

Letter from the Editor

One enduring feature of *Central European History* has been its unwavering commitment to traditional historiographical themes and approaches; at the same time, it remains a receptive venue for many of the more innovative topics and methods that have so enriched the field in recent decades. There is nevertheless one area in which *CEH* continues to struggle: attracting research on the period prior to the nineteenth century, as well as on topics related to the German-speaking lands beyond *Kleindeutschland* proper. This is no doubt a reflection of the current state of the field, as well as of the rich, increasingly specialized publishing landscape. Regardless of the reasons, the journal has, of late, partly made up for these lacunae, thanks to two review forums organized by associate editor **Julia Torrie** on those very topics.

The first, which appeared two issues ago in June 2017, focused on Pieter Judson's masterful new history of the Habsburg Empire. The current issue offers readers an equally stimulating discussion: "**An Empire for Our Times?**," which looks at **Peter Wilson's** ambitious new history of the Holy Roman Empire. In just over a thousand pages, Wilson regales readers with a new interpretation of a thousand years of European history spanning much of the Continent—the "best single-volume history of the Holy Roman Empire currently available," according to **Jason Coy**, one of the forum's participants. In the words of another, **Len Scales**, "It will be a long time before a scholar emerges who commands the breadth and depth of learning, as well as the inexhaustible stamina, necessary to repeat Wilson's venture for changed times. ... The Holy Roman Empire is back on the agenda."

The two studies by Wilson and Judson have more in common than just addressing time periods and geographic regions that have received less than their fair share of coverage in the pages of this journal: both offer daring revisionist interpretations of two polities traditionally regarded as somehow defective or flawed. Whereas Judson forcefully distances himself from the hoary notion of the Habsburg Empire as a "dysfunctional patchwork of hostile ethnic groups" clamoring for the demise of a supposedly "anachronistic imperial relic," Wilson goes against the scholarly grain by arguing, with great verve, that the decentralized nature of authority under the Holy Roman Empire was not only one of its greatest strengths and attributes, but also the very key to the remarkable stability (and impressive cultural output) of a purported political "monstrosity" (*pace* Pufendorf) that lasted almost a millennium. Monstrosity or not, it allowed—in Wilson's view, and not unlike Judson's Habsburg Empire—a variety of cultural and (nascent) national identities to flourish.

Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger questions the appropriateness of treating such a protean polity as a "constant historical subject," yet praises Wilson for tackling what she and the other discussants see as common but anachronistic treatments of the Holy Roman Empire: as a failed predecessor of the nineteenth-century nation-state, as the underlying "first cause" of Germany's alleged *Sonderweg*, and, in more recent times, as some sort of European Union *avant la lettre*—or, as Wilson puts it himself in an extended response to the remarks by Coy, Scales, Stollberg-Rilinger, and **Tom Scott**, as a "blueprint for a new Europe." The "habit of measuring" the Holy Roman Empire against any single model is "why most interpretations have been so hostile," he observes more generally, "because the Empire is always going to fall short of those ideals."

In light of their ultimate demise and the fateful developments that came in the wake of their dissolution, it is understandable why so many scholars have been tempted to focus on the supposedly negative aspects of both the Habsburg Empire and the one that was neither “Holy” nor “Roman” nor really even an “Empire,” as Voltaire famously put it. Both Wilson and Judson rightfully warn against teleological approaches that treat those failures as somehow foreordained—as have others with regard to some of the other “failures” that litter the landscape of German-speaking Central Europe. As Anna von der Goltz reminds us in her insightful review in this issue of Larry Eugene Jones’s *Hitler versus Hindenburg: The 1932 Presidential Elections and the End of the Weimar Republic* (2016), historians of the Weimar era have more or less overcome “their erstwhile fixation on the failure of Germany’s first democracy,” stressing that “the year 1933 was not the predestined telos of the republic’s history.” The same could be said of 1806 and 1918—and, of course, 1989/90 as well.

Still, in the end, things proverbially *did* fall apart in all these empires and republics (even if latter-day Voltaires still occasionally quip that the youngest political entity in this group was neither “German” nor “Democratic” nor a “Republic”...). Was that the result of the “inherent shortcomings” of those polities, of historical contingencies, or, more likely, of some combination of the two, along with other factors? Perhaps more to the point: is “failure” really all that surprising anyway in this context? *All* things come perforce to an end, after all, and one day even the European Union and the United States will no doubt pass out of existence as well. Recent political developments—not least Brexit and the resurgence of disturbing nationalist and populist tendencies on both sides of the Atlantic—suggest that such a scenario might come about sooner than later, or at least sooner than anyone now suspects. If that sounds unduly pessimistic, it is worth asking who, as late as the late 1980s, had seriously anticipated the sudden demise of state socialism and the rapid dissolution of the Soviet bloc.

ANDREW I. PORT
EDITOR

CORRECTION: Because of an error at the proof stage of *CEH* 50/2 (June 2017), Schloss Schönhausen in Pankow was wrongly identified as the birthplace of Otto von Bismarck on p. 200 of Marcus Colla, “Prussian Palimpsests: Historic Architecture and Urban Spaces in East Germany, 1945–1961.” This attribution should have appeared on p. 204 in reference to Schloss Schönhausen (Altmark). Schloss Schönhausen in Pankow served as the seat of the president of the German Democratic Republic until 1960, whereas Schloss Schönhausen (Altmark) was demolished in 1958.