

Review of *Heart of Europe: A History of the Holy Roman Empire*, by Peter H. Wilson (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016). 1008 pages, \$39.95.

Andrew Reeves, Middle Georgia State University

Anyone who has ever looked at the wall map of Europe in a history classroom will have seen the Holy Roman Empire sitting astride Central Europe and Northern Italy for much of medieval and early modern history. But when we push a bit and ask what this Empire was, we find ourselves

falling back to Voltaire's quip that it was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire or (for those of us who teach surveys) that it was a collection of states in Central Europe. We know that it was no modern nation-state, but that it endured for just over a millennium from Charlemagne's coronation by Pope Leo III on 25 December 800 to its dissolution on 6 August 1806. Peter H. Wilson manages to tell the story of this entity in about eight hundred surprisingly readable pages.

The Holy Roman Empire is a difficult topic. Unlike other polities in Western Europe, the Empire was the precursor to no modern nation-state and so it is harder to write with a particular *telos* in mind. Wilson solves this dilemma by eschewing a straightforward chronological narrative (The reader who wants this approach can follow the fifty-three page timeline in the back of the book.) Rather, he examines the empire via themes, with the book divided into four parts: Ideal, Belonging, Governance, and Society. This approach can sometimes be difficult. If the reader does not already know the basic ligaments of the history, people or places referred to in, for example, "Ideals" might not come up again until hundreds of pages later (or might only appear in the timeline). Nevertheless, this approach does allow the history to be divided into more manageable chunks, which keeps the reader from being overly daunted by a thousand years of history.

One of Wilson's great strengths is that he takes much of the German-language historiography of the Empire over the last four decades and makes it accessible to Anglophones. Gone is the view of German nationalists that the Empire was a failure on the road to German nationhood and the view of Italian nationalists that it inhibited Italian national ambitions until the *Risorgimento*. In its place, we have the realization that although the Empire was not a centralized nation-state with a sovereign exercising top-down authority, it was never meant to serve as such. Rather, it functioned by consensus and cooperation and indeed, Wilson suggests that elements of its decentralized form of government could serve as a model for supranational entities like the European Union of our own day.

Wilson also points out that the Empire had institutions throughout its German-speaking regions that endured through the end. The postal service of Thurn and Taxis familiar to the readers of Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* makes an appearance as Europe's first postal service—hardly reflective of an Empire that was a dysfunctional hybrid. Likewise, its courts of highest appeal, the *Reichskammergericht* and *Reichshofrat*, may have dragged on with the cases on their dockets, but in so doing, Wilson shows us, they forced all parties to come to consensus. Along the way we learn that even in Northern Italy (which usually ceases to be part of the Empire on maps of Europe after the sixteenth century) appeals to the *Reichshofrat* continued through the end of the Empire, and until 1797 the Emperor called upon the service of his Italian vassals (225-6).

It is a truism that after the Peace of Westphalia and the Hapsburg defeat in the Thirty Years' War the Empire remained only as a collection of territories. Wilson puts this commonplace to rest by showing the Empire's strength *qua* Empire in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century, framing the wars with the Ottoman Empire not as wars of Hapsburg Austria, but as wars of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

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If there is a weakness, it is that by emphasizing the continued functionality of the Empire through the eighteenth century Wilson downplays the extent to which Prussia and Austria increasingly acted as sovereign nations even within the Imperial framework by the eighteenth century—although discussing the War of Austrian Succession as a civil war within the Holy Roman Empire is a useful corrective to a tendency to treat it purely as a conflict between nation states.

The thematic framework of the book is strongest in the first three sections, Ideal, Belonging and Governance, but by the second half Wilson ends up falling into a more narrative style of history in spite of himself. The chapter on Justice (603-54) thus feels like a jarring interruption as what had been an account of the eighteenth century briefly returns to the Empire's Carolingian and Ottonian beginnings before eventually resuming its narrative flow and bringing us to the end of the Empire and the final chapter entitled Afterlife, explaining how the German-speaking states dealt with the radical changes of Napoleon's destruction of the Empire.

Twenty-two maps allow the reader to make sense of most of the place names occurring in the text, and three appendices of Emperors, Kings of the Romans and Kings of Italy, respectively, are an excellent supplement to the Ottonian, Hohenstaufen, and Habsburg genealogies appearing in the front matter.

All told, Wilson's work is a qualified success, allowing an English-speaking reader to make sense of an empire that covered much of the heart of Europe and which, *pace* Voltaire, if not holy or Roman, did indeed serve as a functional Empire.

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