

The German Peasants' War and Its Impact on Central-Local Relations

Mingchen Xu*

Nanjing Jinling High School, Nanjing, China

*Corresponding author: Mingchen Xu

Abstract

The German Peasants' War (1524–1525) represented a concentrated eruption of social contradictions and political crises within the Holy Roman Empire in the early 16th century. From the microscopic perspective of central-local relations, this paper systematically examines the power interactions between the imperial center and local princes before and after the war, along with the resulting structural changes. The study finds that prior to the war, due to the electoral system, the absence of a fiscal and military apparatus, and the failure of imperial reforms, the Empire had formed a political structure characterized by “a hollow center and powerful localities.” Local princes, ecclesiastical lords, and free imperial cities had constructed centralized “territorial states” within their domains and further undermined central authority through regional alliances. After the outbreak of the war, the peasants' demands were directed squarely at the oppression by local lords. The princes responded in a fragmented manner based on their own interests—some suppressed the uprising, while others made compromises—while the imperial center (Emperor Charles V and his institutions) was completely absent during the crisis, exposing the hollow nature of its authority and its absolute dependence on local military forces. After the war, the victorious princely class systematically strengthened territorial sovereignty through legislative, administrative, and military reforms, and institutionalized the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”) as a formal arrangement for the division of religious and political spheres. Ultimately, the Peasants' War accelerated the transformation of the Holy Roman Empire from a unified empire into a loose alliance of sovereign territorial states, providing a key historical lens for understanding the distinctive decentralized political path of early modern Germany.

Keywords

German Peasants' War, central-local relations, Holy Roman Empire

1. Introduction

The German Peasants' War (1524–1525) was one of the largest and most far-reaching popular uprisings in early modern Europe. The war swept across multiple regions of the Holy Roman Empire, including Upper Swabia, Franconia, Thuringia, Alsace, and Tyrol, involving as many as several hundred thousand peasants. Traditional scholarship has largely examined it within the frameworks of socio-economic history, the history of the Reformation, or peasant resistance movements, emphasizing the intensification of feudal exploitation, the spread of Lutheran Reformation ideas, and the peasants' appeals to “divine law” and “traditional customs.”

However, this war was also a profound political crisis. Its outbreak, evolution, and outcome were closely tied to the unique central-local power structure of the Holy Roman Empire. The long-standing power imbalance between the imperial center and local princes not only shaped the causes and course of the war but also largely determined the direction of Germany's post-war political landscape. Therefore, re-examining this historical event from the microscopic perspective of central-local relations helps reveal the institutional drivers hidden beneath the surface of religious and social phenomena.

Scholarly attention to the German Peasants' War has a long history. From the socio-economic history perspective, Blickle systematically reviewed the economic demands in the peasants' grievance petitions and the *Twelve Articles*, pointing out that the deprivation of common land use rights and the "second serfdom" were the core causes of the uprising (Blickle, 1981). From the perspective of political and intellectual history, Fu Jiahui analyzed the radical nature of Müntzer's ideas of "community of all things" and "governing by divine law," as well as the reasons for their failure (Fu, 2021). From the perspective of the Reformation and political interaction, Wen Han explored the split between Luther and the peasants on the concept of freedom and its profound impact on Germany's subsequent religious conflicts (Wen, 2016). From the perspective of imperial institutional history, Wu Ming summarized the three major characteristics of medieval German feudalism: "weak royal power, no central army, and no centralized administration" (Wu, 1990). Zhu Xiaoyuan, through his study of the Gaismair uprising and the *Tyrolean Constitution*, revealed the fundamental opposition between the peasants' vision of the state and the princes' territorial state model (Zhu, 2021). Wang Qian, based on a quantitative analysis of the *Twelve Articles* and local grievance documents, highlighted the central role of common land disputes in war mobilization (Wang, 2023). Although the above studies have yielded rich results from multiple dimensions such as politics, economy, law, and religion, few have systematically examined, from the perspective of "central-local relations" as a micro-level power structure, how the institutional tensions between the imperial center and local princes were exposed during the war and subsequently solidified afterward. The absence of this perspective makes it difficult for us to fully understand why a massive popular uprising ultimately ended with the comprehensive strengthening of local princely power.

Therefore, the paper examines the historical roots of the German Peasants' War, the contradictions in central-local relations revealed by the War, and the intensified division between the imperial center and regional princes after the War. Through this analytical framework, this paper seeks to reveal that the German Peasants' War was not only a social revolution but also a political turning point in the redistribution of power. Its ultimate outcome was the complete victory of local power and the substantive disappearance of the imperial center.

2. The Political Background Before the Peasants' War: The Decline of Imperial Authority and the Rise of Local Powers

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Holy Roman Empire's internal political landscape resembled a political mosaic pieced together from hundreds of secular and ecclesiastical territories, free imperial cities, and knightly estates of varying sizes. What maintained its superficial unity was a complex and fragile system of feudal contractual traditions. Within this system, the power relationship between the imperial center and local political entities was in a state of continuous dynamic bargaining. By the 1520s, the tensions and contradictions in this "central-local relationship" had reached a critical point. The hollowing out of central authority and the growing strength of local powers ultimately triggered a large-scale social upheaval.

2.1 The Inherent Contradictions of the Imperial Political Structure: Imperial Power Bound by Institutions

The fundamental contradiction in the central-local relations of the Holy Roman Empire was deeply rooted in its unique political institutions. Rather than nurturing a strong monarchy as occurred in contemporary England and France, this structure systematically weakened central authority through a series of legal arrangements, turning imperial power into a kind of "imprisoned authority."

First, the institutional problem of the emperor being elected by the great local nobles directly led to the weakness of imperial power. Since the promulgation of the Golden Bull of 1356, the system under which the emperor was elected by the seven prince-electors was formally established. This document has been hailed as the "Magna Carta of princely freedoms." It not only legally recognized the near-complete sovereignty of the

prince-electors within their own territories (Huber, 1978), but more crucially, it severed the succession of the imperial throne from the stability of hereditary bloodlines, making it instead dependent on political bargaining among a small number of powerful princes. This system meant that every new emperor's power was already subjected to preemptive and legitimate castration from the moment of his accession. The maintenance of the emperor's authority relied heavily on cooperation with local powerholders rather than on commands (Neuhaus, 1997). As a result, the emperor's position became increasingly "princely," with his sphere of action often confined to his own hereditary domains (Wilson, 2016).

Second, the imperial center lacked the basic state apparatus necessary to exercise authority, particularly a unified fiscal and military system. The emperor had no power to levy taxes directly across the entire empire. Imperial finances depended mainly on the so-called "Roman Month" contributions — irregular subsidies that required arduous negotiations with the various territories in the Imperial Diet and were frequently delayed or refused (Krieger, 2005). This left the emperor in chronic financial distress, unable to maintain a standing imperial army or establish an efficient central bureaucracy. When military action was required, the emperor could only issue an "Imperial War Ordinance," calling on the various territories to provide troops and funds according to their size. Whether and to what extent they responded depended entirely on their own interests. This "federal-style" military mobilization mechanism was highly inefficient and left central military actions heavily dependent on the willingness of local princes.

Finally, efforts at imperial reform aimed at strengthening central authority ultimately achieved little due to obstruction by local powers. The *Perpetual Peace* ordinance and the establishment of the Imperial Chamber Court, promulgated at the Diet of Worms in 1495, were intended to end private wars and establish a unified legal order at the imperial level. However, due to the lack of enforcement power, powerful princes frequently ignored its rulings (Brady, 2009). The Imperial Diet itself became an arena for the contest of local interests. The three estates — princes, clergy, and imperial cities — had sharply divergent interests, making it extremely difficult for any reform proposal that might strengthen imperial power or undermine local privileges to pass. Consequently, imperial reform in practice legally acknowledged and solidified the existing pattern of local autonomy, trapping imperial politics in a deadlock characterized by "the rule of law without the power to rule" (Whaley, 2012).

2.2 The Diversified Development of Local Powers: The Formation and Strengthening of Multiple Centers

In stark contrast to the weakness of the imperial center was the vigorous development of local political entities. In the Holy Roman Empire at the beginning of the 16th century, multiple levels and types of power centers existed, constituting *de facto* "states within a state."

At the apex of local power were the secular and ecclesiastical princes. Taking advantage of the imperial center's weakness, they vigorously promoted centralization within their own territories, constructing what are known as "territorial states." This process included establishing standing mercenary armies to replace feudal knightly forces; setting up specialized bureaucratic administrative systems, such as the "administrative district" system in the Electorate of Saxony for managing finance, justice, and local affairs; and issuing unified territorial laws to strengthen control over economic resources and direct rule over subjects (Rowan, 1995). For example, the Elector of Brandenburg and the Duke of Württemberg both successfully suppressed the power of the territorial estates' assemblies in the late 15th to early 16th century, consolidating monarchical absolutism. Ecclesiastical princes, such as the three prince-archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier, simultaneously controlled vast church properties and secular ruling rights. These princes centralized power internally while defending and expanding autonomy externally. They dominated the agenda of the Imperial Diet, directing it to serve the interests of their own territories.

In addition to the powerful princely territories, the free imperial cities constituted another important category of local power centers. Cities such as Nuremberg, Augsburg, and Ulm accumulated enormous wealth through developed long-distance trade, finance, and handicrafts. They enjoyed a high degree of judicial, administrative, and fiscal autonomy. These cities possessed sufficient economic strength to maintain powerful urban defense forces and mercenary troops, enabling them to effectively resist interference from external lords—including the emperor and princes—and defend their "free" status (Scott, 2012). The prosperity of the

cities, supported by their independent economic networks and foreign policies, further deepened the economic and political fragmentation of the Empire.

In the face of external threats or internal unrest, local entities frequently formed regional military and political alliances across territorial boundaries. The most famous of these was the Swabian League, established in 1488, whose members included imperial cities, knights, and some princes. The League possessed its own common laws, diet, and army, maintaining public order and arbitrating disputes within its sphere of influence. Its functions largely substituted for those of the imperial central institutions (Carl, 2000). The existence of local alliances seriously eroded the Empire's legitimacy as a power integrator. The Empire's political ecology had evolved from a theoretical vertical relationship between the emperor and his vassals into a complex web of horizontal and vertical relations among multiple power centers.

2.3 The Impact of Socio-Economic Changes on Political Relations: Resource Competition and Intensified Contradictions

The socio-economic changes in Germany at the beginning of the 16th century were not merely economic phenomena; they profoundly reshaped the balance of power between the center and the localities and directly intensified contradictions at the grassroots level, providing social fuel for large-scale conflict.

One of the key changes during this period was the implementation of the so-called "second serfdom" and the wave of privatization of public resources. With the development of the market economy in Western Europe, particularly the growing demand for grain and timber, lords adopted two main measures to obtain more monetary income: on the one hand, they strengthened serfdom in regions east of the Elbe, increasing labor rents and binding peasants more tightly to the land; on the other hand, in southwestern Germany and similar areas, they used legal means to declare the common resources traditionally shared by rural communes as the private property of the lords and prohibited peasants from using them without payment (Sabeau, 1984). For example, lords issued strict *hunting bans*, turning hunting rights—an important supplementary livelihood and traditional right—into an exclusive privilege of the nobility. This process was essentially a large-scale "enclosure movement," which made peasants' livelihoods entirely dependent on increasingly heavy and unstable rents and taxes, arousing widespread resentment among the peasantry. In the peasants' grievance petitions, clauses concerning disputes over common land use rights accounted for a very high proportion (Blickle, 1981).

The main beneficiaries and promoters of this resource privatization movement were precisely the local princes who sought to strengthen their own power. Control over key economic resources such as minerals, forests, and rivers brought the princes independent and substantial fiscal revenues. The Elector of Saxony grew wealthy from rich silver mines, while the Count of Tyrol enhanced his political position through mining income (Nef, 1952). The increase in economic strength was directly converted into political and military power. Princes used these revenues to support bureaucracies and mercenary armies, giving them greater leverage in bargaining with the emperor and greater coercive capacity in conflicts with peasants and cities. In contrast, the imperial center could not obtain any share from these economic changes. Thus, socio-economic transformation strengthened local princes and further highlighted the central government's fiscal weakness.

In addition, the imbalance in regional economic development exacerbated political fragmentation. The urban economies of southern Germany and the Rhineland flourished, closely linked with trade to Italy and Northern Europe, forming relatively independent economic zones. Meanwhile, the north and east remained predominantly agricultural areas, more deeply affected by the "second serfdom." This economic heterogeneity meant that different regions of the Empire faced vastly different social problems and interest demands, making it difficult to form a unified political agenda. Instead, these differences were more easily guided and exploited by local princes to serve the goal of consolidating their own local rule.

In summary, by the eve of the outbreak of the Peasants' War in 1524, the central-local relations of the Holy Roman Empire had reached an extremely fragile state of imbalance. At the institutional level, imperial power was constrained by the electoral system, *Wahlkapitulationen* (electoral capitulations), and an incomplete state apparatus, becoming a position with greater symbolic than actual power. At the level of political reality, multiple local power centers—princely territories, free imperial cities, and regional alliances—had matured. They exercised complete ruling authority within their domains and had developed strong capabilities to counterbalance central authority. At the socio-economic level, changes characterized by resource privatization

and the “second serfdom” concentrated economic resources and power further into the hands of local princes while intensifying rural grassroots contradictions.

This pattern of “a hollow center and powerful localities” rendered the Empire weak and ineffective in responding to any large-scale social crisis. The center lacked the capacity and resources to mediate or suppress the acute contradictions that had accumulated at the local level. Local princes, when dealing with conflicts within their own territories, acted solely based on their own interests, without any unified approach. The Empire had ultimately become a loose framework full of tensions, ready to fracture at any moment under internal pressure. The German Peasants’ War erupted precisely against this political background, in which the structural crisis of central-local relations had reached its peak. It was both an interrogation and a shock to this failing imperial order.

3. The Outbreak and Suppression of the Peasants’ War: The Full Exposure of Contradictions in Central-Local Relations

In the summer of 1524, a revolt that began in the Black Forest in Upper Swabia quickly spread like wildfire. The German Peasants’ War (1524–1525) erupted against the backdrop of the Empire’s structural crisis in central-local relations, as long-accumulated socio-economic tensions exploded under the influence of Reformation ideas. This popular uprising, which swept across Upper Swabia, Franconia, Thuringia, Alsace, Tyrol, and other regions, fully exposed the distorted central-local power structure of the Holy Roman Empire. The forces that truly shaped the course of events were the local princes and lords with divergent interests. The suppression was essentially a collective counteraction by local powers to defend their own rule.

3.1 Regional Variations and Common Demands of the Uprising: A Challenge Directed at the Core of Local Power

The Peasants’ War was not monolithic. Its forms, organization, and specific demands varied by region, reflecting the Empire’s political fragmentation. Yet the rebels shared a common goal: to protest direct oppressors and seek a more just order based on traditional customs or religious ideals. These demands sharply targeted the local power structures dominated by princes and lords.

In Upper Swabia, where the uprising first erupted, the movement was relatively loose but broadly united. In March 1525, peasant representatives near Memmingen adopted the famous *Twelve Articles*. This document, seen as the moderate program of the rebels, contained core demands: abolition of serfdom; reduction of excessive labor services, rents, and tithes; restoration of communal rights to forests, waters, and pastures; free election of priests by communities; and trials based on “divine law” rather than lords’ arbitrary rule (Scott & Scribner, 1991). Nearly every article directly addressed lords’ infringement on peasants’ economic rights and customary law. Statistics show that 81% of clauses in local grievance petitions concerned the deprivation of common land use rights (Wang, 2023). The wide circulation of the *Twelve Articles* shows that the revolt targeted local oppression rather than the emperor’s supreme authority.

In contrast, the Franconian uprising was more radical and involved alliances with urban commoners and some lower nobles. The *Heilbronn Program* drafted in May 1525 included the economic demands of the *Twelve Articles* but also proposed broader state-building reforms: unified imperial currency and weights/measures, judicial reform, and even a parliament composed of the emperor, princes, nobles, and cities (Scott & Scribner, 1991). Its radicalism lay in bypassing local lords to appeal directly to the imperial center. This highlighted the center’s impotence. The peasants’ and citizens’ fantasy of a strong central power to restrain local lords was itself a critique of existing central-local relations. The program’s complete lack of feasibility proved that any imperial-level reform bypassing local power structures was unrealistic at the time.

The most radical movement occurred in Thuringia under Thomas Müntzer. He advocated “community of all things,” called for common ownership of property and power, and sought to establish a “Kingdom of God” based on “divine law” with officials elected by the common people (Fu, 2021). In Mühlhausen, he helped create the communally oriented “Eternal Council.” Müntzer’s program essentially rejected the feudal hierarchy and private property. Yet even in this most radical form, the direct targets of struggle and the forces of suppression remained local princes such as the Duke of Saxony, with no direct engagement with the imperial center.

Despite varying degrees of radicalism, the uprisings across regions were fundamentally protests against local oppression, not against the central regime. Rebels occasionally petitioned the emperor not out of trust in central authority, but as a customary appeal for legitimacy or leverage against local lords (Blickle, 1998). The uprising was a comprehensive conflict detonated by local tensions and fought primarily at the local level within the imperial framework. What it first exposed was the crisis caused by excessive local exploitation of the grassroots.

3.2 The Princes' Differentiated Response Strategies: The Practical Logic of Decentralized Politics

Faced with the surging uprising, there was no unified command center for suppression across the Empire. Local princes, bishops, and city authorities adopted diverse strategies—from bloody repression to tactical compromise—based on their own strength, geography, interests, and assessment of the situation. This fragmentation was the inevitable outcome of the Empire's highly decentralized politics.

The “hardline suppression faction” was represented by powerful, highly centralized secular princes such as Duke George of Saxony and Duke Anton of Lorraine. They possessed reliable mercenary forces, maintained strong control over their territories, and viewed the peasant revolt as a fundamental threat. At the Battle of Frankenhausen, the combined forces of Duke George and Landgrave Philip of Hesse annihilated Müntzer's peasant army, killing thousands; Müntzer himself was captured and executed (Vogler, 2003). In Alsace, Duke Anton's cavalry carried out brutal suppression. These military victories not only crushed the revolts but also greatly strengthened the princes' authority within their territories and demonstrated the terrible cost of challenging lordly power.

The “compromise and negotiation faction” appeared mainly in regions where princely power was weaker, the uprising stronger, or internal situations more complex. In Upper Swabia, the initial strength of the revolt forced some lords and city authorities to negotiate. For instance, the Memmingen city council partially approved peasants' demands on hunting rights, albeit with strict limitations (Wang, 2023). In Tyrol, rebels even compelled authorities to accept the *Merano Charter*, which included extensive reforms. Such compromises were pragmatic, aimed at dividing the rebels, buying time, or avoiding mutual destruction. They showed that, in the absence of central authority, local rulers had the power to decide whether to wage war on rebels. The content of compromises remained limited to local adjustments and never touched the core of princely sovereignty.

Church lords and imperial cities faced unique situations. Many monasteries and bishoprics, focal points of peasant resentment, often lacked sufficient military strength and suffered heavy blows (e.g., the Bishopric of Würzburg). Imperial cities were caught in complex tensions between their own burghers and external peasants. Some cities (such as Heilbronn) saw alliances between commoners and peasants pushing for reform, while urban elites, fearing social collapse, ultimately cooperated with princely armies sent to suppress the revolt (Scott, 2005).

The differentiation of princely strategies was clearly evident in the actions of the Swabian League. This regional alliance, originally meant to coordinate action, had members (princes, cities, knights) with inconsistent interests. Its military operations were intermittent and aimed primarily at protecting members' own territories and privileges rather than implementing any unified imperial strategy. Negotiations and battles with peasant forces were based entirely on regional political calculations (Carl, 2000). The League's performance in the crisis once again proved that no institution existed at the imperial level to coordinate overall action; local power centers acting on their own was the norm.

The ultimate result of these differentiated responses was that the uprising was crushed piecemeal. Leaderless peasant forces could not withstand the better-equipped and better-organized princely armies, even if uncoordinated. The course of the war dramatically demonstrated that the Empire's political decentralization was actually an advantage in suppressing a fragmented revolt. Each local ruler had strong motivation and full authority to extinguish the fire in his own territory without waiting for slow central decisions. The success of the suppression was not a victory for imperial power, but for the local princes.

3.3 The Imperial Center's Weakness and Dependence: The Absent Arbiter and Empty Symbol

Throughout the Peasants' War, Emperor Charles V and the central institutions played an almost spectator role. This absence exposed the structural defects of the Empire's central-local relations in a time of crisis.

Charles V's situation epitomized the central dilemma. Focused on building a global Habsburg empire, his political priorities lay outside Germany. After the 1521 Diet of Worms, he left German affairs to his brother Archduke Ferdinand and remained mostly in Spain, entangled in wars with France, threats from the Ottomans, and Spanish internal matters (Wen, 2016). Regarding the German peasant revolt, he could only issue vague edicts calling for order and defense of the faith, which lacked concrete military, fiscal, or administrative support and were essentially meaningless to princes on the front lines. The emperor's "supreme authority" floated entirely above real politics.

Archduke Ferdinand, though geographically closer, also had limited authority and resources. His power base was mainly in his Austrian hereditary lands, giving him weak influence over other parts of the Empire. During the crisis, he relied mainly on cooperation with individual princes (such as the Duke of Bavaria) and appeals to local forces like the Swabian League (Fichtner, 1982). Ferdinand acted more as a coordinator than a supreme commander. He could not order princes or mobilize imperial resources, depending instead on voluntary local assistance. This exemplified the central authority's absolute dependence on local powers.

The so-called "imperial central institutions" also failed. The Imperial Diet could not reach quick and effective decisions on suppressing the uprising, as interest conflicts among the estates persisted. The Imperial Chamber Court was powerless to adjudicate the nationwide armed conflict. The imperial fiscal system could not fund military action, and the notion of an "imperial army" existed only on paper. As Wu Ming summarized: "Royal power was extremely weak, with neither a unified imperial army nor a centralized administrative apparatus" (Wu, 1990).

The center's absence had two major political consequences. First, it deprived the rebels of any hope of institutional arbitration. Initial peasant petitions were appeals to traditional feudal contracts, expecting higher lords to correct lower ones. The center's inaction pushed the conflict rapidly toward armed confrontation. Second, it ensured that all credit for suppressing the uprising went to the local princes. The princes proved they were the real and only effective sovereigns in their territories. The emperor's banner might occasionally be invoked for legitimacy, but the real driving force and purpose of the war remained local.

The entire process of the outbreak, spread, and suppression of the German Peasants' War formed a complete logical chain of the Empire's central-local relations. The rebels' demands targeted the abuse of local lordly power, revealing how local governance could slide into oppressive rule without effective central checks. The princes' varied response strategies illustrated the practical logic of decentralized politics: each power center acted according to its own interests, with no unified central command. The central authority's weakness and absence throughout the upheaval confirmed the extent of its hollowing out — it could neither prevent nor manage the crisis, nor even play a symbolic role as arbiter.

For society, it was a great peasant uprising against feudal exploitation. For the political structure, it was a total eruption and violent test of central-local contradictions. The test result was clear: local princes held full rights of taxation and military recruitment; the imperial center was an empty shell stripped of practical function. The war did not weaken local princes but consolidated their position; it did not strengthen central authority but fully exposed its impotence. The Peasants' War actually nourished the soil for the further growth of territorial state sovereignty and paved the way for the eventual collapse of the Holy Roman Empire's central system after the Thirty Years' War.

4. The Long-term Impact of the Peasants' War: Deepened Imperial Fragmentation and the Strengthening of Princely Power

By the summer of 1525, the German Peasants' War had ended militarily. However, the political ripples it triggered across the Empire were far from settled. While the immediate consequences included the deaths of approximately 100,000 peasants and a series of failed peace agreements, the deeper significance lay in its role in accelerating and solidifying the existing central-local power structure of the Holy Roman Empire. The war

proved the complete ineffectiveness of the imperial center in handling major internal crises. The local princes, as the “victors,” used their leading role in the suppression to consolidate and strengthen territorial sovereignty in practice, law, and ideology. The defeat of the Peasants’ War marked the arrival of a new, more thorough order of local decentralization.

4.1 The Strengthening of Princely Territorial Sovereignty: From De Facto Power to Institutional Construction

After the suppression, the princely class did not stop at military victory. Positioning themselves as restorers of order, they exploited the deterrent effect and social trauma of the war to systematically advance the centralization and institutionalization of power within their territories. This process made territorial state sovereignty clearer than ever and pushed ruling methods toward absolutism.

First, princely legislative and economic control expanded rapidly. Since resource disputes had been a major cause of the war, princes quickly used legislation to secure key economic lifelines. In Tyrol, although Michael Gaismair’s reform program failed with the uprising, the Habsburg rulers strengthened their monopoly over silver and copper mines, turning them into pillars of territorial finance (Zhu, 2021). In rural areas, the contentious issue of common land use rights was often “finally resolved” after the war in favor of the lords. Many princes issued stricter laws on forests, hunting, and fishing, legalizing and perpetuating their exclusive rights and completely rejecting peasants’ traditional customary claims (Luebke, 2012). By codifying wartime gains, princes not only reinforced their economic base but also asserted their authority as supreme legislators within their territories.

Second, princely administrative and military apparatuses became further professionalized. The war experience made princes acutely aware of the need for reliable armed forces and efficient bureaucracies. Many territories, such as Bavaria and Brandenburg, accelerated the shift from feudal levies to standing mercenary armies and established more centralized military command systems (Redlich, 1964). Bureaucratic institutions were expanded to improve tax collection, law enforcement, and social control. Lesser nobles and urban elites were more deeply integrated into princely service, binding their interests to the territorial regime and forming a ruling class loyal to the prince. This “state-building” process flourished at the territorial level with far greater efficiency and depth than at the loose imperial center. As Fu Jiahui noted, after the Peasants’ War, “the princely nobility further concentrated wealth and power, strengthening the construction of territorial states” (Fu, 2021). This construction was inward-looking, aimed at tightening control over the territory itself rather than enhancing loyalty to the Empire.

Finally, the failure of the Peasants’ War completely eliminated institutional checks on princely power from grassroots communes and territorial assemblies. Before the war, rural communes and estates’ assemblies in some regions had provided limited constraints. After the uprising was branded an “evil rebellion,” any collective political demands from below could easily be labeled as treason and lose legitimacy. Princes seized the opportunity to suppress or tame the assemblies, weaken urban autonomy, and place rural communes under stricter administrative oversight (Friedrichs, 2000). At the 1526 Diet of Speyer, under princely dominance, a resolution was passed granting territorial rulers the right to determine religious affairs in their lands—the embryonic form of the *cuius regio, eius religio* principle. This granted princes supreme authority over their subjects’ faith from the imperial level and marked a key expansion of princely sovereignty into the spiritual realm (Whaley, 2012). Princely power within their territories thus approached the absolutist concept of sovereignty in secular administration, military affairs, economy, and religion. Imperial fragmentation first manifested in the internal cohesion and external closure of these increasingly complete “mini-kingdoms.”

4.2 The Deepening of Religious-Political Divisions: Confessional Solidification and Territorialization

The close overlap between the Peasants’ War and the Reformation made their influences intricately intertwined. The course and outcome of the war profoundly altered the direction of the Reformation and fully politicized and territorialized religious divisions, carving lasting fissures into Germany.

The war caused a decisive split within the Reformation camp and the officialization of Lutheranism. Before the uprising, Reformation ideas had provided language and legitimacy for peasant and urban resistance. When the revolt turned into violent revolution, the fundamental differences between Martin Luther and radical

reformers became fully public and sharply opposed. Luther published fierce works such as *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, firmly siding with secular authorities (the princes) and calling for merciless suppression. He strictly separated “spiritual freedom” from “bodily obedience” and condemned the peasants’ misuse of the Gospel (Luther, 1967). This stance alienated many common people but won strong support from fearful princes and urban elites. After the war, Lutheranism effectively became the “official religion” protected by many northern and central princes. Control of the Reformation movement shifted to princes seeking to consolidate rule. The Reformation gradually became a tool controlled by secular authorities to strengthen territorial identity and princely power. The radical path represented by Müntzer and others, which combined religious reform with social revolution, was brutally crushed, and ideas of “common property and power” were marginalized (Fu, 2021).

More importantly, religious differences became aligned and solidified with political boundaries. The *cuius regio, eius religio* principle was formally established in the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, with its origins traceable to the post-war expansion of princely power. It allowed each territorial ruler to choose Lutheranism or Catholicism as the official religion of his lands, with subjects required to conform or emigrate (Snyder, 1958). This turned religious faith into part of princely sovereignty and legally recognized the Empire’s permanent religious division. Thereafter, the German map featured not only over three hundred political entities but also overlaid Catholic and Lutheran (and later Calvinist) confessional maps. Religious identity reinforced territorial identity, while territorial boundaries confined religious spread. This pattern of “territorialized religion” made any attempt to reunify imperial faith extremely difficult, as it would directly infringe on princes’ core sovereign rights. As Wen Han pointed out, the opposition between Luther and the peasants on the concept of freedom, along with theological-political differences among reform factions, “ultimately became the beginning of religious conflicts in Germany” (Wen, 2016). The Peasants’ War accelerated this process, making religious differences impossible to reconcile within the imperial framework and turning them into a lasting factor that intensified political fragmentation.

4.3 Changes in the Imperial Political Structure: From a Loose Entity to a Nominal Alliance

The Peasants’ War and its chain reactions ultimately pushed the Holy Roman Empire into a state of complete divergence between law and reality. While still theoretically a single entity, the Empire had in practice lost its function as a unified political body and evolved into a loose confederation of independent territorial states.

The immediate consequence was an irreparable collapse of the imperial center’s legitimacy. Charles V and his deputies’ inaction during the crisis was evident to all political actors. Princes realized that in critical moments they could only rely on themselves—the emperor could neither protect them nor dispense justice. This perception completely eroded any remaining reverence for central authority. Thereafter, although Habsburg emperors retained prestige, any efforts to strengthen imperial power, interfere in princely internal affairs, or reinforce imperial institutions (such as the Imperial Chamber Court) met firm princely resistance based on “traditional freedoms” and wartime experience (Brady, 1995). The Imperial Diet increasingly became a venue for defending individual privileges, while central fiscal and military systems remained paper constructs. As Wu Ming aptly concluded, “the complete collapse of central power occurred after the Thirty Years’ War,” but the process had already accelerated in the decades following the Peasants’ War (Wu, 1990).

Meanwhile, princely territories completed their evolution into de facto sovereign states. In foreign relations, major princes such as the Elector of Saxony and the Margrave of Brandenburg began conducting independent diplomacy and alliances with foreign powers (e.g., France and Denmark). Internally, as noted earlier, they held full rights of legislation, administration, justice, military command, taxation (in practice), and determination of religion. Imperial law was observed only when it did not harm territorial “freedoms” and interests. Imperial knights and most lesser counts were forced to submit to powerful princes, losing independence. The Empire’s intermediate layers collapsed further, forming a simple binary structure of “great princes vs. subjects” and weakening the original hierarchical bonds.

Two key documents from the war foreshadowed this outcome from opposite sides. The imperial-level reform proposals in the *Heilbronn Program* were completely aborted with the failure of the uprising, proving that any scheme to bypass or constrain princely power and rebuild a strong center was a fantasy under the prevailing balance of forces. In contrast, the initial practice and later legalization of the *cuius regio, eius religio*

principle represented historical reality: the acknowledgment and legalization of princes' supreme power within their territories. As Zhu Xiaoyuan's research reveals, the failure of attempts in the peasant programs to establish a "people's state" or participatory polity meant "the decisive victory of the princes' top-down territorial state model" (Zhu, 2021).

Thus, the political nature of the Holy Roman Empire after the Peasants' War underwent a fundamental change. It was no longer a state in formation but degenerated into a "system of territories," whose main functions were to maintain the balance of power among princes, provide a (weakly enforced) legal framework for dispute resolution, and offer common defense against external threats (such as the Ottomans). Imperial unity survived only in shared legal traditions, the symbolic imperial title, and occasional diets. As Wen Han summarized, the failure of the Peasants' War "allowed Germany's divided situation to continue" (Wen, 2016). More precisely, it did not merely maintain division but institutionalized, legalized, and deepened it. After 1525, Germany's political trajectory became irreversibly oriented toward powerful territorial states as the basic units, laying the groundwork for centuries of conflict and eventual unification through the "Lesser Germany" solution.

Through this conflict, the princely class not only crushed revolutionary challenges from below but also used the opportunity to complete the comprehensive strengthening and institutionalization of territorial sovereignty, concentrating economic control, administrative-military machinery, and religious power in their hands. At the same time, the interaction between the war and the Reformation led to the officialization and conservative turn of the reform movement, solidifying religious differences into political divisions aligned with territorial boundaries and greatly intensifying the Empire's internal fractures. Ultimately, all these changes converged to break the last dam of central authority, transforming the Empire—though existing in law—into a loose alliance of sovereign territorial states in substance.

After the smoke of the Peasants' War cleared, a clearer German political landscape emerged: the emperor's halo had dimmed, and the imperial banner could no longer unite forces. What stood prominently across the land were the princely courts wielding strong armies, issuing laws, and determining faith. A war that originated from local oppression ultimately ended in the complete victory of local power, locking Germany onto a distinctive early modern path characterized by decentralization—different from that of England and France. The story of the Peasants' War is thus not only a social tragedy but also a profound political lesson on how power is redistributed amid structural crises. Its echoes extended to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia and even the final dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806.

5. Conclusion

The German Peasants' War was by no means an isolated social conflict, but rather the final explosion of the deep-seated political and structural crisis of the Holy Roman Empire in the early 16th century. Through the analytical framework of central-local relations, this paper finds that the root cause of the war lay in the severe and long-standing power imbalance within the imperial system. Before the war, imperial authority had been continuously weakened by institutional constraints such as the electoral system and the Golden Bull; the imperial center lacked fiscal, military, and administrative enforcement capabilities. In contrast, local powers—including princes, ecclesiastical lords, and free imperial cities—flourished, constructing centralized "territorial states" within their domains and further hollowing out central authority through regional alliances, resulting in a political pattern of "a hollow center and powerful localities." Socio-economic changes, particularly the "second serfdom" and the privatization of public resources, intensified contradictions between peasants and lords while concentrating economic strength and political resources further in the hands of local princes.

The peasants' demands were directed squarely at the oppression by local lords. The princes responded in a fragmented manner according to their own interests—some suppressing the revolt, others compromising—with complete autonomy. Meanwhile, Charles V and the imperial institutions were entirely absent during the crisis, exposing the hollow nature of central authority and its absolute dependence on local military forces. After the war, the victorious princely class, positioning itself as the "restorer of order," systematically strengthened territorial sovereignty through legislative, administrative, and military reforms, and took control over the power to determine religious faith. The practice and deepening of the *cuius regio, eius religio* ("whose realm, his religion") principle solidified the alignment of religious divisions with political boundaries, greatly intensifying the Empire's internal fractures.

Ultimately, the Peasants' War accelerated the Holy Roman Empire's substantive transformation from a theoretically unified empire into a loose alliance of de facto independent sovereign territorial states. Imperial unity survived only in symbols and traditions, while the real centers of political gravity and power resided entirely at the local level. A war that originated from local oppression, was suppressed by local forces, and ultimately consolidated local sovereignty declared Germany's distinctive decentralized path, different from that of Western Europe. It profoundly reveals the structural crisis and risk of internal implosion faced by pre-modern composite empires when central authority continuously erodes due to institutional defects and local powers expand excessively without effective checks. This provides a highly representative historical mirror for understanding the complexity and diverse paths in the transition from traditional empires to modern states.

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Conflicts of Interest

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