TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

The little book you are holding in your hands is no ordinary work, and the scholar who wrote it is not your run-of-the-mill historian. In a little over a hundred pages, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger achieves the seemingly impossible: a concise, elegant, and utterly enlightening account of the immensely complex and often outright chaotic Holy Roman Empire in the early modern period (1495–1806). It is a book that wears its theoretical sophistication lightly and its learning gracefully. And although it contains a powerful and clear story line, it is also a deep, multilayered work. I myself have read it many times since its original publication in German in 2007, and I have never failed to draw inspiration from it or to discover new and exciting insights in its pages.

Understanding the exact reasons for this book's many accomplishments is not a requirement for learning a great deal from it. Indeed, readers who know nothing at all about the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation may skip this short introduction and return to it only once they have finished reading the book in its entirety. Nevertheless, more seasoned students of early modern Europe may definitely benefit from a few introductory remarks about Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger's career and theoretical approach. Stollberg-Rilinger's book is unique not only in what it tells us about the Holy Roman Empire. It is also special in how it does it.

Stollberg-Rilinger is the foremost living historian of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation in the early modern period. She was educated at the University of Cologne, where she studied under the supervision of Johannes Kunisch—an important scholar in his own right, who was one of the earliest German historians to write about the early modern period as such. Kunisch was an expert on a long list of classic themes in German historiography, including absolutism, military history, and state-building processes (*Staatlichkeit*). Throughout her career, Stollberg-Rilinger addressed similarly "big" topics to those of her *Doktorvater*. She did so, however, with an important twist.

Already during her time at Cologne, Stollberg-Rilinger began to draw inspiration from a new wave of scholarship done primarily at the University of Bielefeld by such scholars as Reinhard Koselleck in history and especially Niklas Luhmann in sociology. The cross-pollination between Cologne and Bielefeld proved decisive for the rest of her career. It created a unique blend of classical historiographical themes, on the one hand, and cutting-edge theoretical approaches in cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology, on the other hand. Early products of this approach included Stollberg-Rilinger's fabulous dissertation on the metaphorical language of European absolutism ("Der Staat als Maschine: Zur politischen Metaphorik des absoluten Fürstenstaats," 1986) and a habilitation thesis on the representation strategies of territorial estates in the late phase of the Holy Roman Empire ("Vormünder des Volkes? Konzepte landständischer Repräsentation in der Spätphase des Alten Reichs," 1994).

The real breakthrough came in 1997. That year, Stollberg-Rilinger was appointed professor of early modern history at the University of Münster. There, together with the medievalist Gerd Althoff and other colleagues, she began a long-term project on symbolic communication in the early modern period that in the next twenty years would lead to dozens of important publications. An early essay on

the topic of symbolic communication set the theoretical terms for much that would follow ("Zeremoniell als politisches Verfahren: Rangordnung und Rangstreit als Sturkturmerkmale des frühneuzeitlichen Reichstags," 1997). In 2013, the essay would be expanded into a book that was recently also translated into English as *The Emperor's Old Clothes: Constitutional History and the Symbolic Language of the Holy Roman Empire* (Berghahn Books, 2015). After completing the present book, readers interested in learning more about Stollberg-Rilinger's approach to the history of the Empire may turn to *The Emperor's Old Clothes* as well as to Stollberg-Rilinger's latest book: a prize-winning biography of Austrian empress Maria Theresa (German edition 2017; English translation forthcoming from Princeton University Press in 2018).

Inspired in the first place by the sociological approach of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and then by a long list of works by other scholars, including Niklas Luhmann, Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman, Clifford Geertz, and Pierre Bourdieu, Stollberg-Rilinger's main theoretical claim is that the constitutional history of premodern polities cannot be separated from their procedures and ceremonies. These are not mere sideshows or dim reflections of what "really matters"—for example, royal decisions, written constitutional and legal documents, or grand political ideas. Rather, procedures and ceremonies are themselves extraordinarily important political realms. Unlike earlier German constitutional historians who emphasized written documents, Stollberg-Rilinger focuses on the symbolic language of the king's court, the Imperial diet, and the city council. In this, she relies on and develops further Luhmann's sociological theory, especially his early work *Legitimation durch Verfahren* (1969). In her view, who sat next to whom at the Imperial diet, who arrived when to a new emperor's court, who wore what for which enfeoffment ceremony, or who had the right to speak first at a territorial diet were fundamental political issues in premodern social systems, even or especially when such systems produced few, if

any, written documents. That contemporaries argued about such issues much more than about the creation of written documents is no coincidence. They did so for a reason.

Lest all of this sound too abstract, consider for a moment the somewhat antiquated way in which Americans elect their president today. As recent events have demonstrated all too clearly, both the composition of the electoral college and the resistance to changing anything about it have had decisive influence on the fate of the country. That almost all Americans accept as legitimate the election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States is very much a product of a series of fictions such as the idea that the outcome of the elections represents the will of the American people even though not all citizens cast their votes and the popular vote was not identical to the electoral one. Thus, procedure, decision-making, and political legitimacy are quite inseparable in this case. Or think about the fact that American juries deliberate behind closed doors and not in public, that they do so orally and not in writing, and that they are instructed to refrain from discussing the case with any nonjurors or, until the deliberations begin, even with their peers. These are not trivial matters: in the criminal justice system, procedures often decide matters of life and death. What we decide often depends on how we decide.

Stollberg-Rilinger is too good a storyteller to spell out many of these issues in the present book, which targets a broad audience. Like any master builder, once her work is standing, she dismantles the scaffolding and lets the building carry its own weight. Nevertheless, attentive readers will find dozens of examples in this book where Stollberg-Rilinger's analysis follows the same procedural logic outlined here: in her historical accounts of institutions like the Imperial diet or the two supreme Imperial courts; in her descriptions of events ranging from the negotiations leading to the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the entire evolution of the Protestant Reformation;

and in her discussions of long-term structural processes such as the transition from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period around the year 1500.

Related to her emphasis on the importance of procedures is Stollberg-Rilinger's insistence that the Holy Roman Empire existed at a time when religion, politics, and the economy were not yet separate spheres. The Empire consequently followed a quintessentially premodern logic. To describe it as a proto nation-state (as the German historian Georg Schmidt, for instance, did in a controversial book he published in 1999) is to miss both what was unique about it and what distinguishes it from modern states. Unlike some of Schmidt's followers, Stollberg-Rilinger also uses terms like "progress" and "national unity" very sparingly. Her Holy Roman Empire is not a homogeneous polity with its own "intentions." As a premodern, composite, complex polity, it always looked different from different angles and affected its members in very uneven ways. The Empire was above all a political space of conflicting interests, motives, and effects. Only as such does its history begin to make sense.

Historians must navigate carefully between the Scylla of overwhelming their readers with too much information and the Charybdis of overly abstract theories. As a wise historian once said, history without theory is like a boat without a sail—it wanders aimlessly—while theory without historical facts is like a sail without a boat—it goes nowhere. In her mastery of the sociological literature and her erudition, and with her elegant writing style, Stollberg-Rilinger strikes exactly the right balance. It is my hope that the present translation will help readers understand better the history of the Holy Roman Empire between 1495 and 1806 while also giving them a first glimpse into Stollberg-Rilinger's pathbreaking historical approach.

—Yair Mintzker
Princeton, New Jersey, September 2017