The Immerwährender Reichstag (Permanent Imperial Diet), the subject of Susanne Friedrich’s revised Augsburg dissertation, met from 1663 until 1803. Unlike previous imperial diets, which were ad hoc assemblies usually convened in response to military exigencies, the Immerwährender Reichstag was a standing consultative body that met permanently (as the name suggests) to deal with matters relating to the Holy Roman Empire’s internal and external affairs. For the first time the diet had a fixed location, in the south German imperial city of Regensburg, where principalities able to afford the expense maintained permanent embassies. Foreign powers like France, England, and Holland also sent ambassadors to Regensburg, which by 1700 had become a major diplomatic hub. Paradoxically, although the role of the diet within the empire itself declined owing to the failure to bring about any significant reform of the Holy Roman Empire, the institution acquired new importance on the broader European stage as a venue for building alliances, gathering intelligence, and conducting public relations campaigns. Regensburg became the nodal point of an international public sphere, or what Britain’s ambassador to the diet in 1688 called a place where ‘all publique affaires that are transacted in Christendom are known and carefully examin’d’.

Friedrich explores the expanding networks of information and communication that accompanied the diet’s evolution from representative assembly to diplomatic entrepôt. Her study reflects current scholarly interest in the communicative dimensions of political culture under the Old Regime. Underlying this perspective is the recognition that however much early modern regimes may have deemed secrecy vital to the interests of the state, the exigencies of state-building ultimately had the opposite effect. Chronic warfare and colonial rivalries created a burgeoning demand for political information in the form of newspapers and broadsheets. Expanding bureaucracies generated ever more information, the flow of which in turn accelerated through the development of more efficient postal services. The growth of courts expanded the range of those with access to political information, from high-ranking diplomats and ministers privy to
state secrets, down to subaltern clerks and servants willing to pass on information gleaned from the letters and conversations of superiors. Absolutism, as scholars like Andreas Gestrich and Michael Schaich have shown, did not lessen the volume of available information but increased it.

Nowhere was this sphere of publicity more evident than in the Holy Roman Empire, with its multiplicity of semi-autonomous principalities. Grounding her study in extensive archival research, mostly from German territorial archives, Friedrich illuminates the dense networks of communication radiating from the Regensburg diet and its deputies. Its published resolutions, decrees, and memoranda, she argues, were only the tip of the iceberg. As a venue for gathering and communicating diplomatic information, the diet fostered an insatiable demand for political knowledge in the form of newsletters, newspapers, private correspondence, pamphlets, and broadsides. The role of the Estate deputy broadened accordingly. Not only was he to represent the interests of his principality through formal votes, resolutions, and petitions; his task increasingly evolved into one of gathering and communicating vital information through informal conversations, private visits, eavesdropping at parties and receptions, and the regular perusal of newspapers.

This dual role called for a range of skills, cognitive as well as social. Most deputies were university educated, and some degree of juridical training was necessary to function effectively in the legalistic world of imperial institutions. The ability to comport oneself with appropriate dignity at the diet’s innumerable (and to foreign observers, interminable) ceremonial occasions was also important. Such rituals, argues Friedrich, may have seemed tedious and time-wasting to critics, but they were crucial to the ‘choreography’ and communication of power relations in the empire. In his dealings with other emissaries, a deputy also had to know how to strike the delicate balance between dissimulation and sincerity, concealment and confidence-building requisite for any successful diplomat. Above all, he had to know how to weigh critically the extensive and often conflicting information he received, whether in the form of rumours, the clandestine reports of paid informers, or the plethora of newspapers and newsletters circulating in the city. Through a careful and subtle reading of letters between deputies and their superiors, Friedrich does a good job of reconstructing the *habitus* of Regensburg.
diplomats and the skills they needed to serve their employers effectively.

Much of her book is devoted to microstudies of three imperial Estates. Each represented one of the diet’s three ‘colleges’: Bavaria the electors, Ansbach the imperial princes, and Augsburg the imperial cities. The author’s intent is to show the range of communicative practices and subcultures that made up the diet, but the result is tedious and repetitive. Most of chapter 5, more than a hundred pages with 651 footnotes (!), is taken up with these case studies, which could have served their purpose much more effectively had they been distilled into a section half the size. The vast amount of detail obscures more than illuminates, and more impatient readers may be tempted at this point to put the book aside.

That would be a pity given the insights that follow in chapter 6, which surveys the various media to which diplomats at the Regensburg diet turned for their information. Friedrich is especially illuminating on newsletters and their networks of correspondents, long a murky topic despite the format’s crucial importance as a source of information for both governments and private individuals. She also gives a detailed analysis of how German newspapers reported on the diet, using examples from places like Hamburg, Altona, Berlin, and Munich. She supplements her account with a discussion of other printed formats, such as periodicals and published compendia of imperial and territorial laws, which were aimed at a narrower readership but played an important role in the circulation of political information. Overall the author makes a convincing case for the role of the Regensburg diet in creating a political public sphere—one that was already visible by 1700 and not, as the traditional Habermasian model would have it, first in the 1770s. This insight is not in itself new, as we know from Gestrich’s work. But Friedrich is the first to explore systematically the importance of the Regensburg diet for this process, and in this respect her study is a valuable contribution.

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Book Reviews