‘ONCE WE WERE TROJANS!’
CONTEMPORARY REACTIONS TO THE DISSOLUTION OF THE
HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE OF THE GERMAN NATION

Wolfgang Burgdorf*

List, how with dreaded mystery
Was signed to my prophetic soul,
Of kindred blood the dire decree:—
Hither with noiseless, giant stride
I saw the hideous fiend of terror glide!
’Tis past! I strive not to control
My shuddering awe—so swift of ill
The Fates the warning sign fulfil.
Lo! to my sense dismayed,
Sudden the deed of death has shown
Whate’er my boding fears portrayed.
The visioned thought was pain;
The present horror curdles every vein.

Friedrich von Schiller, *The Bride of Messina. A Tragedy*

The dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation on
1 August 1806, with the exact dating of the individual events, has been
described in detail elsewhere.1 This essay will therefore prescind from a
presentation of the historical events and concentrate on the contempo-
rary perception of the dissolution of the Empire and the subsequent hys-
teresis, or disproportionately muted echo, of this event.

* Translated by Brian McNeil.
1 Wolfgang Burgdorf, *Ein Weltbild verliert seine Welt. Der Untergang des Alten Reiches
und die Generation 1806* (Munich, 2006); id., ‘Wendepunkt deutscher Geschichte. Das
Reichsende 1806 und seine Wahrnehmung durch Zeitgenossen’, in Heinz Schilling et al.
(ed.), *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation 962 bis 1806. Altes Reich und neue Staaten
Nach der Abdankung von Kaiser Franz II: Die Erschütterung wurde von der preußisch
getönten Geschichtsschreibung verdrängt’, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 29 July 2006,
Letzten Generation von Richtern des Reichskammergerichts mit der Auflösung des Heiligen
Das Ende des Alten Reiches 1806 in der Wahrnehmung der süddeutschen Reichsfürsten*
(Berlin, 2006).
The history of the Old Empire was definitively ended in the first week of August 1806. After Napoleon had declared that the constitution of the Empire must be regarded as abrogated, the princes of the Rhine Confederation seceded from the Empire on 1 August. The emperor reacted to this action and to a French ultimatum by abdicating the imperial crown on 6 August 1806. This event shook the whole of Germany. The reactions can be summed up in the terms grief, shame, and rage. Even the emissaries to the imperial diet in Regensburg who had signed the declaration of secession in the name of the princes of the Rhine Confederation were outraged. The Bavarian emissary Rechberg declared on the evening of 1 August that he was ‘furious that he had to come here in order to put his signature to the destruction of the German name’.

Not a few contemporaries declared that what had happened was so unfathomable that it was not immediately possible to comment upon it.

Everywhere in the domains of the former Empire, the news of its end was met with incredulity. As late as mid-October, farmers in Thuringia refused categorically to accept the end of the Empire, which had always existed, and the abdication of the emperor. They believed that this was a plot on the part of the local authorities, before whom they were now defenceless. This was doubtless an extreme form of reaction, but many other examples show that contemporaries found it extremely difficult to grasp that the Empire had in fact been dissolved. The words of Goethe’s mother on 19 August have often been quoted:

And I feel as if an old friend were very ill. The doctors have given up hope of his recovery, and we are assured that he is going to die—and yet despite all this certainty, one is utterly shaken when the post arrives with the news of his death. This is how I and indeed the whole city feel. Yesterday, the emperor and the Empire were omitted from prayers in church for the first time. There were illuminations, fireworks, and so on, but no sign of joy. It is as if we had one funeral after another—that is how our joys now look.

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2 Report by Haas, director of the chancellery, from Regensburg: Rel. 171, 2 Aug. 1806: Vienna, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv [HHStA], Reichskanzlei, Akten der Prinzipalkommission, fasc. 182d.

3 Heinrich Leo, Aus meiner Jugendzeit (Gotha, 1880), 22: ‘Auch ließen sich unsere Bauern nicht ausreden, dass es noch immer einen deutschen Kaiser gäbe.’

4 On the orders of Marshal Augereau, Napoleon’s birthday was celebrated with pomp on 15 August, but the people took part with a demonstrative apathy.