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Dean Messinger

Nationalism and Nation-Building in the Lutheran Reformation

Introduction

The horrors of the Thirty Years War were precipitated by a little over a century of confessionalization and state building, where small, centralized states emerged inside the powder keg of Reformation Germany. Developing regional powers like Saxony and Brandenburg were begging to centralize as princes asserted their authority within and without of the empire. Deep dynastic and territorial feuds became religious as strict confessional lines were drawn. Foreign influence in Germany was at its height, with French expansion along the Rhine, Italian influence through the Roman Catholic Church, and all the while nominally apart the supranational Habsburg Monarchy.

The origins of these states can be explored by examining the years preceding the Reformation, when friction between the Church, the Emperor, and the German estates was growing, as was a sense of Germanic identity. Articulated in the Gravamina, the German estates explained what they perceived as the threats to Germany, namely the political and financial abuses of the Church and the expansion of power of the Emperor. By championing the cause of the Gravamina and making Germanic identity a central part of his argument, Martin Luther was able to gain political support for his movement, leading to the establishment of centralized and sovereign Protestant German states. The first of these states was the Duchy of Prussia, a product of the Reformation, and a world power in the making.

The Grievances of the German Nation

In the latter half of the fifteenth century, before Luther's publication of his seminal attack on indulgences, a rising political sentiment in Germany was growing that criticized the Roman Catholic Church, and to a similar but lesser extent, the authority of the Emperor, who was increasingly viewed with suspicion by the German estates. Called the *Gravamina nationis Germanicae*, or the grievances of the German nation (Gravamina), these series of political and fiscal complaints became an *idée fixe* in Imperial politics, and were often the basis for the demand that a council be called to discuss the issues brought to light.¹ The growth of the Gravamina coincided with the rise of the printing press, which created a "literature of grievance" within the Empire.² This all "helped to generate a growing perception of crisis" which Luther was quick to capitalize on to help launch his program of religious reform.³

First articulated at the Mainz Synod of 1455 in response to the Vienna Concordat signed between Pope Nicholas V and Emperor Frederick III in 1448, the Gravamina was officially adopted by the Imperial Reichstag in 1458.⁴ The Vienna Concordat would prove to be a major source of friction between the German estates and the Roman Church. The Concordat reestablished Papal authority in Germany, including the right of the Papacy to reject episcopal elections, and solidified the right of the Pope to tax, often in its entirety, the first year of a newly appointed bishop's income, which had to be paid to the Pope by an appointee before he could be

¹ Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire: Volume One: From Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia, 1493-1648*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 87.

² Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

invested with his office.⁵ The latter, called the Annates, was a major point of contention because of the widespread noble nepotism within the German church, where disenfranchised younger members of the nobility pursued ecclesiastical careers as a path to a lavish lifestyle and disposable income outside of familial inheritance.

Many of the problems addressed in the Vienna Concordat had their roots in the Western Schism and the ‘captivity’ of the Roman Church in Avignon. The financial burden placed upon both the secular estates and the clerical estates in Germany, which would continue to become a leading point of contention in the conflict, escalated greatly during the Western Schism. It saw the papal claimants in Rome, who received political support from the Holy Roman Empire, relying almost exclusively on the revenue from Germany to finance their administration and their conflicts with the other papal claimants.⁶ Even with the resolution of the Western Schism at the Council of Constance in 1418, the mere perception of overtaxation, as well as the series of real financial abuses, “fed a continuing campaign for reform” among the secular and clerical estates.⁷

The Vienna Concordat also led to friction and a growing mistrust between the Holy Roman Emperor and the German estates, who saw the signing of the Vienna Concordat as a “betrayal of national interests, or at least a failure to protect them,” by the Emperor Frederick III.⁸ Charles V would be caricatured as well, as acting against the interests of Germany, and strong criticisms were levied against him questioning his German loyalties and identity as Holy Roman Emperor *of the German Nation*. One pamphlet, popular enough to have been published in

⁵ Ibid. 85.

⁶ Ibid. 88.

⁷ Ibid. 88.

⁸ Ibid. 85.

nine editions, depicts the embodiment of Germany, the lady Germania, scolding the Emperor Charles V. Written by Johannes Schradin, the pamphlet illustrates Germania's anger at the Emperor for following "the Pope's and the devil's lies."⁹ Germania accuses: "you allow the red whore in Rome to dress you with her harness, and against loyalty and oath, to the German lands disgrace and sorrow you lead a foreign Romance-speaking people into the German land," referring to the Italian and Spanish mercenaries hired by the Emperor to fight the Protestants in Germany.¹⁰

The German estates' conflict with the Emperor was based mostly on the "issues of the emperor's right to tax and to raise an imperial army (and the discussion of whether the Reich should finance a standing army)".¹¹ Finding revenue to finance the war against the Turks became an increasingly futile endeavor for the Hapsburg emperors; as the Turkish threat became more dire, the German estates were growing circumspect of the power and wealth the Emperors were trying to gather to combat this problem. This issue came to a boiling point multiple times throughout the reign of Emperor Maximilian I, Charles V's grandfather and imperial predecessor. The Reichstag, for example, rejected requests for revenue to finance a new crusade against the Turks three different times in 1495, 1512, and 1518, claiming that they could not provide funds for the Emperor until the grievances found in the Gravamina have been redressed.¹²

⁹ Gabriele Haug-Moritz. "The Holy Roman Empire, the Schmalkald League, and the Idea of Confessional Nation-Building." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 152, no. 4 (2008): 427-39.

¹⁰ Haug-Moritz, "The Holy Roman Empire, The Schmalkald League, and the Idea of Confessional Nation-Building.", 436.

¹¹ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*. 73.

¹² *Ibid.* 73.

Other grievances incorporated in the Gravamina included issues surrounding the imperial supreme court, or the *Reichskammergericht*, which was instituted under the reign of Maximilian I as a concession to the German estates in 1495, as the emperor hoped to collect more revenue for his war against the Turks.¹³ Another imperial body was the *Reichsregiment* or the imperial regency council, which had significant legislative and executive power in the absence of the Emperor (a common occurrence, owing to the geographical extent of the Hapsburgs' domains). The supreme court and the regency council fell out of use rather quickly, which troubled the German estates as those institutions were a major check on the power of the Emperor, and calls for their reinstatement would be an essential aspect of the Gravamina.

What was unique about the Gravamina and what set it apart from other popular grievances against the Church and other authorities at the time was the distinct German identity that it conveyed. The Gravamina's independence-minded flavor seemed to appeal to an incipient German nationalism, a fact Luther was quick to pick up on and make a central part of his reforms. For example, one of the key aspects of the Gravamina's challenge to "ruthlessly imposed Papal taxation" and other financial scandals was the belief that "Frenchmen, Italians, and Spaniards ran the Curia, and that the German lands were being milked harder than most to finance the decadent lifestyles of the popes and their minions".¹⁴ Germans also protested the "arbitrary occupation of ecclesiastical offices in Germany by foreigners" appointed by the Pope and the Curia. This too, was caused in part by the Western Schism, which saw a dramatic increase in the number of French clerics in the Curia when it was located in Avignon. After the

¹³ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). 185.

¹⁴ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 87.

turmoil of the Schism and the Avignon papacy, there was a marked decline in German clerical representation in the Curia, and an increase in representation of French and Spanish.¹⁵

Another idea that challenged the political authority of the Pope while encouraging aspiring German nationalists like Luther, was the concept that with the coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor, “God had bestowed the [Roman] empire on the Germans,” giving ammunition to critics calling into question the right of the Pope to rule both temporally and spiritually.¹⁶ This struck a chord with many secular leaders within Germany, as “rulers everywhere resented papal claims to temporal power and Italian meddling in their internal affairs”.¹⁷ It was this feeling that lay behind the “strong secular political support given the forces” of Luther and his reforms.¹⁸

At the same time as the formation of the Gravamina, a greater development was occurring in Germany. Throughout the second half of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, with the aid of the printing press, humanistic scholars were constructing a national self-image of the Germans. The popularity of the updated version of Tacitus’ *Germania*, a Roman historical and ethnographic study of the German lands, in the years leading up to the Reformation reflects a growing interest and discourse in German identity.¹⁹ The publication of *Germania* had a profound impact on German national identity, glorifying the Germanic tribes and their war-like

¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁶ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther and his Road To Reformation, 1483-1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993). 375.

¹⁷ Ozment, *The Age of Reform*, 205.

¹⁸ Ibid. 205.

¹⁹ Gabriele Haug-Moritz. “The Holy Roman Empire, the Schmalkald League, and the Idea of Confessional Nation-Building.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 152, no. 4 (2008): 427-39.

and honorable qualities. After its publication, “the German people (at least the educated among them) began to appreciate that they had a past, that there was a common link joining the multitude of states and principalities, and that these ancestors, so different from the ancient Romans, were like them.”²⁰ This points to a preexisting, that is, pre-Reformation, “idea of the unity of a German nation,” characterized by common customs and a common history.²¹

Even more profound are the parallels drawn between the Germanic tribe’s struggle against the Roman Empire and the German reformers’ struggle against the Roman Papacy. The characterization of the Germanic struggle against the Roman Empire as “the freedom of the Germans... against the rapacious Italians of the south,” was used as an allegory for the reformation against the Roman Church. Protestant writer and leader Ulrich von Hutten published *Arminius* in 1520, which emphasized Arminius the Germanic hero described in Tacitus’ *Germania* as a ‘liberator’ of the Germans, framed against the battle between the Reformation and the Papacy, and can be seen as one of the earliest works of German nationalism.²²

All this evidence points to a clear attempt by Lutheran scholars and writers to create, to quote Benedict Anderson, an ‘imagined community’ of sorts among Germans that was rooted in both German identity and Reformation theology. Part of this ‘imagined community’ was the identification of Protestants “as the true Germans, equal to God’s chosen people, the people of

²⁰ Benario, Herbert W., and Cornelius Tacitus. *Tacitus, Germany = Germania* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1999) 7-8.

²¹ Haug-Moritz, “The Holy Roman Empire, The Schmalkald League, and the Idea of Confessional Nation-Building.”, 430-431.

²² Benario, *Tacitus, Germany = Germania*, 8.

Israel.”²³ The prolific German poet of the Reformation era, Hans Sachs, wrote in his work *Lamentation of the German Land with Loyal Eckhart* “As often happened to the people of Israel, when they were seeing nothing but death before them their enemy was brought down. His arm is still just as long, by which he will redeem His dear people [German protestants],”.²⁴ This illustrates how German protestants believed that “just as divine salvation was manifest in the history of the people of Israel, so too was it now,” believing that God would intervene on their behalf.²⁵

With the Gravamina a much talked about problem among the German estates, Luther had an opportunity to win their support by championing the cause of the Gravamina, and the German estates quickly “found their most effective exponent in Luther”.²⁶ The friction and mistrust between the German estates and the Roman Papacy created by the Gravamina, and both the Church’s and the Emperor’s inability to resolve the problems in it, created “a circumstance which was very much to the benefit of the Reformation” as those who felt abused by the Papacy were more likely to abandon it.²⁷

²³ Haug-Moritz, “The Holy Roman Empire, The Schmalkald League, and the Idea of Confessional Nation-Building.”, 437.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 437.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 437-438.

²⁶ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 87.

²⁷ Brecht, *Martin Luther and his Road to Reformation*, 443.

Martin Luther and the Political Reformation

While no one can speak to Luther's true motivations, it is undeniable that his writings had political messages. Perhaps his most direct political writing, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, published in 1520, focused a large part on secular matters, and presented a "laundry list of social and economic reforms that he thought Germany needed", similar to, and in recognition of the issues of the Gravamina.²⁸ In *To the Christian Nobility*, Luther "dramatically linked the specific problems in which he had become embroiled with the broader political issues embodied in the Gravamina of the German estates... In doing so, he gave the traditional Gravamina a theological foundation they had not previously had".²⁹

What was so controversial about this work was Luther's demand that "Christian authorities [Princes, dukes, etc.] must call to account a clergy and hierarchy that is no longer fulfilling its responsibilities, and must take the reform of the church into their own hands".³⁰ Luther proclaims that the German estates must lead the campaign of reform, since the corrupt Papacy is unable to fulfill its Christian obligations.

This was a dangerous idea for the Church. Investing religious power in the secular rulers would dramatically expand and centralize the powers of the German princes. Arguing that "the ruling princes had a right and a Christian duty to exercise supervisory powers over the church" gave ambitious princes "the opportunity to realize fifteenth-century ambitions to assert secular

²⁸ Michael G Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents*. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2012) 50.

²⁹ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 169.

³⁰ Brecht, *Martin Luther and his Road to Reformation*, 372.

power over ecclesiastical power”.³¹ Using Luther’s ideas as theological justification, Protestant rulers often sequestered Church property and “plundered the wealth of the Church” to pay off their own private debts and strengthen the power of the monarch.³²

Lutherans supported the idea of *summus episcopus*, where ruling princes would act as highest clerical authority within their realm, creating a form of state church, where secular leaders would exercise the powers of an ‘emergency bishop’, as Luther called them, over the church in their territory.³³ With the failure of both the Pope and the Emperor to implement lasting reform, Luther placed this power and responsibility in the hands of the rulers within the Reich, who were for the most part sovereign rulers, like the Elector of Saxony. This dramatically bolstered the legal, religious, and political authority of immediate rulers within the Reich, for “without the twin props of Pope and Emperor, how was the world to be held together in the growing confusion, unless the national monarchs-- representing the order rule of the One within their individual realms-- took over something of the imperial rule in its universal and religious aspects?”.³⁴ While not representing a single nation, the immediate states within the German Reich were for the most part sovereign entities, answering only in religious matters to the Roman Church and paying taxes and homage to the Emperor. Without the Pope in Rome and the authority of the Emperor, these immediate states could realize their sovereignty, centralizing authority, both political and religious, in the hands of the ruling prince, thus creating strong,

³¹ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 262, 268.

³² *Ibid.*, 268.

³³ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁴ Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme of the 16th Century*. (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1975) 28.

independent, and sovereign states within the Reich. Some would grow strong enough to compete on the international stage, including Electoral Saxony, Brandenburg, and the Counts-Palatine of the Rhine, who all converted to Protestantism and with the ensuing freedom from Papal and in many cases Imperial authority, expanded and strengthened their states through confessional nation-building.

What seemed to be one of Luther's main concerns in *To the Christian Nobility* was about "energetically decentralizing the church, combined with strongly reducing Rome's central authority".³⁵ By placing the German church in the caring and Christian hands of the German estates, Luther hoped for an "unburdening of the German church and greater independence for it".³⁶ This again reflects the fledgling German nationalism found in the *Gravamina* that is furthered in Luther's works. Luther saw how "the newly created nationalistic views, matched the demands for clerical reform," and would use a "backdrop of national identity," and "make an explicit appeal to the national powers and to the pride of the Germans," as a means of swaying secular rulers to his cause.³⁷

In his seminal early works, Luther argues from the point of view of not just a Christian, but a *German* Christian, one who could not stand idly by while the forces of Rome pillage his country. In *To the Christian Nobility*, Luther dramatically portrays a Germany that is being ruined by the Roman Church. Describing a morally bankrupt Italy destroyed by the pride of the Church, he writes, "Italy is almost a desert now: the convents are destroyed, the sees consumed,

³⁵ Brecht, *Martin Luther and his Road to Reformation*, 373.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.

³⁷ Haug-Moritz, "The Holy Roman Empire, The Schmalkald League, and the Idea of Confessional Nation-Building.", 432.

the revenues of the prelaties and of all the churches drawn to Rome; towns are decayed, the country and the people ruined, because there is no more any worship of God or preaching; why? Because the cardinals must have all the wealth”.³⁸ Luther foresaw this apocalyptic future for Germany too if they continued to live under the amoral reign of the Popes. He writes, “Now that Italy is sucked dry, they come to Germany and begin very quietly; but if we look on quietly Germany will soon be brought into the same state as Italy”.³⁹ This portrayal of the Pope and his cardinals as the enemies of Germany, purposefully abusing German piety, recasts Luther’s religious reform as well as opposition to the authority of the Pope, as a patriotic duty of all Germans.

Luther also discusses the infamous financial abuses, particularly the high taxes, and in his opinion, disproportionate, paid to the Pope by the German estates. Luther writes, “I think Germany now pays more to the Pope than it formerly paid the emperors; nay, some think more... They think we Germans will always remain such great and inveterate fools that we will go on giving money to satisfy their unspeakable greed”.⁴⁰ Financial abuses were a major cause of dissension with Luther, particularly indulgences, which he saw as the Pope manipulating the good piety of Germans.

One of Luther’s most ardent supporters among the German estates was the Elector of Saxony, Frederick III, who, despite subverting the authority of both the Pope and Emperor to defend Luther after the Edict of Worms, never officially converted to Lutheranism. His choice to

³⁸ Luther, Martin. *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520*. (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company, 1915) 3.

³⁹ Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

support Luther, like that of many other rulers, was one based on politics. In a time when regional powers in Germany were growing in independence and power, two emerging states were vying for power, Electoral Saxony and the Electorate of Brandenburg. So when Albrecht of Brandenburg, the son of the Elector of Brandenburg was appointed Archbishop of Mainz in 1515, the most powerful ecclesiastical state in the Empire, the Brandenburg-Saxony rivalry flared up.⁴¹

In order to finance his election, as well as to pay off the debts he incurred so he could buy a dispensation from the Pope to allow him, aged twenty-four, to become archbishop, which by Canon law requires the appointee to be thirty, Albrecht of Brandenburg began the wholesale of indulgences across Germany.⁴² This act made Albrecht a powerful enemy of Luther, who virulently opposed indulgences, and by the age-old adage of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ made Luther a friend of Albrecht’s political rival, Frederick III of Saxony. By supporting Luther, Frederick III was able to oppose his political rival, the Archbishop of Mainz, whom Luther targeted for particular criticism.

Despite Luther’s growing secular support, particularly from the Elector of Saxony and the Landgrave of Hesse, the Church’s response to the growing crisis was at best lukewarm. While in part due the logistics of the time, the Church’s and the Emperor’s inability to nip Luther’s growing movement in the bud was a result of the political landscape of Germany. With the death of Emperor Maximilian I expected soon, a new election for the position of Holy Roman Emperor would have to take place. The Pope, Leo X, was terrified that Maximilian’s grandson, Charles V

⁴¹ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 148.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 148.

would be elected and create a universal monarchy under his rule, thus challenging the Papal claim to temporal authority. The Pope could not allow this, nor could he allow Luther to continue his heresy. However, his hands were tied. If he brought the hammer down on Luther, Elector Frederick III would inevitably be brought down with him, something he could not allow as he needed Frederick III to vote against Charles V. Leo X even toyed with the idea of Frederick III himself becoming the new Holy Roman Emperor, but the Elector declined.⁴³ So for the sake of political expediency, both Charles V and Pope Leo X hesitated in their action against Luther until the political question of Maximilian's successor was determined, giving Luther time to spread his message and develop a more presentable theology. Furthermore, after the Edict of Worms placed Luther under imperial ban and declared it illegal to harbor or defend him in 1521, Frederick III justified his actions in support of Luther by claiming that since the issues in the *Gravamina* had not been resolved yet, he could not follow the orders of the Emperor.⁴⁴

This brought to light another issue that emerged from the Reformation; the religious and political position of the Emperor. The Reformation, "repeatedly impinged upon the key principle of the implementation and enforcement of decisions take at the level of 'emperor and Reich'".⁴⁵ With the balkanization of the German estates between Protestant and Catholic, pro-Habsburg and anti-Habsburg, the decisions made by the Emperor could no longer be seen as representative of the decisions of the Reich. This again exacerbated relations between the German estates and the Emperor, as the German estates increasingly saw Habsburg wars abroad as counter to the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

interests of Germany, and as wars of Habsburg expansion rather than wars in defense of the Reich.

The Reformation also called into question the legitimacy of “the emperor’s traditional religious function of exercising a secular vicariate over the Church”.⁴⁶ This was challenged by both Luther and fellow reformers as well as by the German estates, who were all disappointed in the Emperor for not taking the responsibility to call a general church council to discuss and implement reforms. Especially after the ascension of Charles V to the Imperial throne, whom many at the time, including Luther, saw as the start of an imperial renewal, many still hoped for a “general reunion of Christendom, a restoration of the *universitas Christiana*, an imperial *pax*”.⁴⁷ With the Edict of Worms in 1521, this aspiration withered, as the image of Charles V in the eyes of the protesting German estates became increasingly one of tyranny and superstition.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁷ Yates, *Astraea*, 25.

The Transformation of Prussia

The political, religious, and social transformation of the *Ordernstaat*, or the State of the Order of Teutonic Order, from an increasingly anachronistic Catholic crusader state into a Lutheran hereditary duchy is emblematic of the political maneuvering behind conversion and the symbiotic relationship between the Reformation and German nationalism.

The Teutonic Order began in Acre in 1191 as the Order of the Hospital of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the German House of Jerusalem, but was reconstituted in 1198 as a military religious order. Under the aegis of Emperor Frederick's Bull of 1226, which authorized the Teutonic Order to build a Christian state in the new lands they would conquer, the Order set out to subjugate the pagan Prussian tribes of the southern Baltic coast.⁴⁸ Establishing a state in 1230, the Teutonic Order became a strong yet regional power, with a growing influence in the Baltic Sea trade and strong connections with the Hanseatic League.

Poland's rise to dominant power in Eastern Europe challenged the Order, and numerous and disastrous wars would permanently weaken their hold on Prussia. The Battle of Grunwald in 1410 would mark the beginning of the end for the Teutonic Order, as their Grand Master, Ulrich von Junginen, lost his life fighting a combined Polish-Lithuanian army.⁴⁹ The Teutonic Knights were never able to recover fully and the Treaty of Thorn in 1466 partitioned the *Ordenstaat* in

⁴⁸ Daniel Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386-1795*, ed. Peter F Sugar and Donald W. Treadgold (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001) 14.

⁴⁹ Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State*, 16.

two, Poland annexing the western portion as Royal Prussia, while the eastern portion remained in the hands of the Order, but under Polish supremacy as Ducal Prussia.⁵⁰

What was unique about the Teutonic Order was their special relationship with the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire. Officially, the knights of the order held the land they ruled as an ecclesiastical fief of the Pope, but they also claimed immediacy within the Empire, making them subject only to the authority of the Emperor. Polish suzerainty over the Order was incompatible with the Order's status as immediate within the Empire, so its members often looked to the Emperor and the Pope to support them in their defense against the Poles.

Time and again, however, the emperor was unable to galvanize any real support for the Order, and in 1515, Emperor Maximilian I signed the Treaty of Vienna, a complex series of dynastic marriages between the Hapsburg and the Jagiellonian family that ruled Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary. By the terms of the treaty, the Emperor was forced to cease support for the Teutonic Order in exchange for the profitable marriages that placed the Hapsburgs on track to succeed to the thrones of Hungary and Bohemia. This was a huge psychological blow to the Order as the Emperor "sacrificed the harassed German colony for the advantage of his house."⁵¹

A central aspect of the Teutonic Knights, which would play a decisive role in their transformation, was their strong sense of German identity. Functioning much like a German colony, the *Ordenstaat* was led by a class of religious knights that came from noble houses in Germany, that ruled over lands inhabited by ethnic Slavs and Balts. The Order served as a German bulwark in the east, and they were proud of the German heritage, much to the

⁵⁰ Heinrich von Treirschke, *Origins of Prussianism (The Teutonic Knights)* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942) 134.

⁵¹ von Treirschke, *Origins of Prussianism*, 140.

consternation of the indigenous Prussians. The Order chose advisors and officials from Germany, “excluding even Prussian-born subjects of German ethnicity,”⁵² Growing friction between the German upper classes and the Prussian nobility would lead to war when a union of Prussian nobles attempted to secede from the Order and join Poland in 1454.⁵³ Eventually, “the desire to escape from Polish subjugation and to assert the Order's immediate status (subject only to the emperor) in the Reich led to the election of two German princes-- Friedrich of Saxony [the first cousin of Frederick III, Elector of Saxony] in 1498 and Albrecht of Brandenburg-Ansbach [the first cousin of the Elector of Brandenburg] in 1511- as Grand Masters,”⁵⁴ By asserting their immediate status within the Reich and creating ties with the powerful families of the German estates, the Teutonic Knights had hoped to reconnect with Germany and gather support for their war against Poland.

The *Ordenstaat's* insistence upon German supremacy led many within the Order to see it facing an existential threat on two fronts. First, while the Order never accepted Poles into their ranks, fears of subversive Polish agents infiltrating the Order and the fear of being “copiously diluted with Poles,” was a major threat to their German identity.⁵⁵ On top of that, the King of Poland often tried to appoint his supporters to the episcopal sees in Prussia, hoping to diminish their ecclesiastical autonomy.⁵⁶ The second existential crisis facing the Orders was its role as a crusading order. With the Christian conversion of the Lithuanians, the last pagans in Europe, in

⁵² Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State*, 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁴ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 258.

⁵⁵ von Treirschke, *Origins of Prussianism*, 138.

⁵⁶ Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State*, 30.

1387, the Order was technically no longer needed. For decades, the Grand Masters of the Order refused to recognize the Lithuanian conversion, and Grand Master Konrad Zollner von Rottenstein rejected the Lithuanian grand duke's invitation to serve as godfather at his baptism.⁵⁷ The Order even sent Jon Wallenrode, the Bishop of Riga, to the Council of Constance in 1414 to argue before both Papal and imperial courts that the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth was not a Christian nation.⁵⁸

This political background happened to coincide perfectly with the rise of the Protestant Reformation, for at the same time that Luther was campaigning against the Pope in Germany, Albert of Brandenburg-Ansbach, the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, was searching for help in his struggle to remain independent, and after being abandoned by both the Pope and Emperor, he was open to new ideas. So when the embittered Grand Master travelled to Wittenberg attempting to solicit aid from the Elector Frederick III of Saxony, he had a fateful meeting with Martin Luther.

Luther's advice to the Grand Master: convert and secularize. After their meeting in 1523, Luther wrote "The Grand Master should set us a good example by establishing a straightforward dominion, on which, without cant or humbug, might be pleasing to God and the world".⁵⁹ Luther later wrote an open letter to Teutonic Knights, exhorting them to abandon the practice of the religious vow of chastity, and instead to marry and start families.⁶⁰

This advice was pleasing to the Grand Master and "the plain truth of such reasoning was

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁹ von Treirschke, *Origins of Prussianism*, 143.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 144.

comfortable to the Grand Master's dynastic claims" and on April 8th, 1525, Grand Master Albert of Brandenburg-Ansbach renounced his religious vows, converted to Lutheranism, and secularized the *Ordensstaat* into the Duchy of Prussia, installing himself as Duke, being the first ruling prince to officially convert to Lutheranism.⁶¹ Also, since he was unable to muster an adequate defense against the Poles, "in order to avoid the Order's physical integration into the Polish kingdom, Albert offered to become an autonomous fief of Sigismund [the Polish King, also Albert's uncle] exclusively. The claim to papal fiefdom, which in 1466 had seemed to guarantee the Prussian knights a semi-autonomous existence, was now dropped".⁶² The duchy Albert of Brandenburg created would become a model Protestant state, and would become a powerful player in European politics when it is integrated with the Brandenburg state, serving as the nucleus of the German Empire in the nineteenth century.

After the secularization of the Teutonic Order, their nationalistic goals could also be achieved. The new duke founded Königsberg University, leading to "a fresh stream of German culture" into the region.⁶³ As the German knights and aristocrats converted to Lutheranism, the Prussian people often avoided it, choosing to remain Catholic or adopt Calvinism instead of what they saw as the distinctly German Lutheranism.⁶⁴ In Prussia, the dual concepts of German identity and Lutheranism were bound together, and Luther was quick to recognize Albert's success, writing, "see the miracle being worked; with all sails set, the Word of God is speeding

⁶¹ Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, 260.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 259.

⁶³ von Treirschke, *Origins of Prussianism*, 144.

⁶⁴ Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State*, 42.

into Prussia".⁶⁵

Conclusion

Prussia's example establishes a precedent of German identity and Lutheranism intertwined, which Luther determined to be the best course of action for the inaction of meaningful reform in Germany, emphasizing the role of political rulers in serving as a catalyst for reform. In Prussia's case, fear of a loss of the Teutonic Order's German identity was used to motivate religious reform to a political end, while Luther used fiery nationalistic and political rhetoric to appeal to the German estates and persuade them of the need for Church reform. Luther's redefinition of the powers of the prince in both secular and religious affairs would plant the seed for the concepts of absolute rule and monarchical sovereignty in the seventeenth century. Using national identity as a vehicle for religious reform would become commonplace throughout the successive reformations and stimulate the creation of distinctly 'national' Lutheran churches across Europe.

⁶⁵ von Treirschke, *Origins of Prussianism*, 144.

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