



Volker Leppin, Ulrich A. Wien, eds. *Konfessionsbildung und Konfessionskultur in Siebenbürgen in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des östlichen Europas. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005. 236 pp. EUR 36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-515-08617-2.



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The Paradoxes of Confessionalization in Transylvania

In their 2005 contribution to an H-German forum on confessionalization, Ute Lotz-Heumann and Stefan Ehrenpreis reminded readers that state formation in early modern Europe did not necessarily drive processes of confession building in as straightforward a fashion as some important statements of the so-called confessionalization paradigm implied. Analyzing both the limitations and the utility of confessionalization as a concept, they noted, “research on territories in early modern Germany as well as on other European countries has shown that the interaction between state formation and confession building was much more complicated.”[1] As proof, they cited a number of important recent studies on German cities like Speyer and Magdeburg, as well as work on critical western European contexts such as Ireland or the Netherlands. The results of this work, they suggested, made it impossible to assume that confessionalization—the formation of clearly defined confessional communities and confessional cultures—could be associated with a larger process of modernization.

This conclusion seems even more well founded if

one looks eastwards to Transylvania, as the collection of essays in *Konfessionsbildung und Konfessionskultur in Siebenbürgen in der Frühen Neuzeit*, edited by Volker Leppin and Ulrich A. Wien, clearly shows. In this eastern Hungarian principality (today, the northwestern part of Romania), not just one, but several, robust confessional communities took shape over the course of the sixteenth century in what can only be described as a “weak state.” Studying the circumstances in which this was possible and the particular forms that the Reformation took in this east European region offers historians of early modern central Europe what Leppin describes in the title of his helpful introduction as a “church-historical special case with general importance.”

The peculiar circumstances in which the Reformation spread in Transylvania are described clearly in several essays in this book, most especially those by Ernst D. Petritsch and Krista Zach. They recount how Ottoman Turkish forces at the Battle of Mohács destroyed the medieval kingdom of Hungary in 1526. In the years that followed, the Ottoman sultan placed much of central and

southern Hungary under his direct rule. In the west and north, the Catholic Habsburg dynasty was able to exercise control over a portion of Hungary. However, in Transylvania, the sultan allowed local princes to rule. Of course, the Porte insisted on regular payments of tribute; it also tried to neutralize Transylvania as a diplomatic and military player in the region. But throughout the sixteenth century, the Ottoman sultans were content with this arrangement, allowing Transylvania a remarkable degree of sovereignty. About Christian confessional matters, Hungary's Turkish rulers were utterly indifferent.

Under Turkish hegemony, Transylvania was a largely autonomous state. But Transylvania's princes remained too weak to enforce any sort of confessional unity. Their only interest could be the preservation of a minimum of unity among all political factions within the principality. Nor could the Catholic Church prevent the spread of multiple forms of Christianity. From the 1540s onward, several of the most important Catholic episcopal sees in Transylvania were vacant. Complex disagreements between Hungary's estates, the Habsburg ruler in distant Vienna, and Rome over patronage rights kept these positions empty for years. In such a context, the cause of religious reform flourished. Printing presses sprang up in several Transylvanian cities, publishing translations of important German texts. At the same time, theologians and university students enjoyed close contacts with German-speaking lands, learning of and transmitting the latest religious arguments into the Transylvanian context. Moreover, several of Transylvania's princes were openly enthusiastic about religious reform, as were important noble families. Their enthusiasm, however, fueled an extremely heterogeneous proliferation of confessional identities and cultures. The provincial capital, Kolozsvár (Cluj or Klausenburg) became a center of anti-Trinitarian thought. The many German-speakers in another regional center, Brassó (Braşov or Kronstadt), opted instead for Lutheranism. Across the province, families could speak of members split between confessions. The essays in this volume also describe individuals who moved through several different confessions as Transylvanians grappled with the implications of the Reformation. Within several decades, four distinct confessional communities were legally recognized in Transylvania: Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism. At different times and places, one or another enjoyed relative strength. But all were tolerated, and enjoyed the space to grow as communities. Indeed, the Transylvanian Diet at Torda (Turda, in present-day Romania) issued a patent of toleration in 1568 that guaranteed com-

plete religious liberty to these four so-called received religions.

The Transylvanian case thus presents historians of confessionalization with an odd set of contradictions. On the one hand, Hungary's princes could do precious little state building, given the geopolitical context in which they ruled. Instead, political circumstances allowed Hungary's noble families to preserve their traditional estate privileges and adapt them to a new age. Historian Konrad GÅndisch calls Transylvania a "monarchy of estates" (*StÃndemonarchie*) for this reason. And yet, this "monarchy of estates" allowed four confessional communities to coexist and even flourish in ways that seem strikingly modern. None of them was dependent on state authorities; all enjoyed the same legal privileges. As several authors point out, this made them more like "free societies," communities organized around conscience, in which individuals were free to associate or not according to their own lights. These contradictions lead some contributors, like Harm Klueping, to ask whether confessionalization is a useful concept at all. Another, Krista Zach, has argued that Transylvania should be seen as a kind of "anti-model" of confessionalization. Most contributors write instead of "confessional cultures," a concept that seems to them more useful when studying the tremendous confessional variations in early modern Transylvania.

The essays in this volume are uneven. Some, like Harm Klueping's, range widely across Europe. Others are more tightly focused on specialized problems, such as the role of Kolozsvár publishers in the spread of religious reform. Many read like reports, a reflection perhaps of this volume's origin in an academic conference. Only too seldom do the contributors engage in sustained comparative reflection on the similarities and differences between Transylvania and the better-studied central European states. A greater emphasis on comparison would sharpen Transylvania's importance for all scholars interested in the problem of "confessionalization." Even so, the volume leaves the reader keenly appreciative of the paradoxes that make Transylvania such a fascinating place on the map of early modern Europe.

Note

[1]. Ute Lotz-Heumann and Stefan Ehrenpreis, "The Concept of Confessionalization as a Research Tool," <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-German&month=0504&week=a&msg=OBVg%2bAebgXhn7SqJrbkRFA&user=&pw=> (accessed on August 13, 2008).

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