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Resistance to Napoleonic Reform in the Grand Duchy of Berg, the Kingdom of Westphalia and the South German States

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1 Central Europe after the end of the ancien regime

The convulsions that followed the French Revolution split the former Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation into four different zones of influence after 1806: Prussia, Austria, the French Rhineland and the Confederation of the Rhine. To a greater or lesser extent, all states underwent considerable modernizing reforms, whether in sustaining or opposing Napoleon’s rule. In Prussia and Austria, reforming policies were moderated by dynastic continuity and, with respect to recruitment, general habituation to earlier forms of military service through the canton system introduced in the eighteenth century.¹

In the Rhineland, advantages arising from a direct incorporation into the French Empire—above all political stability, legal reforms and economic improvements—proved sources of integration while desertion rates were lower than in France itself. Moreover, supporters of the old order had few political alternatives, as the numerous ecclesiastical states and principalities which had dominated the political landscape on the left bank of the Rhine had been dissolved.²

2 The Confederation states before 1809

The situation in the Confederation states was somewhat different. Here the territorial revolution of 1803–06 had merged different dynastic and religious traditions. In the south, former ecclesiastical and princely states and the Imperial free cities were incorporated into the Confederation states of Baden, Württemberg and Bavaria, with Austrian territories added after the defeats of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1805 and 1809. Further north,
Napoleon merged the ex-ecclesiastical states and conquered regions of, among others, Prussia, Hessa, Hannover and Brunswick to form the satellite states of Westphalia and Berg. In order to cope with the need for higher efficiency, the Confederation states introduced a set of administrative reforms, thereby continuing the attempts of enlightened absolutist rulers to disperse intermediate powers and to foster bureaucratic control by the central government. Territories were divided up, with no respect for historical borders, into specific administrative units governed by a hierarchical prefectural system that was meant to abolish the traditional influence of church and nobility even at the parish level. New metric units of measurement and currency were introduced, the taxation and judicial systems were reformed, and Jews were partially emancipated. Guilds, Cathedral chapters and provincial representatives (Landstände) were abolished, as well as the majority of feudal privileges and religious customs. In order to establish the Bürgergesellschaft, a new class of francophile civil servants concentrated on the transformation of the state, law, economy, religion, and political culture through an administrative revolution.\(^3\)

The case of Westphalia was particularly striking. Since there was no need to compromise with old authorities (unlike in the southern kingdoms), Napoleon took great pains to follow territorial acquisition with moral conquest. The implementation of the Code civil and the decree of Germany’s first constitution were meant to provide the basis for a modern, bourgeois society. This would, Napoleon believed, win him the hearts of the public and set an example for other, more reluctant Confederation states.\(^4\)

Yet, despite all his declarations, liberalization and modernization policies were in fact to serve the interests of Imperial France. The Continental System prohibited trade with Great Britain, while high tariffs favouring French products caused additional economic disruption. In Westphalia, large areas were donated to Napoleon’s followers, augmenting the financial deficit of the state and violating the principles of the Code Napoléon by creating a new feudal class of landowners. All over the Confederation states, fiscal duties reached new peaks as Napoleon’s German allies had to contribute to the ever-growing armies of the Emperor. A whole generation of young men was sent off to war, imposing the burden of conscription essentially on the lower social strata, while in most states the well-off were allowed to buy their sons out of conscription.\(^5\) Little wonder Westphalia and the newly incorporated territories in the south became centres of rebellion during the war against Austria in 1809.

The initial integration of the territories into the Confederation states had taken place with little friction. Displeasure with the new regime was usually limited to symbolic actions, such as the removal of the coats of arms of the new rulers. Conflict first occurred when reforms directly impacted upon the lives of subjects, such as the imposition of new taxes, the abolition of privileges, the prohibition of traditional forms of religious devotion, or the