

THE POLITICS OF SENTIMENTALITY AND THE GERMAN *FÜRSTENBUND*, 1779–1785*

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the history of the German Fürstenbund prior to the Prussian take-over of the scheme in 1785. In charting the union's initial conception as a small-state alliance designed to resist both Prussian and Austrian expansionism, the article reveals the cultural dimension of imperial diplomacy. Exclusive concentration on the straightforward diplomatic sources produced by Prussian-style bureaucracies has led historians to underrate the contribution of smaller German principalities, which typically employed more indirect, metaphorical means of political communication. A prominent example of such 'cultural politics' is the process by which Prince Franz of Anhalt-Dessau drew on English precedents in shaping the Fürstenbund. Its participants were to be united not just by formal agreements, but by a shared spirit. Under the leadership of a 'Patriot king', they were to act as champions of ancient regional liberties, thus resembling the English aristocrats of the anti-Walpole opposition whom Franz admired. At the same time, an English-inspired rhetoric of sentimentalism was employed to suggest that this political union would function in analogy with sentimental friendships, creating a firmer bond whilst preserving that small-state 'individualism' which was the source of so many reform initiatives in the late eighteenth-century German Empire.*

I

The *Fürstenbund* has gone down in history as a Prussian-led alliance of German princes founded in 1785 to oppose Austrian influence in the Holy Roman Empire. This view was initiated by the famous Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke, and has dominated German historiography since. To Ranke, the *Fürstenbund* was an example of *ancien régime* style diplomacy, a conventional alliance between Prussia and the small German principalities including English Hanover to preserve peace and the status quo. The need for this 'defensive' alliance arose as a result of Joseph II's policy of ruthless expansion,¹ and his paralysing the *Fürstenrat* in the Reichstag.² The novelty of the *Fürstenbund* to

* I would like to thank Tim Blanning and Joachim Whaley for many valuable criticisms and suggestions.

¹ Leopold von Ranke, *Die deutschen Mächte und der Fürstenbund. Deutsche Geschichte von 1780 bis 1790* (2 vols., Leipzig, 1871–2), I, p. 19.

² During the 1760s and 70s, an old disagreement between the Catholic and the Protestant members of the *Fürstenrat* had reached new heights, centring on the question of which side could claim the votes of the count of Westphalia and Franken. In February 1780, this disagreement led to the suspension of all further meetings. As every decision of the Reichstag required the sanctioning of all three bodies, the entire Reichstag could no longer properly function as a result.

Ranke consisted not in its motivation, nor in its execution. It was, rather, he believed, the first attempt by Prussia to fulfil, albeit reluctantly, its historical mission to unite Germany under its auspices. The *Fürstenbund* thus appeared as a precursor of the Prussian-led ‘small-German’ (*kleindeutsch*) unification of Germany, which Ranke had just witnessed as he was writing his history.

This interpretation of the *Fürstenbund* as conventional yet ‘accidentally’ prophetic can also be traced in the works of historians such as Treitschke and Schmidt, the latter writing in order to place the national aspirations of 1848 in a legitimizing historical context.³ Even in the past decades, however, most scholars have uncritically accepted this convention. Most recently, Dieter Stievermann has reiterated the traditional interpretation of the *Fürstenbund* as an example of conventional imperial diplomacy.⁴ A number of histories of the *Fürstenbund* from the viewpoint of one specific court also more or less follow Ranke’s underlying contentions.⁵ The same line is to be encountered in more general surveys of the period. The first relevant volume in the *Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte* discusses the *Fürstenbund* as a symptom of the ‘decline’ of absolutism in the eighteenth century, an insufficient substitute for proper Prussian allies: a product of the disorientation of the smaller princes who fearfully clung to the status quo.⁶ The subsequent *Oldenbourg* volume on the early nineteenth century, too, treats the *Fürstenbund* as a classical example of the struggle for mastery between the Habsburgs and the Hohenzollern, a weak predecessor of later moves towards unification.⁷

Some scholars, however, have proposed alternative perspectives.⁸ Kurt von

As Erdmannsdörffer argued, an important counterweight to the emperor’s using *Reichskammergerichts-* and *Reichshofratsprocese* to dominate the smaller principalities had thus disappeared. Bernhard Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz Karl Friedrichs von Baden, 1783–1806*, 1: 1783–1792 (Heidelberg, 1888), p. 7.

³ W. Adolf Schmidt, *Geschichte der preußisch-deutschen Unionsbestrebungen seit der Zeit Friedrichs des Großen, nach authentischen Quellen im diplomatischen Zusammenhange dargestellt* (Berlin, 1851).

⁴ Dieter Stievermann, ‘Der Fürstenbund von 1785 und das Reich’, in Volker Press, ed., *Alternativen zur Reichsverfassung in der frühen Neuzeit?* (Munich, 1995), pp. 209–26.

⁵ Walter Schleicher, ‘Fürst Leopold Friedrich Franz von Anhalt Dessau und der Fürstenbund’ (dissertation, Jena, 1924); Ulrich Crämer, *Carl August von Weimar und der deutsche Fürstenbund 1783–1790* (Wiesbaden, 1961); Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Korrespondenz*, 1; Willy Andreas and Hans Tümmeler, eds., *Politischer Briefwechsel des Herzogs und Großherzogs Carl August von Weimar*, 1: *Von den Anfängen der Regierung bis zum Ende des Fürstenbundes 1778–1790* (Stuttgart, 1954).

⁶ Heinz Duchhardt, *Das Zeitalter des Absolutismus* (Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte, 11, ed. Jochen Bleicken, Lothar Gall, and Hermann Jakobs) (Munich, 1992), p. 153. Given Duchhardt’s defence of the Empire against a teleological use of ‘Staatsidee’ (ibid., p. 178), his negative, almost caricatured, portrayal of the *Fürstenbund* is all the more astonishing. Ibid., p. 147.

⁷ Elisabeth Fehrenbach, *Vom Ancien Régime zum Wiener Kongreß* (Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte, 12, ed. J. Bleicken, L. Gall, H. Jakobs) (Munich, 1993), p. 41, and, on the *Fürstenbund* as a move toward unification, p. 126.

⁸ Von Aretin’s interpretation of the last phase of the Empire pays special tribute to the role of the smaller states. Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin, *Heiliges Römisches Reich 1776–1806. Reichsverfassung und Staatssouveränität* (Wiesbaden, 1967). Tim Blanning linked this point to the conception of the *Fürstenbund*: ‘There was a more or less continuous development ... after the spring of 1783, when two quite separate plans emerged. The first was produced by a number of lesser

Raumer linked the critique of nationalist mythology to a reappraisal of the importance of corporatism.⁹ Even for political thinkers such as Montesquieu and Rousseau, Raumer argued, corporate liberty played a much more important role than individual liberty. In the history of the German Empire, in his view, such ‘corporate’ liberties were defended by the *Stände* (estates) against the absolutist state which was by no means all-pervasive. Indeed, if the rulers of the many small and minute principalities of Germany are viewed as *Stände*, as has been suggested by Tim Blanning,¹⁰ then the project of a small princes’ union appears as an expression of this European trend of reasserting corporate liberties against absolutism. In this way Aretin and Raumer prepared the ground for a re-evaluation of the *Fürstenbund*. Neither historian, however, developed the implications of their revised criteria. Despite occasional references to the Enlightenment in their work, the corporate liberties of the *Stände* are treated as essentially pre-modern forces bound to be swept away by modern centralism.¹¹ This article will argue the case for a fundamental reassessment of the *Fürstenbund*. By utilizing some historical techniques not usually employed in diplomatic history, the underlying motivations of the *Fürstenbund* and the cultural values and *topoi* employed in its construction will be deciphered as typical products of the late Enlightenment.

II

The origins of the *Fürstenbund* have usually been ascribed to the court of Baden or, more specifically, to a letter by Karl Friedrich’s minister Edelsheim to Duke Carl August, dating from 24 October 1782.¹² Edelsheim’s proposal contained a distinctly non-absolutist view of political bodies. He argued that

every German heart and every free princely spirit must be offended to see slavery threatening to take over the fatherland, and to feel that there is no longer any tie amongst the limbs of the body, which, if they were united, would share one sentiment, and attempt good and evil for the cause of freedom.¹³

German princes, who intended that the League should form a “third force” between Austria and Prussia and should concentrate on the reform of imperial institutions.’ T. C. W. Blanning, “‘That horrid electorate’ or “Ma patrie germanique”? George III, Hanover and the Fürstenbund of 1785’, *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), p. 315.

⁹ Kurt von Raumer, ‘Absoluter Staat, korporative Libertät, persönliche Freiheit’, in Hanns Hubert Hofmann, ed., *Die Entstehung des modernen souveränen Staates* (Neue Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek, 17, 1967), pp. 173–99 (first in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 183 (1957), pp. 55–95).

¹⁰ Blanning emphasized that the ‘German nobility was a service nobility’. Therefore, ‘the German equivalent of a French or English peer was a territorial prince, whose estates were a state and whose public authority could be abused but not discarded’. T. C. W. Blanning, *Reform and revolution in Mainz, 1743–1803* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 14.

¹¹ Raumer, ‘Absoluter Staat’, pp. 196–7.

¹² This traditional view was most recently repeated in Friedrich Sengle, *Das Genie und sein Fürst* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1993), p. 65.

¹³ Hausarchiv Weimar A xix, fo. 32. All German and French quotations have been translated into English by the author.

Edelsheim's subsequent *Unionsentwurf* of 1783 operated with similarly organic metaphors for unifying Germany's princes in a federal structure.¹⁴ It suggested the formation of several sub-*Bünde* which together would form the *Fürstenbund*. Characteristically, Edelsheim proposed a separate union of the *Kurfürsten*, who would therefore be unable to use their greater political weight to interfere as 'unequal' members in the union of the small princes.¹⁵ This represented a fundamentally new perception of the way in which such structures functioned, a view which reflected, consciously or otherwise, the new organic paradigm of the late Enlightenment.

Christian Wilhelm Dohm referred to this cultural dimension, albeit in a critical manner, when he labelled the *Fürstenbund* in its pre-Prussian phase an 'idealistischer Entwurf'.¹⁶ Writing for Frederick II of Prussia, Dohm tried to ridicule the introduction of cultural formulae into traditional diplomacy. He sensed that Edelsheim's writings had moved away from the rationalist Wolffian conception of the state, and reflected instead the influence of those *Sturm und Drang* paradigms which to Frederick II were the epitome of German culture's barbaric condition. Leading thinkers of the *Sturm und Drang* movement such as Herder pictured the state not as an abstract machine, but a living body. Every 'limb', though it moved independently, was part of that body, and therefore expressed the character of the entire nation. There is little evidence to suggest that Edelsheim himself can be credited with translating Herder into applied politics. The bulk of his writings concerned strategic rather than intellectual problems. His inspiration, as he himself admitted, came not directly from Herder, but via the cultural politics of Prince Leopold III Friedrich Franz of Anhalt-Dessau, prototype of an Anglophile enlightened reformer, and a close friend of Carl August of Saxe-Weimar. According to Edelsheim, Prince Franz was the true founder of the *Fürstenbund*:

In our times, the *Kurfürsten* have ceased to be Germany's supports. Who, then, will walk down the new path and invite everyone to the meal? It is the prince of Dessau who does this ... He, who is perpetually oppressed by his neighbours [the Prussians], will think to himself: what remains to be done? One of us has to expose himself.¹⁷

The fact that Franz never articulated his view of political bodies in a philosophical tract makes the analysis of his influence more difficult, but is in itself characteristic for this new style of politics. Frederick II theorized about his philosophy of the state, and his administrative machinery produced that kind of systematic documentation which allows the historian easily to monitor its implementation. Franz's conception and its peculiar cultural motivation, by contrast, remained implied and metaphorical. They can, however, be

¹⁴ Edelsheim, in W. Adolf Schmidt, *Geschichte der preußisch-deutschen Unionsbestrebungen*, p. 18. (All published archival material will hereafter be cited from the relevant publication.)

¹⁵ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶ This phrase was used by Christian Wilhelm Dohm, Prussian ambassador in Cologne, in a letter of 27 July 1785, to describe the earlier conception of the *Fürstenbund* as developed by Carl August and Franz. In Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, I, p. 158. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

reconstructed by a careful analysis of the political rhetoric associated with the history of the *Fürstenbund* before 1785.

If one accepts Aretin, Crämer, and Schmidt's definition of the key ideas of the *Fürstenbund* scheme in the Edelsheim text, then these ideas can be traced back to the year 1779.¹⁸ From the perspective of small German states, 1779 represented the climax of a long-standing political threat: the aggressive foreign policy of both great powers in Germany, Habsburg and Hohenzollern, which was beginning to undermine the authority of the imperial constitution. For Franz of Anhalt-Dessau, anti-Prussian sentiment clearly dominated: 'You can believe that I have always been more afraid of Frederick II than of the Emperor. Frederick ... was more stubborn than Napoleon, bitter and unfair in word and deed against anybody he disliked.'¹⁹ In 1779, the war of the Bavarian succession led to ruthless Prussian recruiting outside the borders of her own territory. Small states such as Anhalt-Dessau and Saxe-Weimar were faced with the alternative of providing soldiers for the Prussian army 'voluntarily' or allowing Prussian press gangs in. In order to maintain a neutral status, it would have been logical to allow Austrian recruitment as well, an even less attractive prospect. The response from Weimar is well documented. On 9 February 1779 this crisis was discussed in the secret council in Weimar, of which Goethe was a member.²⁰ Carl August's initial reaction was to try to refuse the Prussian request and to seek protection against possible Prussian military intervention at the imperial diet (Reichstag). The secret counsellors considered this policy too openly anti-Prussian, and suggested an alternative which contains the central *Fürstenbund* ideas:

The best and safest solution at the time of this present war appears to be, through a union with some neutral courts, both Catholic and Protestant, to work towards a *Parti mitoyen* which would set itself as a goal to deflect the adversities and oppressions of the warring factions by a common strategy.²¹

Unfortunately it is not recorded which member suggested this solution. At about the same time, Goethe produced a report with almost exactly the same content – according to Hans Tümmeler a retrospective summary of the meeting.²² Additional confusion arises from the date. If Goethe's summary is correctly dated 9 February, this would imply that he first developed the key *Fürstenbund* ideas before they were discussed in the meeting. It seems unlikely,

¹⁸ Aretin's argument about the *Fürstenbund* as a relatively pragmatic and conservative scheme was helped by the fact that he turned Edelsheim, an unidealistic diplomat, into its inventor. This allowed him to dissociate the scheme from earlier, ideologically more ambitious plans, which Aretin dismissed as somewhat obscure and 'ghostly'. Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin, *Vom deutschen Reich zum Deutschen Bund* (Göttingen, 1980), p. 22.

¹⁹ F. Reil, *Leopold Friedrich Franz, Herzog und Fürst von Anhalt-Dessau, ältestregierender Fürst von Anhalt, nach seinem Wirken und Wesen* (Dessau, 1845; repr. Wörlitz, 1995), p. 6.

²⁰ 'Protokoll einer Sitzung des Weimarschen Geheimen Consiliums vom 9. Februar 1779', printed in Willy Flach, ed., *Goethes Amtliche Schriften. Veröffentlichung des Staatsarchivs Weimar*, 1: *Goethes Tätigkeit im Geheimen Consilium*, part 1: *Die Schriften der Jahre 1776–1786* (Weimar, 1950), pp. 46–52.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²² 'Goethes politisches Gutachten aus dem Jahre 1779', in Hans Tümmeler, *Goethe in Staat und Politik. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Cologne and Graz, 1964), pp. 57–76, especially p. 68.

however, that he should have anticipated almost all the arguments mentioned in the real debate.²³ But Goethe certainly took up the idea:

We are sure that at every court [meaning Hanover, Mainz, Gotha, and the other Saxon courts] the same attitude prevails, and it is therefore all the more regrettable that we have not hitherto agreed upon a unified strategy. Recent occurrences [referring to Prussian recruitment] have inspired an even stronger desire in Your Excellency for closer ties with the other princes and to devise another plan for initiating such an urgently required union... with other states adversely affected by the same oppression in order effectively to resist such insults in the future... One might have hoped for happier circumstances to have awakened the princes of the Empire from their lethargy.²⁴

Carl August agreed and contacted the reigning houses of Saxony, Kur-Braunschweig (i.e. Hanover) and Kur-Mainz to discuss the idea. But the conception of the *Fürstenbund* was by no means an obvious idea, as Friedrich Sengle suggested.²⁵ Rather, the plan met with astonishment and opposition in most places. Both Gotha and Hanover considered the proposal from Weimar entirely inappropriate.²⁶ The *Fürstenbund* scheme, we have to conclude, appeared attractive and practicable only in a particular ideological context, which Dohm and Lenthe did not share with Carl August and Franz of Anhalt-Dessau. The cultural setting in which the *Fürstenbund* was conceived in Weimar and Anhalt-Dessau thus merits further investigation.

III

The 1779 Weimar council meeting produced the first clear documentary evidence of a *Fürstenbund* plan. This would lead one to believe that it was above all the context of Weimar neo-classicism which gave rise to a new vision of imperial politics. Yet the reality was more complicated. Weimar politics and culture had, it is true, a shared point of reference. Carl August's writings on the *Fürstenbund* were suffused with a patriotism which derived its inspiration from classical models. The following extract, written as a retrospective summary, makes the duke's affinities to the political language of neo-classicism most explicit. It deserves to be cited in some detail:

[these events] have raised the hope in me that *ancient German sentiment and beliefs* may yet again be awakened amongst us... I hope especially that a close tie of *friendship* amongst the German princes might unite within the imperial system our disjoined intentions, interests and forces... The idea of a union appears to be particularly suitable for this purpose... and could serve as a firm and stable basis, fitting for the *character of our nation* and an *appropriate* monument thereof... All these schemes, however, only aim at one single goal, namely to achieve for the whole [of Germany] what every prince ought to pursue in his own territory, that is, an *appropriate and wise order of things*, without which

²³ Tümmeler refrains from a definite proposition who of the counsellors made the decisive proposal. Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, p. 72 n. 19. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.

²⁵ Sengle, *Das Genie*, p. 64.

²⁶ A particularly sharp reply was formulated by the Hanoverian counsellor von Lenthe, in Tümmeler, 'Goethes politisches Gutachten', p. 75.

no state can exist and no prince can claim the honour of his century ... One flatters oneself with the possibility of awakening the *national spirit* in our fatherland ... and one hopes that the German Union will finally crown itself with this laurel wreath, as a corps for the preservation of *German liberties, customs, and laws*.²⁷

In a postscript Carl August also referred to the objections raised by the Dresden court:

In spite of this I consider it necessary and proper that ... well-meaning [the German term is *gutdenkend*], judicious, and patriotic princes, who care about the general good, have united to further and support these causes. It is necessary that the effects of these be clearly visible, so that they may encourage the many disintegrated, weak parts of the Empire ... It is my wish to prevent the collapse of a building of which the foundation stone has only just been laid, and which should be the honourable expression of our way of thinking, and of our century.²⁸

It is worth highlighting some of the text's key concepts. The first is the frequent reference to patriotism, and the definition of certain virtues as specifically German – Carl August even speaks of awakening national sentiment. Such phrases must, of course, be understood in the specific context of eighteenth-century patriotism, that is, against the backgrounds of texts such as Goethe's *Von deutscher Baukunst* of 1771, Herder's *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur* of 1767/8, or Klopstock's *Hermanns Schlacht* of 1769. Their common denominator was a cosmopolitan patriotism, which associated certain virtues with German identity, not vice versa. German was not automatically good, but 'good' should become characteristically German. Despite Germanic overtones, these virtues were still closely linked to the moral universalism of antiquity, or, more specifically, the attempt to synthesize Greek and Roman models. One of Carl August's leitmotifs is friendship, used to define the envisaged relationship between the princes. This notion of friendship had been considered especially by Cicero as a necessary component of a well-functioning *res publica*, in that it offered a pragmatic model for political communication.²⁹ The other idea derived from the Roman constitution was an emphasis on the legal order, corresponding to Carl August's insistence on the reform of imperial law. Alongside such Roman pragmatism, two other key terms in Carl August's text correspond more to 'Greek' categories. The first is the frequently recurring notion of 'appropriateness', which is dissociated from any specific purpose. Appropriateness is used as a virtue in its own right along the lines of Greek

²⁷ Carl August to Otto Ferdinand Freiherr von Loeben, 30 Mar. 1788, in Andreas and Tümmler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, pp. 465–6, my emphasis (complete text, pp. 465–71). To achieve maximum conceptual precision, Carl August first wrote the letter in French and had it translated into German by Knebel, for whom he also summarized what was most important to him in the text in a separate German *Punctuation* (*ibid.*, pp. 463–4) – key terms are thus of a particular relevance.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 469–70.

²⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Laelius de amicitia / Laelius, on friendship*, ed. J. G. F. Powell (Warminster, 1990), originally dates from 44 bc. Shortly after Caesar's death, it was written with the purpose of forging new bonds amongst the divided Roman aristocracy. Compare Karl Meister, 'Die Freundschaft bei den Griechen und Römern', in H. Oppermann, ed., *Römische Wertbegriffe* (Darmstadt, 1974), pp. 323–9.

prepon: it denoted a balanced state of mind, not just a useful strategy, and was therefore a moral category.³⁰ Carl August's use of 'good' or 'well-meaning' also corresponded to a Greek notion, *agathon* (good), originally designating 'what is worthy of honour or admiration'.³¹ As in the Greek concept, goodness for Carl August was associated both with worthy intentions and with the practical wisdom (insight, judiciousness) required for their realization: a well-meaning, judicious, and patriotic prince therefore deserves 'the honour of his century'. In Greek, *agathon* in a man denotes not just private morality, but also his useful contribution to society. *Agathon* could be invoked to motivate political action: virtue had to be applied to improve society. His reference to Greek values did therefore not distract Carl August from more practical 'Roman' orientation towards legal reform. There was no teleological Grecophile *Sonderweg* at work here.³²

Carl August was familiar with the classics chiefly through their appropriation by the authors of Weimar neo-classicism, above all in the writings of his friend Goethe. It would appear therefore that there was a smooth transition between literary culture and political practice at Weimar. This would support Georg Schmidt's argument that Goethe's involvement in Weimar politics can be seen as an implicit affirmation of the way in which imperial Germany operated.³³ Goethe's neo-classicism, it is true, was never un-political per se – on the contrary, some decades later Goethe even expressed a preference for Roman over Greek models, because they were more practical and politically oriented.³⁴

Yet political involvement could take many different forms. While Schmidt's refutation of the tame *Biedermeier* image of Goethe is entirely convincing in the sphere of domestic affairs, Goethe's view of imperial politics poses greater problems. Goethe himself dismissed the Empire's legal functions when discussing the imperial court at Wetzlar in his *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.³⁵ The

³⁰ Wieland found the German constitution 'appropriate' in the same sense: 'What was then the German imperial constitution was, irrespective of its shortcomings and weaknesses, appropriate to the nation's character and the development of its culture.' C. M. Wieland, *Betrachtung über die gegenwärtige Lage des Vaterlandes*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. J. G. Gruber (38 vols., Leipzig, 1818–23), xxxi, p. 237.

³¹ The term was familiar to the eighteenth-century reader above all through C. M. Wieland, *Geschichte des Agathon*, ed. Klaus Manger (Frankfurt a.M., 1986), first published in three different versions in 1766–7, 1773, and 1794.

³² The most hysterical exponent of this position is E. M. Butler, *The tyranny of Greece over Germany* (London, 1935), who holds Winckelmann's position responsible for the success of National Socialism in the 1930s.

³³ Georg Schmidt, 'Goethe: politisches Denken und regional orientierte Praxis im Alten Reich', *Goethe Jahrbuch*, 112 (1995), pp. 197–212. By focusing on Goethe's practical involvement in politics, Schmidt portrayed Goethe's view of the Empire in a more positive light than the poet's surviving written comments on the subject themselves would suggest.

³⁴ His friend Boisserée noted in 1815 about a conversation with Goethe: 'G. expressed a preference for classical Rome. [He said] he had probably had an earlier life at the time of Hadrian. Everything Roman automatically attracted him, the [Roman's] great sense and order in all public affairs appealed to him, more than the nature of the Greeks. The appreciation of the latter, by contrast, was only acquired.' Sulpiz Boisserée, *Tagebücher*, 1: 1808–1823, ed. Hans-J. Weitz (Darmstadt, 1978), p. 244.

³⁵ Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 12. Buch, WA, 1. Abt., xxviii, p. 133.

extent to which Goethe falsified the statistics of unsolved cases to prove the court's inefficiency is astonishing.³⁶ His wildly distorted figures were happily taken up by nationalist historiography, and still loom in many recent histories of the period as factual information.

These passages, it is true, date from 1812–13. No comparably drastic statements are preserved predating Napoleon's dissolution of the Empire. Yet while Goethe's writings from the early neo-classical period were not outspokenly anti-imperial, his stance was not easily compatible with Carl August's imperial policies even at this early stage. Only four days after the 1779 council meeting in Weimar, Goethe began to dictate the first version of his prototypical 'Greek' play *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, the so-called prose version. The text deals with the conflict between power politics (embodied by the king Thoas) and the individual rights of those who are unable to defend them by force (Iphigenie and her compatriots) – a highly topical subject. There were obvious parallels with Frederick II's power politics and Carl August's reference to a legal framework to defend his rights by the use of arguments rather than arms.³⁷

At the same time, however, there were also marked discrepancies between the play and Carl August's political practice. Iphigenie, rather than adopting a subversive course of defence, reveals the intended conspiracy against Thoas, trusting that he will concede her rights voluntarily.³⁸ Whilst Goethe and Carl August shared the same aversion to power politics, the poet in his play advocated a rather different solution. While the prince joined his fellow ruler Franz of Anhalt-Dessau in embarking on secret anti-Prussian negotiations, Goethe in his *Iphigenie* rejected precisely that kind of traditional secret diplomacy.

Goethe also repeatedly refused to accompany Carl August on diplomatic missions pursuing imperial reforms through the *Fürstenbund*, and during the critical phase in 1786, he escaped practically overnight to Italy. Goethe was not only averse to taking political risks. There was also a more fundamental cultural difference at work here. The Zweibrücken incident was symptomatic. In June 1784, the Prussian Crown Prince Frederick William asked Carl August to travel to Zweibrücken to mobilize Duke Karl's support for the *Fürstenbund*. Goethe refused to accompany Carl August. Duke Karl, a crucial imperial

³⁶ Goethe argued that the supreme imperial court lacked the necessary staff, so that numerous cases were simply not dealt with. The seventeen assessors could not even cope with incoming material, let alone the cases still waiting to be tried, of which there were, Goethe claimed, 20,000. While sixty new cases were tackled every year, twice as many new ones came in. The situation regarding appeals was even worse – Goethe claims that 50,000 were waiting to be tackled (*ibid.*, p. 134). All these data, however, are incorrect. According to a source which Goethe himself borrowed from the library, of 227 new cases in 1771, only 70 to 80 remained unsolved (and some of these because the claimants decided to drop the case or were satisfied with a legal expertise without a subsequent court decision). The latter numbers have been verified by modern research. But also other less precise sources which were available to Goethe, altogether fifteen tracts on the subject, did not exaggerate the numbers as much as Goethe did. (Compare Karl Demeter, 'Das Reichskammergericht in Wetzlar zu Goethes Zeit', *Goethe-Kalender*, 33 (1940), p. 45.)

³⁷ J. W. Goethe, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, V. Akt, 3. Auftritt, WA, 1. Abt., xxxix, especially pp. 390–1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

figure as the prospective heir of Palatinate-Bavaria, proved reluctant and unapproachable. By the time Frederick William had been persuaded effectively to buy the duke's support, Karl had already accepted a large French loan instead.³⁹ Carl August was explicit about his disappointment and frustration about the failure of his mission.⁴⁰ Goethe, however, used the opportunity openly to criticize the project and suggest that Carl August either withdraw altogether from the schemes instigated by Prince Franz, or at least act on his own (rather than Franz's) convictions.⁴¹

Goethe not only disapproved of the methods employed in the attempted bribery. He was also unenthusiastic about the ends envisaged by Franz and Carl August. To Goethe, there was little point in reviving the Empire. Despite being trained as a lawyer and being sent by his family to the Wetzlar court, Goethe developed no interest whatsoever in imperial law. On the contrary, his early play *Götz von Berlichingen* of 1773 already ridiculed imperial law, and glorified instead the seemingly more natural and manly rule of club law. In this *Sturm und Drang* attitude, Goethe was of course inspired by Möser's *Patriotische Phantasien*, which contained an essay explicitly praising primitive club law as more desirable than the anonymity and rationalism of the imperial institutions which were Carl August's chief point of reference.⁴²

Weimar neo-classicism, whilst in principle politically oriented, can thus not be regarded as a sufficient cultural motive for the imperial politics pursued through the *Fürstenbund*. It is therefore necessary to return to the inventor of the scheme, Franz of Anhalt-Dessau, in the search for a more favourable cultural context.

IV

As an imperial prince, Franz played a minor role in the hierarchy of the Empire, but he was also one of the most active proponents of the envisaged federation: 'I should hope never to give reasons to suspect that my convictions or possible deeds might in any way be superficial or lacking in enthusiasm; but one must never forget that I, a poor individual, can only have a quarter of a vote in the Reichstag.'⁴³ In Franz's ideal *Fürstenbund*, traditional status

³⁹ Edelsheim reporting to Carl August, 14 Oct. 1784, in Andreas and Tümmler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, I, p. 104. ⁴⁰ Carl August to his wife Louise, 28 Oct. 1784, in *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴¹ Goethe to Carl August, 28 Oct. 1784, in Hans Wahl, ed., *Briefwechsel des Herzogs-Großherzogs Carl August mit Goethe*, I (Berlin, 1915), pp. 43–4.

⁴² Justus Möser, 'Der hohe Stil der Kunst unter den Deutschen', in W. Kohlschmidt et al., eds., *Sämtliche Werke*, IV: *Patriotische Phantasien I* (Oldenburg, 1949; originally 1770), pp. 263–8. When Möser referred to the German Empire, he meant not all-German institutions and laws, but the complete local autonomy which he believed to have existed in the medieval Empire, as well as the freedom which this near-anarchic structure allegedly granted to everyone to pursue their own quarrels privately without recourse to written law. Compare Jan Schröder, 'Justus Möser', in Michael Stolleis, ed., *Staatsdenker in der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 1995), pp. 296–309.

⁴³ Franz to Carl August, Wörlitz, 13 Feb. 1785, Thür. Staatsarchiv Weimar, D 1654, fo. 46. Ranke rather patronisingly commented on the fate of the small-state union after 1785: 'We can imagine how happy the minor princes must have been that their schemes, even their small achievements, finally gained a certain historical relevance ... Even the most powerless of all [Franz of Dessau] had a share in the great ideas of the century and old German national sentiment.' Ranke, *Die deutschen Mächte*, p. 154.

differences would cease to matter. No individual polity was to be subjected to an overall hierarchy, and contributions to imperial politics would be judged on the basis of their inherent merit alone. On this basis, the prince of a small state like Anhalt-Dessau could assume the function of a great political innovator.

Franz's letters about the *Fürstenbund*, however, were less explicit and conceptual than Carl August's. Franz's cultural leitmotifs were embedded in his language, and can only be reconstructed through an analysis of the stylistic and metaphorical devices employed in his political correspondence. Attention first turns to the category of secrecy, which was one of the main stumbling blocks in the political communication between Carl August and Goethe.

Franz was extremely cautious when writing about the *Fürstenbund*. He continually worried about his letters being intercepted and reported to Frederick II. As a result, substantive discussions were more often than not reserved for personal meetings. For example, when Franz met the Prussian Crown Prince Frederick William to win his support for the scheme, he wrote to Carl August: 'I am counting the moments until the time when I will be able to inform my dear and precious friend about all that has happened at Dessau and Wörlitz. Come soon!'⁴⁴ Franz would insist on such meetings even when Carl August had questioned whether they were necessary: 'I can assure you without the slightest doubt that your visiting me is a matter of urgency... everything I shall have to say requires deliberation and contemplation, as it will only concern things which might happen.'⁴⁵

Such 'deliberation' and 'contemplation' was almost *by definition* a personal affair: traditional diplomatic correspondence in which underlying ideological, let alone personal, issues were not discussed was no adequate substitute. More important than the fear of spies, this was the reason why Franz should always insist on personal discussions: 'What I have to say concerns ideas which, if they are not considered, answered and contemplated *together*, would be fruitless.'⁴⁶

Franz might, it is true, have emulated the example of the epistolary novel, which pioneered a new language for expressing general, personal and sentimental concerns. Yet Franz remained conscious at all times of his aristocratic identity. He sought to reform his role, not to abolish it by adopting a 'bourgeois' style of public debate. To avoid traditional absolutist status rituals like listing titles and using what from Franz's point of view would have been excessively formalized language, secrecy could be used as a more subtle indicator of social status.

This function of secrecy is clearly evident when Franz wrote to Karl Friedrich of Baden:

Again and again I have postponed to thank you for my reception in Karlsruhe, so that I could also write about *our special cause* [the *Fürstenbund*]; it took some time, but now I have returned from a meeting with *our special friend* [Prince Frederick William] who ... is favourably inclined toward the cause. I was chosen to communicate with the *Duke of*

⁴⁴ Franz to Carl August, Sanssouci, 5 Nov. 1786, Hausarchiv Weimar, Abt. A XIX, No. 155, fo. 43.

⁴⁵ Franz to Carl August, Dessau, 18 Dec. 1783, Thür. Staatsarchiv, Weimar, D 1653, fo. 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Br. [= Braunschweig] on this matter; Hofenfels, who spent several days here, will have much to say, which is why it might be useful if you or Edelsheim would soon come to the Karlsberg.⁴⁷

If the letter had fallen into the hands of a Prussian spy, he would quickly have recognized that ‘our special cause’ was a synonym for the *Fürstenbund*, and who was meant by ‘our special friend’ and the ‘Duke of Br.’. This kind of code, however, helped lend an air of importance to the letters beyond their thematic restrictions. This was also reflected in the constantly shifting name codes. In the above letter, people of high status – the prince of Prussia – deserved the ‘privilege’ of a complete code. The second category comprised princes of lesser importance, whose names were merely abbreviated; the third category included subordinate ministers such as Hofenfels and Edelsheim, whose identity was not considered worthy of ‘protection’.

Other evidence also points to the non-pragmatic reasons for Franz’s secrecy. He continued his secretive style until the official involvement of Frederick II in 1785 although it had long become obvious that the Prussian king knew what was going on. On 16 April 1784, Edelsheim wrote a memorandum for Weimar and Dessau, reporting Hofenfels’s assertion that the French court was fully aware of ‘the entire plan of the patriotic estates’ and disapproved of Karl Friedrich’s involvement in the scheme.⁴⁸ If Hofenfels was right, both Frederick II and Joseph II would have been informed. In Strasburg, Schlosser had negotiated with the *Prätor* Conrad Alexandre Gérard, who was not merely a friend of the French foreign minister, but also of Marie Antoinette and therefore close to Vienna. In spite of all this, Franz persisted in his secretive style even when reporting the most basic information regarding the *Fürstenbund* which was, according to all available information, already known in Berlin and Vienna. For Franz, secrecy was a style the function of which transcended such pragmatic reasons.

This phenomenon has an analogy in the social history of the Enlightenment, namely the constitutive role of secret societies, especially the Freemasons, in formulating and practising enlightened creeds. This role has tended to be marginalized by Habermas’s definition of the ‘public sphere’ as the major characteristic of the ‘bourgeois’ Enlightenment.⁴⁹ Masonic lodges and related associations have consequently been criticized as a major impediment in the development of an open democratic discourse in Germany.⁵⁰ The use of secrets

⁴⁷ Franz to Karl Friedrich, Dessau, 11 Dec. 1783, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, 1, pp. 44–5, my emphasis.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–6, quotation from p. 64.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, 1989; first published in German in 1962).

⁵⁰ For example by Michael W. Fischer, *Die Aufklärung und ihr Gegenteil. Die Rolle der Geheimbünde in Wissenschaft und Politik* (Berlin, 1982), and on a more conceptual level, Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and crisis: enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society* (Oxford, 1988; first published in German in Freiburg and Munich, 1976). A more moderate critique of secrecy as one aspect of freemasonry is Rudolf Vierhaus, ‘Aufklärung und Freimaurerei in Deutschland’, in R. von Thadden, G. von Pistohlkors, and H. Weiss, eds., *Das Vergangene und die Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1973), pp. 23–41.

and metaphors in politics is only just beginning to be reconsidered as scholars increasingly criticize Habermas for having overlooked the positive functions of symbolic or non-verbal gestures as means of communication between the absolutist state and the public.⁵¹

Some of Franz's contemporaries had similar problems with appreciating the constructive use of secrecy as a cultural style. Many writers were incensed by the quasi-religious secrecy of Freemasonry, and conspiracies were detected everywhere. Just as in the case of Franz's *Fürstenbund* letters, tactical considerations appear insufficient explanations for Masons voluntarily provoking these suspicions through their excessive secrecy.

In both cases, secrecy became a method for communicating a political vision which viewed individual experience as a model for political improvement. As Nisbet pointed out, the Masonic *arcantum* was closely related to the symbolic importance of friendship in the Lodges.⁵² For Franz, too, the secrecy surrounding the *Fürstenbund* activities was inextricably linked to his attempt to form 'friendships' with the other princes involved. Such friendships were not founded on ideological pledges. Rather, they themselves were metaphors for a reforming impetus which could not be adequately expressed in theoretical concepts. Franz's cult of secrecy can thus be defined in the same way in which Nisbet summarized Lessing's Masonic dialogues: '[They] are characterized by the constant awareness of the deficiencies of [conceptual] speech to express not only the experience of friendship, but human ideals in general.'⁵³

V

The political relationships of the *Fürstenbund* were conceived as analogous to the personal relationships between the princes, especially between Franz and Carl August. Thereby, the recurring rhetoric of 'friendship' – seemingly purely personal – assumed a political relevance. But Franz added a specifically modern sentimental dimension to the 'Roman' category discussed above. His letters which primarily concern the *Fürstenbund* are suffused with phrases such as these: 'My dearest [friend], you know, even without me telling you, how much I love to see you, always and as much as you wish';⁵⁴ 'Love me, as I love you, I cannot repeat this frequently enough';⁵⁵ 'My desire to see you again is

⁵¹ The most authoritative example of the above critique of Habermas was advanced by Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit: politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1994), especially pp. 11–33. Gestrich pointed to the importance of international politics and legal discourses in provoking the formation of a responsive 'public' well before the advent of the economic upheavals which Habermas saw as the primary cause for the public sphere's formation. Compare also the editor's introduction in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the public sphere* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1992), pp. 1–48.

⁵² H. B. Nisbet, 'Zur Funktion des Geheimnisses in Lessings *Ernst und Falk*', in Peter Freimark, Franklin Kopitzsch, and Helga Slessarev, eds., *Lessing und die Toleranz: Beiträge der vierten internationalen Konferenz der Lessing Society in Hamburg vom 27. bis 29. Juni 1985* (Munich, 1986), pp. 291–309, especially pp. 301–3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁵⁴ Franz to Carl August, 25 Dec. 1783, Thür. Staatsarchiv, Weimar, D 1653, fo. 15.

⁵⁵ Franz to Carl August, Dessau, 15 June 1784, Thür. Staatsarchiv, Weimar, D 1653, fo. 65.

overwhelming, because it is one of my greatest pleasures to live with you, and I have so many things to ask and report which would hardly fit on a piece of paper'.⁵⁶

After Carl August's negotiations in Zweibrücken had miscarried, Franz tried to appease his friend by emphasizing his sentimental empathy, and envisaged a solution on an equally emotional level. Friendship ties, he argued, would be restored, though the actual problem which led to the tensions is not even referred to.⁵⁷ The rhetoric is reminiscent of the sentimental literature of the period, and its visual application in Franz's chief artistic achievement: the English-style sentimental landscape garden at Wörlitz.⁵⁸ The gardens of Wörlitz provided Franz's preferred setting for secret *Fürstenbund* meetings, and were intended to inspire in the participants those sentiments of friendship which formed the core of Franz's political vision.

Such cultural references only functioned, however, in communication with like-minded princes such as Carl August and, less frequently, Karl Friedrich of Baden. Other prospective *Fürstenbund* members, such as the princes of Palatinate-Zweibrücken and Gotha did not share in this discourse. Franz proved unable to adapt to different political wave-lengths, and criticized for example Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand of Braunschweig, in sentimental terms, for 'cold' behaviour.⁵⁹

Changes of attitude thus appear as changes of mood, which remain inexplicable. Franz appears to have been extraordinarily insensitive to linguistic codes significantly different from his own sentimental rhetoric. Carl August had reacted similarly to the failure of the Zweibrücken mission. Consequently, it is not surprising that both completely misjudged the intentions and sincerity of the Prussian crown prince, whom they regarded as a like-minded ally, but who in fact acted out of a completely different spirit even before his accession. It was a typical error of judgement when Franz assured Carl August that Frederick William heartily disapproved of orthodox religion as well as all sects and secret orders, especially the conservative Rosicrucians whom enlightened princes regarded as hostile to reform.⁶⁰ At this stage, the crown prince was already a long-standing member of the Rosicrucian order, and after his accession it became clear that he was also committed to revealed religion.

⁵⁶ Franz to Carl August, Dessau, 22 Dec. 1784, Thür. Staatsarchiv, Weimar, D 1653, fo. 153.

⁵⁷ Franz to Carl August, Wörlitz, 29 Oct. / 1 Nov. 1784, printed in Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, p. 110. The purpose of the Zweibrücken mission is discussed below.

⁵⁸ Maiken Umbach, 'Franz of Anhalt-Dessau and England: the Wörlitz landscape and anti-Prussian politics in the late Enlightenment' (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge, 1996), deals extensively with the sentimental imagery of Franz's Wörlitz residence.

⁵⁹ Franz to Karl Friedrich, Dessau, 23 Nov. 1782, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, 1, p. 35, my emphasis.

⁶⁰ Franz, 12 Nov. 1785, at Wörlitz, printed in Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, pp. 190–1.

VI

Central to the rhetoric of friendship was the use of the term ‘good’. Franz turned it into a synonym for the *Fürstenbund*, which he referred to as the ‘good cause’. Franz reported, for example, that the Prussian crown prince supported ‘the good cause’.⁶¹ He used the same terminology when he feared that his royal patron was beginning to lose interest in the *Fürstenbund* scheme after 1785, reminding him that his and the English monarch’s support was required if ‘the good cause should ever grow to maturity’.⁶² Those who enthusiastically participated in the good cause were consequently referred to not just as friends, but also as members of a kind of inner circle: ‘the good’. These included the margrave of Baden, who shared many of Franz’s ambitions:

Dearest, much loved margrave! It is not flattery, but the expression of my heartfelt thoughts, and utterly true, when I tell you that it would be my most exquisite pleasure if I was to enjoy more frequently the personal experience of your friendship... We must hope... that the good [princes] among us should gather together much more frequently.⁶³

In his reply, Karl Friedrich took up Franz’s proposal in terms which echoed his terminology: ‘How shall we proceed to fulfil your intention that the good among us should gather more often, either in person, or at least entirely openly and uninhibited in writing?’⁶⁴

The terminology of goodness in political discourse, too, had classical models.⁶⁵ Yet Franz used the classical terminology of goodness in an explicitly modern, sentimental style. In his letters, it usually appears in conjunction with ‘much-loved’, ‘faithfully-loved’, ‘heart’, ‘joy’, ‘pleasure of friendship’, etc. Goodness is perceived through emotions; political virtue can only be communicated through the lens of personal sentiment. This was not so much philosophical or moral idealism applied to politics, but rather a belief that improvement depended upon a way of thinking and feeling that expressed itself in and must equally be applied to the aesthetic, cultural, economic, and foreign political field.

VII

The term ‘patriotism’ was used by all those involved in the planning of the *Fürstenbund* except for Franz. This does not mean, however, that it was not important to him. The less conceptual character of Franz’s letters meant that patriotism, too, was ‘dissolved’ into sentimental rhetoric. There are numerous

⁶¹ Franz to Karl Friedrich, Dessau, 11 Dec. 1783, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, I, pp. 44–5.

⁶² Franz to Friedrich Wilhelm, 19 Feb. 1786, Thür. Staatsarchiv Weimar, D 1656, fos. 24–5.

⁶³ Franz to Karl Friedrich, undated, after his visit in Karlsruhe which ended on 19 July 1782, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, I, p. 34.

⁶⁴ Karl Friedrich to Franz, his personal rough copy, undated [14 Oct. 1782], in *ibid.*

⁶⁵ The term *vir bonus* is a central category in Cicero’s *Laelius*, used to describe the virtues recommended to leading aristocrats. Compare Heinrich Roloff, ‘Miores bei Cicero’, in Oppermann, ed., *Römische Wertbegriffe*, pp. 274–322.

indications that Franz considered himself a patriot, including the iconography of his *Gothic House* at Wörlitz, which celebrated the traditions of German knighthood.⁶⁶ Franz's political associates, too, referred to him as a patriotic prince, for example when Hertzberg argued that Carl August's patriotism proved that he was a worthy friend of Franz: 'I have been especially delighted to find in him [Carl August] a true German prince and Patriot, and therefore a worthy friend of Your Excellency.'⁶⁷ Even in the eighteenth century, however, patriotism could denote very different political strands, some of which were more central than others to the first conception of the *Fürstenbund*.

When Edelsheim reported to Franz and Carl August about the current state of the *Fürstenbund* negotiations, he was primarily concerned with diplomatic considerations of how other princes and prince-bishops might be won over to support a prospective union. Edelsheim was not disturbed by the fact that the ecclesiastical princes followed purely strategic calculations when he wrote that 'there is an evident trend in the German Empire towards a union. The ecclesiastical princes are driven to join in part by self-interest, and in part by the secret papal emissaries.'⁶⁸ In this context, patriotism merely indicated the degree of involvement in the *Fürstenbund*. Patriotism to Edelsheim meant a difference in quantity rather than quality.⁶⁹

In a similar way, Edelsheim used the constitutional question as a purely formal indicator of support for the union. 'The Kurfürst von Mainz', he wrote, 'is entirely resolved to preserve the imperial constitution by means of the union.'⁷⁰ On some occasions, Edelsheim even used patriotism to play down the importance of an agreement. For example, in a report on negotiations in Zweibrücken, he considered the more ideological term 'patriotic confederacy' (*Bündnis*) safer than the more formal terms 'union' and 'alliance':

Danger is imminent. The cure lies in a general agreement among the imperial estates, which must above all prove itself in negotiations in the imperial diet (*Reichstag*). It is here that the imperial estates must vote patriotically, firmly and united. To achieve this goal, we must create unity – the term union was considered too provocative. If this patriotic confederacy is not to die in its infancy... it has to rely on constitutional principles beyond debate, and the tract itself must not raise the suspicion of being a defensive alliance.⁷¹

Franz, too, was not a nationalist. His *Fürstenbund* was conceived as a loose union of independent political entities, and as such it was directed against the threats posed by the rise of absolutist national states. But it was equally detached – at

⁶⁶ For a more extensive discussion of the political imagery of Franz's Wörlitz estate, compare Umbach, *Franz of Anhalt-Dessau*.

⁶⁷ Hertzberg to Franz, Berlin, 7 Feb. 1786, in Andreas and Tümmler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, I, p. 216.

⁶⁸ Edelsheim to Carl August and Franz, Hanau, 30 Dec. 1783, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, I, p. 48.

⁶⁹ An example is the manner in which Edelsheim praises the *Geheimer Staatsrath* of Kurmainz von Deel. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48–52.

⁷¹ Edelsheim to Carl August, Karlsruhe, 16 Apr. 1784, in Andreas and Tümmler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, I, p. 88.

least in theory – from mere particularism, from a haphazard co-existence of completely autonomous mini-states within the Empire, held together by temporary strategic alliances between individual members. Patriotism acted as a mediating force between these two extremes. Franz's friend and biographer Friedrich Reil reported a discussion which took place at the beginning of the French occupation of Germany. Bourgoing, the French ambassador in Dresden, had condemned the fragmentation (*Zerrissenheit*) of the German Empire. Franz replied:

This is why we now need an emperor who is strong in deed as in spirit, an emperor from our midst, a German man who, united with equally powerful and well-meaning princes of German persuasion, would create a single, unified, and indivisible Confederation. Not a single village inhabited by German must ever be handed over to a foreign power ... The princes must assemble every three years or as often as is required, appear in person, and meet with freely elected representatives of the people, with learned writers, practising lawyers, intelligent merchants, landowners, and industrialists, who would all gather without pomp and military games, in order to discuss the true well-being of Germany and to decide on motions which the emperor would execute.⁷²

To Franz, the legal aspect of Carl August's patriotism was not a central concern – he was more concerned with princes uniting on the basis of shared patriotic sentiment and their common German identity. This German identity included the people at large, but also firmly relied on a strong leader figure to embody the patriotic spirit. In Franz's case, being patriotic meant placing these leitmotifs above the tactical or party political interests of the individual princes.⁷³ Franz's confidence in these beliefs appears to have been at odds with the extreme caution evinced by his letters. He could, however, conceive of such patriotism as essentially 'safe' and non-revolutionary because he was familiar with the culture of English aristocratic patriotism.

Between 1763 and 1785, Franz travelled to Britain on four extended study trips. He spent less time than was customary in London, and instead concentrated on visiting the estates of aristocrats, sometimes befriending their owners, but, more importantly, studying the political allegories inscribed into their landscape gardens, on which he modelled the political iconography of his own Wörlitz estate.⁷⁴ For English peers from the time of the anti-Walpole 'Patriot opposition' onwards, landscape design, and indeed the entire culture associated with political 'retirement' into the countryside, had become a chief medium for the expression of patriotism. Though patriotic virtue had become a central *topos* in the defence of their constitutional role, English aristocrats rarely made this point in writing, leaving middle-class writers to develop an equivalent discourse in 'patriotic' journals, and professional poets such as Thomson to translate this into literature. Like

⁷² Friedrich Reil, *Leopold Friedrich Franz*, p. 91.

⁷³ Franz went as far as to say that the people was potentially more patriotically minded than the aristocracy, the clerics, and even the princes. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁷⁴ A full analysis of the English travels is provided in Maiken Umbach, *Federalism and Enlightenment in Germany, 1740–1806* (London, 1998).

Franz, they restricted direct political statements to private conversations, and preferred indirect, metaphorical expressions of patriotic beliefs. To their English peers, patriotism implied that the reform efforts contemplated in their country residences did not represent particularist interests, but were concerned with the improvement of the nation at large. Throughout, a dichotomy was constructed between ‘corruption’ (used in the sense of particularism), and the stylized figure of a ‘Patriot king’. He was the ideal king, whom the ‘Patriot opposition’ first envisaged, and whose role was rhetorically adopted first by Frederick prince of Wales, and then George III.⁷⁵

The most popular historical prototype of a Patriot king was Alfred, who was praised for having safeguarded English liberties and invented the English mixed constitution. In the gardens of Stourhead, from which Franz copied many features, an inscription on the so-called Alfred tower made the point explicit: ‘Alfred the light of a benighted age / was a philosopher and a Christian / The Father of his People / The Founder of the English / Monarchy and Liberty.’ On the Temple of British Worthies at Stowe, Alfred’s description read: ‘The mildest, justest, and most beneficent of kings, who ... crush’d Corruption, guarded Liberty, and was the Founder of the English Constitution.’ Also at Stowe gardens, probably Franz’s favourite location in England, the bust of the Black Prince evoked another prototype for the Patriot king. The theme was taken up by Frederick Prince in 1735 when he erected in his own garden at Kew statues of King Alfred and the Black Prince, pronouncing in an inscription that he intended to make the latter ‘the Pattern of his own conduct’.⁷⁶

The English idea of the balanced constitution was echoed in the central role which the imperial constitution played in the *Fürstenbund*. Whilst Carl August and others were primarily concerned with constitutional reform, Franz envisaged that a royal leader would act as the human embodiment of the spirit of this constitution, thus immediately adopting the English *topos* of the Patriot king for the German situation. His fixation on that idea was not a result of excessive royalism. Franz never hesitated directly to oppose the official head of the Empire, Joseph II. Rather, it represented the assimilation of an English aristocratic mode of thinking, which, like Franz’s, was more personal than conceptual, projecting abstract ideals on to a real figure.

⁷⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1994; originally published in New Haven, 1992), pp. 206–17.

⁷⁶ *Craftsman*, no. 478, 6 Sept. 1735. On the patriotic imagery of Kew gardens, see J. Colton, ‘Merlin’s Cave and Queen Caroline: garden art as political propaganda’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 10/1 (1976), pp. 1–20; the patriotic iconography of Stowe is analysed in G. B. Clarke, ‘Grecian taste and Gothic virtue. Lord Cobham’s gardening programme and its iconography’, *Apollo*, 47 (1973), pp. 566–71, and J. M. Robinson, *Temples of Delight: Stowe landscape gardens* (London, 1990); for Stourhead, the most useful discussions of the patriotic discourse are M. Kelsall, ‘The iconography of Stourhead’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 46 (1983), pp. 133–43, and Kenneth Woodbridge, *Landscape and antiquity: aspects of English culture at Stourhead, 1718–1838* (Oxford, 1970). A more abstract analysis of the use of British historical precedents in patriotic landscapes of the eighteenth century is Karin Stempel, *Geschichtsbilder im frühen englischen Garten. Fields of Remembrance – Gardens of Delight* (Münster, 1982).

This parallel with the English situation explains the fact that Franz, more than Carl August and his other partners, looked to the Prussian crown prince for support and guidance in the realization of the *Fürstenbund*. Franz continued to believe that after Frederick's death, under the future Frederick William II, Prussia could be turned into a protector of the small principalities rather than their oppressor. Given Frederick William's ambiguous and constantly changing attitudes, Franz's trust appears utterly misplaced. Yet despite repeated disappointments, Franz continued to believe in his Patriot king: 'I trust in God and the crown prince of Prussia.'⁷⁷ His last journey to England in 1785 was indicative of the problems thus caused. Its main purpose was to convince the king of England to reveal to him the secret clauses of the new, Prussian-led *Fürstenbund*, to which Frederick II, who had long been aware of Franz's anti-Prussian manoeuvres, had denied him access. But Franz did not dare to undertake this step without the prior consent of Frederick William. His reception in London was friendly, but did not produce the desired results. Franz therefore continued to pursue his plan in writing, and repeatedly requested supporting letters from the Prussian crown prince. On 19 February he wrote to Frederick William:

I have, with Your Royal Highness's permission, written a letter to Minister Alvensleben in London, asking Hanover to reveal what the role of the small principalities in the Association [the *Fürstenbund*] might be, and what kind of protection they might expect from it. With Your Royal Highness's gracious permission I therein referred to a letter by which You would support my request. I have now received the reply from London which I enclose.⁷⁸ May I be so frank as to most humbly to remind Your Royal Highness – so that I may rest assured and defend myself – to provide me with something in writing proving that I did not undertake the above step without Your Royal Highness's approval. Because the enclosed reply says nothing to that effect, I fear that my move might not have made the best impression, ... and hereby favourable memories of my visit might be greatly diminished ... Moreover, the good cause [the *Fürstenbund*] will hardly grow to maturity ... if Your Royal Highness and the king of England will not continue to support it; the consequences of this I do not need to dwell upon, because nobody is better informed about them than Your Royal Highness. I would need to apologise for being so frank if I did not know that I was writing to a man who is able truly to appreciate my heartfelt convictions.⁷⁹

Frederick William's accession to the throne in August 1786 finally confirmed Franz's worst suspicions. The reply was cool in tone, and the new king announced that he did not want to bother George III with a letter of the kind he had promised to Franz.⁸⁰ Given Franz's absolute reliance – for conceptual

⁷⁷ Franz to Carl August, Dessau, 18 June 1784, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, 1, p. 76.

⁷⁸ The answer noted that no letter from Friedrich Wilhelm had been received: 'I have recently received your letter of 29 November ... I am not aware, however, of a letter mentioned by Your Excellency sent hither from another place [Berlin] to the King.' Alvensleben to Franz, London, 17 Jan. 1786, Thür. Staatsarchiv Weimar, D 1656, fo. 15r. (Franz's copy of Alvensleben's letter, passed on to Carl August). ⁷⁹ Thür. Staatsarchiv Weimar, D 1656, fos. 24–5.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm to Franz, 19 Feb. 1786, Thür. Staatsarchiv Weimar, D 1656, fo. 25 (copy sent to Carl August).

as well as for practical reasons – on a Patriot king as patron of the *Fürstenbund*, it was hardly surprising that he now regarded the scheme as a complete failure. Nevertheless, the transformation of German political discourse that the *Fürstenbund* debates had initiated proved more durable. Key concepts entered the vocabulary even of his political opponents in Prussia. Here Frederick William played a key role.

Throughout the 1780s, Frederick William and his personal adviser Hertzberg employed a distinctive rhetoric of patriotism which represented a marked divergence from traditional Prussian monarchical style. To a lesser extent, even Frederick II, after placing himself at the head of a *Fürstenbund* in 1785, adopted an appropriately patriotic terminology.⁸¹ Frederick William was to inherit this Prusso-centric patriotism, but as long as his over-mighty uncle lived, he still used patriotism as an emphatically ‘imperial’ category. In the following letter, Frederick William praises Franz and Karl Friedrich of Baden for their patriotism and the *Fürstenbund* initiative:

The prince of Dessau has no doubt informed you about the margrave of Baden’s opinions, and about the idea which this prince [Franz] has put to him regarding the formation of an alliance or association which several princes of the Empire wish to form amongst each other... I can only applaud these truly patriotic sentiments... I have today seen a letter by the prince of Dessau in which he mentions that he will go to Karlsruhe to meet the margrave of Baden – for the same reason as on his last visit – which shows that these princes are still actively pursuing their project. One should hope that they will achieve a secure arrangement, until the other princes have unilaterally agreed to follow the lead of the margrave of Baden and prince of Dessau, who are both very wise princes whose virtue one can blindly trust.⁸²

As a consequence of Frederick’s involvement, however, Franz’s role diminished, and he now addressed Carl August as the (new) protagonist.⁸³ Carl August, however, was also losing his confidence. Frederick II had greatly embarrassed Carl August when he had pressurized him into allowing Seckendorff, one of his closest foreign political advisers, to leave Weimar and work for the Prussian court. Carl August interpreted the requisition of one of his *Fürstenbund* negotiators as a veiled threat, preventing him from objecting to Prussia’s take-over of a scheme which he now had to pretend had never been anti-Prussian.⁸⁴

At this stage, Seckendorff still believed that the *Fürstenbund* could be appropriated by Prussia without major distortions. Because the new rhetoric of patriotism was beginning to be widely accepted even in Berlin, Seckendorff

⁸¹ On 14 Apr. 1785 Carl August wrote to the ‘Fürstbischof’ of Würzburg, Franz Ludwig Freiherr von Erthal: ‘The prince of Prussia assures you... that the intentions of the king are truly patriotic.’ In Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, p. 141.

⁸² Friedrich Wilhelm to Graf Hertzberg, 4 July 1783, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, pp. 37–8. Hertzberg, in his response, also referred to the margrave of Baden as a ‘most patriotic prince’. Hertzberg to Friedrich Wilhelm, Berlin, 25 Sept. 1783, (rough copy), *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸³ Franz to Carl August, Wörlitz, 13 Feb. 1785, *ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸⁴ Carl August to Franz, Weimar, 14 Feb. 1785, in Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, pp. 125–6.

hardly needed to alter his tone when writing to Carl August from his new position. According to Seckendorff, Frederick was determined to ‘secure the unstable system of the German Empire, and promote a stability and consistency therein which would be based on its ancient constitution. His [Frederick II’s] wisdom and patriotic conduct will be the crown on the glory of his later years.’⁸⁵

Carl August, by contrast, saw no smooth continuities, and was clearly aware that the original connotations of small-state imperial patriotism had been distorted almost beyond recognition. By his standards, the Prussian adoption of patriotic rhetoric indeed seems purely opportunistic – both Frederick II and Frederick William had Prussia’s interests in mind, not those of the Empire and certainly not those of the smaller princes.

Nevertheless, Aretin’s assertion that Prussian ‘patriotism’ was merely fraudulent is too simplistic.⁸⁶ Patriotism might have been used to conceal very different political intentions, but the very fact that Frederick himself, and to an even greater extent Prussian officials, extensively used this terminology indicates that its importance was increasingly appreciated in Berlin. Patriotism had become an indispensable political concept without which even Frederick could not win over the support or at least acquiescence of the smaller princes to Prussia’s political involvement in the politics of the Empire.

VIII

In Franz’s correspondence, the term ‘freedom’ was only rarely used, being too direct and too blunt a political term for his metaphorical and indirect style. Nevertheless, it does appear in some generalizing statements about ‘the good cause’, for example when he wrote that ‘I trust our rights and liberties (*Freiheiten*) will not fall, but be preserved.’ Despite its brevity, this comment made two central points: the collective use of freedoms, in the sense of liberties, and the association of freedom with rights. Franz’s statement thus reflects a marked tendency in the eighteenth century to place corporate liberties above the arbitrary freedom of the individual.⁸⁷ Despite a popular legacy that might suggest the contrary, corporate liberties even played a central role in at least the initial stages of revolutionary rhetoric in America, Belgium, and France. When Franz talked about ‘our freedoms’, he referred not to a desire for more personal freedom, but the political liberties which properly belonged to the territorial princes as parts of the body politic. Infringing upon these rightful liberties implied a corruption of the entire political system of the Empire.

⁸⁵ Seckendorff to Carl August, 8 Feb. 1785, *ibid.*, pp. 124–5.

⁸⁶ Aretin, *Vom Deutschen Reich*, p. 22.

⁸⁷ Compare Raumer, *Absoluter Staat*. A related point was raised by Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998), emphasising the close connection between the liberty of states and that of individuals in ‘neo-roman’ theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a tradition that was only retrospectively marginalized by the triumph of purely individualist liberalism in the wake of Hobbes. The comment is from Franz to Carl August, Dessau, 18 June 1784, in Erdmannsdörffer, *Politische Correspondenz*, I, p. 76.

Montesquieu had argued that absolutist regimes, rather than gaining power at the expense of the *corps*, in fact eroded the very basis of the country's strength. Accordingly Franz's reference to rights is not to an abstract concept derived from natural law. Instead, like liberties, rights were a pragmatic component of the functioning imperial system as it had developed over time.

In the same way, the English patriotic aristocrats based their political rhetoric on the defence of (supposedly) ancient rights and liberties, both of which had a pragmatic, historical justification, but none in divine or natural law. They were fundamentally opposed to revolution, and both Franz and his English friends could argue that the defence of historical rights and liberties was the proper duty of the *Stände* or estates, albeit with the support of a Patriot king.

The relationship between the people and the princes was envisaged according to the same dialectic of freedom and rights. As Franz himself put it: 'The people have to be raised to civil and political freedom and independence, it has to be enlightened about its duties, but also about its rights.'⁸⁸ Like every other constituent part of the state, the people had political duties, but these went hand in hand with their rights, and both were defined by history. Prussian expansionism, however, was incompatible with the corporate liberties of the imperial constitution. Prussian appeals to the small princes to help defend German 'freedom' against Joseph II's interventionism could not conceal this discrepancy.⁸⁹ As we have seen, Franz and Carl August were more anti-Prussian than anti-Austrian. Indeed, to Carl August Prussia represented the very opposite of a free society: 'I shall soon embark on a journey which, however, will not make me freer, but take away from me, for a time, my personal and particularist freedom – I will go to Berlin for eight days. As soon as possible I shall flee the sight of the blue slaves.'⁹⁰

In 1785 both Franz and Carl August found themselves in a situation where their plans had failed, and at least temporary co-operation with Prussia remained as the only viable option. Both princes compromised thus with Prussia because of the Third Germany's perceived or real lack of political strength. Franz tried to make the best of the situation and at times even seemed to be quite pleased with the chance to outmanoeuvre the Austrians.⁹¹ Carl August, too, accepted the role of a Prussian adviser in the 1787 election of the 'Koadjutor'.⁹² Only Ernst von Gotha believed that the *Fürstenbund* ideals might be rescued even under Prussian rule, when he stated that he would rather 'find my grave under the rubble of the imperial constitution than acquiesce to

⁸⁸ Reil, *Leopold Friedrich Franz*, pp. 91–2.

⁸⁹ General Schmettau, 15 Feb. 1785, to Carl August; printed in Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, p. 128.

⁹⁰ Carl August to Knebel, 26 Dec. 1785, in Andreas and Tümmeler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, 1, p. 211.

⁹¹ Franz to Carl August, Sanssouci, 5 Nov. 1786, Hausarchiv Weimar (HA), Abt. XIX, No. 155, fo. 43.

⁹² After Carl August had masterminded the elections of the Koadjutor of Mainz for Friedrich Wilhelm II, on 26 Oct. 1787 the new king in return ordered that Carl August be informed about all secret plans and undertakings relating to the *Fürstenbund*.

shameful suppression ... In this, I only wish for the support of the Prince of Dessau.⁹³

Franz's and Carl August's co-operation with Prussia did not last. Franz eventually retreated from imperial politics altogether, while Carl August was explicit about the sense of failure of the original *Fürstenbund* conception in the new Prussian-led context:

We have been altogether forgotten ... since we subscribed to the Union ... [In Berlin] one is used to treating things en gros, and forgetting about the Empire out there ... The purpose of the association had been not to function as an alliance of three powerful courts, but an imperial union in the widest possible sense. All princes who joined ... were supposed to form a single body, to constitute an imperial unity, the purpose of which was the preservation of Germany according to its constitution, and to lend it the power which the German Empire enjoys whenever it is united in a single patriotic purpose ... Now, however, the small princes can at best be regarded as supplements to the triple alliance.⁹⁴

The ambitious aim of the *Fürstenbund* had been the revival of 'ancient' corporate liberties. Some scholars have argued that the very existence of this conception lies at the root of a supposed German *Sonderweg*. German notions of liberty, it has been suggested, were distinct from the western political tradition in defining liberty not as a safeguard against the state, but as a quality of the state, or, rather, the principalities. 'The German principalities, unlike other states, continued to embody traditional and theoretical claims of rights against authority. The German principalities of the old regime ... loomed as representative of both the general order and of men's chartered liberties within it.'⁹⁵ Yet it was the failure of the small states to preserve precisely these regional liberties which prepared the ground for the rise of the German nation-state of the nineteenth century. The German Empire with its manifold and numerous component parts cannot sensibly be equated with the Bismarckian Germany. If anything, the latter was prefigured by the large and expanding powers of Prussia and Austria, against which small princes of Germany tried to defend their own autonomy and the federal structure of the Empire. Like territorial aristocrats elsewhere in Europe, the minor German princes tried to resist this centralizing impulse. The anti-absolutist notions of liberty employed in this attempt were neither specifically German nor favourable to a strong central state. It was the failure of the *Fürstenbund*, not its existence, which constitutes a 'peculiarity' of German history.

⁹³ Ernst von Gotha to Carl August, 24 Feb. 1785, in Andreas and Tümmler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, I, p. 131.

⁹⁴ Carl August to Graf Görtz, his old educator, 20 Feb. 1786, in Andreas and Tümmler, *Politischer Briefwechsel*, I, pp. 223–4.

⁹⁵ Leonard Krieger, *The German idea of freedom: history of a political tradition* (Boston, 1957), p. 6.

IX

In his *De jure naturae et gentium* of 1672, Pufendorf had defined a principle of reason of state (*Staatsräson*) which served the general welfare of the subjects. In doing so he laid the foundation for absolutism to incorporate natural law as its *raison d'être*, thus becoming compatible, to some even synonymous, with rationalism. Almost a century later, Frederick II of Prussia appropriated this strategy when he set out the basis for his rule in his *Anti-Machiavel*. From the perspective of rational state building, the Holy Roman Empire was the enemy. In his *De statu imperii germanici* of 1667, Pufendorf had already criticized it as the opposite of his ideal state: 'The German Empire, when classified as a political entity, can only be called an irregular body resembling a monster, which has degenerated from being a monarchy to its current debased condition over a long period of time.'⁹⁶

The attempt to form a *Fürstenbund* from 1779 to 1785 was a direct response to the spread of this rationalist absolutism. It was, moreover, part of a Europe-wide attempt to reassert regional or aristocratic liberties against the absolutist state. This trend was not, however, merely 'traditionalist'. Contrary to what most scholars have suggested, the dividing lines in the conflict between absolutism and confederate regionalism were not those between pro- and anti-modern forces. The *Fürstenbund* 'invented' traditions according to paradigms which must be considered 'modern' by the standards of their time. Its advocates could draw on the writings of a range of political thinkers who have all been labelled enlightened. Rousseau, for example, who was commemorated in Franz's Wörlitz gardens by means of a copy of the famous Ermenonville Poplar Island on which the philosopher was buried, openly advocated the use of the old German imperial constitution to create a new organic political structure, precisely because of its confederate nature.⁹⁷

This kind of argument was not, of course, a direct continuation of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century rationalism. The 'technical' side of Rousseau's argument can, it is true, be traced back at least to Montesquieu's *L'esprit des lois*.⁹⁸ To Rousseau, however, confederations were not just a more rational means of organizing human societies, but also morally superior to the rather abstract centralized state. A federation, he argued, was held together not just by necessity, but by the inner link of the common sentiments of its members, chiefly by their love of the fatherland or 'patriotism'.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Samuel von Pufendorf, *Über die Verfassung des deutschen Reiches* (publ. under the name Severinus von Monzambano), ed. H. Breßlau (Berlin, 1922), p. 94.

⁹⁷ J. J. Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris, 1964), III: *Écrits sur l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre: projet de paix perpétuelle*, pp. 564–5.

⁹⁸ *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, I: *De l'Esprit des Lois* (new edn, Basle, 1799), pp. 290 and 311–12.

⁹⁹ In the *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, as well as in his *Projet de constitution pour la Corse*, Rousseau attached key importance to economic preconditions as well as the customs, tastes, and habits of the people, which together give them a sense of a distinctive common identity. The *Considérations* were written for a purpose closely related to that of the *Fürstenbund*. 'Since 1764

The conflict between the apologists and the critics of absolutism was therefore a conflict between two different conceptions of progress. As a result of the rise of the nation-state in the nineteenth century, the progressive character of the early *Fürstenbund* plans has been largely obscured. Only after 1945 did scholars begin to unearth the assets of the old Empire as a supranational institution for the maintenance of law and order.¹⁰⁰ More recently, they have also become more aware of the fact that the eighteenth-century German Empire was not a direct descendant of the medieval Empire, as many of its eighteenth-century opponents had argued. In fact, nearly all eighteenth-century imperial institutions originated in the early modern period. Perhaps most interesting amongst those is the supreme imperial court (*Reichskammergericht*), founded in 1495, which has come to be recognized as a product of the rationalizing and universalizing tendencies of the Renaissance period.¹⁰¹ In an enlightened eighteenth-century context it was therefore not a contradiction in terms to point to these institutions as starting points for political ‘improvement’.

Such parallels should not, however, blind us to the fact that the reformers who tried to rally around the *Fürstenbund* also criticized the Empire. Franz of Anhalt-Dessau and Carl August of Saxe-Weimar strongly advocated imperial reform, not continuity of the status quo. In doing this, they frequently drew on the same sources as the Empire’s opponents. Johann Stephan Pütter, for example, was an eminent legal thinker who published extensively on the subject of imperial institutions. Pütter’s indictment of the corruption at the court at Wetzlar especially his *Patriotische Abbildung* of 1749 could be read as evidence supporting Goethe’s critical stance, and was indeed used by the poet in this way.¹⁰² Yet equally, and indeed closer to Pütter’s own intentions, it

Poland had been ruled by a king elected under Russian pressure, and it now appeared that it was destined to be absorbed by Russia. In 1768, however, a powerful group of landowners began to resist Russian domination and established a confederation, the Confederation of Bar, of which Wielhorski was a representative. The influence of the Confederation steadily increased. In 1769 it called members from all parts of Poland to an assembly, which commissioned Wielhorski to approach Rousseau ... for proposals for amending the Polish constitution in such a way that Poland would be able to retain its integrity and independence against foreign annexation.’ *The Rousseau dictionary*, ed. N. J. H. Dent (Oxford, 1992), pp. 62–3.

¹⁰⁰ Prominent examples of this trend are Aretin, *Heiliges Römisches Reich*; John G. Gagliardo, *Reich and nation: the Holy Roman Empire as idea and reality, 1763–1806* (Bloomington, 1980); and Volker Press, ‘Das Römisch-Deutsche Reich – ein politisches System in verfassungs- und sozialgeschichtlicher Fragestellung’, in Grete Klingenstein and Heinrich Lutz, eds., *Specialforschung und ‘Gesamtgeschichte’: Beispiele und Methodenfragen zur Geschichte der frühen Neuzeit* (Vienna, 1981), pp. 221–42.

¹⁰¹ This view is proposed by Bernd Diestelkamp and others in Ingrid Scheurmann, ed., *Frieden durch Recht: Das Reichskammergericht von 1495 bis 1806*, exhibition catalogue (Mainz, 1994), especially pp. 453–6.

¹⁰² Johann Stephan Pütter, *Patriotische Abbildung des heutigen Zustandes beyder höchsten Reichsgerichte worin der Verfall des Reichsjustizwesens samt dem daraus bevorstehenden Unheile des ganzen Reichs und die Mittel wie demselben noch vorzubeugen der Wahrheit gemäß und aus Liebe zum Vaterland erörtert wird* (1749). On Goethe’s use of Pütter compare Momme Mommsen, *Die Entstehung von Goethes Werken in Dokumenten* (2 vols., Berlin, 1958), II, p. 450.

could be understood as a passionate plea for the reform and revival of valuable imperial institutions along the lines which Carl August envisaged.

The dispute was thus not so much about different values, but about how the values of the late Enlightenment were best translated into concrete politics. To the *Fürstenbund* planners, the centralized state, created to achieve this very aim, was ill-suited to its purpose. Not only did it encourage arbitrary despotic rule and thus 'enslave' its subjects. They believed that its rise also had detrimental effects on relations between the German territories. Such states, so the correspondence analysed above suggested, had to be seen as 'individuals', too. Each had a specific historical character, each had rights and duties to the German Empire as a whole. In this respect, the size of the principalities was immaterial. They were all parts of a single body. Whilst the imperial order could provide the organizational framework for this new Germany, it was the sentimental discourse associated with the pre-1785 *Fürstenbund* which would transform this late Enlightenment vision into practice. This discourse combined the idea of the rational rule of law with a new emphasis on individual difference and historical sensitivity to determine not just the relationship between the state and the individual subject, but also relations between states. By paying attention to the novel discursive structure of this kind of diplomacy, an alternative path of development in late eighteenth-century German politics emerges.