THE FIRST REICH

By WILHELM WEIS

Most people who spoke of pre-Pétain France as the "Third Republic" knew that the First Republic had been established in 1792 and the Second Republic in 1848. But among the newspaper readers who almost daily find the term "The Third Reich" used to indicate National-Socialist Germany, only few are aware of the fact that "Reich" is the German word for Empire, that the First Reich was the German-European Empire of the Middle Ages and the Second that of Bismarck from 1871 to 1918. And yet, just as the Third Republic professed the ideas of the First Republic by its very name, the Third Reich in many ways considers itself the continuation of the First.

For that reason we have asked a specialist in the field of medieval European history to contribute an article on the First Reich. Hitherto, historians have dealt with the First Reich primarily as a German empire. Today, however, under the impression of Europe's growing union under the leadership of the Third Reich, we are more interested in the First Reich as a European phenomenon.

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It was March 23, in the year 973. The German Emperor Otto I was holding court, and envoys from all parts of Europe had appeared, envoys from the Danes, the Bohemians, Poles, Russians, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Greeks, and Romans. The Duke of Bohemia, Boleslav II, had come himself, and the King of Poland had sent his son. Europe was enjoying imperial peace. And when several days later a Saracen delegation arrived from Sicily and guaranteed peace on behalf of the conquerors of Sicily—

The Imperial Sword, dating from the middle of the eleventh century. The golden scabbard is decorated with the portraits of fourteen rulers (from Charlemagne to Conrad II) and colored enamel plates from the times of Emperor Henry VI, a product of Sicilian culture. The silver guard carries the inscription: Christus vincit, Christus rei[g]nit, Christus imperat. On the pommel can be seen the Imperial eagle and the coat of arms of Emperor Otto IV (thirteenth century)
who had constantly been threatening continental Italy—the German Emperor could indeed present himself as *imperator pacificus*, as the protector of peace.

It is amazing in how short a time this scion of the ducal house of Saxony achieved European recognition and introduced a policy decisive for the whole Occident. His father, after having been elected King of Germany, had still to buy recognition by making concessions to other tribal dukes. But Otto I stands at the beginning of a period in Europe’s history which is considered one of the most brilliant and in which for three centuries the leadership of the Occident was impressively held by the German emperors.

**EUROPE AND THE OCCIDENT**

When we regard the history of those three centuries, from the middle of the tenth to the middle of the thirteenth century, in which the European sphere was under the leadership of the German emperors, we must free ourselves entirely of the conception of Europe’s borders as they are today. These borders are not of very long standing. There was a time when “Europe” came to an end just beyond Vienna, that is to say, when the Balkans were still under Turkish rule. In dealing with the Middle Ages, moreover, it is wiser to use the term “Occident.” The territories east of the Vistula and the Orthodox Slavic peoples of the Balkans were barely above the horizon of medieval mankind.

**THE DOCTRINE OF THE FOUR WORLD EMPIRES**

There is another fact which we must realize if we want to understand medieval history: the tremendous power of tradition and the judging of all happenings from the point of view of men whose lives were determined by the Bible and its interpretation by the fathers of the church.

According to an interpretation by Hieronymus of a passage in the Book of Daniel, medieval Man saw the history of mankind as taking place in four great world-wide monarchies. The last of these was the *Imperium Romanum*. The Christian of the Middle Ages was utterly convinced that this empire would continue to the end of time. Although he experienced the decline of the empire in the storms of the great migration, its resurrection in the empire of Charlemagne proved to him the correctness of Hieronymus’ interpretation. And when this latter empire collapsed in the ninth century, he was immediately inclined to regard the empire of Otto and his successors once more as the continuation of the Roman Empire. The German emperors, too, considered themselves the direct perpetuators of the Roman emperors. To give an instance, Philip of Swabia called himself Philip II when he became German Emperor. There had never been a Philip among his German predecessors. However, a
glance at the history of the Roman Empire will show that at one time (244–249 A.D.) there was a Philippus Arabs on the throne of the Caesars. The very word Kaiser (German for emperor) was simply the German pronunciation of "Caesar."

COASTAL AND CONTINENTAL EMPIRE

Yet, was Charlemagne’s “Carolingian” Empire (from Carolus, Latin for Charles) really a continuation of that of the Caesars? The Roman Empire was, as Map I shows, a Mediterranean empire. North Africa and the Near East belonged to its dominion, as well as Spain. Africa was Rome’s granary, without which it could not feed its masses. As one historian put it, the Mediterranean was the highway and the coasts of the Italian peninsula were the sidewalks of political traffic.

Charlemagne’s empire was quite different. The center of gravity had been completely shifted from the Mediterranean to the regions beyond the Alps and the Carpathians. The eastern part of the former Imperium Romanum had seceded and formed the Eastern Roman Empire under Constantinople, claiming for a long time to be the heirs of Rome. The place of Rome, Byzantium and Alexandria in ancient times was now taken by Paris, Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen), and Frankfurt. The sea coasts had been pushed far away to the periphery, and little attention was paid to them; the empire had become continental. Thus the empire of the Franks had never possessed a fleet, and it was possible after Charlemagne’s death for the Vikings to sail unhindered up the Seine and the Rhine, and for the Saracens to plunder Italy and to occupy Sicily.

The Roman Imperium meant an organization of the Mediterranean area, the Carolingian Empire the first organization of the European continent. The Occident of the Middle Ages was a region for which the sea formed the border, not a connecting link. Countries like Italy and Spain belonged only partially to this Occident, namely with those parts that faced toward Central Europe.

CHURCH AND EMPIRE

It was a vast undertaking to organize a continental empire of that kind. That which ensured the stability of the Carolingian Empire for almost a hundred years was the union with another power which had also inherited much from Roman antiquity: the Roman Church. In the beginning, this union meant a reciprocal give and take, and only later did it lead to serious conflicts. It needed the power of the emperor to knit the Church together; on the other hand, the Church first placed its entire organization at the disposal of the empire. The king of the Franks became the protector of the Church, especially since his possessions more or less coincided with the extent of the Church. And when the Roman Empire was renewed in 800 through Charlemagne’s being crowned emperor by
The Imperial Pfalz (Castle) at Goslar. The medieval emperors had no capital, but built their castles in various parts of the empire where they held temporary court on their travels through the country. So the capital was wherever the emperor happened to be. The Pfalz at Goslar is one of the oldest preserved secular buildings in Germany. It was restored toward the end of the nineteenth century.
the Pope, the title "Imperator Romanus" returned, but its content had been changed completely. The emperor had become a Christian emperor, burdened with the responsibility for papacy and Church, and his office was now of a religious nature.

Hence the Carolingian Empire, with all its emphasis on being the continuation of the Imperium Romanum, was in reality something quite different. Although it was still a universal empire, it was already limited to half of the former Roman Empire, namely, that part subjected to the Pope in Rome. But above all it had experienced a decisive shift towards the north into the Teutonic regions of the Continent.

The empire of Charlemagne did not outlast the death of its founder for long. The incapability of his successors, the rapid degeneration of the ruling house, and, above all, tremendous foreign dangers quickly led to its collapse. After having been split up in 843 into the Eastern, Western, and Central Empires, which in future times were to become Germany, France, and Italy, it was threatened from the south by the Saracens, from the north by the Vikings, while in the east there arose the danger of the Hungarians. At the beginning of the tenth century the Occident seemed to be sinking into chaos. The papal authority had fallen from its height and had ceased to be a dominating spiritual power. The remnants of the Carolingian Empire were crumbling away more and more at its frontiers, the central portion disintegrating completely and the eastern one dissolving into Germanic tribal territories (Saxony, Franconia, Swabia, Bavaria) under their own dukes, each of whom hoped singly to master the external dangers.

**The Holy Roman Empire**

Two generations later the situation had completely changed. The dukes of the Saxon tribe, elected German kings, united the eastern portion of the ex-Carolingian Empire and gained for themselves the claim to European leadership by repulsing a danger to all of Europe, namely, the Hungarians, whom Otto the Great defeated once and for all in 955 on the Lechfeld near Augsburg. Ever since, that is, for almost a thousand years, the Hungarians have been valuable members of the European family of nations.

Otto's authority rapidly extended its influence toward the east and west, and above all the south. He created order out of the chaos of northern Italy and restored papacy to power. And when, in 926, Otto I received the Imperial Crown in Rome from the hands of the Pope, the observer of that time had no doubt that the Roman Empire had arisen again, under the leadership of the Saxons, and sanctified by its connection with the Church. Yet, although people called it Das Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation (The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation), it was not the Roman Empire that was renewed by the German kings of Saxon race and that experienced its climax and tragic decline under the Hohenstaufens—it was the empire of Charlemagne. The personality of Charlemagne stood as a dominating and binding example before all German emperors of the Middle Ages, and beyond him Roman antiquity appeared vague and far off.

Like the empire of Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Empire of Otto the Great and his successors was a continental empire, encompassing continental Europe and not the maritime Europe of ancient times. But it was no longer a universal empire like that of Charlemagne. It no longer contained all of Christianity, since the West had separated. Although the idea of universalism continued to live on, aided by the universal Church, it had already come into conflict with the awakening ideas of nationalism. The empire was finally to founder on the insolubility of this problem.

**National and Universal**

Although the First Reich of the Germans was essentially a national state, it had, through its connection with Rome and by undertaking the protection of the Church, assumed the responsibility for the whole of Christianity. The German emperors of the Middle Ages considered it their twofold task to guarantee the Christian order within the European world.
and to carry the Cross to the east. These tasks led them again and again beyond the region of the German tribes, into northern Italy and into western and eastern Europe.

The special task of the German emperors, to be national and universal at the same time, gives the German history of the Middle Ages its extremely complex character, unlike that of other national histories, and makes it so very difficult for non-Germans to understand this period of European history. By feeling responsible for the Occident and not only for their own national territory, and by acting accordingly, the Germans had

more than once in history to suffer the reproach that they wanted to rule Europe.

...EVEN IN LANGUAGE

The juxtaposition of universal and national thinking is shown most clearly in the sphere of language, where Latin held a dominating position beside the various national languages. Just as in modern history English has been the universal language between the nations, so was Latin during the Middle Ages. The Roman legionaries and merchants had carried Latin as far as the Rhine and the Danube. The Bible was translated into Latin. Latin became the language of the Church, and with the Christianization of the Occident it entered upon its triumphal march.

With this language the Occident possessed a bond that went beyond all national division and that held the leading classes together. A young cleric, for example, whether he was German, French, English, or Slavic, could without difficulty follow his studies at any of the great schools of the Occident, whether in Paris, Bologna, or one of the German cathedral schools. Everywhere the same language was spoken among scholars, and everywhere the spiritual substance was the same. Beside being the language of theology and philosophy, Latin became also the language of law. The laws of the empire, deeds of gift, grants of privilege to secular and ecclesiastic leaders were all made out in Latin.

Side by side with it, there developed national languages, just as in the political sphere national states gradually gained independence. At first these national languages appeared in poetry; then they began to penetrate legislation. In the intercourse between the various states Latin retained its leading position as long as the idea of universalism remained alive. We have the same process in the political sphere, but with the difference that the imperial hegemony came to an end much sooner than the importance of Latin in science and international relations.

GERMANIC FEELING OF UNITY

We have seen that the empire of Charlemagne with its Christian-universal nature served as a model for all the emperors of the Middle Ages. But there was not only the ecclesiastical tradition in that empire; there was also, and to a very strong degree, a Germanic feeling of unity, since Charlemagne's empire in-
cluded almost all the Germanic tribes with the exception of the Anglo-Saxons in England, the Scandinavians, and the Germanic remainders in Spain. (The word "Germanic" is wider than "German" and includes the Germans, Scandinavians, Anglo-Saxons, Dutch, and others.)

In the same way, the empire of the medieval emperors was at first above all a leader and protector of all Germanic states. Even before he was crowned Emperor, Otto I entertained relations with England and France. Personal kinship—his first wife was the granddaughter of Alfred the Great and the sister of the King of England—linked him with England. We know of a number of embassies that passed between the Saxon and the Anglo-Saxon courts. To this day there is a magnificently illuminated gospel in the British Museum that was given to the King of England by Otto.

Relations with France were even closer. Here the memory among the Germanic tribes of their union in Charlemagne's empire never disappeared entirely. Moreover, the northern part of France still had an entirely Germanic character. The three greatest lords of northern France at the time of Otto I—the Carolingian King, Hugh the Great, and the Duke of Normandy—were all of Germanic blood. Two sisters of the German Emperor, one married to the king and the other to Hugh, temporarily took over the regency for their sons who were still underage, and the ancestor of the French royal house, Hugh Capet, acquired the French throne with German help (987). It is true that a French king once proceeded to Aix-la-Chapelle (978) and turned the eagle on the palace from west to east as a sign that this coronation city belonged to France; and, in return, Otto II once rode to Paris to have a Te Deum sung over that city from Mont Martre in an impressive demonstration. But otherwise we hear little about warlike conflicts. Germans and Frenchmen were quite peaceable neighbors in the early Middle Ages.

In Bohemia, which had never been entirely abandoned by its Germanic inhabitants, the Germans gradually won back so much ground that a hundred years later Bohemia was made a regular member of the empire, and its duke became a great German lord and the Imperial cupbearer. Otto I was even interested in the distant Visigoths, who were living in Spain under the banner of the Prophet. Only with the Scandinavian tribes was it more difficult to enter upon relations as these tribes were still heathen.

With the distinct shaping of national states during the following period and with the fusion of the formerly Germanic ruling houses with native families, the pan-Germanic interest and influence gradually disappeared.

THE REICH AND ITS NEIGHBORS TO THE SOUTH

Those who consider the medieval imperial policy with reference to the present new order in Europe will be less interested in domestic German affairs than in the manner in which the dominating position of the First Reich was of influence on the other European countries.

The most striking phenomenon in this respect is the reaching out toward the south. The modern observer, who has grown up in a period of national states, will find it difficult to understand this policy which determined Europe for three centuries. But to those who look at things through the eyes of medieval mankind it will not appear so fantastic and they will recognize that there were a number of reasons for it.

There was the power of the Roman-Carolingian tradition and the common Christian aim. There was the Germanic tribe of the Lombards which inhabited parts of Italy. And finally there was the fact that Otto, to counterbalance the particularist desires of the tribal dukes, had to place bishops in administrative positions in order that they should support his imperial policy. He had, therefore, to prevent the Popes from carrying out an anti-imperial policy and playing off the bishops against the emperor. And in order to gain influence with the Pope, he had to pass through Upper Italy.
In Lower Italy the German kings were only interested in so far as the small Lombard duchies south of the papal territory recognized the feudal supremacy of the empire. They were important as a frontier belt against the south. Not until much later did the marriage of Constance, the last heiress of the Norman Empire of Sicily and Lower Italy, to the Hohenstaufen Emperor Henry, link this country to the fate of the First Reich.

THE WEST

When we consider the relations of the empire with the West, we must bear in mind that the sphere of power of the French kings at that time was comparatively small. The entire territory east of the Rhone and Saône, called Burgundy, was independent and did not obey the French kings. Burgundy was ruled by an independent king, who was, however, left very little freedom of action by the high aristocracy of the country. In the end he saw himself forced to seek the protection of someone more powerful, that of the German Emperor. After the death of her last king, Burgundy became part of the Holy Roman Empire in 1033. From then on the four rivers Schelde, Meuse, Saône, and Rhone formed the border of the empire in the west. The borders between France and Germany have rarely been so stable as at the time when the First Reich was at its height.

THE EAST

Things were quite different in the east. Looking at a population map of Europe, one sees German settlements in large numbers all over Eastern Europe from Riga down to the Black Sea. An Englishman who was shown a map in which the German settlements appeared in red, remarked that it looked as if the German people had splashed its blood here.

The territory between the Elbe and the Vistula had once been Germanic soil. Even after the great westward migration of the Germanic tribes, it had not been abandoned entirely. Then the Slavs poured in. The Middle Ages saw the beginning of the reconquest of these regions. Yet, with all the clashes that may have taken place, it was above all exchange and assimilation that determined the mutual relations of Germans and Slavs. The first Slavic states were organized by Teutons. The first Polish state was founded by Dago, a Norman, who, as the first Duke of Poland, was called Misiko I (962-992). He became a Christian and recognized the emperor's supremacy over part of his territory. Poland was first known as the "Land of Misiko," and not until the eleventh century did the name "Poland" (Land of the Plain) appear. The first Russian empire was founded by the Norman Rurik around the year 860, and his successors, the Rurik dynasty, sat on the Russian throne until 1598.

MISSION WORK AND GERMAN INFLUENCE

The reaching out of the empire toward the east cannot be understood without considering the religious impulse of mission activities. As we have said before, the Christian emperors considered one of their main tasks to be the spreading of the
A CASTLE OF THE
HOHENSTAUFEN
EMPERORS

Trifels Castle in the Palatinate, the leading imperial castle in the days of the Hohenstaufens. A sacred room on the upper floor of the tower housed the Imperial Insignia. Below can be seen the ruins of the castle as it appears today. The photograph to the right shows the bay of the sacred chapel formerly containing the Imperial Insignia.
The Imperial Orb. As early as in Roman times the golden apple was a symbol of the globe and thus of the world-wide power of the emperor. In the Middle Ages it was surmounted by the Cross to indicate the responsibility of the emperors for the Christian world. The orb shown here probably dates from the time of Emperor Henry III (1039-1056).

The Imperial Crown, for centuries the most exalted and venerated insignia of Europe, originated in Burgundy during the tenth century and was probably taken over by Emperor Conrad II when he inherited Burgundy, as indicated by the inscription on the hoop (not shown in the photograph): Chalonensis De Gentia Romanorum Imperator Augustus. Before that time, each ruler had his own crown which disappeared with him.

Today the Imperial Insignia are kept in Nuremberg, where they were brought from Vienna after the Anschluss of 1938.
teaching of the Church. But in every mission activity something of the missionary's national character is passed on to the new converts, and this was even more so in former times. Mission work means at the same time drawing the people onto a new cultural level. Thus the great mission centers in the east became centers of the spread of German culture: Magdeburg for the northern Slavic territories and Salzburg for the southeast.

The eastern colonization up to 1200 was directed mainly at the regions between the Elbe and the Oder and at the territory later known as Austria. Beyond this border strip, which was finally completely Germanized and included in the empire, there were two states which were at times of considerable size and which had close relations with the First Reich.

**EASTERN EMPIRES**

One of these was Poland, which around the year 1000 included all the territory between the Oder and Russia and from the Carpathians to the Baltic. The other was Hungary, whose people at that time turned into an agrarian population and accepted Christianity in its Roman form.

The Poles and Hungarians always recognized the high cultural level of the Reich. With the promise of certain privileges, German settlers were brought in great numbers to the newly founded cities of Poland, such as Posen and Crakow, where they formed the citizen class that was to experience its heyday toward the end of the Middle Ages; and settlers from the Rhine and the Moselle were invited to Hungary. Whenever the rulers of these countries saw themselves threatened domestically by heathen reaction, they always found support with the German emperor. And although they sometimes may have thought that they could do without German sovereignty, in times of domestic disturbance they were always glad to return to the fold of German feudal supremacy.

It is the incontestable merit of the medieval emperors to have won both the western Slavic and the northern world over to Occidental civilization. To accomplish this, they often neglected their own German tasks, subordinating them to their wider Occidental ones, with the result that, when the idea of universalism lost its political effect with the decline of the Hohenstaufens in the middle of the thirteenth century, the German kings were faced by Germany torn asunder and ruled by petty princelings, while England and France, in their concentration upon themselves, were meanwhile growing into flourishing national states. It appears as if, in the beginning, they could only grow in the shade of the imperial tree, which, once they had grown to full strength, they no longer needed.

In the Middle Ages the First Reich made sacrifices for the sake of Europe at a time when the Reich's own inner construction had not yet been completed, and for that reason it had to pay for this first period of European supremacy with inner cleavage and, later on, disintegration.

Today a fully united Third Reich has again undertaken a predominantly European task. Although this task is in many ways the same as that which had to be carried out by the emperors of the First Reich, the basic conditions are different. While at that time a new civilization was being fused out of Germanic, Christian, and classical components, it is today a matter of upholding an already existing, centuries-old European civilization, a civilization in which all countries share that have fought and bled for Europe. The threat of Bolshevism has created a common feeling which can probably be compared only to the feeling of medieval mankind when it saw Christian civilization threatened from outside. Europe has awakened to a consciousness of her unity rarely paralleled in the course of her long history.