

Issues for german emperors 1300-1500



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What issues did German Emperors have to confront and how did they deal with them?

The German Emperors had to confront many problems from 1300-1500, which highlighted the lack of dynastic power they held. The dualism of the monarch and estates in the German Empire is amplified throughout the fifteenth century. Issues included the need for the kings to establish a dynastic power strong enough for them to rule effectively as emperors, including domestic relations, foreign policy and relations with the Papacy. The stability of the German monarchy depended on the cooperation achieved with the territorial princes, especially with the prince-electors. Finances were constantly a key political weakness for the emperor's, they were hamstrung in having to depend upon their patrimonies and acquisitions for money and military support. Additionally, there were concerns of members of the *Reich* to establish public order and the rule of law within Germany. It is important to note that emperors during this time were not expected to state-build, but to build ecclesiastical structures and maintain peace as the feudal overlord. This essay will look at the political set up of becoming emperor and the challenges the Golden Bull caused after 1356. This essay will focus on specific emperors Charles IV, his son Sigismund, and Frederick III, looking at some of the challenges they individually faced and how they dealt with them.

To become emperor of Germany one could not inherit the role but had to be elected. The selection for an emperor was based on criteria of an 'ideal' king, using liturgical texts and saints as an example. The lay princes of the Empire elected the new emperor, with the electoral body consisting of three

ecclesiastical and four lay princes which had been established since 1273. Charles IV was the first King of Bohemia to wear the German and imperial crown, on return of being crowned Holy Roman emperor, Charles IV in 1356 created an imperial constitutional document known as the Golden Bull. An objective of the document was to weaken papal interference in German politics and to strengthen ties between the electors within the empire. The seven electors held full control of the position of Emperor, the successful candidate would be elected by the majority and once elected could immediately exercise royal rights. Strengthening the distance between German politics and papal interference the pope's claim to examine rival candidates and to approve the election was ignored. The document outlined that the territories belonging to the lay electors were to become hereditary, and that the vote was now attached to the possession of these land, which were never to be divided. The new electoral body remained at seven which included the archbishops of Cologne, Mainz, and Trier, the Saxon vote was given to the Wittenberg house, another to the count palatine of the Rhine, the margrave of Brandenburg and one to king of Bohemia (in which case Charles was himself king)[1]. When the throne was vacant the duke of Saxony and the count palatine would act as regents, the Golden Bull therefore excluded the pope's claim to act of vicar of the empire[2]. Concessions were given to the electoral princes, they received sovereign rights including the right to issue coinage, impose tolls and build castles, treason, however, remained a penalty. Cities attempting to become autonomous were restricted upon, which subsequently had long-lasting effects for the future German middle classes. In theory these benefits were limited to the seven electors, although in practice, all secular territorial

princes quickly adopted them[3]. The territorial princes continued to regard their land as a patrimony, yet partitions were frequent, and primogeniture rarely prevailed before the sixteenth century. Partition was not a threat to the ecclesiastical territories, which did not have a dynastic succession this however stopped the ecclesiastical powers from increasing their power in competition with the princes. The election process in Germany's monarchy was viewed as a weakness, the aspiring monarch had to win favour of majority of the electors, who arguably held the real power. Once the monarch was in power they could not, in theory, be deposed[4] though they now the challenge of maintaining domestic stability and authority over the lands in the Empire and the rising secular princes. Charles did successfully manage to secure the Bohemian Crown in accordance with the will of the German kings, yet they could not be assigned as an imperial fief to anyone other than the King of Bohemia[5].

A clear distinction between the king and his lords was that the king could freely move throughout the empire maintaining support from his lords, whereas the lords would have to pay their way to travel[6]. This right to freely travel gradually lost its significance by 1356 with the elective process of the Golden Bull. The institutionalization of the imperial diet in the form of the Reichstag by the late fifteenth century also provided a convenient way to meet all the lords at once[7], ' whilst the parallel move to territorially based imperial governance established a new focus in the capital of the imperial family's hereditary lands'[8].

The role of Holy Roman Emperor by the mid-fourteenth century was more valuable as a way to increase social and economic wealth rather than for

political authority. Emperors could receive incomes from Italy and Germany. Charles IV of Luxembourg faced many challenges during his reign from 1355-1378 including a lack of legal structure and administration, a lack of finances, and a fragmented Empire on which to establish his imperial title. After granting lay rulers virtual independence, through the Golden Bull, Charles had to struggle for dominance of a centralized monarch or a stately-feudal character on the basis of accord between himself and the Imperial Estates. The power given to the electors created hostility from those not chosen along with the Wittelsbach and Habsburg dynasties. Those envious challenged Charles' contribution to a reformed and unified Germany. Germany's territorial fragmentation and the lack of a consistent central power contributed to the development of distinctive differences within the Empire's politics, economy and culture. Charles could not enforce his legislative authority over his subjects or in the royal court, mostly due to lack of money[9]. Under Frederick II most of the royal domains had been lost, so the imperial cities made up most of the royal income but were reliant on the good will of the contributors[10]. Royal possessions were granted as benefices[11] entrusted to vassals. The system allowed the king to raise taxes whilst the beneficiaries would use the resources from the fief to sustain themselves and carry out duties on behalf of the monarchy. The problem with this system was that once a fief had been in possession of a family for more than two generations it encouraged thoughts of hereditary ownership, a rise in power and ruling elites. The indirect control of the Empire that the vassals held was an important means of governance into early modernity[12]. Charles IV concentrated on establishing power and status for his sons and House Luxembourg. His eldest son Wenceslaus was elected as

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King of the Romans, a predominant claim to the title of Holy Roman Emperor. Electors could vote for themselves under the new Golden Bull, so Charles IV named his son Wenceslaus the king of Bohemia securing an electorship for the House of Luxembourg which would go on to help Charles' second son Sigismund. For Sigismund, Charles successfully married him to the heiress of Hungary making him the king of Hungary in 1387, subsequently consolidating power and establishing the house of Luxembourg across Europe. After Charles' death the poverty of the Crown is the clearest indicator of his imperial neglect. Whilst his successes in securing Bohemia in the German will, alongside his children's advantageous marriages, highlight his consumption in his dynastic concerns.

Once Sigismund became emperor he also faced similar challenges to those of his predecessors, of an ununited Germany, problems within the church, and major conflicts in his own lands. Sigismund made Hohenzollern Frederick I the Burgrave of Nuremberg, Margrave of Brandenburg, and an elector of the empire in 1415, in an attempt to unify his princely support. This proved to be a dyer decision for the emperor as in 1424 Frederick went against Sigismund who subsequently lost any real authority over the German princes. During his reign as Emperor, 1411-1437, his attention was constantly drawn to conflict in his own territories as he was the king of Bohemia (1419-1437) and king of Hungary-Croatia (1387-1437). He was successful in his attempt to achieve unity between the empire and church by ending the Great Schism of 1378-1417. As imperial protector of the church Sigismund masterminded the Council of Constance, 1414-1418, where the ecumenical council denounced the three papal claimants and placed Pope

Martin V as the elected Pope. Sigismund's motives helped him defend the title of imperial protector but also benefitted his patrimony of Bohemia where Pope Martin ordered a crusade against the Hussites who were demanding reform from Sigismund in Prague. It could be argued that Sigismund only restored unity within the church to benefit his own patrimonies, rather than focus on his imperial duties. With a united Christendom, Sigismund had hoped a united offensive against the Hussites in Bohemia, where war continued from 1420-1436, and against the Ottoman's. He, however, faced military embarrassment in Bohemia and additional defeat in Hungary where the Ottoman's had successfully invaded the Danubian province 1426-1427. With Sigismund rarely in Germany due to the offensives his patrimonies were fighting the princes set up the Union of Bingen to take on the Hussite war. Sigismund struggled to maintain his own lands, and failed to maintain the Luxembourg dynasty, upon his death in 1437 his only surviving child married into the Hapsburgs. Wilson in the *Heart of Europe* states that 'the lack of dynastic continuity from 1254 to 1437 did not prevent the growth of an institutional memory'[13].

Frederick III, the head of the house Hapsburg, became Holy Roman Emperor in 1452. Despite being known as a weak ruler he did make progress in reuniting the Hapsburg family lands under his own branch. Frederick benefitted from the death of his young nephew Ladislaus in 1457, who was the Archduchy of Austria, Hungary and Bohemia. His foreign policy was successful in managing to recover his family's hereditary lands in Switzerland[14], and in pacifying the eastern borders in Constantinople in 1453. He also successfully found a wealthier ally in Charles VII of France.

Frederick suffered a humiliating defeat when he failed to gain control over Hungary and Bohemia in the Bohemian-Hungarian War of 1468-1478 and was defeated in the Austrian-Hungarian War of 1477-88. Subsequently, Frederick had to relinquish Bohemia to George of Poděbrady and Hungary to Matthias Corvinus in 1485, along with his hereditary lands. Matthias died in 1490 and Frederick recovered his lost patrimonies. By managing to outlive everyone around him he gained Habsburgs a widespread of patrimonies across Europe. Frederick was able to maintain a strong relationship with the church, even receiving the Lombard crown in 1452. Although his greatest political success was bringing Burgundy back into Habsburg control, including the Netherlands and Belgium, by marrying his son Maximilian to Mary of Burgundy. This was an enormous achievement done without huge financial burdens.

A constant theme throughout the emperors is financial and therefore political weakness. With no control over the cities apart from being able to pull in taxation, the emperors had to rely on their own lands to try and assert their political power. With emphasis spent on marriages of their children to gain further land, and military support. Charles IV successfully initiated the Golden Bull, which in the long run was beneficial to Germany. He secured monarchical power for his sons through marriages, and the Bull. Charles however consolidated further authority to secular rulers, a problem that no future Emperor was able to overcome. His son Sigismund found his patrimonies to be time-consuming and expensive, he was an absent monarch constantly whose foreign policy was expensive and failing. Despite failing to maintain the Luxembourg dynasty, Sigismund was instrumental in

ecclesiastic matters orchestrating the Council of Constance and securing papal authority in a time of religious reform. Frederick III's regaining of his hereditary lands was time-consuming and costly, whilst he suffered humiliating defeats he did manage to rectify this by chance and outliving his enemies. Frederick's greatest achievement was successfully securing the Burgundy back to Hapsburg rule. Whilst all these emperors successfully secured further control over Europe for their own families this was undermined due to their failing foreign policy. The expense of these territories proved to be too much for the kings who all struggled to finance the security and stability of their newly gained territories.

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[10]Waugh, p. 142.

[11]Peter, Wilson, *Heart of Europe-A History of the Holy Roman Empire*, (Cambridge & Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 327.

[12]Wilson, *Heart of Europe* , p. 334.

[13]Peter, Wilson, *Heart of Europe-A History of the Holy Roman Empire*, (Cambridge & Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 323.

[14]Waugh, p. 201.