German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650

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 reformations, 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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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*  
*Acknowledgments*  
*A Note on Usages*

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

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

2. Shapes of the German Lands  
   1. *Topography – The Lay of the Land*  
   2. *Languages*  
   3. *The Church*  
   4. *German Lands, German States*  
   5. *Populations, Economies, Societies*  
   6. *Universities*  
   7. *Printing – The German Art*  
   8. *Shapes of the German Lands*

3. Temporal Estates – Farmers, Traders, Fighters  
   1. *“Those Who Work” – Farmers*  
   2. *“Those Who Work” – Burghers*  
   3. *“Those Who Fight” – Nobles*

4. The Church and the Faith  
   1. *Parishes and Pastors*  
   2. *The Regular Clergy*  
   3. *Bishops*  
   4. *A Noble Church*
## Contents

5. Religion – The Bond of Society .......................... 59

### 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
   2. Rebel Forces – The Armies
   3. Political Programs of the German Peasants’ War
   4. The Gospel of Social Unrest
   5. Reckonings, Retribution, and Restoration
   6. Peaceable Kingdoms – Anabaptism

11. Imperial Reformations in the Age of Charles V
   1. The Habsburg Brothers as Lords of the Empire
   2. Empire and Reformations – The Beginnings, 1521–1524
   3. In the Shadow of Revolution – The Birth of Protestantism, 1525–1529
   4. A Moment of Decision – Augsburg, 1530
   5. The Rise and Fall of the Smalkaldic League
   6. The Bitter Fruits of the Emperor’s Victory

12. Imperial Peace, 1555–1580
   1. The Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555)
   2. Securing the Peace
   3. The Empire in the Era of Religious Wars
   4. The Saxony’s – Order and Revolution
   5. Imperial Catholicism – Emperor Maximilian II
   6. The Schism and the Empire’s Future
   7. The “Second Reformation” of German Calvinism
   8. An Emperor’s End

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

13. Forming the Protestant Confessions
   1. Luther’s Reformation and the State
   2. Forming the Lutheran Confession
   3. Pax lutheranorum
   4. Reconstructing Churches
   5. The Reformed Confession – A Second Reformation?
   6. Forming a New Clergy
   7. Reforming the Laity – Disciplining Marriage
   8. Protestant Evangelization
   9. The Harvest of the Protestant Reformations

14. Reforming the Catholic Church
   1. The Ordeal of the Imperial Church
   2. Bavaria – Wellspring of Catholic Resurgence
   3. Counterreformation and Catholic Reformation in Inner Austria
   4. The Struggle for Upper and Lower Austria
   5. Imperial Bishops and Catholic Reforms
   6. Rome, Italy, and the German Lands
## 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
Glossary
Bibliography
Index
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
21. Ottomans Kill Christians; the Pope Persecutes the Poor (Matthias Gerung. Woodcut. 16th century, 2nd half: Strauss, *German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1550–1600*, vol. 1: 305) 363

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
Acknowledgments

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 at 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 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.

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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