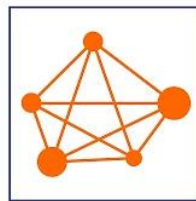


The Liège Revolution and the Electoral Congress of Frankfurt (1790): A Constitutional Compromise in Question

XXIX Annual Forum of Young Legal Historians - Ghent : 17-19/09/2025

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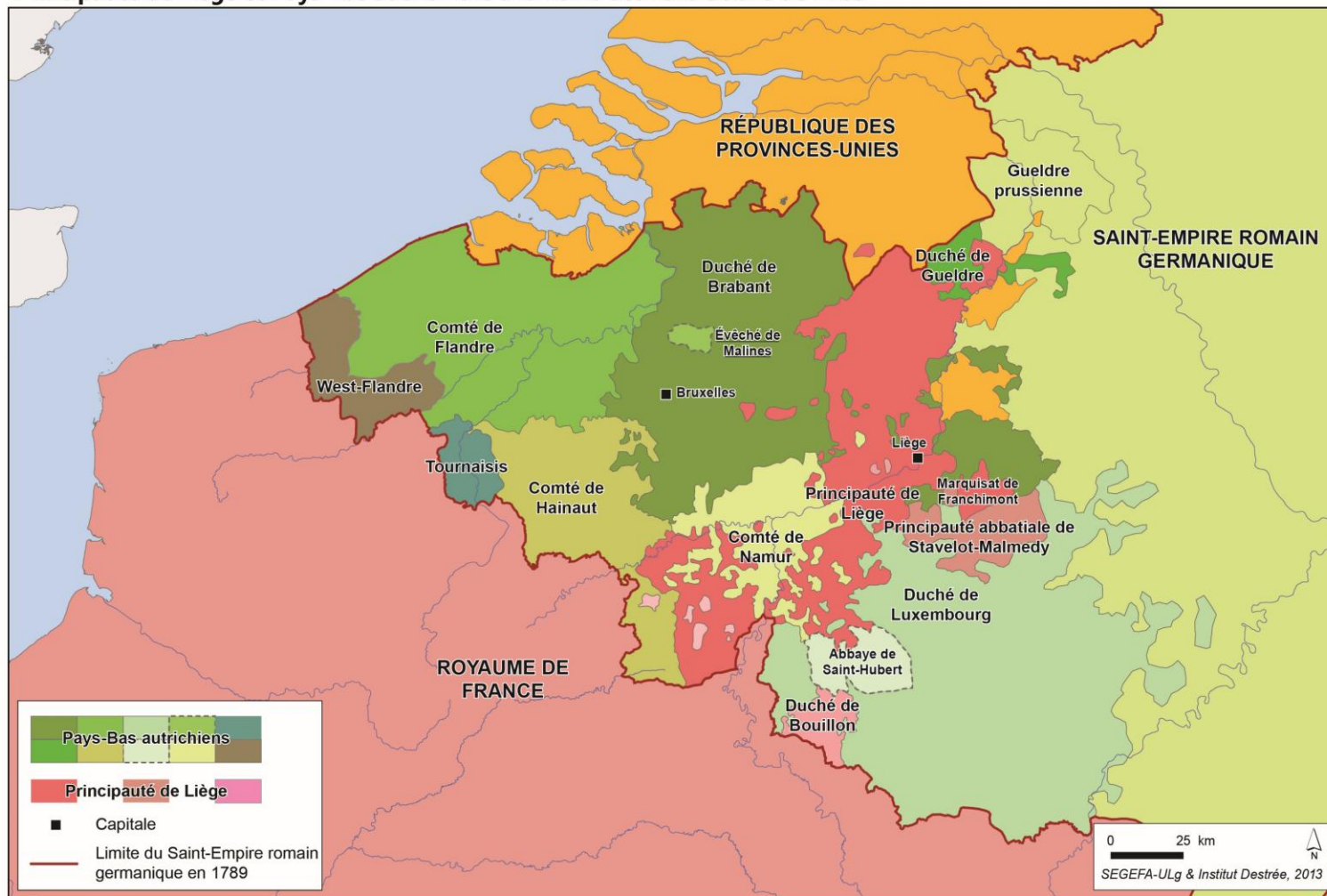
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Historiographical Stakes

- The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt is a relatively overlooked event in the history of the Atlantic Revolutions.
- the existing literature summarises the event as an election without debate, set against a turbulent international backdrop.
- The situation is even more fragmented concerning the Liège Revolution's place in these negotiations.
- Nevertheless, more than a simple imperial election, it sought to shape the constitutional destiny of the regions of present-day Belgium and to resolve the revolutionary crisis raging on the Holy Roman Empire's western frontier.

Principauté de Liège et Pays-Bas autrichiens à la veille des révolutions de 1789

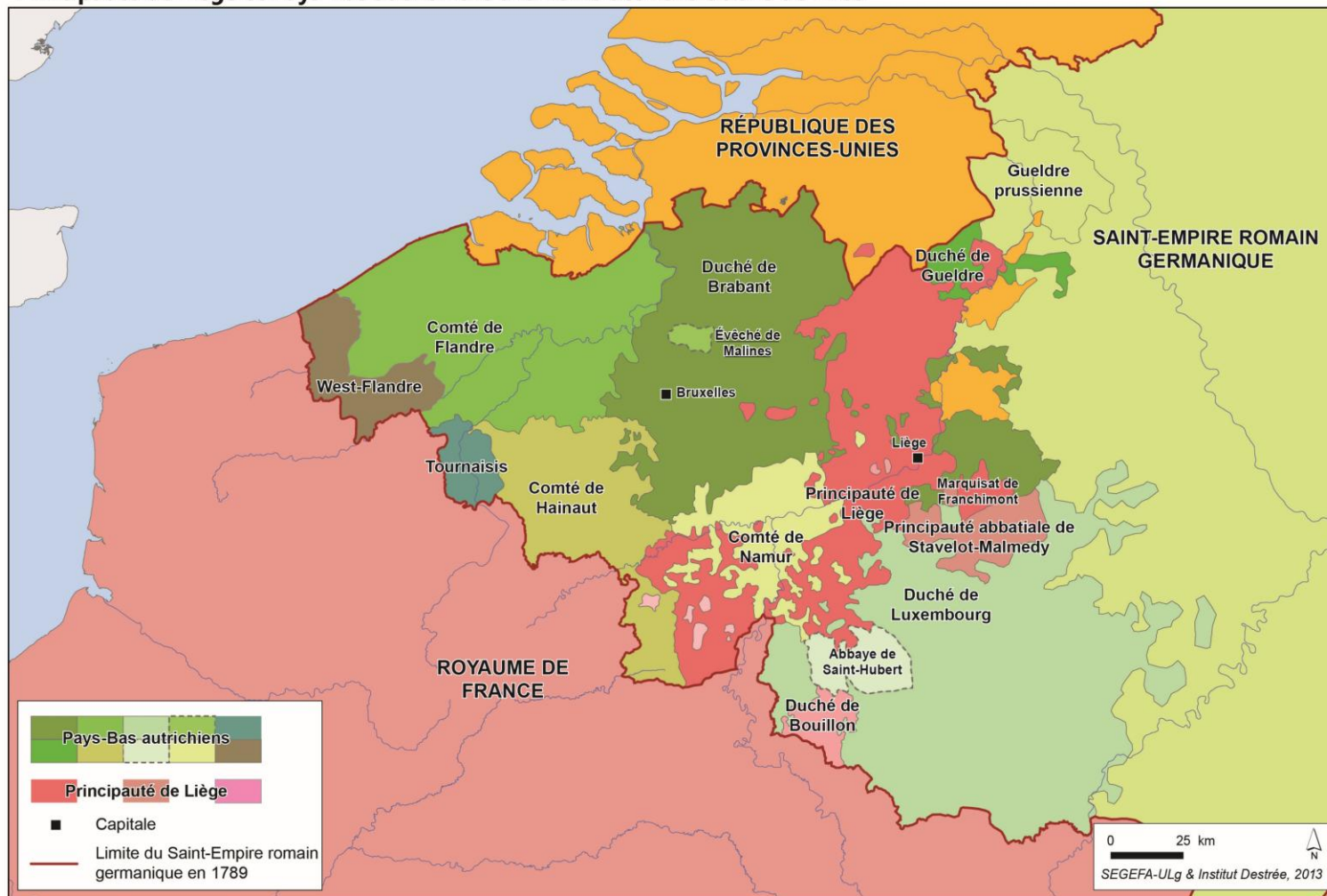


Atlas de la Wallonie, de la préhistoire à nos jours

Historical Context (1)

- On 18 August 1789, a revolution erupted in the Imperial and Episcopal Principality of Liège. It profoundly impacted the region of present-day Belgium, much like the French Revolution and the first Belgian Revolution.
- The Liège Revolution preserved the old power structures even while seeking to redistribute powers more effectively among them and to abolish political or economic privileges.
- Confronted with a similar movement in the Low Countries, Joseph II and several concerned princes initiated proceedings before the Imperial Chamber in Wetzlar.

Principauté de Liège et Pays-Bas autrichiens à la veille des révolutions de 1789



Historical Context (2)

- By the end of 1789, the Imperial Chamber authorised the Lower Rhenish-Westphalian Circle to invade the principality.
- It was led by three directors: the Elector of Cologne, the Elector Palatine and Duke of Bavaria, and the Elector of Brandenburg and King of Prussia.
- However, of the three, only the King of Prussia possessed an army sufficient to confront the country
- The conflict between Prussia and Austria suggested that the Elector of Brandenburg would not meekly follow the Imperial Chamber's and Emperor's orders.



Friedrich-Willelm II - Anton Graff, Oil on canvas (Private collection)



Karl Theodor von Pfalz und Bayern - Johann Georg Ziesenis, Oil on canvas (Private collection)

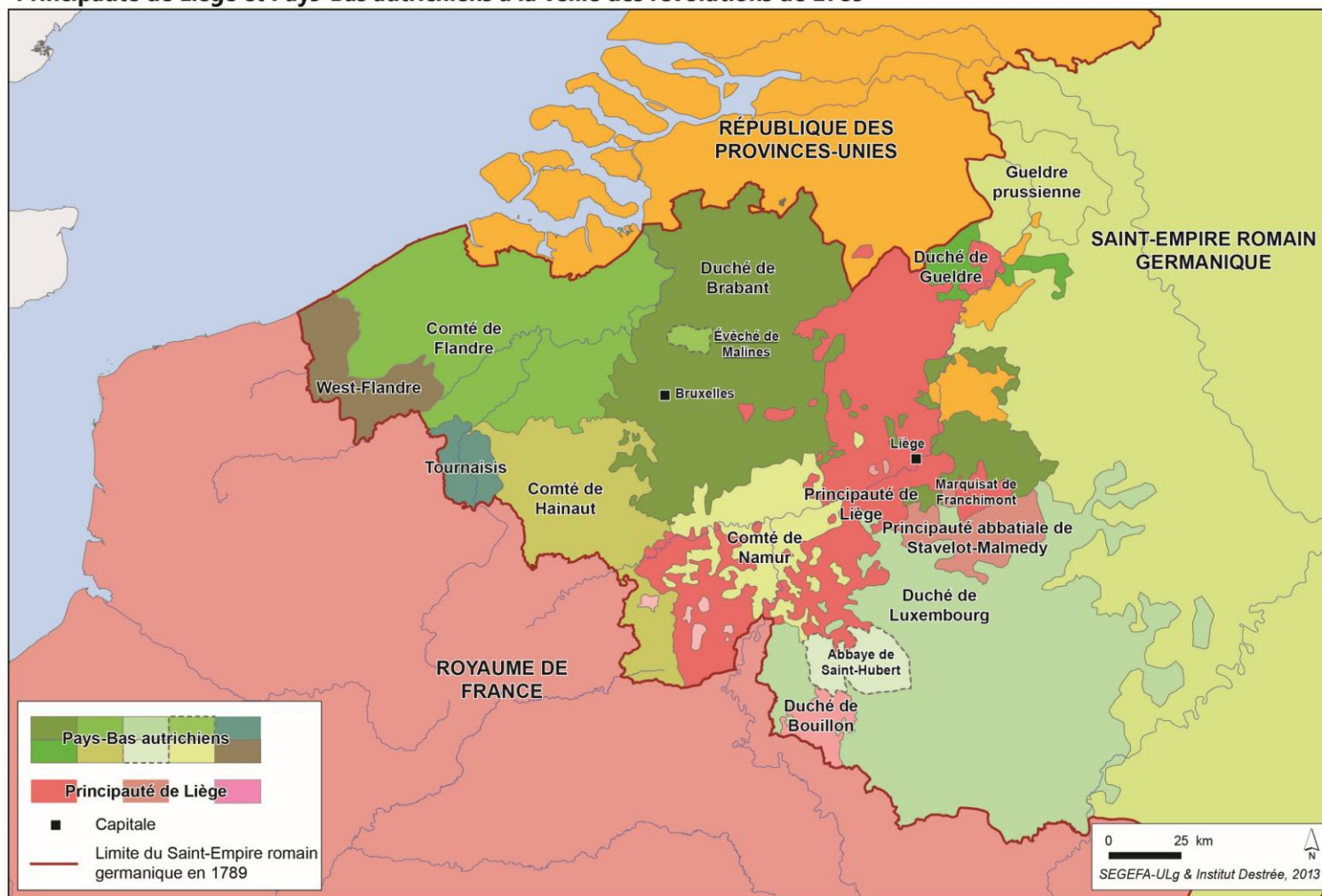


Maximilian von Habsburg, archbishop-elect of Cologne – Anton von Maron, Oil on canvas (Private collection).

Historical Context (3)

- In December 1789, Prussia refused to comply with Wetzlar's injunctions. It even decided to intervene unilaterally in the Principality of Liège, officially to prevent civil war.
- Firstly, the King sought to destabilise Austria in the Low Countries.
- Secondly, the sovereign intended to transform the Liège Revolution into a constitutional laboratory for a forthcoming reform of Imperial law.
- Nevertheless, this protection suffered, from late winter 1790 onwards, from the inherent upheavals within the Liège movement itself.

Principauté de Liège et Pays-Bas autrichiens à la veille des révolutions de 1789



Atlas de la Wallonie, de la préhistoire à nos jours

The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt: Between Compromise and Failure (1)

- In August 1790, the Elector of Mainz convened an electoral congress in Frankfurt for the official election of Leopold of Tuscany as Holy Roman Emperor. This would allow the Electors to informally discuss imperial affairs.
- The future of the revolutionary demands in Liège became the primary subject of the Congress.
- While no prince favoured the idea of a separation or a Liège National Assembly, they did not all agree on the validity of the moderate demands.

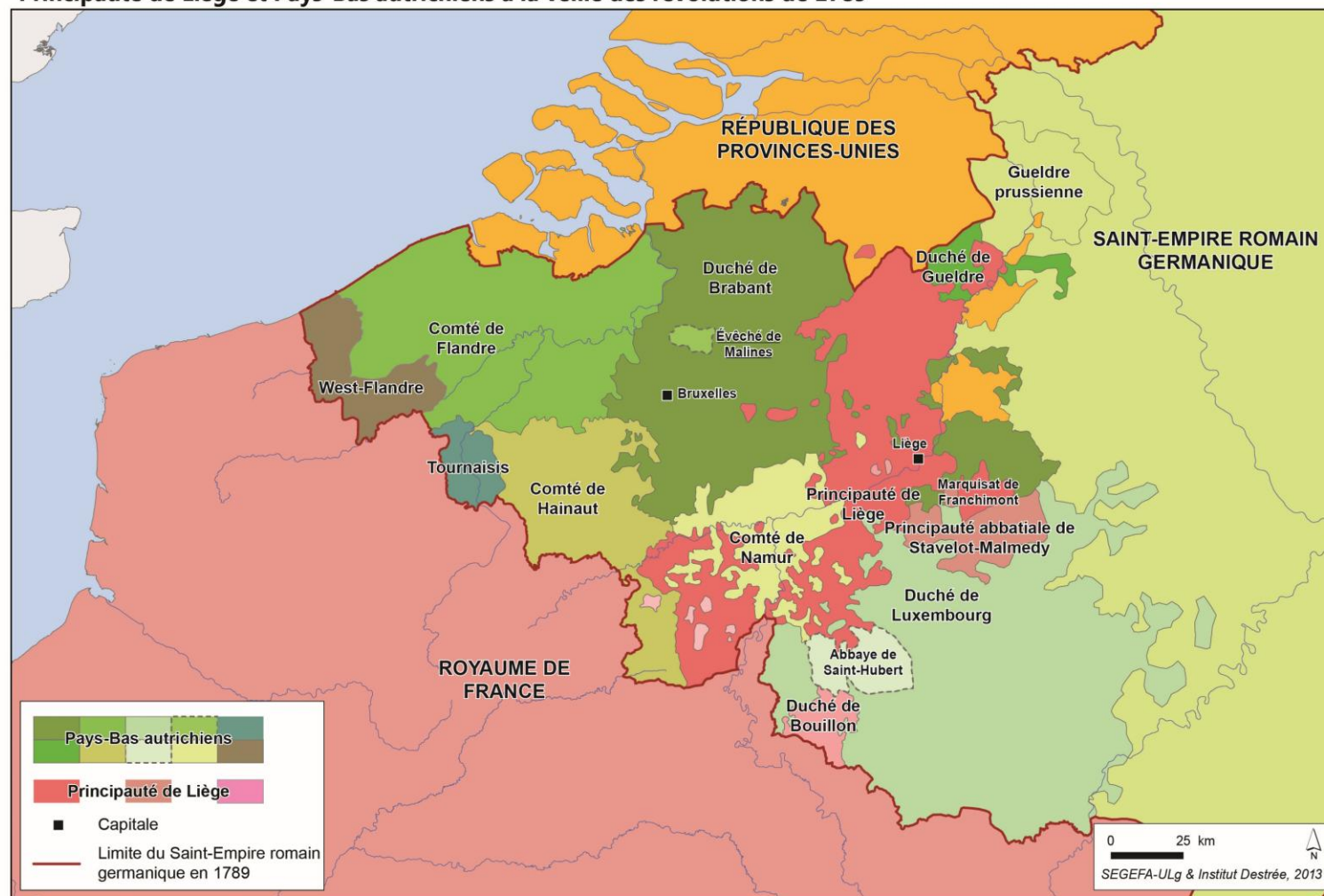
Prince-Electors of the Holy Roman Empire in August 1790

Name	Title / Function	Reign as Elector
Friedrich Karl Joseph von Erthal	Archbishop and Elector of Mainz	1774–1802
Clemens Wenceslaus of Saxony	Archbishop and Elector of Trier	1768–1801
Maximilian Franz of Austria	Archbishop and Elector of Cologne	1784–1801
Leopold II	King of Bohemia	1790–1792
Karl Theodor of Pfalz und Bayern	Elector of Bavaria and Elector Palatine (Personal Union)	1777–1799
Frederick Augustus I	Elector of Saxony	1763–1806
Frederick William II	Elector of Brandenburg (King of Prussia)	1786–1797
George III of Great Britain	Elector of Brunswick-Lüneburg (Hanover)	1760–1806

The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt: Between Compromise and Failure (2)

- Firstly, the Liègeois sought to re-establish the balance between the Prince-Bishop and the country's three estates.
- Secondly, the Revolution hoped to diminish the political and economic privileges of the privileged orders, starting with the clergy.
- For some, these demands were like those of the French Revolution. For others, they were legally founded and could serve as a springboard for a profound reform of the Empire.

Principauté de Liège et Pays-Bas autrichiens à la veille des révolutions de 1789



Atlas de la Wallonie, de la préhistoire à nos jours

The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt: Between Compromise and Failure (3)

- From the opening of the congress, Mainz had dictated the direction of the debates.
- The Prince-Bishop was the first to denounce the proposal of the Elector and he was immediately followed by the Elector of Cologne and the Elector of Trier.
- Furthermore, the revolutionaries, poorly tolerating being excluded, voted to send representatives to Frankfurt despite Berlin's opposition



César-Constantin de
Hoensbroeck, prince-bishop
of Liège, Oil on canvas.



The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt: Between Compromise and Failure (4)

- The Prussian representative in Wetzlar, who also represented the Liège Revolution, was the first to provide a concrete proposal on behalf of Frederick William II.
- The document outlined three measures:
 - The repeal of ordinances reorganising the Estates.
 - The implementation of a census-based electoral system.
 - The retention of deputies elected in 1790 until the convening of new elections.
- The ecclesiastical Electors rejected the project.

The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt: Between Compromise and Failure (5)

- On 26 September, Liège deputies accused the Imperial Chamber of having inflamed the Revolution.
- Faced with this affront, the Electors secretly decided on a new constitutional compromise which we call the first compromise of Frankfurt.
- This text was intended as a preliminary to the re-establishment of perpetual public peace. The Electors had evaded the constitutional question by referring it to a limited commission.

The First Frankfurt Compromise – Summary of the nine Points

Point Number	Summary of the Proposal
Point 1	The estates had to submit completely to the Empire.
Point 2	The Electors asked Hoensbroeck to grant an unconditional amnesty to the revolutionaries.
Point 3	Provided the first two points were fulfilled, the Electors would suspend the execution.
Point 4	The Electors mandated commissioners to verify the submission and disarmament of the revolutionary armies.
Point 5	The commissioners were to restore the regime as it existed before the Revolution, but they could also organise new elections or establish a provisional regency.
Point 6	The Prince-Bishop was to return to Liège to cooperate in redressing grievances against the country's constitution.
Point 7	The princely directors would each send 4,000 soldiers into the principality.
Point 8	All costs related to the execution would be borne by the estates.
Point 9	The commissioners were to mediate conflicts remaining between the prince and the estates and allow for the promulgation of a new constitution.

The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt: Between Compromise and Failure (6)

- Once known in Liège, the first compromise unleashed revolutionary passions.
- the deputies unanimously rejected the text. The break with the Holy Roman Empire then reached a new level.
- However, the moderates of 1789 hoped to renegotiate the compromise, which had the merit of opening the door to constitutional reforms.
- Berlin, anxious to preserve its advantage, drafted the Liège counterproposal.
- The Princes of Cologne and Trier opposed it, as did the secular princes except for Prussia.

Key Events of the Frankfurt Congress (1790)

Date	Description
18 August 1789	Revolution erupts in the Principality of Liège, forcing Prince-Bishop Hoensbroeck into exile.
December 1789	Prussia refuses to comply with Imperial orders and intervenes unilaterally in Liège.
July 1790	Austria and Prussia ratify the Convention of Reichenbach, allowing Austria to suppress revolutions in the Low Countries.
August 1790	Electoral Congress convened in Frankfurt to elect Leopold II and discuss the Liège crisis.
Early September 1790	Electors propose a compromise constitution excluding Liège from negotiations.
26 September 1790	Liège deputies offer submission to the Emperor but reject the illegality of the Revolution.
Late September 1790	Electors secretly draft the First Frankfurt Compromise with ten points including amnesty and restoration.
Early October 1790	Liège radicals reject the compromise; moderates seek renegotiation.
9 October 1790	Second Frankfurt Compromise proposed by Prussia, offering electoral reforms and temporary preservation of clergy privileges.
15 October 1790	Electors meet to discuss a third compromise; most reject it except Prussia.
1 November 1790	Frankfurt Congress dissolved; Westphalian Circle authorised to intervene.
January 1791	Prince-Bishop Hoensbroeck returns and implements authoritarian reforms.



Conclusion: The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt, a Failure?

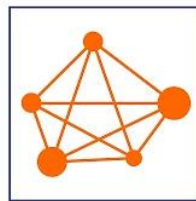
- The Electoral Congress of Frankfurt was the scene of a complex attempt at compromise in the face of a major revolutionary crisis on the western borders of the Holy Roman Empire.
- Its central question was whether the Holy Roman Empire could adapt to the principles of the Atlantic Revolutions.
- Initially, the Electors proposed a vague compromise that, in line with the wishes of the Revolution, the Empire, and the prince, ensured, *de facto*, the triumph of the Prince-Bishop and the ruling elites. Despite an attempt to reopen negotiations and grant the Liègeois the right to elect deputies (the second compromise), the insurmountable differences between the Liège radicals and the Prince-Bishop led to a stalemate.
- This failure was, however, indicative of a political and legal upheaval.
- While the failure of Frankfurt ultimately led to the triumphant return of the Prince-Bishop and a series of authoritarian reforms, it demonstrated the Holy Roman Empire's inability to adapt.

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