This book studies the connections between the political reform of the Holy Roman Empire and the German lands around 1500 and the sixteenth-century religious reformation, both Protestant and Catholic. It argues that the character of the political changes (dispersed sovereignty, local autonomy) prevented both a general reformation of the Church before 1520 and a national reformation thereafter. The resulting settlement maintained the public peace through politically structured religious communities (confessions), thereby avoiding further religious strife and fixing the confessions into the Empire’s constitution. The Germans’ emergence into the modern era as a people having two national religions was the reformation’s principal legacy to modern Germany.

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German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650

Thomas A. Brady Jr.

University of California, Berkeley
To Kathy

Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear
And the rocks melt wi’ the sun;
I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o’ life shall run.
Contents

Figures, Maps, and Tables  xi
Acknowledgments  xiii
A Note on Usages  xv

Part I. The Empire, the German Lands, and Their Peoples

1. Reformations in German Histories  3
   1. Approaching the Subject  4
   2. Peculiarities of German Histories  6
   3. Listening and Telling  9

2. Shapes of the German Lands  11
   1. Topography – The Lay of the Land  12
   2. Languages  14
   3. The Church  15
   4. German Lands, German States  18
   5. Populations, Economies, Societies  21
   6. Universities  23
   7. Printing – The German Art  26
   8. Shapes of the German Lands  27

3. Temporal Estates – Farmers, Traders, Fighters  29
   2. “Those Who Work” – Burghers  34
   3. “Those Who Fight” – Nobles  42

4. The Church and the Faith  49
   1. Parishes and Pastors  50
   2. The Regular Clergy  52
   3. Bishops  54
   4. A Noble Church  56
Contents

5. Religion – The Bond of Society 59
6. Christian Pieties in the Fifteenth Century 63

Part II. Reform of the Empire and the Church, 1400–1520

5. Reform of Empire and Church 71
   1. The Imperial Monarchy – Luxemburg Projects 72
   2. Sigismund – The Luxemburgs’ Second Chance 74
   3. Thinking about Imperial Reform 80
   4. The Passing of the Luxemburgs 86

6. The Empire and the Territorial States 89
   1. A Habsburg Comes to the Throne 90
   2. A Meeting of Minds with Rome 92
   3. The Terrible Decades 93
   4. The Culture of Violence 96
   5. The Origins of the German Territorial State 97
   6. The Territorial State – Character and Growth 99
   7. Frederick as Emperor and His End 104

7. The Reform of the Empire in the Age of Maximilian I 107
   1. Young Maximilian 108
   2. A New Way of Governance – Austria 110
   3. Imperial Reform 114
   4. The Imperial Warlord 121
   5. Matters Out of Hand 123
   6. Maximilian’s End 126

8. Ideals and Illusions of Reforming the Church 131
   1. The Caesaropapist Illusion – Emperor and Church Reform 132
   2. The National Illusion – Blaming Rome, Discovering Germany 135
   3. The Communal Illusion – Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg 140
   4. Maximilian I and the Imperial Church 144
   5. Martin Luther – Friar, Professor, and Prophet 146
   6. Luther’s Appeal to the Christian Nobility (1520) 150
   7. Charles V and Luther at the Diet of Worms (1521) 152

Part III. Church, Reformations, and Empire, 1520–1576

9. Urban Reformations 161
   1. Contours of Urban Reformation 161
   2. The Power of the Word, Printed and Spoken 164
   3. Patricians, Nuns, and Monks 172
   4. Burghers and Priests 177
## Contents

### 10. A Revolution of the Common Man

1. *The Making of a Revolution* – 1525 186
3. *Political Programs of the German Peasants’ War* 191
5. *Reckonings, Retribution, and Restoration* 200
6. *Peaceable Kingdoms* – Anabaptism 201

### 11. Imperial Reformations in the Age of Charles V

1. *The Habsburg Brothers as Lords of the Empire* 207
2. Empire and Reformations – The Beginnings, 1521–1524 209
3. In the Shadow of Revolution – The Birth of Protestantism, 1525–1529 213
4. A Moment of Decision – Augsburg, 1530 217
5. The Rise and Fall of the Smalkaldic League 220
6. The Bitter Fruits of the Emperor’s Victory 227

### 12. Imperial Peace, 1555–1580

1. The Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555) 231
2. Securing the Peace 233
3. The Empire in the Era of Religious Wars 237
4. The Saxony’s – Order and Revolution 239
5. Imperial Catholicism – Emperor Maximilian II 245
6. The Schism and the Empire’s Future 247
7. The “Second Reformation” of German Calvinism 252
8. An Emperor’s End 254

### Part IV. Confessions, Empire, and War, 1576–1650

### 13. Forming the Protestant Confessions

1. Luther’s Reformation and the State 259
2. Forming the Lutheran Confession 264
3. Pax lutheranorum 266
4. Reconstructing Churches 268
5. The Reformed Confession – A Second Reformation? 271
6. Forming a New Clergy 277
7. Reforming the Laity – Disciplining Marriage 281
8. Protestant Evangelization 285
9. The Harvest of the Protestant Reformations 289

### 14. Reforming the Catholic Church

1. The Ordeal of the Imperial Church 291
2. Bavaria – Wellspring of Catholic Resurgence 294
3. Counterreformation and Catholic Reformation in Inner Austria 296
4. The Struggle for Upper and Lower Austria 299
5. Imperial Bishops and Catholic Reforms 302
6. Rome, Italy, and the German Lands 307
Contents

7. Jesuitesses – Women and Catholic Reforms 310
8. Catholic Evangelizations 314

15. Limits of Public Life – Jews, Heretics, Witches 319
   1. German Jewry from Persecution to Convivencia 320
   2. From Prosecution to Exile – Heretics 327
   3. Purging Satan’s Servants – Witches 336
   4. The Entropy of Religious Coercion 346

16. Roads to War 349
   1. The Military Revolution in the German Lands 351
   2. The Specter of the Turk 353
   3. The Imperial Convivencia and Catholic Resurgence 365
   4. Aristocratic Politics and Confessional Strife 367
   5. The Habsburgs and Their Bohemian Problem 370

17. The Thirty Years War 375
   1. The Bohemian War to the Imperial War 376
   2. The Enterprise of War – Finances and Forces 381
   3. The Human Face of War – Soldiers and Savages 386
   4. The Protestant Cause – Gustavus Adolphus and Wallenstein 392
   5. End Game – The Final Phase 398

18. German Reformations, German Futures 405
   1. The Age of Reformations 406
   2. From the Old Confessional Order to the New Confessionalism 409
   3. The Rankean Spell and the Age of Reformations 417

Appendix 421
Glossary 427
Bibliography 433
Index 453
Figures, Maps, and Tables

Figures

1. The Knight, Death, and the Devil (Albrecht Dürer. Engraving. 1513/14) page 46
4. Printings of Luther’s Writings, Total and Vernacular Editions, 1516–1545 165
7. Luther’s Game of Heresy (Unknown master. Woodcut. 1520: Geisberg/Strauss, German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1500–1550, vol. 4: no. 1535) 169
8. Jesus Drives the Money-lenders from the Temple; the Pope Welcomes Them into the Church (Lucas Cranach the Elder. Woodcut. 1521: Lucas Cranach the Elder, Das Passional Christi und Antichristi, Wittenberg, 1521) 170
11. Imperial Diets per Decade, 1490–1599 223
13. Lutheran Church Governance: Albertine Saxony, 1580 269
xii

Figures, Maps, and Tables

14. Reformed Church Governance: The Palatinate, 1563 270
15. Taxpayers at Frankfurt am Main, 1556–1607 326
18. Two Turks with Four Captives (Erhard Schoen. Woodcut. 1529: Geisberg/Strauss, German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1500–1550, vol. 4: no. 1192) 357
19. Lansquenets with Camel, Dromedary, and Turkish Captives (Erhard Schoen. Woodcut. 1530: Geisberg/Strauss, German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1500–1550, vol. 4: no. 1199) 358

Maps

1. The Empire in 1547 xvii
2. The Peace of Westphalia, 1648 xviii
3. Ecclesiastical Organization of the Empire, Ca. 1500 17
4. Bavaria at the Time of the Reformation 58
5. Imperial Circles of 1512 125

Tables

1. Population of the German Lands, 1300–1800 21
2. Payment of the Common Penny, 1495–1499 118
3. The Imperial Diet according to the Register of 1521 153
4. The Formation of a Pastors’ Church in the Duchy of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel and the City of Brunswick, 1585–1630 278
5. Executions of Anabaptists in the German Lands, 1525–1618 328
6. Executions for Witchcraft in the German Lands 340
I have striven neither to mock human actions, nor to weep at them, nor to hate them, but to understand them.

Benedict de Spinoza

This book seeks neither to praise nor condemn the past, nor to justify the present nor to impose a mortgage on the future. It essays to address neither the great issues of German national history nor the current controversies about recent German and European history. The work of a double stranger, neither German nor European, it is written in the first place for fellow strangers, though certainly not for them alone, and in a voice as free as possible from both myths of national superiority or inferiority, and pseudo-theological clouds of guilt, retribution, and incomparability.

While writing this book I have thought especially about other strangers, who might welcome more explanation and orienting information than was available when I began to study this subject. I have written also with a special thought to readers from the lands in which my story is laid, including both those who know the older interpretations and those who come fresh to the subject. In addition to the explanatory notes, therefore, I have added reference materials at the end (references and a glossary).

This book’s themes and argument reflect a long road traveled from the time, forty-five years ago, when, as it turns out, my preparation for writing it began. From my teachers, some of them German refugees, I learned a vision of German history as tragedy, the twentieth century’s self-destruction of a great people at the height of its achievement. From younger West German scholars I learned in the 1960s and 1970s how to study the local and regional histories, which seemed at the time a retreat into pure particularism but in fact allowed larger histories to be told in new ways. From the East Germans, who came into my ken in the 1970s and 1980s, I learned or relearned how to see German histories in terms of the large continuities and restless conflicts, for the mastery of which the insights of historical materialism proved their worth. And from the Alsatians, the Swabians, and the Swiss, among whom I have lived and worked, I learned that peoples can cope with the complexities of modern life without surrendering their fond sense of even deeper, more complex pasts or lusting after power over others. To all of these guides, living and dead, I owe boundless debts I can never repay.

Not once in this passage have I ever been alone. While the inseparability of teaching and research is often academic life’s most treasured cliché, for me it has taken on full
flesh in the writing of this book. History – and this is the motto of my seminars – is not a combat sport. It is a collective search whose soul is debate and dialogue. I have always been surrounded by colleagues who have inspired and supported my reach across generations, disciplines, and nationalities. Some have been my students, some my teachers, in the United States or abroad, and some both. They have pushed me year after year to reconsider opinions, received or my own, and to strive for a presentation of German and European histories that is accurate, intelligible, responsible, and fair.

How could I possibly thank all those who aided, many unwittingly, in the making of this book? To render them all adequate thanks would require a roll as long as my story. It would bear the names of my teachers at the universities of Notre Dame and Chicago and Columbia University; of the colleagues who gave me twenty-three happy years at the University of Oregon and eighteen more at the University of California in Berkeley; of historians in North America, Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, and other countries, with whom I have discussed and debated their work and mine; and of archivists, librarians, staff members, and research assistants who contributed to this book in various, indispensable ways. Among them I single out the colleagues (in alphabetical order) who read parts or all of the manuscript and/or supplied me with references and sources: Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Erica Bastress-Dukehart, Peter Blickle, Miriam U. Chrisman, Luke S. Clossey, Deborah Cohen, Brad Gregory, Carina L. Johnson, Greta G. Kroeker, Howard B. Louthan, Christopher Ocker, Michael O. Printy, Thomas N. Robisheaux, James J. Sheehan, Peter E. Starenko, and Ellen M. Yutzy Glebe. Jeanne E. Grant and Tyler Lange read drafts and completed citations. Very special thanks are due to Julie K. Tanaka, who read the entire manuscript several times with her sharp editorial eye, made many corrections, and gave many helpful suggestions. Katie Russell of Berkeley’s Geography Department created the maps. In addition to them all, I am beholden to the students, undergraduates and graduates, who over many years have inspired me to investigate new subjects and to question my ideas about old ones, and who have taught me that nothing is truly self-explanatory.

I owe special thanks to the directors and staff of two special institutions, both of which support resident scholars with exemplary dedication and efficiency. The Historisches Kolleg in Munich, which is dedicated to the advancement of historical studies, was my scholarly home in 1998–99. There I made the first, ultimately decisive, revisions of this book. I am grateful to the Kolleg’s curators and staff and especially to Dr. Elisabeth Müller-Luckner for her kindness and help. The second institution is the National Humanities Center, a magnificently organized and superbly operated home of scholarship in the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. There I completely revised the manuscript again in 2001–2. I am grateful to the director, trustees, and staff, and especially to Dr. Kent Mullikin, for that golden year. For a scholar to work in either of these houses is a foretaste of the Elysian Fields.

In the book’s final phase I received most support from Cambridge University Press, and in particular from my editor, Eric Crahan, and my copy editor, Sally Nicholls. To them my heartfelt thanks.

Last and best, my deepest and most enduring gratitude goes to Kathy, my incomparable wife, companion, friend, and collaborator for more than forty years. She is present in all my work as in my thoughts; she lends me her courage when I have none; and she gives me her precious counsel at need. Some time ago and with not a little Swabian hyperbole, Peter Blickle compared our partnership to that of Marx and Engels. “If we are to live up to that mark,” I whispered to her, “we must each grow more whiskers.”
A Note on Usages

I have tried to avoid unnecessary capitalization and to use English equivalents as frequently as possible. The terms “Empire” and “Imperial” are capitalized only when the historic polity of the Holy Roman Empire is meant. “Church” is capitalized when the entire Western, or Roman Catholic, Church is meant. As the Imperial church is but one branch, it is not capitalized. “Reformation” is not capitalized, except when it refers to the entire movement of Protestant and Catholic reform.

The Holy Roman Empire (of the German Nation) refers to a polity, not a country. It corresponds roughly to “the German lands,” which are the German-speaking lands, including Bohemia and, sometimes, the colonized Baltic areas. While the adjectival form “German” is frequently used, the noun “Germany” refers to the post-Napoleonic country. The one exception is the humanists’ Roman-inspired use of “Germany” as a collective alternative for “the German lands.”

The term “evangelical” is used to mean Biblicist religion in the sixteenth century, either separated or not from the Church of Rome. Protestant is used to mean those people who call themselves “evangelical” in opposition to Rome.

The term “bishopric” normally refers to both the diocese under the bishop’s spiritual authority and the territory (Hochstift) under his feudal temporal jurisdiction.

The names of members of ruling dynasties take their English forms, those of others retain the original forms.

Place names are given in their usual English forms or, if no such form exists, in the form of the country in which they lie (e.g., Strasbourg not Straßburg), or in more than one form then or now used (to help the reader to locate them).

The words “upper” and “lower” in topographical names always refer to altitude or drainage, so that “upper” is always topographically higher than “lower.”

Many of the references used are German-language texts. Where these are quoted, unless indicated, the translations are mine.

In the period around 1600, German monetary equivalents would have been as follows: 1 Gulden (fl.) = 0.85 Thaler (Th.) = 4 “old” pounds (lb.) = 15 Batzen (Bz.) = 20 Schilling (sch.) = 60 Kreuzer (dr.) = 120 pence (d.) = 240 Heller (H.).
Map 1. The Empire in 1547