H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susanne Rau. *Geschichte und Konfession: Städtische Geschichtsschreibung und Erinnerungskultur im Zeitalter der Reformation und Konfessionalisierung in Bremen, Breslau, Hamburg und Köln.* Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz Verlag, 2002. 550 S. EUR 29,00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-935549-11-0.

Reviewed by Dean Phillip Bell (Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies)

Published on H-German (October, 2003)

In this broad and lengthy Hamburg dissertation, Susanne Rau examines the context and narrative structure of the early modern chronicles in four Hanseatic cities–Bremen, Breslau, Hamburg and Cologne. Situating these chronicles within the framework of the Reformation and confessionalization, Rau asserts that history, though not developed into a formal academic discipline until the end of the seventeenth century, nonetheless played an important role in the debates and discussions of the period. She further contends that these early modern chronicles were important in the general development of historical writing and the formation of modern historical thought.

The study employs a method of narrative analysis and chronicler biography. It examines the chronicles within a broad and ambitious range of background material–particularly the development, or failure, of the reformation in each city–and a range of more theoretical studies related to the nature of history, collective memory and collective identity. Critically engaging the work of Halbwachs, Nora, White, and Cavalli, among others, Rau establishes an engaging and consistent method of interpretation. She considers the background and context of individual chronicles as well as the subjects, internal connections and means of presentation within the chronicle narratives.

Rau asserts that history is power and an important expression of city memory. While history has an entertaining and moralizing function, it is also a means to create consensus and develop external and internal boundaries. On the one hand, Rau cautions that historiography was not the most powerful medium of cultural construction in early modern Germany. On the other hand, she argues that confessional historiography was a significant attempt to mediate language and reality. Rau distinguishes between history and historiography, and is therefore able to assume that although history was not a formal academic discipline, the histories of the period could be meaningful and strategic. She maintains that the emphasis placed on particular events or personalities was indicative of the chroniclers' perspectives as well as of the broader city identity.

Although she utilizes a methodology of narrative analysis, Rau backs away from a deconstructionist assumption that history is merely a text. She asserts instead that history is handed down in large part through text. This is an important observation, for it underscores the idea that there are multiple forms of memory, including written, oral and pictorial, and it compels Rau to explore the sources for and reception of the chronicles. A good deal of attention is, in fact, given to questions such as the background of the chroniclers, their education, and the sources that they accessed and utilized. Rau concedes that chronicle passages are not always representative of the broader society. She also clearly articulates differing approaches and selections among the various chronicles within the same cities. In addressing both the creation and reception of the chronicles, Rau considers the nuances of the concepts of "public" and "private" in the early modern period. She offers a very good discussion of manuscript copying and the practice of collective readings, reminding us that chroniclers were often writing for the listener as well as the reader. Nonetheless, the degree to which we can take these chronicles as representative of "city memory," suffers from a certain lack of clarity regarding who, in fact, represents or constitutes the city.

Rau contends that identity is a question of orientation. It is precisely in this regard, however, that we need to know more about whose vision of the past is reflected in the text. The chronicles might, for example, reflect particular groups within and even beyond the city–as in Breslau, where the chronicles were often created within a broader regional context. The reception history provided by Rau does not–and in all fairness probably could not–answer the question of how representative the chronicles, or particular passages, actually are.

Clearly the chronicles do reflect, as Rau writes, the beginnings of more thematic organization. Rau's discussion of the early modern development of official collecting, storage and systematization of sources does comport well with other more general cultural and political developments. One must ask, however, if this is the result of humanism, the Reformation, or more general changes? One underlying assumption of the book is that history often has origins in conflict and crisis; and in this way, history can be employed as a means of continuing or challenging tradition. History becomes the judge over current affairs and could be consciously shaped by members of all the confessional camps. This conclusion is strengthened by the selection of the cities studied: Lutheran Hamburg; Catholic Cologne; Lutheran and then Reformed Bremen; Re-Catholicized and then multi-confessional Breslau. In the same way that she finds reformation festivals as tools to preserve confessional identity through social discipline, Rau sees in the histories she examines confessional apologetics and attempts at creating positive self-images. Yet, Rau concedes that the earliest reformers had little interest in history per se. Luther, for example, utilized history as an example and had only an indirect influence on the developments for which Rau argues. Even Melanchthon employed history primarily to serve understanding of the Bible–though with Melanchthon, Rau does find an understanding of history as a melting pot of experiences and an important distinguishing capacity between the sacred and the profane. While Rau clearly makes a good case for the possible uses of history and borrows from the very significant scholarship of confessionalization, the two are in the end not welded together in a particularly convincing manner. Both are seen to be contributors to a "modernizing thrust," and yet their connection tells us little more than that they could go hand in hand.

Despite the inclusion of long, and at times underanalyzed quotes, and some repetition, this is overall a very interesting book, with a great deal of detail and attention to the scholarly literature and the sources. [One detail: there is a strange (backwards and reverse) pagination between pages 457 and 508 in the copy reviewed.] This book offers an energetic, broad and much needed look at some of the important early modern chronicles. It also raises anew some significant questions about community, identity and the nature of historical writing that will continue to occupy the attention of scholars for some time to come.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Dean Phillip Bell. Review of Rau, Susanne, *Geschichte und Konfession: Städtische Geschichtsschreibung und Erinnerungskultur im Zeitalter der Reformation und Konfessionalisierung in Bremen, Breslau, Hamburg und Köln.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8241

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.