

Feudal Foundations

1000–1350

One of the peculiarities of Central Europe is that some people from the region consider the Middle Ages to be the high point in their national historical traditions. Therefore, we should examine the period before 1500 because the process of empire building in Central Europe, which gradually led to the demise of the kingdoms of Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland, began shortly thereafter. By the end of the eighteenth century most of Central Europe had been divided among three dynastic powers: Habsburg Austria, Romanov Russia, and Hohenzollern Prussia. It would be a distortion, however, to view the history of Central Europe from the perspective of these three powers at their nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century territorial zeniths, because each of these great empires started small. Around 1300, Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow were the capitals of feudal duchies that were modest in size and negligible in importance when compared with the kingdoms of Bohemia, Hungary, or Poland. The misfortune of these nations with the venerable tradition of having their own kings and lords—the modern but somewhat misleading terminology would be “national self-determination”—was that they became the subjects and vassals of foreign powers. Therefore, one aspect of understanding Central Europe involves developing both a feeling for the real and ideal dimensions of those older Central European kingdoms—which were empires in their own right but were conquered by foreign powers—and the sense of tragedy that goes along with it.

During the nineteenth century, there was a peculiar alliance in Central Europe between the assumptions of liberalism, on the one hand, and the premises of nationalism and Romanticism, on the other, and this wedding of apparently disparate ideas produced very favorable interpretations of the

Middle Ages. The concept of nationalism had to be retrospectively articulated in terms of people's "ancient" freedoms, which had been violated or lost, an enterprise that required a Romantic reinterpretation of the Middle Ages as a period of national freedom, at least in comparison with subsequent periods of foreign domination, which had to be reestablished in the spirit of liberalism. This may seem terminologically a bit complicated, but it basically means that visions of the future frequently were versions of the past transformed by Romanticism and liberalism. The freedom and independence of the past that had been lost in the past had to be regained or reestablished in the future.

It is important to avoid confusing the medieval meaning of the term "nation" (*natio*) with its nineteenth-century counterparts "nation," "nation-state," and "nationalism." In the Middle Ages, there were four large political entities in Central Europe: the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and the kingdoms of Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland. It would be misleading to call these political bodies "states" in the modern sense of the word. Rather, they were relatively loose confederations ruled by kings who claimed a limited amount of jurisdiction for specific subordinate political and territorial units, each of which, in turn, was ruled by nobles who exercised a high degree of autonomy in their own domains. These nobles had a mutually dependent and ambivalent relationship with their respective kings, who in some cases had a hereditary claim to the throne but, in others, were elected by the nobility. In the medieval world, these nobles were the constituent members of the "nations," a term referring to a relatively small class of blue-blooded persons who held titles and lands, not the population or "the people" in terms of the modern democratic theory of popular sovereignty.

Each of these kingdoms also had its own "constitutional order." The kings and the noble members of the political nation were mutually bound to observe certain rights and execute certain duties, a relationship that embodied an inherent conflict. The kings could not expand or centralize their power without infringing on the lords' traditional rights, and the lords were interested in limiting or reducing royal interference in their affairs. Hungarian historians, for example, like to compare the Golden Bull issued by the Hungarian King Andrew II in 1222 with the Magna Carta of civil and political liberties granted by England's King John in 1215. In both cases, the idea of "ancient rights," "rights of the nation," and the limitation of royal power is important.

One of the peculiarities of the development of Central European kingdoms is that they did not evolve into constitutional monarchies like England's, nor did Central European kings manage to create absolute monarchies at the expense of the nobility, as in France. Poles and Hungarians like to point out the similarities between the constitutional developments of their own historical kingdoms, in terms of the protection of individual rights and the rule of law, and the corresponding developments in England. As promising as the auspicious domestic political development of these kingdoms may have been at the time, it was truncated between the sixteenth and

late eighteenth centuries by the intervention of foreign empires. Given the subsequent absence of continuity, it would be exaggerating to speak of “democratic traditions” in the region that reach back to the Middle Ages.

All four of Central Europe’s political nations also were multiethnic, in the contemporary sense of the word. There were Czech and German nobles in Bohemia, Poles and Lithuanians in the “Polish nation,” and an entire kaleidoscope of ethnic groups among the nobility in the “Hungarian nation.” But none of these nobles was a “nationalist” in the nineteenth-century sense of the word. The “national interest”—to use a modern term—consisted of the interests of the nobles. “National freedom” referred to the rights of this privileged group, and the “nation” was coextensive with their domains, which were unified by their common allegiance to a king.

Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians find it easy to look back over long spans of time, because they identify more readily with distant and idealized eras of “national freedom” than they do with the intervening histories of foreign subjugation, regardless of how long they may have lasted. The feudal kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary may seem historically remote, but the apex of each of them—a “golden age” before the Turks and the Austrians or the Germans and the Russians came and conquered—have played a vital role in each of these nations’ historical imaginations right up into the twentieth century.

For example, when the borders of Central Europe were redrawn after World War I, many Central Europeans looked at the territorial dismemberment of the Austrian and Russian empires as an opportunity to reestablish their “historical borders” which had been violated centuries beforehand—and not in terms of an ethnically defined policy of “national self-determination” aimed at creating homogeneous nation-states that would require unprecedented new borders. In other words, after World War I, many of the “new” states in the region wanted their “old” borders to be reestablished, and this objective became a source of conflict among neighbors, because the historical borders either had been fluid throughout the ages or did not correspond to national borders in the ethnic sense of the word.

It is important to recognize the vitality of historical imagination in this context. Otherwise, the claims of the Poles in 1918, who looked back to the frontiers of the Polish–Lithuanian Republic of 1772, or the Czechs and the Hungarians, who talked about the historical inviolability of the borders of the medieval kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary after World War I—the former with and the latter without success—would be incomprehensible.

Croatian and Serbian nationalists provide the best contemporary examples of thinking in these terms. For each of them, the deterioration of Yugoslavia after 1989 represented an opportunity to restore national freedoms that had been long lost. After the death of Zvonimir, the Croatian king, in 1089, the Croatian nobility elected the king of Hungary to the Croatian throne. The personal and dynastic union of these two kingdoms extended the domains of the kingdom of Hungary to the Adriatic and is viewed as a windfall in Hungarian history. The Croats, however, tend to interpret it as an early and tragic loss of national independence which took 900 years to

reestablish. For many Serbian nationalists, the current attempts to create a Greater Serbian state can be historically legitimized as “restoring” the medieval kingdom of Serbia. The Turkish victory at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 ushered in the end of the Serbia’s medieval empire on the Balkans, and the Serbs had to wait 600 years to start reestablishing it.

These examples illustrate the extent to which the peoples of Central Europe, who were “independent nations” during the Middle Ages but became subject nations in the following centuries, have an intimate relationship to their distant pasts or tend to think in terms of a longer historical continuum.

The Disunited German Empire

The middle of the thirteenth century provides many examples of the dynamics of feudal politics in Central Europe, and medieval Germany is a good illustration of the centrifugal tendencies inherent in feudal forms of political organization. The kings of Germany, who were elected by a select group of feudal lords, bore the title “Roman King of Germany” after they had been crowned in Aachen, the capital of Charlemagne’s former empire, and they received the title “Holy Roman Emperor” if they were crowned by the pope in Rome. Whether or not imperial legitimacy was contingent on papal confirmation was a hotly debated issue among medieval contemporaries. The emperors and their supporters preferred to view the emperor as God’s highest representative on earth, a position that the papacy and papal partisans claimed for the pope. This dispute was a constant cause of conflict between secular and ecclesiastical authorities. It also was a source of divided loyalties within the empire, which gave “imperial” and “papal” parties a convenient vehicle for realizing less lofty political interests in the name of principle. It also cultivated attitudes of particularism and helped lay the foundations for an “anti-Roman” sentiment in Germany that was to flourish later during the Reformation.

The practice of papal coronation for the emperor was abandoned in the fourteenth century, which made the title of “Holy Roman Emperor” a secular and German affair instead of a papal and Roman one, and the addition of the qualification “of the German Nation” to the imperial title reflected the scope of the emperor’s claims. But the kings of Germany as the “Holy Roman Emperors of the German Nation” never managed to overcome the particularism that prevailed in the empire. On the one hand, the noble lords of the empire’s numerous feudal estates were obligated to recognize the regal and imperial claims of the kings they elected, were bound by the codes of chivalry to demonstrate their subordination at court by participating in the rituals of fealty, and were required as knights to go to war under certain circumstances. On the other hand, the kings were technically the patrons and benefactors of the nobles, and on election the kings confirmed the rights of their subordinates to their titles and properties in exchange for their loyalty and services. As the highest temporal authority, the king could recall, for example, titles and properties if one of his vassals were “lawless” or died without legitimate heirs, and regrant them. However, within the em-

pire there was an inherent conflict between the centralizing aspirations of German kings with imperial titles and intentions and the regional interests of the feudal lords, who technically were their vassals but resisted every attempt at centralization as an infringement on their particular rights.

During the thirteenth century, Germany's feudal estates managed to replace the tradition of hereditary monarchy with the institution of electoral monarchy, and the idea of the German empire as a confederation of feudal lords, who considered themselves the authentic representatives of the "German nation," gradually replaced the identification of the empire with the German kings as emperors. This inversion of the idea of sovereignty greatly strengthened the position of the individual feudal estates in Germany and was a turning point in the empire's constitutional history. It made the feudal parts of the empire more powerful than the regal or imperial whole, and this constitutional development helped make German disunity the status quo for centuries.

Although it would be a mistake to underestimate how formidable the empire was to medieval contemporaries, it remained throughout the Middle Ages a decentralized feudal state or, rather, a loose affiliation of fundamentally autonomous feudal states. Thereafter, the German tradition of feudal particularism also was reinforced by the confessional disputes of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. All attempts to consolidate the ideal German empire into a real one failed. Despite the theoretical unity of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which continued to play an important role in the German idea of Germany, the factual disunity of Germany became an established part of the European order until the late nineteenth century. For example, in 1648 when the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War, the last great early modern religious conflict among European Christians, there were more than 300 independent German states and literally thousands of sovereign subentities like "free cities" or "free monasteries." After the Napoleonic Wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which led to a considerable simplification of the political map of Germany, there still were forty German states.

In light of these circumstances, retrospective generalizations about "Germany" before the end of the nineteenth century or an identification of "the German" with "the Prussian" thereafter are dangerous because they tend to overlook the strength and diversity of those regional traditions in Germany that have feudal origins. During World War II, for example, Allied planners devised several scenarios for weakening "imperial" Germany, and they seriously considered rejuvenating the German tradition of particularism, by creating a number of smaller German states, each of which would have had a regional identity based on historical precedents reaching back to the Middle Ages. Whether the unification of Germany was (and is) the logical or desirable consequence of German history or a dangerous exception to the German historical rule of disunity is basically a question of the length of historical perspective assumed. The unified German national state that existed from 1871 until 1945 (and was reestablished in 1990) is a historical anomaly compared with the German tradition of disunity.

Central Europeans often view the history of Central Europe in terms of a proverbial and imperial German *Drang nach Osten*, a “drive to the east,” or as a series of Slavic–German struggles that may be interpreted as archetypal East–West conflicts. Although it would be misleading to depreciate the long-term importance of German missionary work and settlement beyond the eastern borders of the empire during the Middle Ages, the major foreign policy thrust of German kings then was a “drive to the south”—a series of futile imperial attempts to gain control of Italy, which led to an ongoing struggle between the German kings and the papacy. In comparison with this “North–South” conflict or the various attempts to consolidate the empire from within, the eastern frontier of the empire was, in many respects, a theater of subordinate political importance. On and beyond this frontier, however, several families, the first generation of Central European dynasties, engaged in struggles for hegemony and territory.

*Austrian, Bohemian, Hungarian,
and Polish Dynasties*

During the tenth century, a series of *Marken*—in Old German, *Mark* meant both “province” and “border”—were established along the turbulent eastern frontiers of the Holy Roman Empire to secure its borders, and in 976 a noble German family, the Babenbergs, was entrusted with a duchy in the Danube Valley called Ostarrichi, literally the “eastern realm,” which laid the historical foundations for Österreich, or Austria. The Babenbergs gradually worked their way down the Danube and finally established a ducal residence in Vienna, not far from the frontiers of the Kingdom of Hungary ruled by the Árpád dynasty (896–1301), which had its seat in the Hungarian Plain but ruled a multinational empire extending north and east to the Carpathian Mountains (including contemporary Slovakia, part of Ukraine, and Romanian Transylvania), south to Serbia, and southwest to Croatia. North of the Babenbergs’ realm, the Přemysl dynasty (895–1306) had consolidated itself on the plateau of the Bohemian Massif, and north of the Kingdom of Hungary the Piasts of Poland (860–1370) had established a loosely knit kingdom on the plains between the Carpathian Mountains and the Baltic Sea in the Vistula Valley.

Each of these four families was confronted with similar problems. On the one hand, they had the task of consolidating their domestic power over their own feudal vassals or estates, whose interests frequently clashed with their own, and on the other, they had to maintain their holdings or extend them at the expense of their neighbors. The outcome of these domestic struggles made negotiable the relationships of feudal kings to their own frequently powerful vassals. Since political power in the medieval world was personally exercised by individuals, not anonymously administered by modern institutions or states, its scope was limited by any contemporary standards. Consequently, the fate of dynasties depended to a great extent on their leading figures’ personal mastery of the political skills of diplomacy and warfare.

Feudal borders also were frequently renegotiated after conflicts, and

there were many chronic points of friction among these four dynasties. Both the Babenbergs and the Árpáds were interested in rounding out their holdings along the contemporary Austrian–Hungarian border at their respective neighbor’s expense. The Czech Přemysls were engaged in an intermittent struggle with the Polish Piasts for control over the territories between the Bohemian Basin and the Vistula Valley: to the southeast, Moravia, which they gained, and to the northeast, Silesia, which often changed hands before becoming part of the Bohemian realm in the fourteenth century.

It also is important to note that there was no medieval “Kingdom of Slovakia.” Rather, Slovakia was part of the Kingdom of Hungary from about the year 1000 until 1918, and the Slovaks were predominantly peasants with Hungarian lords. After World War I, Slovakia united with the predominantly Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia to form the Republic of Czechoslovakia, and the only precedent for an independent Slovakian state is an embarrassing one: a clerical–authoritarian puppet state that collaborated with Nazi Germany from 1939 to 1945. However, the Czechs, who look back at their own royal traditions and a history of comparatively higher cultural and economic development than that of the Slovaks, often view the Slovaks as a culturally underdeveloped “subject nation” of peasants and country bumpkins. Such attitudes contributed to the deterioration of Czechoslovakia after 1989.

This is just one example of an entire series of Central European national stereotypes and prejudices that go back to medieval relationships. There were larger nations that historically had been lords—like the Austrians (as Germans in the medieval sense of the word), Hungarians, Czechs, and Poles—and smaller nations that they viewed as “natural” subjects: Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs in southern Central Europe; Romanians in the southeast; Slovaks in the middle; and Ukrainians and Belarussians in the east. This idea of a hierarchy of nations in Central Europe was reinforced during the nineteenth century, when the amalgam of nationalism and Romanticism popularized the idea that the superiority of some nations had been demonstrated by the roles they had played as historical agents in the past, regardless of how remote, and that the passivity or inferiority of others had been documented by the fact that they could not look back on comparable traditions or achievements. Having been subjects instead of lords or objects instead of agents of history, the “subject nations” were frequently considered to be peoples with “no history.”

Bohemia’s Imperial Bid:

King Otakar’s Thirteenth-Century Empire

In 1246, the death of Friedrich “the Quarrelsome,” the last Babenberg Duke of Austria, created one of the first great Central European opportunities for empire building, in the medieval sense of the word. Killed in a border quarrel with the Hungarians, Friedrich had no male heir to assume his title, which left open the question of the succession of his duchy. Technically speaking, the King of Germany had the right to dispose of the titles and

territories vacated by Friedrich's death because Austria was a duchy of the Holy Roman Empire, but the empire was in such a state of disarray in the middle of the thirteenth century—two competing kings had been elected by conflicting parties of feudal lords—that the issue remained unresolved. Nonetheless, Otakar II, the king of Bohemia, and Béla IV, the king of Hungary, were not concerned about the legal technicalities surrounding the vacant ducal seat of the Babenbergs, and they both were interested in the real opportunities that Friedrich's death and the ensuing power vacuum presented. Béla acted quickly and seized the southern half of the Babenberg holdings, the province of Styria, where he placed his son Stephen as ruler.

Otakar's entry into Austria was more diplomatic. He negotiated with the Babenberg vassals in the Danube Valley, who were tired of the conflicts and insecurity the interregnum had caused and prepared to accept Otakar as their lord, and then in 1251 he married Friedrich von Babenberg's sister, Margaret, a woman more than twenty years his senior, in order to strengthen the legitimacy of his acquisitions. He began calling himself *dux Austriae*, Duke of Austria, and he consolidated his new holdings by using a policy of resolutely punishing disobedience and generously rewarding loyalty.

During 1254/1255 Otakar participated in a crusade led by the Order of the Teutonic Knights against the indigenous pagan inhabitants of Prussia on the Baltic coast, which exposed him to the possibilities for expansion in the plains of the north, but his immediate interest was rounding out and consolidating his holdings in the south. In 1261, he drove the Hungarians out of Styria, gained the allegiance of the Styrian estates, and, in the process of negotiating a peace settlement with the Hungarians, arranged an engagement with Kunhata, a granddaughter of the Hungarian king. This interdynastic marriage, so typical of medieval politics, was facilitated by a papal dispensation he received to divorce his wife, Margaret, who was too old to bear the children he urgently needed as successors, and was designed to help cement the peace with the Hungarians. Although Otakar needed to establish stability on the eastern borders of his realms in order to pursue his interests in the north and the south, his marriage to Kunhata could not overcome the long-standing Bohemian–Hungarian rivalry or repress his newly acquired Hungarian in-laws' desire for revenge.

Motivated by a vague papal promise of attaining "perpetual dominion" over heathen territories in Lithuania, Otakar undertook a second crusade in 1267 to assist the Teutonic Knights in their allegedly Christian mission of converting eastern Central Europe's last stronghold of infidels—the modern military term for these crusades would be "pacification"—and he entertained the idea of establishing a territorial base of operations on the Baltic that would eventually allow him to exercise more influence over the fragmented holdings of the Polish Piast dynasty. This aspiration never left Otakar, whose interests turned south once again, where he gained control of Carinthia and Carniola, two duchies in contemporary southern Austria and Slovenia. Otakar's political vision was, as one medieval chronicler observed, to extend his power *ut a mari usque ad mare*, "from the Baltic Sea to

the Adriatic Sea," *et terminos orbis*, "and the limits of the world,"¹ and some historians see his plans as the first manifestation of the idea of a "Danube confederation," or multinational Central European empire.

Otakar's plans were challenged in 1273 when Rudolph von Habsburg, a nobleman with holdings in southern Germany and Switzerland, was elected king of Germany. One of Rudolph's first royal acts was to reclaim the duchies of the empire that had been illegally occupied before his election, among them Otakar's acquisitions, in order to enhance his own holdings. Although Rudolph had the law of the empire on his side, Otakar was squatting on the properties in question, and he initially tried to bargain with Rudolph, a situation complicated by the fact that Otakar technically was Rudolph's vassal because Bohemia was part of the Holy Roman Empire. Otakar wanted to make his recognition of Rudolph as king contingent upon Rudolph's recognition of Otakar's hereditary titles and holdings in Bohemia as well as the holdings he had illegally acquired in the past twenty-five years, but Rudolph showed no willingness to negotiate. In 1276, Rudolph organized an army with the help of cooperative German lords and dissatisfied Austrian ones, and he managed to mobilize the Hungarians against Otakar. (The use of national terminology here may be a bit misleading. In this context, Germany, Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary should be treated as geographic and, in some cases, dynastic concepts, not as primordial national states. Rudolph von Habsburg, for example, was a German from Switzerland who ruled in Austria without being German, Swiss, or Austrian as we usually understand the terms. Medieval power was not "national.")

Rudolph marched on Austria and forced Otakar to renounce his claims. Otakar's preparedness to reconcile himself with Rudolph was merely a tactical ploy, however. Outnumbered in 1276, he appealed to the interests and fears of his Slavic neighbors to the north in Silesia and Poland by vividly describing the Germans' territorial greed in terms of their "never satiated mouths," "filthy hands," and "vile desires." Within two years Otakar felt that he had organized enough support to settle his score with Rudolph, who relied on loyal members of the German and Austrian estates and an alliance with the Hungarians to defend his claims. In accordance with the code of chivalry, Otakar and Rudolph agreed on a time and place to do battle, and their armies, ranging from knights on armored horses to archers, each allegedly 20,000 strong, met on the Marchfeld Plain north of Vienna on August 26, 1278.

When the opposing armies clashed on the battlefield, Otakar's troops held their ground and then appeared to be gaining the upper hand. Although the only honorable form of knightly combat was frontal, Rudolph had made provisions for a tactically brilliant but chivalrously despicable surprise attack, an ambush on one of Otakar's flanks, which was executed so effectively by a small group of fully armored knights that it threw Otakar's troops into disarray. They panicked and fled, and once Otakar recognized the hopelessness of the situation, he followed them. Although the exact circumstances of his death have never been completely clarified, he apparently was taken captive by personal enemies—some of his own disgruntled

Czech vassals—disarmed, and murdered. After Rudolph's battlefield tactics, this was the second great violation of the code of chivalry that day.

In the nineteenth century, there was a tendency to see Otakar as a primordial representative of Pan-Slavism or, conversely, to regard Rudolph's success as a "German victory" over a "Slavic threat," but these are basically examples of the type of nationalistic pathos and chauvinism that can accompany the interpretation of key medieval events. Rudolph's victory was a turning point in the history of Central Europe, nevertheless, in that it established the Habsburgs as a contender in the Danube Basin. Aside from demonstrating greater longevity than any other European dynasty—the Habsburgs ruled for 640 years, from 1278 until 1918—they eventually realized their own version of a Danube empire some centuries later.

Although it is tempting to say that Bohemia's imperial aspirations died on the battlefield with Otakar, this was not the case. In 1298, Otakar's son Wenceslas II arranged an engagement between his nine-year-old son, Wenceslas III, and Elizabeth, a daughter of Andrew III, the king of Hungary, and in 1300 Wenceslas II was also crowned king of Poland, not as an act of Slavic solidarity, but in an attempt to find a strong man from the outside to overcome the fragmentation of the Polish kingdom. When Andrew III, the last male in the Hungarian Árpád dynastic line, died in 1301, the Přemysls made their claim to the crown of Hungary, but they met the resistance of the Hungarian magnates and the pope, who promoted the interests of an even more distant foreigner: Charles Robert from the Neapolitan line of the French Anjou dynasty, who was crowned king of Hungary in 1308.

As provocative as the vision of unifying the Bohemian, Polish, and Hungarian crowns may have been, it was as unrealistic as it was short lived. The Přemysl dynasty had neither the resources nor the support it needed to realize such ambitious plans. Wenceslas II died in 1305, and the Přemysl dynasty expired one year later when his son Wenceslas III was murdered under unclear circumstances on his way to assert his interests in Poland. Contemporaries attributed the regicide to agents of the king of Germany, his own disgruntled Czech vassals, or Hungarian or Polish nobles. The Habsburgs of Austria immediately tried to seize the Bohemian throne vacated by Wenceslas III's death, a move reminiscent of Otakar's old aspirations, though with reversed roles, but the newly elected king of Germany, Henry VII von Luxemburg, managed to negotiate his son John onto the vacant throne by arranging a wedding with a Přemysl princess and cajoling the Bohemian nobility.

The Middle Ages were a period devoid of nationalism in the modern sense of the word, but even so, Central Europeans alternately interpret medieval history in a spirit of cosmopolitanism or through the spectacles of nationalism. In the cosmopolitan vein, for example, Czechs look back at success of the Luxemburg dynasty in Bohemia between 1310 and 1437 as one of the high points in their history, although the Luxemburgs were foreigners and "Germans" in the medieval sense of the word. For example, Charles of Luxemburg, King of Bohemia, was elected king of Germany in 1346 and crowned as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV in Rome in 1355, two

events that made Prague an imperial capital. Charles founded the first Central European university in 1348, not in Germany, but in Prague, and his reign is generally recognized as a period of peace, prosperity, and cultural blossom.² Similarly, Hungarians seem to have no problem with the fact that Louis I of Anjou (1326–1382), a king who went down in Hungarian history as “the Great,” was a French dynastic transplant via Naples, because he ambitiously consolidated and expanded the Kingdom of Hungary.

Dynastic politics can be construed to represent the beginning of a long tradition of confederative plans for Central Europe. The brief unification of the Bohemian and Polish crowns under Wenceslas II from 1300 to 1305 or the Přemysl's aspirations in Hungary may have been chances to form a union or unions that would have been more successful in resisting the future aggression of larger and stronger neighbors like the Germans and the Russians. (The idea of having missed an important historical opportunity 500 nor 600 years ago is very Central European.) Nevertheless, during World War II, leading Polish and Czechoslovak politicians in exile, General Władysław Sikorski and Eduard Beneš, discussed the idea of a Czechoslovak–Polish confederation.³ In January 1990 both the American security expert Zbigniew Brzezinski and the foreign minister of the new Czechoslovak reform government, Jiří Dienstbier, speculated that a Czechoslovak–Polish confederation could be one means of helping the western Slavs resist in the future the influence of larger neighbors like the Soviet Union and a unified Germany.

Poles and Hungarians also look back fondly at the period between 1370 and 1385, during which Louis the Great, king of Hungary, was also king of Poland, although the long-term viability of this constellation was nil. The fact that the magnates of Hungary elected a number of kings from the Polish dynastic line in the following 150 years and a Hungarian was elected king of Poland in the sixteenth century can be seen as neighborly reciprocal gestures. Many patterns of conflict and cooperation in Central Europe were established in the Middle Ages, and they still play an important role in the Central European historical imagination. The ambivalent relationship that most Central Europeans have to the Germans provides perhaps the best example of this point.

The German “Drive to the East,” 1200–1350

It is common to interpret the history of Europe in terms of predominantly Western innovations that moved east. The German-speaking world traditionally has played a formative role in the history of Central Europe because it has been the primary transmitter of Western ideas to its eastern neighbors. In the early Middle Ages, for example, German dioceses and missionaries played a decisive role in converting the pagan peoples of the east to Western Christianity. One of the consequences of these conversions was the adoption of feudalism as a Western form of political and social organization that was in many respects superior to the tribal structures it replaced. Christians tilled the soil, and their lords were constrained, in theory at least, by

the rule of law. There are later examples of this West–East pattern of transmission in the Middle Ages: German contributions to the development of the east, a gradual movement eastward of the borders of the German-speaking world, and the establishment of German colonies or settlements throughout the eastern half of Central Europe.

The importance of German culture and civilization for Germany's eastern neighbors and this West–East mode of transmission were established early and proved to be enduring. German influences traditionally have been a source of stimulation and enrichment for their non-German neighbors to the east, and Central Europeans who are prepared to take a dispassionate look at their national traditions readily recognize the substantial influence of German philosophy, literature, science, technology, and investment on their own cultures and countries. But this appreciation is seldom devoid of ambiguity because the Germans not only exercised a congenial culturally enriching influence; they also often came as conquerors and overlords.

Before the nineteenth century, historians showed relatively little interest in the medieval phenomenon that came to be called the German *Ostbewegung*, the “eastward movement,” or the *Drang nach Osten*, the “drive to the east.” However, nineteenth-century nationalism and Romanticism threw a new light on this period, which was amply interpreted by messianic chauvinists of German culture as an early manifestation of the superiority of German culture or, conversely, criticized by Slavic historians as the forerunner of German imperialism. The German “drive to the east” was, however, neither an example of cosmic historical forces at work nor a primordial German imperial conspiracy but basically the result of population pressures in the German empire combined with the presence of personal and economic opportunity outside the German-speaking world. From 1200 until 1350, the year the plague, or Black Death, began taking its toll in Europe, there was a wave of German emigration to the kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary.

During the twelfth century, a medieval agricultural revolution provided the basis for an unprecedented population boom. The transition from a two- to a three-field system of cultivation, a French innovation based on the introduction of winter crops, and the improvement of the most primitive forms of agricultural technology—like the metal plowshare, the scythe in its current form, and the use of horses instead of oxen—made agricultural production more intensive and extensive, and the consequential growth in population in Germany provided the human material for “colonies” or settlements in the less densely populated east.

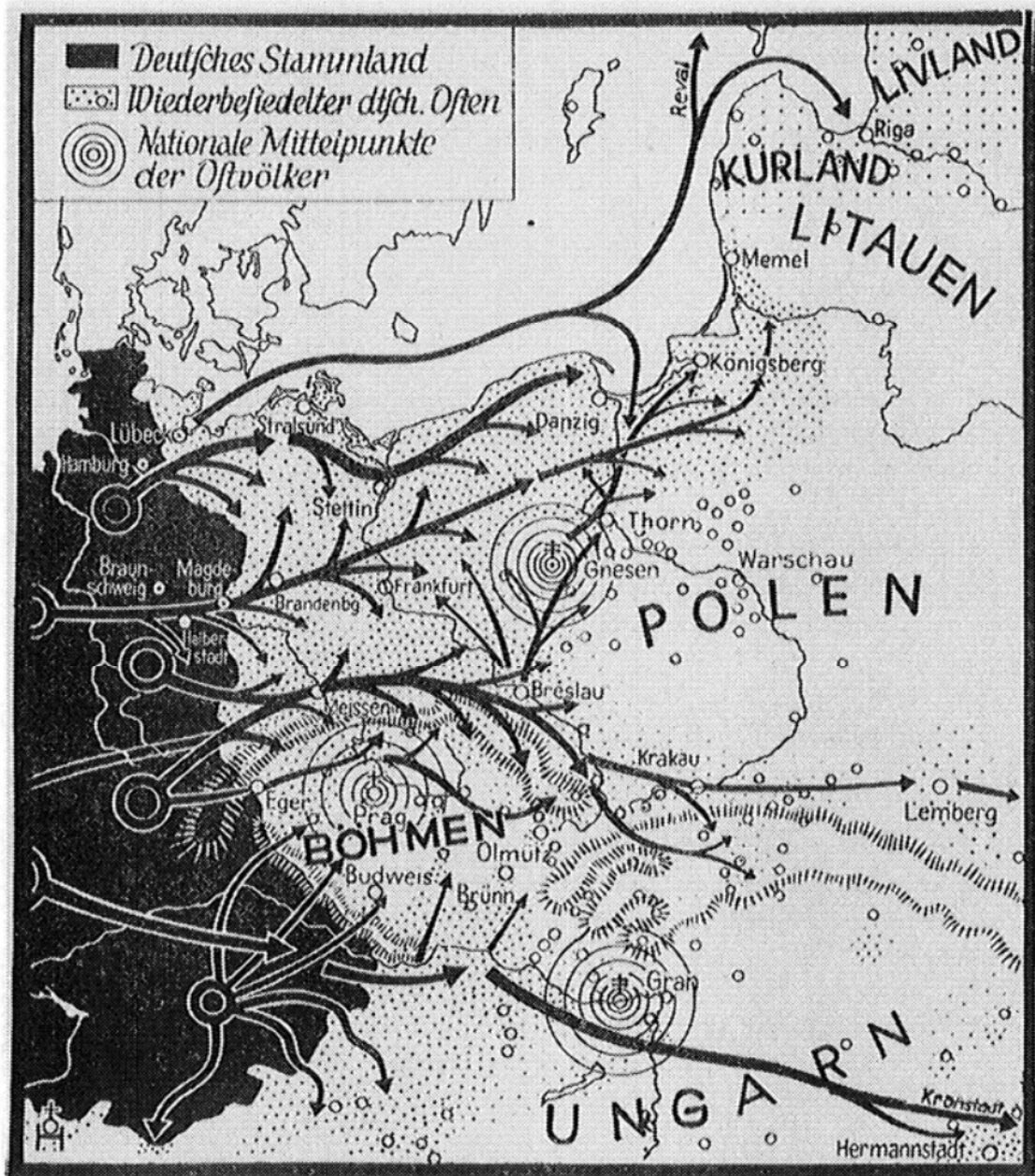
Enterprising feudal lords recognized that their own prosperity depended on their subjects' productivity, and they invited groups of German farmers and burghers, which medieval chronicles called *hospites*, or “guests,” to cultivate their lands and trade in their towns and cities. The *Theutonici*, or “Germans,” were enticed by the legal conditions of land tenure or commerce which were more favorable than those prevailing in the German empire and less restrictive than the local or traditional laws “hosts” applied to their indigenous subjects. During the nineteenth century, German histori-

ans made quite an affair out of the introduction of the *ius Theutonicum*, the so-called German law, used to attract settlers as well as the adoption of German municipal corporate charters based on the "Law of Magdeburg" by cities outside the German-speaking world, because these innovations fit well into their conception of the Germans as "carriers of culture" to an eastern wilderness. German dioceses had played an important role in the initial Christianization of Central Europe, and then German law "civilized" it.

German law was not exclusively German in origin, nor was it solely applied to Germans. Rather, it was part of the package deal that lords were willing to offer settlers from Germany, other "guests," and sometimes their own subjects if they were willing to relocate, in exchange for prospects of participating in the fruits of settlers' labor in the future and as compensation for the hardships of pioneering, like draining swamps and felling forests. Self-interest was a primary motive for hosts and guests alike. German settlers offered to their hosts not only manpower but also the transfer of technology and know-how in their rudimentary forms, and "the East" had a function for medieval Germans that was analogous in some respects to that of "the West" for nineteenth-century Americans. One thing the histories of both these otherwise disparate frontiers have in common is the role they played in the formation of similar national myths. German historians later stylized the "eastward movement" into a "taming of the wilderness" and a Teutonic form of "manifest destiny."

The history of German settlement in the east and the various organizational forms developed to promote it is an intricate topic.⁴ A few generalizations must suffice here as points of orientation. There were a number of different patterns of settlement. In some cases, German settlers gradually displaced or absorbed the indigenous populations. The gradual Bavarian settlement of the Danube Valley and the eastern Alps between 800 and 1000 created a German-speaking peninsula in the Slavic world and laid the foundations for Austria. (Whether the Slavic population was displaced or assimilated is not clear.) Between 1000 and 1200, Germans gradually settled the areas coextensive with contemporary East Germany, which made Bohemia a Slavic-speaking peninsula in the German-speaking world. Between roughly 1200 and 1350, there was a virtual boom of settlement in areas farther east like Silesia and along the Baltic coast: parts of contemporary Poland. The borderlands of Bohemia and Moravia also became relatively homogeneous German-speaking areas during this time and represented another German "penetration" of the Slavic-speaking world.

A second common pattern of development was the establishment of "linguistic islands"—German-speaking towns, villages, and farming communities of varying sizes—scattered throughout the medieval kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary and as faraway as the Ukraine. The German or "Saxon" colonization of Transylvania in the Carpathian Mountains, which the kings of Hungary vigorously encouraged during the thirteenth century, is a good example of a large "island" that maintained its German linguistic and cultural identity right into the twentieth century. Although German "guests" also assimilated into their host cultures, many scattered, smaller "islands"



With the exception of the Teutonic Order, German settlement in various regions in East Central Europe from the thirteenth through the eighteenth centuries was a peaceful process overall. However, starting in the nineteenth century German nationalists began to portray it as a conquest just as the non-German nations of the region began to perceive it as age-old aggression. Black areas represent German “core territory”; arrows, the patterns of the German “drive to the East”; dotted areas, the “resettled [*sic*] German East”; and concentric circles, the “national centers of the Eastern peoples.” (“The Greatest Colonial Achievement in History: The German Resettlement [*sic*] of the East from the 12th to the 14th Centuries,” map from a National Socialist tract by A. Hillen Ziegfeld, *1000 Jahre deutsche Kolonisation und Siedlung* [1000 Years of German Colonization and Settlement] [Berlin: Edwing Runge Verlag, 1943], p. 15; Austrian National Library)

also retained their ethnic homogeneity and identity. In other cases, German burghers established themselves as a trading class in foreign towns and cities, along with the Jews. (The emigration of Western European Jews to East Central Europe increased steadily after the thirteenth century, but the motives for the Jewish migration were different from those of the German "pioneers." That is, Western European Jews were expelled from the west or fled to the east—in particular to the kingdom of Poland—to escape religious persecution.)

The initiators of the German settlement were royal or noble non-German hosts, not the German guests, and so we should not assume that the Polish, Czech, or Hungarian nobles who invited the German settlers were either "teutonophiles" or in a position to anticipate the long-term "national consequences" of their policies. In other words, neither they nor the German settlers had the extensive prejudices regarding themselves and foreigners that nineteenth-century nationalism produced; they did not think in terms of nations or states in the modern sense of the word. German colonization also cannot be construed as some kind of German "national policy" or a teleological movement of *das deutsche Volk*. On the contrary, it was a question of foreign invitation and individual initiative.

German settlers had a predominantly symbiotic relationship with their host cultures, from the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century, which eventually poisoned the traditions of cohabitation with nationalism. German historians began exalting the process of medieval settlement as a "heroic deed of the German people" or the "greatest colonial achievement in history," just as Czech historians, for example, began to describe the Germans as a bunch of foreign parasites or predators who unscrupulously enriched themselves at the cost of the Czechs.

The physical presence of millions of Germans outside Germany,⁵ combined with an exaggerated German nationalistic interpretation of the Middle Ages in the nineteenth century, also contributed to the elaboration of the concept of Central Europe as a German *Sprach- und Kulturraum*, a "linguistic and cultural space." This idea depreciated the autonomous cultural achievements and traditions of the non-German peoples of Central Europe, and these nineteenth-century attitudes helped lay the foundations for Adolf Hitler's twentieth-century ideology of race and space.

The Germans were not, however, the only inhabitants of the Northern European Plain that have shown a historical propensity for eastern expansion. For centuries, proponents of the French imperial idea regarded the Rhine as the eastern "natural border" of France in a manner similar to the spirit in which German imperialists viewed the Vistula. Poland had a long tradition of eastward expansion, and Russia eventually extended its empire from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.

Some historians and geographers have explained this phenomenon as the inherent tendency of states to expand in the direction of least resistance, and they have often supplemented this theory with a chauvinistic and foreboding doctrine of cultural types based on the assumption of a West-East *Kulturgefälle*, a "cultural gradient" or "decline," or the inherent ability of "su-

perior" Western cultures to overcome "inferior" Eastern ones.⁶ However, in the context of Central Europe, "the East" always has been a concept used relative to national frontiers. For the French, the East as the beginning of a "cultural decline" started in Germany, but for the Germans it began in Bohemia or Poland. For the Czechs it began in Slovakia, and for the Poles in Ukraine, Belarus, or Russia. A regional variation of the same type of pattern can be found in southern Central Europe: As "Germans," many Austrians looked down on Hungarians, and at their worst, Austrians and Hungarians shared a disdain for their Slavic neighbors to the south on the Balkan Peninsula, to the north in Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia, and to the east in general.

Stemming the German Tide?

The Battle of Grunwald

Although the medieval German settlement of the east was a peaceful process overall, there was one notable exception that played an important role in the historical imagination of the Poles and the Germans in particular: the activities of the "Order of the Hospital of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the German House of Jerusalem," better known as the Teutonic Knights. This order was a product of the Crusades: the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 and the failure of the Third Crusade forced them to relocate their activities to Europe, where they were reconstituted as a chivalric order that offered its services to any ruler who was willing to pay them to fight pagans and infidels. Their Central European career began with a brief stint in Transylvania under the patronage of the king of Hungary in 1224 and 1225, but then he released them, allegedly because of the lack of loyalty they showed their royal patron.

The Teutonic Knights did draw themselves to the attention of Conrad of Mazovia, a Piast prince who ruled a realm in central Poland. Conrad was engaged in an ambitious operation, the conversion and subjugation of his pagan neighbors to the north in Prussia, but he was short of manpower. In 1226, he offered to give the Teutonic Knights the district of Chelmo (or Kulm), which would provide them with a base of operations and reward them for their efforts, and shortly thereafter the Teutonic Knights appeared on the scene to assume their "Christian duty." For the next six decades they converted the Prussians using military instead of missionary methods, the sword instead of the Gospel, and they established a well-organized realm that they stocked with German settlers from the West. Much to the consternation of their original Polish hosts, the Teutonic Knights became a formidable continental power in their own right and skillfully managed to have their operations sanctioned by the pope and the German emperor. They also had the audacity to pocket Gdańsk, a vital port on the mouth of the Vistula, which they called Danzig, as well as its hinterland of eastern Pomerania. The acquisition of these territories effectively sealed off the Poles from free access to the sea and helped create a problem that was to last for centuries.

At the peak of its development around the end of the fourteenth century, the Order of the Teutonic Knights controlled Prussia, Estonia, and Latvia.⁷ They continued their crusading in the east in an attempt to “convert” and subjugate Lithuania, the last pagan stronghold of Central Europe, and they became embroiled in intermittent conflicts with the Poles. Then, a Polish–Lithuanian interdynastic marriage in 1386, one of the conditions of which was the conversion of Lithuania to Christianity, robbed the Teutonic Knights of their missionary legitimacy as crusaders, in addition to laying the cornerstone for the Jagiellonian dynasty: a personal union of the kingdom of Poland with Lithuania that lasted for centuries and initially functioned as an anti-Teutonic coalition.

There were a number of long-standing points of contention between the Teutonic Knights and their Slavic neighbors: the control of the Vistula, disputes over borders, and the Teutonic Knights’ ambitious policies of acquisition and colonization. The day of reckoning came on July 15, 1410, near the village of Grunwald in Prussia. The king of Poland, Władysław Jagiełło, had organized a motley “Pan-Slavic” army of some 39,000, consisting of Poles, Lithuanians, Czechs, and Ukrainians and supported by Tatars and troops from as far away as Romanian Wallachia. These troops engaged the Teutonic Knights, a force 27,000 strong under the leadership of the order’s Grand Master, Ulrich von Jungingen, on the battlefield near the village of Grunwald. Given the sources, the course of the battle and the relative merits of each “national contingent” of the Polish army are rather difficult to summarize, but by the end of the day approximately half the Teutonic Knights were dead, and the other half had been taken prisoner for ransom. As resounding as the defeat may have been, the conditions of peace were rather mild. The Teutonic Knights agreed to withdraw from part of Lithuania, and they guaranteed free trade on the Vistula. These relatively minor concessions were completely disproportionate to the enormity that the Battle of Grunwald later assumed in the Polish historical memory.

During the nineteenth century, the Teutonic Knights played a central role in Polish historical poetry and literature, which usually made little or no distinction between them and the Germans in general and depicted them as a pack of bloodthirsty, sadistic, and unscrupulous invaders, an image diametrically opposed to the contemporary German Romantic depiction of the Teutonic Knights as those noble representatives of Christian culture and German chivalry who heroically civilized the east. One of the first Polish medieval poems commemorating the Battle of Grunwald compared it with a Polish David’s victory over a German Goliath, and Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish national poet of the nineteenth century, saw the Polish conflict with the Order of the Teutonic Knights as a metaphor for the struggles of smaller oppressed nations like the Poles against larger tyrants like the Germans and the Russians. There also is a long Polish tradition of regarding the Teutonic Knights as the precursors of future German aggression and oppression, like the Prussian participation in the division of Poland after 1772 or the German occupation of Poland during World War II. The Battle

of Grunwald also frequently has been stylized into a national or even racial struggle between Germans and Slavs. In Soviet mythology, for example, the Teutonic Knights were the medieval forerunners of Hitler's armies, which made the Battle of Grunwald the medieval Slavic counterpart of stemming the German tide at Stalingrad in 1942/1943.⁸

Neither the Order of the Teutonic Knights nor the Battle of Grunwald, which the Germans refer to using a different name, Tannenberg, played the central role in German history or historical literature that they did for the Slavs in general or the Poles in particular. Nonetheless, the Germans interpreted their victory over the Russians on the eastern front at the beginning of the World War I as a modern Battle of Tannenberg and a belated rectification of the historical record. In addition, Hitler commemorated this victory by giving his plans for the German invasion of Poland in 1939 the code name Operation Tannenberg. Even though the activities of the Order of the Teutonic Knights never reached into Russia, the Nazis also drew parallels between the order's medieval conquest and settlement of the east and their invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. *Blitzkrieg* and *Lebensraum* were merely the modern versions of the Teutonic Knights' "eastern mission"—German swords and plowshares as the means of civilizing the eastern heathens and providing the German people with more space to live. The fact that one SS division was named after the Order of the Teutonic Knights merely demonstrates to what extent the Nazis used and abused historical precedents for their purposes.

Historians have done a tremendous amount of work in recent decades in an attempt to portray the role of the Teutonic Knights in a manner devoid of nationalistic and Romantic prejudices, and this enterprise has been complemented by a balanced attempt by all the nations involved to evaluate dispassionately the role of German settlement in East Central Europe in the Middle Ages in general. However, this has been an uphill battle because something as academically remote as the discoveries of professional medievalists does not immediately debunk national myths so dear to the people who believe in them.

The Great Late Medieval Kingdoms

Poland and Hungary, 1350–1500

When Czechs, Hungarians, and Poles look back on their histories, they share a sense of tragedy related to those events leading up to the loss of “national freedom,” and for the Hungarians and the Poles, this feeling of loss is often intensified by reminiscences about extensive territories lost as well. If the old historical kingdoms of Poland and Hungary were “organic wholes” to the same extent that many Poles and Hungarians feel they were, the sensations they experience are akin to the phantom pain that amputees have after having lost a limb. They know that what has been lost is gone for good, but neurological quirks sometimes allow them to feel pains in the missing extremities.

The Czechs are perhaps an exception to the other peoples of Central Europe because they generally do *not* think in “imperial” dimensions (although many Slovaks might contest this statement, because they feel that the Czechs did not treat them as equal national partners as long as they were living together in one state). The grand visions of the last three representatives of the Přemysl dynasty—Otakar; his son, Wenceslas II; and his grandson, Wenceslas III—were medieval and ephemeral, and the kingdom of Bohemia reached its modest territorial zenith in the fourteenth century under the Luxemburgs, by contractually securing the previously contested duchy of Silesia from Poland and briefly ruling the duchy of Brandenburg farther north.

After that point, the Czechs never made any major territorial demands on their neighbors, and the relatively small size and stable borders of the kingdom of Bohemia is one explanation for the fact that the idea of a “Greater Bohemia” has never played a pronounced role in the Czechs’ his-

torical imagination or perception of themselves. When Czechs look back, their sense of national loss is not intensified by the recollection of territorial sacrifices as well. This characteristic distinguishes Czechs from Hungarians and Poles, whose sense of loss is exacerbated by the fact that they ruled multinational empires substantially larger than their twentieth-century states. Historical magnitude—the idea of having been great—is an important part of the Central European mode of national self-perception as well as a form of retrospective psychological compensation for smaller states. The rise of the kingdom of Poland or the history of the kingdom of Hungary at its zenith in the late fifteenth century serve as good illustrations of this point.

The Wedding of Poland and Lithuania, 1386

Most people, with the obvious and understandable exceptions of Poles and Lithuanians, do not realize that Poland and Lithuania were a joint continental superpower at one point in their histories. During the fifteenth century, the unified kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania were the largest European power, and the genesis of the Polish–Lithuanian union in 1386 is a good example of how dynastic politics and primal “national alliances” functioned in late feudal and early modern Central Europe.

Toward the end of the fourteenth century, the Polish Piast dynasty expired, but it did so under auspicious circumstances. The reign of the last Piast, Casimir the Great (1333–1370), marked the end of nearly two centuries of fragmentation and the beginning of a phase of “national consolidation,” in the medieval sense of the word. Casimir reasserted the crown’s authority over the nobility, which had exploited its past weakness, and he expanded his kingdom’s holdings to the east and southeast using a skillful combination of warfare and diplomacy. Casimir gave Kraków, the historical capital of Poland, the political and architectural status of a European capital, and he founded Central Europe’s second oldest university there in 1364. According to the chronicles, he was loved by his people and respected by his contemporaries, but his long list of achievements unfortunately did not include a legitimate male heir.

The fate of the Piast dynasty hinged on Casimir’s procreational misfortune. None of his three legal marriages produced male offspring, and the three sons he did sire, who were the results of amorous adventures with other married women, had no legitimate claim to his patrimony. Like many great politicians, Casimir also preferred to leave unresolved the question of his succession. Although there were a number of options concerning possible lines of succession, the crown was assumed by Casimir’s nephew, Louis of Anjou (“the Great”), the king of Hungary, who was a product of a previous interdynastic marriage between Casimir’s sister Elizabeth and Charles Robert of Anjou, the first “Neapolitan” king of Hungary.

Modern observers, who are accustomed to thinking in neat categories like nations that correspond to states, and vice versa, or who project modern national identities into the past, are frequently misled or confused by the patterns of interdynastic marriage because they appear to be nationally

incompatible. But it made just as much sense to the Polish contemporaries involved to have a Hungarian king of Poland as it did for Hungarians to have a French king of Hungary from Naples, because the nobles of the feudal estates, who elected the kings, considered their particular interests to be the interests of the "nation," in the medieval sense of the word. They had no problem electing a foreign king if they thought he would promote their interests, because the virtual absence of the kinds of attitudes produced by nineteenth-century nationalism made politics a much more cosmopolitan affair.

After the first generation of Central European dynasties expired, the question of succession was resolved in each case by electing "foreigners" as kings instead of choosing "domestic" candidates from among the indigenous nobility. After the Babenberg line died out in Austria in 1240 and Otakar's interregnum, the Austrian estates recognized Rudolph von Habsburg's claims. When the Hungarian Árpád dynasty ended in 1301, the Hungarian magnates were prepared to elect an almost exotically foreign king from Naples, just as the Czech nobility were willing to ally themselves with the powerful but equally foreign and "German" House of Luxemburg after the Přemysl dynasty died out in 1306.

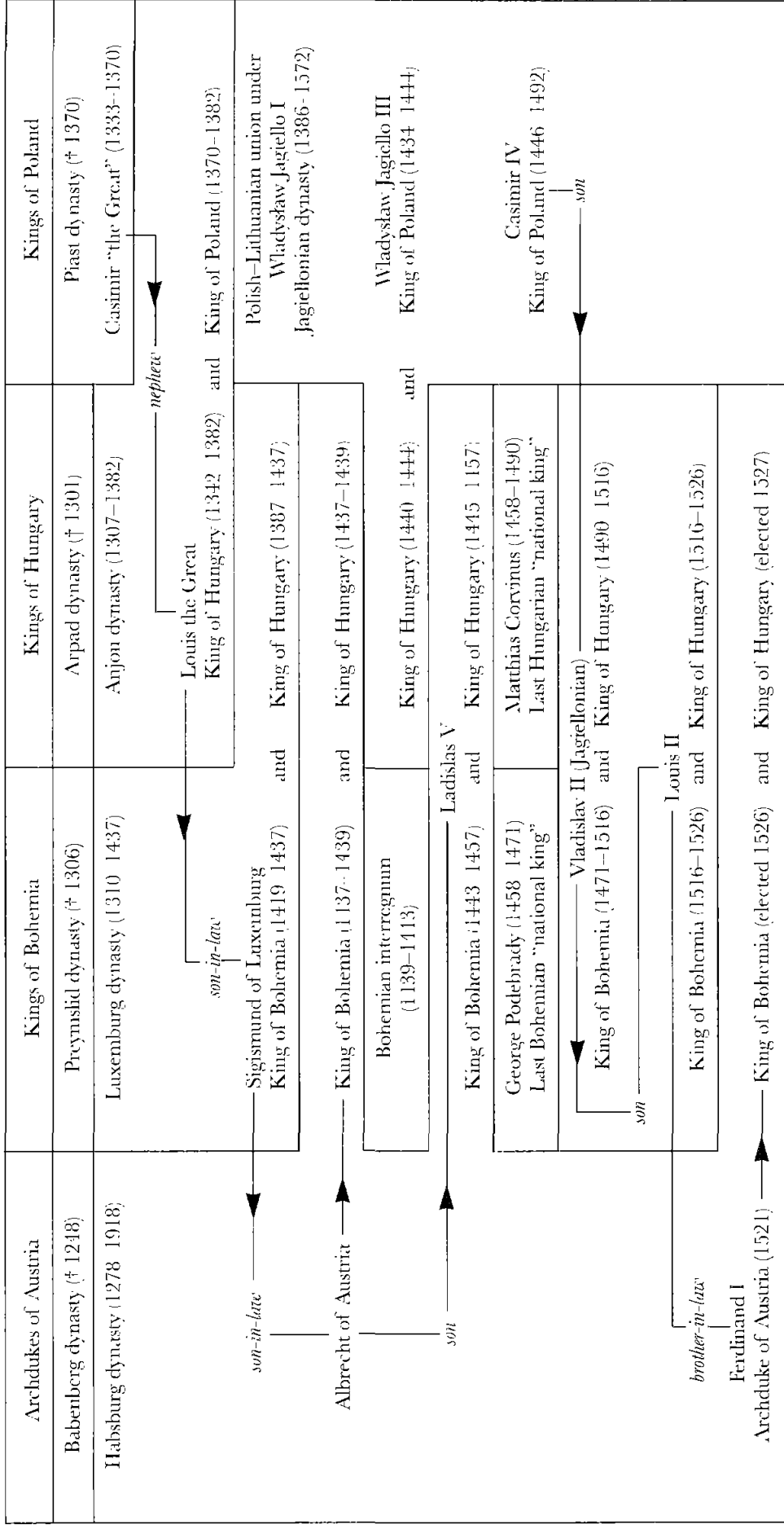
In this respect, the personal union of Hungary and Poland under Louis of Anjou from 1370 until 1382 was no great exception. Before Louis, the kings of Bohemia had also been kings of Poland (1300–1306), and after him there were Polish kings of Hungary (1440–1444, 1490–1526). The crowns of Bohemia and Hungary also were personally united between 1419 and 1459 under Sigismund of Luxemburg, Albrecht von Habsburg, and Albrecht's son Ladislas V, and they were reunited from 1490 until 1526 under a Polish prince from the Jagiellonian dynasty who had been elected to both thrones, Vladislav II, and his son, Louis II.

In each case, there were relative advantages and disadvantages to having a foreigner on the throne, and there seemed to be alternating patterns of benefit and abuse that depended on the personalities, interests, and skill of the respective foreign kings. In some cases, they put the regal resources of their "home kingdoms" at the disposal of their "second kingdoms" and new subjects, or they were the source of beneficial innovation. Exploitation or neglect, however, were also inherent possibilities in such a constellation.

In Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland, the nobility also had a certain logic in turning to foreigners to resolve the domestic crisis of succession that accompanied the expiration of a dynasty. Each indigenous caste of nobility had centuries of experience in infighting, protecting local interests, and resisting royal centralization. Therefore, nobles generally were not interested in seeing someone from their own "national" ranks succeed to a position of royal predominance, because domestic alliances of ambition, jealousy, or greed might upset the delicate balance of interest and self-interest that feudal nobles traditionally cultivated among themselves.

When foreigners were elected king, they frequently made generous concessions to the indigenous nobility. Coronation ceremonies included the guarantee of the newly chosen king to respect the nobility's "ancient rights"

Dynastic Transitions, "Foreign" Kings, and Joint Kingdoms



and “ancient freedoms.” The kings had to swear that they would—to use a modern term—“uphold the constitution,” and one of the peculiarities of the constitutional development of these kingdoms was that the nobility remained much stronger, much longer than in Western Europe. If there was one thing the noble estates of Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland had in common, it was their interest in having kings who would not interfere excessively in their affairs. The large size of these kingdoms’ noble classes, which ranged from lesser nobility with little more than titles to magnates and barons with vast estates, also was a comparative structural peculiarity. In the Middle Ages, 4 to 5 percent of the population were “noble” in Hungary (and 7 to 8 percent in Poland), whereas the average in Western Europe was about 1 percent.¹ This kind of noble overrepresentation in the population made them a more formidable special interest group and a greater royal problem than elsewhere.

It is an irony of history that the Hungarian, Bohemian, and Polish nobles, who considered themselves the true representatives of their respective nations, promoted political institutions based on the weakness of central authority, and exactly this characteristic—the persistence of feudal structures—proved to be an enormous deficiency in the future because it reduced the ability of these kingdoms to resist their neighbors (and enemies), who had adopted comparatively modern and more efficient forms of centralized political organization.

The Angevin line of Louis the Great, the king of Hungary and the king of Poland, suffered the same fate as that of his Piast predecessor, Casimir the Great. Having failed to produce a male heir, Louis made arrangements for a female succession and received the assurance of the Hungarian and Polish nobility that the elder of his two daughters, Maria, who was married to Sigismund of Luxemburg, was to succeed him as queen on both thrones. When Louis died in 1382, the Hungarian crown passed via Maria’s marriage to Sigismund into the hands of the Luxemburgs for a generation, but the Polish nobility saw that it would be in their best interest not to become part of this powerful constellation and chose instead to elect Louis’s younger daughter, the ten-year-old Jadwiga, queen of Poland. After her election, their next task was to find a husband for Jadwiga who would be a suitable king for themselves. Although Jadwiga was technically already engaged to Wilhelm von Habsburg, a prince from Austria whose family was later to base an entire empire on a series of successful interdynastic marriages, the most influential factions of the Polish nobility chased him out of Kraków when he arrived to claim his bride. They decided that another marital scheme would be more advantageous and opted for a conjugal and political relationship with the grand duchy of Lithuania instead of Austria.

Around the turn of the fourteenth century, Lithuania, a country of 25,200 square miles today, was at the peak of its development. It stretched from the shores of the Baltic Sea east toward Moscow and southeast through Ukraine to the shores of the Black Sea and encompassed approximately 350,000 square miles. (Just for the sake of comparison: It was 100,000 square miles large than France or the U.S. state of Texas.) The Lithuanians, the last

pagans of Europe, were a robust and disciplined tribe of warriors, who had managed to exploit the indigenous weakness of the various principalities of European Russia to their own advantage, and they ruled their extensive holdings with a circumspective policy of demanding modest tribute and exercising sufficient tolerance.

Jogaila, Grand Duke of Lithuania (ca. 1351–1434), was realistic enough to recognize that paganism was not a religion with a future. Confronted with Christianity in the form of the crusading Teutonic Knights and in the neighboring kingdom of Poland, whose own expansion to the east was a source of bilateral conflict, he realized that Roman Catholicism was bound to come sooner or later. In any event, the prospects of voluntary conversion and a marriage to the virgin queen of Poland, a union laden with political opportunities, were much more promising than the probability of forced conversion at the receiving end of the swords and lances of the Order of the Teutonic Knights. The knights had successfully subjugated the indigenous pagan inhabitants of Prussia and the Baltic coast and were in the process of using their crusaders' mandate to batter Lithuania's western frontiers.

Polish and Lithuanian matchmakers negotiated a package of conditions that were incorporated into Jogaila and Jadwiga's marriage contract: Jogaila's baptism before the wedding; the conversion of his pagan subjects to Roman Catholicism; the release of Polish prisoners and slaves; and the coordination of operations against a mutual enemy, the Teutonic Knights. On February 15, 1386, Jogaila was baptized. Three days later, he married Jadwiga, and their joint coronation took place in March. The new king of Poland accepted the Christian name Władysław, and his Lithuanian name was polonized as Jagiełło. He returned to Vilnius, the historical capital of Lithuania which also received a new Polish name, Wilno, decreed the abolition of the pagan gods, and began the mass conversion of his subjects. One of the most important short-term consequences of this marriage was that Poland assumed responsibility for propagating Catholicism among the Lithuanians, which deprived the Teutonic Knights of their legitimacy as Christian crusaders. It also laid the foundations for a political alliance that was to bring to a halt the Teutonic Knights' eastward expansion.

This Polish–Lithuanian marriage also had many far-reaching consequences. It established a personal union of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and for the next 186 years, the Jagiellonian dynasty directed the two kingdoms like a team of horses pulling a common chariot. (This affiliation can be compared with the union of the kingdoms of Scotland and England under the Stuarts at the beginning of the seventeenth century, which eventually led to the establishment of the United Kingdom.) After 1572, Poland and Lithuania formed a constitutional union, a commonwealth or "united kingdom," that prevailed until the first partition of Poland 200 years later in 1772.

The greatest benefactors of the personal and then the constitutional unions of Poland and Lithuania were the nobles, who managed to maintain their feudal or "ancient freedoms" for centuries after they had ended elsewhere in Europe. In other words, while the modern, centrally administered

CENTRAL EUROPE, ca. 1500



Based on Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993)

state was evolving—as either despotism in czarist Russia or absolutism in France, Prussia, and Austria—Poland became a dual anachronism characterized by the weakness of its crown and the strength of its feudal estates. Poles, however, prefer a more poetic and patriotic interpretation of this phenomenon, like the island of freedom in the sea of tyranny.

The Polish–Lithuanian union also drew Poland politically into the East where it became the most influential representative of the West. The participation in Western European traditions is one of the most important criteria for qualifying to be Central European, and in this respect, the eastern frontiers of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth represented the greatest

extension of Western European civilization in the European East. Furthermore, the westward expansion of imperial Russia in the eighteenth century interrupted the "Western development" of this region by politically incorporating it into the East. The establishment of the Baltic republics and the reestablishment of Poland after World War I make the interwar period a short-lived "return to the West" for the region, but it was reincorporated into the East by the creation of the Soviet bloc after World War II.

Before the establishment of the newly independent states (NIS) in 1991, one scenario for the deterioration of the Soviet empire, which was frequently dismissed as unrealistic, was that those non-Russian republics that had been Christianized by the Teutonic Knights—Estonia and Latvia—or historically had been part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth—Lithuania, Belarus, and perhaps Ukraine²—would abandon the Soviet Union or "imperial Russia" and thus reinstate the borders of "the West" roughly along the frontiers of Poland-Lithuania before it was partitioned at the end of the eighteenth century. It would be misleading to overestimate how "Western" the Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belarussians, or Ukrainians are, but this should not detract from the fact that the deterioration of the Soviet Union occurred roughly along the lines of the historical frontier just described.

The Poles were the senior partners in the Polish–Lithuanian union. The Lithuanian nobility were gradually assimilated or polonized to such an extent that the term "Polish" came to represent the joint interests of the Polish and Lithuanian nobility (similar to the way in which the umbrella term "British" came to epitomize the common or national concerns of England and Scotland—and with the same asymmetry). In the long run, two ethnically different groups of nobles identified themselves with one cultural tradition and as one "political nation," in the medieval sense of the word.³

The union of Poland and Lithuania also added a new national dimension to the two-tier order of feudal society in the east. In western Belarus and western Ukraine, the educated, middle, and administrative classes and the landowning gentry became predominantly Polish and Roman Catholic. The urban centers were polonized and had considerable Jewish populations (due to the high level of Jewish immigration to Poland-Lithuania from Western Europe). The lower classes and the rural population of serfs were Eastern Slavs and Orthodox. For example, cities like the Lithuanian Vilnius or the Ukrainian L'viv became "Polish" to such a great extent that Poles eventually regarded them as essentially Polish, and it was common for Polish landowners to rely exclusively on the labor of Belarussian or Ukrainian serfs.

Although tolerance was one of the political keys to ruling an ethnically diverse and religiously heterodox kingdom, the Poles had a propensity to regard their Western, Catholic, and national culture as superior to the indigenous Eastern Slavic and Orthodox cultures over which they ruled. The fact that Polish rule of the "subject nations" in vast regions of the European East was more tolerant and benevolent than the iron fist the Russian czars

(and then the Soviets) later imposed obscures the Polish lords' attitudes toward their non-Polish subjects, some of which still exist in contemporary Polish nationalism. From the Polish point of view, there is a tendency to look back at the Polish–Lithuanian union as one big happy family. But the national perspectives of the former subject nations of the Poles like the Belarussians and the Ukrainians are not quite so rosy or sentimental.

The long-term consequences of the Polish engagement in the east after 1400 also were analogous in some respects to those of the medieval German “drive to the east” before 1350. The Poles, who perceived themselves as standing at the threshold of a West–East “cultural gradient,” came to consider themselves as “carriers of culture” to less developed civilizations and regions. Although the Polish settlement of regions eastward was never as extensive as the medieval German “colonization” of its east, the development of a fundamentally Polish ruling class and the formation of Polish “linguistic islands” in urban centers created a situation that made the drawing of national borders along ethnic–territorial lines virtually impossible in the future. This fact was amply demonstrated by the problems surrounding the establishment of Poland’s eastern frontier after World War I and its revision during World War II.

One of the combined results of these phenomena was that Polish nationalists later assumed that eastern Central Europe and considerable portions of Eastern Europe historically belonged to a Polish “linguistic and cultural space,” a notion that had an uncanny similarity to the German nationalistic concept of Central Europe as a *deutscher Sprach- und Kulturraum*. Although Polish variations on this idea of national and cultural space were relatively benign in comparison with the German ones, they were not devoid of equally condescending or chauvinistic undertones.

Both Poles and Lithuanians look back on the personal union of their countries under the Jagiellonian dynasty and the subsequent creation of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth as the golden ages in their histories. Together they stopped the German expansion to the east at the Battle of Grunwald. They held the Russians at bay for centuries, and at the same time, they defended Christian Europe from the onslaughts of eastern hordes.

Poles and Lithuanians have never forgotten the historical magnitude of these achievements or the former dimensions of their kingdoms, but as the easternmost representatives of the cultural sphere that defines itself as “the West,” they feel that the importance of their role has never received the recognition from the West that it deserves. Although there is a certain amount of retrospective resentment among Lithuanians, who have recognized that the Polish–Lithuanian affiliation benefited the Poles at the expense of Lithuania, neither Poles nor Lithuanians have forgotten their legacy of collaboration. As the Eastern bloc crumbled in 1989 and the aspirations for national independence by the republics of the Soviet Union climaxed thereafter, some Poles saw the historical precedent of a Polish–Lithuanian association as the basis for some kind of future cooperation, but this vision has not materialized.

*The Greatest Hungarian King:
The Reign of Matthias I, 1458–1490*

When Hungarians look back on their history, they have a large, multinational kingdom in their mind's eye. At its peak, the Kingdom of Hungary stretched from the Carpathian Mountains and Slovakia in the north through the central Danube Valley to Serbia in the south and from Transylvania in the east across the Danube Valley to Croatia on the coast of the Adriatic in the west. As elsewhere in medieval Europe, the idea of ethnicity barely played a role in formulating the concept of the Hungarian "political nation." Its constituent members, feudal lords, were not only Hungarian but also Romanian, Serbian, and Croatian, and they even included a few magnates of French and Italian origin, who had been benefactors of the crown. These nobles conducted their business with one another and with the crown in Latin, and regardless of their differences of ethnic origin or mother tongue, they all regarded themselves as members of the *gens Hungarica* or *natio Hungarica*, the "Hungarian nation."

Despite this cosmopolitan tradition, some Hungarian historians have not looked back favorably on the "foreign kings" who ruled this multinational kingdom after the death of Louis of Anjou, "the Great," in 1382. Louis's successor and son-in-law, Sigismund of Luxemburg, who was elected Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation and King of Bohemia after assuming the Hungarian crown, is best remembered for a combination of arbitrariness and ruthlessness when he was in Hungary, or absenteeism and neglect when he was not. The following reign of Sigismund's son-in-law, a Habsburg, Albrecht of Austria (1437–1439), and the tenure of a Polish king from the Jagiellonian dynasty, Władysław III (1440–1444, known as Ulászló I in Hungarian history), were too brief to be of any lasting consequence.

Subsequent kings from these foreign dynasties had poor reputations, according to the Hungarian historical record. Vladislav II (Ulászló II for Hungarians), a Jagiellonian prince who had been elected king of Bohemia before assuming the Hungarian crown in 1490, and his son, Louis II (1516–1526), were responsible for presiding over a period of national decay that culminated in a resounding Hungarian defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1526, a catastrophe that was merely a prelude to the Turkish occupation of most of Hungary for the next 160 years. Ferdinand I, a Habsburg, was elected king of Hungary in 1527, and his family turned the crown of St. Stephen from an elected national institution into a hereditary foreign possession for the next 391 years, until 1918.

Under these circumstances, there is a certain temptation to make foreigners responsible for Hungary's national tragedies. From this perspective, the bumbling of Polish kings contributed to the demise of Hungary, which Western Christendom abandoned to the Turks, with the sole exception of the Habsburgs, who benefited from Hungary's predicament. Given the relationship between foreign rule and national calamity in Hungarian history, it is no mere coincidence that the brief interlude of "national independence," between 1444 and 1490, during which Hungary was ruled by

Hungarians, was the last “golden age” in Hungarian history. This era is identified with the career of a Hungarian general, János Hunyadi, and his son Matthias, the only “national” king to rule Hungary between the expiration of the Árpád dynasty in 1301 and the demise of the Habsburg Empire in 1918.

The career of János Hunyadi was nothing less than meteoritic. Not a “high-born” magnate but a member of the lesser Hungarian nobility from Transylvania, Hunyadi made a name for himself by brilliantly serving the Hungarian crown.⁴ He also accumulated more than 4 million acres of land in the process, which made him the largest landowner in Hungarian history. Raised at the court of Sigismund of Luxemburg, Hunyadi put his considerable strategic and military skills at the disposal of Albrecht von Habsburg, the Austrian duke and son-in-law of Sigismund, who had assumed his father-in-law’s multiple titles and holdings as Holy Roman Emperor, King of Bohemia, and King of Hungary.

Albrecht, who was the type of dynastic material out of which empires were made, entrusted Hunyadi with organizing the defense of Hungary’s southern frontier which, after the Turks’ decisive victory over Serbia in 1389 at the Battle of Kosovo, had become Western Christendom’s front line of defense against the Ottomans’ expanding Islamic empire. But Albrecht’s brief two-year reign showed how ephemeral imperial visions were in those days. Albrecht contracted dysentery in the course of a military operation against the Turks in Serbia and died in 1439, leaving behind a pregnant wife instead of a successor.

The Hungarian nobility then elected Władysław III, the Jagiellonian king of Poland, to the Hungarian throne, and he as well relied on Hunyadi’s skills in the field. Hungary’s turbulent southern frontier also turned out to be the scene of Władysław’s demise. Hunyadi considered offense to be the best defense, and he made plans to expel the Turks from Europe with the help of the peoples they had subjugated—Serbs, Romanians, and Bulgarians—who, in turn, would confederate with Hungary in the future. During an offensive Hunyadi organized to push the Turks back down the Balkan Peninsula, Władysław fell in the Battle of Varna on the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria in 1444. (He is remembered as “Władysław of Varna” in Polish history. This heroic attempt to stop the Turkish advance later became, for Poles, the national achievement of a Polish king and, for Hungarians, of a Hungarian king.)

Left with a vacant throne for the third time in seven years, the Hungarian nobility elected the five-year-old Ladislas V, the son that Albrecht of Austria’s wife bore shortly after Albrecht’s death, and they simultaneously designated Hunyadi as “regent,” a position that entailed the guardianship of the child-king and the interim government of Hungary until Ladislas came of age.

During his regency, Hunyadi promoted centralization, ostensibly to mobilize the resources he needed to continue the defense of Hungary’s southern frontier, but chronic infighting among the various factions of Hungarian nobility and the fact that they suspected him of exploiting his powerful position to further his personal interests instead of those of the nation un-

dermined the kind of national unity that a concerted military effort required. Hunyadi's regency ended in 1453 when Ladislas came of age (and the Turks finally took Constantinople, an event marking the end of the Byzantine Empire).

Hunyadi crowned his career by lifting the Turkish siege of the border fortress of Belgrade in 1456, but he scarcely had an opportunity to enjoy the fruits of his victory because he fell victim to a plague that had broken out in the Hungarian camp. The magnitude of Hunyadi's achievement, which was perceived as a decisive victory over the Turks, impressed his contemporaries to such an extent that the pope ordered Christian churches to ring their bells daily at noon, a practice still observed in many Roman Catholic countries today. The death of the sixteen-year-old Ladislas V, unwed and childless, in the following year facilitated the rise of János Hunyadi's son Matthias, who, despite a series of intrigues against him and his family, managed to organize the noble support he needed to be elected king of Hungary in 1458.

Matthias Hunyadi, also called Matthias Corvinus, embodied the ideals of the Renaissance ruler. (Corvinus is a Latin derivative of *corvus*, "raven," the animal adorning Matthias's coat of arms.) As a humanist, he combined personal erudition with a generous patronage of the arts. His collections, library, and court were renowned throughout Europe. As a politician, he used Machiavellian cunning to achieve his objectives, and he did not shy away from methods that were nothing less than despotic. Matthias understood that his royal power was limited by the traditional strength of the Hungarian nobility, and so he pursued a straightforward and ruthless strategy of augmenting the former by diminishing the latter.

Matthias's plan for strengthening the central authority of the crown was to curtail the feudal privileges of the powerful nobility or "magnates," a measure that—along with carefully orchestrated propaganda praising his wisdom and magnanimity—won him the sympathies of the people, who preferred the new forms of regimentation he introduced to the old ones he replaced. Matthias initiated a more equitable system of justice and taxation and instituted a relatively effective administration for executing them, and he reinvested the income he gained as a result of more effective tax collection in projects that produced political capital. The instrument he devised for executing and enforcing his policies was Central Europe's first standing army, a troop of well-paid mercenaries frequently clad in black armor or chain mail, estimated to be 30,000 strong and under Matthias's personal command. With his "Black Army," Matthias Corvinus bypassed the king's traditional feudal reliance on the nobility for military support, a medieval practice that had constantly weakened the crown because the nobles often used their "ancient rights" to withhold it. The Black Army was a lethally effective tool for dealing with domestic resistance as well as an agile military detachment that could respond quickly to foreign threats.

During the first part of Matthias's thirty-two-year reign, he reassumed his father's mission of crusading against the Turks. However, he soon recognized that Hungary's resources alone would never be sufficient for this task, so he made peace with the Turkish sultan in order to stabilize Hungary's

southern frontier. Then he turned his attention to the northwest, Bohemia and Austria, and spent the last twenty years of his life trying to establish a "Danubian empire" under the hegemony of the Hungarian crown. Hungary had always played an important role in the southern Central Europe's various imperial schemes, so Matthias was no great innovator in this respect. Otakar of Bohemia, Sigismund of Luxemburg, and Albrecht of Austria each had considered founding a Danubian empire, and the interdynastic marriages among the ruling houses of Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, and Austria throughout the Middle Ages were attempts to achieve some kind of larger and lasting union at the nuptial altar instead of on the battlefield.

The first phase of Matthias's imperial plans brought him into conflict with the kingdom of Bohemia, a prosperous realm torn by decades of confessional strife between the Roman Catholics and the Hussites. The Hussites were the followers of that forerunner of the Reformation and "Bohemian Luther," Jan Hus, whom Catholic authorities had condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415. The Bohemian nobles were divided into Catholic and Hussite factions, which correspondingly supported or resisted the crown, and the king of Bohemia, George of Poděbrady, tried in vain to find a politically acceptable solution to the problem of religiously inspired rebellion. The fifteenth-century Bohemian predicament of religion and rebellion, war and reconciliation, was merely a small-scale preview of the types of problems Central Europe was to face on a grand scale in the following century.

Matthias had no political reservations about exploiting the problems of George of Poděbrady, and although Matthias was a devout Catholic, he supported the rebellious faction of Hussite nobility by invading Moravia in 1468. The following year, the Hussite opposition elected him as a schismatic "king of Bohemia," and Matthias took this political mandate as a pretext for extending his holdings into Silesia. George of Poděbrady died the following year. (Poděbrady was the last Czech king of Bohemia, just as Matthias was the last Hungarian king of Hungary. Consequently, Poděbrady enjoys a position in Czech national history similar to that of Matthias in Hungarian history. However, Poděbrady never was as successful as his adversary.)

The subsequent election of a new and legitimate king of Bohemia, the Jagiellonian prince Vladislav II, by the Czech nobility who had remained loyal to the crown, changed the composition of the political fronts that Matthias faced, and he spent most of the rest of the decade battling the Catholic king of Bohemia, a Pole who could rely on dynastic assistance from home. In 1478, Matthias sought a compromise to consolidate his holdings and offered to recognize Vladislav's titles and holdings in Bohemia if Vladislav were willing to recognize those of Matthias in Moravia and Silesia. Vladislav, who later earned the nickname *Dobre*, Czech for "good" or "OK," because he was so complacent, was neither politically nor personally strong enough to do otherwise and accepted the deal. Satisfied for the time being with what he had achieved in Bohemia, Matthias next turned his attention to the Habsburgs' holdings in Austria.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Habsburgs' domains were rough-

ly the size of contemporary Austria. After the struggle with Otakar of Bohemia and the assumption of the duchies of the Babenbergs in 1278, the family had fared quite well and had expanded their holdings from the east toward the Adriatic and through the Alps to the west. The House of Habsburg, however, also had been plagued by the episodes of internal strife that accompany any family business, and compared with other Central European dynasties, they were not among the major players in the game of power politics. Matthias's antagonist, the archduke of Austria and Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III (1416–1493), may have laid the foundations for the rise of the Habsburg Empire by arranging a fortunate marriage between his son, Maximilian I, and Maria of Burgundy, but he was no formidable opponent himself. Frederick III, who was renowned for his combination of indecisiveness and persistence, never defeated Matthias; he merely outlived him.

Matthias started his operations against Austria in the spring of 1480 by invading the duchy of Styria (in contemporary southern Austria) and began working his way north to Vienna. Castles and fortified towns fell one after the other, and Matthias, who came to conquer, not to plunder, gave orders to his Black Army to treat the local populace diplomatically, which basically meant curtailing to a certain extent the standard pastimes of soldiers, like rape, pillage, and arson. In five years, Matthias occupied eastern Austria, took Vienna by siege, and settled there apparently with intention of making the city the capital of his empire. Frederick III retired to the city of Linz, about a hundred miles upstream from Vienna on the Danube, and did what he could, which apparently was not too much. In his capacity as Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III solicited support from the noble estates in Germany and received an amount reflecting the modesty of the powers inherent in the imperial crown and title he bore: a weak army of knights that Matthias's Black Army scattered without trouble. Otherwise, Frederick waited.

In the meantime, Matthias made himself comfortable in Vienna. He donated a new roof for Vienna's central landmark, St. Stephen's Cathedral, and he cultivated the allegiance of the fickle Viennese in particular and his Austrian subjects in general by using circumspection and generosity. His only son, Johannes Corvinus, was the product of a love affair he had with Barbara Edelpeck, the daughter of a Viennese commoner, and Matthias had every intention of securing his son's succession to the Hungarian throne and his empire. But then Matthias died suddenly in Vienna in 1490 at the age of forty-seven after a short and mysterious illness, and his empire, which had been held together by his ambition and authority, disintegrated into its previous parts.

The death of Matthias in his prime and the mysterious circumstances surrounding it—some forensic historians think he was poisoned—has traditionally been treated as a tragedy in Hungarian history, although Matthias had made more than enough enemies in the course of his career. He took half the kingdom of Bohemia away from Vladislav, which angered loyal Bohemians and the Jagiellonian dynasty, and he fought with the Hussites against the Catholics, which aggravated the pope. He was squatting on Habsburg territory, and many Hungarian magnates saw his superabundant pow-

er as a threat to their own vital interests. Under these circumstances it would have been easy to find a villain with a vial of poison, if there was one, either at home or abroad.

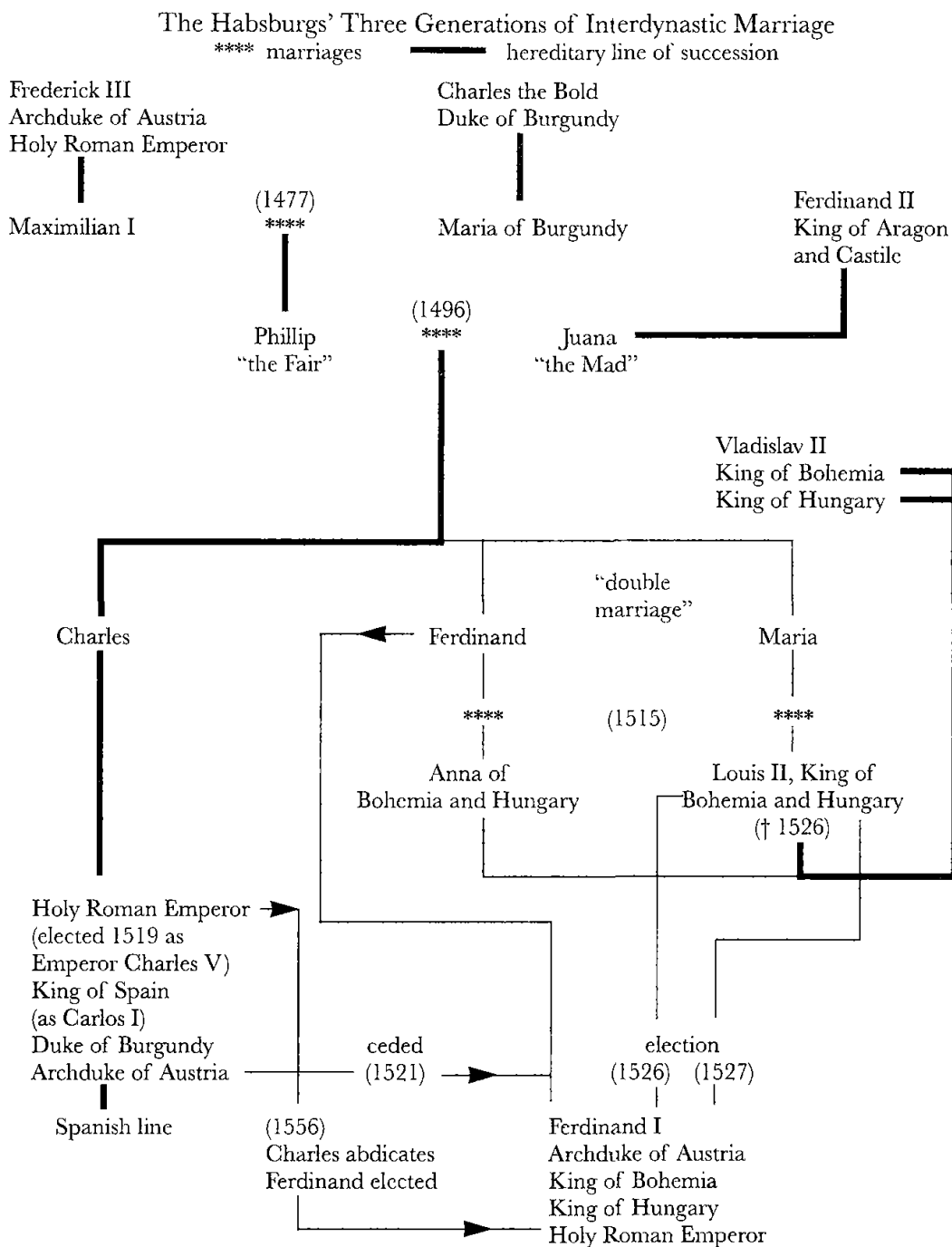
Analyses of Matthias and his political achievements vary. Was he was a Hungarian national patriot, whose plans were a farsighted and noble attempt to gain control of the resources and manpower he needed to defend Hungary and Western Christendom from the Ottoman threat, or was he merely a rapacious and cosmopolitan dynasty builder, who was discouraged by his lack of success in the south and inspired by the more promising prospects for expansion elsewhere? The historical truth is perhaps to be found somewhere in between. Hungarians have traditionally assessed Matthias Corvinus as “the greatest of Hungarian kings.”⁵ His defense of the peasants and lesser nobility against the magnates made him popular, a “people’s king.” The national importance and popularity of Matthias in Hungarian history also is undoubtedly related to the fact that before (and after) his reign, the kingdom of Hungary was (and remained) an object of foreign imperial acquisition. Under Matthias, however, Hungary was the center of an empire. He reversed the established historical roles and, for a change, made Hungary, the traditional prey of foreign empires, an imperial predator.

Matthias’s conquest of Vienna is viewed as a high point in Hungarian history, and some Hungarian cynics regard it as the most recent one. It even is mentioned in the third strophe of the Hungarian national anthem, a nineteenth-century epic national poem by Frenec Kölcsey: “and the proud fortifications of Vienna groaned under King Matthias’s dark (or ‘black’) army.”⁶ His death in 1490 marked the beginning of the end of this brief, proverbial “golden age.”

The Hungarian nobles’ decision to elect to the Hungarian throne the Jagiellonian prince and king of Bohemia, Matthias’s former adversary Vladislav, partly because Vladislav’s incompetence was in their own interest, marks the beginning of the downward curve in the nation’s fortunes. The death of Vladislav’s son and successor, Louis II, in the Battle of Mohács against the Turks in 1526 was a national tragedy. Given the intricacies of dynastic politics in Central Europe, the fact that the grandson of a Polish king was simultaneously the king of Bohemia and the king of Hungary should be no surprise at this point, but in order to explain why his death in 1526 was a national catastrophe for Hungary—as well as Bohemia—and an enormous windfall for Austria, we must examine one more piece of the Central European mosaic: the rise of the Habsburgs.

*Empire Building at the Altar:
Habsburg Marital Diplomacy, 1477–1515*

For European dynastic families, whose business was ruling, children were political capital. Marriages were investments or the diplomatic equivalent of mergers. Warfare was one of the vicissitudes of the market, and the inability to procreate amounted to bankruptcy. Like modern multinationals, these families had home offices and foreign subsidiaries, and they ran their oper-



ations on an international scale. It would be a moot point to argue which European dynasty ran the best business, but it is an indisputable fact that the Habsburgs stayed in business the longest, from 1278 until 1918. They saw the local competition like the Anjou and Luxemburg dynasties go bankrupt, and they watched big foreign concerns fold, like the English Tudors or Stuarts or the French Bourbons. The key to the Habsburgs' success was not fighting wars to force their competitors out of the market but arranging marriages, which positioned them well within it. Three generations of dynastic intermarriage from 1477 until 1515 changed their family business into a global concern.⁷

Frederick III, who had been so ineffectual in stopping Matthias Corvinus from realizing Hungarian imperial plans, laid the foundation for the Habsburg Empire by arranging a marriage between his son, Maximilian I, and Maria of Burgundy, the only child of Duke Charles “the Bold” and the sole heiress to a flourishing principality that encompassed vast stretches of contemporary eastern France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The Burgundian court, perhaps the most luxurious and sophisticated in all of Europe at the time, merely reflected the prosperity of the realm over which Charles ruled. Maximilian and Maria married in 1477, and even though Maximilian had to fight a series of wars to defend his claims in Burgundy, their marriage was a happy if brief one. Maria bore him an all-important son, Philip, before her tragic death in 1482 when she, late in her second pregnancy, fell from a horse, killing herself and her unborn child.

The death of Maximilian’s father, Frederick III, in 1493, brought the Habsburgs’ Austrian holdings into his hands, and three years later Maximilian managed to arrange a marriage between his twelve-year-old son, Philip, and Juana of Aragon, the daughter of the king of Spain. As fate or fortune would have it, Juana’s older brother, the heir apparent to the throne, and her older sister, a vehicle for female succession, died young, and their deaths made Philip “the Fair” heir to the vast Spanish holdings on the Iberian Peninsula and in southern Italy and Sicily. Although Philip died relatively young at the age of twenty-eight, and Juana, who had a depressive disposition, eventually went insane and accordingly was known as Juana “the Mad,” this couple managed to produce six children. The three eldest, Charles (known as Carlos in Spanish history), Ferdinand, and Maria, provided their grandfather with the human capital he needed to pursue the next phase of his nuptial diplomacy.

Although Maximilian’s greatest success had been in the west, he never lost sight of the importance of the east, and he negotiated carefully with Vladislav II, the Jagiellonian prince who had been elected king of Bohemia after the death of George of Poděbrady in 1471 and king of Hungary after the death of Matthias Corvinus in 1490. Maximilian proposed a double engagement. The first nuptial bond was a straightforward deal: His granddaughter Maria was to marry Vladislav’s son and heir, Louis II. The second had a male option clause. One of his grandsons, either Charles or Ferdinand, was to marry Vladislav’s daughter Anna. Which husband Anna was to have, however, would be determined by the Habsburgs at a later date. The preengagement, engagement, and marital contracts that were negotiated over a decade were enormously complicated, and they included the mutual guarantee that if one of the dynasties were to expire, the other was to inherit the rights to its titles and holdings. Therefore, the potential Bohemian–Hungarian regal in-laws of the Habsburgs had something to gain from their Austrian in-laws under certain circumstances, and vice versa. This entire deal was closed in Vienna in 1515 with the famous “double marriage” of four preadolescent children. Ferdinand von Habsburg married Maria of Bohemia and Hungary, and Louis II of Bohemia and Hungary married Anna von Habsburg.



Marital diplomacy was the key to the rise of the Habsburgs. In *The Family of Emperor Maximilian I* (1515), portrait by Bernhard Strigl, are depicted Maximilian (left), Holy Roman Emperor and archduke of Austria, with his son Philip, whose marriage established a claim to the Spanish throne (center), and Maximilian's wife, Maria of Burgundy. In the foreground are his grandchildren Ferdinand (left) and Charles (center) with Louis II, king of Bohemia and Hungary (right), who was wed to Maximilian's granddaughter Maria. Charles inherited all titles and lands from his father and grandfather but ceded the Austrian holdings to his brother Ferdinand, who, after the death of his brother-in-law Louis II in the Battle of Mohács in 1526, became king of Bohemia and Hungary. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

Due to the institution of primogeniture, the prospects for Ferdinand as the second-born son were not especially good. When Maximilian I died in 1519, Charles added his grandfather's Austrian and Burgundian holdings to the substantial Spanish ones he had inherited from his father, Philip, in addition to being elected king of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation as Charles V. As a Habsburg raised in Burgundy and at home at the Spanish court, Charles, who traveled extensively during his reign, was a truly cosmopolitan figure. He had accumulated such an enormous amount of power that he was the last German emperor to take seriously the medieval concept of a *monarchia universalis*, the idea of a unified Christian European empire dating back to Charlemagne. But he did cede his Austrian holdings to his younger brother by 1522, a fraternal act that established within the Habsburg dynasty a western Spanish line and an eastern Austrian line.

The two branches of the family worked closely together. For example, when Charles V abdicated as German emperor in 1556, he engineered the election of his brother, Ferdinand, to the position he had vacated, and the Habsburgs gradually turned the office of the Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation from an elected position into a hereditary entitlement that the Austrian line controlled until 1806 when Napoleonic imperialism led to the dissolution of the remnants of what Germans retrospectively called the "First Reich." The division of the House of Habsburg into a Spanish and an Austrian line also established a pattern that for centuries was to determine the dynamics of continental politics. The rise of France involved conflicts with both "national" branches of the Habsburg dynasty: a Spanish empire and a growing Austrian one.

Charles's fraternal generosity, Maximilian's prenuptial agreements, and Ferdinand's wedding band laid the foundation for the rise of the Habsburg Empire in Central Europe, and the death of Ferdinand's brother-in-law, Louis II, king of Bohemia and king of Hungary, at the Battle of Mohács in 1526 provided an occasion to erect the superstructure. Looking back at the three generations of Habsburg marital diplomacy, it is easy to understand the old saying "Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube" (Let the others fight wars; you, lucky Austria, marry). These marriages, however, also led to wars. Charles, the most powerful Catholic ruler in Europe and the Holy Roman Emperor, became inextricably entangled in Christianity's civil war, the Reformation, and after Ferdinand assumed the Hungarian crown, he also inherited the responsibility for defending Western Christendom against the Islamic infidels of the Ottoman Empire.

The Bulwarks of Christendom

Religion and Warfare, 1400–1550

“Bulwark” is a military term with heroic connotations like valor, fortitude, and self-sacrifice. It also is a historical metaphor for the role that almost every Central European nation sees itself as having played at one time or another in history, from the Middle Ages right up to the present. The larger context of the bulwark metaphor is the assumption that the history of Western Christendom—or Western Civilization or “the West”—is analogous to the chronicle of a fortress that has had a succession of different enemies at its gates. Consequently, the “fortress of Europe” has had a number of bulwarks, each of which has assumed a specific tactical function in the overall strategy of defense at a given time. The descendants of the defenders of the Croatian, Hungarian, Austrian, German, and Polish bulwarks, each of which was constructed using different historical materials, tend, however, to look back on the achievements of their particular national bastion instead of the overall historical architecture of the European fortress. The occupants of one bulwark always seem not to have appreciated the achievements of the inhabitants of the other bulwarks because nationalism has limited their field of vision.

The use of the bulwark metaphor, as well as synonyms like “bastion,” “battlement,” and “rampart,” dates back to the Middle Ages. The term *antemurale christianitatis* (from medieval Latin *ante* [pre- or fore] and *murus* [wall]), “the Bulwark of Christendom,” was commonly used to describe Central Europe’s (or Western Christendom’s) frontiers with oriental infidels like the Tatars and the Turks or with the Eastern schismatics of the various Orthodox denominations. Significant national claims to having championed the Pan-European cause of Christianity at one time or another in history differ because the nature of the oriental or Eastern threats changed throughout the ages.

Before the Ottoman Empire gained a foothold on the Balkan Peninsula during the fourteenth century, the Eastern threat came from Asia. The Mongols, nomadic warriors from the depths of Central Asia, appeared on horseback in Europe in 1240 and cut a swath of destruction through Ukraine, Russia, southern Poland, Silesia, Moravia, Hungary, and the Balkan Peninsula. With their speed and agility, they decimated every military force of cumbersome armored knights that the various rulers of medieval Europe could mobilize. Although they withdrew the following year as unexpectedly as they had appeared, some of them, the Tatars, settled in the Volga River Basin and the Crimea along the northern coast of the Black Sea.

Historians generally agree that the Mongols had the potential for virtually destroying Europe in 1240/1241—Hungary, for example, lost an estimated 60 percent of its population—and that the Mongols' unexpected withdrawal to the east was a stroke of good fortune. The residual Tatar threat after their departure never was of comparable dimensions. On the contrary, the subsequent expansion of the kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania to the southeast made the Tatars' periodic raids and demands for tribute an almost exclusively Polish problem. The Tatars' conversion to Islam, however, added a religious dimension to this conflict which, combined with the memories of the Mongols' original conquest, rhetorically and psychologically turned a Polish national problem into the Polish defense of Western Christendom.

The use of the term *antemurale christianitatis* also referred to Christendom's front line of defense against the Ottoman Empire, and the history of this military frontier from the end of the fourteenth century, the Turks' resounding victory over the Serbs at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, until the end of the seventeenth century frequently is portrayed as a series of futile attempts to stop the Ottomans' advance interspersed with periods of peace during which the Turks consolidated their gains. If one adopts a definition of Europe as coextensive with Christianity, the Orthodox East represented the West's front line of defense in its conflict with Islam, and the kingdom of Serbia, and before it Bulgaria, defended the West in this respect.

After the fall of Serbia, the responsibility for this task fell to Hungary. Although the Hungarians launched various crusades and preventive wars against the Turks, these operations cost more than they gained, but the Hungarians held their own for well over a century: until the Battle of Mohács in 1526. Before taking a look at the consequences of the Turkish capture of the Hungarian bulwark, it is useful to recall a few of the crucial events that transpired beforehand inside the fortress of Western Christendom. The Reformation not only undermined the unity of the Christian West; in the process, it also changed the entire idea of the "Bulwark of Christendom."

*The Crack in the Foundation:
Jan Hus and the Bohemian Precedent*

The conventional event and date that historians use to designate the beginning of the Reformation is the posting in 1517 of Luther's "Ninety-five Theses on Indulgences" on the doors of the Palace Church in Wittenberg. From

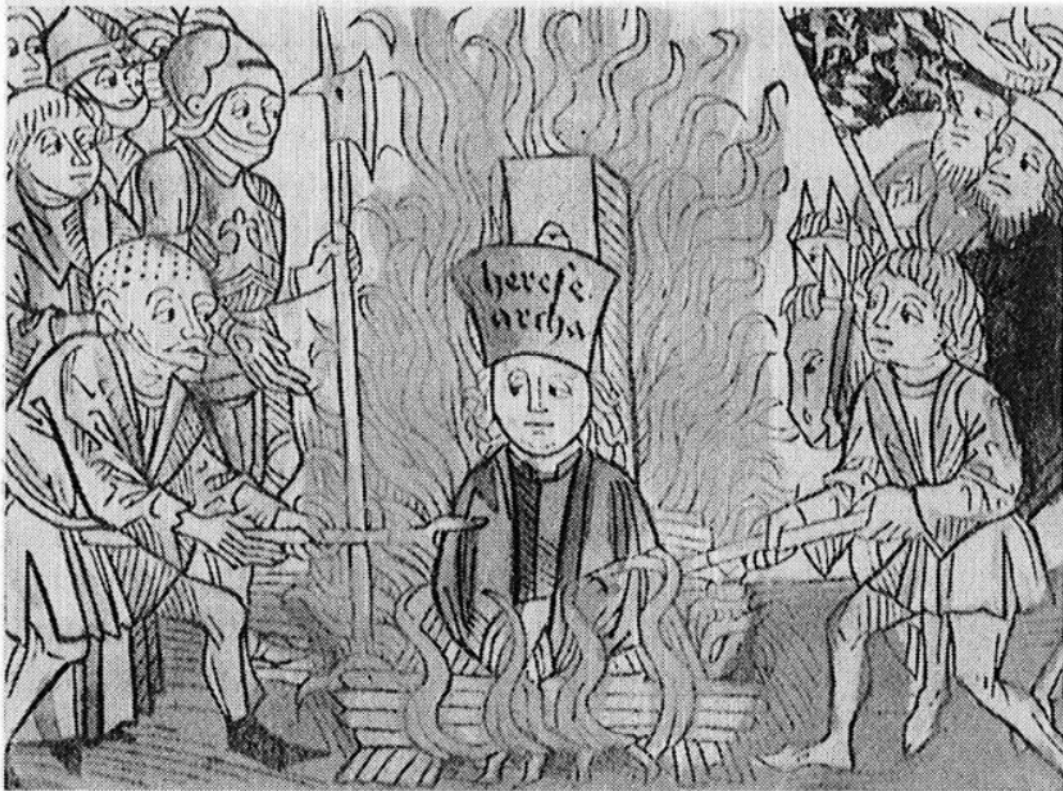
the Czech point of view, the Reformation began a bit more than a century earlier, with the career of a Bohemian priest, Jan Hus (1369–1415), whose theological, liturgical, and ecclesiastical reforms anticipated those of Martin Luther (1483–1546).

It would be unwise to overestimate how innovative or modern Hus was. His ideas were influenced by other fourteenth-century theologians, the Englishman John Wycliff in particular, who wanted to “renovate” the church, and he stood clearly in a late medieval theological tradition lacking the existential spirituality characteristic of Luther. Hus’s work, like that of his German successor, culminated in a critique of a church he considered insufficient. His reformation of the liturgy, rejection of ecclesiastical hierarchy, introduction of the vernacular instead of Latin in worship, and belief in the primacy and immediacy of the Gospel were concerns and innovations echoed later in Luther’s works. In both cases, the logical consequence of their theological quests was to doubt the adequacy and the legitimacy of the Roman Church as a vehicle for Christian salvation. Their interpretation of the Bible and their understanding of the relationship between man and God led them to question the idea of Roman authority in matters ranging from the nature of the sacraments to the question of how a community of believers should be organized.

Although neither Hus nor Luther intended to split the Christian church or to change the worldly order of lords and subjects that God had ordained, they did destroy the traditional symbiosis between Roman Christianity and worldly authority, thereby pitting denominations of Christians against one another in civil war. In some cases, their teachings inspired Christian subjects to rise up against their ordained superiors, who, in turn, fulfilled their God-given duties as Christian lords by slaughtering their insubordinate and schismatic subjects. Hus’s followers pitched Bohemia into five decades of intermittent internal strife (1419–1470), and Luther’s teachings precipitated a series of wars among noble factions in the German empire (1522–1555), as well as a major uprising of peasants against the nobility (1524–1526). The unity of Western Christendom, based on the venerable tradition of “one, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church,”¹ deteriorated as Christians fought Christians in the name of God and True Religion.

Hus’s career ended when he was called to the Council of Constance in 1414, one of the periodic synods of ecclesiastical authorities the Roman Church organized to formulate doctrinal and organizational policy. Hus responded as a devout Christian and went prepared to defend his teachings. Sigismund of Luxemburg, the Holy Roman Emperor and king of Hungary, also provided Hus with an imperial assurance of safe conduct and immunity. In Constance, however, Hus refused to recant, and Sigismund reneged on his imperial guarantees. The ecclesiastical authorities then dealt with Hus as a heretic and burned him at the stake on July 6, 1415. In the process, they also created the first anti-Catholic martyr of the Reformation and a Czech national hero.

Hus’s religiously motivated rejection of the Latin ritual and the Roman Catholic Church later became archetypical symbols of Czech aspirations for



The Bohemian theologian Jan Hus was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415, after being condemned as a heretic by Roman Catholic authorities at the Council of Constance. Woodcut from a fifteenth-century chronicle by Ulrich von Richental. (Austrian National Library, Picture Archive)

national independence which, translated into the spheres of culture and politics, were historically manifested as a struggle against German and Roman Catholic domination. The perfidious conduct of Sigismund of Luxemburg also became a national symbol illustrating the extent to which Czechs could rely on Germans to protect Bohemia's national interests. The election of Sigismund of Luxemburg, the "murderer" of Hus, to the Bohemian throne in 1419 precipitated the outbreak of the Hussite wars.

The Hussite faction, fortified by faith, was led by Bohemian nobles who were willing to fight their German and Roman Catholic king. They were defending the freedom of the Bohemian nation, on the one hand, and their own freedom of conscience, on the other. For the first time in history (and according to some observers, the last) the Bohemians also showed an exceptional amount of military initiative and ingenuity, and they scored impressive victories in the field. However, unresolvable theological differences, which had political implications, between radically minded social utopians and more moderate Hussites weakened this "national movement" which eventually degenerated into a state of civil war, and the moderate Hussites eventually sided with their Catholic enemies to eliminate the residual threat that the Hussite fundamentalists represented.

Anti-German sentiment among Bohemia's nobles helped elect George of Poděbrady, the first "national king" of Bohemia since the extinction of

the Přemysl dynasty in 1306 and the last Czech king of Bohemia, in 1458, but he did not manage to overcome the cleavages that the Hussite wars had created. After the Habsburgs procured the Bohemian crown in 1526, the Czechs increasingly perceived this Roman Catholic and “German” dynasty as a dual threat to the Czech nation, which defined itself using Hus as a national hero and forerunner of the modern Czech struggle for national recognition and independence.

In the Czech historical tradition, Hus became a nationalist and a democrat, but a Czechoslovak Communist interpretation described those followers of Hus as propagating a radical form of Christianity, not as protodemocrats, but as proto-Communist social revolutionaries. Under the Communist regime, May 9, the commemoration of the liberation of Prague by the Red Army in 1945, was the official national holiday. Then in May 1990, the Czech “national” parliament—a “state” legislature for the Czech half of the Czechoslovak federal republic—declared July 6, the day of Hus’s martyrdom in 1415, as the new Czech national holiday, whereas the parallel Slovak body adopted July 5, the feast day of St. Cyril and St. Methodius, the first Christian missionaries in Central Europe, as their national holiday. Because of their Roman Catholic traditions, Slovaks generally do not identify themselves with Hus.

The execution of Hus inflicted such a deep wound on the Bohemian national soul that the Czech Roman Catholic Cardinal Beran raised the issue of Hus at the Roman Catholic Church’s twentieth-century synod of ecumenism and liturgical reform in the early 1960s, the Second Vatican Council, which incidentally introduced the vernacular as the language of worship 550 years after Hus had done so.² Czechs see Hus’s fate as an expression of one of the tragic paradoxes of their history. Czech ingenuity, the Czech quest for national freedom, or a combination of both have repeatedly been frustrated by historical circumstances. Hus was doomed to fail because he was ahead of his times, and Luther’s later success in Germany overshadowed the importance of Bohemia’s historical precedent.

*Western Christianity Divided:
The Reformation*

If Czechs overestimate the importance of Hus for Luther, then Germans underestimate it, but these tendencies are to be expected when people deal with their own national heroes. One of the most striking differences between the biographies of these two reformers is that Hus defied the Roman Church and ended up at the stake; Luther did the same and died in his own bed at the age of sixty-three. To understand the origins of Luther’s defiance, we shall briefly explore one of his early theological insights.

On the surface, Luther’s Ninety-five Theses were a critique of the Roman Church’s practice of selling indulgences, or ecclesiastical dispensations for sinning in exchange for cash. Although the purchase of an indulgence may not appear to be a “good work,” it was one of those worldly acts through which people tried to attain salvation and, in this respect, comparable to oth-

er worldly acts of a much more positive nature, like brotherly love. Luther's fundamental insight was that no worldly act could save a person's soul because faith, and faith alone, was the prerequisite of salvation. Luther assumed that if people listened to the Word of God and were prepared to submit to his Will, they would open their soul for the gift of Divine Grace, which exhibited itself as faith. Although faith, in turn, could manifest itself as good works, good works were not necessarily a manifestation of faith. Therefore, Luther developed the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

One of Luther's central theological insights was to make salvation solely an affair between individual believers and their God (provided that they had access to the Gospel, which, as the Word of God, was the sole source of faith). Luther explicitly rejected human merit in this world as the vehicle of salvation and implicitly denied the necessity of an intermediary between individual Christians and their God. Because of the emphasis Luther placed on the subjectivity or "inwardness" (*Innerlichkeit*) of the religious experience, historians have called him the father of modern subjectivism and individualism and made him responsible for that peculiarly German propensity for soul-searching and introspection. But the direct result of Luther's "inwardness" combined with his belief in the immediacy and profound simplicity of the Gospel was to question the entire legitimacy of the Roman Church, with its emphasis on "external" rituals and doctrines which, according to Luther, had distanced themselves enormously from the original spirit of the Gospel and had nothing to do with faith.

It is also an indisputable fact that at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Roman Church was in a sad state of disarray and a negligent shepherd of souls. Luther felt that by selling indulgences and neglecting pastoral work, like the propagation of the Gospel, the Roman Church was stealing people's money with the deceitful promise of heaven and abandoning their souls to hell at the same time, and he responded to this injustice with wrath reminiscent of biblical prophets. The Roman Church was nothing more than an instrument of the devil, and the pope was nothing less than the Antichrist personified.

Luther, whose initial aspiration was to reform the church, had no grand designs to change the worldly order, but the disparity between his intentions and the consequences of his teachings was enormous. Luther was a conservative in many respects, although the full implications of his political or social conservatism were by no means apparent to his contemporaries and became clear only after Protestantism was established under the patronage of Protestant sovereigns. For example, Luther believed that God, in his Providence, had assigned each Christian a station in life. Since salvation was a spiritual affair between God and man, there was no point in attempting to change the worldly order of things in God's name, and doubting God's Providence was a sign of an absence of faith, that all-important prerequisite for salvation. Luther's theology of spiritual subjectivity consequently supported conformity or a recognition of the political and social status quo as divinely ordained. Good Christians used their conscience in private and fulfilled their Christian duty at a divinely appointed station in public.

Two important phenomena have their origins in this teaching. First, Luther helped change the entire concept of work from a biblical curse—the Roman Catholic–Mediterranean interpretation of Genesis—into a Christian duty by elevating every person’s task to the status of a divine “calling”: doing one’s Christian duty in life. In his famous study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber concluded that Calvinism’s radical transformation of the Lutheran idea of providential vocation provided one of the foundations for the development of the “Protestant work ethic” that contributed to the “rise of capitalism.”³

Second, Luther’s teachings were one of the origins of the German tradition of subordinating the individual to the state. This phenomenon is partly related to the manner in which Lutheranism and, later, the various Reformed churches became politically established. In northern and central Germany especially, the advocates of Protestantism among the German nobility initially provided this religion with a worldly haven in their political domains, which led to the establishment of “territorial churches,” and these lords also used Protestantism as a conviction, or a pretext, to legitimize their conflicts with the Roman Church and the (Catholic) Holy Roman Emperors of the German Nation. The subjective personal and public political identification of German nobles and their subjects with Protestantism, which owed its initial organizational survival to the protection it received from secular rulers, regionally elevated the religion of the “territorial churches” to the status of a “state religion,” on the one hand, but political patronage also gradually led to a subordination of Protestant churches to the Protestant state, on the other. Although the reasons for the historical and structural subordination of the Protestant Church to the Protestant state were not primarily theological, Luther’s theological subordination of the individual to the status quo justified this phenomenon in principle. The subordination of the German Church to the German state and the German Protestant as a Christian individual to the German state had devastating consequences in the future.

During the nineteenth century, a German “religion of the state” evolved out of the tradition of Protestantism as a “state religion” and Luther’s theology of “inward” spirituality and external conformity. The rise of Prussia before 1870, the Second German Empire thereafter, and the Third Reich each may be used to illustrate this point. At first it may appear contrived to make Luther’s apolitical form of German devotion responsible for the later German worship of the godlike state. But there is no overlooking the fact that under the leadership of political deities like the Kaiser or the Führer, many good Germans religiously served the imperial German state by using their consciences in private and doing their duty in public. The affinity between this phenomenon and Luther’s theological paradigm of good Christians serving the Lord by serving their lords is too strong to be overlooked.

Attempts also have been made to interpret Luther as a revolutionary, although the term and the concept were completely foreign to him and his contemporaries. Luther stood at the end of a long medieval tradition of Christian reform characterized by concepts like *renovatio*, *restauratio*, and *re-*

formatio, which implied a return to a more pristine and authentic form of Christianity. Nevertheless, Marxists, for example, saw Luther as a representative of an “early bourgeois ideology” and interpreted the Reformation as a social upheaval caused by the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

In this context, Thomas Müntzer, initially an ally of Luther and then his antagonist, is of particular interest because he abandoned Luther’s premises and understood the Christian mission as the establishment of a more just and equitable social order, here and now. Müntzer’s radical theological and political program was that “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” He was one of the ideological and organizational masterminds behind the peasants’ uprising of 1525, which shook the southern German-speaking world with its attempt to erect the kingdom of God on earth. Needless to say, the feudal lords put down this uprising with ruthlessness and bloodshed, and in a tract he composed especially for this occasion, Luther gave them his blessing for doing their Christian duty.

For Marxists, Müntzer was the founder of a revolutionary tradition that the “other Germany,” the German Democratic Republic, used for forty years in its futile attempt to create a separate national identity for a “socialist German fatherland.” (If the historical personalities that a country uses on its currency are an indication of their national importance, we should point out that Müntzer adorned East Germany’s smallest bill, the five-Mark note, a place of prominence analogous to George Washington on the U.S. dollar. Karl Marx was on the East Germany’s one-hundred-Mark bill.)

Müntzer could be regarded as a predecessor of Marx because he believed in the perfectibility of human society and recognized the necessity of mass action to achieve it. He can even be construed to have anticipated Lenin because Müntzer understood that revolutionary action required a radical program and a revolutionary organization, a group of specially selected and self-sacrificing believers. Although his ideology was “historically conditioned” by Marxist standards, Müntzer anticipated the revolutionary role that the masses were to play in the future. From the dual perspective of a history of the oppressor and a history of the oppressed, the genealogy of “capitalist” Germany ran from Luther to Bismarck to Hitler, and to the Federal Republic of Germany; the heritage of the “other” or socialist Germany ran from Luther to Müntzer to Marx, and to the antifascist tradition of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) during the Nazi era, and it culminated in the German Democratic Republic.⁴

This example shows how divergent the interpretations of Luther and the Reformation can be. Of course, to his contemporaries, Luther was anything but conservative. His theological assault on the Roman Church and the papacy had enormous worldly consequences and brought him into conflict with Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, a Habsburg who saw himself as a Catholic defender of the faith. Luther’s critique of the Roman Church resulted in an official condemnation of his writings and his excommunication in 1520, but the “heretic” responded with an unprecedented act of defiance by burning a copy of the papal bull in public and calling it the work of the devil. Ecclesiastical authorities expected the secular supplement to excom-

munication, an imperial ban, from the emperor, but German nobles sympathetic to Luther's cause implemented some of the empire's venerable legal stipulations, basically feudal forms of due process, to insist that the accused had the right to be heard before being condemned. After having received an imperial guarantee of safe conduct—Luther undoubtedly had in mind the fate of his predecessor Hus under similar circumstances—he appeared in 1521 at the Imperial Diet in Worms, a convocation of the German feudal estates. In the presence of the emperor, however, Luther refused to recant.

These acts of defiance made Luther a national hero in both the modern and the medieval sense of the word. Various representatives of the empire's feudal estates, members of the *natio Germanorum* or "German nation," disliked papal and imperial intervention in their secular affairs just as much as Luther disdained them in his theological and spiritual ones. For Luther, nothing less than salvation or eternal damnation was at stake. His interest in Christian freedom was neither an invitation to sectarianism nor a call for insubordination, although some of his contemporaries interpreted it as such. Although he believed that the conflict of Protestant subjects with their Catholic lords or Catholic and Protestant lords among themselves was unjustifiable, the Will of God would determine the outcome. Although Luther encouraged Protestant lords to obey their Catholic superiors, he did not hesitate to advise them to use the sword to combat the schismatics of other Reformed churches as well as the sedition of their subjects.

Luther's teachings left in their wake a series of insurrections and wars, but it would be difficult to sort out concisely the motives for the individuals or groups who participated in them. They ranged from religious messianism to calculating pragmatism. For the empire's feudal estates, Luther's teachings represented an opportunity to maintain or augment the traditional liberties they had, owing to the chaotic constitutional state of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. In this respect, Protestantism provided a theological justification for the realization of immanently worldly interests. The conflicts of the feudal lords of the German nation with the Roman Church and the Holy Roman Emperor, a Catholic Habsburg raised in Burgundy and the king of Spain whom the German estates regarded as an alien with ambitious dynastic aspirations, also gradually assumed all the terminological characteristics of a national struggle against foreign subjugation. This conflict was not a national struggle of the German people in the nineteenth-century sense of the word, but the nineteenth-century interpretation of the Reformation retrospectively turned it into one.

The terminology that Luther used in his acrid attacks on the Roman Church contributed to the mutually exclusive use of the term "German," which was identified with attributes like authentic and legitimate, and the terms "Latin" or "Roman," which were associated with characteristics like debasement, degeneration, and foreign domination. One of the best examples of the Reformation as a "Latin-German" conflict concerns the liturgy and dealt with the language of worship: Latin, the linguistic manifestation of the universality of the Roman Church but incomprehensible to the layperson,

versus German, an example of the vernacular understood by everyone. Luther's translation of the Bible into German was not only a milestone in the development of the German language; the Word of God *auf deutsch* also opened a completely new realm of religious experience for his contemporaries. This is one credible spiritual or psychological explanation for the subsequent success of the Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany and elsewhere.

The identification of the German word with the True Word of God, German religion with True Religion, and the German church with the True Church appear to follow almost naturally, and the Second German Empire later provided one of the most plastic examples for how Germans later interrelated the ideas of religion, exceptionalism, and nationalism. Erected between 1893 and 1905, the Cathedral of Berlin, reminiscent of Michelangelo's original plans for St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome and with a small-scale emulation of its dome, symbolized Berlin and Germany's position as the global center of the Protestant world.

Although the motives for Luther's deprecating attitude toward all things Latin were theological, his Latin-German terminology had its political counterpart during the Reformation in the Protestant German estates' "national" struggle against all things "Roman": papal and ecclesiastical authority and intervention, on the one hand, and "foreign" (Habsburg and Catholic) imperial power, on the other.

With the support of classical texts, Ulrich von Hutten, a German humanist and contemporary of Luther, added a new dimension to the use of these terms. The Roman poet Tacitus, for example, had described the Teutonic tribes that initially inhabited *Germania* as noble, courageous, peace-loving peoples and valiant warriors, and von Hutten interpreted the conflicts between these primordial inhabitants of Germany and the Roman Empire as a classical precedent explaining the present. The pope and the emperor, Roman and imperial, were the joint descendants of Caesar and the contemporary representatives of the age-old "Latin" aspiration to subjugate the German world.

Although we should not overestimate the impact of von Hutten's comparison—simply because most of his contemporaries were illiterate—we should note that he developed a form of argumentation at the beginning of the sixteenth century based on the rhetorical disparity of German culture with Latin or Mediterranean civilization, which went far beyond Luther's theologically motivated distinction between Rome and Germany. In the future, von Hutten's reasoning was taken literally to extremes. In the nineteenth century, Germans classicists began ignoring the great importance of Semitic and Egyptian influences on Greek culture and started postulating that the origins of Greek culture were "Aryan" (and hence proto-German).⁵ These assumptions were coupled with the deprecating attitude that Roman civilization represented a debasement of the classical Greek world.

Some historians even associated German culture in its purest form with the primordial Teutonic inhabitants of *Germania*, thereby reducing Christianity to a historically acquired attribute that was essentially foreign to the

genuine nature of *das deutsche Volk*. The proponents of this genre of national genealogy, which reached perverse dimensions in Nazi Germany, questioned the idea of a genuine nexus between Christianity and Germanness (*Deutschtum*) altogether. They extolled, for example, the assertive values of combative Teutonic paganism, criticized the “submissiveness” inherent in Christianity as foreign to the true nature of Germans, and denounced the Judeo-Christian tradition, owing to its historical origins in the eastern Mediterranean world, as “oriental” or “foreign to the Nordic species.”⁶

The “Luther-to-Hitler” interpretation of German history is problematic. Luther and the Reformation contributed to the early development of a friend-foe metaphor that postulated rectitude and authenticity to be integrally “German” attributes and simultaneously identified the concepts of “Latin” or “Roman” as symptomatic of debasing or threatening foreign influences. Proponents of nineteenth-century German Romanticism and nationalism also later adopted and transformed the friend-foe terminology of the Reformation for their own political purposes. In this context, Luther was retrospectively assigned the role of having been the “savior of the German nation,” and the Reformation was turned into something it initially had not been: the beginning of a long struggle of the German nation for a free and unified Germany.

The conflicts following the Reformation actually did more to promote German disunity than perhaps anything else, because they added a new denominational dimension to the well-established feudal traditions of particularism that existed in the Holy Roman Empire. Both Protestant and Catholic parties eventually recognized that the denominational issue could not be solved by force, and so they agreed in 1555 to call a halt, for the time being at least, in the Religious Peace of Augsburg which established the principle of *cuius regio, eius et religio*, literally, “whose rule, his religion.” This pact, which recognized only Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism and denied the legitimacy of various other Reformed churches, gave the empire’s numerous secular lords the right to choose their religion as they saw fit and to make that religion binding on their subjects as well. The Religious Peace of Augsburg was basically a recognition of the status quo, which contained the religious problems without solving them, as the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) was to demonstrate later.

The Reformation weakened the traditional “bulwark of Christendom” by dividing it, and if one is prepared to bypass the various periods and patterns of conversion and reconversion, the following generalizations about the confessional landscape of Central Europe toward the end of the sixteenth century are possible. In the German-speaking world, Bavaria and Austria were thoroughly Protestant, although they later were vigorously reconverted to Roman Catholicism, and outside a sprinkling of Catholic strongholds in west central Germany, the rest of the German-speaking world, interspersed with pockets of Calvinism, became predominantly Lutheran. The Reformation established a North-South denominational watershed that eventually led to the development of two different German cultures: a “northern” and Protestant one, in which Hohenzollern Prussia eventually

assumed a leading political role, and a “southern” and Roman Catholic one under the ascendancy of the Habsburgs of Austria and seconded by Bavaria. Northern Germany became a bulwark of the Protestant form of Christianity, and Austria and Bavaria became dual bastions of the Roman Catholicism in the southern part of the German-speaking world.

Because of Hus’s influence, the Czechs in the kingdom of Bohemia were predominantly Protestant before the official German beginning of the Reformation, and the Reformation only reinforced the development of a distinctive form of Czech reformed devotion, the Bohemian Brethren. The doctrines of Luther and Calvin also made substantial inroads in the kingdom of Hungary, and they established a few smaller niches in the kingdom of Poland, which was and remained a paradigm of religious tolerance during Europe’s various confessional conflicts. Due to its large holdings in the (Orthodox) East, only about half the population of the kingdom of Poland was Roman Catholic, and one of the reasons for the considerable size of Poland’s pre-Holocaust Jewish population was that the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth served from the thirteenth century onward as a traditional haven for Europe’s religiously persecuted. The primary pattern of Jewish migration in medieval Europe was west to east, and the Jews fleeing Christian pogroms in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, were followed by Protestants fleeing Roman Catholic persecution in the seventeenth century. The Reformation also helped reinforce the bulwark idea as a Roman Catholic national metaphor in Poland, because thereafter the country was surrounded by schismatics—German Protestants in the west and the Russian Orthodox in the east—in addition to being threatened by infidels—the Tatars and later the Turks.

The Reformation ended the unity of Western Christianity. It subdivided the idea of the “bulwark of Christendom” among various denominations and nations, and the creation of smaller bastions out of the materials that previously had been nominally cemented by one religion helped weaken those southeastern “bulwarks of Christendom,” Hungary and then Austria, which were responsible for defending Western Christendom from the Islam of the expanding Ottoman Empire. Therefore, we should take a brief look at the consequences of this Christian disunity for Western Christendom’s battle on its southeastern frontier.

Western Christianity Threatened:

The Rise of the Ottomans’ European Empire

The medieval Christian world had a long tradition of crusading, and if there was one thing Christians shared with Muslims, it was the conviction that God, like Allah, looked favorably on the idea of holy wars. The various crusades organized during the Middle Ages to regain the Holy Land were relatively futile quests, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth century onto the Balkan Peninsula provided an occasion for Western Christendom to launch what could be called its last crusade. Sigismund of Luxemburg, the king of Hungary, organized this operation to help secure

the southern frontier of his kingdom, which had come under the increasing pressure of the Ottoman Empire after the defeat of Serbia in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Married to the daughter of Louis "the Great," the last Angevin king of Hungary, he used his wife's family ties to inspire French and Burgundian nobles with the idea of driving the Turks out of Europe, and defending the faith was the kind of project the popes had repeatedly encouraged. The flower of the French nation participated in this crusade, which ended in 1396 when Christian forces numbering about 8,000 engaged an estimated 12,000 to 20,000 Turks in the Battle of Nicopolis south of the Danube in Bulgaria. Bewitched by the ideas of chivalry, honor, and glory and nonchalant about details like reconnaissance or tactical planning, the noble French knights—against all the good Hungarian advice they received to the contrary—plunged ardently into a battle that ended in a debacle, which Sigismund of Luxemburg barely escaped.

The manner in which the Ottoman sultan, Bajazet I, treated his vanquished Christian enemies was responsible for making a deep, lasting, and bad impression on Western Christendom. Sultan Bajazet, enraged by his losses on the battlefield and indignant about the fact that the crusaders had massacred Turkish prisoners from a preliminary engagement, decided to take vengeance. Several thousand French prisoners, who were either not young enough to become slaves or not prominent enough to hold for ransom, were stripped naked, bound together at their hands and necks in groups of three or four, and marched in front of the sultan. Then from early morning until late afternoon, executioners decapitated them, one by one, in the presence of the sultan and the French nobles being held for ransom. Although crusaders were notorious for conducting themselves barbarously in the lands they traversed to and from their Christian missions and were usually just as ruthless with their enemies, Western Christendom was shocked by this "oriental" bloodbath. Indeed, incidents such as these provided the basis for the later Western perception of the Turkish threat.⁷

Each Hungarian king after Sigismund had to devote more and more attention to the Turkish problem on the southern frontier. Sigismund's next two successors on the Hungarian throne, Albert of Austria and Władysław III, died there; János Hunyadi and his son Matthias Corvinus managed to hold the front; Vladislav II inherited this problem; and his son Louis II lost his life there. Louis II's antagonist was Suleiman the Magnificent, the sultan under which the Ottoman Empire reached its peak. Before the conquest of Hungary, the Ottoman Empire stretched from Belgrade to Baghdad and controlled Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. Both its resources and despotism, a superior form of organization that facilitated marshaling such resources, made the confrontation with Hungary an unequal match.

Suleiman's army of 150,000 marched up the Danube and met the forces of Louis II, who had managed to gather 24,000 knights, mercenaries, and auxiliaries, on the plains of southern Hungary near the small village of Mohács on August 29, 1526. The Hungarian strategy was straightforward, chivalrous, and, from a tactical point of view, somewhere between stupid and suicidal. The hopelessly outnumbered knights charged frontally into the







The Battle of Mohács in 1526, which the Hungarians lost to the Turks, was a national catastrophe. Detail from a Turkish miniature with Hungarian forces being led by King Louis II (mounted, upper left), who was killed; Turkish artillery and Turkish troops (right). After Mohács, the Turks occupied most of Hungary for more than 150 years. (Austrian National Library, Picture Archive)

THE OTTOMAN THREAT, 1526–1683



Based on Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993)

-  International frontiers, ca. 1500
-  Frontier of the Ottoman Empire at its peak, 1683
-  Borders of Ottoman vassal states
-  1683 Sites and dates of major Habsburg victories

After the Ottoman Turks decisively defeated the Hungarians in the Battle of Mohács, in 1526, the kingdom of Hungary was divided into three parts for more than 150 years. The Ottomans occupied most of Hungary; the Habsburgs, elected kings of Hungary in 1527, ruled a small strip of territory, “Royal Hungary,” on the north-western frontier of the kingdom of Hungary; and Hungarian nobles ruled a semi-independent vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in Transylvania. In the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire also expanded up the Black Sea coast into Ukraine, opening up a theater of direct Polish–Ottoman conflict. In 1683, the fortunes of the Ottoman Empire turned dramatically when Polish, German, and Habsburg forces lifted the Turkish siege of Vienna. During the following thirty-five years, Habsburg

center of the Turkish lines, which feinted flight to their flanks in order to give the artillery positioned behind them an open field of fire, and then the Turkish troops converged on the Hungarian forces to finish off what was left. Twenty-two thousand members of what chroniclers proverbially called the flower of the nation left their lives on the battlefield. Louis II, extracted from the melee by a group of noblemen, fled. Whether he drowned crossing a river or his noble escorts vengefully murdered him has never been clarified. In any event, the path to Hungary was open for the Turks, and the throne of Hungary was vacant for the Habsburgs.

Hungarians view the Battle of Mohács as the central tragedy of their history because it marked the loss of national independence and the beginning of a series of foreign occupations. After 1526, Hungary was a defeated nation, occupied alternately by the Turks and the Habsburgs. (The Habsburg's initial occupation of Hungary did gradually evolve into a partnership.) The Hungarians' national response to defeat and occupation never was complete capitulation or total assimilation. On the contrary, one of the recurring themes of Hungarian historiography and literature has traditionally been the survival of the Hungarian nation despite the tragedies and hardships of foreign occupation.

After their decisive defeat at Mohács, the Hungarians mastered the arts of revolt, accommodation, and survival. Given the absence of great victories in the past 500 years of Hungarian history, the commemoration of defeats in the spirit of national martyrology, like the Battle of Mohács in the sixteenth century or Hungary's abortive revolutions of 1848 and 1956, has played a central role in articulating the nation's history as a tragic struggle. The commemoration of a defeat, however, simultaneously functions as a celebration of national tenacity—a will to resist and an ability to survive—and this is an attribute that the Hungarians share with the Poles and, to a lesser extent, the Czechs.⁸

Before 1989, Hungarians used to tell a joke that compared the consequences of the Turkish victory in 1526 with those of the Russian one in 1945. The Turks did not force the Hungarians to celebrate Mohács every year (the commemoration of the advent of the Bolshevik Revolution was a national holiday in Communist Hungary), nor did they make Hungarians learn Turkish (learning Russian was mandatory in Hungarian schools). Furthermore, the Turks did not constantly tell the Hungarians that they were their brothers and that they were going to live with them in perpetual friendship.

If Mohács represents a central national tragedy for Hungarians, Austrians simultaneously see it as a windfall in their own history because it was the birth of the Habsburgs' Central European empire. With the exception of a small strip of territory along Hungary's western and northern frontiers and

imperial armies launched a series of campaigns against the Ottoman Empire that culminated in the liberation of the kingdom of Hungary. By 1720, the Habsburg Empire had succeeded in regaining most of those territories of the "Christian West" that had been lost to the "Islamic East" after the Battle of Mohács in 1526.

Transylvania in the east, the Turks eventually occupied the central Danube basin. The death of Louis II vacated the Bohemian and the Hungarian thrones, and the advance of the Turks certainly helped inspire the Bohemian estates to elect the archduke of Austria, Ferdinand I, king in 1526, because they sought formidable allies.

Although Ferdinand also had a technical claim to the Hungarian throne, election by the Hungarian nobility was a prerequisite for legitimacy. One faction of Hungarian nobles elected Ferdinand von Habsburg as the king of Hungary in 1527, but another group chose János Zápolyai, the voivode of Transylvania, for the throne. Which king was the legitimate one, the foreign Habsburg or the Hungarian Zápolyai, depends on the national perspective assumed. Austrians opt for Ferdinand, and Hungarians choose Zápolyai. (This claim to the crown was eventually abandoned without recognizing the legitimacy of the Habsburgs, and a series of princes from the Hungarian stronghold of Transylvania—István Báthori, István Bocskai, Gábor Bethlen, Ferenc Rákóczi—well known to Hungarians but virtually unknown to everyone else, continued the struggle for independence.) Tripartition—a Habsburg in the west, the Turks in the middle, and the Hungarians in the east—characterized the situation of Hungary for the next one and a half centuries and created a triangular conflict on the Christian–Islamic frontier.

As the kings of Hungary, the Habsburgs were confronted with two problems: the Turkish occupation of Hungary and the assertion of their rights and titles in unoccupied Hungarian Transylvania. The Hungarians in unoccupied Transylvania also were confronted with two problems: the Turkish occupation of Hungary and the maintenance of the relative independence of unoccupied Transylvania as a base of operations against the Habsburgs and the Turks, who treated Hungarian Transylvania as a vassal state. The Habsburgs fought alternately with the Hungarians and the Turks, depending on whether the insubordination of their Hungarian subjects or the menace of the Ottoman infidels temporarily appeared to be the greater threat, and the Hungarians oscillated between trying to play off the Turks against the Habsburgs, and vice versa, depending on which of the two foreign powers momentarily appeared to be the lesser evil.

The fact that a specifically Hungarian strain of Calvinism also became established in eastern Hungary during the Reformation added another dimension to this triangular conflict. In the future, Protestant Hungarians allied themselves with their fellow believers in the German empire against the Catholic Habsburgs in confessional conflicts, which illustrates how interdenominational conflict in the Christian West affected the Habsburgs. As a bulwark of Catholicism, they were confronted with Protestantism, and as the bulwark of Christendom, they were confronted with the Turks. The relationship between Western Christendom's internal conflicts and its external defense is perhaps clearest on this point. Protestants hesitated to give the Habsburgs the money or the support they would have needed to retake Hungary or to combat energetically the Turks, simply because they were not sure whether those resources would be used against the infidels or themselves.

There is a striking difference between the way in which Austrians and Hungarians view what happened after the Hungarian “bulwark of Christendom” fell in 1526. From the Austrian perspective, when they assumed the Hungarian crown, the Habsburgs also shouldered the responsibility for defending Western Christendom, a burden that was complicated by Hungarian sedition on the frontier and Protestant ingratitude behind it. For the Hungarians, the beginning of the Turkish occupation and the Habsburgs’ expropriation of the Hungarian crown marked the beginning of a futile struggle for national liberation that ended 160 years later when the Habsburgs finally defeated the Turks and “liberated” Hungary in the process. (Liberation is a very ambiguous term in Central Europe, and Central Europeans use it with irony. The Habsburgs’ liberation of Hungary from the Turks entailed putting down a Hungarian national insurrection. Therefore, the Hungarians were “liberated” from one empire only to be subjugated by the next. Likewise, the Soviet Union “liberated” East Central Europe from National Socialism and then incorporated it into its own empire.)

The Turkish occupation also uncoupled vast parts of Hungary from the orbit of Western civilization for more than one and a half centuries. This fact can be used as one explanation for the subsequent lag, by Western standards, in the country’s development. Some Hungarian historians have argued, for example, that the gap between Hungarian and West European levels of development widened noticeably after 1526. Because of the Turks, the Hungarians missed out on some 175 years of Western European development that they otherwise would have participated in had the Turks not been in Hungary.

Furthermore, Hungarian economic historians were among the first in the old Communist East to popularize the term “East Central Europe” in the 1970s. One of their reasons for doing so was the attempt to describe the structural peculiarities of this region and the consequences of its Turkish occupation. In this context, there were indeed important differences between the concepts of Southeastern Europe, western East Europe, and East Central Europe. The term “western East Europe” implies, for example, a Hungarian affinity to Russian (and ultimately Soviet) patterns of development, whereas East Central Europe terminologically and methodologically dissociates Hungary (and Slovakia and Poland) from “the East” by formulating the concept of “Central Europe” as a region that, after the end of the fifteenth century, no longer kept up with “the West” but continued to draw its primary impulses from there.⁹ This concept is both important and useful, as we shall see, but it also is a bit unusual insofar as its counterpart, “West Central Europe,” never was adopted or articulated by Austrian, Czech, or German historians. One reason for this may be that the old East–West terminology of the Cold War did not permit thinking of Europe in terms of a middle that was neither East or West.

Southeastern Europe may be used to describe the Balkan Peninsula as a region whose indigenous development was different and later was influenced by a prolonged Turkish occupation. The magnitude of the consequences of Turkish occupation also increased in proportion to the length

of its duration. Therefore, they were more profound farther south and added deep-seated structural differences to the initial denominational differences between southern Central Europe and the lower Balkan Peninsula. For example, Hungarians and Croats, adherents of Roman Christianity, spent much less time under Ottoman rule than did their Orthodox neighbors to the south, like the Serbs, Romanians, and Bulgarians, and the extended Turkish presence on the Balkans is frequently used to explain the legacy of underdevelopment in those regions. By Western European standards, Turkish occupation hindered the economic development of this region, although its lag in modernization after the Turks were gone cannot be solely attributed to its Ottoman heritage.¹⁰

The prolonged Turkish occupation of the Danube Basin and the Balkan Peninsula also helped complicate the ethnic map of the region. War, migration, and resettlement campaigns contributed to the establishment of Serbian minorities in Croatia, the Albanian majority in the historically Serbian province of Kosovo, Croatian and Hungarian minorities in Serbia, and the Croatian–Serbian–Muslim patchwork of Bosnia. Many Serbs attempted to escape the hardships of Ottoman rule by moving north, or they were actively recruited to serve as “frontiersmen” on the Western or Habsburg side of the military frontier. As a result, Eastern Orthodox Serbs played an important role in the defense of Western Christendom. The migration and Habsburg recruitment of Serbs to serve as militia-farmers on the military frontier created new “linguistic islands” of Serbs in the kingdoms of Croatia and Hungary. Albanians in turn filled the vacuum left by Serbian migration in the province of Kosovo. There were also many converts to Islam in the southern regions. Later German settlers, Hungarians, and Croats also moved south as the Habsburgs pushed the Ottoman Empire back down the Balkan Peninsula.

The confrontation with the Ottoman Empire was geopolitically a North–South conflict on the Balkan Peninsula, but it was an East–West confrontation in ideological terms: the Islamic Orient or East versus the Christian Occident or West. Although contemporaries may not have recognized this, historians now tend to agree that the magnitude of the Turkish threat was never as great as the contemporary portrayals of it. There also were two natural bulwarks containing the Ottoman expansion northward, Austria’s Alps and the Carpathian Mountains on Poland’s southern frontier, and there do not seem to be any indications that the Turks ever seriously planned to cross either of them. On the one hand, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire along the shores of the Black Sea and inland from there brought it into peripheral contact with the kingdom of Poland and eventually opened a subsidiary theater of Christian–Islamic conflict in Ukraine. But the Polish heartland never was threatened. On the other hand, the Ottoman Turks would have liked to have rounded out their holdings by taking Vienna, which they besieged in 1529, but the premature onset of winter and a plague in their camps evidently encouraged them to abandon an operation that otherwise would apparently have been a success.

Although the Ottoman threat then subsided until the second Turkish

siege of Vienna in 1683, in the interim, Habsburg propagandists enjoyed praising the dynasty as a paragon of courage and as the bulwark of Christendom, and the frequent exaggeration of the Turkish threat was a means of amplifying the Habsburgs' achievements and importance. Overstatement also helped mobilize support at home and abroad, by implying that if the Habsburg bastion fell, the Turks would first slaughter the Habsburgs' own uncooperative subjects and then proceed up the Danube to the Rhine or Paris and do the same to the Habsburgs' Protestant and French enemies. In this respect, the propagation of the idea of a common menace contributed to bridging denominational gaps and consolidating the Habsburgs' domestic and international position by emphasizing their indispensability.

One contemporary description of the eastern front demonstrates the type of hyperbole used: "The Austrian countryside, far and near, is strewn with dead bodies, and its waters are colored with blood. The fields are devastated, villages and market-towns burnt, and our Holy Religion mocked and ridiculed."¹¹ The themes of barbarism and sacrilege abound in the chronicles of the times which, aside from making the "Infidel Turk" responsible for pillage and plunder and dragging Christians into slavery, portrayed as common Turkish practices, quartering children or raping pregnant women and then cutting open their stomachs and tearing the unborn children out of their bodies. It would be unwarranted to make light of the people's suffering, but Turkish warfare was usually not any more or less ruthless than its contemporary Christian counterpart.

Despite periodic conflicts between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, the military frontier between the Christian West and the Ottoman East was relatively stable. Nonetheless, the Ottoman reconnaissance units (Akindshi), which were called "runners and burners" because they lived off the land, wreaked havoc whenever they crossed the frontier. Strategically speaking, they were a nuisance, not a threat, but they did remind the Habsburgs and their subjects that Austria was the bulwark of Christendom.

The conflicts of the sixteenth century among Western Christians as well as the confrontation between the Christian West and the Islamic East consolidated the bulwark as a metaphor that the nations of Central Europe repeatedly used to define their respective roles in European history as well as their relationships with one another, and there are many examples of the multipurpose use of the bulwark metaphor in the twentieth century. When Nazi Germany occupied and annexed Austria in March 1938, Hitler called Austria "the newest bulwark of the German Reich." In the early 1950s, the Hungarian Stalinist Mátyás Rákosi—using that peculiar Communist mixed metaphor of "struggling for peace"—called Hungary "a bulwark on the front line of peace." Poland was a "bulwark of Catholicism" in Communism's atheist East. East and West Germany were the respective "bulwarks" of the Warsaw Pact and NATO. And Croatia and Serbia became bulwarks in the war that erupted in the former Yugoslavia in 1991.

One may question the value of military metaphors as a mode of national self-perception because they do not promote peaceful coexistence but, on the contrary, can be a source of conflict themselves. The Czechs are an ex-

ception to this rule because the bulwark metaphor never really made its way into their national vocabulary. This fact is strange, because the Czechs appear to be the only Central Europeans topographically entitled to use the bulwark metaphor to describe their country. The Bohemian Basin is surrounded by mountains. But apparently it would never occur to a people surrounded by so many other bulwarks to call themselves one.

The Counter-Reformation

The Roman Catholic Church and the Habsburg

Dynasty Triumphant, 1550–1700

The idea of reform inspired Protestants and Catholics alike with an apocalyptic sense of urgency that led them to see the world as a battlefield for the agents of God and the devil. Even though religion was often misused as an ideological pretext for the cynical realization of pragmatic political objectives, spiritual conviction was, for better or worse, a motive for action. Habitual Christians of all denominations today have trouble understanding what was at stake because the passions involved are so foreign to our contemporary way of life. The liberal tradition of the separation of church and state, the achievements of post-World War II ecumenism, and the vacuity of the allegedly postideological world in which we live make religious fervor a relatively rare phenomenon.

The Counter-Reformation was nothing less than a spiritual battle for souls, a psychological battle for hearts, and an intellectual battle for minds, and it also became a physical battle for bodies. If the Catholic Church failed to win one of the first three, it did not hesitate to destroy the fourth—the bodies of those whose souls and hearts were possessed or minds recalcitrant. Religious zeal was not a peculiarity of the Roman Church, which, like its Protestant counterparts, existed in a world still populated by demons and devils, who frequently manifested themselves as fanatics and heretics.

It would be difficult to try to ascertain retrospectively whether the Catholic zeal for reconversion, which infamously displayed itself in the Spanish Inquisition's torture and burning of heretics, was any worse than the Protestant fervor that produced witch-hunts in Germany. The doctrinal and organizational centralization of the Roman Church, however, made the excesses of its crusaders qualitatively different from Protestant ones, and it also

demonstrated that the Roman Church was better equipped for conflict than any of its numerous Protestant opponents were. The Roman Church rejuvenated the tradition of the “one, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church,” and Catholic apologists never tired of emphasizing that Protestantism was divisive and partial instead of “one” or universal, innovative instead of apostolic, and sinful instead of holy. Because the Roman Church was unified and the Protestant churches were not, it did not have to pursue the ancient Roman imperial strategy of divide and rule; it merely had to find a means to conquer the divided.

If the posting of Luther’s Ninety-five Theses is conventionally used to mark the beginning of the Reformation, then it is equally conventional to use the Roman Catholic Church’s Council of Trent (in northern Italy, from 1545 until 1563) as the inauguration of what German Protestant historians pejoratively called the Counter-Reformation, but people more sympathetic to Roman Catholicism have referred to as the Catholic Reformation. The former term insinuates that the Catholic Church merely reacted to the beating it had taken during the Protestant Reformation, whereas the latter places this episode in the broader tradition of Catholic reform as one of those periodic returns to the original purity and strengths of the doctrine from which it had strayed. The Counter- or Catholic Reformation was undoubtedly both. But since the Protestant term for Catholicism’s reform enjoys greater currency than the Roman Catholic one—just as the Protestant interpretation is more popular in the German- and English-speaking worlds than the Catholic one—it will be used here without necessarily being a categorical endorsement of the Protestant position.

At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church did not attempt to refute the individual points of Protestant criticism. Indeed, the shortcomings of the Roman Church were apparent to devout Catholic men of God, who recognized that the institution of the church was in dire need of reform. Nonetheless, the Roman Church made few concessions on the theological front. On the contrary, it reaffirmed just about everything Luther and his contemporaries had criticized. Luther’s rejection of scholastic philosophy and theology had led him to call reason a whore; a renaissance of neoscholastic rigor was the Roman Church’s response. Luther rejected the entire spectrum of intermediaries and rituals that Catholicism placed between people and their God, from the Virgin Mary and the saints to the pope, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, priests, and the Roman sacraments and liturgy; the Roman Church posited them as indispensable means of Salvation in addition to making the Protestants’ subjective conviction of being saved or chosen by God a cardinal sin. The Protestant spirituality of “inwardness” led to a rejection of the traditional artistic and architectural accoutrements of worship, ranging from relics and processions to magnificently designed and adorned houses of God, because they merely distracted the soul or fell into the category of worshiping false idols. The Roman Church propagated a sensuous and dramatic new form of expression that rejuvenated the tradition of *ad majoram gloriam Dei*, “for the greater glory of God,” and intended to give Christians a glimpse of his glory, the Baroque.

The Counter-Reformation was originally a Mediterranean phenomenon because Italy—the home of the papacy and the Baroque style—and Spain—the birthplace of the Roman Church's most effective counterinsurgency organization, the Society of Jesus, or Jesuit order—were the two Roman Catholic countries least affected by the Reformation. The most important Mediterranean political agent of the Counter-Reformation was Habsburg Spain, and the Habsburgs of Austria, who received the full support of their Spanish dynastic relatives, Rome, and the Jesuit order, eventually assumed this role north of the Alps.

Before 1600 the progress of the Counter-Reformation in the north was limited. The Jesuits spearheaded the Roman Church's efforts and eventually assumed a leading role in education as a battle for hearts and minds, but the Habsburgs were not necessarily predisposed to become the papacy's vehicle in the battle for bodies and lost ecclesiastical terrain. Ferdinand I, the Habsburg who, as the archduke of Austria, king of Bohemia, king of Hungary, and (after 1556) Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation, personally embodied the rise of the House of Austria to a major power, felt that tolerance was the best means of dealing with the issue of denominational diversity.

His successors between 1564 and 1619—Maximilian II, Rudolph II, and Matthias—individually confronted the religious issue with an open sympathy for Protestantism, incompetence, and pragmatism, in that order. The ascendancy of Ferdinand II to the Bohemian throne in 1617 and his assumption of the Austrian titles and Hungarian crown along with his election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1619, however, changed the complexion of the situation because he was prepared to ally himself with Rome and its agenda. Ferdinand II was renowned for his personal devotion, and he identified with loyalty the divinely ordained mission of the House of Habsburg with the Roman Church and Roman Catholicism in a manner which made heresy seditious or sedition heretical. The Catholic piety of the Habsburgs gave their dynasty a mission and an absolutistic ideology; the Counter-Reformation presented them with an opportunity to combat Protestantism and consolidate their realms in the name of God.

Breaking Bohemia's Back:

The Battle of White Mountain, 1620

Ferdinand II perceived Protestantism as the primary political problem inside and outside his immediate realms. As Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand took seriously the Roman Catholic obligations he saw as part of his Roman imperial title, and he viewed the gradual Protestant erosion of the political-denominational status quo, which had been established by the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555 but undermined by the conversion of the subjects of Catholic lords to Protestantism, as a process that had to be reversed.

The domestic situation that Ferdinand II confronted in his own realms when he came to power also was complicated.¹ The union of the Habsburgs' various realms was dynastic or personal, not constitutional, and the Habs-

burg Empire never completely lost its character of being a collection of feudal estates. For example, Ferdinand had a series of titles and domains, each of which had its own constitution. He was the archduke of Austria *and* the king of Bohemia *and* the king of Hungary, and so on. Each of these realms had its own feudal estates with its own historical traditions and institutions and particular regional interests, and the dynasty could increase its power only at the expense of these respective feudal estates. In addition, the majority of Ferdinand's subjects were Protestants, and Protestant apprehension about Roman Catholicism reinforced the feudal estates' traditional aversion to royal attempts at centralization. The rebelliousness of his Protestant Hungarian subjects in Transylvania was a good example of how these religious and feudal interests coalesced, and Bohemia became one.

A conflict between Bohemian nobles and the representatives of the crown in 1618 over the violation of a royal guarantee ensuring freedom of religion, made by one of Ferdinand II's vacillating predecessors on the Bohemian throne, provided an occasion for the Counter-Reformation to turn into a Central European military conflict. A group of enraged Bohemian nobles threw two of Ferdinand II's appointees, responsible for managing royal affairs in his absence, and their secretary out of one of the windows of the Hradčín, the royal castle in Prague. (They survived their fall of more than sixty feet by falling onto a heap of compost, *vulgo*, or in the Czech oral tradition, horse shit.)

This act of defenestration—from Latin *de* (out) and *fenestra* (window)—is a symbol of enormous historical importance for the Czechs. In 1419, the Hussite wars, which nineteenth-century Czech historians viewed as the first “national struggle” against German–Catholic hegemony, began when Hussites threw Catholic councilmen out of a window of the Prague town hall. The “Prague defenestration” of 1618, which Czechs traditionally have seen as the beginning of a second national struggle in the spirit of the first Hussite one, was to have ruinous consequences for Bohemia. The third defenestration in 1948—when the Czech foreign minister, Jan Masaryk, a non-Communist in Czechoslovakia's recently formed Communist government and the son of Thomas Masaryk, the founding father of the Republic of Czechoslovakia in 1918, was found dead beneath the open window of his office—symbolized a political and a personal break with Czechoslovakia's interwar tradition of independence and democracy. (According to the Communist authorities, Masaryk's death was a suicide, but all evidence unearthed since then clearly points to murder.)

In 1618, the Bohemian nobility decided that Ferdinand had violated the rights of the estates he had solemnly sworn to observe when assuming the Bohemian crown, so they retracted the crown and established a directory of thirty nobles to rule the land. Then they elected a Protestant prince from the duchy of Pfalz in Germany, Frederick V, king of Bohemia, an act that eventually dragged German Protestants and Catholics into the affair.

A nation's fate never hinges on a single event, but there always are relatively isolated incidents, like battles, that may be used to symbolize auspicious or ominous turning points. The Battle of White Mountain (Bílá hora)

outside Prague in 1620 plays a role in the Czech historical memory analogous to the one that the Battle at Mohács in 1526 does for Hungarians, because it symbolizes the beginning of a national tragedy. The Bohemian estates were determined to fight for their liberties and organized an army of 20,000 men. Ferdinand II resolved to reassert his rights and sent a legion of 25,000 mercenaries under the leadership of a Catholic Spanish-Flemish nobleman, Field Marshal Johann Tserclae von Tilly, to restore order in the lands of the Bohemian crown. The Battle of White Mountain had none of the epic qualities one would expect from confrontation with such profound consequences. More of a skirmish than a clash of cosmic forces, it lasted less than an hour. Tilly's professional soldiers of fortune scattered their poorly organized opponents, and Ferdinand II proceeded with the work of dismantling Bohemian independence.

Czech nationalist historians and Habsburg apologists have argued whether Ferdinand was vengeful or merciful to the point of exhaustion. Twenty-seven leaders of the uprising were arrested, put on trial, and beheaded on the square outside Prague's town hall. After 1918 twenty-seven white crosses were inset in the plaster there to commemorate these martyrs of the Bohemian nation, which incidentally included a number of German nobles. Distinguishing between the Bohemian nation and the Czech nation is important in this context. The Bohemian nation in the medieval sense of the word consisted of Czech *and* German nobles who fought the crown to maintain their own freedoms and privileges, not those of "the people." The Czech nation as a linguistic, cultural, and eventually political entity arose in the nineteenth century, and nineteenth-century Czech nationalists tended to reinterpret retrospectively the old Bohemian nation in modern Czech national terms. This led to distortions and turned the feudal or religious conflicts of German kings with Bohemian nobles or German Catholics with Bohemian Hussites into ethnic conflicts between Germans and Czechs.

Ferdinand II's imperial strategy for breaking resistance once and for all in the kingdom of Bohemia was ruthlessly straightforward. He expropriated the rebels, reconverted the lands of the Bohemian crown to Catholicism, and eventually demoted the relatively independent kingdom of Bohemia to the status of a dynastic province by turning its crown from an elected privilege into a hereditary possession. Czech historians later referred to the period starting with the Bohemian defeat in the Battle of White Mountain as *doba temna*, "the time of darkness."

Approximately 150,000 people emigrated from the lands of the Bohemian crown to escape religious or political persecution, among them 185 noble families and other traditional carriers of Czech culture like urban bourgeoisie, ministers, and professors. More than 50 percent of the land, and an even higher percentage of the larger landed estates, changed hands in the course of these confiscations.

The greatest benefactors of the Habsburg policies were the *soldatesca*—the officers of the international pack of mercenaries whom the Habsburgs had recruited to fight their wars for them and who were paid in land instead of cash—and the established Bohemian nobility that had remained loyal to

the Roman Church and the Catholic crown. These measures changed the makeup of the Bohemian estates by ennobling foreigners—Spanish, Irish, Italian, Flemish, and German mercenaries patronized by the Habsburgs—or by increasing the holdings of the indigenous Catholic Bohemian nobility. Bohemia's large class of nobles, which was predominantly Czech, Protestant, and recalcitrant, was replaced by a smaller one, which was "German," Catholic, and loyal to the Habsburgs. (In 1918 the Republic of Czechoslovakia confiscated eighty estates that were larger than 25,000 acres, the majority of which belonged to aristocrats who had long records of serving the Habsburgs.)

The power of these nobles not only was enhanced by their loyalty to the Habsburgs or the magnitude of their estates—by the mid-seventeenth century eighty-five families controlled more than 60 percent of the country's peasants—but also was augmented by the development of practices usually subsumed under the term of "second serfdom," a phenomenon that had little to do with the Habsburgs or the Counter-Reformation but temporally coincided with them. The development of "second serfdom" in Bohemia and also in eastern Austria, Hungary, Poland, and parts of eastern Germany consisted basically of lords' reassertion of feudal rights over peasant-serfs at a time when, farther west, the restrictions of medieval or "first serfdom" were gradually disappearing because of the development of money-based or cash economies that made it more profitable for lords to extract money, rather than goods or services, from their tenant-serfs. "Second serfdom" restricted rural mobility by binding peasants to the land and by increasing the burden of traditional labor obligations that they owed their lords.

It might lead too far astray to delve into the complexity of this issue. In brief, however, "second serfdom" became a characteristic of vast regions of Central Europe, and one of its consequences was that it helped maintain hierarchical, predominantly rural forms of social and economic organization, which inhibited in the long run the development of more mobile or prosperous societies. Old forms of subjugation reasserted themselves under new conditions of dominion in Central Europe, whereas the deterioration of old forms of subjugation in Western Europe gradually led to the acquisition of new freedoms, both economic and political. It would be difficult to overestimate the long-term consequences of this kind of development, because Central Europe's neofeudal political structures reinforced relative economic backwardness, and vice versa. In other words, "in East-Central Europe the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries cannot be regarded as an era of transition from feudalism to capitalism but rather a peculiar, belated feudalism. Medieval conditions, instead of waning, were consolidated."²

This pattern of postponed or retarded development in Central Europe was established early on and was enduring. A rift between the levels of economic development in Western and Central Europe—East being a term reserved for Russian developments—may have existed as early as the twelfth century, and it began to widen considerably in the seventeenth century. The consequences of Western Europe's "dual revolution"—a term E. J. Hobs-

bawm used to describe the (British) Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century and the French (political) Revolution of 1789³—also manifested themselves later and to a lesser extent in Central Europe than in Western Europe. Although it is a bit too simplistic to couple the evolution of capitalistic or industrial societies with the rise of liberalism and democracy, the development of Central Europe was characterized by the persistence of its precapitalistic or preindustrial economies as well as the perseverance of its neofeudal and, later, absolutistic political traditions and institutions.

A brief digression on the ensuing peculiarities of the development of Central Europe's economic and social structures is perhaps necessary here. Economic historians have investigated the reasons for the "West-East developmental gradient" in Europe and the phenomenon of "backwardness," and they distinguish among the various regions based on criteria related to urbanization, capital accumulation, commerce, industrialization, the development of market relations and real incomes, and the like, which usually are summed up under the concept of "modern economic growth." Economic historians also employ variations on a threefold division of Europe: an Atlantic region and its hinterland reaching from the French coast across the Netherlands to the North Sea; a Mediterranean region; and a Continental region. Central Europe belonged to the Continental region of economic development, and by the eighteenth century, there were wide economic disparities between the economically more dynamic regions of northwestern or "Atlantic" Europe and the Continental regions, which increasingly regressed toward the (Russian) east and the (Ottoman) southeast.

Another characteristic of this economic development was its "unevenness." The most advanced part of Central Europe was its small "Atlantic region": the northern Rhine Valley, which had a long Hanseatic commercial tradition and hence possessed the structures conducive to industrialization. Otherwise, there were great disparities in the patterns of development in western Germany between the northern and southern regions, such as Bavaria. A more important regional frontier was a west-east one that ran along the Elbe River, roughly corresponding to the border between Prussia in the east and a plethora of German states and estates in the west (or, to use a more contemporary frontier, to the former frontier between East and West Germany). Large landed estates and second serfdom were characteristic of the economic organization on the Northern European Plain from the Elbe River deep into Russia, and they had their counterparts to the south in Bohemia, eastern Austria, and Hungary. Although there were notable exceptions in Bohemia, Silesia, and parts of Austria, agrarian "backwardness" or retarded economic growth (using the Western European or Atlantic standards of commercial capitalism and industrialization) later became one of the characteristics of Central Europe. The longer that the venerable economic structures prevailed and the farther east that one went, the greater the gap became. In terms of their development, Prussia, Bohemia, and Austria were less backward than Poland and Hungary which, in turn, were ahead of Russia or the Ottoman Empire.⁴

Back to the consequences of the Habsburg victory in the kingdom of Bohemia in the seventeenth century: It is difficult to determine whether the victory of Ferdinand II's Habsburg imperialism over the indigenous Bohemian nobility merely accelerated a number of processes that had already begun, like the accumulation of lands into larger estates, second serfdom, or a homegrown Bohemian Counter-Reformation started by the Jesuits, or to what extent it instigated them. The formation of an upper class of wealthy aristocrats, who were assimilated into the Roman Catholic and German-speaking court culture of the Habsburgs and became their most reliable representatives and agents in the kingdom of Bohemia, inhibited for centuries the development of the Czech language and culture, just as the reestablishment of Roman Catholicism as the religion of the land robbed the Czechs of their particular form of devotion. During the nineteenth century, the retrospective pathos of nationalism merely amplified these injuries.

Confronted with the choice of staying and conforming to the Habsburg, German, and Roman Catholic culture or leaving, many members of the Bohemian national elite left, and the term "Bohemian" initially appeared in various European languages to describe the abject state in which these émigrés lived. Only later did it assume the poetic connotations of Puccini's *La Bohème*.

Unlike the Hungarians or Poles, whose histories also are characterized by protracted periods of imperial occupation but interspersed with uprisings and revolts or "struggles for national freedom," the Czechs never seemed to assume a confrontational course with their Habsburg subjugators. Consequently, by Hungarian or Polish standards, there is an absence of open conflict and rebellion in Czech history, and Hungarians and Poles have criticized the Czechs for this fact.⁵

Poles tend to forget that the Roman Catholic Church, which was the spiritual backbone of the Polish nation in times of occupation and duress, remained alien in many respects to the Czechs, because of the manner in which it was forced on them during the Counter-Reformation. Roman Catholicism was a German-Habsburg religion, not a Czech one. Hungarians often overlook the fact that their nobility was never expropriated, exiled, or "Germanized" to the great extent that the Bohemian nobility was, and the kingdom of Hungary retained (and eventually regained) a fair amount of real political autonomy under the Habsburgs that the kingdom of Bohemia lost and lost for good in the seventeenth century. Thereafter, the Czechs did not have a traditional class of aristocrats who could act as the carriers of the "national cause" as the Hungarians or the Poles did.

The fact that the Bohemian nation was effectively decapitated in the seventeenth century had enormous consequences for the evolution of Czech political culture in the future. Poland and Hungary were "gentry nations" in the seventeenth century and continued to be so until the nineteenth century. However, Bohemia ceased to be a "gentry nation" because it lost its aristocratic "national leaders" in the seventeenth century. In Bohemia during the nineteenth century, the Czechs had to constitute themselves—from

scratch and from the bottom up, so to speak—as a linguistic, cultural, and political nation. Therefore, Czech nationalism was “bourgeois, democratic, fairly egalitarian, rational, and pragmatic,” whereas Polish and Hungarian nationalism, in part due to its feudal origins, was aristocratic, more defiant, and romantic.⁶ Surprisingly, the Habsburgs’ destruction of Bohemia’s feudal nation in the seventeenth century contributed to the evolution of a more modern and democratic Czech political culture in the long run.

Nevertheless, in order to create the impression of some kind of national continuity, some Czechs have maintained that there was a psychological strategy for national survival that people adopted in the seventeenth century and that was operative until the twentieth century. But the attempt to construe continuity here is not especially convincing, because after the seventeenth century the “Czech nation” consisted basically of illiterate peasant-serfs. According to this version of the story, the development of a Czech double standard, or “double life,” was allegedly one means of dealing with foreign occupation. Public life was putting up with the trials and tribulations of subjugation and the demands of collaboration, whereas private life was an “inner emigration”: an attempt to maintain as much personal integrity and decency as possible under such circumstances. In other words, behind a facade of external conformity, Czech authenticity continued to exist. The psychological mechanisms of overt resilience and covert resistance helped the Czechs as a nation survive and eventually flourish under the Habsburgs until 1918, and it facilitated their survival under other foreign empires in the future: the Germans from 1939 until 1945 and the Communists and Soviets thereafter.

In 1979, one Czech dissident described the everyday attitude of the contemporary Czech citizen living under neo-Stalinism as “the choice of a politically disengaged pursuit of private welfare, purchased by a formal loyalty vis-à-vis power, and the illusion of decency within the limits of a private existence.”⁷ These are attitudes that pessimistically describe the Czech tradition, and they also have a certain affinity to the features of one of the champions of Czech national literature (but a figure hardly known outside the country), Jaroslav Hašek’s “good soldier Svejk.”⁸ After World War I, Hašek, a humorist of high caliber, wrote a series of novels describing the adventures of Svejk, an outspoken Czech who constantly got himself into and out of trouble. He ended up in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I but confounded his superiors by always *literally* following orders. In doing so, Svejk illustrated the absurdity of the military in particular and war in general and also managed to avoid participating in the insanity and barbarism around him.

Svejk is an ambiguous figure because he conformed and collaborated, and it is not clear whether or not his servitude was feigned, his dull wittedness simulated, or his mistakes part of a calculated strategy of subversion. Svejk was petty bourgeois, not the stuff out of which heroes are made. But critical Czechs are perhaps the first to admit that they do not have a heroic national tradition of resistance.

*Winners and Losers:
The Peace of Westphalia, 1648*

The Habsburg conquest of Bohemia started as a regional confessional conflict between a Catholic lord and his Protestant subjects, but it spilled over into Germany as the protagonists of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism took sides (and arms) for and against Ferdinand II, the Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation. The dynamics of the escalation of this conflict, which led to a series of wars over the next thirty years, are too complicated to be discussed in detail here, but the Habsburg–Bohemian confrontation developed into a Pan-European power struggle that had very little to do with religion. The Habsburgs of Spain and Austria, allied with the Catholic states and estates of Germany, championed the causes of the Counter Reformation and the (Catholic and Habsburg) Holy Roman Emperor. The Protestant and anti-imperial estates of Germany allied themselves with the Catholic but anti-Habsburg France, the Protestant maritime powers of England and the Netherlands, and the Lutheran Sweden, whose king, Gustavus Adolphus II, was not only a champion of the Protestant religious cause but also wanted to establish his own Baltic empire.

The Thirty Years' War was Europe's first "world war," but none of the parties involved were victors in the sense that they vanquished their enemies. They merely fought one another to a state of exhaustion that led to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Battered at sea by England and the Netherlands, overextended on land, and plagued by domestic problems, Spain was the big loser in this conflict, and the beginning of Spain's demise as a major European power made France the big continental winner. France extended its "sphere of influence" eastward, and after 1648, France claimed the role of being the *protector Germaniae*, "protector of Germany." This ostensibly anti-Habsburg pretense barely veiled France's interest in a weak, disunited Germany and aspirations to establish its "natural border" on the Rhine River.

Habsburg Austria won at home and lost abroad. The Habsburgs consolidated their control of Bohemia and Austria, which were thoroughly reconverted to Catholicism, and the Protestant powers promised not to interfere in the future in the Habsburgs' internal religious affairs. As the traditional bearers of the office of the Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation, however, the Habsburgs effectively lost their ability to intervene in the affairs of the German empire because the Peace of Westphalia recognized a multitude of German states as sovereign entities. In this respect, the Habsburgs and the idea of the German empire as some kind of cohesive whole were losers, whereas the numerous German states and their rulers were winners because they factually and formally were emancipated from the venerable constraints of the emperor and the empire. This event not only marks the beginning of the Habsburgs' long but gradual departure from a position of predominance in German politics, but the idea of "territorial sovereigns" also cemented the German tradition of particularism and disunity for the next two centuries.

Among the biggest losers in the Thirty Years' War was the "civilian" population of Germany, and the Thirty Years' War was a "modern" conflict in this respect. For decades, the various armies of foreign mercenaries had lived off the land like locusts, and between 1618 and 1648 the classic agents of Malthusian population control—war, famine, and plague—reduced the total population of Germany by about 35 percent, from 21 million to 13.5 million, and regionally up to 90 percent in areas of the Rhine Valley and Bavaria, which often were battle zones. As a result, it took approximately a century for Germany to regain its prewar population.

The lands of the Bohemian crown were the biggest loser in just about every respect. The Czechs lost their crown, most of their nobility, and their religion, in addition to about 70 percent of a population of 3 million; by 1648, only 5,000 of the country's previous 35,000 prospering towns still existed. Between 20 and 25 percent of the peasants' lands had been abandoned by 1650, and the gaps that emigration and the war had created in the Czech population were frequently filled by German-Catholic immigrants. This represented the second wave of the "Germanization" in Bohemia, which had begun in the Middle Ages.⁹ The toll of the Thirty Years' War was enormous, but it was the last great religious war that representatives of Western Christendom fought among themselves, although it was not Western Christendom's last great religious war.

*Defeating the Infidel, or Poland Saves the West:
Lifting the Turkish Siege of Vienna, 1683*

Between the first Turkish siege of Vienna in 1529 and the second one in 1683, the Christians of the west spent more time and energy combating one another than the infidel Turks. Despite all the rhetoric about the Turks as a Pan-European threat, the Ottoman Empire was basically a problem for the easternmost representatives of Western Christendom, the Habsburgs of Austria and the kingdom of Poland. The Turkish threat also was a godsend for denominational and dynastic opponents of the Habsburgs: Protestants inside and outside their realms and the Bourbons in France. France, for example, consistently allied itself with the enemies of Habsburg Austria, because any energy the Habsburgs expended on the infidels in the east detracted from their potential to intervene in the affairs of the west. After the initial Ottoman advance at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the military frontier between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires was relatively stable. Further Ottoman expansion in Europe had followed the lines of least resistance—along the coast of the Black Sea to Romania and into southern Ukraine—and although contemporaries did not recognize it, the Ottoman Empire was suffering from one of those diseases that befalls all imperial giants: overextension.

The expansion of the Ottoman Empire into (Ukrainian) Poland and the machinations of French diplomacy also added new elements to the well-established triangular struggle among the Habsburgs, Hungarians, and Turks on the eastern frontier. Under Louis XIV, France supported the Ot-

toman Empire against the Habsburgs; interceded on behalf of Poland in Istanbul in order to help establish peace on the Polish–Ottoman front in Ukraine; and then appealed to the king of Poland, Jan Sobieski, whose wife was French, to funnel French support into Hungary. In 1678, after soliciting French and Turkish patronage, Hungary began one of its intermittent revolts against the Habsburgs, the Kuruc uprising. Imre Thököly, one of the Hungarian national heroes that the Magyar struggle with the Habsburgs produced, was the mastermind of the so-called Kurucs, a Hungarian word derived from the Latin *crux*, the “cross” that the crusaders wore in combat against the infidels and that became a term for Hungarian national crusaders against the Habsburgs. For the Habsburgs, the Kuruc uprising added the problem of internal insurrection to the task of external defense.

This situation merely demonstrates to what extent other considerations were at work behind the Baroque stage settings of the drama of Western Christendom versus the Oriental infidel. For the Hungarians who were interested in regaining independence, the Ottoman Empire appeared not only to be stronger than the Habsburgs but also the lesser of two evils, and the vision of a unified Hungary under Ottoman patronage animated the Hungarians’ plans. For Jan Sobieski, the idea of a future reunification of the Polish and Hungarian crowns may not have been out of the question. After all, there were a number of historical precedents: Louis the Great from the Anjou dynasty, the king of Hungary (1342–1382), was also the king of Poland from 1370 until 1382; Władysław Jagiello III, the king of Poland (1434–1444), was the king of Hungary (as Ulászló I) from 1440 until 1444; and Stephan Bartory, a Hungarian prince of Transylvania, was the king of Poland from 1576 to 1586. Finally, for the Catholic French and the Islamic Turks, anything that was bad for Habsburg Austria was good for them.

Retrospective self-justification is an important function of national historiography. Austrian historians, who consider themselves the heirs to the Habsburg tradition of defending Western Christendom, criticize the Poles and Hungarians for surreptitiously or blatantly participating in French machinations that benefited the Ottoman infidels. Polish and Hungarian historians, who think of their histories in terms of national struggles for emancipation from imperialists like the Habsburgs, emphasize its pro-French aspects and, as good Westerners, play down its direct benefits for the Turks. It is fruitless to argue, therefore, whether the French dagger in the imperial back of the Habsburgs was better or worse than the Ottoman scimitar in their stomachs.

The second Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683 changed the situation because Sobieski, the king of Poland, decided that the defense of Western Christendom was more important than anything else. His conviction destroyed the diplomatic house of cards the French had built and eventually made Sobieski and Poland the “saviors of the West.” The West received a generous advance notice about the intentions of the Ottoman Empire because Islamic tradition required that a “holy war” had to be ceremoniously proclaimed in Istanbul. Festively gathering men and matériel in Istanbul and then formally sending them off on their crusade was another part of this rit-

ual, which coincidentally contradicted the rationale of logistics like the advanced deployment of supplies or heavy war matériel. Historians are unsure why the decision to take Vienna was made, because it violated the practices of coexistence and cooperation that had been established on the Austrian–Ottoman frontier, but many attribute it to the personal ambitions of Kara Mustafa, the grand vizier and, next to the sultan, the most powerful man in the Ottoman Empire.

On March 31, 1683, Kara Mustafa sent a formal declaration of war to the Austrian emperor, Leopold I, in Vienna, and he left Istanbul with his troops, a force of around 180,000, on the same day. Mustafa's strategy was to reach Vienna as soon as possible in order to shorten the amount of time the Habsburgs would have to organize their defense, but this plan turned out to be a momentous error because the heavy-siege artillery that would have been necessary to shell into submission the fortified city of Vienna could not be moved as fast as the troops. Nonetheless, Mustafa's army made good time by contemporary standards. They were at the gates of Vienna three and a half months later and surrounded the city on July 14. Emperor Leopold did not exactly raise the morale of the Viennese by fleeing the city with his entire court a week before the Turks arrived, supposedly to organize support in the German empire, but he set an example that many wealthy Viennese followed.

The massive walls and bastions of Vienna, state-of-the-art seventeenth-century fortifications, and an international contingent of 12,000 troops were responsible for holding the Turks at bay until relief could be organized, but the city took a terrible beating in the process. After the Turks gave up hope that Vienna would capitulate, they dug a network of trenches that led up to the city's fortified walls; tunneled underneath them to deposit explosives, which they detonated to breach the fortifications; and then stormed the gaps that had been torn in the walls. By the beginning of September, two-thirds of the original 12,000 defenders had fallen, and the remainder had been weakened by hunger and disease.

The relief of Vienna contained all the elements of a Christian crusade. Pope Innocent XI called on all Christians to defeat the infidels and, more important, generously helped finance the operation. Emperor Leopold appealed to his own estates, German duchies, and Poland for help, and three different relief armies of approximately equal size collected during the summer and began to converge on Vienna. Contingents from the German empire—Bavaria, Saxony, Brandenburg, Hannover, and Württemberg—marched down the Danube and joined forces upstream from Vienna with the Austrian imperial corps under the leadership of Duke Charles of Lorraine and the Polish troops under Jan Sobieski, who was given the honor of being the commander in chief of some 75,000 men, half infantry and half cavalry. On September 12, the relief forces gathered on Kahlenberg, a small mountain overlooking Vienna on the banks of the Danube, and then swept down the slopes to engage the Turks, who were not only exhausted from the protracted siege but also tactically ill prepared to deal with the assault. The entire day was spent in battle.



A contemporary engraving of the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683: in the background, flanked by Turkish tents, is the network of trenches that the Turks dug to reach the city's fortifications, the besieged city, and the Danube. (Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien)

Which leader merits the official title of the “savior of Western Christendom” is an issue that historians of different national dispositions have debated for the last three centuries. Austrians like to emphasize the importance of Duke Charles of Lorraine’s leadership and troops, but the absence of either the German or the Polish contingents undoubtedly would have reduced the strength of the relief forces so much that a victory would have been improbable. The fact that the Polish cavalry under the command of

Sobieski formed the spearhead that broke through the Turkish lines at a critical point in the battle also is important. The Poles were the first to storm the Turkish camp and consequently had the great honor of taking the tent of the grand vizier, Kara Mustafa. In the ensuing confusion Kara Mustafa fled, and the Turkish resistance collapsed.

The following night Sobieski wrote his wife from the grand vizier's tent, where he had set up his headquarters: "Our Lord and God, Blessed of All Ages, has brought unheard of victory and glory to our nation. All the guns, the whole camp, untold spoils have fallen into our hands. Having covered the trenches, the fields, and the camp with corpses, the enemy now flees in confusion." He also noted that Duke Charles of Lorraine, the duke of Saxony, and the commander of the forces defending the city of Vienna "embraced me, congratulated me, and called me their saviour."¹⁰ Sobieski harvested the greatest glory (and according to some of his comrades in arms a disproportionately large chunk of the Ottoman booty) in Vienna, and he entered the nearly vanquished city before Emperor Leopold I arrived, a violation of protocol that led to rather cool relations between the Habsburg emperor and the Polish king. Nevertheless, before returning home, Sobieski and his Polish troops participated in a pursuit action that led to another resounding Turkish defeat in Hungary.

Conjectures about what would have happened if the Turks had taken Vienna are futile but provocative. Historians tend to agree that the expansion of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the seventeenth century beyond Vienna was improbable or that the loss of Vienna would not have resulted in a collapse of the Habsburg Empire. But contemporaries were not aware of the inherent weaknesses of the Ottoman giant, and sensitized by more than a century of propaganda and hyperbole, they perceived the Turks' invasion as an appalling threat to Western Christendom. The triumph of Western Christendom at Vienna in 1683 and subsequent victories in the following years, such as the liberation of Budapest in 1686, therefore made a correspondingly profound impression on everyone at the time. The victory at Vienna was the pinprick that deflated the Ottoman Empire's imperial balloon in southeastern Europe, and it marked the beginning of a new phase of expansion and consolidation for the Habsburg Empire.

With the victory over the Turks, both the Austrians, who consider themselves the legitimate curators of the Habsburg heritage, and the Poles claimed to have saved the West. For the Poles in particular, it would be difficult to overestimate Sobieski's and Poland's accomplishment because it is portrayed and perceived by Poles as one of the zeniths in their nation's history, documenting how unselfishly Poland has served the idea of the West. Most people outside Poland do not know that Poles repeated the achievement of saving the West in the twentieth century when Polish troops led by another great Polish military man, Marshal Józef Piłsudski, defeated the Red Army in the Battle of Warsaw in 1920. Although Bolshevik Russia in 1920, like the Ottoman Empire in the late seventeenth century, was not strong enough to pursue an expansive policy in the West, Poland saved the West in 1920 in a way similar to how it saved Western Christendom in 1683.

The Consolidation of the Habsburg Empire

The Habsburgs established Central Europe's first modern empire. After the momentous victory in Vienna in 1683, the wars the Habsburgs fought are a good indication of where they made their gains. In the east and southeast, expansion was at the expense of the Ottoman Empire and rebellious Hungary. Austria's imperial armies fought a series of wars against the Turks (1683–1699, 1716–1718, 1737–1739) and put down a major uprising in Hungary (1703–1711), which, after having been liberated from the Turks by the Habsburgs, attempted to liberate itself from its liberators. These external and internal conquests pushed the border of the Habsburg Empire down the Balkan Peninsula approximately to the southern periphery of the historical kingdom of Hungary, a frontier that ran from the Adriatic coast north of Belgrade to Transylvania.

The Habsburgs consolidated their power in Hungary by using a strategy similar to the one they had pursued in Bohemia. Along with the introduction of an energetic program of reconversion to Roman Catholicism, the Habsburgs expropriated recalcitrant nobles and generously patronized those aristocratic families who were willing to serve the dynasty loyally. Their strategy was to forge a community of interests among the Roman Catholic Church, the dynasty, and the indigenous aristocracy. The Habsburgs did not succeed in Hungary to the extent they did in Bohemia, however, because many of the nobility's "ancient rights" remained intact along with the Hungarian crown as a nominally electoral institution. As a result, the Hungarians later became the strongest and most influential minority in the Habsburgs' multinational empire.

The 160 years of Turkish occupation, uprisings, and Habsburg–Ottoman wars had greatly weakened Hungary and taken a heavy toll on its population, which dropped from around 4 million in 1500 to 3.5 million in 1700. The Habsburgs also promoted a German-Catholic settlement of vast regions of the central Danube Valley that had been depopulated. During the eighteenth century more than a million settlers, many of them from the southern German province of Swabia but also including emigrants from the Rhine Valley, Tyrol, Belgium, and France, relocated there, and they were subsequently called "Danube Swabians." As in Bohemia after the Thirty Years' War, this modern phase of German "colonization" created new "linguistic islands" similar to those that initially had been established in the Middle Ages. Croats and Serbs, who fled north to escape from living in the Ottoman Empire, and Slovaks, who moved south, also added new dimensions to the ethnic composition of Hungary, whose population may have been up to 75 percent Magyar in the Middle Ages but was only around 40 percent Magyar by 1800.¹¹

In the west, Habsburg Austria's major antagonist was Bourbon France, and the major fields of conflict between these two imperial dynasties were Germany and Italy, regions that consisted of a series of smaller disunited states and hence were the kind of power vacuums that lent themselves to foreign intervention and expansion. The War of the Spanish Succession

(1701–1714), which was precipitated by the extinction of the Spanish line of the Habsburgs and conflicting Austrian and French claims to the vacant throne, eventually led to the Habsburgs' acquisition of Spain's "eastern" territories on the Continent: the Spanish Netherlands and holdings in Italy, which established Habsburg predominance in the northern part of the country. Between 1683 and 1740, the Habsburgs more than doubled the size of their realms, from a domain of approximately 115,000 square miles, an area a bit smaller than the British Isles, to an empire of more than 230,000 square miles, somewhat larger than contemporary France, and they later acquired a considerable portion of Poland.

This comparison is perhaps misleading insofar as the Habsburg Empire was not a cohesive kingdom. Outside their acquisitions in Italy and the Netherlands, the Habsburgs' hereditary "Austrian" holdings, the kingdom of Bohemia, and the kingdom of Hungary formed the territorial tripod on which their Central European empire rested. These realms were held together by neither a constitutional apparatus comparable to that of the United Kingdom nor a centralized state bureaucracy similar to that of absolutistic France, and they were by no means as ethnically and linguistically homogeneous or "national." On the contrary, the Habsburg Empire was a collection of different kingdoms and domains, many of which were multinational (or multiethnic) but personally unified by the dynasty although otherwise laterally unrelated. The hereditary Austrian holdings were predominantly German but included Slovenes and Italians: the lands of the Bohemian crown were predominantly Czech but included a great number of Germans; and the kingdom of Hungary encompassed Magyars, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Rusyns, Romanians, Germans, Serbs, and Croats. The inhabitants of Tyrol, for example, had very little in common, with the exception of their Habsburg ruler, with the Czechs in Bohemia or the population of Hungarian Transylvania.

Although none of these peoples thought in the categories of nineteenth-century nationalism, in each part of their empire the Habsburgs were confronted with different political (or feudal) institutions, religious (or Protestant) traditions, and ethnic (or non-German) groups. They used an ideology of dynastic imperialism and absolutism that the Roman Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation reinforced—one ruler, one religion—in their attempts to consolidate these heterogeneous holdings, but it was difficult to apply uniformly because of the various forms of feudal and denominational particularism. The Habsburgs broke the various forms of resistance they encountered the best they could, but incompletely. Their imperial and Roman Catholic ideology commanded the allegiance of their subjects at the expense of turning some of them into enemies.

The consolidation of the Habsburg monarchy drew the veneer of one upper-class civilization—cosmopolitan and imperial, aristocratic and German-speaking, Roman Catholic, and supranational—over the surfaces of heterogeneous regions that were particularistic and neofeudal, ethnically and linguistically polyglot, subservient, and outwardly conformist. The proliferation and density of Baroque monasteries, churches, and religious

monuments in the Habsburgs' realms attest to the outward success of the Counter-Reformation and the idea of the Church Triumphant. Politically, the Habsburgs carried the Roman Catholic Church's victory over heresy and the infidel, and the idea of the Dynasty Triumphant found its visual expression in a building boom of Baroque palaces that celebrated the achievements and grandeur of the dynasty and its aristocratic attendants. The Habsburgs' court, which was their prime instrument of government, created an unusually cosmopolitan forum for the careers of aristocrats—Germans, Czechs, Hungarians, and Italians, all "Austrians" in the imperial sense of the word—who were prepared to identify their interests with the concerns of a dynasty that defined itself in terms of its imperial and Catholic supranationalism. In serving the imperial whole, they stood above the empire's constituent parts.

Despite this cosmopolitan touch, German was the language of assimilation and dominion in the Habsburg Empire, and the consolidation of the Habsburgs' power in the historical kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary eventually contributed to the idea of defining southern Central Europe as part of the "German linguistic and cultural space." The Habsburgs' German and the Roman Catholic Church's Latin also became symbols of foreign subjugation for many of the empire's non-German and Protestant subjects. The dynasty's violation of the venerable feudal rights of their subjects, the Bohemian and Hungarian nations in particular, and the Roman Church's simultaneous smothering of Protestantism created a reservoir of resentment that nineteenth-century nationalism later tapped so successfully.

The Habsburgs may have succeeded in consolidating their realms from the top down, but they failed to create a mode of consolidation that worked from the bottom up. This lack of integration perhaps did not diminish the initial strength of the Habsburg Empire, but it created a heritage of latent dissatisfaction that weakened it internally and eventually helped tear it apart. Nevertheless, the rise of the Habsburgs' Danubian empire at the expense of the kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary and the Ottoman Empire ended the first phase of empire building in Central Europe.

Absolutism as Enlightenment

1700–1790

The rise of continental European absolutism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the concomitant development of the stream of thought called the Enlightenment may appear to be incompatible in theory, but they were compatible in practice. Although the various philosophers of the Enlightenment agreed on a few basic methodological principles like a faith in reason instead of revelation, a critical analysis of tradition and authority, and the scientific spirit, there is really no point in arguing who the best representatives of the Enlightenment were because each nation seems to have its own. In the British tradition, for example, John Locke or David Hume are representative figures. In France, Voltaire and Rousseau are generally regarded as the respective moderate and radical representatives of the Enlightenment. Among professional philosophers and most Germans, Immanuel Kant, the professor from Königsberg in East Prussia, generally is recognized as the consummation of the Enlightenment. (A cursory glance at the biographical dates of Locke, 1632–1704; Voltaire, 1694–1778; and Kant, 1724–1804, illustrate the West–East transmission or British–French–German sequence of the Enlightenment.)

Prussian, Austrian, and Russian rulers interested in enlightenment could not rely on much indigenous critical philosophy because seventeenth-century Prussian Protestant piety, Austrian Counter-Reformation Catholicism, and Russian Orthodoxy did not provide fertile soils for freethinkers. Therefore, the best representatives of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Central and Eastern Europe were not homegrown philosophers but monarchs, and these monarchs looked to France for political and philosophical inspiration.

The philosophy of the Enlightenment, like the French (political) and

(British) industrial revolutions that followed in its wake, was initially a Western European innovation that gradually moved eastward with proportionately decreasing amounts of success. In light of the insularity of British developments, they should perhaps be bracketed out of consideration here. British political institutions somehow escaped the ruthless scrutiny of Reason as they evolved into a parliamentary system. The British tradition of Enlightenment also was more empirical and skeptical than the French tradition, which was influenced to a much greater extent by rationalism and the assumption that it was both feasible and desirable to plan and execute projects on a grand scale.

In France, the Bourbons used the idea of enlightened progress—a more rational organization of the state and society—in order to enhance the power of the dynastic state as well as to justify the monarchy's infringement on the venerable (or backward) feudal rights of the nobility and the church, which had limited it for centuries. A more effective and larger professional bureaucracy for the administration of public affairs ranging from the military to the construction of roads and canals or the collection of customs, taxes, and duties; the codification of laws; the propagation of new agricultural and industrial technologies or foreign trade; the guarantee of religious toleration; and the improvement and extension of education as well as its secularization, which involved breaking the Jesuit monopoly on universities, are just a few examples of how enlightened absolutism simultaneously benefited the state and the population as a whole. Each increase in the health, wealth, and intelligence of the absolute monarch's subjects was an incremental gain in power and potential for the absolutistic state, and in this respect monarchs recognized the benefits of enlightenment, which was ambiguously altruistic and obviously authoritarian. As modern forms of organization and technology, rationality and progress placed new instruments of dominion at the disposal of enlightened monarchs, who used them to pursue their age-old dynastic interests, the enhancement of power, but still saw themselves as representatives of God's divinely preordained order on earth.

As a technique for augmenting control, enlightenment enhanced the power of the Bourbon dynasty and French state, but at the same time the (liberal English and radical French) philosophical presuppositions of enlightenment gradually eroded the Baroque foundations of French absolutism. The standard interpretations of the dynamics of the Enlightenment usually emphasize that enlightened philosophy lent itself first to absolutism's destruction of old and obstructive feudal freedoms but then, carried on to its logical conclusions, became an expression of the rising middle or bourgeois classes' interest in more intellectual, political, and economic freedom. This development, in turn, eventually led to the revolutionary demise of absolutistic monarchy. This is not the place to expound on the relationship between philosophical enlightenment and political revolution or the problematic issue of the economic preconditions for both. Nonetheless, in Western Europe there were two broad patterns of enlightenment: one absolutistic form that the dynastic state instigated and administrated "from above" and one democratic form that the rising middle class initiated and

articulated “from below.” In the former case, the enlightened dynastic state thought for the people, and in the latter, the enlightened people thought for themselves.

Enlightenment in Hohenzollern Prussia, Habsburg Austria, and Romanov Russia was quite different from its Western or French precedents. By around 1700, all these ruling dynasties knew that they were either falling behind or were backward to start with, and so they turned to foreign ideas and experts in order to do something about it. However, “enlightenment from above” was not accompanied to a comparable extent by “enlightenment from below,” and the Central and Eastern European enlightenment of absolutism as a “revolution from above” was not succeeded by a liberal democratic “revolution from below.” On the contrary, secularization and centralization “from above” frequently met the violent resistance of religious traditionalists and feudal particularists, particularly in Romanov Russia and the Habsburg Empire, who felt that enlightenment was merely a violation of venerable religious customs, just as absolutism was an encroachment on revered traditional rights.

The Enlightenment ushered in a new age of freedom. Poles, however, are in the peculiar position of identifying the Enlightenment with their loss of freedom because the Polish–Lithuanian Republic became a victim of enlightened absolutism.

*Triangular Conflict in the East:
Poland-Lithuania, Sweden, and Russia*

Despite the legendary importance of Jan Sobieski and Poland’s intercession in lifting the siege of Vienna in 1683, Poland appears to have been only marginally involved in major sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Central European conflicts: the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, which were basically a struggle between northern German Protestants and southern German Catholics, or Western Christendom’s struggle with the Ottoman Empire, which for the most part was a burden for the Habsburgs of Austria. In accordance with its tradition of religious tolerance, Poland refrained from participating in the excesses of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and Poland’s conflict with the Ottoman Empire in Ukraine also was basically a venerable struggle with an old enemy, the Crimean Tatars, who were vassals of new lords, the Ottoman Turks. Therefore, one might be tempted to delegate Poland to some kind of peripheral position outside the mainstream of Central European events which appear to have been centered on the Rhine and the Danube Valleys. But Poland was the pivot on which the conflicts on the Northern European Plain hinged. If Poles are asked to identify the archenemy they have constantly battled throughout their history, it would be geography, because every point of the compass marks a different adversary that at some time or another swept across the Polish plains: the Swedes from the north, the Tatars and the Turks from the south, the Prussians from the west, and the Russians from the east.

It is difficult to call Swedes Central Europeans because their abstention

from Continental conflicts for the past few centuries made them a paragon of European neutrality or Scandinavian isolationism. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Sweden tried to establish an empire based on nothing less than a *dominium maris Baltici*, a “dominion of the Baltic Sea,” and it intended turning the Polish–Lithuanian Republic, Russia, and Brandenburg Prussia into permanently landlocked countries. The first phase of Sweden’s imperial expansion was in the eastern Baltic. Finland, a Swedish vassal state, was the scene of direct Swedish–Russian conflict, whereas the struggle for the hegemony of contemporary Estonia and Latvia was a triangular affair among Swedes, Russians, and Poles, who fought in a series of rotating two-against-one alliances, coalitions that depended on exploiting the fluctuating strengths and weaknesses of the parties involved. The reign of Gustavus Adolphus II (1611–1632)—the “Lion of the North” and Swedish king who entered the Thirty Years’ War on the side of German Protestantism for the sake of defending the faith—marked the beginning of the second phase of Swedish expansion, and Gustavus Adolphus added substantially to the realization of a Swedish *dominium maris Baltici* by seizing Polish Baltic ports in addition to acquiring a territorial foothold along the coast of northern Germany.

If the seventeenth-century rise of Sweden’s Baltic empire and the western expansion of Russia’s empire under the Romanovs toward the Baltic and in Belarus was the source of one “northern” triangular conflict for the Polish–Lithuanian Republic, then the gradual Russian encroachment on Ukraine and expansion toward the Black Sea during the same period provided the basis for a second triangular conflict in the south, in which Poland-Lithuania, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire alternately fought among themselves. The fact that Russia gradually forced the Ottoman Empire out of the Crimea (north of the Black Sea) and Moldavia (east of the Carpathians) merely indicates the extent to which the Polish–Lithuanian sphere of influence in the region had deteriorated. The Russian–Ottoman conflict also reinforced the idea of Russia as the bulwark of Orthodox or Eastern Christendom.

The Polish–Lithuanian Republic was in the worst possible geopolitical position because Russia and Sweden each had more to gain from Polish losses in the Baltic north and in the Ukrainian south than they could hope to gain through Polish alliances. The two stronger powers systematically exploited the weakness of the third, which began to play an increasingly negligible role in the Swedish–Russian struggle for hegemony, aside from providing a convenient, centrally located battlefield. In 1655, for example, the nephew of Gustavus Adolphus, Charles X, invaded the Polish–Lithuanian Republic, ostensibly to check Russian advances in the east, and as a result of this Swedish intervention, Poland’s last effective resistance to its enemies in the east collapsed. The six years of confusion that followed are known in Polish history as “the Deluge.” Swedes romped up and down the Vistula Valley from the Baltic to the Carpathian Mountains; at Sweden’s invitation, Calvinistic Hungarians from Transylvania joined the action; and Russia made substantial gains in the east and Ukraine.

The Great Nordic War (1700–1721), a conflict in which Sweden’s King

Charles XII (1697–1718), “the last Viking,” and Russia’s Czar Peter the Great (1698–1725) were the major antagonists, conclusively resolved the struggle for Baltic hegemony. Charles was an ingenious field marshal but a poor politician, and his diplomatic incompetence offset his military ingenuity. Therefore, he was eventually confronted with a coalition of virtually any and everybody who had something to lose by his success or to gain by his failure. Russia; Poland-Lithuania; the German states of Saxony, Prussia, and Hamburg; Denmark; and Norway joined forces against him. This conflict raged along the Baltic coast, in Denmark, and throughout Poland, and it extended into Belarus and down into Ukraine. The turning point of this war was deep in Ukraine at the Battle of Poltava in 1709.

Charles was the first modern “imperialist” who shipwrecked on the vastness of Russia (and apparently neither Napoleon in 1812 nor Hitler in 1941 learned from the lessons of their predecessors). Greatly weakened, Charles nevertheless continued his struggle for the next nine years, but his death during the siege of the Danish castle of Frederiksborg in 1718 punctuated the end of the idea of a Swedish Baltic empire, and the victors divided the Swedish spoils among themselves. Russia, which gained control of Estonia and Latvia as well as Finland, and Prussia, which reestablished itself on the Baltic coast, were the biggest winners. Poland-Lithuania, nominally among the short-term victors in the denouement of the Baltic conflict, was actually one of its long-term losers because the new Baltic power constellation—an expansive Russia and an expanding Prussia—eventually led to its demise.

Although the maintenance of a Swedish–Baltic empire certainly would have influenced future events in Central Europe and provided a geopolitical alternative to the development of the Prussian and Russian empires that began to come into their own after its collapse, conjectures about what could have happened if Sweden had retained its predominance in the Baltic region fall into that futilely provocative realm of historical speculation. Estonians and Latvians look back on the seventeenth century with fondness. As coastal people on the Baltic, their “natural” business partners were in Sweden, Hamburg, or Amsterdam. They would have benefited more from a western, Protestant Swedish-Baltic empire than the eastern, Orthodox, and Russian one that absorbed them. But Russian and German expansion and East–West conflicts determined the political dynamics of Central Europe from the eighteenth century until the end of the twentieth, and if there was one country caught fatally in the middle of this field of contention, it was Poland.

*The Polish Paradox:
Freedom Without “Enlightenment”*

Both parliamentarianism and absolutism were inherent in the constitutional struggle between lords and vassals in European feudal societies. In Western Europe, medieval monarchy, which was based on a complicated system of mutual rights and contractual obligations that regulated the relationships between kings and nobles as well as nobles and their subjects, developed in two relatively distinct directions. One historical trend, which could be called

the British or parliamentary path, entailed the expansion of the venerable rights of the nobles at the expense of those of the crown and the extension of those rights to commoners. It culminated in a liberal democratic tradition characterized by ideas such as parliamentary representation, limited government, the sovereignty of the people, government by the consent of the governed, and catalogs of civil rights. Medieval monarchy's other pattern of development, which could be called the French or absolutistic path, strengthened the crown at the expense of the historical rights of the nobility and centralized power in the hands of the monarch or state.

Both distorted versions of the British parliamentary pattern of development and imitations of the achievements of French absolutism applied to Central Europe. The Polish–Lithuanian Republic, for example, experienced a peculiar, truncated form of British development, which resulted in a weak crown and a parliament controlled by a large and relatively free and strong nobility, whereas its neighbors, Prussia, Russia, and Austria, followed the French pattern of absolutistic development with varying degrees of success. During the eighteenth century, the Poland–Lithuanian Republic became a political anachronism that was simultaneously more free and less modern than its Prussian, Austrian, and Russian neighbors, whose absolutism was based on the elimination of feudal freedoms that had previously limited the centralization of political power.

The Hohenzollerns of Prussia, the Romanovs of Russia, and the Habsburgs of Austria divided the Polish–Lithuanian Republic among themselves in three phases at the end of the eighteenth century (in 1772, 1793, and 1795), and after the final partition, Poland effectively disappeared from the political map of Europe for 123 years. The initial demise of Poland came relatively late in comparison with the downfalls of the historical kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary, which were incorporated into the Habsburg Empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century and “Austrianized” to a certain extent by the end of the seventeenth century.

It is a moot point to argue whether or not the Polish loss of independence was any more or less tragic than the corresponding Czech or Hungarian forfeitures of national freedom at much earlier dates. But it was much more complete. The kingdoms of Hungary and Bohemia remained formally intact as component parts of the Habsburg Empire—the Habsburgs were the kings of both Hungary and Bohemia—whereas the historical kingdom of Poland virtually ceased to exist. It is one of those paradoxes of Polish history that the Polish nobility's love of their “golden freedoms” contributed to their loss. A few observations about the anomalous development of the Polish–Lithuanian Republic explain this point as well as why the country was so ill equipped to face the absolutistic challenges of its “enlightened” neighbors.

The formal establishment of a parliamentary system in Poland dates back to 1493. The great achievement of the Polish Diet, or Sejm, the representative body of the nobility, was to limit royal prerogative. The precedent of *nihil novi*, “nothing new” without the consent of the Diet, was established in 1505, and in 1569 Sigmund II August, the last representative of the Jagiel-

lonian dynasty, succeeded in turning the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth from two hereditary domains personally united by one dynastic family into one constitutionally united “republic” with a freely elected monarch. After the extinction of the Jagiellonian dynasty in 1572, each subsequently elected king of the Polish–Lithuanian Republic had to swear solemnly to respect and protect the existing laws of the country, and this ritual merely symbolized to what extent the idea of sovereignty had been transferred from the king to the nobles, the constituent members of the “political nation.” The interests of the “Polish nation” were the interests of the nobles, and they, in turn, preferred weak kings to strong ones.

The institution of electoral monarchy turned out to be less fortuitous for the Polish–Lithuanian Republic. Only three of the ten kings elected in the two centuries between the expiration of the Jagiellonian dynasty in 1572 and the first partition of Poland in 1772 were Poles.¹ The introduction of an electoral monarchy greatly increased the importance of Warsaw, because a small village in its immediate proximity, Wola, was chosen as the site for royal elections simply because it was more centrally located than the historical capital of Kraków in the south, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century the royal seat was moved to Warsaw. One of the procedural peculiarities of Polish politics was that both the election of kings and the passage of legislation in the Sejm (Diet) were based on the principle of unanimity, which in turn rested on the assumption that minority parties would recognize their moral obligation to submit to the will of the majority. As unusual as this traditional practice may seem, it functioned well as long as the participants in the political game were willing not to take advantage of its inherent formal flaws.

For example, when anywhere between 10,000 and 15,000 nobles converged on Warsaw to participate in a royal election, the usual instruments of intuition, persuasion, cajoling, threats, and bribery normally led to unanimity. Periodically, though, there also were times during which the failure to agree or the election of competing kings meant that the election had to be settled on the battlefield. The legislative or parliamentary counterpart of unanimity was the so-called *liberum veto*, a device allowing any single member of the Diet to halt the proceedings. This veto had traditionally been used as a means of clarifying certain points or as a vehicle for lobbying. However, after the middle of the seventeenth century, it degenerated into an instrument of parliamentary obstruction. The *liberum veto* gave Polish nobles, who were willing to act as the agents of foreign powers, the opportunity to block legislation and lame innovation in the Diet, on the one hand, and it gave foreign powers ample opportunity to criticize Poland as an anarchic and unruly country, on the other.

Another peculiarity of the Polish situation was that an inordinately large percentage of the population was involved in the political process. Approximately 10 percent of the population—ranging from powerful barons with enormous holdings to penniless and propertyless petty gentry—enjoyed the “golden freedoms” by virtue of their titles and standing, and this class of nobles and gentry was two to ten times larger than any of its Western European counterparts. Given the power the nobles had acquired and their sheer

strength of numbers, it is easy to understand how the idea of Poland-Lithuania as a “republic of nobles” evolved. The nobility also demonstrated attitudes that appear to be modern, such as a reliance on using legal precedent, a belief in protecting individual rights, and the importance of limiting central government, but in fact they were feudal. The Polish nobility consistently used their “golden freedoms” to protect and promote their particular feudal interests in a manner which prevented the republic from developing into a more modern and viable centralized state. Then the partitions of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century transformed the venerable vices of the gentry into national virtues in the nineteenth century. For example, the old habit of opposing royal power expressed itself as the will to resist foreign oppression; feudal conservatism was transmuted into a determination to preserve national traditions; and the idea of a restoration of Poland lent itself to revolutionary interpretations.

There are nominal and formal affinities between the modern freedoms we associate with the liberal democratic tradition and the “golden freedoms” of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic, and there is also a long Polish tradition of drawing parallels between the constitutional development of Poland-Lithuania and the United Kingdom—such as a reliance on legal precedent, the protection of individual rights, and a Polish form of habeus corpus. The similarities of these two traditions are important to Poles because they can be used to demonstrate how venerable Poland’s “democratic tradition” is. However, they also obscure the fact that despite Poland’s freedom-loving traditions, it has virtually no tradition of modern representative or parliamentary democracy, nor did it ever have the type of advanced capitalistic economy that provided the basis for economic and political liberalism in the West.

Poland may have been a relatively free country by the standards of eighteenth-century absolutism, but not by modern standards. The Polish nobility, for example, enjoyed the “golden freedoms,” whereas nine-tenths of the population, which was subject to backward forms of feudal tenure and control, did not. In this respect, waxing poetic about how free Poland was before the partitions is a bit problematic. Furthermore, as the representatives of the “political nation,” in the medieval sense of the word, the Polish-Lithuanian nobility was a multinational and religiously heterodox class that defined itself in terms of its hereditary rights or position in the political process and not by the modern ethnic, linguistic, or religious criteria of “Polishness”: Polish born, Polish speaking, and Roman Catholic. The language of politics, Latin, merely reflected the cosmopolitan nature of the medieval idea of the “Polish nation.”

The feudal ideas of freedom and nation were different from modern-democratic and ethnically Polish concepts of both, just as the national freedoms that were lost in the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic at the end of the eighteenth century were different from those that Poles aspired to achieve in the nineteenth century.² A reinterpretation of the feudal past in the spirit of nineteenth-century liberalism and nationalism, which produced distorted idealizations of the “golden age” as more free and

more national than it had been, was a trait that the inhabitants of the “historical kingdoms” of Central Europe—Czechs, Hungarians, and Poles—shared. Nevertheless, the idea of “regaining” the freedoms of the past played an important role in each of these people’s visions of the future.

Frederick the Great and Prussian Pathology

Hohenzollern Prussia provided the regional model for Central European enlightenment, which Romanov Russia and Habsburg Austria imitated because it was most successful in the implementation of the French enlightened absolutistic strategy. The reigns of both Prussia’s Frederick Wilhelm I (1713–1740), “the Soldiers’ King,” and Russia’s Peter “the Great” (1689–1725) were typical of the first generation of enlightened absolutists because they were marked by a pragmatic interest in technical and organizational innovations for the sake of military development and state administration, not in the philosophical trappings of enlightenment as a means of justifying absolutism. Frederick Wilhelm resolved most elegantly and efficiently the inherent and age-old conflict between the centralizing aspirations of the crown and the particular feudal interests of the landed nobility. Instead of fighting Brandenburg-Prussia’s strong class of landowning nobility, the Junkers, he effectively enlisted them into the service of the state by making careers in the military or the bureaucracy part of the duties and status of that class. Aristocracy became part of the state bureaucracy.

Frederick Wilhelm was above all a military man, and he was one of the first regents of Europe to make the uniform of the commander in chief the centerpiece of a regal wardrobe. In addition to turning the Prussian army into a professional organization during his reign, the emulation of military discipline in all realms of public life accompanied the standard repertoire of enlightened reforms aimed at improving of public administration, which enhanced the power of the dynastic state. Coupled with the indigenous Prussian strain of Calvinistic piety, these innovations led to the development of austere values: The religious concepts of Christian vocation and Calvinistic virtue coalesced with the military values of authority, service, and duty and the demands of rational organization. *Zucht, Ordnung, und Pflicht*—“discipline,” “order,” and “duty”—became the cardinal virtues of Prussian military organization, the state, and society. The subsequent rise of Prussia from a second-rate to a major European power, which also developed Europe’s most effective standing army for a state of its size, merely demonstrated how compatible Protestantism, absolutism, militarism, and “enlightened” rationality were with one another.

The reign of Frederick the Great (1740–1786), the son of the “Soldiers’ King,” represented the classic age of enlightenment in Prussia. Unlike his father, who was primarily interested in the pragmatic benefits of rationalization, Frederick the Great was a full-fledged intellectual apostle of the French form of enlightened absolutism. He imitated all the irrational high Baroque extravagance of the court of France’s Louis XIV (but on a smaller scale), and he adopted French philosophy to legitimize the enhancement of