

Thomas A. Brady, Jr. *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650.*

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When the universally acknowledged dean of Reformation studies in the U.S. produces a sweeping overview of the subject after five decades in the field, it is an understatement to say that the rest of us are eager to know what he thinks. Above all, Thomas Brady seeks to break “the Rankean spell” that he believes continues to animate so much of our understanding of the Reformation and the formation of “German national identity.” While most of us have discarded many of the clearly outdated aspects of nineteenth-century formulations of this question, we continue to rely to a large degree on the same conceptual language, all of which Brady attempts to shatter from the outset, intentionally pluralizing “history,” “Reformation,” and even “Germany.” This is not mere cleverness, but an intentional epistemological earthquake, based on Brady’s long and profound consideration of the fundamentally diverse nature of politics and religion in the premodern German lands. For him, the Holy Roman Empire should not be viewed primarily as a failed modern state, but rather as a mostly successful arbiter of political and religious divisions. Nor is it constructive — except to self-serving modern political agendas — to perceive the Protestant Reformation as a failed early modern attempt at national unity. If we truly seek to understand the social dynamics of the early modern era, the “story of Germany” motif of 1870 or 1990 must give way to “the stories of German lands” and the various political and religious “reformations” that shaped them.

Like all historians, though, Brady knows well that we all need experienced guidance through the cacophony of stories out there and he obliges by providing his own central storyline, albeit a dual narrative — reform of empire, reform of church — in four parts with multiple subplots and numerous excursions. Again, the plurality of competing voices and stories is highly deliberate: Brady is simultaneously seeking to dislodge the primacy of focus on “the” Reformation or “the” nascent modern state while conveying that there were some strong currents of lasting change beneath the turbulent and apparently chaotic waves above. His central character is not Martin Luther or Charles V, but the *convivencia* of German political and religious order, whose origins he detects in the imperial politics of the early fifteenth century. Brady argues that the political reforms initiated by Sigismund and brought to fruition under Maximilian I — the subject of part 1 — not only counteracted the entropic pull of diverse and numerous German states but also minimized the politically and socially disruptive potential of sixteenth-century religious divisions produced by the failed religious reforms of the same era (part 2). To be sure, the diverse religious reforms of Protestants and Catholics triggered social upheavals of all kinds (part 3), but Brady believes that without the very success of the Holy Roman Empire in keeping such an unmanageable house in relatively good order the damage could have been much worse. Thus the key moments of political success in his story are the bookend accommodations of Constance and Westphalia, with the 1530 Diet of

Augsburg, and its pivotal “agreement to disagree” at the literal center of the book (and on its cover as well). And of course the emblematic tragedy of the empire’s early modern *convivencia* is the Thirty Years’ War, where the “coagulation” of religious antagonisms since the 1555 Peace of Augsburg finally led (but not inevitably) to a complete breakdown of both political and religious order (part 4). In a fascinating coda, Brady traces up to the present the varied legacies of the subsequent Westphalian *convivencia*, returning to themes of religious and political structures in the shaping of “German identity.”

Like many useful adjectives, the term *magisterial* has suffered considerable debasement, yet no other word (in its original grandeur) captures the scope of learning and historical imagination embodied in this work. I can think of no other single volume that would be more useful to anyone new to the field — scholar, general reader, graduate, or advanced undergraduate student. Brady assumes nothing but a keen curiosity and an open mind, lucidly explaining every new term or concept, while also painting colorful and insightful portraits of a gallery of key players. He moves effortlessly between the imperial court, university lecture hall, and village tavern, with a fine sense of their interconnectedness as well as their distinctiveness. His command of both the macrohistorical vista and the microhistorical concreteness is simply stunning. Scholars more familiar with the field will be grateful to Brady for remedying their own pockets of ignorance and will rue that they did not have such a masterpiece available to them during their own graduate training. The broader scholarly implications of Brady’s arguments are even more significant: his provocative reconceptualization of not just the Reformation period, but also the last 600 years of Germany history will be studied and debated for years to come. The book represents a truly remarkable and enduring achievement.

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