Territories and Estates.

The Holy Roman Empire was not a highly centralised state like most countries today. Instead it was divided into dozens – eventually hundreds of individual entities governed by kings, dukes, counts, bishops, abbots and other rulers – collectively known as princes. There were some areas ruled directly by the emperor. At no time could the emperor simply issue decrees and govern autonomously over the empire. To a greater extent than in other medieval kingdoms such as France and England, the Emperors were unable to gain much control over the lands that they formally owned. To secure their own position, Emperors were forced to grant more and more autonomy to local rulers.

The number of territories in the Empire was considerable, rising to about 300 later on. Many of these “little states” covered no more than a handful of square kms, so the Empire was often called “patchwork carpet”.

The supranational, multiethnic structure of these feudal states made perfect sense to the people who lived in them and shaped their development. Indeed in the period 1450-1555 the Holy Roman Empire was a dynamic political unit of crucial importance to the growth of the Habsburg empire and the Protestant Reformation.

People were not living in “Germany” – they were living in their particular feudal state in the Holy Roman Empire.
Imperial Estates and Imperial Diets and Imperial Courts.

Diets or meetings were a part of the structure of the Holy Roman Empire going back to the time of Charlemagne. The emperor would call a meeting with his most important princes, seeking their opinions and advice.

When Frederick III needed the dukes to finance a war against Hungary in 1486, he faced a demand from the united dukes for their participation in an Imperial Court. Frederick’s son finally convened a Diet at Worms (in SW Germany on the Rhine) in 1495 and the king and dukes agreed on a set of legal acts to give the Empire some formal structure.

Firstly they set up Imperial Estates.

An entity was considered an Imperial estate if it had no authority above it except the Holy Roman Empire. These estates were –

1. Territories ruled by a hereditary nobleman such as a prince, archduke, duke or count.

2. Territories in which secular authority was held by a clerical dignitary such as an archbishop, bishop or abbot. This territory was called a “prince-bishopric” e.g Cologne, Trier and Mainz.

3. Free Imperial cities, which were subject only to the jurisdiction of the Emperor.

Then the Imperial Diet was set up.

This was to be the legislative body of the Holy Roman Empire and was to consist of the members of the Imperial Estates. Not
all members had equal voting rights. The diet became the most important site of communication, conflict and negotiation between the emperor and the estates.

The diet was summoned by the emperor only when needed; sessions were held in the leading imperial cities of the south. When the diet met, the emperor presided, flanked by six of the electors, with the archbishop of Trier seated directly in front of the imperial throne. Along the sides of the hall sat the representatives of the imperial princes and facing the emperor at the back of the hall were the representatives of the imperial free cities.
The Imperial Diet in Worms in 1495 marked the establishment of other important changes. The diet outlawed all private wars and noble feuding and established the Imperial Chamber Court to replace violence with arbitration. They also voted to establish a new form of direct taxation the “common penny”, to fund the Imperial Chamber Court. The tax was collected from all male inhabitants, regardless of status.

In 1497, emperor Maximilian I established the Aulic Court as a court of the king or emperor run by 21 of his appointees.

Imperial Circles.

Imperial Circles were regional groupings of most of the various states of the Empire for the purposes of defence, taxation, coinage, peace-keeping and public security.

In 1500, 6 Imperial Circles were established. This was increased to 10 in 1512 and these remained largely unchanged until 1790. A number of territories remained unencircled, notably those of Bohemia, the Swiss Confederacy, The Netherlands and the Italian territories. The Imperial Diet was largely ignored by these unencircled territories.

Each circle had a Circle Diet but not all circles were included in the Imperial Diet.
A map of the Imperial Circles - 1560
By 1500 in the Imperial Estates there were about a dozen big cities with over 10,000 inhabitants each, and about 20 with between 2,000 and 10,000 people. Visitors to the empire from Italy, such as Machiavelli, noted the size and wealth of these great cities.

Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), Francis I of France (1494-1547) and The Reformation.
Charles V was a Habsburg. His grandfather was Ferdinand of Ferdinand and Isabella fame. Charles inherited Austria and other lands in central Europe, he inherited the crowns of Castille and Aragon and is sometimes referred to as the first king of Spain.
This resulted in the closest Europe would come to a universal monarchy. There were widespread fears of this happening and he had many enemies. His reign was dominated by war.

There was the war with France led by Francis I. Francis had tried to enlist the help of Henry VIII at the Field of the Cloth of Gold for a campaign in Italy, but was not successful. Francis was captured by the forces of Charles V at the battle of Pavia but freed 12 months later after relinquishing the Duchy of Burgandy and the Charolais region of France and also renouncing his Italian ambitions.
At the battle of Pavia, Tercios were used. These were the first professional army in Europe and were very successful.

Officers of a Tercio.

In the novel Don Quixote (1605), the prisoner Ruy Perez recounts high points in the Mediterranean struggle between the Spanish Tercios fleets and the Ottoman and Barbary fleets at the battle of Lepanto (1571). The battle of Lepanto involved more than 400 vessels and was a decisive defeat of the Ottomans. It was also the last major naval battle fought almost entirely
between rowing vessels – the galleys and similar. The battle was in essence “an infantry battle on floating platforms”.

To save France from the grasp of Charles V, Francis formed close contacts with the Ottomans. The alliance has been called “the first diplomatic alliance between a Christian and a non-Christian empire”. This “unholy alliance” also aided Protestantism in Germany in its struggles against Charles V.

Francis I and Suleiman the Magnificent. Painting by Titian 1530.

The Ottomans captured most of Hungary by 1526.

Charles’ Spanish domains were the chief source of his power and wealth. He sanctioned the conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires. The resulting vast expansion of territory and the flow of South American silver to Castille had long term effects on Spain.
After 34 years of energetic rule he was physically exhausted. He abdicated and retired to a monastery where he died 2 years later in 1558.

His son became Phillip II of Spain – the ruler responsible for the famous Spanish Armada and who married Queen Mary I of England.

Francis I was also noted for his care of the elderly Leonardo da Vinci who supposedly died in his arms in the Château du Clos Lucé at Amboise in the Loire valley.

**The Protestant Reformation.**

The Protestant Reformation stemmed from the defiance of Martin Luther. In 1517 Luther sent his “95 Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” to the Archbishop of Mainz. He may also have nailed copies to church doors in Wittenberg.
In time Luther led a Protestant church and many princes of the empire converted. This resulted in conflict between a number of princes and Charles V. The princes formed themselves into a defensive league called the Schmalkaldic League (named after a town in Thuringia). Charles was unable to prevent the spread of Protestantism and he was ultimately forced to concede to the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 in which the empire was divided on confessional lines. Rulers were allowed to choose either Lutheranism or Roman Catholicism as the official confession of their state. Calvinism was not allowed until the Peace of Westphalia.

Lutherism was officially recognised in the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, and Calvinism the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. Other Protestant confessions existed illegally within the Empire.
Confessional differences - 1560

The Thirty Years’ War.

Between 1618 and 1648 there was one of the longest, most destructive, notoriously bloody and complex conflicts in European history.

After the peace of Augsberg, 1555, the empire enjoyed relative peace for the next 60 years. In the east the Ottoman Turks had conquered most of Hungary by 1526 but they were gradually
pushed back. In the west the Rhineland increasingly fell under French influence. After the Dutch war against Spain the Netherlands were allowed to leave the empire.

The catholic church started forcibly reasserting control in Austria and Hungary causing anxiety among the Protestant princes.

The war began when the newly elected Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, tried to impose religious uniformity on his domains, forcing Roman Catholicism on its peoples. These events caused widespread fears throughout northern and central Europe, and triggered the Protestant Bohemians living in the dominion of Habsburg Austria to revolt against their nominal ruler.

Foreign powers, including France and Sweden, intervened and strengthened those fighting imperial power. They seized considerable territory for themselves.

The standard presentation of the war as a religious struggle is misleading. The combatants do not divide neatly along confessional lines. Catholic France backed Protestant Sweden financially from 1631 and militarily from 1635. Saxony and many Lutheran princes supported the catholic Habsburg emperor for most of the conflict.

The 30 years’ war ended with the peace of Westphalia in 1648. The treaty gave the territories almost complete independence. The Swiss Confederation and the Northern Netherlands left the empire. The Habsburg emperors focused on consolidating their own estates in Austria and elsewhere.
To secure their own position, Emperors were forced to grant more and more autonomy to local rulers. The process began with the Investiture Controversy (ended in 1122) and more or less concluded with the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, at the end of the 30 year’s war.

At the battle of Vienna (1683) the army of the Holy Roman Empire decisively defeated a large Ottoman army, ending the western expansion of the Ottoman advance and leading to the eventual dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in Europe.

The long conflict of the 30 years’ war resulted in the empire never recovering its former strength. However it did prove surprisingly successful in resolving internal tensions and defending itself against external attack until the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars forced its final dissolution in 1806.

During the 30 years’ war the Duke of Bavaria was given the right to vote as the 8th elector and the Duke of Brunswick-Luneburg (Hanover) became the 9th elector. A candidate for election would be expected to offer concessions of land or money to the electors to ensure their vote. No law required him to be catholic but no protestant was ever elected. To what degree he had to be German was a matter for dispute. During the Middle Ages, some kings and emperors were not of German origin. Since the Renaissance, German heritage was regarded as vital.
The Renaissance – 14th to 17th Century.
The Printing Revolution.

Johannes Gutenberg, 1398-1468, was a goldsmith, printer and publisher of Mainz in the Holy Roman Empire who developed a mechanical movable-type printing process. The mass-production of the movable-type, the use of oil-based ink, adjustable moulds and the use of screw presses allowed him to mass-produce printed books that were economically viable for printers and readers alike. This printing revolution is widely regarded as the most important invention of the second millennium.

It played a key role in the development of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. It introduced mass communication which permanently altered the structure of society. The sharp increase in literacy broke the monopoly of the literate elite on education and learning and bolstered the emerging middle class.
Johannes Gutenberg – 1398 to 1468.
Movable type.
Gutenberg Bible – Printed in the 1450s.
Spread of printing presses with movable type 1450 -1500
Modern Period.

By the 1700s, the Habsburgs were chiefly dependent on their hereditary lands to counter the rise of Prussia. The Habsburgs were embroiled in various European conflicts, such as the War of the Spanish Succession, the War of the Polish Succession and the war of the Austrian Succession. The German dualism between Austria and Prussia dominated the Empire’s history after 1740.
Holy Roman Empire – 1750.

**Austria-Prussia Rivalry.**

On the death of her father, Emperor Charles VI in 1740, Maria Theresa of Austria had assumed rule of the Habsburg dominions. This was objected to by King Frederick of Prussia who launched an invasion of Austrian controlled Silesia. Frederick defeated the Austrian troops in 1742 and Maria Theresa had to cede the bulk of the Silesian lands to Prussia. Frederick invaded Bohemia in 1744 and had success in more battles. Maria Theresa’s husband, Francis I, became Holy Roman Emperor in 1745 and thus Maria Theresa became an empress. The battles between Prussia and Austria continued with other countries also joining in. However during the Napoleonic wars they joined forces to fight France.
French Revolutionary Wars and Final Dissolution.

From 1792 onwards, revolutionary France was intermittently at war with various parts of the empire.

Between 1795 and 1814 “medialisations” took place in the Holy Roman Empire. This was the process of annexing the lands of one imperial state to another. Further there was a “secularisation” process in which the temporal power of the ecclesiastical ruler, such as a bishop or an abbot, over a secular territory was removed.

The empire was dissolved on 6 August 1806, when the last Holy Roman Emperor, Francis II, abdicated, following a military defeat by the French under Napoleon at Austerlitz in 1805. The victory by Napoleon of a larger Russian and Austrian army is regarded as his greatest military achievement.
Carl von Dalberg receives Napoleon in front of the archepiscopal palace at Aschaffenburg in September 1806.

Some observations by Peter Wilson on the Empire and the EU.

“…medieval history has been plundered for personalities and images that could be appropriated to articulate present-day agendas. Since 1977, several exhibitions have promoted the Staufers as transnational European rulers whose Empire incorporated ‘regions of innovation’ transmitting culture, trade and ideas between Germany and Italy. Above all, Charlemagne has come to personify the links between the Empire and post-1945 aspirations for a united Europe, whereas other emperors, notably Charles V, remain viewed in national terms….”

“Conservative politicians favouring European integration found the Empire an attractive model with which to underpin their arguments.”

“…alleged parallels include the Empire’s conciliatory tendencies, its internal rule of law, and its tolerance of different identities, which provided ‘an ideal framework for flourishing and diverse cultures’ whilst inhibiting the development of modern nationalism ‘that has spread so much evil across Europe and the world’.”

“Europeans still generally conceive their past through the prism of nineteenth-century nation states.”
“Several leading German historians have also expressed alarm at their colleagues’ equation of the Empire with the EU, believing this could stir ‘latent fears of German hegemonic ambitions’, and mean that ‘German enthusiasm for Europe will be misinterpreted as a cloak for German national interests’.

“….perspectives are bound by the understanding of the state as a single, centralised monopoly of legitimate power over a recognised territory. …Such states are supposedly hermetically sealed containers, with their population free to decide internally how they are governed, whilst acting internationally with one voice through their national government. [However] wide aspects of daily and national life are clearly beyond the effective control of most governments, which are increasingly vulnerable to global economy, popular, technological and environmental forces.”

“It is far from clear that a recovery of ‘national sovereignty’… would restore citizen’s confidence in national governments controlled largely by colourless politicians widely criticised for being out of touch with local and individual needs.”

“The empire’s history is a reminder that decentralised political systems are not necessarily peaceful in their intentions. Like the Empire, the EU does not possess its own armed forces, nor has it waged wars, yet decentralisation ensures a significant proportion of wealth continues to be spent on defence as each member remains fully armed.”

“Although celebrated… as having peaceful intentions, the 18th century Empire was the most heavily armed part of Europe, and it proved incapable of preventing individual members, such as Austria or Saxony, from waging their own wars outside its frontiers.”
“Both the EU and the Empire have lacked a single capital or a clear political core.”

“The EU displays clear differences from the Empire in that its members retain the formal legal equality accorded to sovereign states….By contrast, autonomy in the Empire was embedded in a hierarchy defined by status and differing constitutional rights.”

“The Empire appears to have done rather better than the EU in fostering attachment amongst its inhabitants, who valued it as a framework sustaining local and particular liberties, and in respecting diversity, autonomy and difference.”

“So some political scientists now argue that decentralised, fragmented systems offer different, perhaps even better ways to forge consensus by ‘legitimation through deliberation’. Consensus becomes a more open-ended, ongoing process of bargaining between interested parties, rather than a periodic assignment of mandates to elected representatives.”

“….conflict resolution in the Empire was about workable compromises, not questions of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Like current practice within the EU, the Empire relied on peer pressure, which was often more effective and less costly than coercion.”

‘However, our review of the Empire has also revealed that these structures are far from perfect and could fail, even catastrophically. Rather than providing a blueprint for today’s Europe, the history of the Empire suggests ways in which we might understand current problems more clearly.”