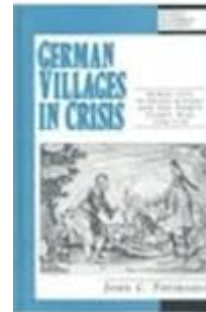


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**John C. Theibault.** *German Villages in Crisis: Rural Life in Hesse-Kassel and the Thirty Years' War, 1580-1720.* Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995. xiv + 237 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-03839-4.



**Reviewed by** Thomas Max Safley (University of Pennsylvania)

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This dissertation from Johns Hopkins University studies the impact of the Thirty Years' War on a particular area of the Holy Roman Empire, the Werra region in the landgraviate of Hesse-Kassel. By so doing, it offers something old and something new. It contributes to the debate about the consequences of the Thirty Years' War that began with Gustav Freytag's *Pictures from the German Past*, and which gained particular sophistication in the opposing works of Guenther Franz and S. H. Steinberg. It also advances thinking about the nature of prosperity, catastrophe, and recovery in premodern societies as suggested in the works of Bernd Roeck, Thomas Robisheaux, Rudolf Schloegl, and David Sabean. *German Villages in Crisis* uses the crises of the mid-seventeenth century as an opportunity to expose the dynamic relationship between state power and peasant organization. The result analyzes tellingly the complexities of rural life, its propensity to endure, and its capacity to change.

Theibault organizes his book into three parts: the village as a corporate body; the village as a collection of parts; the village as affected by war. This structure reveals at once the author's assumptions about his topic and the intrinsic difficulty of his subject.

The book begins with an examination of the villages of the Werra as units in the political organization of Hesse-Kassel. Theibault uses a variety of sources to ex-

plore the exercise of lordship as intended by those above and as experienced by those below. Like most other polities in the Empire and in Europe, an array of secular, ecclesiastical, superior, and inferior magistrates exercised control over and demanded allegiance from the rural population of the Werra, often for conflicting ends. Despite their commitment to a process of state-building, the landgraves realized only partial success in rationalizing those powers under their dominion. Thus, the particular constellation of local authorities—their policies, their vigor, their proximity, and their conflicts—differed from village to village and determined the relative integration of each village into the larger corporate body of the state. Such local arrangements and accommodations also shaped the understanding of the villagers themselves by admitting contests among the authorities and with the villagers over the allocation of space or the enforcement of conformity. The variety of these arrangements and their results points quite correctly to the manifold ways in which power and perception undermined or reenforced one another in early modern Europe.

By placing politics first, Theibault tries to avoid the base-superstructure dichotomy implicit in most Marxist discussions of agrarian history. He wishes to argue—as, indeed, much of his evidence indicates—that the interaction of material base and political (or cultural) su-

perstructure is constant and inseparable. Nonetheless, the organization of his book makes concrete his assumption that political organization “located” rural society. It underplays the fact that fiscal needs inspired much of politics in the Early Modern period, and especially that part devoted to the more efficient administration and exploitation of resources. Thus, politics shaped the material base but was, as Theibault admits, shaped by it as well.

Accordingly, the second part of this study turns from villages as political units to villages as configurations of discrete demographic and economic units. The findings are reasonable without being surprising. Households tended to contain small, nuclear families based for the most part on conjugal units. In general, these families enjoyed abundance through the late sixteenth into the early seventeenth century. At least until 1618, population and income rose in the Werra. Whether this upward trend led inexorably to a Malthusian ceiling seems debatable. Certainly, not all prospered alike. Wealth concentrated in a few hands: in one village, 11 percent of the population controlled 41 percent of the wealth. Yet, that unequal distribution was far less radical than in most early modern cities. Unusual signs of social tension are not to be found. Theibault concludes that rural society in the Werra was hierarchical and that the divisions between rich and poor were less important than those between landowners and tenants or between neighbors and strangers. The Thirty Years’ War marked, therefore, a sudden disaster rather than gradual decline.

Though exemplary for careful methodology and judicious reasoning, the chapters on demography and economy in the Werra are the least satisfying of the book. Representative as the statistics may be, they are too limited geographically and chronologically to encourage firm conclusions about the entire region before, during, and after the war. Demographic observations are drawn largely from the register of a single village between 1639 and 1653. Most economic data comes from a single survey of taxable wealth in 1586. Beyond these sources, evidence is fragmentary, based on individual households or isolated villages. If, as Theibault argues, rural histories must take into account profound local variation, then his findings must remain provisional. He handles his materials well but cannot avoid their limitations.

The final three chapters abandon structural analysis of the Werra and turn to a more traditional chronology of the war years and deliver the most exciting insights of the book. Theibault begins this part with the history of the Thirty Years’ War in the Werra. Of par-

ticular interest here is the fascinating look it affords at the logistical apparatus of armies engaged in the conflict, a simple but informative description of occupation and exaction. Beyond organizational history, Theibault makes effective use of chronicles to trace the psychological effects of war on villagers of the Werra. He then moves to the material impact of the war. Again, the limited nature of the sources—based on single villages for short periods of time—limits some of the conclusions, but, in general, Theibault makes a strong case for the catastrophic consequences of the Thirty Years’ War. Different regions of the Empire suffered differently but the Werra was one of the first and most frequent victims. Repeated mortality crises, due in large part to famine and disease rather than violence, suppressed populations far beyond the war years. On average, the Werra suffered a 50 percent loss in population. Coupled with exactions by occupying forces and the destruction of working capital, the regional economy declined absolutely. Again, though the decline was apportioned unevenly—some villages suffering more and longer than others—all were affected greatly. The results accord well with the picture drawn by Freytag and substantiated by Franz.

In the final chapter on the war, Theibault turns his attention to recovery and reorganization. As bad as the war was in the Werra, recovery began before the violence ended. Villages were reconstructed and production renewed, sometimes under the incessant demands of the landgraves for taxes, sometimes under the simple imperative of survival. Yet, as the economy recovered, it did not simply return to the *status quo ante*. Traditional agriculture persisted because long-term declines in population relieved the pressure to increase productivity. At the same time, however, artisanal trades expanded because high real wages drove marginal producers out of agriculture and into industry. Thus, the war promoted a restructuring of the economy that stopped short of protoindustrialization. In terms of its effects on society and economy, the Thirty Years’ War was both rupture and conjuncture. It promoted new structures without destroying old ones.

*German Villages in Crisis* demonstrates the ways in which structures and events influence one another. It was not a neat process, but Theibault has done much to elucidate its complexities and contradictions. He uses difficult sources with great care and finesse to demonstrate that war in the Werra devastated traditional, rural society without destroying it. In many ways, his book returns to an old theme of German social history—the devastation of the Thirty Years’ War. Yet, it reveals new

details that expand current interpretations of economic,tryside.  
political, and social processes in the early modern coun-

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