

# THÜRINGEN

BLÄTTER ZUR LANDESKUNDE

The ‘Land’ Thuringia received numerous attributes in view of its history, such as “heartland of German culture”, “centre of Reformation”, “home of the Bach family” and “land of classicism”.

The landscape, steeped in culture and tradition, around the Wartburg castle and the town Weimar had not been unified territory until the 20th century, but instead a prime example of German particularism. This provoked the historiography of the 19th century to emphasize the cultural impulses that derived from Thuringia leading



*Wartburg Eisenach*  
(Thoma Babovic,  
Thüringer Tourismus GmbH)

to the formation of a nation, yet simultaneously to castigate the cataclysmic fragmentation: “Our culture owes Thuringia a lot, but our state does not owe anything” (Heinrich von Treitschke).

The more recent historiography reversed this verdict as it uncovered significant political, social, and economic forces of innovation that originated from Thuringia.

Considering the step-by-step unification between 1920 and 1990, the positive developments prevail: the princely spirit of representation bestowed splendid castles, parks,

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## *Thuringia*

### *An Historical Overview*

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museums, libraries and theatres in a unique density upon the “Land of Residencies” and made it synonymous with the ‘Land’ of writers and thinkers. Thuringia, however, continues to be regarded as a leading example of the longlasting, territorial fragmentation that is characteristic of Germa-

ny, despite changing views on this matter.

The Mediaeval Empire was gradually weakened for the benefit of the regional powers to the point of their de facto independence after the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48). These events bestowed some petty princes, particularly in south-

west and central Germany, several secular and ecclesiastical estates on a relatively small territory. The territorial splintering was in Thuringia most prominent, at times there were 30 state-entities and nowhere else it lasted for such a long period. Nevertheless, there

were two distinctive historic reference points that anchored Thuringia deeply in the collective memory; despite the century-old particularism: the Early Mediaeval Kingdom of Thuringia and the Landgraviate of the Ludowingian dynasty.

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## *From the Thuringian Kingdom to the Landgraviate of Thuringia*

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**T**he “Thoringi” tribe emerged from the Germanic tribes of the Hermunduren, the Anglii and the Warnii in the course of the early migration period and was for the first time referred to by the Roman author Vegetius Renatus. In the 5th century, the Thoringi were able to establish a powerful kingdom. It extended across a small central settlement, situated at the area of ‘Altmark’ and the river ‘Elbe’ up to the rivers ‘Werra’ and Danube. Signifying an important aspect of power in the late ancient Germanic Europe, the kingdom was allied with the Ostrogoth kingdom of Theoderic the Great. Family bonds led to the marriage between Theoderic’s niece Amalaberga and the Thuringian King Herminafriid in 510. Yet, after Theoderic’s death (526), the Thuringians were defeated in a crushing battle at the river ‘Unstrut’ by the armies of the Franks and the Saxons. In 534, Herminafriid was assassinated. At this point, Thuringia ceased to be an independent actor on the political stage.

Thuringia became an integral part of the Frankish Empire, ruled by the Merovingian kings. The Christianisation process, which begun in the 6th century, was accelerated under the aspi-

ring dynasty of the Carolings, who were rulers of the Frankish kingdom since 751. The Christianisation movement met its first completion with the founding of the diocese of Erfurt (which should soon belong to Mainz) by the missionary Bonifatius in 742.

Since the 9th century, the German Empire had grown gradually from the eastern part of the Frankish Empire. Under the rule of the Ottonian-Saxon kings (919–1024), it constituted one of the most important pillars of the central power. The close relations to the king diminished with the takeover by the Salian dynasty. This was the beginning of the rise of a local lineage that bred the Landgraves of Thuringia (1131–1247) and gained great significance during the Hohenstaufen period (1138–1254).

The Ludowingian dynasty emanated from Franconia and was named after its first-born male dignitaries. Guided by Louis the Bearded (Ludwig der Bärtige), they settled in the area of Friedrichroda around 1040. His son Louis the Jumper (Ludwig der Springer, 1080–1123), who was the legendary founder of the castles Wartburg, Neuenburg and the monastery Reinhardsbrunn, succeeded with the expansion of manors, fiefs and dominions inside Thuringia.

His son Louis, in turn, successfully extended the Ludovingian dominion by accumulating property on the territory of Hesse.

In 1151, Louis I (1151–1140) was enfeoffed with the newly established honors of a Thuringian landgrave by the Holy Roman Emperor Lothar of Supplinburg. The Ludovingians, who were supposed to consolidate the peace and ensure sovereignty, soon counted to the most powerful rulers amongst the imperial princes. Louis II (1140–1172) reinforced the bonds with the Hohenstaufen emperor through the marriage with a half-sister of Frederick I Barbarossa. Under the rule of Louis III (1172–1190), the landgraviate increased significantly its influence in the course of the disempowerment of Duke Henry the Lion (Heinrich der Löwe, 1180/81) of the Guelph dynasty.

The reign of Hermann I (1190–1217) represented a glamorous peak, because he was affiliated with the legendary

minstrel's contest (Sängerkrieg) at the Wartburg (1206/07), which was symbol for the chivalric-courtly noble culture that was practiced at the court of the landgraviate (initiated and influenced by Walther von der Vogelweide, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Heinrich Veldecke). Louis IV the Godly (1217–1227) is known as the husband of the Holy Elizabeth of Thuringia until today. The coronation of Louis' successor Henry Raspe to become regent in 1246, however, did not represent a worthy height of the Ludovingian reign. Not only was Henry unable to enforce his 'anti-kingdom' against Frederick II of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, but also with his death the Ludovingian lineage was extinguished as there were no male heirs to the throne by 1247. A bloody war of succession ended with the separation of the landgraviate in a Thuringian and a Hessian part in 1264. The Thuringian landgraviate fell to the margraves of Meissen of the Wettin family.

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## *The Land of Particularism*

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**D**uring the Late Middle Ages, the house of Wettin possessed far-reaching land, extending beyond the territories of today's Saxony, Thuringia, and the southern Saxony-Anhalt. In 1425, they were invested with the Duchy of Saxony, centred at Wittenberg, thus becoming one of the prince-electors of the Holy Roman Empire. Also in Thuringia, they were able to extend their possessions (Altenburg, Coburg, Weimar) as well as to establish themselves as the most powerful force after the 'War of Thuringian Counts' (1342–46). The entire property of the

Wettin family was divided by the repeated distribution of the estate among heirs and coheirs and finally separated into two ruling branches – an Ernestine branch (Thuringian) and an Albertine branch (Ducal Saxony) in 1485, ruled by the brother Ernest and Albert respectively. Initially, the Ernestine branch held with the possession of Wittenberg also the electoral title. Wittenberg and the title, however, were lost to the Albertine branch with the defeat by the Emperor and Duke Moritz at the Battle of Mühlberg during the Schmalkaldic War in 1547. The Albertines drove the

development of the electorate (from 1806 kingdom) Saxony into a unitary territorial state forward and made Dresden its capital.

The, in Weimar residing, Ernestine dukes proceeded quite differently: beginning with the 'Erfurt division' (Erfurter Teilung) of 1572, the Ernestine territory was repeatedly subdivided into as many as ten single duchies and counties in Thuringia (Eisenach, Jena, Hildburghausen, Eisenberg, Saalfeld, Römhild). After a final restructuring in 1826, the duchies Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (since 1815 grand duchy), Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Saxe-Meiningen and Saxe-Altenburg remained in existence until 1918.

Alongside the Wettin family, two other noble dynasties were able to establish themselves as territorial rulers; the members of the Reußen lineage of eastern Thuringia, first accounted of in the 12th century, whose title of count was confirmed by the Holy Roman Emperor (Count of the Holy Roman Empire) in 1673 and who received the title of 'Princely Counts' (Reichsfürst) in 1778. At certain intervals, the Reuß dynasty subdivided its land in numerous small entities such as Schleiz, Lobenstein, Ebersdorf, Hirschberg, Saalburg, Burgk, Dölau and Rothenthal. The last territorial redeployment in 1848 resulted in the existence of a Principality of Reuß Elder Line (Greiz) and the Principality of Reuß Younger Line (Gera).

The House of Schwarzburg was named after its ancestral origin in the Thuringian Forest and its possessions can be traced back to the 8th century. In 1697, the Schwarzburg family also received the rank of 'Princely Counts' and their territory was subdivided into the branches of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen and Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt in 1599. Further splintering did not take place, only in the 17th century it came

to the development of the 'bylines' Arnstadt and Ebeleben. Apart from Henry Raspe, Günther von Schwarzburg obtained royal dignity, which he held for an equally short time and with no noteworthy effects.

Therefore, Thuringia was in large part dominated by three dynasties across the centuries, yet further constituent parts have to be added: the imperial towns of Mühlhausen and Nordhausen, the Hessian territory of Schmalkalden, the electorates of Mainz (Erfurt, Eichsfeld) and the Albertine territories between Langensalza and Naumburg and around Suhl, Schleusingen and Ziegenrück.

The old Thuringian Erfurt was prominent as a cultural and commercial hub and as one of the biggest German urban centres of mediaeval times. Erfurt had gained farreaching autonomy, similar to a free imperial city and was a substantial power centre with its adjacent territory since the middle of the 13th century. After its subjection through the ruler of Mainz, it remained the seat of a governor of the Electorate of Mainz. Other powerful counts originated from the House of Henneberg in the southwest of Thuringia, who became extinct in 1583 and whose possessions were taken over by the Wettins.

Whilst the single states managed to resist all consolidations that took place between the French Revolution and the Congress of Vienna (1789–1815), parts of the remaining territories (Erfurt, Eichsfeld, Nordhausen and Mühlhausen) fell to the Kingdom of Prussia in 1802.

After the defeat of Prussia against Napoleon at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt in October 1806 and the French occupation until 1813/1814, all states, including the territories of the Electorate of Saxony, were ultimately handed over to Prussia. Henceforth, Thuringia was bipartite, consisting of a free single state

and a Prussian part, the core of which was the 1816 created government district Erfurt in the province Saxony. In addition, there were the district Schmalkalden (Province Hesse-Nassau, since 1866) as well as, according to contemporary understanding, parts of the administrative district Merseburg (Sangershausen, Eckartsberga, Querfurt, Weißenfels, Naumburg and Zeitz) that were counted towards the 'Prussian Thuringia'.

The founding of the German Empire in 1871 did not have a noticeable effect on these circumstances. The new federal nationstate unified 22 monarchies, three Hanseatic cities and the area of Alsace-Lorraine. From now on, nearly one third of all sovereign princes (Bismarck's "wrens") were crowded in the Thuringian region. The German hegemonic power Prussia gained an increasingly significant position in Thuringia; it was origin of important economic impulses, as it took over the railway network, accelerated the modernisation of the legal, administrative, and educational systems and maintained garrisons in nearly all single states. Despite the partly political backwardness, this led together with the nimbus of a unifying power to the creation of a Prussian patriotism within the accordant territories.

Thuringia's historic significance is especially concentrated within the cultural realm. It represents the heartland of the Reformation that took its course with Luther's pronouncement of his 95 Theses at Wittenberg. Martin Luther visited the, at that time leading, University of Erfurt (1592) and between 1501 and 1505 he lived as monk in the St. Augustine monastery before he relocated to Wittenberg. The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise (1486–1525) became Luther's patron and facilitated Luther's residence at the Wartburg in

1521/22, where the reformer translated the New Testament from Latin into German. In 1548, Frederick's nephew John Frederick ("Hanfried") founded as substitute for the University of Wittenberg (1502) that was lost to the Albertines in 1547, the "Hohe Schule" (from 1558 university) in Jena. Later, it should become the Protestant University of the territory.

The widely ramified Bach family also calls Thuringia its home; Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach in 1685 and first employed in Arnstadt, Mühlhausen and Weimar. Furthermore, many famous names have to be mentioned such as: the mystic Meister Eckhart, Thomas Müntzer, who was the spearhead in the Peasant's War in Thuringia (1525), Lucas Cranach and Heinrich Schütz as well as Ernst Haeckel, Carl Zeiss, Ernst Abbe, Ernst Barlach, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry van de Velde and Walter Gropius.

The cultural landscape of Thuringia was most heavily influenced by the Weimar Classicism or alternatively by the 'Goethe period' (1775–1832), which represented the golden age of the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach. The 'Musenhof' (court of muses) of the Duchess Anna Amalia and the regency of her son Carl August, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (1775–1828) attracted many great thinkers, literati and artists of the time to the so-called 'Athens of the Ilm' (the Ilm is a long river in Thuringia, which is a left tributary of the Saale): alongside the poet laureate Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Christoph Martin Wieland, Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schiller worked and resided here. At the same time, the University of Jena developed into a centre of Philosophic Idealism (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) and of Early Romanticism (Schlegel, Tieck, Brentano, Novalis). Schiller taught as profes-

sor at the University of Jena, from 1789 until 1793.

Saxe-Weimar also experienced a 'silver age' under the Grand Duke Carl Alexander (1853–1901), who renewed the Wartburg Castle, retained the tradition of the Weimar classical period and promoted Franz Liszt. The rulers of the smaller single-states were likewise keen to distinguish themselves as patrons. In Gotha, Ernest the Pious (1640–1675) attempted to create a prototype of an absolutist state and in Meiningen, George II (1866–1914) had contributed significantly to the history of German theatre.

On the way to 19th century's modernity, important impulses originated from Thuringia. It existed a favourable climate for the liberal national movement; for instance, Saxe-Weimar's constitution of the year 1816 was the first of its kind. The Wartburg Festival 1817, the founding of the German fraternity at Jena in 1818 and the preparations for the National Fraternity Union at Eisenach in 1859 underline the propitious conditions. Moreover, there was the liberal

Duke Ernest II of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (1844–1893), nonetheless, there were also conservative rulers still in power, whereby a general reorientation was clearly notable at the turn of the century.

The industrialisation that had begun in the middle of the 19th century had varied innovative features, especially the University of Jena advanced to a leading example of scientific-technological progress (Zeiss, Schott). As aspiring industrial region, Thuringia became early a political centre for the workers' movement, where path-breaking party congresses took place: for example, the foundation of social democracy under the political leadership of August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht in Eisenach in 1869, and in 1875 the consolidation with the General German Workers' Association led by Ferdinand Lassalle in Gotha, and the elaboration of the Erfurt Program of 1891, according to which the name 'Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands' (SPD/ Social Democratic Party of Germany) was adopted.

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## *The 'Freistaat' of Thuringia*

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**T**he desire to form a united state of Thuringia had been existing since a long time. The unifying ambitions had emerged during the Revolution of 1848/49. At the beginning of the 20th century, the demands became increasingly louder mainly because the structures of the small single-states were clearly outdated. Especially, the writing of the social democrat Arthur Hofmann from Meiningen, "The misery of the small states in Thuringia" (1906) sparked fierce controversies.

After all, it was World War I (1914–18) and the end of the monarchies during the German Revolution, which decisively accelerated the unification process. After the union of the two Reuß states, seven single states remained, which amalgamated to the free state of Thuringia (Freistaat Thüringen) with Weimar as its capital on May 1, 1920. Merely, Coburg was not integrated, because of its accession to Bavaria and the Prussian territories did not belong to the new Thuringian state.

Whereas the process of the land-formation (1918/20) appeared, to a large extent, to work with the consensus of all political camps, the conduct of the inner-arrangements ran less smoothly. The first coalition-government formed by the SPD and left-wing liberal democrats (1920/21) that had placed its focus on social justice, failed soon. A bloody civil war, enhanced by the Kapp-Putsch in March 1920, created profound trenches between the socialist working class and the bourgeois-conservative stratum. The result was a development of pronounced political camps that benefited only the radical parties. For the time being, the from 1921–23 incumbent social democratic government led by August Frölich remained dependent on the communists, which culminated in the joint “Volksfrontregierung” (Popular Front government) in autumn 1923. It represented the height of the controversial “red Thuringia” that became a centre of reform efforts (“Greilsche Schulreform) and modern culture (Bauhaus Weimar 1919–1924). Under the bourgeois-conservative governments from 1924 until 1929, most of the reforms of the last years were reversed. From this point in time, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) gained increasingly influence on the policy-making and politics of the Thuringian parliament (Landtag). Thus, Thuringia had become an early stronghold of national socialism.

In 1930/31, the developments led to the government participation of the NSDAP – the very first time in the Weimar Republic. Under the Minister of the Interior and Education Wilhelm Frick, the National Socialists were allowed to gather useful experiences that can be considered as a trial run for the later takeover. In fact, it came to an early takeover in August 1932, when the

NSDAP, led by its head of Nazi district (Gauleiter) Fritz Sauckel took over almost sole government responsibility. After Hitler’s takeover, Sauckel managed to distinguish Thuringia as a Gau-prototype of the Third Reich. Weimar was made, in ostentatious NS-manner, the power-centre of the Gau and the concentration camp Buchenwald was built (1937–1945) in close proximity, where 50.000 people were killed. Simultaneously, Sauckel was able to extend his power throughout Thuringia. In 1944, he received the title and authority of the highest governor of the administrative district Erfurt.

Only with the end of World War II the ‘Land’ Thuringia was founded, including the former Prussian territories that was largely on par with Thuringia’s territory of today. After a short period of American occupation, Thuringia transferred to the Soviet occupation zone in July 1945 according to Allied agreements and became later part of the 1949 founded DDR (German Democratic Republic). With the introduction of “democratic centralism” (demokratischer Zentralismus), Thuringia was divided into the districts of Erfurt, Gera and Suhl in 1952. The rigid “build-up of Socialism” (Aufbau des Sozialismus), was only shortly slowed down by the upheaval of June 17, 1953 with its centre of gravity being in eastern Thuringia (Jena, Gera, Wismutregion), and led to the transformation of virtually all areas of state, society and economy. In the periods of seeming consolidation, for instance, after the construction of the Wall, the industrially developed Thuringia became a centre of “DDR-Hochtechnologie” (GDR-high-technology) (Carl Zeiss Jena, Mikroelektronik Erfurt). At the end of the 80ies the demise of the “real existing socialism” (real existierender Sozialismus) became increasingly apparent.

The turning point (Wende) and the reunification of Germany in 1989/90, also meant the irrevocable integration of Thuringia. The three districts combined with the districts of Altenburg, Schmölln and Artern constituted the 'Bundesland' with a surface area of 16.171 km<sup>2</sup> and 2,7 million inhabitants. Under the 16 federal states Thuringia ranks on 11th or as the case may be on 10th position. Erfurt became the capital of the new Thuringia. Since the adoption of the constitution in 1993, it has been named "Freistaat Thüringen" (Free State of Thuringia) on the basis of 1920. After a first coalition government formed between CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and FDP (Free Democratic Party) (1990–94) as well as a grand coalition between CDU and SPD (1994–99), Thuringia has been governed by the CDU with an absolute majority (state premiers: 1990–92 Josef Duchač, 1992–2003 Bernhard Vogel, since 2003 Dieter Althaus). Thuringia could not escape the drastic problems

that the social and economic change brought (deindustrialisation, unemployment, decline in population). Nonetheless, in many areas Thuringia is able to show good results in comparison with other new federal states.

The famous cultural landscape combined with the charming nature of the "green heart of Germany" attract tourists from across Germany and the world. The inhabitants' strong bond to their "country" is typical of Thuringia. Despite the diversity of state entities and administrative units, there has always been the awareness that there was a superordinate unity, which particularly referred to the landgraviate of Thuringia. Today, Thuringia's coat of arms reminds symbolically of the historic "unity within diversity" by picturing the red-silver streaked Ludowingian 'Thuringian Lion' on blue background surrounded by eight silver stars that represent the former single states and Prussian territories.

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