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Germany on the Eve of Reformation

When the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian I died on 12 January 1519, rumours were rife that ships were moving down the Rhine with sacks of French gold tied to their hulls. Denied bills of exchange by the German bankers, agents of the French monarch were forced to such desperate measures in order to ensure that their king, Francis I, had enough ready wealth at his disposal to contest the pending imperial election. Opposing Francis I was Maximilian's grandson Charles, Duke of Burgundy and King of Spain, whose agents, while conceding that 'these devils of Frenchmen scatter gold in all directions,' had managed to win most of the seven electors over to the Habsburg candidate using similar methods of bribes and benefices (Knecht, 1994, p. 166). Other potentates had come forward, including Henry of England and Friedrich the Wise of Saxony, but ultimately the imperial election crystallized into a contest between the Valois king of France and the Habsburg heir Charles of Ghent. And it was an event of profound importance, for in essence it was a struggle between the two most powerful sovereigns in Europe for rule over one of the largest empires of the age. All of the major European sovereigns followed the election with great interest, including the Medici Pope Leo X, who, fearing the King of Spain more than the King of France, sided with Francis I. But an imperial election was not decided by foreign powers. The electors of the Holy Roman Empire would choose the next king, and in the end Charles was elected unanimously because it was thought that the Habsburg was the best choice for the German

lands. The King of France, it was believed, would not respect the liberties of the Empire, and no internal candidate had enough personal might to command the realm. As the Archbishop of Mainz observed, the Empire was too weak and exhausted to preserve itself, and as no German prince had the power or the wealth to shoulder the burdens, it was necessary to elect a sovereign who was feared (Kohler, 1999, p. 68). For these reasons the electors that gathered on 28 June 1519 at Frankfurt am Main chose the Habsburg sovereign as the next King of the Romans and, in imitation of Charlemagne, crowned him in the city of Aachen in the following year.

On his election the Habsburg candidate became Emperor Charles V. As a ruler over a dominion, no other European sovereign of the age could claim to be his equal. 'Sire,' wrote his Grand Chancellor Mercurino Gattinara, 'God has been very merciful to you: he has raised you above all the Kings and princes of Christendom to a power such as no sovereign has enjoyed since your ancestor Charles the Great. He has set you on the way towards a world monarchy, towards the uniting of all Christendom under a single shepherd' (Brandi, 1965, p. 112). In part this was the rhetoric of Empire, and few spoke so eloquently on the theme as Gattinara; but for many of Europe's rulers it must have seemed a fairly realistic assessment. In 1506 Philip the Fair of Burgundy died, thus leaving the possessions of his Burgundian house to his son Charles. In addition to a claim to the duchy of Burgundy (in French hands since 1477), the holdings included Franche-Comté and the provinces which came to be known as the Netherlands (including the duchies of Luxembourg and Brabant, the counties of Flanders, Holland, Zeeland and Hainault, and a host of smaller lordships). Ten years later, on the death of his grandfather Ferdinand of Aragon, and with his mother Joanna of Castile unfit to rule, Charles inherited Castile and Aragon and thus the kingdom of Spain. Castile also secured him sovereignty over much of the New World, while the Aragonese empire brought with it Sardinia, Sicily, Naples and the Balearic islands. Finally, when his grandfather Maximilian I died in 1519, Charles added the Habsburg dynastic lands of Austria, a stretch of territory that ran into parts of southern Germany and the Tyrol. Moreover, once he had become the German king and future emperor, he could number the largest realm in Christendom among his already extensive domains.

In the year when Charles was elected (1519), the core area of the Empire comprised the German-speaking heartlands (roughly equivalent to modern-day Germany and Austria), but the realm also reached north-west to the Netherlands, further north to the regions of Holstein, Dithmarschen, Frisia and the Baltic lands of the Teutonic Order, east to Brandenburg, Pomerania, the kingdom of Bohemia (which encompassed Moravia, Silesia and Lusatia) and the Austrian lands (Austria, the Tyrol, Styria, Carinthia, Carniola), while to the south parts of northern Italy belonged to the Empire, as did the lands of modern Switzerland. Some of these frontier regions had very loose relations with the Empire. The states of northern Italy, the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Swiss lands were in effect independent powers, while imperial sovereignty was very weak in the Netherlands and the lands of the Teutonic Order. But it was a massive realm nonetheless, and the crowning glory for Charles of Ghent. A few weeks after the election Gattinara suggested that in future all official documentation should lead with the following formula: 'King of the Romans, elected Roman Emperor, semper augustus'.

By the late fifteenth century the Empire had effectively contracted to a core of German territories. The sources begin to speak of the Holy Roman Empire of the *German Nation*, even if the pluralized designation 'the German lands' was still common parlance. The ambiguity is understandable, for Germany was far from a unified country (Scott, 1998, pp. 337–66). Geography could not offer a precise definition. Well into the sixteenth century Alsatian Humanists continued to debate the contours of Germania, and neither the histories nor the atlases of the day could agree on the details. Even the cartographer Abraham Ortelius, a precise and exacting man, admitted that the dimensions escaped him. Nor was language much of a guide, even if the reference to the German tongue (*Gezünge*) was at times taken as synonymous with nation. The lands were divided by dialects, with some strands of High German and Low German mutually incomprehensible. Against this, as we will see, was a maturing sense of nationalism, part political and part historical in inspiration, but the most articulate notion of political identity was still tied to the doctrine of the *translatio imperii*, the belief – indeed, the foundation idea of Charlemagne's dominion – that the Empire had been created in

order to protect and oversee the Christian commonwealth. Repeated attacks from the Hussites and the Turks in the fifteenth century strengthened the conviction that this was a specifically *German* duty, but it remained a very vague and abstract vision at a time when an inclusive sense of identity was evolving in other parts of Europe. Indeed, even in the Empire itself it was something of an unnatural notion, for the real thrust of state development and political solidarity was located at the territorial level. Yet the two ideas of Germany made up its national character, and its history was a dialogue between these two conceits.

Medieval emperors believed that they had been elected to rule alongside the papacy in preservation of the Christian faith. The ideal purpose of their rule was the religious and political unity of Christendom. With this idea guiding their actions, it is little wonder that many of them considered the interests and the integrity of the German lands as secondary to the idea of empire. History is replete with examples of kings who neglected Germany in order to pursue broader ambitions (Heer, 1995, pp. 94–175). A quick survey of some fifteenth-century monarchs will make the point: Sigismund, the last of the Luxemburgs, spent little more than two years of his twenty-seven-year reign in the German lands. He was consumed with foreign affairs, especially the politics of his kingdom of Hungary. Friedrich III, for many the founder of Habsburg world power, spent most of his time and energy consolidating his Austrian inheritance. During his reign there were two separate royal chanceries, one in Austria and one for the imperial lands. It was Friedrich who once scribbled in his notebook the cryptic monogram AEIOU for the Latin phrase *Austriae est imperare orbi universo* – 'all the world is subject to Austria.' Maximilian I, the grandfather of Charles V, patterned his rule on that of Charlemagne, and he still believed that the primary task of the emperor was to defend the Christian commonwealth. He never acquired a command of German, though he knew seven languages, and his main interest in the land was always financial: he needed money to pursue his imperial ambitions.

The German Estates, in contrast, especially the electors and the powerful secular princes, were more concerned with the preservation of peace and order than the foreign policy of their elected king. Moreover, by the late fifteenth century the impe-

rial office was explicitly associated with the German Nation, and the Estates were naturally suspicious of any king who threatened the traditional liberties of the realm or used imperial resources for dynastic ends. The summit of this mistrust was reached during the reign of Charles V, when the Catholic emperor was accused of scheming to reduce the German princes to a state of slavery. In part it was a battle of conscience, for by this stage the Reformation had polarized the Empire. Yet it was also a question of German liberty, now categorically contrasted with imperial ambition. Indeed, it was the Catholic chancellor of Bavaria, Leonhard von Eck, who warned the princes that 'nothing less than a monarchy' was the ultimate aim of the emperor and his councillors. 'Therefore it is crucial for the German princes that they keep an eye on how things develop, lest one after the other are swallowed up, destroyed, and hunted down' (Schmidt, 1999, p. 85).

The political constitution of the Empire reflected the complex history of the realm. In essence it was a community of feudal ties (*Lehensverband*) and thus a matrix of dependency and obligation (though there were enclaves of communal rule in some of the towns and villages). At the peak of the feudal pyramid was the emperor, and all other powers in the realm derived their sovereignty from him. At certain levels, there was scope for common action – between princes, between cities, or between sympathetic parties at the imperial diets – but the sovereign powers rarely had the same political agenda in mind and contradictory tendencies were common. The crucial point of division remained the conflict of interests between the emperor and the German Estates (though relations were in constant flux and not all of the great dynasties were related to the emperors in the same way). By the late fifteenth century the tensions had become pronounced. 'The dualism of the Empire is reflected in the two issues which remained running sores throughout the century,' observes Tom Scott: 'on the one hand, the need for the kings to establish a dynastic power base (*Hausmacht*) strong enough to enable them to rule effectively as emperors; on the other, the concern of members of the *Reich* to establish public order and the rule of law within Germany' (Scott, 1998, p. 350). Over time, a political system had evolved which served to negotiate between the conflicting interests. Allusions to the various 'members' of the Empire were eventu-

ally superseded by more specific references to the imperial Estates (*Reichsstände*), the earliest and most influential being the electors entrusted with the duty of selecting the king and watching over the security of the realm. When Charles V came to power, the seven electors were the three spiritual princes of Trier, Mainz and Cologne, along with the four secular rulers of Bohemia, Ernestine Saxony, Brandenburg and the Palatinate.

By the late fifteenth century, following a period of reform initiated during the reign of Maximilian (1493–1519), the imperial diet (*Reichstag*) had emerged as the principal forum for political affairs, though its powers were limited to the granting or withholding of taxes and military aid. Membership was comprised of the leading estates of the realm. The electors, who generally exercised the most influence, were joined by the major spiritual and secular sovereigns (the princes, dukes, margraves, landgraves, archbishops and bishops), the lesser prelates (abbots, abbesses, provosts) and the lesser secular rulers (counts and lords), and the free imperial cities (though the urban communes did not get a vote until the seventeenth century). At the same time new legal institutions emerged, with the functions of the imperial Chamber Court (*Reichskammergericht*), a forum of justice independent of the emperor, confirmed at the diet of Worms (1495). Further initiatives included the creation of imperial circles (*Kreise*), fairly precise regions that could serve as intermediary levels of control between the Empire and the Estates, and a regency council (*Reichsregiment*), which, though very short-lived, was composed of a select committee of men who would have powers of executive rule. Ultimately, all of these measures, from the diets to the courts to the councils, had the effect of limiting the powers of the emperor (or indeed any of the great princes with visions of absolute rule) and ensured that Germany remained a composite of territorial powers rather than a monarchy under the sway of a single ruler.

Thus, well before the election of Charles V, significant powers of rule were effectively in the hands of the territorial lords. The medieval ideal of a *sacrum imperium* had not been abandoned, especially by Charles V, but the realities of rule pressed hard on public understanding of the realm. It is worth noting this fact, that during the century of Reformation, despite the scale of the Habsburg empire, the promises of imperial reform and the evo-

lution of the Estates, the leading nobles continued to dominate the German lands. By embracing an ideology of absolutism, 'the princes came to regard themselves as trustees and guardians of distinct, separate territories and no longer as the emperor's personal followers and liegemen' (Wilson, 1999, p. 38). In the end, real power lay in the rights and responsibilities granted to the princes by the emperors, and as such the matrix of power in Germany, to a great extent, had already been determined by former relations to imperial rule. The path to power had remained constant: in order to substantiate princely status, the candidate had to participate in imperial governance, and this meant sitting in councils and court, holding ceremonial offices, and honouring the Empire and its legal constitution. In return the candidate held an imperial fief, which could be a large principality, along with independent rights of rule, including powers of jurisdiction, defence, taxation and regalia. All of these rights and privileges comprised the princes' sovereignty (*Herrschaft*), the range of powers a prince might exercise. Over time, inevitably, the gradual accumulation of these endowments had given rise to extremely powerful lords. By the fifteenth century some of the princes in Germany were near equals of the emperor, similar in kind to the leading monarchs of the age. One century after the Reformation Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff made note of this in his work *The German Princely State* (1660), observing how the German principalities, while not kingdoms in the sense that France or Spain were kingdoms, were nevertheless expansive units of rule 'with all manner of languages and nations, various customs and characteristics, unruly subjects, powerful and hostile neighbours, and the other difficult and weighty conditions found in the great kingdoms of the world'. Fundamental to understanding the rise of the Reformation in Germany is the role played by these princely states, both in domestic terms, that is, with reference to the evolution of these lands into 'great kingdoms', and in the broader context of imperial relations.

The other important feature of the political landscape in the late medieval period was the rise of the urban commune. Germany was not just a land of princes and prelates, but a realm, as Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini observed in the mid-fifteenth century, of 'rich and populous cities'. This was true to a point.

There was a large number of German towns in the sixteenth century – perhaps as many as 3,000 in Germany proper, with eighty-eight in the Swiss lands and almost double that number in Habsburg Austria. But the vast majority of the urban communes were rather small, with less than 2,000 inhabitants gathered in a fairly congested space. Even the large cities such as Nuremberg, Augsburg and Cologne (with populations ranging between 20,000 and 30,000) were dwarfed when compared with the city-states of the Italian peninsula. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that urban culture had developed enormously throughout the medieval period. Towns and cities had won rights and privileges from their lords in return for a fee or a loan. Over the course of decades, the gradual accumulation of such benefits had given rise to a number of powerful civic centres (Isenmann, 1988, pp. 74–102, 131–98). The first such privilege to be granted was the right of trade (usually awarded because it benefited the local seigniorial economy), but the communes secured other rights and liberties as well, including the right to administer justice, the right to impose taxation, the right to form independent alliances, and the right to issue and enforce laws and statutes independent of the lord. City governments, made up of councils, courts and executive committees, could exercise almost unlimited sovereignty over the local population. From the preservation of the peace and the security of trade to the common defence, the application of laws and the maintenance of public order (*Polizey*) – the entire spectrum of local rule was, in many instances, in the hands of an urban elite. The emergence of the urban commune, the 'self-administrating and, for the most part, self-governing *res publica* or community', was a feature of central importance to the political culture in the German lands (Dilcher and Brady, 1997b, p. 220).

Of course, not all cities enjoyed the same range of powers. A distinction must be made between the territorial cities (*Landstädte*) and the free and imperial cities (*Frei- und Reichsstädte*). In both cases the relationship between the lord and the city defined the nature of the commune. In the territorial city, the sovereign powers of the lords were the most intense and the powers of the commune the weakest. This did not rule out a considerable degree of power. Some of the largest cities in the Empire (Prague, Munich, Vienna) were territorial cities, while a number of others, especially in the north, became virtual inde-

pendent powers. Bremen was considered powerful enough to have received a summons to the *Reichstag*, an honour usually reserved for the imperial cities alone. But the vast majority of territorial towns and cities in the Empire were fairly weak dependent communities, serving a broader territorial unit and thus subject to the legal, political and economic manipulation of the local lord. By far the most influential communes in the Empire were the imperial cities, a species of urban settlement whose liberties and privileges inspired Niccolò Machiavelli to write in *The Prince* that the 'cities of Germany enjoy unrestricted freedom, they control only limited territory, and obey the emperor only when they want to'. Unlike the territorial city, the greatest of the imperial cities (which included, among others, Nuremberg, Ulm, Schwäbisch Hall, Augsburg and Rothenburg) did not have an intermediate overlord, but rather derived their rights and privileges directly from the emperor. In return for considerable wealth and a promise of allegiance, the German emperors had granted select urban communes a range of liberties. Nuremberg, perhaps the most influential city in the Empire, achieved its independence in this manner, first winning the favour of the emperor in its quarrel with the Hohenzollern castellans, and then progressively amassing a range of rights and prerogatives. Some communes had experienced a different path of evolution, in particular the free cities (*Freie Städte*), the most famous of which were the diocesan capitals along the Rhine (Cologne, Worms, Speyer, Strasbourg), which could claim a degree of independence from their overlords and were thus grouped among the imperial cities, even if this independence was not constitutionally recognized. Moreover, it must be stressed that the imperial cities differered greatly in size and status in the Empire, whatever their institutional or historical similarities. The great cities of Cologne and Nuremberg, for instance, had very little in common with the free city of Zell am Harmersbach, an urban commune with little more than 200 people within its walls.

Late medieval Germany was thus a landscape of disparate powers, from large princely territories to smaller duchies and imperial cities; but for the majority of men and women life was experienced within the confines of a rural parish. Most people, perhaps 85 per cent of the population, lived and worked on the land. Given the sheer number of territorial lords in the Empire,

it is not feasible to describe the typical conditions of life in the rural context or the typical form of political culture. At best, it is possible to identify general trends (Rösener, 1996, pp. 63–83; Scott, 1996, pp. 1–31). First, a clear distinction emerged between the system of rule in place in the western part of Germany (a type of landlordship, *Grundherrschaft*) and those lands east of the River Elbe, where a much more extreme feudal relationship was common (*Gutsherrschaft*). On the eve of the Reformation the subject peasants in Prussia, Pomerania, Mecklenburg and Brandenburg were less free than the peasants in Switzerland, Swabia, Bavaria, or the territories of Franconia. In the west a gradual transformation had taken place. During the medieval period the manorial system had largely disappeared, having been replaced by a weak feudal matrix based on the payment of rents and dues instead of labour services. In addition, many of the tenants had been invested with hereditary rights over the lands they cultivated. By the fifteenth century, in certain regions, some peasant households enjoyed substantial freedoms and considerable wealth. Second, as a result of the changes in economic and political relations, the German lands, especially in the south-west, witnessed the rise of the village commune. The commune (*Gemeinde*) emerged as the political association at the local level, roughly (but not exactly) equivalent to the village itself. Over time, as the lords waned in strength or fell back on regular income from rents and dues, the communes assumed fairly independent powers of rule. Based on the principles of cooperation, peace and neighbourhood, the rural communes became quite powerful units of governance (Wunder, 1986, pp. 33–79). Indeed, in some areas, such as Switzerland, Graubünden, Vorarlberg and the Tyrol, peasant communes were represented at the territorial diets. But even in those regions where the peasants did not have a voice in territorial governance, the very fact of this alternative form of political culture had an effect on the nature of rule.

The social structure of the German lands evolved within this political framework, with each of the Estates, from princes to peasants to urban patricians, laying claim to distinct powers of rule. It could be an unstable mix, and social relations on the eve of the Reformation were in flux (Rabe, 1991, pp. 77–100). In general, the most comprehensive sovereign powers were those

enjoyed by the nobles. Yet the nobility was far from a unified Estate. By the late fifteenth century the leading princes of the realm (electors, dukes and margraves) had emerged as major sovereigns ruling over major states, while the lesser nobility (the imperial knights) had suffered a loss of prestige. No longer central to military affairs or political developments, many of the lesser nobles reacted by turning against the princely state, while others entered into princely service. This was the age of feuding knights, noblemen caught between the economic and political changes of the day. Equally unsettling for the traditional social hierarchy were the developments taking place in the larger urban communes. By the late medieval period, many of Germany's greatest cities were in the hands of a patrician elite, a closed caste of families with most of the wealth and almost total control of governance. As a ruling elite they were exclusive, and as an economic elite, as the Fuggers and the Welsers of Augsburg demonstrated, they could be without equal in the Empire. But this was the urban minority. The majority of people lived under the rule of this patriciate and worked within the town walls – from merchants to artisans, labourers and menial servants. Some were citizens of the city, permanent members of the community with inherited property and fixed employment; but many others were non-citizens, a tolerated underclass with basic civic rights and limited personal possessions. By the fifteenth century, as more and more people migrated from the countryside to the towns, the number of resident non-citizens was on the rise and the divisions between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, were becoming magnified. And the reason for the rise in the urban population was rooted in the changing conditions of rural life, for even the social structure of the agrarian setting was suffering strain. For while it is true, as we have seen, that in certain areas of Germany the peasantry lived under relatively favourable conditions, there was a general trend at work which drove many peasants off the land: the intensification of territorial rule. Faced with the demands of a developing monetary economy, noble landlords reacted by increasing the dues and fees required of their tenants. As they did this, they also restricted the use of the common lands, including the woods, waters and meadows essential to the developing rural communes. In response, the peasants

either moved to the towns and cities or petitioned their landlords for a return to the ancient laws. And on occasion, more ominously, they would rise up in revolt.

Despite the tensions, the rural context remained the bedrock of the German economy; but it was a vast and multiform geography, and there was no uniform or consistent character to the agrarian setting. Aside from some regions of natural uniformity, such as the river valleys of the Rhine, the East Frisian marshlands, or the forest lands stretching from Thuringia to the Palatinate, the economic setting was just as elaborate as the social and political framework. The most a historian can do is identify some very general features. First, the agrarian economy on the eve of the Reformation was still recovering from setbacks suffered during the Middle Ages. The population was increasing, settlements were expanding, and land that had lain fallow and deserted after the Black Death was being reclaimed. This was an age of agricultural development, as the many books of husbandry testify. Second, the price of grain and manufactured goods rose steadily, while the average wage, measured relative to inflation, did not keep pace. People of this century thought they had less to spend on basic household needs than their ancestors (Lutz, 1983, p. 46). But it is difficult to speak of an average wage or a general economic shift that affected the whole of Germany. There were too many different regions with too many different strengths and weaknesses. Most areas were primarily agrarian and were based on the production of cereal crops, especially the lands to the south-west and the holdings east of the Elbe. But other areas, where the land was not suited to crops, had to rely almost exclusively on grazing or dairying. This was the case in the Swiss lands and the Rhaetian Free State, for instance (where English travellers noted how young herdsmen, always in search of valuable fertilizer, carried around manure in their hoods). Great swaths of southern Germany, including Württemberg, Upper Swabia, Franconia and lower Bavaria, were areas of extensive viticulture, and in years when there was a bad yield the local economies suffered. Similarly, in the regions around Lake Constance and Upper Swabia, where the production of linen was paramount, flax was the dominant crop and whole communities relied on its yield. Nor should we forget that this was an age of developed mining and metalworking. The first industrial landscapes dependent upon the

extraction of base metal ores emerged in the mining districts of Thuringia, Tyrol, Bohemia, Salzburg and Hesse (Scott, 1996, pp. 1–25). The number of examples could be multiplied, but the basic point has been made: the economic landscape of Germany was immensely varied and complex, and while rural agriculture remained paramount in importance, there were certain crops and industries that shaped the features of certain regions.

And yet for all the regional diversity (indeed, perhaps because of it) the German lands formed the basis of an intricate network of communication and exchange. At the local level, most of the trade was fairly limited, and to a certain extent the markets were self-sufficient. Germany was crowded with regional markets trading in the basic foodstuffs, grain above all, manufacturing crops and limited industrial goods. But there were much broader constellations as well, some running the length of the Empire (Kießling, 1996, pp. 145–79; Scott and Scribner, 1996, pp. 113–43). In most instances the nucleus of a region of trade was a large urban commune, a town so big that it was unable to provide for itself. To offer a few examples: in order to provide grain for the imperial city of Nuremberg, it was necessary to draw on supplies within a radius of 100 kilometres. To feed the people of Cologne, over 10,000 wagons rumbled through the city gates every year. Areas were shaped and animated by the economic gravity of towns. In the south, Nuremberg and Augsburg dominated, while Strasbourg and Cologne commanded the banks of the Rhine, Magdeburg sat in central Germany, and wealthy Hansa towns such as Bremen, Lübeck and Danzig flourished in the north.

In addition to the urban networks running through the German lands were the vast constellations of regional trade and industry. The main commodity of the age was grain, and by the sixteenth century extensive markets ran throughout Germany. There was a concentration of activity in the south-west, a line of exchange that joined Strasbourg and Basle with Frankfurt and Cologne, while to the north the Hanseatic cities engaged in the international market, shipping grain to Holland, Flanders, England and Normandy. Trade in wine reached similar dimensions. The Neckar district in the south encompassed an area reaching from Lake Constance north to the river Main and east to the borders of Bavaria. And yet this was a fairly modest range of commerce compared to the enormous distances covered by

the Rhine trade, an enterprise which shipped cargo as far afield as Scotland, Norway, Sweden, England and Russia. Of course, Germany had the advantage of many navigable rivers joining the interior with ports of trade – most famous of all, perhaps, being the Rhine, a waterway that linked Freiburg, Basle, Strasbourg and Cologne, and reaching, through the Main, to the markets of Bamberg, Würzburg and Nuremberg. It also sat at the centre of the many land routes intersecting the Empire, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, the Levant to the Atlantic. The realm was immense, and in general there was great variety in the German lands, regions as different in kind as foreign nations, but there was also a complex web of transport and communication which created something of a whole.

Another force drawing the land and its people together was the developing sense of German identity (Dickens, 1974, pp. 1–48). In part it was pure fabrication, the self-serving fictions of the princely courts. But there was a pronounced note of a more general German nationalism in the late medieval period, and it would prove crucial to the spread of the Reformation movement. In its origins it was aggressively xenophobic, directed at the Italians, the French, and above all the papacy, and it would draw on legal and political precedent for support. When Lupold of Bebenburg drafted his *Tractate on the Laws of the Kingdom and the Empire* (1341), for instance, he appealed to written law to demonstrate the independence of the Empire from the pope. In his *De Concordantia Catholica* (1433) Nicholas of Cusa wrote in similar terms, rejecting the pope's claims to sovereignty and declaring that the emperor had been appointed by God to preserve the faith. The earliest expressions of German nationalism approached the theme from this perspective. The essential aim was to demonstrate that the German lands at the heart of the Empire had a common foundation and their own sovereign destiny. As notions of identity developed, the sentiment found voice in a wide variety of ways, including the run of prophecies common to the medieval age and the corpus of grievance literature assembled in the fifteenth century. *The Book of One Hundred Chapters* (*c.*1500), for example, referred to the Germans as the chosen people and the German language as mankind's tongue before Babel. A number of prominent scholars wrote works in this vein, including Jacob Wimpfeling, whose

Germany; *In Honour of the City of Strasbourg* (1501) was a paean to German culture, and Johannes Trithemius, the author of the *Illustrious Men of Germany* (1495), a biographical collection of pious and learned figures. But perhaps the most powerful voice was that of the Humanist Conrad Celtis, the poet laureate, who spent much of his working life gathering and editing texts of German history, including the *Germania* of Tacitus, rediscovered in 1455 and soon to become the foundation text of the nationalist movement. Celtis believed that the German Nation would not fulfil its true potential until it sloughed off the 'yoke of slavery' imposed by 'foreign barbarian kings' and united in common purpose. 'Behold the frontiers of Germany,' were his words during a public address in Ingolstadt, 'gather together her torn and shattered lands!' (Dickens, 1974, p. 35).

As the nation evolved, a new sense of secular identity and spirit of mind evolved, a type of intellectual awakening often associated with the Renaissance. And while there is no doubt that the cultural revolution in Italy found its supporters in the north as well, the German movement was more than just the imitation of Italian civilization. A distinct type of intellectual culture had evolved north of the Alps, and it would be this fateful combination of spiritualism, Humanism and scholasticism that created the conditions for the Reformation. This is not to suggest, however, that German culture was essentially different from the rest of Europe or that it was immune to broader influences. Rudolf Agricola believed that his countrymen were the equals of any scholars in Europe, and he measured their worth in terms familiar to the values of the Renaissance. 'I have the brightest hope,' he wrote, 'that we one day shall wrest from haughty Italy the reputation for classical expression which it has nearly monopolised, so to speak, and lay claim to it ourselves, and free ourselves from the reproach of ignorance and being called unlearned and inarticulate barbarians; and that our Germany will be so cultured and literate that Latium will not know Latin any better' (Spitz, 1996, p. 210).

By the start of the sixteenth century the intellectual culture of the German lands had reached a high level of sophistication. The Empire was home to numerous universities, sixteen in all, with the medieval foundations in Prague, Vienna, Heidelberg,

Erfurt and Cologne joined by more recent creations in Tübingen, Basle, Freiburg, Frankfurt an der Oder and Wittenberg. Inside the universities the faculties were coming to terms with the new trends of thought challenging the intellectual order. Many schools of theology were divided between an older approach, the *via antiqua*, a system derived in great part from the work of the great medieval thinkers, and the modern way, the *via moderna*, a philosophical approach which tended to question the traditional assumptions and place its trust in empirical knowledge and personal experience. Meanwhile, in the arts faculties, the pursuit of the liberal arts (*studia humanitatis*) was transforming the themes and objects of serious inquiry. The movement sharpened the skills of the German scholars, for it was emphatically philological and literary in nature, and it demanded technical improvement; yet it had a wider application, and it had an impact on more than just the halls of higher learning. It worked a transformation in other areas of culture as well, including the realm of public governance, with its impact on the rules of diplomacy and the reform of law, and the more private spheres of life, where issues of conduct and discipline were paramount. Indeed, in the German lands, the effects of the intellectual movements of this age were felt most strongly in the settings where the conditions of life were most vital and complex: the urban communes, for instance, imperial cities like Nuremberg, where Willibald Pirckheimer balanced his work as a translator of Greek texts with his duties as councillor, diplomat and military leader. By the eve of the Reformation, these German cities were at the heart of an intellectual culture as advanced as any in Europe. It is no acccident that the first extant representation of the earth in the form of a globe was designed and executed in Pirckheimer's city of Nuremberg, or that the first edition of the century's most important work of science, the *De revolutionibus* (1543) of Nicolaus Copernicus, was first published within its walls. Nor should we forget that the printing-press, perhaps the most important invention of the age, was first put to use in the fifteenth century in the German city of Mainz.

The evolution of intellectual culture also gave rise to a heightened critical awareness. The late fifteenth century was marked by a growing sense of unease and uncertainty in the German lands. Critics of the secular realm claimed that Germany had never been in a worse condition, pointing to the

widespread practice of usury and the growth of monopolies, the lack of morals and religion infecting the social order, and the rampant corruption crippling the state. A note of distress was sounded. In the predictions and prognostications of the age the authors continually made reference to the poor state of affairs and the need for public reform and renewal. One of the most influential publications in this vein was Joseph Grünpeck's *Speculum* (1508), a work which borrowed from traditions of medieval prophecy while directing its comments at contemporary affairs. For Grünpeck, it was clear that there was 'a pitiful disintegration of Christendom, destruction of good customs and laws, misery of all estates, raging of plagues, inconstancy in all things, dreadful events befalling everyone' (Strauss, 1995, p. 12). Some authors followed in kind, supporting their predictions of floods, feuds, social unrest and political revolution by drawing on the works of medieval astrologers such as Johann Lichtenberger and Regiomontanus. Other authors resurrected the legends associated with the advent of a conquering hero, tales of a reforming emperor in the mould of Friedrich Barbarossa, who would wake from a sleep of centuries and reform Church and State. Still other authors added to the literature of grievance by drafting manifestos and proposals for imperial renewal. The most influential tract written in this vein was probably the *Reformatio Sigismundi* (1438), a work which combined a sharp critical awareness with a traditional sense of prophetic foreboding. The tract claimed that God had withdrawn his grace and the Empire was gripped by corruption and decay. The only remedy was thorough reform, first of the Church and indeed the spiritual life *tout court*, and then of the secular estate, for the relations of power in the Empire had left it paralysed. 'What can a king do nowadays?' reads the *Reformatio*. 'He cannot stop wars; no one obeys him; the imperial cities, seeing that there is no sovereign in the land, do as they please. Thus, the empire falls sick . . .' (Strauss, 1971, p. 18).

Even more critical than the dissatisfaction with the state of secular society was the sense of grievance directed against the Church. The Empire had a long and unique history of uneasy relations with Rome, for unlike the situation in other lands of Europe, the papacy had not made substantial concessions in order to appease the secular powers of Germany. The result, as everyone seemed to realize, was that no other land was as richly

exploited by the papacy as the German Nation. And when this realization was combined with the unhappy memories of the numerous conflicts between the emperors and the powerful popes of the medieval period, it is not difficult to understand why the Church became a natural target for criticism. Moreover, by the fifteenth century the reform proposals of the medieval era had assumed a much more nationalistic tenor (Dickens, 1974, pp. 1–48). The ideas first voiced by the Franciscan spiritualists remained alive, just as the proposals of the conciliarists surfaced on occasion, but by the fifteenth century most critics believed that the imperial Church (*Reichskirche*) was unique in its corruption and would require a remedy unique in its approach. The earliest proposals still thought in fairly general terms, and for men such as Lupold of Bebenburg, Nicholas of Cusa and Gregor Heimburg the constant refrain was greater distance from Rome. With time, however, the critics recognized the extent of the problems and a number of substantial reform manifestos emerged as a result. The *Reformatio Sigismundi*, for instance, listed the failings of the Church, beginning with a traditional attack against the greed of the papacy, and moved on to a much more detailed criticism of the quality of the Church and its servants. But the most striking testimony to the state of antagonism were the successive *Grievances of the German Nation* (*Gravamina nationis Germanicae*), the long lists of criticisms written by the Estates and directed against Rome. Dating from the early fifteenth century, the grievances detailed the perceived failings of the Church and the 'oppressive burdens and abuses imposed on and committed against the Empire by the Holy See in Rome' (Strauss, 1971, p. 52).

In the final decades of the fifteenth century the state of the Church had become a matter of great urgency. Moreover, it was clear that the issues would only multiply if the Church did not accept the need for reform. By the time the Estates gathered at the imperial diet in Worms in 1521, the catalogue of grievances numbered 102, ranging from complaints about the 'unqualified, unlearned, and unfit persons' taking up benefices to the legal and fiscal misdealings of the papacy. But the diet of Worms would not be remembered for the criticisms directed against the Church by the German Nation. History would remember Worms for the criticisms voiced by a professor of theology from

the University of Wittenberg. For at the diet the newly elected king Charles V would not only meet the German Estates for the first time, he would also encounter – for the first and only time – the most powerful German voice of the age, the Saxon theologian Martin Luther.