



Heart of Europe: A History of the Holy Roman Empire by Peter H. Wilson.

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In his magisterial *Heart of Europe*, Peter Wilson, Chichele Professor of the History of War at the University of Oxford,¹ has produced what will long remain the preeminent text on its subject. Not a book for beginners, it can, nonetheless, be consulted as profitably in parts as in toto.

Wilson proceeds thematically rather than strictly chronologically. He bravely forgoes the usual concoction of vignettes to propel his narrative, instead meticulously identifying crucial elements in the empire's distinct evolution. That said, the book does include many interesting details and stories that illuminate particular technical points. There are four major parts or thematic groupings: respectively, "Ideals," "Belonging," "Governance," and "Society." Each in turn comprises three chapters organized under a series of headings and subheadings. For example, chapter 11, "Association," has an immediate text heading—"Leagues and Associations"—followed by a subheading, "Political Tendencies and Common Features." This level of articulation gives readers a clear sense of the overall flow of the text.

Most of Parts I–III concern the empire in its medieval and early modern forms, from its founding in AD 800 through the emergence of other great states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Part IV concentrates on the empire as part of the evolving system of European states, especially as it came to be dominated by the Austrian Habsburgs.

Part I focuses on the founding and *raison d'être* of the empire over its first several hundred years. Wilson stresses (as he must for modern readers) the overarching importance of religion—the "Imperial Church"—in the lives of both emperors and subjects. He is at pains to show that medieval leaders often used religiosity as a cover for bad behavior. Emperors wielded "two swords": first and foremost, that of warrior-kings, and secondly that of "defenders of the faith."

Piety remained important, particularly with the start of the First Crusade in 1095, but otherwise it became less obviously politicized until the emergence of baroque Catholicism in the seventeenth century when emperors regularly led religious processions and dedicated elaborate monuments as thanksgiving for victories or deliveries from danger. Throughout the Empire's existence, the routine of the imperial court remained regulated by the Christian calendar, with the highly visible presence of the imperial family at important religious services. (31)

The empire was under the protection of the divinely inspired emperor, guarantor of his subjects' persons, faith, and legal rights. It was long a case of *the* empire, not of one among others, as came to pass case by the eighteenth century. It stood against the "outer" empire of the Ottomans, fulfilling its role, however ineffectively at times, as defender of the faithful (144).

Part II traces the changing physical reality of the empire over time. It remained, Wilson stresses, relatively stable in size, but was never a singular state or "nation" per se like, say, France,

1. His voluminous earlier work includes *German Armies: War and German Politics, 1648–1806* (Bristol, PA: UCL Pr, 1998).

although at the end imperial leadership carried the loyalty of its subjects by adding to “Empire” the phrase “and the German Nation” (235).

Part III concerns the actual mechanics of imperial administration and governance. Its three chapters should be essential reading for those seeking to understand the role of the supranational empire in the actual lives of its subjects.

Imperial governance was programmatic in that it was guided by coherent ideals and goals. All kings and emperors—like modern governments—had to react to circumstances and improvise, but they were not simply at the mercy of events. The difference lies in what they were trying to achieve. “State” and “nation” were not yet clearly delineated concepts functioning as focused policy objectives. Kings and emperors were not state- or nation-builders, because no one felt either needed building. Medieval monarchs were expected to build churches and cathedrals. Otherwise, their role was primarily to uphold peace, justice and the honor of the Empire. Changing circumstances, like violence, rebellions, or invasions, were not seen as “problems” to be “solved” through new laws, better institutions, or more coherent frontiers. Most of the misunderstandings surrounding the Empire’s political history stem from attempts to impose anachronistic expectations on its rulers’ behavior. For most of the Empire’s existence, imperial governance was guided by the prevailing ideas of good kingship. (296)

This said, the early modern period saw tweaks and improvements to the governance of the empire—the use of paper documents, improved taxation methods, and more effective levying of troops. Wilson also clarifies in detail the operations of the Reichstag as the dominant elected corporate body (409).

Part IV treats the social history of the empire; one chapter, “Associations,” describes its numerous corporate bodies, from the Electors’ League to trade guilds and even urban shooting societies. Another, titled “Justice,” recounts the fall of the empire, which the author attributes more to Napoleon’s rapacity than to the destructive nature of the French Revolution. “Habsburg officials feverishly prepared legal documents to enable [Emperor] Francis [II] not merely to abdicate, but to remove the Empire entirely from Napoleon’s grasp by dissolving it” (654).

The book’s final chapter briefly reviews the “Afterlife” of the empire. Interestingly, many of its subjects were unhappy to see it go and fretted over what, if anything, might replace its legal structures and protections. Wilson perceptively observes that, Napoleon aside, the coming of industrialization and capitalist notions of property would, by the 1830s, have dissolved the corporate bonds that had held the empire together. It is debatable whether, as he muses, the story of the empire’s history of multinational governance holds useful lessons for the European Union.

Peter Wilson has written a wonderfully accessible treatment of a complex and daunting subject, notable for its acute insights into the political, cultural, and social realities of Central Europe throughout a whole millennium. *Heart of Europe* also features a rich collection of twenty-two excellent maps, as well as many (often full-color) illustrations relevant to points made in the text. There are also dynastic trees for the great imperial families and a detailed chronology.