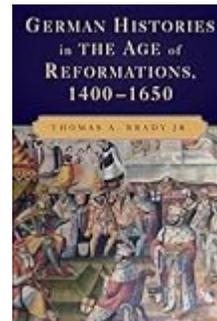




Thomas A. Brady Jr. *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400-1650*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 477 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88909-4; \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-71778-6.



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Published on H-German (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

The Grand Sweep of Early Modern German History

This book is a tour de force by one of the leading historians of early modern Germany. Thomas A. Brady Jr. has written a history of the German lands in a grand narrative style, tracing political, religious, and social developments over two and a half centuries. Brady's writing is gripping, his scholarship deeply erudite, and his arguments are strongly and persuasively presented.

One of the most distinguished scholars in this field, Brady has written books on the ruling class of Strasbourg, on Jacob Sturm, the political leader of the Strasbourg reformation, and on Holy Roman imperial politics in southern Germany. His influence in the field goes far beyond his publications, however. Brady mentored dozens of younger scholars in his years at the University of Oregon and at Berkeley and he has been a major presence at conferences and *Tagungen* for decades. His connections among leading scholars in Germany, his broad intellectual interests, and his support of younger scholars on both sides of the Atlantic has done much over the last thirty years to open up the once insular fields of Reformation and early modern German history.

In this book, Brady gives full rein to his love of narrative history. The book is full of lively anecdotes and brief biographies of important individuals. The emperors, particularly Maximilian I and Charles V, are star actors in this drama. Brady has a particular affection for Maximilian: "He would attempt to refashion the Imperial office from a feudal lordship into a modern—one might say 'Renaissance' monarchy ... Maximilian aimed to rebuild German power in the image of the great emperors of the past" (p. 108). Maximilian comes across on the one hand as a wise ruler, intent on reorganizing the Austrian state along more efficient and effective lines. On the other hand, Brady calls him "the ablest royal warlord of his generation" (p. 110), whose military ambitions created a never-ending need for money. "Although he understood quite well the ancient Roman commonplace, 'money is the sinews of war' ... Maximilian remained nonetheless perfectly heedless, even reckless, about how it was obtained in order to serve his quest for fame and glory" (p. 112). By the early 1500s, Maximilian had made himself the "true lord of the Empire" (p. 120), yet in the decade

before his death in 1519 wars in Italy and Hungary once again drove him to bankruptcy and defeat. Brady argues that Maximilian was “the first Holy Roman emperor in 250 years who ruled as well as reigned,” but at the same time, “everything about Maximilian bears the feel of the makeshift and ad hoc” (p. 128). In the end, the emperor was a man of his times and certainly not a proto-national or proto-absolutist ruler. Yet, he also created most of the institutions and practices that came to characterize the Holy Roman Empire throughout the early modern period, a “state” that mixed “western” centralizing characteristics with the “loosely integrated, elective politics of East Central Europe” (p. 129). Brady’s deep knowledge of Maximilian’s life and times leads him to admire the emperor’s hard work and determination and, perhaps, to regret that Maximilian’s state-building project foundered on the shoals of military expenses and religious conflict.

For Brady, Charles V is a less sympathetic, but also a more tragic figure: “Charles’ reign opened in that bright sunlight [of the conquest of Mexico and the piles of gold delivered to the docks at Antwerp]; it would end thirty-nine years later in a grim mood of defeat, his grand personal empire in tatters, his Holy Roman Empire in a state of precarious peace, his beloved Church wallowing in one of the deepest crises in its long history” (p. 207). Brady thus presents Charles as a victim of the divisions created by the Reformation, at least in his role as German emperor. Victorious in war against the Protestants in 1547, the emperor could neither consolidate his rule nor impose Catholicism in the empire. By the mid-sixteenth century, the imperial estates were strong enough to survive military defeat and prevent any imperial centralization. The age of princes had come. Brady ends the story of Charles with a splendid evocation of his abdication in Brussels in 1556: “Charles, tears flowing down his face, blessed his kneeling son, raised him into an embrace, and kissed him” (p. 229). This is history in a dramatic mode and Brady pulls it off with great aplomb. The book is a pleasure to read.

German Histories is, however, more than a narrative history and indeed much more than a survey of the field. Rather, Brady presents an extended argument about the nature of German political development and its relationship to the contentious religious history of Germany in this period. He insists on a nuanced and generally positive assessment of the political system of the Holy Roman Empire, a consensus that has been developing among German historians over the last twenty years or so. This book will perform a great service for the field if it can bring this new perspective to modern German histori-

ans and scholars of other parts of Europe who are still wedded to the view of the empire as a failed state or as the structure that prevented Germany from developing “properly”; that is, in the way France and Britain did, into a nation-state.

Brady also aims to reorient the venerable field of Reformation history. In no way a traditional church historian (*Kirchenhistoriker*), Brady focuses here on the social and political history of the religions of Germany. His first interest is in the manner in which the political system of the empire adjusted to (and influenced) the religious developments set in motion by Martin Luther’s movement. Brady places Luther in the tradition of late medieval reform, but emphasizes that the printing press gave him an unprecedented influence: “By the time Luther arrived in Worms, some half a million copies of his writings were circulating in the Empire, an explosion of print unfathomable in its uniqueness and its power. This reception and this reception alone—not the consistency of Luther’s words but the response to them—burst the hardened logjam of reform and at last made possible reformations of the church in the German lands” (p. 156). Brady then traces the reception of Luther’s ideas in the cities, among peasants, and by the princes.

Brady’s discussion of the early Reformation follows the path laid out in the last twenty years by scholars like Robert Scribner, Peter Blickle, and Brady himself. The focus is on the appeal of the evangelical movement; its potential for creating dramatic religious, social, and political change; and how it was ultimately domesticated by the German princes: “the possibility of a deep and lasting reform of religious life depended fundamentally on the unprecedented claims to action and voice from social groups who in more settled times possessed little or none” (p. 158). One chapter analyzes the urban Reformation, a second the “Revolution of the Common Man”; that is, the Peasants’ War of 1525. Brady emphasizes the ways in which both these movements were quite traditional, in their attack on the Catholic Church—embodied as “Rome”—and their view of a “more or less serious gulf between the Church’s operations and the mission Christ had laid upon it” (p. 158). In the early 1520s, these communally based movements threatened the established order in Germany, yet princes, city councils, and ultimately most Protestant leaders (including Luther) repudiated and repressed more radical ideas: “The German Protestant reformation thus stationed itself between the fact of Rome and the possibility of a revolution” (p. 158).

Although not in Brady's view a revolution, Protestantism certainly led to significant changes in Germany. Protestant territories and towns witnessed a new focus on the written word in general and on reading the scripture. Clergymen became citizens, services were simplified, and processions and pilgrimages were abolished. Brady's narrative of the period from the 1520s to the 1580s traces this process, but above all the ways in which the empire managed the religious schism. The creation of the Schmalkaldic League, which brought together Protestant rulers in self-defense; the failure of the Augsburg Interim (1548) to accomplish the restoration of Catholicism; and the 1555 Peace of Augsburg were all steps on this path. Brady argues that this peace—"a deal, like all peaces"—took some time to take hold, but it did last for more than fifty years (p. 232). He also reminds us, once again, not to read modern concepts into the past: "It is wishful thinking to assume that the coexistence of plural religious communities in a single polity would in time necessarily go beyond formal *convivencia*, to mutual acceptance and tolerance. It is more nearly nonsensical to assume that religion ipso facto generates violence" (p. 233). Brady uses the concept of *convivencia*, the word used to describe the coexistence of Jews, Muslims, and Christians in medieval Spain, regularly in the last part of the book to describe the uneasy coexistence of Christian confessions in Germany.

Brady ends this section of the book with a discussion of Maximilian II, one of the most enigmatic Holy Roman emperors. Even as he lay dying in 1573, no one could determine his personal religious convictions. Brady describes his bizarre funeral in Prague in some detail and then concludes with typical flair:

"Maximilian II was the last Imperial monarch who had lived before Luther died. Born in 1526, when the first Diet of Speyer finessed the issue of the religious schism ... [he was] nearly forty when he came to the throne in 1564. On all major fronts—the Ottomans, the religious schism, the European wars, and his personal religious attitude—he decided, as the Imperial estates had done at Speyer in 1526, not to decide. He was a monarch trapped in an unfinished reformation. His personal inclinations may have been evangelical, but an emperor's policy could only be Catholic, for it gained legitimacy from the pope and support in the Diet from the Catholic bishops and abbots. The situation was most delicate.... Given these uncertainties, the least dangerous policy for Maximilian II was to defend the imperial *convivencia* of 1555. By this logic he lived: in this conviction he died" (p. 256).

Part 4 of *German Histories* has fewer of these rhetorical flourishes, partly because it is more analytical and less of a narrative. The focus here is on the development of what Brady calls the "old confessional order." Chapters on the development of Lutheran and Calvinist identity emphasize the importance of training an effective pastor, the development of schools and catechism training, and the long time it took to develop a popular confessional identity. Brady places this process in the context of the theological and political disputes that divided Lutherans among themselves and from the Calvinists. Setting aside traditional interpretations that place Protestantism at the heart of a modernization of Europe, Brady insists on the importance of the creation of "new local churches ... transpolitical shells, confessions, marked by a conformity in doctrine and, to a lesser degree, in ritual practice" (p. 289). This development was in and of itself a great achievement.

Brady's discussion of Catholic reform is a critique of the "confessionalization thesis," which argues (among other things) that the German confessions developed in parallel. Brady argues Catholic confessionalism developed quite differently from its Protestant counterpart. Catholic leaders, unlike Protestants, could not recreate their church from the ground up and they had to deal with structures and institutions that often hinder reform. On the other hand, assistance came from the wider Roman Church, in form of resources and the new orders, especially the Jesuits. In the end, German Catholics rebuilt a badly damaged church by maintaining and exploiting ties with the wider Roman Church, reviving the structures of the ancient imperial church, and by a dedication to restoring popular religious practice. Brady links the development and the cultures of the confessions to their ties with the empire. The creation of confessions and the development of a confessional system in the late sixteenth century was peculiarly German and only possible in the context of the Holy Roman Empire.

The book ends with several chapters on the Thirty Years' War. Brady argues that the war was neither inevitable nor primarily the result of religious tensions: "Its chief causes were contingent causes, and the most serious one of them resided in the Habsburg dynasty's rule and misrule" (p. 373). The war was a human disaster and Brady details that disaster in detail. But when the war ended, Germany returned for another 150 years to a strengthened religious *convivencia* and a stable, albeit exotic, political system. Brady's focus on the ways in which the empire absorbed and channeled religious conflict leads him, correctly in my view, to emphasize the

continuities of the “old confessional order” from about 1575 to 1806.

In his conclusion, Brady reminds his readers that religious conflict and tension were central to the history of Germany in the long nineteenth century as well. Indeed, in this era of “confessional rivalry and competition ... religious communities, no longer sheltered or constrained by the Imperial *convivencia*, strove to maintain and even enhance their positions in conditions of rapid political and social change” (p. 409). As the confessions have declined in social and political importance in the post-World War II era, at least in Europe, the field of Reformation history has (finally) transcended the older narratives of Protestant triumphalism: “What has happened to the histories of reformations can be called ‘historicization,’ setting history back into historical context” (p. 420).

The sarcasm, or perhaps irony, in this passage might sound somewhat odd (or unnecessary) to younger schol-

ars. It reflects, I believe, the battle that Brady and other scholars of his bent had to fight against traditional Reformation church history early in their careers, battles fought out in conference panels, on editorial boards of journals, and in book reviews. *German Histories* succeeds in its goal of placing the religious changes of the early modern period into a wider political and social context and, yes, historicizing those events and developments.

There is also something wonderful about the fact that someone has written a book that seeks to grasp the grand sweep of German history across three centuries. Until now this sort of book did not exist and it is needed. Germany, unlike France or England or Spain, did not develop a nation-state in this period, but just like those “nations” it has a history and that history constitutes more than just a series of local or regional histories *and* is not just a history of the Protestant Reformation. There is no one better to have filled this need than Brady.

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Citation: Marc R. Forster. Review of Brady Jr., Thomas A., *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400-1650*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

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