Part I

The Empire, the German Lands, and Their Peoples

Topography displays no favourites; North's as near as West.
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colours.
Elizabeth Bishop

If statistics lie with numbers, maps lie with spaces. Their prevarications consist not chiefly in the simplifications required to represent visually physical features, places, and countries in a tiny space, in two dimensions, and in a few colors, for such distortions arise from the inherent limitations on the cartographical representation of geographical and historical realities. Mapmakers do the best they can. The problem lies rather with those makers of national myths who declare polities of distant ages to have been embryonic forms of modern nation-states, and who require maps to support their claims. Consider a map of Latin Christendom in 1400. The map's western tier is after a fashion recognizable today: Scotland and England sit in their places; France lies in the right place, though it is too small; and Iberia presents a recognizable constellation of kingdoms. Eastward, Bohemia, if stripped of its satellite lands, is very nearly the shape of the modern Czech Republic, while a willing eye might see the modern Hungarian Republic in the much truncated form of the old Hungarian kingdom and the Polish Republic as an enlarged, if considerably displaced, version of the old Polish kingdom. The rest is unfamiliar. Only the physical features of mountain, river, and sea enable us to identify Scandinavia, Ireland, and, with a heavier dose of imagination, Italy, that quintessential "geographical expression."

The center, the space of modern Germany and a good deal more, lies at the gradient of recognition's bitter end. Here even the poet Elizabeth Bishop's fine distinction between the historians' and the mapmakers' colors becomes meaningless. The Alps are still the Alps, of course, and the courses of the great rivers still run as they did in 1400, but no other template has anything like a shape recognizable to the untrained modern eye. In the place of Germany we find around 1400 something called "the Holy Roman Empire," the parts of which its peoples called "the German lands." None of its multiple templates – topographical, demographic, ethnolinguistic, ecclesiastical, political, or virtual – sports an obviously ancestral likeness to any of the many Germanys of modern times. Not even the most willing wishful thinking can descry in these landscapes more than a few polities that, even with a great dollop of

courtesy, bear likenesses to what later came to be called "states." Bavaria is one, of course, though it is too small, and Austria is another, though it is too large. For the rest, one might be reading a map of China during the Era of Warring States or Greece in the fifth century BC and trying to imagine that they represent ancestral forms of modern counterparts. In such regions, political configuration, historical cartography's bedrock, leads the student of history utterly astray.

There is hope, however. For once we are willing to lay aside assumptions about the genealogies of modern nations and states, other templates come to the rescue. The place to begin is physical topography, the benchmark template for all other shapes in all parts of the world. In the German lands, apart from some canalization of rivers and poldering (filling in) of arms of the North Sea, the physical landscapes remain today much as they were in earlier times. On this template, then, the others may be laid in their order of comprehensibility.

When the theater is built, the company can come onstage. The peoples of the German lands are ranged according to "estates," which are the legally defined status groups according to the notions and practices of the time. Most conventionally they make up two (actually three) lay estates – peasants, burghers, and nobles – and one clerical estate, because the separation of laity from clergy by the church's canon law formed a general principle of legal status in that age. There was nothing static or essential about estates, not only because of the great social mobility that had made medieval society possible, but also because concepts of estates and schemes of estates evolved in response to changes in social realities. Whether one looks at these peoples in terms of estates, which privileges the law, as people then tended to do, or in terms of classes, which privileges the economy, as we tend to do, is a matter of the historian's choice. It depends on whether we intend to look at them in their own time and place or in relation to the world that evolved from theirs. The historian's complete task is, of course, to do both.

It is by no means false to use the lens of classes and proto-classes, for then, as today, tensions and conflicts between such groups drove social change at the most elemental levels. They are classes in our time, but they were estates in their own. In another kind of historical work, one might translate them and their interrelations from the sources' language into the terms modern thought has extrapolated from the class systems of the capitalist age. This entails special problems – the medieval burghers were not really a proto-bourgeoisie, the peasants and lesser artisans were not a proto-proletariat – but class analysis is perfectly appropriate to an investigation of how the social orders came to be and what they portended for the future. In this book the peoples are brought on stage in groups that they might have recognized, and they are arrayed in their cultural multiplicity, their linguistic divisions, and, fundamentally important for this book, their religion.

Part I opens the book with general chapters on the historical setting and modern images of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (Chapter 1) and the various shapes of the Holy Roman Empire (Chapter 2). The following chapters populate this stage with the temporal (Chapter 3) and spiritual (Chapter 4) estates that form the ensuing story's dramatis personae.

I

Reformations in German Histories

Liberty is characteristic of the Germans.

Justus Lipsius

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Karl Marx

In the beginning was Waterloo. Near that small place south of Brussels on 18 July 1815, the armies of two Protestant kingdoms, Britain and Prussia, joined to crush the polyglot forces of a French power thought in Protestant lands to represent both Revolution and Rome. Within a generation Protestants were celebrating their sixteenth-century reformation as the dawn of a modern age of unprecedented prosperity, freedom, and knowledge. In 1827, with Napoleon only six years dead, the Scottish polymath Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) named the Germans the creators of three keys to modern civilization: the printing press, gunpowder, and Protestantism.[1] (He was right about two of the three.) In 1845–47 his exact contemporary, the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), published his *German History in the Age of the Reformation* (1845–47), the single most influential modern interpretation of the German Protestant reformation. Ranke's vision, contrary to much received opinion, was not national but European. "It is one of the greatest coincidences presented by the history of the world," he wrote,

> that at the moment in which the prospect of exercising dominion over the other hemisphere opened to the Romano-Germanic nations of the Latin church, a religious movement began, the object of which was to restore the purity of revelation. Whilst other nations were busied in the conquest of distant lands, Germany, which had little share in those enterprises, undertook this mighty task.[2]

1 Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 1: 32. Carlyle adapted a judgment of Francis Bacon (*Novum Organum*, 1620, Bk. 1, Aphorism 129), who named three great discoveries unknown to the ancients: printing, gunpowder, and the compass.
2 Leopold von Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*, vol. 1: 176.

Ranke saw, as Carlyle did not, that the transformation begun in Germany with the Protestant reformation had failed its historic tasks. Far from establishing German or revitalizing European unity, it created the division between Catholic and Protestant that ran right through the middle of Ranke's own nation. "The events of an entire millennium," he wrote, "live on in the conflicts between the Empire and the Papacy, between Catholicism and Protestantism, in the midst of which our age still stands."[3]

I. APPROACHING THE SUBJECT

The twentieth century's events have liberated the two terms in the book's title, "German" and "Reformation," from great, old historical narratives.[4] Just as there was no "Germany," so was there no "German history" or "German nation" before the nineteenth century. There lived, however, peoples whose histories unfolded in what they called "the German lands." They had two things in common: their lands lay in a polity named "the Holy Roman Empire," and they spoke mostly forms of German as mother tongues. In those days, "Germany" was a notion through which scholars tried to conceive, often in confused ways, the pluralities of these lands as possessing a definite if not very concrete unity.

Just as there was no singular idea of "Germany," so there was no singular "Reformation." This hard fact of its plurality has surfaced in recent historical writing, in which "Reformation" refers to a complex set of transformations of Western Christianity – Protestant, Catholic, and others – during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Though often in conflict with one another, they shared a zeal for a more spiritual understanding of the Christian religion and a relative social, if not religious, equality of laity and clergy. The transformations' deeper causes lay far back in the rise of cities and trade, the formation of a monarchical church, the organization of universities and invention of new genres of learning, and the fashioning of bureaucratic forms of governance. Their immediate roots lay in the search for security in the era after the Black Death and in a growing political and spiritual empowerment of the laity.

These two clutches of pluralities were related in a particular way. Whereas the reformations arose from forces identifiable in very many parts of Christendom, they – so this book argues – took the form of popular movements only in places where a general weakness of authority and an intense localization of power endowed them with substantial agency. From this perspective the German lands acquire interest as the sites where, first, the Protestant reformations began and first flourished, and, second, the Catholic reformation displayed, in response to the Protestant challenge, its most striking powers of renewal and recovery. In these lands, too, extreme political diversity both gave scope to these reformations and set limits to their possibilities for success. In consequence, the Holy Roman Empire became the site par excellence of a permanent, legally fixed plurality of religions embodied in a structure of multiple confessions.

3 Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 1: 3.
4 The title offers a modest play on Ranke's title, *German History in the Age of the Reformation* (rendered by Sarah Austin, his translator, as *History of the Reformation in Germany*).

The story constructed in this way can be read in both directions.[5] On the one hand, in the German histories the reformations consolidate religious plurality (without religious tolerance) into a stable, overarching polity, the Holy Roman Empire, thereby completing the reconstruction of governance that had begun in the fifteenth century. On the other hand, German histories radically qualify the western European narrative of reformation religions as cohesive forces in the rise of the typically modern form of the European imperial nation-state. The first reading largely informs this book; the second I must leave to other hands.

The meanings of the story told here will be altered, of course, if its two contexts are expanded into the times that followed those treated here. At the end of this book stands a glance forward into the subsequent history of the Holy Roman Empire and into German history down to the Great War. Brief and of modest scope, it is more a set of suggestions than an argument.

The story presented here does not attempt to integrate fully the German histories into a general European history. To do that would require a conceptual fusion of two quite differently figured narratives. The first, social narrative finds early modern German histories conforming closely to general European norms, regardless of whether one looks at population, family and household, gender relations, or the growth of the market economy. What is called the "old European marriage pattern" of late marriage, household formation, and many celibates dominated the entire zone west of a line drawn from Trieste to St. Petersburg. Zero-growth agriculture constrained the zone's economies and continuously reproduced an unequal distribution of output, although capitalist structures and relations of production were simultaneously taking firm root in both countryside and town. These striking conformities of the German lands to European social patterns lend no support to arguments for German exceptionalism.

An integrated political narrative, on the other hand, uncovers German forms and practices so wildly diverse and particular that they can only with the greatest difficulty be classified at all. The term "political" covers here the entire realm of what may be called "public life," a world in which authority, power, belief, and behavior remained (from the modern point of view) fused and interwoven. Political and religious norms were public, because they generated and reproduced, bounded and informed the terms of governance in units great and small. "Public life" is therefore not to be confused with the modern concept of a "public sphere," which is a creation of bourgeois society in the age of capitalism. The latter's hallmarks are separation of public from private life, centralization of power, uniformity of legal status, and a degree of secularization at least in principle. In the German lands, by contrast, until post-Napoleonic times, public life depended on what subsequently came to be disaggregated into politics and religion, each gaining its own distinct history. "This is the reason," Ranke wrote,

> why church history cannot be understood without political history, and vice versa. Only the combining of the two allows each to appear in its true light and leads perhaps to an intuition of the deeper level of life from which both arise. If this is the case in all nations, it is especially visible in the Germans, who of all peoples have concerned

5 It can also be read in a third direction, hinted at earlier, toward the history of European and post-European Christianity.

themselves with greatest persistence and originality with things ecclesiastical and religious.[6]

Judged by other early modern European histories, those of the Germans represent an extreme in this regard. They therefore require to a special degree a binocular vision that sees both their fundamentally European track from an agrarian-feudal to an industrial-capitalist world and their peculiar patterns of managing power through political and religious diversity. It might be possible to integrate these two ways of seeing into a new grand narrative of European history, but this would require a book of longer scope and broader learning.

2. PECULIARITIES OF GERMAN HISTORIES

This book relates a narrative of authority, belief, power, and tradition. It is typically European in its inner substance but not in its manifestations. It is European in that the early modern Empire, like the western kingdoms, arose fairly rapidly between 1400 and 1650 on foundations laid in an earlier age but ravaged, if not swept bare, by the epidemics and economic depression of the fourteenth century. The story is atypically European in that the German lands' recovery preserved and even enhanced the multiplicity and autonomy of polities, both temporal and spiritual. This book explores how one group of lands, loosely aggregated into a common polity both temporal and spiritual, undertook to reform and strengthen its overarching polity during this era of recovery. It tells how their efforts produced a simultaneous realization of political and frustration of religious reform; how this outcome briefly opened the space for an unprecedented intervention from below into the great issues of politics and religion; how the resulting conflicts led to a negotiated settlement and a provisional stabilization of the entire polity; and how, in the wake of the greatest of Europe's religious wars, the polity reconstituted itself to endure for another 150 years. In sum, the German lands' recovery from the late medieval depression preserved and even enhanced the multiplicity and autonomy of polities, temporal and spiritual. They did not take the road toward the European imperial nation-state.

In writing this book I have tried to shun arguments and judgments based on assumptions about unique experiences and national character. While no one can deny the existence of unique experiences of individuals, perhaps even of specific human groups – beyond the obvious truth that in some sense every human experience is unique and therefore at the deepest level incomparable – such things have no value for the historian who aims to explain. In history, as in physics, the singular cannot be explained, the incomparable cannot be comprehended but only admired or deprecated. Against this incomprehension the historian's chief weapon is comparison or analysis. "Human reality, like that of the physical world, is vast and variegated," Marc Bloch (1886–1944) wrote, and the historian's analysis of it begins when "he seeks out the similarities in order to compare them."[7] This requires a certain assumption, perhaps an act of faith, for, because the assumed uniformity is limited to some very general aspects, "the criticism of evidence relies upon an instinctive metaphysics of

6 Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 1: 4.
7 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 144.

the similar and the dissimilar, of the one and the many."[8] In other words, the one is not the opposite of but the complement to the many.

The historical record is riddled with claims to uniqueness or incomparability. Some of these were simply expressions of feelings of the time. When the Württemberg jurist Friedrich Carl von Moser (1723–98) wrote in 1765 that "we are a people with name and speech under one common ruler, under laws of a single kind, and bound to a great, common interest in liberty," he was paying (deserved or undeserved) tribute to the hardened dispersal of governance in the Holy Roman Empire.[9] It was not long after that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) placed a quite contrary notion into the mouth of Frosch, a student at Leipzig: "The Holy Roman Empire, lads, / How can it possibly hold together?"[10] To Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), the defunct Empire was the "moldiest load of junk with all its trumpery";[11] to Gustav Freytag (1816–95) it was a "miraculous creation of a soul without a body."[12] This progressive mystification of that old political order helps to explain why a modern scholar, puzzled by dissimilarity, should wonder why "the fragmented Holy Roman Empire lasted so long in the midst of consolidating, bellicose monarchies. Why didn't it disappear into the maws of large, powerful states?"[13] It is one thing for the historian to recognize and mark off things that are not or perhaps cannot be known. It is quite another thing, however, to elevate the dissimilar into the mysteriously (and pathologically) unique by locating "the origin of what distinguishes German history from the history of the great western European nations" in "the memory of the greatness of the German Middle Ages" and "the earthly reflection of eternity and the ultimate basis of the Germans' mission."[14]

Another example of hypostasizing dissimilarity into uniqueness is the longstanding dogma of the Germans' political passivity, what is sometimes called "zombie obedience" (*Kadavergehorsamkeit*). A story from Kurt Tucholsky (1890-1935) illustrates the term's meaning. "Mommy! Mommy!" cries a young lad, "Georgie keeps hitting me! He says I should sit in the trash can and sing 'The Watch on the Rhine'! We're playing soldier. I don't want to sit in the trash can, Mommy!" The mother replies, "Why do you do what he says, you lazybones, you yellow-belly?" With sudden enlightenment the young boy says, "Because he's my boss."[15] Like all tales that rest on belief in national character, this one "explains" some modern event or process in terms of a timeless characteristic. It rests on the assumption that the German past was peculiarly burdened by authoritarian governance, which instilled in Germans a peculiar mental habit of obedience. Once again, dissimilarity is escalated into uniqueness. Truth to tell, premodern German governance in the hands of princes, nobles, and magistrates was hardly more authoritarian than France's royal or England's Parliamentary absolutism, but it was authoritarian in a different way.

8 Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 115–16.
9 Friedrich Carl von Moser, *Von dem deutschen Nationalgeist*, 5.
10 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, vol. 7: 90, ll. 2090–1.
11 Heinrich Heine, *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen*, 130.
12 James J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866*, 145.
13 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 1990–1992*, 65. "Religious organizations" is Tilly's quaint term for the German ecclesiastical principalities.
14 Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, vol. 1: 554.
15 Peter Blickle, *Obedient Germans? A Contradiction*, 11.

Absolutist rule in the western style found meager soil east of the Rhine. In the German lands the localization of governance precipitated by the late medieval crisis had dispersed power into and conferred authority on many middling, small, or even tiny polities. The most durable product of post-medieval German politics was not Prussia or the other large states, but Switzerland.

This critique of the exaggeration of dissimilarities into oppositions can be extended into the other major sector of this book's narrative, religion. That the Germans were and are an especially devout people, a long series of observers, German and foreign, has asserted. It was expressed by the Göttingen theologian Carl Friedrich Stäudlin (1761–1826), Goethe's contemporary. "The Germans are still on the whole a very religious people [*Nation*]," he wrote, "and true religious education [*Bildung*] and Enlightenment have attained a higher level among them than among any other nation." In his time, Stäudlin thought, there began "a new revolution in religious knowledge and in the theological sciences" so general that it can "in comparison with other nations be put forth as a general characteristic of the [German] nation."[16] The chief thing to notice in this text is that Stäudlin speaks of religion, not as personal belief, devotion, and praxis – its traditional meaning – but as education, knowledge, and science. Put plainly, religion is culture. His concept shares much with what Ranke meant when he remarked that "the German nation ... has most persistently and independently concerned itself with ecclesiastical and religious matters."[17] The Protestant reformation, Ranke thought, expressed "the maturation of the spirit of Christianity, which had lain latent in the depths of the Germanic nature, to the consciousness of its essence, independent of all accidental forms; in a return to its origin – to those records in which God's eternal covenant with the human race is directly proclaimed."[18] Yet for Ranke the comprehensible aspect of "God's eternal covenant" is not the possibility of individual salvation from the consequences of sin through God's grace, but the welfare of this world. "From the purely historical point of view," he writes, the total triumph of Protestant religion in the German lands "would have been the best thing for the national development of Germany."[19]

Precisely this – the development or the domination of a national religion – did not happen in the German lands either in the age of reformations or thereafter. Instead, there arose a configuration of multiple, transpolitical religious communities – confessions – a configuration that differed from those of other countries chiefly in its longevity. Neither religions nor churches, the confessions fixed the outcomes of the reformations. "The reformation as a historical event," it has been said, "could not have had such far-reaching consequences, had the political system of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation not presented it with the possibilities for fixing itself in the territories, despite the emperor's resistance."[20] Whether the confessions survived so long because of a uniquely German devotion to religion, the historian cannot say, but they certainly endured because of their embeddedness in the public life of the German lands under the Empire and, in more recent times, their toughness in the face of the claims of a hegemonic national state.

16 Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, *Kirchliche Geographie und Statistik*, vol. 2: 324–5.
17 Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 1: 3.
18 Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 2: 111–12.
19 Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 3: 272.
20 Stefan Ehrenpreis and Ute Lotz-Heumann, *Reformation und konfessionelles Zeitalter*, 1.

3. LISTENING AND TELLING

German Histories is a drama in four parts. Part I (Chapters 1–3) sets the stage and introduces the actors in terms of the physical, political, economic, ecclesiastical, social, and cultural landscapes of the German lands. Part II (Chapters 4–8) recounts the reconstruction of political governance and the programs of religious reform from 1400 to 1520. Part III (Chapters 9–12) examines the movements for religious reform from the beginnings of the Protestant reformation to the consolidation of religious peace around 1580. Part IV (Chapters 13–17) takes the story forward through the formation of the Protestant confessions and the Catholic revival, the treatment of dissenters (Jews, Christian heretics, and witches), and the Thirty Years War. A final chapter presents conclusions and reflections and suggests in broad terms the questions this work raises to historians who write on more recent eras.

This braided narrative sums up the author's participation in the historian's perennial struggle to establish general, explicable similarities among multiple phenomena without destroying their concrete shapes and specific meanings. The topography of the deeper German past, its strong pluralities and weak unities, makes this an especially daunting task, because the oceans of empirical diversity tend to overwhelm the islands of conceptual unity. The resulting liens on coherence menace the historian's native posture between two purposes: achieving understanding and proposing explanation. Understanding or comprehending the past in its own terms requires us to examine the sources truthfully and skillfully. In them lie sleeping, mused Arthur J. Quinn (1942–97), "these shades from time gone, . . . geniuses of a certain time and a certain place, . . . all strangely requiring only a little of our blood to return to fleeting life, to speak to and through us."[21] "The past will be made more understandable," H. C. Erik Midelfort writes, addressing the same point, if historians "take as a first task the attempt to see a distant world and its problems as people did in the past."[22]

Upon understanding should follow explanation, comprehending the past in the light of and for the sake of the present. Our study of the past, wrote the German Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) nearly a century ago, "for all its striving after exactitude, objectivity, and minuteness of investigation, . . . [is] constantly obliged to come back to present experience. The present continually hovers before the backward-looking glance, because it is by the aid of analogies drawn from the life of to-day – however little this may be consciously before the mind – that we reach the causal explanation of the events of the past."[23] We are as much a part of our past as it is of us.

Two purposes, one goal. Like Buridan's ass the historian shuttles back and forth between two equally desirable objects, lured at once by a hunger to understand the past as reported by those who lived it and by a thirst to explain it comprehensibly to one's own age. Getting the events right and embedding the personalities and events correctly in the proper settings should make the past understandable by putting us outside ourselves and allowing us to converse with those long dead. Finding out why

21 Arthur J. Quinn, *A New World: An Epic of Colonial America from the Founding of Jamestown to the Fall of Quebec*, 2.
22 H. C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, 3.
23 Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World*, 17.

the story should matter then drives us back to our own time, when we see how our times are similar to and dissimilar from times past. Ranke said the same thing in the words of his own day: "Out of the distance of the centuries, we come to know the great combinations that lie within things; acting in present time, however, we cannot depend on this knowing."[24]

24 Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 4: 50.