

The Rise and Fall of World's First Superpower

By Bala Prasad

One cannot discuss the concept of world superpowers without first having a basic understanding of the rise of the world's first superpower, the Holy Roman Empire, as well as of its fall. It all started in 800, when Frankish king Charlemagne travelled to Rome to provide assistance to Pope Leo III. In a ceremony in St Peter's, on Christmas Day, Leo was due to anoint Charlemagne's son as his heir; instead, the pope placed a crown on Charlemagne's head and acclaimed him emperor. It was this public alliance between the pope and the ruler of a confederation of Germanic tribes that launched the concept of the new Holy Roman Empire (although the Holy Roman Empire only becomes formally established in the next century).

During the next century, when Pope John XII needed help against his Italian enemies, he appealed to a strong German ruler, just as his predecessor had done. The coronation of Otto I by Pope John XII in 962 marked the beginning of an unbroken line of Holy Roman emperors lasting for more than eight centuries. Otto I did not call himself Roman emperor, but his son Otto II used the title - as a clear statement of western and papal independence from the other Christian emperor in Constantinople.

Otto and his son and grandson (Otto II and Otto III) regarded the imperial crown as a mandate to control the papacy. They dismissed popes at their will and installed replacements more to their liking (sometimes even changing their mind and repeating the process). This power, together with territories covering much of central Europe, gave the German empire and the imperial title great prestige in the late 10th century.

But, of course, subservience was not the papal intention in reinstating the Holy Roman Empire, and a clash was inevitable. The struggle for dominance between emperor and pope came to a head in two successive reigns, of the emperors Henry III and Henry IV, in the 11th century.

In 1046 Henry III deposed three rival popes, and over the next ten years he personally selected four of the next five pontiffs. But after his death, in 1056, these abuses of the system evoked a rapid reaction. Pope Nicholas II, elected in 1058, initiated a process of reform

This time Henry's response was more aggressive. He summoned a council which deposed the pope and elected in his place the archbishop of Ravenna (as pope Clement III). Henry marched into Italy, entered Rome and was crowned emperor by this pope of his own creation. Meanwhile the real pope, Gregory, was living in a state of siege in an impregnable Roman fortress.

Gregory appealed for help to his vassals the Normans, recently invited by the papacy to conquer southern Italy and Sicily. A Norman army reached Rome in 1084, drove out the Germans and rescued Gregory, who subsequently fled south with his rescuers.

which exposed the underlying tension between empire and papacy. One year later, Nicholas condemned abuses within the church, including simony (the selling of clerical posts), the marriage of clergy and, more controversially, corrupt practices in papal elections. Nicholas then restricted the choice of a new pope to a conclave of cardinals, thus ruling out any direct lay influence. Imperial influence was his clear target.

In 1059 Nicholas II took two political steps of a kind, unusual at this period, which will later be commonplace for the medieval papacy. He granted land, already occupied, to recipients of his own choice; and he involved those recipients in a feudal relationship with the papacy, or the Holy See, as the feudal lord.

This time the beneficiaries were the Normans who were granted territorial rights in southern Italy and Sicily in return for feudal obligations to Rome. The pope, in an overtly political struggle against the German emperor, was playing a strong hand. The issue will be brought to a head within a few years by another pope, Gregory VII.

Pope Gregory seized political control by decreeing, in 1075, that no lay ruler may make ecclesiastical appointments. Powerful bishops and abbots were henceforth to be pope's men rather than emperor's men. Thus spawns "the investiture controversy," being in essence a dispute over who has the right to invest high clerics with the robes and insignia of office.

The nine-year struggle between Pope Gregory VII and the emperor Henry IV provides a vivid glimpse of the political role of the medieval papacy. Henry IV, alarmed at the demands being made over investiture, sent a threatening letter to the pope in 1076. The pope responded by excommunicating the emperor. By his public penance at Canossa, Henry had the excommunication lifted. But the truce was short-lived.

German princes opposed to Henry IV elected and crowned, in 1077, a rival king - Rudolf, the duke of Swabia. Rudolf and Henry engaged in a civil war, which Henry won in 1080. By then the pope had recognized Rudolf as the German king and had again excommunicated Henry.

Clement III returned to Rome and reigned there with imperial support as pope (or in historical terms as antipope) for most of the next ten years. Urban II, the pope who preached the first crusade in 1095, was not able to enter the holy city for several years after his election. Unrest prevailed in Rome, and uncertainty in the empire, until the Hohenstaufen win the German crown in 1138.

And that, good reader, is a brief glimpse of the rise and fall of the world's first superpower, the Holy Roman Empire.

Sincerely, *Bala Prasad*