, Emperor or 'Duce'.<sup>90</sup> As a principle of order whose authority rests not on mere violence, but on a superior spiritual substance naturally drawing others to itself, the true *Imperium* cannot compose with the counter-Imperium of an independent Church, 'it must replace, absorb, subordinate every Church to itself'.<sup>91</sup> Hence the superiority of the pre-Christian Roman empire over the Holy Roman Empire, which foundered over its inability to re-establish, under a 'divine' emperor, the unity of spiritual and temporal that had also characterised the rule of the ancient Nordic kings. In a critical review of Alois Dempf's book *Sacrum Imperium*, he wrote that the attainment of this unity was the aspiration of the Ghibelline Middle Ages, expressed in the myth of the 'sacral emperors' who would rise again to fight the ultimate battle and establish the *Imperium* in its superior, universal meaning. The author's Catholicism meant he had lost touch with the pure, original form of the *Sacrum Imperium*, and only confined himself to its 'domesticated', meaning Christianised, form.<sup>92</sup> According to Evola, the last Ghibelline Emperor, 'the last knight' who had had a clear notion of the imperial office's autonomous sacredness, and even contemplated the possibility of having himself elected Pope, was Maximilian I of Habsburg, whose conception of empire was surely closer to the Hohenstaufen's than to that of his ultra-Catholic and inquisitorial grandson Charles V's.<sup>93</sup>

### **The Empire as a supranational order**

While, for some, the cannons of the Great War had woken the glorious Germanic *Reich* of Barbarossa and Frederick from a lethargy of many centuries, and even defeat had only accelerated its providential

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<sup>90</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, pp.76-8.

<sup>91</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, p.67

<sup>92</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, pp.93-8. See A. Dempf, *Sacrum Imperium. Geschichts- und Staatsphilosophie des Mittelalters und der politischen Renaissance*, (Munich, 1929).

<sup>93</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, pp.105-11.

comeback, others mourned the demise or foreboded the return of a very different Empire and, with it, of a very different Germandom.

### *Universalist Germandom*

The conservative Austrian playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal spent the war years outlining and propagating 'the Austrian idea' as a higher form of Germanness rooted in the universalist, Catholic and European heritage of the Carolingian empire as an ideal of peace, 'reconciliation, synthesis, and overcoming the divisions'. 'The contemporary German Reich', he explained, 'does not represent the entire face of the German character in Europe, [...] this face is unrecognisable without the traits of an older and higher German culture preserved in Austria'.<sup>94</sup> Despite his public combativeness, however, in a private letter from the summer of 1917, commenting on the gloomy state of the Habsburg empire, he lamented 'the agony, the real one, of the thousand-year-old Holy Roman Empire of the German nation'.<sup>95</sup>

Ignaz Seipel similarly argued, in 1916, that Central Europe had been the testing ground for the ideal of a supranational Christian commonwealth, of which Austria was the last carrier in European history.<sup>96</sup> 'The supranational state ideal of Rome', he explained, 'resurrected in the empire of Charlemagne, whose idea was to unite the Christian family of nations under a single secular head, as they were united under a single spiritual head'.<sup>97</sup> Although the sphere of effectiveness of this idea progressively shrunk to the German peoples and their immediate neighbours, and eventually collapsed in the early

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<sup>94</sup> F. Fellner, 'Die Historiographie zur österreichisch-deutschen Problematik als Spiegel der nationalpolitischen Diskussion', in Lutz and Rumpler, *Österreich und die deutsche Frage*, pp.38-9; A. Kozuchowski, *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary. The Image of the Habsburg-Monarchy in Interwar Europe*, (Pittsburgh, 2013), pp.85-8. See also C. Pornschlegel, 'Bildungsindividualismus und Reichsidee. Zur Kritik der politischen Moderne bei Hugo von Hofmannsthal', in G. von Graevenitz (ed), *Konzepte der Moderne*, (Stuttgart, 1999), pp.251-67.

<sup>95</sup> K. von Klemperer, 'Das nachimperiale Österreich, 1918-1938: Politik und Geist', in Lutz and Rumpler, *Österreich und die deutsche Frage*, p.309.

<sup>96</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*. For a summary and analysis of the book, see Klemperer, *Seipel*, pp.54-65.

<sup>97</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, pp.12-13.

19<sup>th</sup> century, the Austrian emperor is 'notwithstanding the resignation of the Roman imperial dignity by Francis II, the successor of the Roman emperors [...] as representative of an inherently imperishable idea.'<sup>98</sup> Seipel described the supranational mission of his fatherland in providential terms: it had to preserve 'the older and higher idea of the state, which animated the medieval Christian empire and, earlier, the Roman empire. Just as the chosen people of the old covenant had to salvage their faith in the one God for a better future in the midst of a heathen environment, our Austria will keep alive, for a time when the exclusive dominance of nationalism has been recognised as culturally inferior, an idea of state that transcends nationalism and recognises own authority to the state alongside the nation.'<sup>99</sup> The Austrian idea stood above transient political fashions: 'Austria erit in orbe ultima.'<sup>100</sup> Seipel retained his grand vision of the Austrian idea after the collapse of the Habsburg empire, for example remarking, in 1928, that '[t]o cultivate our own little garden and to show it to foreigners in order to make money out of it are no proper tasks for the inhabitants of the Carolingian Ostmark and the heirs to the conquerors of the Turks'.<sup>101</sup> In a book widely read in the interwar period, Keyserling also argued that Austria 'is the only country in which the tradition of the Holy Roman Empire endures, where even today German universalism thus finds a body for itself'; 'the supranational European idea', which alone could rescue Europe, had first blossomed from that tradition.<sup>102</sup>

After a new authoritarian corporatist constitution was introduced in 1934, Austria's alleged kinship with the supranational Empire against the imposture of the Nazi Third *Reich* became the regime's central legitimising myth in its struggle for survival. The double-headed *Kaiseradler* reappeared as the state's coat of arms, replacing the republican eagle with hammer and sickle in its claws, albeit without the old

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<sup>98</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, p.20.

<sup>99</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, pp.17-18.

<sup>100</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, p.20.

<sup>101</sup> Klemperer, *Seipel*, p.298.

<sup>102</sup> H. von Keyserling, *Europe*, (London, 1928), pp.146, 148. 'All nations are of course thoroughly unpleasant affairs' is the book's remarkable opening line.

crown and with a white-red breastplate. That this was also a struggle between competing interpretations of the *Reich* and of what it meant for the German nation was evident to contemporaries on both sides of the fence. Thus, the German military attaché in Vienna reported that Dollfuss had become the rallying point for all opposition against the Third *Reich*, and that there was already talk of a Catholic 'Fourth *Reich*'.<sup>103</sup> And the German new conservative Giselher Wirsing attacked Schuschnigg's vision of a new *Sacrum Imperium*: 'Dr. Schuschnigg likes to speak of the crown of Charlemagne, which is kept in the cathedral treasury in Vienna. For him it is not a romantic dream that the noble rock of this venerable diadem should shine again over Germany or parts of Germany. Here he feels is his true mission. [...] Third Reich - Roman Empire - Sacrum Imperium - today and in the future the fate of our continent will be decided in this struggle.'<sup>104</sup> Thus, in a 1938 letter to Schuschnigg inciting him to resist Hitler at any price, Otto von Habsburg argued that only an independent Catholic Austria, home to the veritable Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, could save Germany from the pagan Nazi empire and bring back together the peoples of Central Europe under a supranational power.<sup>105</sup> So pervasive must have been this idea that the young conservative and aspiring diplomat Kurt Waldheim, still far from the career that would see him, among other things, Secretary General of the United Nations and a controversial Christian Democratic President of the Republic of Austria in the 1970s and 1980s, found no better topic for his 1944 doctoral dissertation than 'The *Reichsidee* in Constantin Frantz'.<sup>106</sup> In 1943, Austrian aristocrat and independent scholar Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddin too had no doubt that 'in order to understand the German scene more accurately we must go back in history as far as Christmas day of A.D. 800.' Charlemagne's coronation and the tradition of the First

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<sup>103</sup> Klemperer, 'Das nachimperiale Österreich', p.315. See also G.D. Rosenfeld, *The Fourth Reich. The Specter of Nazism from World War II to the Present*, (Cambridge, 2019), p.43.

<sup>104</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.110-11. See also A. Staudinger, 'Austrofaschistische "Österreich"-Ideologie', in E. Tálos and W. Neugebauer (eds), *Austrofaschismus. Politik, Ökonomie, Kultur 1933-1938*, (Münster, 2014), pp.28-53.

<sup>105</sup> O. von Habsburg, *Le nouveau défi européen. Conversations avec Jean-Paul Picaper*, (Paris, 2007), pp.109-10.

<sup>106</sup> K. Waldheim, *Die Reichsidee bei Konstantin Frantz*, (PhD Thesis, University of Vienna, 1944).

*Reich* meant that ‘the character of the Germans, on account of their existence in the heart of Europe, was of a catholic, i.e., universal nature,’ unless corrupted ‘by political or religious heresies’ of a ‘herdist’, ‘identitarian’ or ‘nationalist’ nature, such as those that first erupted with Hussitism and Lutheranism and later gained the upper hand.<sup>107</sup> The calling of the Germans was to serve Europe, not to dominate it, as expressed in the device of the German Emperors of the Luxemburg dynasty: ‘*Ich diene* – “I serve” – [...] one of the best European and Christian traditions’.<sup>108</sup>

Even within the German *Reich*, during the First World War, the Catholic philosopher Max Scheler had wondered whether a victory of the Dual Alliance could not mean ‘a kind of reconnection to the historical forces and ideas that have sustained the medieval German empire; [...] to the [...] providential calling of Germany as the heart of Europe to reconcile in the formation of supranational federal state organisations the idea and reality of Christian Europe, and eventually of mankind [...]’.<sup>109</sup> Rather more polemically, Wilhelm Foerster had argued that nothing short of a re-conversion of Bismarckian Germans to the Old *Reich*’s Catholic spirit and supranational federalism would suffice. This provoked an angry reply of the national conservative Wilhelm Stapel, who was predictably critical of Foerster’s Catholicism and antinationalism.<sup>110</sup> Hermann Platz too tried to recapture a German identity that would strive for a new continental unity centred on the Rhineland: ‘here for the first time, thanks to the genius of Charlemagne, [the occidental spirit] solidified’, so that ever since his imperial crown ‘remains symbolic of our longing for the *Reich*’.<sup>111</sup> And Theodor Haecker remarked that ‘until the eighteenth century the German nation, as a member of the Holy Roman Empire, shared with every good European’ the awareness of their common Occidental heritage, of which Virgil had been the first

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<sup>107</sup> E. von Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *The Menace of the Herd or Procustes at Large*, (Milwaukee, 1943), pp.164-6.

<sup>108</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, p.168.

<sup>109</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.360.

<sup>110</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, p.63.

<sup>111</sup> H. Platz, ‘Abendländische Vorerinnerungen’, in *Abendland*, 1/1 (October 1925), p.5.

bard.<sup>112</sup> 'In Aachen stands the chair of Charlemagne', he continued. 'Out of the Imperium Romanum came the Imperium Sacrum of the Christian West. [...] This chair is the most awe-inspiring, the most richly significant national shrine of the German people. [...] Aachen stands for more than Weimar in the destiny of the German people.'<sup>113</sup> When Chancellor von Papen, advised by the Catholic national conservative Edgar Jung, proclaimed a *Sacrum Imperium* that sounded ambiguously nationalistic, he was duly reprimanded: 'it should be noted that there was never a Holy German Empire. History knows only a Holy Roman Empire. [...] In the universal monarchy of Charlemagne, the "First Reich" appears to us in its full form. But that was not a nation state and not a national empire, rather the community (*civitas*) of occidental Christianity'. One had to choose between the centralised, secular nation-state and the supranational Christian *Reich*, between Bismarck and Charlemagne.<sup>114</sup>

Neither did this fight for the soul of Germany end with the country's ruinous defeat in 1945. On the contrary, supranational conservatives felt they had been right all along. Thus, in 1948 Leopold Ziegler believed time was finally ripe for the advent of a new *Imperium Europaeum* which would not only be a Third Force between East and West but also a genuine Third *Reich*, a third European empire after the *Imperium Romanum* and the *Imperium Sacrum*.<sup>115</sup> In the same year, Moenius wrote that the necessary function of 'world emperor', once belonging to the Romans and the Germans, had now been transferred to the USA, the foremost power of the Occident, called to take over the mantle of its imperial predecessors as harbinger of peace and justice.<sup>116</sup> And, in 1949, Alfred Missong still resorted to the *Reichsidee* to succinctly express how European supranational integration and Austrian national identity

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<sup>112</sup> T. Haecker, *Virgil, Father of the West*, tr. A.W. Wheen, (London, 1934), p.102.

<sup>113</sup> Haecker, *Virgil*, p.108. A part of this passage is also quoted in Heer, *Holy Roman Empire*, p.15.

<sup>114</sup> H. Weinzierl writing in 1932 in Moenius' *Allgemeine Rundschau* and quoted in Faber, 'Third Reich and Third Europe', pp.252-3. See also L.E. Jones, 'Franz von Papen, Catholic Conservatives, and the Establishment of the Third Reich, 1933-1934', *JMH*, 83/2 (2011), pp.272-318.

<sup>115</sup> C. Bailey, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow. German Visions of Europe 1926-1950*, (New York, 2013), p.72.

<sup>116</sup> G. Moenius, *Der neue Weltmonarch*, (Augsburg, 1948). See also R. Faber, 'Vom Heiligen Römischen Reich zur euro-amerikanischen Weltordnung. Über christliche Abendland-Ideologie', in R. Faber (ed), *Imperialismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, (Würzburg, 2005), pp.21-40.

were just two sides of the same coin for the post-war Christian democracy of the new ÖVP, even though the party opted for using the term *Heimat* as less controversial than *Reichsidee*, which by then risked being confused with the Nazi 'New Order'.<sup>117</sup> In the early years of European integration, even West-German Chancellor Adenauer connected the new supranational endeavours with the Empire: '[i]n this city, [...] which was the seat of Charlemagne and the coronation city of the German kings,' he said in Aachen in 1954, 'we are in the heart of Europe, in the heart of the Christian Occident. [...] However, this look into the past fills us Europeans today with melancholy. Europe has squandered its European heritage in the centuries since the time of Charlemagne.'<sup>118</sup>

### *Charlemagne's legacy*

In this as in previous periods, the historic Empire that galvanised supranational conservatives was at odds with that of national conservative histories. To begin with, Charlemagne was for national conservatives at best a German hero and more commonly the hated butcher of the Saxons, whereas for supranational conservatives he represented the common ancestor of Europe and the creator of its first unity, which they strived to re-enact. He was, therefore, the patron saint of their entire endeavour. While the former saw the first *Reich* as '*Roma Aeterna*' and were drawn to the East, to the scene of medieval Germanic colonisation, the latter's intent was reconnecting the German spirit with its Roman, and therefore Latin, springs southwards, along the banks of the Rhine and of the Danube, where Germans could also be reawakened to their mediating mission between the Latins and Slavs by rediscovering the 'Austrian idea' as their own: '[t]he occidental culture went and still goes from the south sea to the north sea, from southwest to northeast. Is it not the natural fulcrum on the Rhine [...]?'

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<sup>117</sup> D.A. Binder, 'Pietas Austriaca? The Imperial Legacy in Interwar and Postwar Austria', *Religions*, 8/9 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8090171>.

<sup>118</sup> K. Adenauer, 'Speech upon receiving the 1954 Charlemagne Prize in Aachen', <https://www.karlspreis.de/de/preistraeger/konrad-adenauer-1954/rede-von-konrad-adenauer> (14 April 2024). See also D. Koch and W. Koch, *Konrad Adenauer. Der Katholik und sein Europa*, (Aachen, 2018).

[...] On the Rhine, the longing for and the belief in a future *Reich* [...] is still alive,' wrote Platz.<sup>119</sup> Beyond the Rhineland, there surfaced at times an even broader 'Burgundian' consciousness harking back to the Middle Reich (*Zwischenreich*) of Charlemagne's grandson Lothar I, stretching forward to the time of Charles V and then down to the 'Carolingian' Europe of Adenauer, De Gasperi and Schuman. Thus, Heer observed in the 1960s that 'as a "middle Europe" it was the first to foster the development of a European character and consciousness', and called Charles V the 'Burgundian' to underline approvingly his cosmopolitan vocation.<sup>120</sup> Still in the 1980s, Otto von Habsburg would recall that this Middle *Reich* 'plays, down to our own time, a key political role in all supranational European endeavours', and its 'spiritual power' animated both Adenauer and Schuman.<sup>121</sup> The latter's 1950 declaration, he explained, had stemmed from this historical heritage in his native Lorraine, initiating through European integration 'the renewal of a continent, this reunion between Eastern and Western Franks'.<sup>122</sup>

Much is missed, therefore, when the Catholic Rhineland's German and European federalist vocation is merely traced back to its being a border region that experienced first-hand the horrors of all Franco-German wars. The region's historical self-perception was not at all that of a border area between nation states, but of an autonomous connecting ecosystem nurtured by the heritage of Lotharingia, of Burgundy, of the old ecclesiastical electorate of Cologne and of the supranational Empire from the Carolingians to the Habsburgs. From 1919, this sense of the region's distinctive historical identity and European mission even underpinned separatist ideas for an independent Rhineland state, very different from the narrow separatism promoted by France in the aftermath of both world wars. Also for

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<sup>119</sup> H. Platz, 'Abendländische Vorerinnerungen', pp.5-6.

<sup>120</sup> Heer, *Holy Roman Empire*, p.20.

<sup>121</sup> Habsburg, *Reichsidee*, pp.46-51.

<sup>122</sup> J.F. Thull, 'L'inspiration médiévale des Pères de l'Europe contemporaine: l'exemple de Jean de Pange', *Itinéraires*, 3 (2010), p.109.

Moenius and his associates, Germans only lived in harmony with their European surroundings when they successfully assimilated the classical and Roman tradition of supranational unity and logical clarity in the Empire's Romano-Germanic synthesis. This remained alive in the South and West but had been for centuries under attack from the 'colonial Germany' of the North and East, whence anti-Occidental influences such as the Reformation, Romanticism, Idealism and *völkisch* vitalism all came.<sup>123</sup> In the blunt language of Foerster: '[o]nly Rome could create Germany'.<sup>124</sup>

Although it might have strengthened their case, supranational conservatives did not question the basic periodisation of imperial history established in 19<sup>th</sup> century historiography, and significantly revised only in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, they did possess a sense of supranational unity not inferior to that of those who, a generation later, experienced European integration firsthand, and were inspired by it to re-examine the Empire's history in a more positive light. They believed that, although its institutional forms might have decayed and even crumbled at the customary junctures of which Borussian historians and their national conservative followers made so much – the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, with the exhaustion of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, and then again the Thirty Years War and the Peace of Westphalia – the *Reich* had in fact continued to fulfil its mission as 'a bulwark against the dissolution of Europe' into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>125</sup> Never 'a "state" of the national variety', it occupied for them a position intermediate between national and international law.<sup>126</sup> In their thought, the Roman and the Christian elements, which were expunged as alien in nationalist interpretations, took central stage alongside the Germanic one. Thus, for Ziegler, the Empire's Romano-Germanic synthesis had been the most accomplished expression of what he called 'the European spirit', which had strived to realise the *corpus*

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<sup>123</sup> Munro, 'Holy Roman Empire', pp.454-5.

<sup>124</sup> F.W. Foerster, *Europe and the German Question*, (New York, 1940), p.12.

<sup>125</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.12.

<sup>126</sup> Heer, *Holy Roman Empire*, p.14; Foerster, *Europe*, p.11.

*christianum* uniting different races and nations.<sup>127</sup> The last Hohenstaufen Emperors' attempt to re-organise the Empire as an *Imperium* on the Roman model, constituting itself autonomously from the necessary spiritual power, were partly to blame for this political order's tragic downfall and the ensuing gradual de-Christianisation of Europe.<sup>128</sup> This is clearly at odds with the caesaropapism of Stapel, Evola and others. What had eluded the boundless ambitions of Barbarossa and Frederick, however, was finally achieved by national rulers after Renaissance scholars rediscovered centralistic Roman law and Machiavelli ushered in the era of *raison d'état*, which could not but corrode the medieval *Reich's* universalist and federalist structure, accelerating Europe's disintegration into absolutist states.<sup>129</sup> Ricarda Huch's 1934 history of the Empire, therefore, ends with gloomy words already around the pontificate of Pius II, the humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, in the second part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century: 'thus fell apart the *Reich*, Germany. The Christian Occident, in which Pope and Emperor had integrated the peoples within a unity [...] became a coexistence of nations confronting each other jealously, suspiciously, armed, without a power over them acknowledged by all that could have connected them peacefully.'<sup>130</sup>

Even more than in previous periods, the heroes of national conservatives were almost invariably the villains of supranational conservatives. Thus Luther, in which the German *Reich's* true spirit had dwelled according to Hielscher and others, for Kuehnelt-Leddihn was successful in 'de-Europeanizing the Germanies (a process which unfortunately is still continuing)' and, in his hatred against everything non-German, chiefly Rome and ultimately Latin clarity and logic, 'could never please a Catholic cosmopolitan such as Charles V'.<sup>131</sup> The latter continued to enjoy a first-rate reputation among

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<sup>127</sup> L. Ziegler, *Der Europäische Geist*, (Darmstadt, 1929), pp.10-11, 27-8.

<sup>128</sup> Ziegler, *Europäische Geist*, pp.31-2, 43-7, 58-9.

<sup>129</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, pp.4-6.

<sup>130</sup> Huch, *Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation*, p.395.

<sup>131</sup> Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, p.170. Ricarda Huch, however, had a more positive opinion of Luther, see her *Stein. Der Erwecker des Reichsgedankens*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Berlin, 1932), pp.10-11.

supranational conservatives as a universalist whom, as Ziegler remarked, 'our little German historians [...] still see far too much as Luther's political opponent'.<sup>132</sup> Prussia's contribution to German history and its relationship with the Empire also continued to provoke heated disagreements. National conservatives' admiration for the Hohenzollern's 'resurrection' of a unified German empire was unbounded, although of course their work would only be completed in a new *Reich* comparable to that of the medieval Hohenstaufen. To conservatives of a more supranational persuasion, instead, Prussia represented 'colonial Germany' and 'the traitor in the German midst', which had conspired with Sweden and France to finally bring about the downfall of the First *Reich* and divert the Germans from their supranational mission in Middle Europe.<sup>133</sup> Thus, Foerster observed that modern Prussia had merged the 'two constituents of colonial Germany', the Dukedom of Prussia and Brandenburg.<sup>134</sup> He traced the roots of the Prussian worldview back to the Order of the Teutonic Knights, whose Grand Master Hermann von Salza had been educated at the Hohenstaufen court at Palermo and 'had been initiated there into the world-embracing ambitions of imperial statecraft'.<sup>135</sup> What to national conservatives appeared as the noblest of lineages was here mentioned to disqualify Prussian absolutism as an 'oriental' despotism coming from Byzantium to pollute the Occidental-Catholic soul of true Germandom. Moeller's characterisation of the stern Prussian spirit is approvingly quoted, but only to dismiss it as un-German, a 'warlike Christianity' whose crusades against the Slavonic peoples were marked by bloody savagery and lust for domination, and which had since openly shaded the Christian element to embrace a crude Darwinism.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ziegler, *Europäische Geist*, p.60.

<sup>133</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, p.172.

<sup>134</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.57.

<sup>135</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.47.

<sup>136</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, pp.51-3.

Unsurprisingly, some of the worst lines were devoted to Frederick II of Prussia, 'the rotting, syphilitic friend of Voltaire, who was basically an enemy of true Germandom'<sup>137</sup>, and to Bismarck, '[t]he Buonaparte of the German Revolution'.<sup>138</sup> A more positive, though still ambivalent, assessment of Prussia can be found in Ricarda Huch, a Protestant whose vision of the *Reich* was as much influenced by Frantz as it was by the Romantics, and therefore combined the national, supranational and cosmopolitan elements typical of Romantic conservatism.<sup>139</sup> As her 1932 biography of Stein claims, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Prussia was the only German power to which those who dreamt of a renewed *Reich* could turn.<sup>140</sup> The *Reich* it was called to rebuild, however, seemed closer to Constantin Frantz' cosmopolitan empire than to Bismarck's national *Kaiserreich*, which Huch despised as a centralist betrayal replacing the old imperial ideal of '*Freiheit, Recht und Harmonie*' with the new one of '*Ordnung, Gewalt und Macht*'.<sup>141</sup> Her take on Stein offers a sympathetic portrayal that, however, was completely at odds with prominent contemporary attempts to present Stein as the forerunner of a *völkische Reichsidee* and a precursor of National Socialism.<sup>142</sup>

Both sides could at least agree on one point: that the spirit of the *Reich*, however differently they characterised it, had survived in spite, perhaps because, of all the shortfalls and setbacks that had befallen it. Thus, for Foerster, the *Reich*'s supranational tradition 'did not perish until the year 1866 in the break-up of the German confederation, whose statutes expressly declared that it was designed to promote the peace of Europe and the European balance of power.'<sup>143</sup> Seipel concurred, observing that 1866 meant 'the transformation of the German Confederation in a new *Reich* fundamentally different

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<sup>137</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, p.176.

<sup>138</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.20.

<sup>139</sup> R. Huch, *Die Romantik*, (Leipzig, 1920).

<sup>140</sup> Huch, *Stein*, pp.19-20.

<sup>141</sup> Huch, *Stein*, p.11. Also see Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.291-2.

<sup>142</sup> See p.78 n.154 above.

<sup>143</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.10.

from the old'.<sup>144</sup> Most tragically, it derailed Austria's efforts to solve the mounting nationality problems within a framework compatible with European unity and peace. Inspired by the Old *Reich's* ideal, Austria's intention, he claimed, was to achieve the national unification of both Germans and Italians, but within the framework of a supranational Middle European federation: 'the old Imperium should have come alive again in a form adapted to the times, a double confederation (*Doppelbund*): the German on one side and the Italian on the other. Austria would have belonged to both and could have easily been the initiator of further national unifications. [...] Their example could have become a model for the southern Slavs and even the Rumanians, the Ukrainians, the Poles.'<sup>145</sup> Kuenehl-Leddihn similarly wrote that 'the "German League" already was a step in the wrong direction. It was a definite break with the idea of the First Reich, yet even the *Bund* had its supranational aspects',<sup>146</sup> while 1866 marked 'the coming of a centralized "Germany" under identitarian rule [...]'.<sup>147</sup> And Rohan suggested that the creation of an Austrian crown by Metternich and of a German crown by Bismarck had been revolutionary acts that desacralised the *Kaiserkrone*.<sup>148</sup>

### *Rechtstaat and federalism*

In addition to such historical narratives, also in this period the old cosmopolitan conservative notion of the *Reich* as, primarily, a legal order maintaining peace, administering an impartial justice and protecting historical rights survived in the supranational conservative conception of the *Rechtstaat*. Platz, for example, wrote that 'seen from the perspective of the life of states, the cornerstones of this *Reich*, its essential content, are peace and justice'. Not by chance the Emperor was 'the guardian of universal peace', a role most admirably fulfilled by Emperor Henry III when, in 1043, from the pulpit in

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<sup>144</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, p.120.

<sup>145</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, pp.139-40.

<sup>146</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, pp.178-9. Seipel, for whom the Empire had been 'the greatest political organisation in the world', was more upbeat about the *Bund*, 'a political Areopagus for the entire Europe', see *Nation und Staat*, pp.107-8.

<sup>147</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, pp.181-2.

<sup>148</sup> Bailey, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, p.38.

Konstanz, he declared a general indulgence and promised to forgo vengeance, bringing peace to the *Reich*. Platz approvingly quoted Ziegler's characterisation of the event as 'the most festive and exalted moment in our history', one in which the Emperor sacrificed his pride for the *Reich*'s prosperity.<sup>149</sup> Huch also reminded that it was said of the Emperor that 'his heart should be a living well of justice, the highest judge, the protector of the weak, the damper of the violent'.<sup>150</sup> And Rohan suggested that a new empire in Central Europe could be like the old Holy Roman Empire, within which the Emperor would play more the role of the judge in a supranational 'order of right', rather than the 'embodiment of genuine power'.<sup>151</sup> In his preface to a 1943 volume devoted to the relationship between *Reich* and justice in German philosophy, and including a contribution of Hugelmann on Nicholas of Cusa, the editor Karl Larenz argued that the two concepts stood in close proximity in the German tradition. On the one hand, the *Reich*'s allure derived in no small part from the belief in its inner justice. On the other, the German idea of justice sought its fulfilment in a moral and political whole, which Hegel had merely called 'state', but which in the last resort could only be the *Reich*.<sup>152</sup> At a time when the German people were rediscovering and renewing the *Reich* as a political form, it was important to also reconnect with the 17<sup>th</sup> century German natural law tradition that, for example in Leibniz and Pufendorf, had so clearly formulated its relationship with justice and had been obscured by the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century's legal positivism.<sup>153</sup> At the height of Nazi power in Europe, it surely was something to plea, in the name of the *Reich*, for a return to the German natural law tradition, even though the plea came, in this case, from legal scholars who were no opponents of the regime.

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<sup>149</sup> Platz, 'Abendländische Vorerinnerungen', p.6.

<sup>150</sup> Huch, *Stein*, p.6.

<sup>151</sup> Bailey, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, pp.39-40.

<sup>152</sup> The opinion that 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Hegel had transferred to an immanent entity, the state, attributes that German thinking had traditionally referred to one constitutively opened to transcendence, the *Reich*, also surfaces in Heer, see p.129 above.

<sup>153</sup> K. Larenz, 'Vorwort', in K. Larenz (ed), *Reich und Recht in der deutschen Philosophie*, (2 vols, Stuttgart, 1943), vol.1, p.V.

A similar continuity with previous periods can be seen in polycentric and anti-centralist conceptions of federalism. Federalist, as Kuenhelt-Leddihn explained, once more with reference to Frantz, meant 'anti-centralist', so much so that in the Old *Reich* 'there was no political *capital*', while a multitude of cities are associated to the memory of the imperial court and rituals (Prague, Innsbruck, Ghent, Aix-la-Chapelle, Rome, Bologna, Frankfurt, Speyer, Germersheim, Wiener-Neustadt, Utrecht and Vienna are specifically mentioned).<sup>154</sup> Huch too underlined that the federalist *Reich* and the centralist State stood in irremediable opposition to each other as the 'expression of different worldviews'. The *Reich* was 'strong and alive and active in all its members; but predominantly dormant as a whole', and its authorities 'did not rule and administer, but united, a heart that parcels out and summons, from which all strengths come and to which they go back'.<sup>155</sup> Its tasks were maintaining peace and enforcing rights, limiting power and wealth, balancing power with counterpower. Huch also captured the polycentric nature of imperial federalism in three volumes dedicated to the autonomous existence of imperial cities.<sup>156</sup> In the practical politics of this period, the quest for polycentricity stemming from this conception of the imperial tradition often expressed itself in radically federalist reform plans of the Weimar constitution, such as those advanced by the *Reichs und Heimats Bund Deutscher Katholiken*. Founded in 1924 and supported, among others, by Konrad Adenauer, this organisation sought, eloquently enough, 'the working out of a new ideal of Reich and State, which is both Christian and German... This ideal is the Federalist - Greater German idea which has long been the common property of German Catholics.'<sup>157</sup>

*Nurturing diversity, promoting harmony*

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<sup>154</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, p.165.

<sup>155</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.287-8.

<sup>156</sup> R. Huch, *Im alten Reich. Lebensbilder Deutscher Städte*, (3 vols, Leipzig, 1927).

<sup>157</sup> Munro, 'The Holy Roman Empire', p.460.

However far-fetched some of their prefigurations, supranational conservative authors gave them very practical significance. They had witnessed the catastrophic dissolution of social and European order into competing ideological frenzies and warring nationalisms. They were convinced that overcoming them required a reconnection with the Occidental tradition of thinking and practicing supranational order, perfected in the *civitas humana* of medieval Christendom with the Empire as its beating heart. Multiple strokes across many centuries had impaired its functioning, but its faint beating could still be heard at the beginning of the 1860s. They therefore set about recapturing what they saw as an old wisdom from the depths of history by engaging directly with its medieval sources, as in Alois Dempf's 1929 treatise *Sacrum Imperium* or, more commonly, with the tragic modern figures that had been aware of its looming decline and the attending perils: the Romantics, Stein, Metternich and Frantz of course, but also, at times, more remote figures such as Nicholas of Cusa or Leibniz.<sup>158</sup>

The disease of civilisational disintegration that culminated in the disorders of the first half of the twentieth century was variously diagnosed. For Kuenhelt-Leddihn, it chiefly manifested itself in a running amok of the low craving for 'identity', 'uniformity' and 'sameness' unleashed by modern religious and political heresies and driving all contemporary identarian revolutions: the French, the Russian and the German.<sup>159</sup> A proper spiritual and political order had to resist this 'animalistic', 'herdist' instinct in order to pursue the freedom, diversity and harmony reigning among *persons* conceived in the image of God, as opposed to the equality, identity and monotony of atomised *individuals* yearned for by collectivists of all stripes: 'equality stands for monotony and not for harmony. A harmonious melody can only be established by different unidentical musical tones. [...] Human society presupposes

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<sup>158</sup> Dempf, *Sacrum Imperium*; A. Dempf, *Görres spricht zu unserer Zeit. Der Denker und sein Werk*, (Freiburg, 1933); L. Just, 'Der europäische Gedanke bei Niklas Vogt und Joseph Goerres', *Abendland*, 4/11-12 (August/September, 1929), pp.334-40. On Max Scheler's appreciation for Leibniz, see Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.359.

<sup>159</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, pp.15-30.

such an inequality and unity', to be reconciled only in the sign of Christian love.<sup>160</sup> The Empire, then, had been the guardian of this humane and 'diversitarian' order, which alone was compatible with human dignity and freedom: 'even when its existence became fictional it still served the purpose of giving to its inhabitants an appeal to a spiritual mission and bestowing on them a certain supranational character which restrained them from making efforts to germanize the French of Lorraine or the Slavs of Bohemia and Lusatia.' And further: 'there was a great diversity within the boundaries of the Empire, diversity of language, dialect, customs, dresses, and traditions. It was a world in itself; it was the heart of Europe and its most respected realm.'<sup>161</sup> The analogy of musical harmony to convey the supranational *Reich's* distinctive nature as a political form, be it the Old *Reich* or the Austrian empire, seen as its direct continuator, was not unique to him. For Benedikt too, the universal state 'is contradictory to Plato's "symphony", which leads to the monotony of the total state, it corresponds rather to the Aristotelian teaching of harmony, of the accord of many tones.' He referred to Nicholas of Cusa, one of the greatest theorists of the Empire, who had justly sought in the *coincidentia oppositorum* and the *concordantia varietatis* a divine law: 'filled with Cusanian spirit, the monarchy [Austria] united the national, social and cultural contrasts of Central Europe in the harmony of a higher community.' It was an attempt 'to preserve contrasts in their God-created colourfulness and to combine them in a higher unity of peace, instead of eliminating them'.<sup>162</sup>

Preserving contrasts meant protecting the twenty-four million people – out of a total population of about a hundred and ten – who belonged to precarious national minorities in interwar Central Europe and therefore assumed great symbolic importance for these conservatives.<sup>163</sup> The massive transfers of population that concluded the Second World War were profoundly upsetting to them precisely because

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<sup>160</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, p.24.

<sup>161</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, pp.164-5.

<sup>162</sup> H. Benedikt, *Monarchie der Gegensätze. Österreichs Weg durch die Neuzeit*, (Vienna, 1947), pp.207-8.

<sup>163</sup> Klemperer, *Seipel*, p.126.

they represented a mortal wound to the colourful variety and diversity so central to their worldview. Unsurprisingly, many of them turned into aggressive advocates of the rights of German expellees in the Federal Republic. Preserving contrasts also meant maintaining and nurturing, as opposed to levelling, historical, cultural and national diversities, while rejecting what they saw as the West's exclusionary nationalism. Haecker emphasised that under the current circumstances no single nation, let alone the German one, could impose a new *Pax Romana*, 'whereby the Western world might be denationalised and levelled'. If it did, it would commit 'the greatest crime against both humanity and Christianity' because 'levelling in the spiritual realm is anti-Christian'. Only the nations' spiritual conversion could revive the *Imperium Romanum*, 'which has never quite perished': through 'mutual understanding, conciliation and respect' we must create a 'higher commonwealth [...] in the spiritual form of faith, hope and love'.<sup>164</sup> For Foerster too, Christianity had magnified the value of individualities, both personal and national, so that 'the unique value of the individual nation' represented 'one indispensable foundation of international order', to be supplemented by 'a principle of combination which controls its operation'.<sup>165</sup> Towards the end of his long life, in 1961, he even expressed scepticism about plans for Europe's political unification that were then unfolding within the newly born European communities. He feared that they might result in a centralisation inimical to the 'discreet' nature of European unity, historically based more on the openness of independent peoples to each other than on the uniformity enforced by central institutions.<sup>166</sup>

All in all, the supranational *Reich* had to maintain and harmonise differences, unlike the national state, which levelled them internally through the centralistic eradication of cultural diversities and entrenched them internationally behind absolute national sovereignties. The supranational *Reich* also had to

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<sup>164</sup> Haecker, *Virgil*, pp.78-9.

<sup>165</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, pp.5-6.

<sup>166</sup> F.W. Foerster, *Deutsche Geschichte und politische Ethik*, (Nuremberg, 1961), pp.219-21.

overcome the distinction between the internal and international dimensions by letting sovereignty break down within a single order organically constructed from the bottom upwards, from the family as the smallest natural unity of society to the Empire, whose ultimate vocation, since its dawn in Hellenistic and Roman times, had been that of an oikumene.<sup>167</sup> Using the neo-Thomistic language that was rapidly spreading in Catholic thought after Leo XIII, prelate Seipel argued that every 'natural organisation of mankind' grew from a threefold root that was already present in the family: 'tribe and race go back to common descent, people and nation to community of life, the state and the empire to organisation based on authority.'<sup>168</sup> The Austrian Catholic Hugelmann, whose scholarship purported to prove that the medieval Empire had represented a synthesis between a German national kingdom and a supranational organisation, similarly argued that the medieval *principium unitatis* 'never meant unity as uniformity but, on the contrary, always organic unity (*gegliederte Einheit*)'. He insisted that 'the visible unity of mankind in Church and *Reich*' in medieval thinking was 'neither absolute nor exclusive', but only the 'overarching dome' of a structured human society in which, between the individual and the *Reich*, there were numerous 'intermediate unities' (*vermittelnde Einheiten*), such as family, local community, city, province, kingdom, all endowed with genuine autonomy and own goals, while participating in the harmonious unity of the whole.<sup>169</sup> Various conservative doctrines attempted to systematise and actualise this perspective, the most lasting of which was Pope Pius XI's influential definition of the principle of subsidiarity in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. Although in practice the organicism underpinning such views often translated into a preference for corporatist organisational forms, it is worth pointing out that these differed from contemporary fascist corporatism, which also aimed to overcome the economic and social challenges of modernity. They were anti-statist, while

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<sup>167</sup> Platz, 'Abendländische Vorerinnerungen', p.6.

<sup>168</sup> Seipel, *Nation und Staat*, p.24.

<sup>169</sup> K.G. Hugelmann, 'Der Gedanke des Nationalstaates und die mittelalterliche Weltanschauung', in *Abendland*, 4/11-12 (August/September 1929), p.341. Unsurprisingly, he then referred to Nicolas of Cusa to strengthen his point.

fascist corporatism was state-centric; and they aimed to protect and organise differences, while the fascist state purported to overcome them in a higher form of absolute unity. Like the idea of *Heimat*, that of subsidiarity took on an important role in post-war Christian democracy. Both can be traced back to a neo-medieval worldview combining particularism and universalism to overcome nationalism and internationalism. In German-speaking Central Europe, this all was part and parcel of the traditional conservative *Reichsidee*.

#### *Religious transcendence and political order*

Both before and after the Second World War, many supranational conservatives were clear that the foundational difference between their Empire and the *Reich* of national conservatives was the former's living bond with the Western tradition of right thinking about the spiritual and political order appropriate to European mankind. Much has been made, by *Sonderweg* historians attempting to explain the 'German catastrophe', of the 'anti-Western' proclivities of German-speaking conservatives, singled out for their ill-fated convergence on Nazism.<sup>170</sup> This is surely justified in the case of many national conservatives, but it seems less so for most supranational conservatives, whose polar stars were the Christian Occident and the Empire. If by West we mean the principles of national democracy and sovereignty, at the time most recently expressed in Wilsonian self-determination, then, conservatives striving to maintain Central Europe's supranational unity as the mainstay of continental peace would naturally be hostile. To them, the sovereign national state was indeed Western, while the federal supranational *Reich* was Germanic and Central European. Moreover, they typically did see nationalism and democracy as twin evils, to be remedied by returning to the supranational, federalist and, for some, monarchical tradition of empire. In the very specific sense of rejecting these powerful trends in political

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<sup>170</sup> Winkler, *Long Shadow*, pp.15-16; F. Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, (Zurich, 1946).

modernisation, they were indeed anti-Western; in all other senses, they were not. They did not share the *völkisch* hatred for the western tradition of Roman and Christian universality that animated national conservative and national socialist *Reich* utopias. In fact, the revival of this tradition centred on the memory of the First *Reich* was their principal political goal.

Their widespread reservations towards the League of Nations had similar roots. The League appeared an experiment in abstract internationalism, disconnected from the European tradition of supranational unity, and destined to founder on the selfish policy of its sovereign members. As Foerster wrote, a European federation 'cannot be erected by a bureaucratic machine on the basis of an abstract conception of Europe. It must grow slowly and organically from a specific nucleus [...]. The first condition that must be fulfilled is a radical change of mental attitude in the centre of Europe, a political and moral conversion such as was envisaged by Frantz and Adam Müller who 125 years ago taught that "Christ died also for states"<sup>171</sup>. And Moenius wrote that 'we Catholics do not need to learn the "European" of a Briand: We have the Catholic Latin [...] which once sustained Christendom, in truth the League of Nations of the Middle Ages [and] upon whose reawakening today the best powers – even those of a secularised spirit – set about with such strenuous effort'.<sup>172</sup> He attacked Spahn, Jung and the rest as 'pseudo-conservative' representatives of a revolutionary Germany that had abandoned its responsibilities to the Occident, while genuine conservatives believed in a Germany 'which is willing to bind itself to its own traditions; to its Roman-Germanic inheritance; to its Christian medieval past; to its leading participatory role in the Occidental Peoples' Family'. The *völkisch Reichsideologie* of Moeller and Stapel was dismissed as heralding a depraved concept of the Ghibelline *Reich*, which would be absorbed solely by its power. Only a state which understood its universal calling could claim to

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<sup>171</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.30.

<sup>172</sup> Munro, 'Holy Roman Empire', p.452. See also J. Lehnert, 'Rome ou la solution à tous les problèmes européens: Georg Moenius et le concept de romanité durant l'entre-deux-guerres', *Amnis*, 11 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.4000/amnis.1844>.

represent the German *Reich*, and it was this notion of a *Reichsmission* that German Catholicism had to defend.<sup>173</sup> In a 1946 letter, after the nationalist *Reich* had declared its final bankruptcy, Ziegler also condemned it as a betrayal of the German ideal: ‘we have become faithless to our unwritten law; we have betrayed and sold “the Reich” to the “anti-Reich”’.<sup>174</sup>

What, in the last resort, gave this ‘anti-*Reich*’ its devilish, totalitarian quality, many supranational conservatives fathomed, was its pursuit, to use once again Voegelin’s language, of a completely ‘immanentised eschaton’. This pursuit found an extreme manifestation in National Socialism but could be traced back to the immanentism of the Enlightenment. Devoid of otherworldliness, in this philosophy ‘[t]he meaning of life, human happiness and all the other basic values were projected into this world and that change brought an enormous thirst for “justice”, earthly justice [...]. [T]he point of gravity was shifted to our earthly existence, and the happenings and events of this life became automatically “weighty”, final, irrevocable, unbearable.’<sup>175</sup> Again Ziegler, in a 1958 letter reveals his pain at the realisation that the *Reich*, which he had put at the centre of his life’s work, had become a vehicle for the bloodiest chiliarism: ‘oh unique horror! All the irruptions of chiliarism, necessary in themselves, were stifled or anyway choked in their own blood. To this day there was and there still is not a Third One.’<sup>176</sup>

Foerster went as far as offering a modernised, historically grounded interpretation of the supernatural mission of the Empire, whose fall had been prophesised to usher in the era of Antichrist. The Empire represented the Christian order of the Occident that had tamed the biological, beastly side of men, its lower powers, and put them at the service of a higher spiritual and moral mission. It had protected the sanctity of the individual soul from the oppression of the Collective, the Beast of St. John’s Apocalypse,

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<sup>173</sup> Munro, ‘Holy Roman Empire’, pp.460-2.

<sup>174</sup> L. Ziegler, *Briefe: 1901-1958*, (Munich, 1963), p.365.

<sup>175</sup> Kuenhelt-Leddihn, *Menace*, pp. 32-3.

<sup>176</sup> Ziegler, *Briefe*, p.434. Ziegler was commenting on the following book: W. Nigg, *Das ewige Reich. Geschichte einer Sehnsucht und einer Enttäuschung*, (Erlenbach, 1944).

freed by the new heathenism and Machiavellianism that was gradually spreading after the Renaissance. Its fall in 1806 and the defeat of its *Reichsidee* in 1866 broke the dam, and an era of unfettered nationalism and diabolical collectivism ‘to build Valhalla on earth’ began, culminating in Hitler.<sup>177</sup> In this sense, Foerster can appear to us today as the ‘anti-Winkler’. According to Winkler, the medieval belief that the *Reich* was the *Katechon*, the ‘restrainer’ holding back the rule of Antichrist, had been the core of the *Reich* myth, and its revival in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany a key determinant of Nazism.<sup>178</sup> On the contrary, for Foerster the *Reich* had truly been the ‘restrainer’ of the Antichrist, the dam against the identitarian collectivism that led to the inhumanity of National Socialism, in very tangible historical terms. All in all, it seems clear that Winkler’s case is grossly overstated when he claims that ‘the myth of the “Reich” was certainly the most sturdy’ bridge ‘between Hitler and the educated circles in Germany’, and that a ‘Reich concept’ enabled all factions of ‘the German right, from the “conservative revolution”, via right-wing Catholicism, to the National Socialists’ to close ranks.<sup>179</sup> Although some did close ranks with the Nazis around a *Reich* concept, others were since the beginning led into irreducible opposition to them by such a concept, and still others, including many of the conservative plotters of July 1944, broke ranks with them at a later point for loyalty to such a concept.<sup>180</sup> To quote only the main example, Claus von Stauffenberg (1907-1944), the very man who tried to assassinate Hitler in 1944, came from an ancient lineage of imperial counts and was profoundly steeped in the George Circle’s expectation for a new universal *Reich* mighty and beautiful like that of the Hohenstaufen.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.447. Considering the book’s thesis and his other works, this is clearly the meaning of his entire ‘Epilogue’, even though the Empire is no longer directly mentioned. See *Europe*, pp.442-53.

<sup>178</sup> Winkler, *Long Shadow*, pp.7-8.

<sup>179</sup> Winkler, *Long Shadow*, pp.15-16.

<sup>180</sup> H. Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler. German Resistance under the Third Reich*, (Oxford, 2003), pp.42-133; H. Mommsen, ‘Die künftige Neuordnung Deutschlands und Europas aus der Sicht des Kreisauer Kreises’, in P. Steinbach and J. Tuchel (eds), *Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, (Bonn, 1994), pp.246-61.

<sup>181</sup> W. Bräuninger, *Claus von Stauffenberg. Die Genese des Täters aus dem Geiste des geheimen Deutschland*, (Vienna, 2002), pp.97, 99; M. Riedel, *Geheimen Deutschland: Stefan George und die Brüder Stauffenberg*, (Cologne, 2006).

## The Empire and Fascism

A systematic analysis of the Old *Reich*'s place in fascist political thought goes beyond the scope of my inquiry. Fascism is emphatically not part of what can be treated, on sound scholarly ground, as conservative political thought.<sup>182</sup> Its self-definitions tend to convey the sense of a revolutionary break with traditional ways, and usually reveal an assumed hostility toward conservatism. As to what Freedom called 'other-definitions', only socialists and Marxists have, for the most part, categorised fascism as a conservative phenomenon of capitalist defence.<sup>183</sup> Conservatives, even when they sided with it to forestall perceived threats to their positions from the left, were usually clear that fascism was distinct from their tradition, at times seeing it as a mortal enemy of it. Only new or revolutionary conservatives, whose membership in the conservative ideological family is itself open to challenge, have often, especially in the interwar period, treated fascists as kindred spirits, while vigorously protesting their distinctiveness from them since the Second World War. At a more analytical level, fascist patterns of thought and action are so revealing of totalitarian dynamism that their inclusion in the conservative phenomenology cannot be justified. Given, however, the centrality of the *Reich* concept in National Socialist ideology, its overlap with the First *Reich* in Nazi historical memory and the decisive influence that national conservative views of the Empire had upon both, a brief mention of the most relevant aspects seems appropriate here.<sup>184</sup> The associations with Nazism that any political use of the *Reich* concept, including by supranational conservatives, evoked in the post-war period and, especially, after the mid-1960s, were also consequential, another reason not to leave Nazi views and uses of the Empire completely unmentioned.

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<sup>182</sup> M. Blinkhorn, *Fascists and Conservatives. The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, (London, 2003).

<sup>183</sup> M. Freedom, 'Morphological Analysis'.

<sup>184</sup> F.L. Kroll, 'Die Reichsidee im Nationalsozialismus', in Bosbach, Hiery and Kampmann, *Imperium, Empire, Reich*, pp.179-96.

### *Centralist nationalism*

Given the ideological fluidity of Nazism, it is unsurprising to find contradictory views expressed on the Empire by its leading figures. Rosenberg, the leading ideologue of Nazi Neopaganism, can be considered the arch-hater of the First *Reich* for its association with Rome and Catholicism, 'an experiment of the first magnitude in the annihilation of nations'.<sup>185</sup> It was obviously to Charlemagne's adversary, the pagan Saxon Widukind, that Rosenberg's sympathies went, and he encouraged his cult within the party and among the SS.<sup>186</sup> For him, the Nazi Third *Reich* had to be the opposite of the First. On the other hand, Himmler, the leading practitioner of Nazi Neopaganism, worshipped what he saw as ancient Germans, Franks as much as Saxons, and associated all of them with the *Reich* mystique. Thus, he venerated Widukind, but also regarded himself as the reincarnation of the Saxon Emperor Henry I, 'whose tomb he opened and whose cathedral he turned into a cult centre for his SS'.<sup>187</sup> Hitler himself greatly admired the Empire's splendours, declaring in 1942 that 'if we want to make a claim to the world at all, we have to refer to the German imperial history. Apart from ancient Rome, the imperial history is the most powerful epic that the world has ever seen'.<sup>188</sup> In order to appropriate that epic for his *Reich*, after the annexation of Austria, he ordered the Empire's regalia transferred from the imperial treasury in Vienna to Nuremberg, the 'soul' of the Nazi Party, where they were presented to the public in a desecrated church, the *Katharinenkirche*, and then stored in a secret bunker until the end of the war.<sup>189</sup> Interestingly, he also considered Charlemagne 'one of the greatest

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<sup>185</sup> Kolnai, *War*, p.573.

<sup>186</sup> A. Barbero, 'Interpretazioni di Carlo Magno nella crisi della democrazia tedesca (1933-1949)', *Il Mulino*, 51/1 (2002), p.24.

<sup>187</sup> Heer, *Holy Roman Empire*, p.11.

<sup>188</sup> Faber, 'Third Reich and Third Europe', p.251.

<sup>189</sup> S.D. Kirckpatrick, *Hitler's Holy Relics. A True Story of Nazi Plunder and the Race to Recover the Crown Jewels of the Holy Roman Empire*, (London, 2011); D. Paulus, 'From Charlemagne to Hitler: the Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire and its Symbolism', *Charlemagne: A European Icon* (2017), <https://cpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/bhttps://cpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.bristol.ac.uk/dist/c/332/files/2016/01/Paulus-2017-From-Charlemagne-to-Hitler.pdf> (14 April 2024).

men in world history' for having been able 'to federate the quarrelsome and bellicose Germans', and found it improper to call a hero like him by the name 'killer of the Saxons': 'one mustn't let the great German Emperors be relegated to the background', as Rosenberg did. In fact, his own breaking of tribal particularism in the Nazi *Reich* found a precedent in the achievement of the great Frankish Emperor: 'without compulsion, we would never have united all the various German families with these thick-headed, parochially minded fellows – either in Charlemagne's time or to-day.'<sup>190</sup>

In a didactic 1940 booklet on the national socialist *Reichsidee*, former teacher and *SS-Brigadeführer* Friedrich Schmidt similarly argued that Charlemagne had laid 'the granite foundation' for the unity of all Germans, to be fulfilled more than a millennium later in Hitler's *Reich*, and that quarrels between him and Widukind were reconciled, as they both had a place in the national socialist interpretation of German history.<sup>191</sup> The sentiment revealed in these thoughts points to the first distinctive feature of Nazi views of the Old *Reich*: the *Reich* is only truly realised when a centralist notion of absolute national unity has triumphed. To the extent that the Empire departed from such a notion, a large extent indeed, it obviously failed to realise the *Reich's* ideal. Had Germans attained the same homogeneity and unity as some other nations, Hitler never tired of repeating, they would have been the globe's masters. There is therefore no place for the tribal federalism that was positively appraised, in different ways and to different degrees, by both national and supranational conservatives as quintessential to the *Reichsidee*. This significant Nazi departure from all conservative apprehensions of the *Reich* was not lost to contemporaries, being for example picked up in 1938 by Aurel Kolnai, one of the first systematic students of Nazi ideology in the English language. He wondered whether Hitler's scorn for 'the architecture of diversity' and the centralisation of Germany by the Nazi regime were not directly

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<sup>190</sup> H. Trevor-Roper (ed), *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944. His Private Conversations*, tr. N. Cameron and R.H. Stevens, (London, 2000), pp.289, 380-81.

<sup>191</sup> F. Schmidt, *Das Reich als Aufgabe*, (Berlin 1940), pp.35-7.

opposed to the *Reich's* very idea, whether the Nazis had not in fact completed the task originally incumbent on the Weimar Republic to sweep away the remnants of dynastic federalism: '[i]s not Germany becoming at last an ordinary national state, with nothing left to recall that main feature of the Reich, a supreme Crown above vassal crowns?'.<sup>192</sup> The Italian revolutionary conservative Evola associated the Empire with the 'organic state', a 'synthesis of unity and multiplicity' necessarily implying decentralisation. Writing in 1953, he stressed that 'totalitarianism is the opposite, a system characterised by absolute, despotic, gloomy centralisation and hyperorganisation'.<sup>193</sup> Historian Clemens von Klemperer made the complementary observation that Hitler's loathing for the Habsburg Empire's national diversity made him, despite his Austrian upbringing, 'a post-imperial type'<sup>194</sup>.

#### *Racialism and religious immanentism*

A second peculiarity of Nazi views of the *Reich* in its relationship with the historic Empire is hardly surprising too: its nature as a racial, almost biological property of the German nation. Although the *Reich* had already become the German nation's exclusive and eternal possession in the writings of national conservatives, this was still predominantly meant in a cultural and spiritual sense, even when a certain idea of racial superiority crept in during the interwar period. According to Schmidt, instead, the German tribes gave to Charlemagne's *Reich* the living substance from which its greatness and splendour derived ever since. Although the *Reich's* forms and goals during the Middle Ages might have been religious, they had in fact, 'grown out of the biological substance of German humanity'.<sup>195</sup> National Socialist historians such as Ernst Krieck (1882-1947) and Karl Richard Ganzer (1909-1943) openly

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<sup>192</sup> Kolnai, *War*, pp.610, 615.

<sup>193</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, p.181.

<sup>194</sup> Klemperer, 'Das nachimperiale Österreich', p.316.

<sup>195</sup> Schmidt, *Reich*, pp.35-36, 40.

conceptualised the *Reichsidee* as a racist and imperialist ideological programme having nothing to do with Christianity.<sup>196</sup>

The virulent disassociation of the Empire from Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, animated by a desire to recover its purely Germanic essence, was more than typical and can in fact be counted as an additional core feature of Nazi views of the *Reich*, obviously shared with influential figures in New Conservatism, such as Moeller. Thus, Hitler could sentence in all seriousness that '[t]he fact that this German empire was named "the Holy Roman Empire" has nothing whatsoever to do with the Church, and has no religious significance'. He also argued that 'the Church has always wormed its way into power and succeeded in winning its way by flattery into the good graces of the German Emperors, from Charlemagne onwards', obviously implying that he, unlike them, would not be duped.<sup>197</sup> Schmidt did admit that Christianity had provided the spiritual foundation of Charlemagne's *Reich*, but also explained how it was an alien teaching in tension with the primordial Germanic soul, which constantly tried to escape it. It was this tension that later caused the *Reich's* ruin and the German people's distress.<sup>198</sup> The German nation was now finally in a position to rebuild a *Reich* that would unleash all its biological energies by replacing 'a 2000-year-old spiritual aberration' with the revolutionary National Socialist creed.<sup>199</sup> The new *Reich*, then, unlike the Empire, had its spiritual foundation within itself, grown from the womb of the *Reichsvolk* and intimately corresponding to its character. Unlike the Empire, it found its realisation not in an otherworldly future, but in this world, by recognising 'in the German man God's helper in perfecting the world' and by devoting all energies to

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<sup>196</sup> E. Krieck, *Die deutsche Staatsidee. Ihre Geburt aus dem Erziehungs- und Entwicklungsgedanken*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Leipzig, 1934); E. Krieck, *Der Wille zum Reich. Rede gehalten in der Aula der Neuen Universität am 5. Mai 1940*, (Heidelberg, 1940); K.R. Ganzer, *Das Reich als europäischen Ordnungsmacht*, (Hamburg, 1941). Meier-Stein contrasts their vision with that of Srbik, see *Reichsidee*, p.122.

<sup>197</sup> Trevor-Roper, *Table Talk*, pp.382, 521.

<sup>198</sup> Schmidt, *Reich*, pp.37-40.

<sup>199</sup> Schmidt, *Reich*, p.56.

the protection of his health. This radical immanentism, then, was ultimately 'the difference between the *Reich* of the year 800 and the *Reich* of today'.<sup>200</sup> A similar injunction to abandon the pursuit of any heavenly *Reich* and embrace that of an earthly Germanic *Reich* is contained in the extremely popular historical novels of such National Socialist authors as Werner Beumelburg.<sup>201</sup> The ultimate incompatibility between the traditional and the Nazi *Reichsidee* received, so to speak, official sanction in June 1939, when a circular sent to all Nazi Party organisations banned any further use of the expression 'Third *Reich*' to avoid comparisons with the previous two.<sup>202</sup> In the early years of Nazi rule, instead, the active adoption of the locution, originally coined outside Nazi circles by Moeller van den Bruck, had represented a convenient bridge to old and new conservatives, Catholics and Protestants alike.

#### *Prussianism and imperial colonisation*

Little was truly original in National Socialist interpretations of the Empire. They simply filtered theses and patterns developed in Borussian, national and especially new conservative political thought through the lenses of their own violently racist and anti-Christian worldview, thus realising more fully their totalitarian potential. After the great medieval Emperors, the tale is again the familiar one of disunity and decline until 1648, when the Empire basically ceased to exist in anything but name. The longing for a new great *Reich* uniting all Germans, however, continued to burn in the German heart, until the Hohenzollerns took it upon themselves that it should be fulfilled. Apart from its organisational and political achievements, Prussia's main contribution to the idea of the *Reich* was the definition of the proper relationship between individual Germans and the national community as one of readiness

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<sup>200</sup> Schmidt, *Reich*, pp.77-9.

<sup>201</sup> W. Beumelburg, *Mont Royal. Ein Buch vom Himmlischen und vom Irdischen Reich*, (Hamburg, 1936); K.H. Schoeps, *Literature and Film in the Third Reich*, tr. K.M. Dell'Orto, (New York, 2003), pp.87-93.

<sup>202</sup> Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p.677. See also E. Vermeil, *Germany's Three Reichs. Their History and Culture*, tr. E.W. Dicks (London, 1944).

to sacrifice oneself and one's life for the sake of the whole's higher good. It was this trait that enabled Bismarck's success and determined Germany's subsequent economic and military revival by bridging the divisions and loosening the constraints of the old dynastic order. In this sense, the results of the First World War were a necessary step towards completing the *Reich* and creating a new European order. Versailles was, as for many new conservatives, 'the birthdate of a new Germany', since it wiped away the old dynasties and aroused a sense of injustice in the German people, fostering the birth and growth of Hitler's revolutionary movement.<sup>203</sup> Hitler himself in *Mein Kampf* recognised the organisational achievements of Brandenburg-Prussia, which made it an 'example and crystallisation point of a new Reich', as one of three major events in German history. He underlined how his own work towards the *Großdeutsches Reich*, completed in 1938, and beyond, towards the *Großgermanisches Reich*, pursued during the war, was building upon Bismarck's foundations. The other two events worth remembering were the *Ostmark*'s colonisation and the acquisition of the spaces east of the Elbe River. 'We start', Hitler wrote, 'where we finished six centuries ago. We stop the eternal German migration to the south and west of Europe and turn our gaze to the land in the east.'<sup>204</sup> Hitler was unusual, however, in believing that the medieval Empire had had no 'coherent policy concerning the colonisation of the Eastern territories', so that Nazi policies towards the East really had no precedents in history. According to him, the Empire's 'racial policy' had been firmly fixed on the south, by which he meant Italy and, in particular, Lombardy, which 'had all the special characteristics necessary to make it part of the Roman-Germanic Holy Empire', as it was inhabited by populations of Germanic stock.<sup>205</sup> In 1941, of course, this did not prevent him from naming the grandest act of his

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<sup>203</sup> Schmidt, *Reich*, pp.44-56.

<sup>204</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.161-2.

<sup>205</sup> Trevor-Roper, *Table Talk*, pp.380. Also see Liulevicius, *German myth of the East*, chapter 7.

eastern policy, the invasion of the Soviet Union, after the Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick 'Barbarossa'.

Hitler and, even more obsessively, Himmler shared with all Nazis and new conservatives the conviction that inherent to the *Reich* concept was the notion of a German imperial nation acting as the ordering power of the continent, which had to be unified to keep pace with Russia and the USA. History taught that the recreation of a *Reich* comprising all the Germans inevitably had to result in a new European order, emanating from the central Germanic space and returning France and England to their proper role as peripheral European states.<sup>206</sup> When the early successes of their expansionist policies before and during the war posed the problem of how concretely this new European order should be structured, they therefore naturally looked back to imperial history for inspiration and solutions. Their plans pragmatically took shape as an abandonment of the 'Westphalian' system of independent states in favour of a more differentiated imperial structure. The new *Reich's* central position as the pre-eminent power was meant to reproduce the feudal overlordship enjoyed by the medieval Empire. Several non-sovereign political entities would cluster around it, enjoying various degrees of autonomy. In 1939, the famous medievalist Percy Ernst Schramm, who that year joined the Nazi party and would become the keeper of the *Wehrmacht's* war diary in 1943, saw in Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia a step towards the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>207</sup> These regions, of course, became the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia'. In the East, Himmler dreamt of reconstituting a political structure inspired by the old state of the Teutonic knights and entrusted to his SS Order.<sup>208</sup> In the West, he discussed with Hitler a possible reconstitution of medieval Burgundy as a centre for science and the arts, once again independent from France and comprising French-speaking Switzerland, Picardy

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<sup>206</sup> Schmidt, *Reich*, pp.22-6.

<sup>207</sup> Ruehl, 'Reich and Rulership', p.220.

<sup>208</sup> J. Hermand, *Old Dreams of a New Reich. Volkish Utopias and National Socialism*, (Bloomington, 1992), pp.242-4.

with Amiens, the Champagne district with Reims and Troyes, Franche-Comté with Dijon, Chalons and Nevers, the Hainaut province and Luxembourg. The new state, like the old one, whose borders it was expected to reproduce, would have access to both the Channel and the Mediterranean, and possess autonomous administration, currency, laws and even orders of merit, including the old Order of the Golden Fleece, which should be recreated with a French *SS-Führer* as Grand Master. He even thought about the Belgian Leon Degrelle as a suitable Burgundian chancellor, under a German *Reichswarweser*. In a 1940 memorandum to the German authorities, Degrelle himself argued that in Nazi Europe Belgium should recover the role of a crossing point between East and South that it had had 'under the Dukes of Burgundy and under Charles V, when she was *Germania Inferior*, taking the oath of fealty to the Holy Germanic Empire.'<sup>209</sup>

As to Hitler, he wanted the *Reich* back to its 1648 borders and thought the Netherlands should again be part of the imperial complex, hence his appointment of Arthur Seyss-Inquart as *Reichskommissar* there. And Hans Frank, Governor General in occupied Poland, thought of himself as a 'feudal king', placed to rule over the Poles by his emperor. Even when, in the second part of the war, a weaker military position made such openly hegemonic phantasies unserviceable and encouraged the development of more inclusive concepts of continental unity under Nazi leadership, the presence of the medieval Empire as an inspiration remained strong. In 1944, for example, a 'Charlemagne Division' was formed to organise French volunteers of the *Waffen-SS*.<sup>210</sup> Still at the end of 1944, an SS group elaborated a vague plan for a 'European confederation' harking back to Theodoric's Ostrogoth empire, as well as to the Empire of Carolingians and Hohenstaufen. This imperial federation, they thought, was a superior alternative to both a system based on the absolute equality of peoples and the American

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<sup>209</sup> M. Salewski, 'National Socialist Ideas on Europe', in W. Lipgens, *Documents on the History of European Integration. Vol I: Continental Plans for European Union, 1939-1945*, (Berlin, 1985), p.77. On Degrelle, see M. Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium. Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement 1940-1944*, (New Haven, 1993).

<sup>210</sup> R. Forbes, *For Europe Revisited. The French Volunteers of the Waffen-SS 1943-1945*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Solihull, 2022).

melting-pot model.<sup>211</sup> Reflecting, still in the early 1940s, on the prospects for Europe's re-organisation after an Axis victory in the war, the Italian revolutionary conservative Evola observed that the fiction of the 'democratic' equality of sovereign nations, behind which there hid the Western powers' cynical imperialism, will have to give way to 'imperial spaces' recognising the reality of power hierarchies. Sovereignty will no longer be absolute, but 'partial' and 'graduated', accommodating various degrees of autonomy and subordination as in the feudal system, though in modern form. The German *Reich* was well-positioned to accomplish this, since it retained a vital bond to the feudal spirit. However, the dominant nation had to abandon the closed nationalism reflected in such slogans as '*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*', and find a structuring principle that could ensure its attractiveness to other nations in its space, lest it should fall back into perverted 'imperialist' habits of mere exploitation and de-nationalisation of weaker peoples. To succeed, therefore, Nazism had to 'romanise' itself, instead of continuing to fault the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns and even the Hohenstaufen for not having been sufficiently nationalistic.<sup>212</sup>

Nazi authors, after all, had appropriated the revolutionary conservative distinction between *Reich*, supposedly based on a calling to lead by one's own superior achievements (*Führung*), and the Western powers' imperialism, based on naked force and a will to dominate (*Herrschaft*).<sup>213</sup> As we have seen, this distinction between *Reich* and imperialism, however differently conceived, was in fact equally central to supranational conservative authors. Whenever it appeared, it was an attempt to conceptualise an integrated Central European political order of different nations capable of coming to terms with the fact that one of them, the German, enjoyed demographic, economic and civilisational pre-eminence. How could one avoid that this fact resulted in the mere imperialist subordination of other

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<sup>211</sup> These various plans are usefully summarised in Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.162-7. Also see Heer, *Holy Roman Empire*, p.20.

<sup>212</sup> Evola, *Federalismo imperiale*, pp.113-21.

<sup>213</sup> Schmidt, *Reich*, pp.29-31.

nations to the Germans? A formal recognition of legal equality under a League of Nations was obviously no solution, as what mattered was the substantial inequality of resources and power. The neo-Roman and Christian *Reichsidee* carried by the Germans seemed to offer a possible answer, though perhaps not a realistic one, as it required their self-sacrifice as a nation at the service of a higher, universal ideal. The anti-Roman and Germano-centric *Reichsidee*, on the contrary, which had absorbed western nationalism and projected it back onto the imperial glories of the past, when applied to Central Europe could not but reproduce the pattern of domination typical of modern imperialism, notwithstanding its upholders' protestations to the contrary. We, who know the unspeakable brutality of Nazi occupation and extermination policies toward 'inferior' races during the war, can attest to that. We must, however, concur with Clemens von Klemperer that 'Hitler's *Reich* was only a final fever of that agony of the *Reich* in the center of Europe', which had been ongoing since the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and of which Hofmannsthal had written in 1917.<sup>214</sup> However horrendously disfigured its traits, even in Nazism the *Reichsidee* was still essentially about defining the mode of life most proper to the Germans in their inevitable intercourse with the other nationalities of the Central European space.

## **Conclusion**

By the end of this period, whose beginnings had seemed to confer renewed relevance on the *Reichsidee*, the long 'agony of the *Reich* in the centre of Europe' appeared all but complete. The cataclysmic rise and fall of Hitler's *Reich*, the territorial re-organisation of Central and Eastern Europe ensuing from it and the epoch-making ethnic transformations engendered by both destroyed the last existential conditions that seemed to justify the Empire's enduring relevance. The national minorities, German or otherwise, whose existence had been so central to the 19<sup>th</sup> century rise of supranational

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<sup>214</sup> Klemperer, 'Das nachimperiale Österreich', p.316.

conservatism, had been erased or had become residual. And the struggle to organise the continent's centre as an oasis of ethnic diversity in an age of extreme nationalism appeared lost.

Despite all this, not everyone realised at once that, in their traditional forms, the old conservatisms inspired by the Empire were becoming obsolete. And not everyone saw that attention had to turn to the gradual supranational integration of (Western) European national states and to the modernisation of conceptions that, while in some ways prescient and forward-looking from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the interwar period, appeared increasingly out of phase with the emerging new conditions of Germany and Europe. The next chapter will be devoted to this final part of our story.

## V. Back to the future (c.1955-)

### Context and authors

For about a century and a half after its demise, the Empire had remained an active conservative ideal of order. The further the actual polity receded into the past, however, the more the experiences of order connected with it became remote and overlaid with anachronistic and ideological distortions. The battle of imperial symbols that had climaxed in the interwar period attested to that. Already during the 1950s, signs started to appear that the time was up for the Empire as a politically active ideal, at least in its traditional form. This decade has been widely recognised by historians as a transitional one in which German ideas of domestic and European order started to shift from a predominantly 'Occidental' stance in a more 'Western' direction. The trend gained momentum in the 1960s, a decade of intellectual upheaval in which traditional conceptions of Germanness and Europe came to be bitterly contested and retreated to the advantage of more liberal, pluralist and democratic notions.<sup>1</sup> This coincided with the coming of age of a younger generation that had played no active part in the 'German catastrophe' and looked at the traditional culture within which it seemed to have incubated with bewilderment, if not revulsion.<sup>2</sup>

A high-impact sign that the wind was changing came with the public backlash against the *Abendland* movement, a hotbed of supranational conservative concepts and figures, in the aftermath of commemorations for the millennium of Otto I's victory at the battle of Lechfeld, in 1955. The occasion coincided with the consolidation of the Cold War divide and the debates around the most appropriate extent and forms of German re-armament within the Western bloc. Prominent conservatives drew open parallels with the ongoing struggle of the Christian Occident against the

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<sup>1</sup> Conze, *Europa*, p.399; R. Uertz, 'Konservative Kulturkritik in der Frühen Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Die Abendländische Akademie in Eichstätt (1952-1956)', *Historisch-Politische Mitteilungen*, 8/1 (2001), p.67; Schildt, *Zwischen Abendland und Amerika*; G. Müller and V. Plichta, 'Zwischen Rhein und Donau. Abendländisches Denken zwischen deutsch-französischen Verständigungsininitativen und konservativ-katholischen Integrationsmodellen 1924-1957', *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Europäischen Integration*, 1/5 (1999), pp.17-47.

<sup>2</sup> Meinecke, *Deutsche Katastrophe*.

neo-pagan Bolshevik ideology. This drew intense journalistic and political attention to organisations such as the *Abendländische Aktion* and the *Abendländische Akademie*, as well as to conservative personalities such as the former's founder, Gerhald Kroll (1910-1963), and the latter's President, Friedrich August von der Heydte (1907-1994), a university assistant to *Grossdeutsch* Austrian historian Karl Hugelmann before the war, a decorated parachutist during it and a prominent professor of international law in the postwar period. They were both close to conservative government circles and notably to the Bavarian CSU, of which Kroll was a founder and for which von der Heyde would serve as a member of the *Landtag* in the late 1960s. As a scion of the south German nobility who remained attached to the *Grossdeutsch* tradition and connected to the Habsburg family well into the Federal Republic, von der Heydte embodied the residual continuity of supranational conservatism as an aristocratic ideal centred on the Empire's memory in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His early postwar books dealt with the imperial thinking of the late Middle Ages in tension with the developing concept of the sovereign national state, openly making the case for its relevance at a time when the necessity of a supranational controlling power was felt anew.<sup>3</sup> In his 1980s memoirs he still commented, with reference to his and his children's dual German-Austrian citizenship, that 'we are thus Germans in the sense of the Holy Roman Empire', while his last book, published towards the end of the century, was a tribute to the Habsburg monarchy as 'a European idea' and celebrated Otto von Habsburg (1912-2011), the last crown prince of Austria-Hungary, who fought 'for a new, greater union of peoples, for a united Europe'.<sup>4</sup> Habsburg was one of several influential figures from such ruling political parties as the CDU, CSU and *Deutsche Partei*, as also of high Catholic prelates, aristocrats, senior judges, diplomats and scholars whose affiliation to structures linked with the *Abendland* movement had been publicly revealed in 1955. Critics, such as the prominent left-wing Catholic publicist Walter Dirks (1901-

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<sup>3</sup> F.A. von der Heydte, *Die Geburtsstunde des souveränen Staates. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Völkerrechts, der allgemeinen Staatslehre und des politischen Denkens*, (Regensburg, 1952); F.A. von der Heydte, *Vom Heiligen Reich zur Geheiligten Volkssouveränität*, (Württemberg, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.63, 65.

1991) picked up on the reactionary conservatism that seemed to underpin supranational conservatives' neo-medieval leanings, alleging that they displayed continuities with the Third *Reich* and aimed to subvert the Basic Law in pursuit of an authoritarian order. Things went so far that the Bundestag created a committee of inquiry on the matter, while the resulting public discredit was such that the movement rapidly lost ground and never recovered in its pristine form. Its legacy, however, was not entirely dispersed.<sup>5</sup>

From the late 1950s, supranational conservatives started not only to partly modernise their key themes and concepts, but also to develop new alliances, most notably with French Gaullism, and to find a more stable political home within the Bavarian CSU of the charismatic Franz Josef Strauss (1915-1988), whose European vision they lastingly shaped, as well as the Austrian ÖVP, whose roots were in Seipel's Christian social tradition and in the anti-Nazi 'imperial' conservatism of the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> They shed their traditional scepticism towards 'western' parliamentary democracy and set out to steer domestic and European political structures in a Christian conservative direction, countering the influence of the new mounting progressive tide.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the 'Paneuropa' ideal's revival supplied a viable complement to the more loaded *Reich* and *Abendland* concepts, managing to express in a more acceptable form at least the European aspects of the old supranational conservative *Reichsidee*. The mastermind of this process was none other than Otto von Habsburg, President of the transnational conservative think tank CEDI since 1952, Vice President of the Paneuropean Union since 1957 and for decades at the centre of a complex transnational web of conservative organisations and figures spanning half of the continent and keeping contacts with the other half. In 1973, he took over as President and completed the transformation of the Union into an organ of conservative Europeanism, heir to the supranational

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<sup>5</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.164-9.

<sup>6</sup> E. Eisner, *Das europäische Konzept von Franz Josef Strauss. Die gesamteuropäischen Ordnungsvorstellungen der CSU*, (Meisenheim Am Glan, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Conze, *Europa*, p.400.

conservative tradition and openly tracing its genealogy back to the Old *Reich* and to the Habsburg empire, seen as its rightful successor. From 1979, he served for two decades as an influential member of the directly elected European Parliament, whose Foreign Affairs Committee he chaired.<sup>8</sup> Under his long presidency, which lasted until 2004, the Union became an influential advocate for the liberation of the central European peoples from the communist yoke, with a strong youth branch created in 1975 by Bernd Posselt (1956-). A young Bavarian conservative journalist and the son of Sudeten German and Styrian parents, Posselt would take over Habsburg's parliamentary seat for the period 1999-2014 and, to this day, advocates for the supranational conservative tradition in his capacity as a publicist and President of the Paneuropean Union's German chapter.

The 1960s and 1970s, however, saw not only the modernisation of what was left of the supranational conservative tradition, but also two additional developments of importance. The first was the re-emergence, in a mutated but still recognisable form adapted to the post-1960s environment, of the interwar revolutionary conservative fascination with the Empire in the various 'New Rights' that sprang up in those decades, most notably in France, Germany and Italy. In post-war Italy and France, some of its animating spirit continued to manifest itself in individual personalities and small circles that were now on the political and intellectual margins, such as Julius Evola (1898-1974) and the 'Catholic Ghibelline' Attilio Mordini (1923-1966). The rediscovery and translation of the interwar new conservative literature, which had been mostly German and Italian, began at the hand of French *Nouvelle Droite* authors grouped, since 1968, around the ethnonationalist think-tank GRECE. Thus, for example, some of Evola's work on empire was translated into French in the 1960s. Alain de Benoist (1943-), a political theorist with a past as a young journalist and far-right activist, was, and remains, their key ideologue. Drawing on the revolutionary conservative *Reichsideologie* of such authors as van den Bruck and Evola, he

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<sup>8</sup> Baier and Demmerle, *Otto von Habsburg*; Brook-Shepherd, *Uncrowned Emperor*.

rekindled the vision of a new European empire that would counter the influence of liberalism, capitalism and multiculturalism, and embrace a regionalism with strong ethnic identitarian traits.<sup>9</sup> Unlike supranational conservatives such as Otto von Habsburg, who enthusiastically supported post-war European integration as the latest embodiment of the *Reichsidee*'s Christian federalism, de Benoist and his New Right followers have vehemently opposed it as an agent of Americanisation and liberalisation. Since the 1970s, the movement has expanded from France into a European network of organisations and intellectuals spanning many countries, including Italy (*Nuova Destra*) and Germany (*Neue Rechte*).<sup>10</sup> Named as the 'European New Right', authors affiliated with it have often displayed an intense interest in the topic of a European empire and in its venerable historical archetype: the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s, a momentous geopolitical transformation, destined to result in the fall of the Berlin wall and to be consolidated in the 1990s, lent a new lease of life to all conservative prefigurations of order harking back to the Empire, be they of the supranational or 'new right' variety: the return of *Mittleuropa*. The consolidation of the Cold War and the division of Europe through the Iron Curtain had engulfed historic Central Europe and rendered the ancient problem of how to best organise the Germans' cohabitation with the other peoples of the region obsolete. From the mid-1980s, the easing of the Soviet grip on the communist countries of the Warsaw Pact under Mikhail Gorbachev meant the re-opening of long-obstructed Central European vistas and the reactivation of long-removed Central European experiences, which were historically connected, in conservative imagery, with the Empire ideal. These naturally intensified in the 1990s, with the formal end of the

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<sup>9</sup> S. François, 'Les paganismes de la Nouvelle Droite (1980-2004)', (PhD, Lille 2 University of Health and Law, 2005), p.51; A. de Benoist, *L'Empire intérieur*, (Saint-Clément-de-Rivière, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Even in Malta, a far-right political party, eloquently named *Imperium Europa* and seeking to unite all 'European natives' into one political entity, was created under the influence of New Right ideas.

<sup>11</sup> For a sympathetic presentation, see T. Sunic, *Against Democracy and Equality. The European New Right*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (n.p., 2011). For more neutral or critical takes, see J. Antón-Mellón, 'The idées-force of the European New Right: a new paradigm?', in A. Mammona, E. Godin and B. Jenkins (eds), *Varieties of Right-Wing Extremism in Europe*, (Abingdon, 2012), pp.53-68; M. Crone, 'Towards Great Ethno-Civilizations and Spiritual Empires? How the European New Right Imagines a Post-Liberal World Order', *New Perspectives*, 29/4 (2021), pp.320-31; T. Bar-On, 'The French New Right's Quest for Alternative Modernity', *Fascism*, 1/1 (2012), pp.18-52.

bipolar division of Europe, the deepening of both globalisation and European integration and a general re-awakening of interest in neo-medieval forms of imperial order overcoming the national state as the basic unit of international relations.<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, this period saw a flurry of New Right re-engagements with the *Reich* concept, especially by German historians and publicists, such as Bernhard Willms (1931-1991), Karlheinz Weissmann (1959-), Helmut Diwald (1924-1993) and Hans-Dietrich Sander (1928-2017).<sup>13</sup> Armin Mohler's important and periodically republished 1950 book on the Conservative Revolution, as well as his activism as a journalist and publicist inspired by it in subsequent decades, had prepared the ground for a conscious re-emergence of this tradition.<sup>14</sup> However, this trend picked up strength since the 1980s.

Supranational conservatives celebrated the comeback of the historic community of central European peoples as the beating heart of continental unity. New Right's works, instead, must also be understood, against the background of the then raging *Historikerstreit*, as national conservative contributions towards a 'normalisation' of German historical consciousness that would have enabled united Germany to take back its rightful place as the central power of the continent, without the complexes and limitations that had emasculated it since its defeat in the Second World War and the discovery of the Holocaust.<sup>15</sup> The intellectual and political influence of the New Right in conservative and radical right circles has grown steadily to this day, and one should therefore not be surprised to spot supporters of a revolutionary conservative notion of a new Empire with strong identitarian traits in the intellectual surroundings of such contemporary parties as the German

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<sup>12</sup> In political science, neo-medievalism had first been conceptualised in Hedley Bull's influential *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, (London, 1977), becoming an established concept by the 1990s. See, for example: O. Wæver, 'Imperial Metaphors: Emerging European Analogies to Pre-Nation-State Imperial Systems', in O. Tunander, P.K. Baev and V.I. Einagel (eds), *Geopolitics in Post-Wall Europe. Security, Territory and Identity*, (London, 1997), pp.59-93; J. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*, (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> H.D. Sander, *Der nationale Imperativ. Ideengänge und Werkstücke zur Wiederherstellung Deutschlands*, (Krefeld, 1980); B. Willms and P. Kleinewefers, *Erneuerung aus der Mitte. Prag, Wien, Berlin: diesseits von Ost und West*, (Herford, 1988); K. Weissmann, *Die Zeichen des Reiches. Symbole der Deutschen*, (Asendorf, 1989); R. Gehrke, 'Nationalkonservative Historiographie im geteilten Deutschland. Das Wallensteinbild bei Hellmut Diwald', in J. Bahlcke and C. Kampmann (eds), *Wallensteinbilder im Widerstreit*, (Vienna, 2011), pp.331-48.

<sup>14</sup> Mohler, *Konservative Revolution*.

<sup>15</sup> For an account of German revisionist historiography, see R.J.W. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow. West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past*, (New York, 1989).

*Alternative für Deutschland*, the Austrian *Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) or even the Italian *Lega*.<sup>16</sup>

The second development of importance since the 1960s was the attempt to reconnect with the actual experiences of order that had underpinned the historic Empire, trying to go beyond the anachronistic political deformations dominant until then. This was primarily accomplished through a flourishing revisionist historiography on the Old *Reich* that positively reappraised imperial history in its late medieval and especially early modern phases, often against the background of contemporary politics at the German and European level. This literature belongs to our problem insofar as it has historicised themes formulated by previous generations of conservative political thought on the Empire or found an echo in contemporary conservative thought. The first condition is certainly met in the case of Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin (1923-2014), the undisputed pioneer of this new historiographical trend.<sup>17</sup> Aretin was a Bavarian Catholic aristocrat descended from an old and self-conscious lineage of Imperial Barons. His father, Erwein Freiherr von Aretin, had been a prominent monarchist and anti-Nazi publicist theoretician of the supranational conservative *Reichsidee* in interwar Bavaria, while his *Doktorvater* in Munich was the Catholic conservative historian Franz Schnabel, who had shared a similar fascination for the *Reich* in his youth.<sup>18</sup> Aretin's research agenda on the Empire seems directly inspired by the supranational conservative tradition. The second condition is at least partly met by Peter Claus Hartmann (1950-), the historian who most openly held the experience of the Empire to be of relevance for contemporary European integration, and to whose work some supranational conservatives resorted to vindicate their long-

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<sup>16</sup> G. Costanzo, 'L'alternativa al centralismo: tornare al Sacro Romano Impero', Il Talebano, (14 February 2017), <https://iltalebano.com/2017/02/14/la-soluzione-al-centralismo-tornare-al-sacro-romano-impero/> (15 April 2021); F. Fratus, Federalismo e Imperium, Il Comunitarista, <https://www.fabriziofratus.it/il-comunitarista/primo-piano/politica-europea-1/99-federalismo-e-imperium.html> (15 April 2021).

<sup>17</sup> By Aretin, see: *Heiliges Römisches Reich; Das Alte Reich; Friedensgarantie und europäisches Gleichgewicht*.

<sup>18</sup> E. von Aretin, 'Das mißverstandene Reich', in Büchner, *Was ist das Reich?*, pp.78-82; F. Schnabel, 'Das Werden des Reiches', in F. Schnabel, *Abhandlungen und Vorträge, 1914-1965*, ed. H. Lutz (Freiburg, 1970), pp.117-33, an essay originally published in 1933. See also: E. von Aretin, *Krone und Ketten. Erinnerungen eines bayerischen Edelmannes*, (Munich, 1955); K. Breuning, *Die Vision des Reiches. Deutscher Katholizismus zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur (1929-1934)*, (Munich, 1969), pp.69-70.

held worldview.<sup>19</sup> The philosophy of symbolic forms that the German American scholar Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) developed from the 1940s through the mid-1980s, and which was in part posthumously published only in the 2000s, can also be interpreted as an attempt at recapturing the experiences of order that had made the medieval *Sacrum Imperium* possible, and whose decline Voegelin deemed partly responsible for what he saw as the 'gnostic' derailment of Western civilisation in the modern epoch.<sup>20</sup>

### **Supranational conservatism between 'literalisation' and regeneration**

Despite the Empire's enduring vitality as a supranational and federalistic ideal of German and European order in the early Federal Republic and beyond, by the mid-1950s signs had started to multiply that 'the times in which the whispering of "Sacrum imperium" as a model for European unification met with approval were coming to an end.'<sup>21</sup> Ever since a conservative 'public sphere'<sup>22</sup> had started to emerge in Germany's Western occupation zones, the *Reich* concept had appeared too compromised with the Nazis to be used as in the interwar period. The *Abendland* concept, with which it had been closely associated, replaced it to an extent in conservative discourse, but the 'neo-Carolingian' order they were both meant to evoke remained unchanged, and started to appear hopelessly out of touch with the new political, social and cultural realities.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in the 1950s Kroll could still write that '[a] renewal of the *Abendland* will [...] also be a renewal of the *Reich* and will never do without the imperial power as a form established by God, if it does not want to end entirely

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, B. Posselt, 'Deutschlands Geschichte, Europas Zukunft: Reich der Regionen', (9 December 2020), [http://www.bernd-posselt.de/article.php?efxf\\_artikel=1753](http://www.bernd-posselt.de/article.php?efxf_artikel=1753) (4 February 2024); P.C. Hartmann, *Das Heilige Römische Reich deutscher Nation in der Neuzeit 1486-1806*, (Stuttgart, 2005); P.C. Hartmann, *Kulturgeschichte des Heiligen Römischen Reiches 1648 bis 1806. Verfassung, Religion und Kultur*, (Vienna, 2001); Hartmann, 'Mitteleuropa der Regionen'.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Voegelin's most directly relevant contributions include: *Collected Works. Vol. 20: History of Political Ideas. The Middle Ages to Aquinas*, ed. P. von Sivers (Columbia, 1997); *Collected Works. Vol. 21: History of Political Ideas. The Later Middle Ages*, ed. D. Walsh (Columbia, 1998); *Collected Works. Vol. 17: Order and History. The Ecumenic Age*, ed. M. Franz (Columbia, 2000); 'World Empire and the Unity of Mankind', *International Affairs*, 38/2 (1962), pp.170-88.

<sup>21</sup> Conze, *Europa*, p.172.

<sup>22</sup> On the concept of 'public sphere', see J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. T. Bürger and L. Kert (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.111-16. Also see M.E. Reytier, 'Die deutschen Katholiken und der Gedanke der europäischen Einigung 1945-1949. Wende oder Kontinuität?', in H. Duchhardt (ed), *Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte*, (Munich, 2002), pp.163-84.

in ungodliness'. Similarly, in the periodical *Neues Abendland*, one could read high praise of the imperial monarchy as an 'idea of order according to which crown and sceptre come from the hand of God and are to be administered in the name and upon the mandate of Christ'. The republican form could only be a provisional solution for the 'terrible present time without an emperor', which was obviously an 'Interregnum', a term meant to evoke the medieval Empire's periods of turmoil.<sup>24</sup> The emblem of the *Abendländische Aktion*, founded in 1951 in Munich on the model of the interwar *Österreichische Aktion* and with a similar agenda, was the red cross of St George over a white background, in the golden centre of which stood the double-headed eagle. The explanation of its meaning read almost as a manifesto of supranational conservatism: '[w]e have chosen a symbol that is full of reference to our history and that seems to us to express what we want: the commitment to a German state identity that affirms the supranational legal order, because that is what the old, millennia-old symbol of the double-headed eagle means [...], encircled [...] by the cross, which expresses the conviction that politics loses its moral ground if it is not based on the moral law.'<sup>25</sup>

Such utterances might have still contained insights into the problem of supranational order, including the constitutive importance of an openness to transcendence and the need for an independent power to represent and guarantee internal diversities. However, these insights were by then connected to such an outmoded worldview and expressed in such anachronistic terms that they were bound to be corrupted by their supporters and lost to everyone else. The extent to which this was so could be seen in the concrete constitutional proposals of some supranational conservatives. Thus, Kroll rejected popular sovereignty and parliamentary democracy in favour of a mixed constitution based on natural law and an organic conception of the people represented not directly, as individuals, but based on their belonging to *Länder* and estates. The state president was to be elected for life by a conclave of about forty men and was expected to act very much like

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<sup>24</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.144-6.

<sup>25</sup> Georg Stadtmüller quoted in Conze, *Europa*, p.131.

an elected monarch, who would appoint and dismiss the government. He was in fact a modernised Kaiser on the Holy Roman or Austrian model, the 'guardian of justice' and 'representative of divine power'. All this went much beyond the organic corporatism widespread in Catholic conservative circles and drew directly on the old imperial constitution, containing 'elements of the medieval Reichsidee and religious-sacred prefigurations.'<sup>26</sup>

Equally revealing in the 1950s was the fascination of some supranational conservatives with the authoritarian constitutions of Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal, seen as positive examples of organic societies in which the Catholic Church retained a decisive social and political function. Spain could even take on a higher meaning by virtue of the country's historical links to the Habsburg dynasty and therefore to the Empire. It could offer 'the model of a Christian-universal state and world order, quashed by humanism, rationalism and liberalism', thus making a fundamental contribution to 'the rebirth of the Occident'.<sup>27</sup> The idea that only a Habsburg restoration could have enabled Austria and *Mitteleuropa* to retain their independence in the Cold War was also common in those circles, as the notion that only such a restoration could have protected them from the Nazis had been in the 1930s. In the most exalted formulations, the entire Europe should have been federated under a Habsburg emperor, an unlikely political phantasy to say the least.<sup>28</sup> To borrow from the technical language of Eric Voegelin, the Empire 'symbol' had become 'literalised' and therefore 'opaque' to the experiences of order it was meant to evoke. Ossified as the reactionary image of a theocratic authoritarianism, it obstructed the recovery and adaptation of the very experiences it had been meant to salvage and transmit, which were susceptible of modern re-articulation. Its many critics were therefore not unjustified when singling it out as a distortive conception in scholarly and public debates about the meaning of the *Reichsgedanke* for German and European history ever since the 1950s.

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<sup>26</sup> Uertz, 'Konservative Kulturkritik', pp.54-7.

<sup>27</sup> Conze, *Europa*, p.142; Uertz, 'Konservative Kulturkritik', p.57.

<sup>28</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.78-9.

Already in the 1930s, looking at the German scene from France, the leading Catholic intellectual Jacques Maritain had begun to warn against ‘the dangers of a univocal conception of the Christian temporal order, linking it to dead forms’ such as the medieval Empire. Its upholders sought ‘in the Holy Empire the unity of the political realm and of the Church’ and were therefore easily inclined ‘to say that political realities are themselves of divine and sacred nature’. They had a distorted conception of ‘the Kingdom of God, of which they want to find a realisation in time and in history.’<sup>29</sup> Early in the post-war period, the prominent left-wing Catholic publicist Walter Dirks had similarly criticised the ‘restorative’ character of the epoch Germans within the young Federal Republic seemed to be entering. He meant the tendency to revert to the party system and capitalist economic structure of the pre-Nazi Weimar period, especially on the Christian democratic and conservative side of the political spectrum represented by the CDU-CSU.<sup>30</sup> From an ideological standpoint, he saw this accompanied by a re-emergence of the Christian conservative vision centred on the Empire’s memory. ‘The *Reich*’, he wrote in 1969, ‘is a profoundly reactionary category’ and the archetype of all totalitarian states insofar as ‘we always understand by that a perennial state authority in a wide cultural area, including a “religion”, which as a cult or ethos connects, sanctifies and legitimate authority and culture’. As an empire that was at the same time a church, Hitler’s state had had ‘all the features of the classical *Reich*’. The same could be said of ‘the Russian-Bolshevik empire’ in its structure ‘as the unity of a wide-ranging rule legitimated by a political religion of salvation’, which truly made it into ‘the heir of Byzantium and of the Holy Moscow’. Dirks identified the ‘affinity’ and common ground offered by ‘the vision of the *Reich*’ as an important enabler of the widespread surrender of German Catholics to Nazism after 1933.<sup>31</sup> He also warned

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<sup>29</sup> J. Maritain, *Humanisme Integral*, (Paris, 1936), pp.109-11, 157-8.

<sup>30</sup> Uertz, ‘Konservative Kulturkritik’, pp.45-6.

<sup>31</sup> W. Dirks, ‘Preface’, in Breuning, *Vision des Reiches*, pp.7-9. In this sense, Dirks can be considered a precursor of Winkler, although his argument, unlike Winkler’s, was narrower and more defensible, not going as far as openly blaming the entire German *Sonderweg* on the Empire and the *Reichsideologie*. Another precursor was arguably Maritain, for whom ‘through the notion of the Holy Empire, [...] the political ideal of Germanic racism has today the chance of penetrating other layers of the German population [...] that remained attached to Christian culture.’ See Maritain, *Humanisme*, p.158.

that aspects of that vision were still alive in German Catholicism and, to an extent, had in fact been absorbed 'in the structure and ideology of the Federal Republic'. They were at work in contemporary ideas of Europe as an 'either "Christian" or at least "occidental culture (*Kultur*)"', and a longing for the *Reich* hid behind the fascination of many conservatives with Franco and Salazar.<sup>32</sup> Maritain similarly wrote that each type of fascism harked back to an idealised political form from the past, with the 'Holy Empire' being that of 'the fascism of the Catholic type', chiefly embodied by Portugal's regime.<sup>33</sup> This was also the overall message of Klaus Breuning's important study of the convergence between right wing Catholicism and Nazism in the last years of the Weimar Republic, which Dirks prefaced and which insisted on the theological and philosophical affinities between Catholic and Nazi *Reichsgedanken* in the interwar period.<sup>34</sup>

Elsewhere, Dirks faulted the *Abendland* and *Reich* concepts as a dangerous 'ideology' of reactionary closure that had no place in the modern world, rejected the positive legacy of Enlightened secularisation and had prevented the democratisation of both German Catholics and Protestants, contributing to the disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And yet, 'one of the driving forces of the Little Europe of the Six, of the reservations vis-a-vis England and Scandinavia, of the clear and open sympathy for Portugal, of the willingness to open up to Franco's Spain, obviously lies in this conception'. He even saw the infamous German notion of *Kultur* flowing from the same polluted source that had mixed worldliness and otherworldliness: 'in the notion of *Kultur* shaped in this way, common human reality and absolute ideality are brought together similarly to how, in the Middle Ages, the worldliness entrusted to the Emperor and the salvation entrusted to the Church were'.<sup>35</sup> Dirks' condemnation chimed with that of the Austrian historian Friedrich Heer, who understood the

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<sup>32</sup> Dirks, 'Preface', pp.7, 10-12.

<sup>33</sup> Maritain, *Humanisme*, pp.295-6.

<sup>34</sup> Breuning, *Die Vision*.

<sup>35</sup> W. Dirks, 'Das christliche Abendland. Sein Nachwirken in den Konfessionen der Bundesrepublik', K. von Bismarck and W. Dirks (eds), *Christlicher Glaube und Ideologie*, (Stuttgart, 1964), pp.118-22, 124. For a similar attack symptomatic of a change in atmosphere since the mid-1950s, see also: T. Büttner, 'Abendland-Ideologie und Neo-Karolingertum im Dienste der AdenauerCDU', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 7/8 (1959), pp.1803-24.

sacralised 'Holy Empire' as a 'total coercive order (*Zwingordnung*)' rooted 'in Charlemagne's attempt to organise the Occident as a total state', and which tried to assert itself through those 'worldly weapons' which the Frankish Emperor, 'the patriarch of the European total state', had used for the first time in their complete fullness: the 'persecution of those of different faiths, of the "unbelievers", of all those who do not want to submit to the religious and political service of the one power'. Had 'the realisation of this uniform formula based on German-Germanic, Carolingian-Ottonian political religiosity' succeeded, Europe would have been transformed 'into a tsarist-sultanic coercive state'.<sup>36</sup>

A broader reading of Heer's corpus reveals that his take on the Empire was rather nuanced. On the one hand, he condemned the totalitarian tendencies that he deemed inherent to the Carolingian conception of the *Sacrum Imperium*, modelled after Constantine's and Justinian's Eastern caesaropapism and conceiving Europe 'as the unity of an imperialist autocracy' under the single Emperor-God. On the other hand, he was fond of the Empire's cosmopolitan ethos and extolled the conception of Europe 'as a society of free peoples under the presidency of the Roman Pope and Emperor', promoted, in his view, by the likes of Otto III, Maximilian I and Charles V.<sup>37</sup> Be that as it may, Heer's condemnation of the *Sacrum Imperium* has been more widely retained than his extolment of the cosmopolitan Empire. Such damning assessments as Dirks' and Heer's must obviously also be understood against the background of the gradual opening of the Catholic Church to dialogue with the modern world, which culminated in the Vatican II Council of 1962-5. They were confirmed in the late works of the influential German-Polish Catholic theologian Erich Przywara (1889-1972), for whom the world was witnessing the end of Constantinian and Carolingian

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<sup>36</sup> F. Heer, *Aufgang Europas. Eine Studie zu den Zusammenhängen zwischen politischer Religiosität, Frömmigkeitsstil und dem Werden Europas im 12. Jahrhundert*, (Vienna, 1949), pp.619, 657-8; Heydte, *Geburtsstunde*, p.40 n.55.

<sup>37</sup> F. Heer, *The Intellectual History of Europe*, tr. J. Steinberg (London, 1966), pp.16-7, 29-30, 40, 68-9. Heer is here borrowing the words of the leading British Catholic historian Christopher Dawson in his *The Making of Europe. An Introduction to the History of European Unity*, (Washington, 2003). See also R. Faber, 'Third Reich and Third Europe: Stefan George's Imperial Mythologies in Context', in Ruehl and Lane, *A Poet's Reich*, pp.254-5.

Christendom, which had postulated an organic relationship between politics, religion and culture in the Occident.<sup>38</sup>

Ever since those disputes, a 'literalised', and therefore partly distorted, *Abendland* and *Reich* 'symbol' has continued to surface in important reactionary pockets of European conservatism, only to be countered by 'Enlightened' Catholics with the same recurrent arguments. At the beginning of the new millennium, it was present in the European imagery of conservatives sceptical towards what they saw as the EU's liberal progressive direction and searching for alternative conceptions of continental order, as in a raft of articles published by the Austria-based periodical *Neue Ordnung*. Support for a Christian confederation of European peoples in the tradition of the Old *Reich*, with Germany acting as 'the Israel of the New Alliance', could thus be expressed from a traditionalist Catholic perspective.<sup>39</sup> Or one could draw on the thinking of the 'last Ghibellines' Evola and Mordini to reconcile the customary clash between the *Reichsidee*'s Christian and pagan interpretations, centred on Charlemagne and Frederick II of Hohenstaufen respectively, reaching the conclusion that the decline of European culture could only be reversed by reembracing a militant Christianity.<sup>40</sup> Finally, one could commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the 1803 Imperial Recess qualifying it as an 'act of self-destruction [...] whose consequences have not yet been overcome', as from then on 'spiritual states were to be considered obsolete and the ordinary large state with its devastating effects on communities and culture began its dubious triumph in the area of the Imperium Romanum [...]. The ground for the further waves of destruction of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A. Spadaro, 'The Gaze of Magellan: Europe, Pope Francis and the Charlemagne Prize', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 105/419 (2016), p.338. See also E. Przywara, *Idee Europa*, (Nuremberg, 1956); E. Przywara, *Logos, Abendland, Reich, commercium*, (Düsseldorf, 1964); P.S. Peterson, 'Erich Przywara on Sieg-Katholizismus, Bolshevism, the Jews, Volk, Reich and the Analogia Entis in the 1920s and 1930s', *Journal for the History of Modern Theology*, 19/1 (2012), pp.104-40. More recently, a similar argument was developed, from a more conservative perspective, in C. Delsol, *La fin de la Chrétienté: l'inversion normative et le nouvel âge*, (Paris, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> T. Jentzsch, 'Das Heilige Römische Reich und die Deutschen', *Neue Ordnung* (IV, 2000), <http://www.neue-ordnung.at/index.php?id=561> (15 April 2021).

<sup>40</sup> M. Schwarz, 'Kaiser des Abendlandes', *Neue Ordnung* (IV, 2000), <http://www.neue-ordnung.at/index.php?id=562> (15 April 2021).

centuries had been carefully prepared'.<sup>41</sup> It is to similar instances of conservative Catholic integralism and Christian identity politics in the Europe of the 2010s that Antonio Spadaro, a Jesuit intellectual close to Pope Francis, seemed to be reacting when, approvingly quoting Heer and Przywara, he explained that for the Holy Father too 'Europe was born and raised in relationship and in contrast with the *sacrum imperium*, that has its own roots in the attempt by Charlemagne to organise the West as a totalitarian state.' 'Christendom' was indeed 'coming to an end', but this did not mean 'the decline of the West', implying on the contrary 'the possibility for the Church of resuming the evangelical pathways initiated by Francis of Assisi' and constantly impaired by its enmeshment with the worldly affairs of the Occident. Pope Francis, the recipient of the 2014 Charlemagne Prize, 'radically refutes the idea of the realisation of the Kingdom of God on earth, which was at the base of the Holy Roman Empire and all similar political and institutional forms'. The task of his Church should be definitely 'post-Carolingian': 'to be going out, going forth and encountering the wounded', as opposed to retrenching in a neo-Carolingian European fortress possessing a Christian 'identity' against an external 'enemy'.<sup>42</sup>

Alongside these phenomena of reactionary 'literalisation', which have made traditional supranational conservative conceptions into an intellectually and politically spent force, the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has also seen variegated attempts at recovering the concrete historical experiences of order associated with such conceptions, and at clarifying their relevance for the

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<sup>41</sup> M. Möller, 'Reichsdeputationshauptschluss 1803', *Neue Ordnung* (I, 2003), <http://www.neue-ordnung.at/index.php?id=441> (16 April 2021). Most recently, the *Reich* and *Abendland* concepts featured prominently in an edited volume with contributions by conservative authors from various European countries, see D. Engels (ed), *Europa Aeterna. Unsere Wurzeln. Unsere Zukunft*, (Neuruppin, 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Spadaro, 'The Gaze of Magellan', pp.338-40. Pope Benedict XVI, Francis' predecessor on the chair of Saint Peter, had a strikingly different take on Europe and the Empire, much closer to the supranational conservatism present in his Bavarian milieu. Developing this theme in detail would require more space than I can afford here. Suffice to say that the future Pope naturally felt closer to Vienna than to Berlin, got to know Otto von Habsburg in 1970s Bavaria, looked sympathetically at the latter's political endeavours and remained in friendly contact with him until his death. See G. Fejérdy, 'Authority in Critical Times – Last Farewell to Pope Benedict XVI', Otto von Habsburg Foundation, (1 May 2023), <https://habsburgottoalapitvany.hu/en/authority-in-critical-times-last-farewell-to-pope-benedict-xvi/> (6 February 2024). Moreover, Joseph Ratzinger's writings on Europe assigned a central place to Charlemagne and his Empire, see, for example, Benedict XVI, 'Europe and its Discontents', *First Things* (January 2006), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/01/europe-and-its-discontents> (6 February 2024).

ongoing processes of Europeanisation and globalisation. Overall, these efforts have resulted in a positive reappraisal of the Empire as an anti-totalitarian supranational order based on subsidiarity and protecting religious, cultural and ethnic diversities in a tolerant spirit of 'rooted cosmopolitanism'.<sup>43</sup> Politically, they have mainly centred around Otto von Habsburg's reinvention of the *PanEuropa* ideal as a modernised equivalent of previous supranational conservative conceptions. Its attractiveness, however, was arguably dampened even in conservative circles by what we might call 'the mortgage of the Habsburgs', its enduring association with the ambitions of the European imperial family *par excellence* to continue to play an active political role in the region of its ancestral rule and beyond. Historiographically, those efforts have allowed a reconnection with the experiences that made the early-modern, and especially the post-Westphalian, Empire into the epitome of a German and European order institutionalising 'unity in diversity' and serving as the centre of equipoise of a continental federacy. They have helped clarify the actual historical context whence the cosmopolitan and supranational conservative Empire ideal started to emerge in early modern Central Europe, freeing it from the neo-medieval incrustations that had weighed it down ever since the Romantics. Finally, philosophically, they have probed the deeper meaning of the *Sacrum Imperium* within the human quest for political order in history. These three dimensions, the political, the historiographical and the philosophical, were largely worked out in autonomy from each other, but must be brought together by the historian of ideas to truly make sense of the problem at hand.

#### *Europe's autonomy and its geographical axes*

Despite its early ecumenical appeal, Coudenhove's Paneuropean movement had been the expression of an aristocratic conservative ethos applied to the interwar problems of (Central)

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<sup>43</sup> For a recent formulation of the concept from a difference perspective and without reference to the Empire, see K.A. Appiah, 'Cosmopolitan patriots', *Critical Inquiry*, 23/3 (1997), pp.617-39.

European disunity.<sup>44</sup> After a period of eclipse, it re-emerged since the 1960s, not least through the injection of Gaullist themes and personnel within the Paneuropean Union, where French and German conservatives with 'Gaullist' leanings could meet and coordinate.<sup>45</sup> *Paneuropa* came to stand for a distinctively conservative Europeanism consisting of various elements, all in direct continuity with the supranational conservative tradition. The first was support for a stronger international role of united Europe in autonomy from the USA: the notion of Europe as a 'great power', as opposed to a mere 'battlefield' in the global confrontation between non-European powers.<sup>46</sup> This call for a Europe that would be united not only economically but also politically and militarily, asserting its independence while remaining part of the Western alliance, was of obviously Gaullist provenance.<sup>47</sup> However, it was also a continuation of supranational conservative reservations towards the alleged materialism of American culture, and an expression of the desire to preserve the old continent as a distinct oasis of high 'occidental' culture, within the broader Cold War West, resisting the mounting tide of 'Americanisation'.<sup>48</sup> A relevant dimension of Europe's great power projection was supposed to be the intensification of relations with other continents, chiefly Africa and Latin America.<sup>49</sup> At a time of often violent decolonisation, however, this could become a minefield. Thus, critics of the *Reich* and *Abendland* concepts as an ideology of reactionary closure readily argued that they were also directed 'against the non-Christian peoples of Africa and Asia', and symptomatic of a culture that understood itself as 'unique and of higher value, similar to the Greek world vis-à-vis the "barbarians"'.<sup>50</sup> The southwards, African thrust of *Paneuropa*, however, seemed more propelled by the traditional 'Roman' and Mediterranean

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<sup>44</sup> M. Gehler and A. Ziegerhofer, 'Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi und die Paneuropa-Bewegung', in Rill and Zellenberg, *Konservatismus in Österreich*, pp.291-312; Conze, *Coudenhove-Kalergi*.

<sup>45</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.197-206.

<sup>46</sup> O. von Habsburg, *Europa - Großmacht oder Schlachtfeld?*, (Vienna, 1963).

<sup>47</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.185-92; B. Posselt, 'Die Welt und wir: Europäischer Traum?', (August 2020), [http://www.bernd-posselt.de/article.php?efxf\\_artikel=1743](http://www.bernd-posselt.de/article.php?efxf_artikel=1743) (4 February 2024).

<sup>48</sup> A. Doering-Manteuffel, *Wie westlich sind die Deutschen? Amerikanisierung und Westernisierung im 20. Jahrhundert*, (Göttingen, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> O. von Habsburg, *Européens et Africains - L'entente nécessaire*, (Paris, 1963).

<sup>50</sup> Dirks, 'Das christliche Abendland', p.118.

dimension of supranational conservatism, creatively adapted to the contemporary problem of relations with the black continent in a post-colonial era. Habsburg expressed a great fondness for the 'Mediterranean idea', understood as the encounter between the peoples, cultures and faiths of the two shores. The Mediterranean Sea remained 'the hub of this continent, its geographic federator', so much so that every time the unity of Europe was attempted one could see 'politicians trying to bring it together around the basin, today like over a thousand years ago, when Charlemagne, proclaimed emperor, sent ambassadors to a Palaiologos widow to ask for her hand.' In the 1970s, this meant 'the almost inevitable extension of the continent to the southern shores of the Mediterranean', welcoming the then ongoing negotiations between Israel and the European Economic Community (EEC). It also meant suggesting to simultaneously open the door to an Arab state such as Jordan, Tunisia or Lebanon, so that Islam too could contribute its share to the construction of Europe, and the European idea could help pacify the Middle East.<sup>51</sup>

The importance of the Mediterranean, however, never overshadowed the two central geographical axes, which *PanEuropa* inherited from previous cosmopolitan and supranational conservatism since the Metternich era and which can be considered as its second core element: the Rheinland, which in its modern form also expressed the Franco-German relationship as the engine of European integration, and Central Europe. In the Cold War context, the latter could only mean the cultivation of middle European relations, not least by means of a proximity to the associations of *Vetriebene*<sup>52</sup>, the rejection of the Yalta settlement and a commitment to freeing the peoples that lay in oppression beyond the Iron Curtain in order to re-create historic central Europe, the 'core space (*Kernraum*) of Europe'.<sup>53</sup> This was all obviously contained, in a compact form, in *PanEuropa*, which after all indicated the need to unite the 'entire' Europe, and not only its Western half.

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<sup>51</sup> O. de Habsburg, G. de Chambure, *Naissance d'un continent. Une histoire de l'Europe dite par Otto de Habsbourg à Guy de Chambure*, (Paris, 1975), pp.90-7.

<sup>52</sup> Posselt remains to this day a vocal spokesperson for Sudeten Germans and their descendants, see, for example, B. Posselt, 'Sudetendeutsche als Motor', Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (2020), [https://www.hss.de/download/publications/AA\\_83\\_Flucht\\_Vertreibung\\_05.pdf](https://www.hss.de/download/publications/AA_83_Flucht_Vertreibung_05.pdf) (February 4, 2024).

<sup>53</sup> Conze, *Europa*, p.143.

Habsburg never ceased to thunder against 'the injustice of Yalta' and to fight for Central Europeans to be given a place at the table of European integration.<sup>54</sup> In 1991, after their 'liberation', he celebrated Europe's way back to its 'centre' (*Mitte*), long pronounced dead and now finally reborn, which he clearly meant not only in a geopolitical and historical, but also in a profounder spiritual sense – as a predisposition to supranational integration forged by a long experience of Christian universalist rule. He predicted that Berlin, Prague, Vienna and Budapest would be the continental metropolises of tomorrow.<sup>55</sup>

*Europe's Christian-Occidental foundations and religious ecumenism*

Indeed, the insistence on European unity's cultural foundations and on its Christian-Occidental roots, against a technocratic bureaucratisation of supranational integration, can be considered as a third core element of the revamped *PanEuropa*, in direct and conscious continuity to the supranational conservative *Reichsidee* ever since the Romantics. Already in the Adenauer era, part of the continued appeal of the *Abendland* conception in conservative and Christian democratic circles depended on the fact that European integration was increasingly developing along functionalist-economic lines. In this context, the concept appeared to fill a 'cultural gap' in the dominant European narrative, evoking a supranational political order that also stood for Christianity and anti-communism, was centred on a neo-Carolingian and neo-Burgundian vision of the Rhineland, but also advanced a subtle claim to historic *Mitteleuropa*, implying the illegitimacy of the German Democratic Republic and of the other communist regimes in the region.<sup>56</sup> As mentioned, in the changed climate of the 1960s, this had aroused growing indignation against the obscurantist notion that 'the success of the cultural and political integration of Europe depends on its inhabitants all becoming Christians again or at least regulating their common affairs according

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<sup>54</sup> Habsburg, *Reichsidee*, pp.84-90.

<sup>55</sup> Habsburg, *Zurück zur Mitte*, (Vienna, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Conze, *Europa*, pp.159-60.

to the principles of Christianity'.<sup>57</sup> Partly as a reaction to this accusation, but largely in continuity with the mainstream of cosmopolitan and supranational conservatism since the Empire's last decades, the Christian dimension of *PanEuropa* took on Erasmian, humanist traits, placing an emphasis on tolerance and ecumenism for the achievement of a new era of unity. According to Habsburg, tolerance was 'indispensable to the establishment of a community whose members have different traditions, often antagonistic systems of references, and a capital of so elaborate customs'. Summarising his creed for the future of the continent in 1975, he declared that it casted 'Europe and nationalisms, Europe and too close an observance of confessional bonds' as 'irreconcilable antinomies', while it held 'patriotism' and 'the Judeo-Christian heritage' to be 'an essential complement to the European idea': 'God is certainly not European, but without the Cross our historical weight would not reach that of Australia'. He believed that 'everyone can contribute [to the exalting endeavour of uniting Europe], regardless of his race, religion or degree of agnosticism [...]. Our only enemy [...] is the materialist gangrene; it is against it that we will build Europe'.<sup>58</sup> In the 1980s, he similarly rejected the, then already spreading, notion that the Muslim minorities of Germany and France could be a threat to the Christian identity of Europe, holding the latter to be 'inseparably linked' with 'tolerance and diversity, as well as with the spiritual foundation of action in public life'.<sup>59</sup> Decades later, confronted with the new threat of Islamist terrorism in Western countries, Posselt similarly refused any stigmatisation of Europe's Muslims as such. He pointed out that there were different Islams, and that even Charlemagne had sought a dialogue with the peaceful Abbasid Caliphate in Bagdad, while not hesitating to wage war against the aggressive Emirate of Cordoba.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Europe's nations and regions as pillars of supranational subsidiary federation*

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<sup>57</sup> Dirks, 'Das christliche Abendland', p.121.

<sup>58</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, pp.177-80; B. Posselt, 'Recht auf Blasphemie?', (February 2020), [http://www.bernd-posselt.de/article.php?efxf\\_artikel=1730](http://www.bernd-posselt.de/article.php?efxf_artikel=1730) (4 February 2024).

<sup>59</sup> Habsburg, *Reichsidee*, pp.247-49, 255.

<sup>60</sup> B. Posselt, *Ist Religion gefährlich? Wahrheit und Terrorismus*, (Augsburg, 2007), pp.43-4.

The search for a culturally grounded European unity respectful of religious, ethnic and historical diversities also resulted early on in what is arguably a fourth core element of the *PanEuropa* ideal: the notion of a 'Europe of fatherlands' emphasising the role of the continent's historic nations and regions as pillars of supranational unity, in a way strangely reminiscent of some *Reichspublizisten*'s insistence on the role of the Imperial estates as 'pillars' of the *Reich*, counterbalancing the power of the *Kaiser*. A 1960 CEDI document proclaimed support for a 'political community of Europe based on the cooperation of the historically grown European nations, which does not obliterate their individuality, but enables action as a political unit in the decisive questions of common foreign policy, defence and the economy'.<sup>61</sup> In the post-Second World War decades, Coudenhove himself had come to oppose the progressive European federalism of Altiero Spinelli's Union of European Federalists in the name of a 'Carolingian Union' that respected the national states, while incorporating them in a common continental order.<sup>62</sup> He became close to French Gaullism and their confederal vision of Europe, which, however, was filtrated through the memory of Bourbon and Napoleonic claims to the Carolingian heritage. As such, it was interpreted as a union of states clustered around France, the benign imperial hegemon, as opposed to the supranational commonwealth dear to Central European conservatives.

In the 1970s, Habsburg clarified that the nascent European polity would be the expression of a 'law of repetition [...] of federative behaviours' on the continent, which had had its highest previous examples in the experience of Burgundy, of Charles V's rule and later of the Danubian Monarchy, and was now reawakening in the Council of Europe and the EEC.<sup>63</sup> It was to be concretely institutionalised as a supranational legal order coupled with the rigorous respect of the principles of 'decentralisation' and 'local autonomy', the protection of both dimensions, diversity as well as

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<sup>61</sup> Conze, *Europa*, p.187.

<sup>62</sup> Conze, *Coudenhove*, p.70.

<sup>63</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, pp.85 89-90.

unity, being entrusted to a 'federator'.<sup>64</sup> The federator was no longer conceived in dynastic terms, but the function it performed was deemed to be an inevitably 'imperial' one, necessitated by the nature of supranational order itself and brought home through a characteristic reflection about the relationship between royal-national and imperial-supranational power: 'between the two functions, the royal and the imperial, there is a fundamental difference; while the king is a territorial sovereign, the emperor is a legal sovereign[,] [...] [his] judgment has, fundamentally, the value of arbitration; far from commanding a specific nation, the emperor arbitrates the disputes between territorial sovereigns, and therefore commands each monarch reigning in his respective realm [...]; its territorial sovereignty is mediated by the royal presence which, for its part, cannot extend to more than one nation at a time [...]. [...] The European confederation too [...] will be made on the basis of a supranational authority, therefore imperial in its content if not in its form.'<sup>65</sup> The concepts of imperial immediacy and territorial mediation came directly from the Empire's legal tradition, and served to evoke an order qualitatively different from that of the modern state, be it federal or not, insofar as it constitutionally acted as a protector of the national and local spheres of autonomy and a guardian of diversity, with one overarching goal in mind: 'to preserve the cultural particularities of which we are the heirs, so that the world will not be impoverished by their disappearance [and] [...] none of the peoples of this continent will be able to boast of any precedence over the others.'<sup>66</sup> The same concepts have often been expressed by his associate Posselt, for which too the contemporary 'European idea [...] can be based in many ways on the Holy Roman Empire', 'a supranational arbiter' and 'federal legal system that transcended nations'.<sup>67</sup>

According to Habsburg, in the dual function of the federator, 'the old dream of independence through interdependence' was realised, a dream best embodied by Emperor Charles V, the

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<sup>64</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, pp.17, 81-159.

<sup>65</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, pp.23-4.

<sup>66</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, p.179.

<sup>67</sup> Posselt, *Reich der Regionen*.

ancestor with whom he clearly identified the most, and which he saw as the best model to build a united Europe.<sup>68</sup> Charles embodied the archetype of a supranational power for which ‘harmony between his subjects was always preferable to his own hegemony over them; and no one better than him has succeeded in maintaining an equal balance between all the peoples over which he reigned [...] and in developing at the same time their particularisms, their respective autonomies, this vast profusion of distinctive features’ in which Habsburg, like all supranational conservatives before him, clearly delighted.<sup>69</sup> The ‘fundamental maxim’ followed by Charles V to achieve this result, he explained, was none other than a strict principle of subsidiarity, ‘which obliges us to deny a large entity the right of fulfilling a function for which a small one suffices’. This derived from what he saw as the central idea of a just political order: ‘that man is the repository of all rights; [...] and that the pyramid of power only builds itself correctly and with real chances of success in one direction, that which goes from the base to the top’.<sup>70</sup> This take on the Empire as an ideal framework nurturing diversity and cultural flourishing, and one from which the European Union (EU) could usefully learn, is strikingly similar to that of Hartmann. Especially after 1648, the historian argued, ‘the loose, confederal structure of this confessionally mixed, multi-ethnic, politically fragmented imperial complex guaranteed [...] an exceptional cultural diversity’.<sup>71</sup> ‘It represented a kind of Central Europe of the regions’ and could ‘provide guidance’ to build ‘a Europe of the regions that overcomes nationalism, maintains collective peace and legal certainty, and vastly strengthens the functions of regional authorities based on the principle of subsidiarity’. No better model was available to pursue ‘unity in the greatest possible diversity and an administration that is very close to citizens and extensively considers the various regional interests, traditions, differences and necessities’.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, p.90.

<sup>69</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, pp.107-8.

<sup>70</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, p.108-9. See also O. von Habsburg, *Charles Quint*, (Paris, 1968).

<sup>71</sup> Hartmann, *Kulturgeschichte*, p.15.

<sup>72</sup> Hartmann, ‘Mitteleuropa der Regionen’, p.21.

While making no comparable claim to contemporary political relevance, decades earlier Aretin had of course pioneered this new understanding of the imperial constitution in its last period as a 'legal order' that fulfilled a 'great European function' and whose primary purpose was 'guaranteeing the life of such a politically diverse commonwealth under a single roof and ensuring that everyone's rights were maintained'.<sup>73</sup> He had also recognised that nationalist historiography had been unable to offer a 'fair assessment' of the Empire, either dismissing it in favour of the national state or interpreting it 'in terms of a hegemony over Europe' and 'an ideal of the power state [...] that was no less foreign to the *Reich* concept of the Middle Ages than to the legal order of modern imperial history.'<sup>74</sup>

#### *Openness to transcendence and anti-totalitarianism*

This understanding of the Holy Roman *Reichsidee* and of its contemporary meaning – as a supranational subsidiary federation – for European integration is clearly a far cry from the idea of Charlemagne's Empire as the archetypal totalitarian collectivism. In a direct rebuke to Heer's claim to that effect, von der Heydte had in fact clarified early on that 'the essence of the "*Reich*" has seldom been so misunderstood. "*Reich*" and "total state" are mutually exclusive terms: the "*Reich*" is never, while the "total state" is always, the "ultimate value"; the independence of its members belongs to the essence of the "*Reich*"; the "*Reich*" succumbed – not only as a historical phenomenon, but also as an idea – precisely when the Hohenstaufen emperors and the popes similarly tried to turn it into a "universal state"'.<sup>75</sup> The real *Reich* is never the ultimate value, von der Heydte implied, because, as the archetypal Christian polity in history, it institutionalises the Christian openness to and tension towards transcendence – where only ultimate value lies – and thus structurally limits the reach and value of the political down here. It is arguably in Eric Voegelin's

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<sup>73</sup> Aretin, *Heiliges Römisches Reich*, vol.1, pp.4-5.

<sup>74</sup> Aretin, *Heiliges Römisches Reich*, vol.1, p.V.

<sup>75</sup> Heydte, *Geburtsstunde*, p.40 n.55.

philosophy that this understanding of the Empire's significance as an anti-totalitarian political order achieved its most refined formulation.

The ramifications of the problem in the impressive corpus of the German American philosopher are too complex to be comprehensively traced here. A summary teasing out the main issues will have to suffice. At the core of Voegelin's grand scholarly project there was a quest for the causes of modern totalitarian political disorder. This took the form of a sweeping inquiry into the principal types of order experienced throughout human history, motivated by the famous insight that '[t]he order of history emerges from the history of order'.<sup>76</sup> Voegelin told the story of a move from the 'compact symbolisations' of order typical of Ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires, which he called 'cosmological', to the more 'differentiated' ones achieved by Israel, through revelation, and Hellas, through philosophy. The latter two more clearly differentiated between the immanent and the transcendent pole of human consciousness and grasped that the individual soul's openness to transcendence was the ultimate source of moral and political order in history.<sup>77</sup> During the subsequent 'ecumenic' age of imperial dislocation, extending roughly from Alexander the Great to the fall of the Western Roman Empire, those insights about human nature and the nature of political order were compounded by the new discovery of universality: '[t]hrough the hard reality of empire, there begins to shine forth, as the subject of history, a universal mankind under God.'<sup>78</sup> They also received their most refined formulation in the Christian synthesis, particularly in St Paul's 'compromises with the world' that, combined with Stoic natural law, promised to overcome the problem of mankind's civilisational divisions and created an 'imperial Christianity' potentially capable of endless extension.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> E. Voegelin, *Collected Works. Vol. 14: Order and history. Israel and Revelation*, ed. M.P. Hogan (Columbia, 2001), p.19.

<sup>77</sup> E. Voegelin, *World of the Polis*; E. Voegelin, *Collected Works. Vol. 16: Order and history. Plato and Aristotle*, ed. D. Germino (Columbia, 2000).

<sup>78</sup> Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age*, p.147.

<sup>79</sup> J.C. Herndon, *Eric Voegelin and the Problem of Christian Political Order*, (Columbia, 2007).

These complex developments culminated in the crucial evocation of the medieval *Sacrum Imperium*, a most sophisticated, though also most fragile, attempt at institutionalising and protecting the discovery of the constitutive importance of the experience of transcendence for humanity, and therefore for political order.<sup>80</sup> In his openness to transcendence, man experiences his membership in a ‘universal mankind under God’, for which he constantly seeks appropriate forms of political ‘symbolisation’ and organisation. In his condition as a fallen and finite creature, however, man only exists in specific cultural, geographical and historical circumstances that also constitute him, and through which only he can experience whatever imperfect forms of universality are attainable in history. This surely must have made thinkable for the first time what von der Heydte referred to as ‘the idea of an organically structured global community which is not formed directly from the single individuals as citizens of the world, but which – as *communitas communitatum* – is organically composed of a number of ruling associations’, all endowed with intrinsic worthiness and autonomous existence, but all participating in the ultimate unity of mankind as God’s children. This must have also showed the way ‘from a world state to a community of states, from world law to international law’.<sup>81</sup> The entirely novel idea of an empire that really was a Christian community of nations, nurturing and raising them through their individual participation in a common spiritual substance, was born.

For Voegelin, then, the *Sacrum Imperium* evoked a political order that remained open to transcendence while making the necessary compromises with the world, acknowledging the human ‘tension of existence’ between particularism and universality. The concrete form it took in the Middle Ages was strictly time-bound, and it would be naïve to be captivated by its external trappings and attempt to reproduce them, as many supranational conservatives did. The basic experiences of order motivating it, however, were seen as universally human ones, so much so

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<sup>80</sup> J. von Heyking, ‘Post-9/11 Evocations of Empire in Light of Eric Voegelin’s Political Science’, in D. Tabachnick and T. Koivukoski (eds), *Enduring Empire. Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, (Toronto, 2009), pp.192-7.

<sup>81</sup> Heyde, *Geburtsstunde*, p.16.

that 'for Voegelin, [...] the only hope is to move away from the pathologies of the modern and try to re-establish, as far as is possible, the [balance] that the *sacrum imperium*, at its best, offered.'<sup>82</sup> This subtle, and therefore inevitably precarious, balance was constantly threatened on two fronts: by spiritual purists like the followers of Joachim of Fiore and Francis of Assisi, who asserted the primacy of the spiritual dimension and held temporal and spiritual authorities accountable to a standard of moral perfection unattainable amidst the vicissitudes of historical existence; and by established authorities themselves – be they temporal, such as Emperor Frederick II, or spiritual, such as Pope Boniface VIII – who attempted to dogmatically invest their rule with an ultimacy and perfection it could not possess under the *Sacrum Imperium*, an order constitutively 'in tension' and perpetually unfulfilled, because no rightly conceived political order in history could claim to resolve the 'tension of existence'. Thus, the Empire, like Gothic cathedrals in their tension towards eternity, was structurally unfinished: it maintained connections and negotiated balances among autonomous entities endowed with own freedom and value, it did not settle their differences and consolidate them into a single entity once and for all.

Interestingly, Voegelin detected in St Francis' theology the conception of an 'intramundane Christ', a distorted notion of 'immanentist' social critique bent on pursuing the impossible realisation of God's Kingdom on earth through social reform, instead of recognising the full consequences of transcendence. He detected the same distorted immanentism in Frederick II's sacralised emperorship, which similarly presents itself as a notion of salvation through political action. From this perspective, Spadaro's enthusiasm for St Francis and his condemnation of the Empire as such appear misguided. On the contrary, the authentic *Sacrum Imperium* ideal stands out as the fragile paradigm of the 'existential openness' that orders human existence in history, a 'symbol' of the 'open society' and an antidote to the 'existential closure' to transcendent reality that feeds the

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<sup>82</sup> N. Rengger, 'Between Transcendence and Necessity: Eric Voegelin, Martin Wight and the Crisis of Modern International Relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22/2 (2019), p.340.

'gnostic' claim to ultimacy and earthly fulfilment, motivating modern totalitarianism.<sup>83</sup> Unsurprisingly, unlike St Francis and Frederick II, St Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa were very much to Voegelin's liking, as they both sought to maintain a balance between 'an affirmation of particular nations [...] and an affirmation of a mystical human community'. This balance was captured by the former's conception of 'the mystical body of Christ' and by the latter's concept of *concordantia*, which interwar supranational conservatives had already rediscovered as a central aspect of the imperial order.<sup>84</sup>

The decline of the *Sacrum Imperium* ushered in the era of self-enclosed 'gnostic' national states of the Hobbesian type, and thus the modern schizophrenic approach to politics and international relations, with actors oscillating between the search for an unattainable moral perfection and a brutal *Realpolitik*. The former manifested itself, for example, in the utopianism of Woodrow Wilson's national self-determined sovereignty and his moralising approach to international affairs, which had destabilised Central Europe beyond repair. The latter erupted in the even more disruptive brutality of fascist aggressions. An insightful recent essay on the topic, then, correctly summarises that, for Voegelin, '[t]he *problem* of order in the modern world [...] represented the failed attempts to maintain the balance inherent in the *sacrum imperium* and the rise of ideologies and movements – immanentist and Gnostic – that seek to replace that balance with a focus either on excessive spiritual reform [...] or of ideologies that emphasise the material or the will to power (Marxism, Fascism).'<sup>85</sup>

Although Voegelin, in keeping with traditional historiography, located the crisis of the *Sacrum Imperium* around the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and attributed its final un hinge to the sectarian energies unleashed by Luther's and Calvin's 'Great Reformation', he also emphasised that the

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<sup>83</sup> Henri Bergson's, as opposed to Karl Popper's, notion of the 'Open Society'. See Germino, *Open Society*, pp.71, 140-1.

<sup>84</sup> Heyking, 'Post-9/11 Evocations', pp.195-7. Also see p.217 above.

<sup>85</sup> Rengger, 'Between transcendence and necessity', p.334.

'immanentist crisis' to which it had succumbed intensified in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was also aware that the imperial legacy overshadowed the problem of European order into the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in a 1941 essay on Nazi geostrategy, he had remarked that '[t]he German centre of Europe is the old empire core, a residue, one might say, burdened with the imperial tradition [...]. Around this empire core lies, then, the zone of the old national states that separated gradually from the empire';<sup>86</sup> and he clearly believed the historical events of the 'empire core' to have furnished the basis of Western ideological history.<sup>87</sup> His philosophy, then, helps us see more clearly how the supranational conservative Empire also signified a refusal of both a crude realism and a utopian idealism. Instead, it prompted adherence to what Voegelin and his pupil Dante Germino named 'spiritual realism', another outgrowth of an existential attitude that accepts the need for 'balance' and 'tension', and does not succumb to the temptation of seeking a final solution to problems that can have no such solution in history.<sup>88</sup> Thus Foerster had written, with reference to Bismarck, that 'the appalling logic of his principle "Might before right"' was contrary to a true realism, which should factor in both man's highest and lowest qualities, not only the lowest.<sup>89</sup> And Habsburg remarked, commenting on the complex relationship between power and ethics, that he found 'a continuous stay in the air of the peaks as unhealthy as a confinement to the sewers', and that 'even Charlemagne, who dreamed of unifying the Occident under the banner of Christ, played one prince against another'. However, the conflict between morality and politics, inevitable at the tactical level, could possibly be solved at the strategic level, where the imperial federator mostly moved.<sup>90</sup>

The *Reich* 'symbol', then, expressed the peculiar conditions of politics in the fallen world of historical reality open to the experience of transcendence: in this world, ethics and power could never completely coincide, but neither could they be completely divorced, lest one should fall into

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<sup>86</sup> E. Voegelin, 'Some Problems of German Hegemony', *The Journal of Politics*, 3/2 (1941), p.155.

<sup>87</sup> Heyking, 'Post-9/11 Evocations', p.193.

<sup>88</sup> Germino, *Open Society*, pp.178-80.

<sup>89</sup> Foerster, *Europe*, p.24.

<sup>90</sup> Habsburg, *Naissance*, pp.173-4.

demonic forms of fascist *Realpolitik*; moreover, in this world, the unity of mankind as a universal community of the spirit could never be fully organised in the political realm, but had to at least be recognised as the grandiose horizon beyond all particularisms, diversities and antagonisms. This constant struggle to balance power and ethics/law, diversity and unity, particularity and universality, ultimately grounded in the tension of existence with its openness to transcendence, largely accounts for the conceptual building blocks of supranational conservative thought that we have elucidated across two centuries.

### **The Empire in the thought of the 'New Rights'**

While the supranational conservative *Reichsidee* displayed some vitality in the post-war German-speaking world, the national and revolutionary conservative one suffered a more complete retreat, becoming almost unutterable. Its affinity with fascism had often gone too far beyond a mere tactical alignment, while the Nazi *Reich's* crushing defeat, occupation and dismemberment rendered its programme of national assertion and continental hegemony politically obsolete and morally bankrupt. One should not hastily conclude, however, that the national conservative Empire ideal's long and influential history had come to an end in Germany and Europe at large.

#### *Between nation and ethnos*

In this period, the tension between nation and empire that had manifested itself with growing intensity in post-Wilhelmine national conservatism was decidedly solved in favour of empire by some New Right authors. This was already evident in the post-war works of the writer and former leading member of the French Waffen SS Marc Augier (1908-1990), better known by his pen name Saint-Loup and influential in some New Right circles. Like many former Waffen SS foreign volunteers, he had sought to rehabilitate himself by claiming that he had contributed to a European crusade against Bolshevism. By the last years of the war, he had argued, Nazism 'was no longer German in the narrow and nationalist meaning of the term. It was European', and plans were being

made for Europe's re-organisation as a supranational empire of 'patries charnelles' that no longer coincided with the traditional nations of the continent. In the post-war Italian and French far-right, it was not usual for all this to crystallise in the utopia of a new European or, more typically, Eurasian empire uniting all the ethnicities of white Indo-European civilisation. Sympathy for a variety of ethnic regionalist movements, such as the Breton, Flemish, Alsatian, Norman or Corsican one, could naturally find its place in this vision.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, de Benoist, the leading New Right ideologist, argued that in Europe 'two great models of *polity*, of political unity, were elaborated, developed and clashed': the empire and the nation. The former was an ancient political form having the Holy Roman Empire as its archetype, whose history he retraced, broadly following national conservative historiographical conventions. The latter, on the contrary, was a modern political form fully developed only after the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as a consequence of the French revolution, and driven by centralising absolutism and the rise of the bourgeoisie. While the nation was a territorial form of unity, the empire was a spiritual one. Its political order was determined by a juridical or spiritual idea, and 'the emperor holds power by embodying something that goes beyond simple possession...he rules over sovereigns, not over territories, and represents a power transcending the community he governs'. De Benoist also customarily distinguished between empire and imperialism, which developed out of the decay of an empire's spiritual content, turning it into a mere system of domination, as in the case of the Napoleonic Empire, Hitler's Third *Reich*, the French and British colonial empires or even modern American and Soviet imperialism. Moreover, while the nation pursued a mechanical centralisation and cultural homogenisation that ultimately left atomised individuals impotently facing state and market alone, the empire 'embraces various cultures', trying to reconcile the particular and the universal based on autonomy and the respect for diversity: 'the medieval *Reich*, a supra-national institution (because *animated* by a principle beyond the political order), was fundamentally pluralist.

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<sup>91</sup> François, 'Les paganismes', pp.393-4.

It allowed people to live their own lives according to their own law. In modern language, it was characterized by a marked “federalism” particularly able to respect minorities.’ De Benoist went as far as defining the nation as ‘an *anti-empire*’, wrote that ‘the empire is never a closed totality’ and celebrated Johannes Althusius as ‘the first federalist’.<sup>92</sup> A cursory examination of these utterances might even yield the – as we will see, mistaken – impression that the traditional gulf with supranational conservatism had been filled.

New Right speculations on empire were meant to be directly relevant for contemporary politics. The 1991 annual conference of the European New Right, organised by the GRECE in Paris, was devoted to the topic ‘Nation and Empire’. Participants attacked the nation state and supported a European political federalism fashioned on the imperial model as a response to new international and domestic developments such as the end of the Cold War, economic globalisation, the ongoing political transformation of Eastern Europe and the growth of regionalist and secessionist movements across the continent. The medieval Empire took centre stage as the model of a multination federation.<sup>93</sup> Elsewhere, de Benoist rhetorically asked: ‘is it not this idea of empire which underlies all the debates currently surrounding the construction of Europe?’. He went on to explain that the nation state had run its course, challenged from above, by global markets and international bureaucracies, and from below, by new forms of regionalism and intermediate bodies. Europe needed a unity of political decision-making, but to preserve its richness and diversity it could achieve it neither on the ‘Jacobin model’ nor based on ‘the economic supra-nationality dreamt by Brussels technocrats’. It could only build itself as a federal entity that would be the vehicle for an idea, i.e. on ‘an *imperial* model’, solving the problems of regional cultures and ethnic minorities through the idea of autonomy, while reviving local democracy and participation. ‘Imperial principle above, direct democracy below: this is what would renew an old tradition!’ and empower Europe to

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<sup>92</sup> A. de Benoist, ‘The Idea of Empire’, *Telos*, 98-99 (1993), pp.81-98; A. de Benoist, ‘The First Federalist: Johannes Althusius’, *Telos*, 118 (2000), pp.25-58.

<sup>93</sup> A. Tonini, ‘The European New Right: from Nation to Empire and Federalism’, *Telos*, 126 (2003), pp.101-12.

reject the 'deculturalizing and depersonalizing' trends of American imperialism.<sup>94</sup> The eminent Italian medievalist Franco Cardini, who had been close to Attilio Mordini in his youth and was then associated with the New Right, endorsed a similar agenda in a 1998 book on Charlemagne as 'a father of the European fatherland', stressing how the Emperor had managed to unify Europe based on a unity in diversity that allowed the various European languages and cultures to flourish and coexist under common institutions. His legacy could be of great help for contemporary Europeans to design their own continental institutions.<sup>95</sup> In 2011 Cardini, unlike de Benoist a traditionalist Catholic, even declared proudly that 'as a European, on July 16 2011 I was, anonymous, in the mass of hundreds of thousands of anonymous European citizens who rushed to Vienna to pay their last respects to the remains of Otto von Habsburg, the last heir to the imperial throne [*sic*] Austria: in the name of that old Europe that was destroyed in 1918 by the unjust Versailles peace talks, which gave way to the nationalist hysteria and mad capitalist selfishness and ferocity.'<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, while in France and Italy New Right thinking on empire mostly took this ethnocentric but anti-nationalist turn, its later German offshoot has displayed a much more traditional concern for balancing nation and empire as the *Reich's* two indispensable poles. Its specific circumstances can explain why, when re-appropriating the old revolutionary conservative *Reichsidee*, the German New Right refused to go as far as others in its repudiation of nationalism. At the core of the movement's agenda there was precisely the desire to free the German nation from the damning captivity to which it had allegedly been sentenced by its vanquishers. The 'normalisation' of Germany – the country's ability to exorcise the demons of its past, rediscovering itself as a confident national state – was at stake. And what had been the German normal throughout history if not the *Reich's* vision? Moreover, as discussed, in the German context, the

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<sup>94</sup> Benoist, 'Idea of Empire', pp.94, 97.

<sup>95</sup> F. Cardini, *Carlomagno. Un padre della patria europea*, (Milan, 1998).

<sup>96</sup> 'New synthesis for Europe. Interview with Franco Cardini' (2017), [http://www.geocities.ws/cisalpini/valisa\\_allegati/francoCardini.htm](http://www.geocities.ws/cisalpini/valisa_allegati/francoCardini.htm) (15 April 2021).

supranational conservative *Reichsidee* was still active in important pockets of conservatism within the CSU and the Paneuropean Union, and it had supported the national and European course of the Federal Republic as the Germans' true 'normalisation', a return to their authentic self after the follies of nationalism. As such, it was obviously unserviceable for the goals of the German New Right. No doubt, the resort to the conservative revolution's imperial nationalism, which had been predicated on an exalted notion of the German nation's exceptional destiny, as a tool for 'normalising' the German nation, contained a paradox. It has remained happily hidden to its expounders.

Thus, in 1980 the right-wing historian Hans-Dietrich Sander openly advocated a Fourth *Reich* in the tradition of revolutionary conservative nationalism, presenting it as a 'restoration of Germany'. The Germans had to finally 'reawaken the slumbering Furor teutonicus' and pursue the 'national imperative' of destroying the USA–Soviet world order, a necessary step towards solving the 'German question', long 'suppressed' by the West German elites. In 1990, he reacted to developments in Eastern Europe by advocating the restoration of Germany's 1937 borders and a new *Reich* constitution that would reflect the German 'national spirit' and promote a 'policy of preserving German interests alone', accelerating 'the death of a United Europe'. In the same year, he founded his journal *Staatsbriefe*, named after what the medievalist Wolfram von den Steinen, a prominent member of the interwar George Circle, had referred to as the 'letters of state' of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, ever the tutelary deity of national conservatives. Through it, for the next decade or so, Sander set out to revive the Ghibelline 'idea of the *Reich*'. Unsurprisingly, he drew on the 19<sup>th</sup> century historiography of Gustav Droysen and was heavily influenced by the imperial nationalism of the George Circle in its latest phase. He argued that the Hohenstaufen idea of the German *Reich* had been corrupted when the Hohenzollerns, and later the Nazis, replaced its universal mission as an 'ordering power' (*Ordnungsmacht*) with a purely territorial one. Sander saw the disappearance of the *Reichsidee* after 1945 'for the first time in a millennium' and the Allies'

're-education' as the cause of a 'mass psychosis' for the Germans. This trauma had now to be overcome by rediscovering the *Reich's* original vision, reacquainting West Germans with its virtues and 'reclaiming' and 'recolonising' the 'German East': 'the Germans need the *Reich*. Europe needs the *Reich*. The world needs the *Reich*', he proclaimed.<sup>97</sup>

Aiming for a similar re-awakening of the *Reich* spirit in Germany, in 1988 the political scientist Bernhard Willms advocated a 'renewal from the centre' of the continent that would overcome the division of Germany and Europe based on a 'conception of Mitteleuropa as a self-determining empire of nations' antithetical to the Federal Republic's policy of *Westbindung*. He envisaged a modernised central European *Reich* encompassing BRD, DDR, Austria and Czechoslovakia as its nucleus, and organised into decentralised networks thanks to modern technologies, with ministries scattered throughout the three old imperial cities of Prague, Vienna and Berlin. The *Reichsidee* included 'the notion of a self-asserting unity in an appreciative multitude of peoples, states, nations, and even social systems' and, most of all, that of 'a comprehensive peace' meant not as 'global peace' and 'humanitarian dreams', but as rooted 'in concrete, large-scale (*großräumig*) territoriality'. This imperial idea, which was very much part of Central Europe's legacy, could offer 'an independent prospect for a Europe between the superpowers.'<sup>98</sup> The nationalist historian Helmut Diwald too placed his hopes for the Germans' future in a renewal of the *Reichsgedanken*. He saw the 919 'creation of the *Reich*' as the beginning of a tradition of national self-determination that now had to be reasserted: '[t]hat was a thousand years ago, but its implications are very much worth considering today.'<sup>99</sup>

The revival of the national conservative *Reichsidee* prompted by the German New Right as an alternative to globalisation, americanisation and Europeanisation was also detectable within the Austrian radical right. Thus, Andreas Mölzer, a former Styrian journalist and FPÖ politician, who

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<sup>97</sup> Rosenfeld, *Fourth Reich*, pp.256-9; Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.494-7.

<sup>98</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, pp.493-4.

<sup>99</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.498. The date is noticeable for excluding the Carolingians as insufficiently German.

also served as a Member of the European Parliament until the mid-2010s, published extensively on the subject of Austro-German relations and advocated 'a reconstruction' of *Mitteleuropa* on the Empire's model, which, in the early 1990s, he interpreted in the characteristic way of Austrian Pan-Germans à la Srbik: 'even though the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation was a religiously legitimised, multinational structure of legal protection, whose *Reichsidee* always referred to the whole Christian Occident and was never narrowly national, it remains a fact that the Germans played the major role in it, quantitatively, but also as the shaping and structuring element of the polity.' A central European confederation under the influence of the German economy and language, including Austria, would inevitably reform after the fall of communist regimes and, while probably never acquiring a legal recognition, it would constitute 'the authentic heir to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation as it existed until 1806.'<sup>100</sup>

A longing for the *Reich* as a manifestation of revolutionary conservative identitarianism is also palpable in the right-wing Austria-based periodical *Neue Ordnung*. In 2003-4, the magazine asked several younger German-speaking authors to pronounce on the *Reichsidee*'s contemporary relevance, which offered yet another occasion to redeploy old ideas revamped by the New Right. Thus, one contributor presented the revolutionary conservative *Reichsidee* as 'a concept for Europe's future'. He specified that the Germans, as the *Reichsvolk*, had to regain their lost authority to 'lead the imperial associates (*Reichsgenossen*) in the periphery': 'regaining a sovereign national state is the basic requirement of and not the anthesis to realising the *Reichsidee*. The (German) *Reich* is therefore a national state and a supranational great space (*Großraum*) at the same time.' Germany had to re-organise the European continent as a *Reich* in the schmittian sense: a space from which the intervention of external powers was barred. This obviously required 'the global overthrow of the counter-empire (*Gegenreich*), the USA', as well as overcoming 'the anti-empire

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<sup>100</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.499.

(*anti-Reich*) on German soil': the BRD.<sup>101</sup> Another contributor praised the Empire's tradition as a superior alternative to both the neo-roman imperialism of American neoconservatives under George W. Bush and the 'masonic-liberal' EU: the *Reich* of the Germans was 'an ever-present possibility' and would 'come back as surely as day follows night. It cannot perish'.<sup>102</sup>

In 2016, the historian Hans-Georg Meier-Stein, author, in 1998, of a sympathetic study of the national conservative *Reichsidee*, sorrowfully reached a more pessimistic conclusion: 'the *Reichsidee* is lost to the present like the Nibelung gold in the Rhine'. He clarified that neither a national nor a Christian *Reichsidee* of the type advocated by Otto von Habsburg could be considered viable, the former due to the lack of a sufficiently broad basis for German national power, the latter for the secular and agnostic nature of modern societies. Besides, Germany's crashing defeat in 1945 had discredited the entire German past, brought about the loss of the German East (Pomerania, Prussia, Silesia and Bohemia) and ushered in a liberal era centred on consumption that made a 'restoration' unthinkable. The German tragedy was not isolated but shared in the broader decline of European civilisation.<sup>103</sup> Meier-Stein passed a damning judgement on Otto von Habsburg's supranational conservative *Reichsidee*, which can well be seen as representing the general revolutionary conservative stance on the matter: Habsburg belonged 'rather to the conservative centre, but certainly not to the intellectual right', while his 'unbelievably naïve' work attempted a 'romantic transfiguration of the old Habsburg monarchy' and to 'pedantically [...] steer the reader in the direction of Bonn's European policy'.<sup>104</sup>

### *Neo-paganism and identitarianism*

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<sup>101</sup> J. Schwab, 'Die Reichsidee', *Neue Ordnung* (I, 2004), <http://www.neue-ordnung.at/index.php?id=378> (15 April 2021).

<sup>102</sup> K. Richter, 'Das Reich - Europas Zukunft?', *Neue Ordnung* (II, 2004), <http://www.neue-ordnung.at/index.php?id=393> (15 April 2021).

<sup>103</sup> H.G. Meier-Stein, 'Gewinnt die Reichsidee an Aktualität?', *Neue Ordnung* (IV, 2016), <http://www.neue-ordnung.at/index.php?id=1126> (18 April 2021).

<sup>104</sup> Meier-Stein, *Reichsidee*, p.491.

In the eyes of Meier-Stein, an author whose sympathies clearly lay with the conservative revolution, supranational conservatism counted as insufficiently radical and nationalist. It is, however, only when we have found what differentiates even a seemingly anti-nationalist version of the revolutionary conservative *Reichsidee*, such as that of de Benoist, from the supranational conservatism of, say, Otto von Habsburg, that we can rest content. The difference is indeed foundational, and it might come close to revealing to us the nature of the intangible barrier separating, in the Western civilisational space, conservatism proper from right-wing radicalism in its many shades and permutations. As explained, the supranational conservative Empire ideal institutionalised and drew the political consequences of the Christian distinction between transcendence and immanence. The national and revolutionary conservative Empire concept, on the contrary, reflected an existential posture – and most commonly an intellectual system – that radically denied that distinction. Mordini's main theological work, posthumously published in 1976, attempted a synthesis between the 'traditionalist' worldview of authors such as Evola, to which a revolutionary conservative understanding of the *Reich* borrowed from German interwar authors was central, and a Christianity strangely poised for earthly fulfilment.<sup>105</sup> Most others, however, openly rejected Christianity and embraced various shades of neo-paganism. Evola's publications in this period deepened his early interest in oriental spirituality, which was not at all uncommon in anti-Christian radical right authors.<sup>106</sup> While a neo-pagan fascination with India surfaced at times in the celebration of Alexander's imperialism and of the pre-Christian Roman empire as the model of a future European empire of separate ethnicities, the Christianised, medieval Empire was mostly dismissed. Some yearned for the return of the *Imperium Romanum* 'as it never was, but as, from Alexander to Julian, it was conceived: from the old Pictish Caledonia to the Indus, from the Mediterranean rim to the limes of Trajan'. Even the Nordic and Arian leaning of Evola's pagan

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<sup>105</sup> A. Mordini, *Il Mito primordiale del Cristianesimo quale fonte perenne di metafisica*, (Milan, 1976); A. Mordini, *Il Cattolico Ghibellino*, ed. F.F. Carli (Rome, 1989).

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, J. Evola, *Il libro del principio e della sua azione di Lao-Tze*, (Milan, 1959).

imperialism could be criticised for accepting the ‘continental’ dimension of the Carolingian empire, instead of fully rediscovering the Mediterranean and Eurasian orientation of the authentic Roman and Hellenistic imperial tradition. Thus, one author reflected that ‘[t]he Carolingian Empire reneged the *Mare nostrum*: to define it, one would say *Europa nostra*. It was not long after that a Benedictine monk from St Gallen gave a continental and conceptually clear, already modern definition of Europe.’<sup>107</sup> This ‘Roman’ and ‘Mediterranean’ idea had clearly little in common with that of such supranational conservatives as Moenius or Habsburg.

De Benoist had an unusually positive take on the medieval Empire, but he too dismissed its Christian component’s ‘decadent’ and ‘egalitarian’ implications.<sup>108</sup> He interpreted the Empire’s *renovatio* by Leo III and Charlemagne not as the practical implementation of, but as a break ‘with the Augustinian idea of a radical opposition between *civitas terrena* and *civitas dei*, which could have been understood to mean that a Christian empire was only a chimera.’<sup>109</sup> In other words, he shared Heer’s, Przywara’s and Spadaro’s interpretation of the Empire as a polity, except that they condemned and he commended it. In his urge to distance the supranational empire he advocated from the liberal universalism he loathed, de Benoist made a revealing observation: ‘[e]ven with its universal principle and vocation’, he wrote, ‘the empire is not universalist in the current sense of the term. Its universality never meant expansion across the whole earth. [...] [T]he empire [...] differs from a hypothetical world-state or from the idea that there are juridico-political principles universally valid at all times and in all places. Since universalism is directly linked to individualism, modern political universalism must be conceived in terms of the individualist roots of the nation state. Historical experience shows that nationalism often takes the form of an ethnocentrism blown up to universal dimensions.’<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> François, ‘Les paganismes’, pp.395-6.

<sup>108</sup> De Benoist, ‘Idea of Empire’; De Benoist, ‘Johannes Althusius’; A. de Benoist, ‘Moeller van den Bruck, the Anti-Liberal’, introduction to A. Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany’s Third Empire*, (London, 2012), pp.11-16.

<sup>109</sup> Benoist, ‘Idea of Empire’, p.81.

<sup>110</sup> Benoist, ‘Idea of Empire’, p.92.

Many supranational conservatives would have concurred that a great deal of modern liberal universalism has not really been a manifestation of authentic universality, but a form of western ethnocentrism ‘blown up to universal dimensions’. However, none of them could have ever followed de Benoist in the equal and opposite extreme of hypostatizing and petrifying cultural diversities, to the point of completely losing sight of that ‘universal mankind under God’ which, according to Voegelin, ‘the grinding wheels of imperial ambition to conquer the *ecumene*’ had inadvertently revealed during the Ecumenic Age, and later the *Sacrum Imperium* had attempted to organise politically.<sup>111</sup> Even when coated with the mantle of universal and supranational empire, radical right thinking remains the product of an immanentist and gnostic mindset, and must inevitably collapse into one or another form of tribal identitarianism. This identitarianism oblivious to the reality of universal mankind seems to be the red thread connecting the national conservatism of the Wilhelmine period – which appeared to have harmoniously merged ‘nation’ and ‘empire’ – with the revolutionary conservatism of the interwar years – for which ‘nation’ and ‘empire’ existed in tension, but not in irreconcilable contradiction – and the post-1960s New Rights – which either maintained the interwar balance, or discarded nationalism altogether in favour of more regional and ethnic forms of identitarianism, in substantial continuity with mature fascist thought. The latter variety of New Right thinking ‘longs for hundreds of homogeneous, regional communities in the context of a sovereign, independent, hierarchical, united Europe.’<sup>112</sup>

Although a regionalist thrust based on a strong subsidiarity has remained common in supranational conservatives too,<sup>113</sup> what is unique to the pan-European regionalism of the New Right is its remaining firmly and happily within the horizon of an ethnic tribalism, arguably a consequence of its neopagan closure to transcendence and conscious regression to the cosmological thinking of

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<sup>111</sup> Heyking, ‘Post-9/11 Evocations’, p.192.

<sup>112</sup> T. Bar-On, ‘Fascism to the Nouvelle Droite: The Dream of Pan-European Empire’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 16/3 (2008), p.340.

<sup>113</sup> B. Posselt, ‘Reich der Regionen’.

early civilisations. In their 2012 'Manifesto for a European Renaissance', leading New Right authors Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier clarified their ambition to return to the thinking expressed 'in cosmological stories and in pre-Socratic thought', as well as their rejection of 'the absolute distinction between created and uncreated being, as well as the idea that this world is only the reflection of another world', i.e. the rejection of the distinction between immanent and transcendent reality, and of the attendant fact that the ultimate fulfilment of reality is not attainable in history.<sup>114</sup> No wonder their Empire appears more similar to ancient cosmological empires on the Egyptian or Mesopotamian pattern than to the *Sacrum Imperium* of supranational conservatives, which rested squarely on that distinction. In the words of a Voegelinian scholar, national and revolutionary conservatism in all its manifestations 'is a neo-pagan order that remains closed towards transcendent reality and hence reverts to the tribalism of a particular national community rather than aspire to the openness and common bonds of mankind.'<sup>115</sup>

In this way, at the end of our inquiry, we come to realise that the denominations we have utilised to describe 'supranational conservatism', arguably the main strand of modern political thought inspired by the Empire, and 'national conservatism', arguably its main counterpoint, are historically contingent. The former ultimately refers to political universalists who, with different degrees of awareness, resisted various forms of modern identitarianism – including those carried by the latter – to avert or remedy their likely political consequences on European order. It is correct to emphasise the 'supranational' dimension of their thinking insofar as the main identitarian distortion they resisted since the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been nationalism. However, there certainly are forms of right-wing identitarianism that go beyond national conservatism. And the reality of contemporary

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<sup>114</sup> A. de Benoist, C. Champetier, *Manifesto for a European Renaissance*, (London, 2012), pp.30-1.

<sup>115</sup> A. Moulakis, 'Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin on Machiavelli', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 4/3 (2005), p.256. The comment, written with reference to Machiavelli's conception of order, seems even more applicable to the forms of tribal identitarianism embraced by the New Right.

identity politics shows that there is a rich variety of identitarianisms coming from the most diverse political quarters, whether left, right or centre, socialist, liberal or conservative.<sup>116</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter concludes our historical analysis of two and a half centuries of conservative thought on the Empire. It shows that, despite its residual presence in pockets of conservatism to our day, since at least the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Empire ideal had become too detached from the experiences of order it had emerged to transmit. The universalist Empire smacked of Catholic reaction and appeared too distant from the challenges of contemporary democratic politics, de-Christianised culture and societal individualism. Attempts at political modernisation were only partially successful. At least, however, it still harboured insights about European order developed in its long confrontation with modernisation's most disruptive consequences. It also supported the process of continental integration, while remaining critical of some aspects of it. The identitarian Empire, on the contrary, seemed an alienated, oppositional and revolutionary ideology, which could only be treated as conservative in the sense of the spurious interwar 'new' conservatism it openly drew on. Its vision of continental order, moreover, appeared a phantasy completely detached from the continent's reality.

In both cases, the Empire ideal was becoming an obstacle to effective political action. The very word 'empire' had become an obstacle, as it was and remains primarily associated with oppressive orders, from Europe's colonial systems to Hitler's rule. It had to be discarded altogether so that people could re-engage with the actual historical object and experiences that had given rise to it. From a political ideal, the Empire was finally ready to become an object of dispassionate historical inquiry, as recent advances in our understanding of it attest. If it had anything to teach new generations dealing with novel challenges such as europeanisation and globalisation, it would do

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<sup>116</sup> F. Fukuyama, *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, (London, 2019).

so as a polity irretrievably lost in Europe's past, not as the archetype of a superior order constantly on the verge of returning.

## Conclusion

This thesis showed that the Holy Roman Empire ideal influenced the genesis of German conservatism and shaped various strands of German-speaking conservative thought into the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is all the more remarkable because the conditions that enabled the Empire to remain a reasonably functioning order until the 18<sup>th</sup> century had already disappeared by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Revolutionary and Napoleonic France had demonstrated the potential of a large, centrally directed national state, which became the Empire's nemesis. Its onslaught beyond the Rhine resulted in the destruction of the smaller estates and of the Imperial Church, damaging the Empire's status hierarchy beyond repair and drastically reducing its flexibility and adaptability. By the Congress of Vienna, a flatter hierarchy of German and European powers emerged, opening the way to modern German federalism and to the Concert of Europe, as opposed to the older more polycentric imperial ideal. The Napoleonic experience had also changed perceptions of empire and heightened the contrast between the early modern Empire's model, which combined particularism and universalism, and 'empire' in the later sense of the imperial domination of a 'centre' over several subject peripheries, which could be anachronistically associated with some phases of the medieval Empire. Finally, the experience of 1789-1815 also changed ideas of nation and nationality, heightening their link with political legitimacy and sovereignty. This raised the problem of deciding who belonged to the nation and changed the question of minorities from one largely relating to different religions, to one based on ethnicity defined primarily by language and culture. However, despite this ancient polity's formal disappearance in 1806 and failed restoration in 1814-5, the long 'agony of the *Reich* in the centre of Europe', of which Clemens von Klemperer wrote, had only just begun, and would last another century and a half.<sup>1</sup> By 1866, also the Third Germany – with its relative autonomy from Austria and Prussia, in which a shadow of the Empire's

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<sup>1</sup> See p.234 above.

polycentricity survived – and the European embeddedness of the *Bund* – which was reminiscent of the Empire's – had been smashed. There remained the long-standing problem of Central Europe's ethnic composition, which seemed to rule out its partition into separate national states and to necessitate an imperial framework modelled after the Old *Reich*, variously interpreted as a supranational commonwealth or a German-led empire; but, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, unimaginable massacres and unprecedented populations' displacements had largely removed that too. By then, one might be excused for saying after everything that had happened, the Holy Roman Emperor had no clothes: new, less ideological and anachronistic ways of harnessing the imperial tradition for the new challenges of Germany's and Europe's supranational integration and re-unification had to be found. The Empire's new revisionist historiography, burgeoning since the 1960s, partly supplied them.

Thus, the year of Adenauer's death, Aretin published his fundamental reinterpretation of the Empire as a viable polity possessing an effective legal system, protecting diversity, and embedding Germans within a broader European ecosystem. His narrative was not openly political, but it certainly stemmed from a Bavarian Catholic conservative milieu and suited the historical self-understanding of the Federal Republic as a federalist and Europeanist Germany based on the rule of law. Towards the end of the century, its political implications were openly drawn by Hartmann, another Bavarian whose vision of the Empire as the precursor of a European union of the regions based on subsidiarity clearly aimed at legitimising the advanced phase of European integration initiated by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. This strand of the new historiography focused on culture and institutions, putting forward themes and interpretations that were strikingly similar to those historically advanced by cosmopolitan and supranational conservatives. It also 'de-Borussified' the early modern Empire, with the now defunct Hohenzollern monarchy, which these conservatives had so detested, largely excluded. A different, more national and liberal, interpretation of the Empire was instead advanced in the works of other important revisionist historians such as Georg

Schmidt and Joachim Whaley. They de-emphasised the transnational, cosmopolitan dimension of the early modern Empire, with its connections to Imperial Italy and Burgundy, and focused instead on its German core. The latter's tolerant and open patriotism positively shined against the subsequent German nationalism, representing, once again, a benevolent ancestor to the Federal Republic, but this time a liberal and progressive one, as opposed to a moderately Catholic and conservative one.<sup>2</sup> Finally, it is worth recalling that much of the early modern Empire's new 'social history', with its focus on 'structures' and 'mentalities', was, despite its often left-leaning politics, openly indebted to the pioneering work of national conservative historians such as Otto Brunner.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from their positive re-appraisal of the Empire, which demolished once dominant Borussian interpretations, all these revisionist works contributed to problematising our understanding of modern German history, emphasising its open-ended and contested nature, an endeavour that this thesis tried to complement in the field of intellectual history. In this field, no lesser authority than Friedrich Meinecke formulated the standard Borussian orthodoxy: his sympathetic description of German political thought's complex transition from the cosmopolitanism of the Empire's final phase to the national state thinking of Bismarck's time remains a standard work. His interpretation of the tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in Romantic political thought as the manifestation of a transitional immaturity in this process was revealing, as it reduced Romantic conservatives to little more than half-baked nationalists.<sup>4</sup> Like him, I looked at German (conservative) political thought from Johann Jakob Moser to Otto von Bismarck (and beyond). Unlike him, I stressed the survival of (conservative) cosmopolitanism and its development into supranationalism. His was a work of national intellectual history, where the contours of the nation were teleologically defined by Bismarck's *Kaiserreich*. Mine is a work in the transnational history of

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<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, *Geschichte des Alten Reiches*; Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*.

<sup>3</sup> For example, G. Benecke, *Society and Politics in Germany 1500-1750*, (London, 1974); D. Sabean, *Power in the Blood. Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany*, (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism*, pp.49-70.

ideologies showing how the characters, borders and meaning of Germanness remained contested for a much longer period, perhaps to this day. In a 1940 letter to Henrich von Srbik, Meinecke himself almost admitted as much: 'in these days', he wrote, 'you must be thinking often of your own ideas of the *Reich*. Sometimes one thought of them merely as romantic, but they were the premonition of what was coming.'<sup>5</sup> Indeed, considering 20<sup>th</sup> century German history, the transition from 18<sup>th</sup> century cosmopolitan Empire to 19<sup>th</sup> century national state appears to only have led to a short historical dead alley, already acknowledged by some at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more widely recognised by the late 1910s.

The more interesting transition to trace appears that from 18<sup>th</sup> century cosmopolitanism to what we might call the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century 'national supranationalism' or 'supranational nationalism', depending on which pole of the tension received higher emphasis, the former usually resulting in federative prescriptions, the latter in imperialist ones. At no moment of this history, except perhaps in the official discourse of the 1870s and 1880s, did Germany appear fully reconciled with the sovereign national state as a political form, to which its central position on the European continent and ethnic entanglement with other nations made it ill-suited. It experienced a constant tendency to break free of the national state's rigid constraints in order to experiment with more flexible political forms, whether of a federalist or imperial nature. In a sense, this was the source of both the European Germany of the pre-1866 and post-1949 periods and the German Europe of the 1915-1945 period. Historians have only recently started to do justice to this alternative conception of German history, perhaps most powerfully captured in Dieter Langewiesche's concept of 'federative nationalism' as a key legacy of the Empire and an approach that did not necessarily identify German unity with the attainment of a national state.<sup>6</sup> While confirming the importance of

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<sup>5</sup> Sweet, 'Historical Writing', p.54.

<sup>6</sup> D. Langewiesche, 'Föderativer Nationalismus als Erbe der deutschen Reichsnation: Über Föderalismus und Zentralismus in der deutschen Nationalgeschichte', in Langewiesche and Schmidt, *Föderative Nation*, p.215-42. See also A. Green, 'The Federal Alternative? A New View of Modern German History', *HJ*, 46/1 (2003), pp.187-202.

Langewiesche's concept by studying the political thought of numerous conservatives who shared it *ante litteram*, this thesis also showed that the idea of Germany as a 'federative nation' shaped by the Empire's memory almost always implied some form of continental central European unity as an essential component. In other words, the 'federative nation' did not only exist through its internal articulations, but also had to organically integrate within a broader continental ecosystem. My findings also reinforce a revisionist and open-ended reading of Germany's political identity and trajectory by problematising the way conservative and, more tangentially, liberal voices contributed to it. The differences between various strands of conservatism and liberalism were such that lumping them together in a narrative pitting modernising liberal forces against backward conservative ones makes little sense. The nationalist Empire ideal often brought together national conservatives and national liberals in support of aggressive and imperialist policies, while the cosmopolitan and supranational Empire ideal mostly expressed a moderate, aristocratic and tolerant conservative ideal that countered them. Indeed, through the prism of the Empire's role in it, this thesis shed some feeble light on German liberal imperialism, whose history largely remains to be written, unlike that of British liberal imperialism, which is more advanced.<sup>7</sup> It also demonstrated more clearly the fault lines between conservative and fascist uses of the *Reichsidee*. Transnational approaches and novel analytical prisms, such as those adopted in this thesis and some other recent works, can help nuance the traditional identification of German conservatism with the most extreme Prussian Protestant national authoritarianism.<sup>8</sup> This neglects powerful alternative strands, more typical of southern, western and Catholic Germany, to which recent scholarship pays more attention, but about which much remains to be discovered and understood. One, however, should not exaggerate confessional divisions either: supranational conservatism

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<sup>7</sup> D. Bell, *Reordering the World. Essays on Liberalism and Empire*, (Princeton, 2016); U.S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire. A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*, (Chicago, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Conze, *Europa*; Großmann, *Internationale*; Lok, *Europe against Revolution*; Pestel, Reboul and Lok, *Cosmopolitan Conservatism*.

was only predominantly, but far from exclusively, Catholic, as the prominent example of Constantin Frantz, among others, shows.

Finally, in these concluding considerations, one might be excused for venturing beyond strictly historiographical issues to briefly consider whether supranational conservatism, the main strand of conservative thought shaped by the Empire's legacy and whose evolving ideological morphology this thesis mainly traced, possesses any persistent normative value. Chapter 5 showed how, by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the supranational Empire had become what Voegelin called 'an obsolete symbol', one that 'may have the effect of destroying the order of existence it was created to protect' because the polity it evoked was by then too remote from actual political realities and overlaid with all sorts of reactionary phantasies.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that the experiences of order it had originally emerged to capture had – or have – become irrelevant. As shown throughout the thesis, at its core, this order is an anti-totalitarian subsidiary federacy that protects religious, cultural, national, ethnic, social, personal and other differences in a tolerant spirit of rooted cosmopolitanism. It attempts 'to preserve contrasts in their God-created colourfulness and to combine them in a higher unity of peace, instead of eliminating them' (Haecker).<sup>10</sup> It strives to reconcile diversity 'in the harmony of a higher community' (Benedikt), but also 'to preserve the cultural particularities of which we are the heirs, so that the world will not be impoverished by their disappearance', thus pursuing 'the old dream of independence through interdependence' (Habsburg).<sup>11</sup>

This conception of the right political order is critical of the idea and practice of the absolutist early modern state as much as of those of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century bureaucratic national state. It deplores the anti-pluralist conception implicit in the state's claim to ultimate sovereignty, already scorned by the 18<sup>th</sup> century *Reichspublizisten*, its 'centralising, overbearing tendency, which

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<sup>9</sup> Webb, *Voegelin*, p.217.

<sup>10</sup> See p.217 above.

<sup>11</sup> See pp.217, 257 above.

inevitably tends to restrict the free movement of social forces' and to reduce the individual parts to a condition of dependence.<sup>12</sup> It mainly delineates, as Hegel critically but correctly argued, a 'system of justice, whereby each part is maintained in separation from the state', a supranational legal authority arbitrating, in a spirit of benign neutrality, conflicts among nationalities, classes and confessions, and whose influence over the individual territories is mediated by national and local authorities, as Habsburg explained.<sup>13</sup> While the modern state is, in Huch's words, about 'order, coercion and power', this different polity pursues 'freedom, law and harmony'.<sup>14</sup> The freedom of all, whether small or big, weak or strong, is 'the bond of unity among members so unequal in power' and the 'common good' of this 'quite particular constitution' (Moser Sr.), this 'association of independent members under an elected head' acting 'as the supreme judge and protector' (Frantz).<sup>15</sup> Unity is not identified with centralised decision-making, but with a polycentric governance system characterised, among other things, by the spontaneous formation of leagues and by the existence of multiple power balances, both necessary manifestations of the polity's internal diversity and essential instruments to protect the weaker members and prevent a full political consolidation, which would destroy the polity's essence.

The rigid distinctions typical of the modern state-centric paradigm – particularly those between state and civil society, and between national and international – are undermined, if not overcome, by encouraging pluralist arrangements that blend statist and societal elements and connect constitutional and international law. The identity between *Volk* – intended both as people and as nation – and *Staat* – not necessarily in the technical sense of 'state', but also in the looser one of 'political order' –, first postulated by the democratic nationalism of the French Revolution, is also rejected. Differences within peoples and between nations are never to be eradicated in the mould

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<sup>12</sup> Frantz, *Widerherstellung*, p.359.

<sup>13</sup> See pp.51, 257 above.

<sup>14</sup> See p.212 above.

<sup>15</sup> See pp.43, 105 above.

of a homogenous national demos, as maintaining them is the polity's principal *raison d'être*.<sup>16</sup> This structurally limits the extent to which the polity can be democratised, i.e. transformed into a collection of individual citizens whose membership of distinct cultural and political units can be abstracted away for the purpose of a majoritarian political process. As argued by Benedikt, it also confers on this polity a quality that, for want of a better translation of the German term *künstlich*, one could call 'artificiality'. The polity does not correspond to the most primal leanings of human groups, which would naturally privilege the tribal and 'herdist' (Kuehnelt-Leddihn) comfort of homogeneity in their construction of political order.<sup>17</sup> It is consciously created and maintained by appealing to the higher charms of a 'diversitarian' order and by establishing an authority 'that has more interest in the community as such than in the parts, that protects the substance of the community from the self-interested assault of the parts, that stands above the parts and does not belong to any of them', while still protecting and nurturing each of them based on its unique strengths and needs.<sup>18</sup> This is the path towards the 'European confederation of peoples' (Andrian-Werburg), with 'a free confederacy of all civilized states and peoples' (Schlegel), 'the cosmopolitan idea of the union of nations' (Janssen), on the ever-receding horizon.<sup>19</sup>

If one extracts the experiential substance and jettisons the reactionary shell, as I have tried to do in the paragraphs above, the experiences of order expressed by supranational conservatives suddenly appear less remote, particularly in today's Europe. A continent where the trend 'away from classical sovereignty and toward something closer to *Landeshoheit*, territorial jurisdiction under an external legal regime', has been evident for decades.<sup>20</sup> Where supranational integration brought about a 'European rescue of the nation state', but also its subtle transformation into a

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<sup>16</sup> See p.198 above.

<sup>17</sup> See p.205 above.

<sup>18</sup> Benedikt, *Monarchie*, p.15.

<sup>19</sup> See pp.99, 62, 158 above.

<sup>20</sup> Osiander, 'Westphalian Myth', p.283. On the concept of *Landeshoheit*, see pp.47-8 above.

'member state'.<sup>21</sup> And where, as a consequence, some of the exclusionary and anti-pluralist claims of the nation state have been undermined, but not nearly all, and where the temptation to transfer some of these claims to the European level, instead of abolishing them altogether, is ever present and must be constantly resisted. A continent, moreover, where political fights are increasingly interpreted as a contest between 'globalists' and 'nationalists', while a viable constitution necessarily institutionalises an 'in-between' order combining rootedness in particularity with a tension towards universality, and thus eschewing the one-sidedness of both an abstract cosmopolitanism and a closed nationalism. This continent faces the challenge of protecting long-standing cultural diversities, but also of acknowledging the value of more recent ones, such as those engendered by the development of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional societies. What is more, on this continent, traditional forms of democratic political 'representation' are in crisis, and some hail the rise of an active citizenry organised in social groups, performing public functions and present at all levels of governance, including the transnational one, as a possible remedy.<sup>22</sup> Finally, on this continent, polycentricity and experimentation under a common institutional framework appear at least as concrete an option for handling the challenges of complexity than the centralisation and harmonisation associated with modern state-building.

Some of the most insightful scholarly works of the last decades on the constitutional form best suited to the European integration experiment have underlined its 'in-between' and 'third way' character from a positive perspective, and often also openly defended the latter's desirability from a normative perspective. Thus, in his pioneering work, Joseph Weiler argued for a 'European constitutionalism beyond the state', whose very constitutional telos would require that 'the distinct peoplehood of [Europe's] components [...] remain intact – in contrast with the theory of most, and

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<sup>21</sup> A. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (London, 2000); C.J. Bickerton, *European Integration. From Nation-States to Member States*, (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> K. Nicolaidis, 'The Peoples Imagined: Constituting a Democratic European Polity', in J. Komárek (ed), *European Constitutional Imaginaries. Between Ideology and Utopia*, (Oxford, 2023), pp.231-58; M. Kaldor, *Global Civil Society. An Answer to War*, (Cambridge, 2003).

the praxis of all, federal states which predicate the existence of one people.<sup>23</sup> And a whole new strand of political science, pioneered by Kalypso Nicolaïdis, has conceptualised the EU as a *demoicracy* in the making, 'a Union of peoples, understood both as states and as citizens, who govern together but not as one'.<sup>24</sup> A *demoicratic* federal union constitutionally respects its peoples' irreducible diversity by encouraging polycentricity and their horizontal collaboration, privileging consensual decision-making and refusing majoritarian mechanisms that would oppress the smaller states.<sup>25</sup> Rejecting the same statist assumptions is also at the core of the 'neo-medieval empire' paradigm proposed by Jan Zielonka to make sense of the enlarged EU, which emphasises a polycentric system of government, multiple and overlapping jurisdictions, the preservation of cultural and economic heterogeneity, fuzzy borders and divided sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> The pluralist and 'diversitarian' ethos inspiring such approaches is often reminiscent of the forgotten supranational conservative arguments unearthed by this thesis, as are some of the institutional implications derived from them and the tendency to trace a European path to supranational federalism distinct from the American one and more radically 'subsidiary' than it. The fact that these views today are frequently articulated from a 'progressive' standpoint only adds interest to a strand of thought that offers a sophisticated defence of supranational European order, institutional pluralism and cultural diversity from a genuinely conservative perspective. All the more so at a time when a new guise of nationalist conservatism, in many ways a resurgence of the national conservatism analysed in the previous chapters, appears once again in the ascendant.

As defined and traced in this thesis, national conservatism in its various incarnations appears more as a disturbance of and a deviation from the mainline of conservative political thought than as its

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<sup>23</sup> J.H.H. Weiler, 'In Defence of the Status Quo: Europe's Constitutional Sonderweg', in J.H.H. Weiler and M. Wind (eds), *European Constitutionalism Beyond the State*, (Cambridge, 2003), p.10.

<sup>24</sup> K. Nicolaïdis, 'The Idea of European Demoicracy', in J. Dickson and P. Eleftheriadis (eds), *Philosophical Foundations of European Union Law*, (Oxford, 2012), p.254.

<sup>25</sup> K. Nicolaïdis, 'Demoicratic Theory and Europe's Institutional Architecture in Times of Crisis', in S. Piattoni (ed), *The European Union. Democratic Principles and Institutional Architectures in Times of Crisis*, (Oxford, 2015), pp.137-63.

<sup>26</sup> Zielonka, *Europe as Empire*. See also P. Haldén, *Stability Without Statehood. Lessons from Europe's History Before the Sovereign State*, (London, 2011).

foremost manifestation. It typically takes root on a ground where the wheat of genuine conservatism grows entangled with the chaff of right-wing radicalism. Far from a psychology and a culture of hope and acceptance, its existential drivers tend to be experiences of alienation, cultural despair, apocalyptic dread, and millenarian exaltation. In the western civilisational space, conservatives essentially advocated for the preservation of political and social orders that comprehend and institutionalise the Christian differentiation between transcendence and immanence in all its multifarious implications. The most obvious such implication is a drastic relativisation of the importance and reach of the political and, consequently, an emphasis on 'limited politics'. There are, however, less obvious, but equally important ones, which all emerged in previous chapters. One of them is a specific conception of the relationship between ethics and power, right and might, in the fallen world of historical reality open to the experience of transcendence. In this world, they can never completely coincide – in contradiction with the total moralisation and ultimate disappearance of power sought by most strands of liberalism and socialism –, but neither can they be completely divorced, lest one should fall into extreme forms of *Realpolitik* that take success, at whatever price and with whatever means, as final proof of goodness. Another neglected implication of the differentiation between transcendence and immanence is the already mentioned preference for compound and federalist political orders that, like the Empire, are programmatically incomplete, and the consequent distrust towards unitary and centralised orders that claim full rationality, comprehension, and control. However, as well elucidated by Eric Voegelin, the differentiation between transcendence and immanence as a universally human experience also entails a notion of the ultimate unity of mankind and an obligation to somehow acknowledge it politically, though always within the limits set by changing historical circumstances. It thus enjoins resisting exclusionary nationalism and other forms of tribal identitarianism that may alienate individuals and communities from important aspects of their own and others' humanity.

As shown throughout the thesis, these features are present in the supranational conservative Empire ideal and can even be considered its ideological morphology's core. They are also present, though in varied and often attenuated forms, in all strands of mainstream conservatism. Even the most patriotic and 'sovereignist' of them still valued forms of international coordination achieved through a concert of states and a balance of power legitimated by common principles, in which a shadowy conception of the unity of mankind is implied. Not so national conservatism, which lacks at least some and at times all these features. It is not rare for its upholders to embrace the most cynical *Realpolitik* and even to seek violent upheaval and justify the overthrow of existing institutions as cathartic. It is also not unusual for them to believe in the possibility of reconciling all conflicts within the existing body politic, for example by means of an extreme organicism that hollows out from within any meaningful federalism. Finally, it is most typical of them to reject any notion of the unity of mankind in order to embrace one or another form of tribal identitarianism, of which nationalism is only the most common. National conservatives appear more receptive to these radical impulses because they always undermine and often altogether reject the distinction between transcendence and immanence, either in favour of a militant Christianity that promises the imminent pursuit of the millennium on earth, or in favour of a neo-pagan vitalism with similar practical effects. Although it historically was, and perhaps will remain, partly connected with a conservative constellation of forces and ideas, it is doubtful that an ideological morphology exhibiting such features can be correctly treated as genuinely conservative, even when it self-defines as such. Should the present thesis' sole achievement be to help establish this fact more rigorously and precisely than it has been understood so far, I dare hope that it will still be deemed a valuable contribution to both the theory and the practice of contemporary conservatism in historical perspective.

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