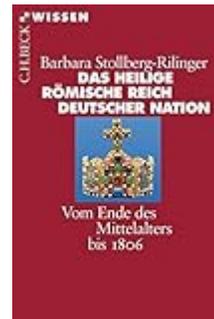




**Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger.** *Das Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation: Vom Ende des Mittelalters bis 1806.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2006. 133 S. EUR 7.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-406-53599-4.



**Reviewed by** Tryntje Helfferich (History Department, Ohio State University, Lima)

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## The Structure of the Holy Roman Empire

In this volume Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger has put together a straightforward, clear summary of the history of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation during the early modern period. Stollberg-Rilinger has become well known as a historian of political ritual and symbol, but her focus in this book falls neither on ceremony nor on society and culture. Instead, she takes a more traditional approach, emphasizing the empire's political history. She argues that while the medieval Holy Roman Empire was a disparate union of states held together principally by bonds of personal loyalty to the emperor, in the early modern period the empire also took on "new forms" (p. 8). Thus though the empire retained its nature as a personal and traditional union, after around 1500, she argues, it also developed important and enduring institutional structures that would define the empire as a federation (*Verband*) until its demise in 1806. The nature and development of these federal institutions is thus the very foundation of this book. In particular, this emphasis shapes the seven central chronological chapters, which carefully trace the empire's political and constitutional developments from 1495 to 1806. Only in the first two introductory chapters and the final summary

chapter (all three of which are excellent in their assessment of the eternally tricky problem of what, exactly, the empire was) does her current expertise shine. Here she clearly states the role of tradition, consensus, public ritual, and political perception in linking the various portions of the empire together throughout its history, and stresses the importance of both the formal ties of federal institutions and the more informal ties of tradition and loyalty in shaping the early modern empire.

Stollberg-Rilinger's stress on the institutions of the empire is an excellent way to limit the overwhelming scope of the empire's early modern history, but it also causes her some difficulties. Most noticeable is how it leads her to a geographic focus on only those states of the empire that were bound together by their involvement in multiple imperial institutions, but particularly in certain core institutions such as the Reichstag. This decision minimizes the significance of those states that maintained a more traditional feudal relationship to the empire, those that participated in some but not all imperial institutions, or those that were not "German" (a term she does not define), since she argues that "the most

important unity-building imperial institutions ... by and large only extended to the German members of the empire” (p. 13). Thus states peripheral to the “German” core, including the Netherlands, northern Italy, the Swiss Confederation, and Savoy, receive only a tantalizingly brief summary in chapter 2, despite the fact that many would have self-identified as members of the empire or of the “German Nation” well into the early modern period.

Stollberg-Rilinger’s depiction of the empire’s history puts her firmly in the camp of those modern scholars (such as Maximilian Lanzinner) who see the empire as a well-functioning and successful federation built on consensus and a careful balancing of liberty and unity, rather than as the divided, awkward political monstrosity described by many nineteenth-century scholars.[1] Furthermore, she argues, the empire was extraordinarily efficient at responding to changing situations, modifying and reforming its very structures in order to meet new challenges. Even the enormous divisiveness of the Reformation, she writes, could only temporarily degrade this well-balanced federation, since after the Peace of Westphalia the empire emerged not broken and feeble, as some past scholars had argued, but with even stronger institutions and a more unified sense of purpose than before. Yet ironically, it was this very success, she claims, that led to the empire’s final self-inflicted downfall. The Peace of Westphalia, by legally reinforcing the liberties and rights of the individual imperial states, she argues, eventually allowed the empire to become ruinously polarized, and by the late eighteenth century the larger states, particularly Brandenburg-Prussia and Austria, began to weaken the imperial structure by using its institutions as mere tools in their political rivalries. Thus the empire fell not because of internal religious conflict or external threats; it fell only because its most important members finally lost interest in it.

Stollberg-Rilinger’s discussion of the Reformation is also significant, for it shows her adherence to the historiographical school that sees the process of confessionalization as linked to that of state-building and “modernization” within the individual territories of the empire. But while this book presents numerous such arguments of interest to historians, this book is not an academic monograph. Instead, this volume is directed at the curious general reader, and here it succeeds admirably. For example, this book traces the development of the name of the empire over the ages, it explains the shifts in imperial institutions over time, it explains the structural effects of the Reformation on the empire, and it includes little details that the average reader might appreciate, such as the difference between the emperor and the “king of the Romans,” and the name of last emperor to allow himself to be crowned by the pope (Charles V). Furthermore, her explanation of the material shows a steady appreciation of how to write in way that eschews the usual academic German stuffiness in favor of a style easily accessible to the general public. Cheap, concise, and clearly written, this book should serve nicely as an introduction for anyone interested in the history of the early modern empire. Its focus on the “German” core of the empire should also certainly help it appeal to those members of the German or Austrian public who simply want to know more about the history of their own region, and reading it would certainly benefit any who might not otherwise have appreciated the importance of the Holy Roman Empire, or who, influenced by old textbooks, might have thought it to be nothing but a colossal historical failure.

#### Note

[1]. Maximilian Lanzinner, *Friedenssicherung und politische Einheit des Reiches unter Kaiser Maximilian II (1564-1576)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1993).

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