

German Historical Institute  
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**The Protestant Reformation  
in German History**

*Thomas A. Brady, Jr.*

with a comment by  
*Heinz Schilling*



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## Preface

Nineteen ninety-seven marked the tenth anniversary of the founding of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. Over the past decade we have had the honor of hosting distinguished scholars as participants in our Annual Lecture series. The series has typically featured a guest speaker who has presented an original lecture on the general topic of his or her research; a commentator was then asked to reflect on the lecture and perhaps elaborate on it in the spirit of scholarly dialog.

In 1997 we invited two renowned historians, Professor Thomas A. Brady Jr. from the United States and Professor Heinz Schilling from Germany, to present their ideas on one of the great events in German history—Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation. We were especially eager to have them address the question of whether and to what extent the Reformation can be declared to be, above all, a part of *German* history. The two speakers approached the problem from different directions yet concentrated on two main points: first, the diversity and breadth of the changing interpretations of the Reformation over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and second, the close symbiosis of academic history writing, national identity formation, and the politics of memory.

However, let me first emphasize that both Brady and Schilling have in recent years advocated a revision of early modern German history. And both have done so by rejecting two simplistic paradigms: first, that the Reformation must be assessed in terms of the rise of the modern nation-state, an interpretation advanced forcefully by Leopold von Ranke, and second, the opposite view that there is a continuity "from Luther to Hitler" that retrospectively condemns the age of reformation.

Professor Brady is one of the world's leading scholars in the field of Reformation studies. He received his B.A. from the University of Notre Dame and earned an M.A. from Columbia University. In 1968 he was awarded a Ph.D. by the University of Chicago. He was

inspired by Professor Hans Baron to study the German Reformation. Professor Baron's photograph is among those of émigré historians hanging on the walls of the Institute's lecture hall.

In his dissertation, Professor Brady combined biographical and structural approaches in writing a social history of sixteenth-century Strasbourg. He focused in particular on Jacob Sturm, a humanist and later proponent of the Schmalkaldic League. His first book, *Ruling Class, Regime, and Reformation at Strasbourg, 1520–1550* (1978), grew out of this project and presented a masterful analysis of the "minicycle of endurance, decline, collapse, and reconstruction of aristocratic power" occurring in this city.

This case study formed only the starting point for Brady's far-reaching research agenda of delineating the social and political processes of "The Reformation" from the local to imperial levels. Between 1967 and 1990 Brady pursued this project at the University of Oregon, first as an assistant professor and finally as a President's Distinguished Professor of Humanities. In 1990 he became Alumni Association Distinguished Professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

In 1987 Brady published his second book, *Turning Swiss: Cities and Empire, 1450–1550*. In this study he put forward an intriguing interpretation of the political options that the South German free imperial cities could have chosen: They could have supported a strong monarchy against the "common man," based on an alliance with the Habsburg emperor, or they could have opted for a "Swiss way," which meant forming federations, along Swiss lines, of self-governing cities with peasant leagues. Although the cities attempted the first option, Brady shows how they finally ended up adopting a "German way"—one of aristocratic particularism.

These insights also provided the background for Brady's third book, *Protestant Politics: Jacob Sturm and the German Reformation* (1995). The success of this publication is illustrated by the fact that within two years two abridged and revised editions were published in English and in German, though under different titles. With this trilogy on Jacob Sturm, Brady has convincingly demonstrated how "the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Reformation flowed together" in the life of this one individual. Moreover, he has shown how the Reformation was shaped by the political structures of the Holy Roman Empire, its "dispersed governance," and the social



movements that made the Reformation simultaneously an urban, a rural, and a communal event.

In addition to his books Brady has published numerous articles and has edited and translated other scholarly works. With Roger Chickering (Georgetown University), he edits the book series, "Studies in German Histories."

Professor Brady has been honored for his achievements in a variety of ways. He has received fellowships from the Humboldt Foundation, the Fulbright Program, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 1986 he was the recipient of the Presidential Faculty Excellence Award at the University of Oregon, and in 1987 he was awarded the German Studies Association's Book Prize. Both underscore his well-earned reputation as one of the pre-eminent historians of early modern Germany.

Commenting on Professor Brady's lecture is Professor Heinz Schilling, who studied German literature, philosophy, and history at the universities of Cologne and Freiburg. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Freiburg in 1971. Subsequently, he was an assistant professor of history at the University of Bielefeld, where he achieved his *Habilitation* in 1977. He went on to teach at the universities of Osnabrück and Gießen, and is currently at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Moreover, Schilling has been a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and at the Center for Western European Studies at UC Berkeley. Today, he is a leading member of several learned societies and co-editor of the *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*.

Professor Schilling is one of the most prolific and original writers in the field of early modern German history. His interests are wide-ranging, from the history of the Dutch refugees in Germany and England in the sixteenth century—the topic of his dissertation—to various topics in religious, social, and urban history. He also has published two comprehensive studies on German history from the Reformation to the end of the Seven Years' War.

In his work, Schilling has emphasized problems of religious sociology and modernization. Based on this approach, he has argued for "confessionalization" as a new paradigm for explaining the epoch before the "modern" era. This interpretation has been outlined in an illuminating essay in the *Handbook of European History*, co-edited by

Brady. Like Brady, Schilling has shown considerable skepticism toward teleological models of German history. Professor Schilling's work offers us a window through which to view ongoing historiographical debates concerning the place of the Reformation in German and European history.

We are pleased to publish the following papers, reworked versions of what was presented at our 1997 Annual Lecture, as part of the Institute's Occasional Papers series.

Washington, D.C.  
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*Detlef Junker*

## The Protestant Reformation in German History

*Thomas A. Brady, Jr.*

We historians stand like Balaam's ass, wavering undecided between two desires. We want, on the one hand, to reawaken and speak to the dead, to lend our living powers of speech, as the late Arthur Quinn wrote, "to these shades from time gone, some demanding our attention, some reluctant to have it, some long thwarted into abject silence, ... yet all there somehow, geniuses of a certain time and a certain place, and all strangely requiring only a little of our blood to return to fleeting life, to speak to and through us. For they do wait for us, you know, not as the faint spoor of long-vanished existence, but as real persons, real yet speechless until some questioning voice dissolves the spell of their silence."<sup>1</sup> Yet, on the other hand, we also desire to privilege some voices from the past—we call them "sources"—and to relegate others, equally authentic, to silence. This act of historical triage will help us with the task of "explaining history" by establishing connections, analogies, and parallels between their present and our own. "Subjects which do not admit of such a relation to the present," Ernst Troeltsch once wrote, "belong [merely] to the antiquarian."<sup>2</sup> And so we historians pick and choose, giving voice here and denying it there, and from our choices we build stories about the past. We call them "historical narratives," and their one supreme qualification is that they must make sense to us.

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This work is dedicated to the memory of Bob Scribner (1941–1998).

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Quinn, *A New World: An Epic of Colonial America from the Founding of Jamestown to the Fall of Quebec* (Boston, 1994), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World* (1912; reprint, Philadelphia, 1986), 17.

I do not mean to suggest that historical narratives are arbitrary or private. On the contrary, they are public, often very public, and, if importantly so, they cannot be changed arbitrarily without open controversy. The intractable durability of historical narratives comforts some people and infuriates others. Among the latter I count Stephen in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, who declares that "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."<sup>3</sup> Also included is our own Henry Ford, who announced that "history is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition."<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, history scorned sneaks around the corner to take revenge. It did on an Englishman, Augustine Birrell, who once dismissed history as "that great dust-heap."<sup>5</sup> Years later, when he was British chief secretary for Ireland, the calm state of that country persuaded him to go on holiday from Dublin to England. The year was 1916, just before Easter Sunday.

How very much stories about the past matter is suggested by the fierce controversies that proposals to change them sometimes spark. Consider the furies aroused by Daniel Goldhagen, only the latest in a long series of quite public controversies in this century about German history. Of course, for obvious reasons, Germany's history is the most sensitively public and morally impacted of all recent European histories, and the most carefully scrutinized. One consequence of this condition, however, has attracted little notice. It is the telescoping of German history into its most recent eras. Nowadays, as the story tends to be told, Germany's ancient history begins with Napoleon, its Middle Ages last from 1871 to 1918, and its modern history begins barely eighty years ago. This crowding of German history into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a very recent thing. Within living memory the Germans possess a much longer, though not uncontested, narrative that represents itself as a German national history. This narrative, its creation and its fortunes, forms the backdrop of this essay.

My subject is the place of the Protestant Reformation in modern narratives of German history. In the past, this sixteenth-century event formed the opening chapter of what may be called (to give it its

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<sup>3</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris, 1922), 34.

<sup>4</sup> In the *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1916, in an interview with Charles N. Wheeler.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine Birrell, "Carlyle," *Obiter Dicta, First and Second Series, Complete* (London, 1910), 5.

traditional nickname) the "Luther-to-Bismarck" story of German history.<sup>6</sup> In those days the Reformation occupied, as Jaroslav Pelikan has written, a position in German scholarship "analogous in some ways to that of the Civil War in American historiography, as the crucial and (in a quite literal sense of the term) epoch-making event by which the nature of an entire national community and of its history has been defined."<sup>7</sup> Or "was defined," for, about seventy-five years ago, the Reformation was toppled from its privileged place at the start of modern Germany's creation myth. I will explore in three main stages how this happened. First, I describe how the Protestant Reformation gained this position in the hegemonic nineteenth-century narrative of German history.<sup>8</sup> Second, I relate how the Reformation lost its privileged status after World War I. And third, I illustrate the reawakening of the Protestant Reformation in German historical studies since 1960.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Kupisch, *"Von Luther zu Bismarck": Zur Kritik einer historischen Idee: Heinrich von Treitschke* (Berlin, 1949).

<sup>7</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, "Leopold von Ranke as Historian of the Reformation: What Ranke Did for the Reformation—What the Reformation Did for Ranke," in Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell, eds., *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1990), 90. On the role of the Reformation in the idea of "the German way," see Bernd Faulenbach, *Ideologie des deutschen Weges: Die deutsche Geschichte in der Historiographie zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1980), 125–31.

<sup>8</sup> I mean what Georg G. Iggers has called "the one main tradition of German historiography." Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1983), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Historians of the German Reformation have been remarkably reticent in examining the history of the field's scholarship. We are better served for the Protestant Reformation as a whole by A. G. Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985). Although the authors set out to do for the Reformation what Wallace K. Ferguson had done for the Renaissance in his superb *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), the result, alas, is useful but not very enlightening. It concentrates on scholarship as such and thus avoids just the aspect of the Reformation as an idea in modern European thought on which this study focuses. Some of this same ground was recently trod by Heinz Schilling in "Die Reformation—ein revolutionärer Umbruch oder Hauptetappe eines langfristigen Wandels?" in

## I

The Reformation's privileged place in the Luther-to-Bismarck story reflected an old belief that Martin Luther's Christian message had originally been and still was peculiarly suited to the needs of the German soul. The notion of an elective affinity between Protestant Christianity and the German nation goes back at least to the Prussian theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher was the most representative German Protestant thinker of the nineteenth century, which, as Karl Barth wrote, "in the field of theology was *his* century."<sup>10</sup> He also was a thoroughly political theologian in whom, as James J. Sheehan has written, "religious feelings and national loyalties issued from the same source and flowed in the same direction." That direction led toward "some kind of new Reich, a unified political community that would combine both cultural identity and state patriotism."<sup>11</sup> In 1809 Schleiermacher wrote that one might "allow the continued existence of Catholicism for the Latin peoples," so long as Protestants strove "with good conscience to spread the reformation among the Germanic peoples as the form of Christianity most properly suited to them."<sup>12</sup>

Soon enough, Schleiermacher's words about the German nation's need for spiritual unity took narrative form at the hands of Leopold von Ranke, the most widely read historian in nineteenth-century Germany and, I might add, Europe. In his second masterwork, *German History in the Age of the Reformation*, Ranke told how the Protestant Reformation should have but did not accomplish a fusion of cultural identity and the German state. He started from the convergence shortly after 1500 of two separate movements for national unification and for religious reform, which were united by their common desire to be liberated from Rome. At this moment—Ranke meant 1521, when

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Winfried Speitkamp and Hans-Peter Ullmann, eds., *Konflikt und Reform: Festsschrift für Helmut Berding* (Göttingen, 1995), 26–40.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte* (Zurich, 1947), 379.

<sup>11</sup> James J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989), 379.

<sup>12</sup> Werner Schuffenhauer and Klaus Steiner, eds., *Martin Luther in der deutschen bürgerlichen Philosophie 1517–1845* (Berlin, 1983), 364.

Luther burst into public view—"the most important thing for the future of the German nation was whether the nation would succeed in breaking away from the papacy without endangering both the state and its slowly and painfully acquired culture."<sup>13</sup> Luther's public career was launched with the greatest expectations for fusion with the movement for national political reform. Barely two years later, in 1523, history brutally dashed this hope for national regeneration. "Before any sort of new constitution in a Protestant sense could even be imagined," Ranke wrote, "we see emerging an oppositional organization in favor of the Catholic principal, which has had the most momentous significance for the fate of our country."<sup>14</sup> From this point onward, Catholic resistance, behind which stood Rome, blocked the fulfillment of reformation as a national task and thereby deprived the Germans of national unification in both a political and a religious sense. Ranke believed that "the triumph of the Protestant system in all Germany would have been the best thing for the national development of Germany."<sup>15</sup> But this did not happen, and the Reformation's defeat by Rome and its German clients doomed the German nation to internal division and vulnerability to its foreign foes for the next 300 years.

Some persons are luckier than others, and Ranke was very lucky. He lived long enough to see history put right what history had set wrong in the sixteenth century. It was in this light that Ranke, then in his seventies, saw the twin events of the miraculous year 1870. On the one hand, France's defeat made possible German unification under Prussia; on the other, the Vatican Council's decree on papal infallibility made necessary, Ranke believed, the end of Germany's 350 years of religious coexistence. "A convinced Protestant might say," he wrote slyly, "this result was the divine decision against the

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<sup>13</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*, ed. Willy Andreas, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden, n.d), 1:229.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:292–93.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Leonard Krieger, *Ranke: The Meaning of History* (Chicago, 1977), 167. It is worth noting that a decade later, when he gave his impromptu history course to King Maximilian II of Bavaria, Ranke very much softened this stark impression of an early, sudden derailment of the Reformation. See Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte: Vorträge dem Könige Maximilian II. von Bayern gehalten*, ed. Alfred Dove (Darmstadt, 1954), 95–8.

claim of the pope to be the only interpreter on earth of faith and the divine mysteries."<sup>16</sup>

## II

Many Protestant citizens of the new Germany saw things Ranke's way.<sup>17</sup> It seemed such a natural step to complete the military victory over France with victory in a "struggle for civilization," or *Kulturkampf*, against Rome.<sup>18</sup> This campaign did not represent Bismarck's triumph over the German liberals, as is sometimes alleged, for, in David Blackbourn's words, "it symbolized better than anything else what it was that the supporters of progress wanted."<sup>19</sup> And, as they celebrated the historic double victory over France and Rome, Germany's monarch shared their joy. Emperor Wilhelm wrote to Lord John Russell, the aging doyen of the British Whigs, that he intended to make war on "a power whose lordship is considered in no country in the whole world to be compatible with the freedom and welfare of the nations; against a power that, if it is victorious in our day, will threaten, and not only in Germany, the blessings of the Reformation, freedom of conscience, and the authority of the laws.... I accept now

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<sup>16</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *The History of the Popes During the Last Four Centuries*, trans. E. Ward Fowler, 3 vols. (London, 1913), 3:570. This edition contains two chapters that Ranke added in the sixth edition of 1874.

<sup>17</sup> Ranke's grim picture of the Protestant Reformation's fate in Germany had been tempered by a prophetic note that held out hope for change: "Allein auf Erden kommt nichts zu einem reinen und vollkommenen Dasein; darum ist auch nichts unsterblich. Wenn die Zeit erfüllt ist, erheben sich aus dem Verfallenden Bestrebungen von weiterreichenden geistigem Inhalt, die es vollends zersprengen. Das sind die Geschehnisse Gottes in der Welt" (Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*, 1:40).

<sup>18</sup> Fritz Fischer, "Der deutsche Protestantismus und die Politik im 19. Jahrhundert," in Fritz Fischer, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das deutsche Geschichtsbild: Beiträge zur Bewältigung eines historischen Tabus* (Düsseldorf, 1977), 67, emphasizes this unanimity. See Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1990), 1:chap. 13.

<sup>19</sup> David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780–1918* (New York, 1998), 283.



the battle that has been laid upon me."<sup>20</sup> It remains something of a mystery as to why this monarch so badly misjudged his power to reshape the loyalties of one-third of his subjects.

The joyous assault on Rome reached its emotional high point in the Luther jubilee of 1883, which assumed the character of a kind of belated birthday party for the new Germany.<sup>21</sup> The historian Heinrich von Treitschke—like Ranke, a Saxon<sup>22</sup>—announced that "the confessional division approaches its end. Because the Roman Church has spoken its final word on papal infallibility, we feel more painfully than ever the gulf that separates the parts of our nation. To close this gulf, and thus to revitalize Protestant Christianity again, so that it will become capable of dominating our whole nation—this is a task which we acknowledge, and which later generations will fulfill."<sup>23</sup>

Alas, as the moment of triumph seemed near, history cunningly snatched it away, just as it had done in 1523. Even as Treitschke spoke, the struggle for civilization against Rome was faltering, and by 1887 it was dead. And worse followed, for, as calamity like luck seems to feed on itself, so the failure against Rome was followed by a second failure against a youthful German social democracy, which—insult added to injury—had carved itself largely out of Protestant Germany's social body. By the early 1890s the exhilaration of triumph was beginning to give way in Protestant circles to a sense of unease. The philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey warned his fellow Protestants that they

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<sup>20</sup> Emperor Wilhelm I to Lord John Russell, Feb. 18, 1874, quoted in Hans Rost, *Fehlwege deutscher Geschichte* (Nuremberg, 1963), 128.

<sup>21</sup> Gangolf Hübinger, *Kulturprotestantismus und Politik: Zum Verhältnis von Liberalismus und Protestantismus im wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Tübingen, 1994). See also his "Protestantische Kultur im wilhelminischen Deutschland," *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 16 (1991): 174–99. His views are accessible in English in Gangolf Hübinger, "Confessionalism," in Roger Chickering, ed., *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion* (Westport, Conn., 1996), 156–84. See also H. W. Schmidt, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict* (Princeton, N.J., 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Treitschke, often cast as a conservative, was in fact a liberal, and in religion a deeply skeptical one. See Hermann Haering, "Über Treitschke und seine Religion," in Josef Ahlhaus et al., *Aus Politik und Geschichte: Gedächtnisschrift für Georg von Below* (Berlin, 1928), 218–79; and the fine characterization in Kupisch, *Von Luther zu Bismarck*, 49–94.

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich von Treitschke, "Luther und die deutsche Nation," in his *Historische und politische Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1897), 4:395–6.

were caught between two fires, Catholicism and socialism, to which their own "spiritual poverty" made them vulnerable. "It is not only elemental feelings but also their integrated intellectual systems that give social democracy and ultramontaniam their predominance over all other political forces of our time."<sup>24</sup> Dilthey was simply echoing, though less directly, Bismarck's adage that "both elements, the ultramontane and the socialist, are born foes of Germany."<sup>25</sup>

Yet the Protestant bourgeoisie of Wilhelmine Germany did not panic. It had learned to live with this feeling of being caught spiritually and politically between two foes so long as "our state," as Bismarck had declared before the Prussian upper house in 1875, "is now a Protestant state."<sup>26</sup> This was the crucial reason why the Luther-to-Bismarck narrative had become a type of orthodoxy and why, in the consciousness of the German Protestant bourgeoisie, believing or unbelieving, "the Reformation was never far below the surface of educated discourse."<sup>27</sup> Although shaken by the obduracy of its foes, the narrative retained its power right into World War I, in the service of which it performed creditably as an argument for the superior value of German civilization.<sup>28</sup> The fortunes of war, however, are notoriously unreliable and cruel, and a sense of impending doom tends to encourage a re-evaluation of the established ways of linking the past to the present. This kind of rethinking had begun in Germany by 1917—another Reformation jubilee year—when cracks were beginning to appear in the Luther-to-Bismarck story.<sup>29</sup> We can

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<sup>24</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1914), 2:91, quoted in Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Neuwied, 1962), 362.

<sup>25</sup> Moritz Busch, *Tagebuchblätter*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1902), 2:229.

<sup>26</sup> Replying to Hans von Kleist Retzow, April 14, 1875: "Unser Staat ist nun doch einmal evangelisch" (quoted in Rost, *Fehlwege*, 129).

<sup>27</sup> Blackbourn, *Long Nineteenth Century*, 293.

<sup>28</sup> Faulenbach, *Ideologie des deutschen Weges*, 125–31.

<sup>29</sup> See the excellent anthology by Günter Brakelmann, comp., *Der Deutsche Protestantismus im Epochenjahre 1917*, Politik und Kirche: Studienbücher zur kirchlichen Zeitgeschichte, vol. 1 (Witten, 1974), 309; he notes in the March 1917 lectures of the theologian Otto Baumgarten "im Raume des Protestantismus der erste nennenswerte literarische Niederschlag eines beginnenden Umdenkens" on the part of liberal Protestant theologians. The parallel crisis of belief in the Rankean paradigm among some liberal Protestant historians is analyzed by

examine some of them in a jubilee lecture by Erich Marcks, yet another Saxon historian and a loyal Rankean whose faith in the old narrative was deeply shaken by the war.<sup>30</sup> He proposed a new view of the role of the confessions, more definitely constituted and disciplined translocal religious communities, in the rise of modern Germany, a view based not on antagonism but on fruitful coexistence. "Both of these old, great, perhaps greatest, spiritual parties," he said, should in the future live "within a whole, which today is coming together itself wonderfully and irresistibly, namely, the nation and the fatherland."<sup>31</sup> Far from being merely a curse on Germany, Marcks felt, the historic religious split had prepared the Germans for national unification because "it bound the Protestants together throughout Germany, and the Catholics as well, [and became,] as surprising as this may sound, a unifying force. Württemberg and Saxony, Bavaria and Cologne stood stalwartly together, and in all the divisions, old and new, there was also a new solidarity."<sup>32</sup> Confessional division had been not the antithesis of German unity but rather just one stage on the road to its realization in Bismarck's great policy. To Ranke this division had been the *bête noir* of German history, to Marcks it had come, in the midst of World War I, to represent not a catastrophe but "a doubling of the German way of life."<sup>33</sup>

As interesting as they are, it must be said that Marcks's revisions had no effect on writing about the Protestant Reformation in German

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Walther Hofer in *Geschichtsschreibung und Weltanschauung: Betrachtungen zum Werk Friedrich Meineckes* (Munich, 1950); and Hans Heinz Krill, *Die Rankerennaissance: Max Lenz und Erich Marcks: Ein Beitrag zum historisch-politischen Denken in Deutschland 1880–1935*, Veröffentlichungen der Berliner Historischen Kommission beim Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut der Freien Universität Berlin, vol. 3 (Berlin, 1962), 127–225. These beginnings of a more-or-less radical revision of the old positions flowed into the tremendous crisis in German Protestantism unleashed by the defeat in 1918. See Martin Greschat, ed., *Der Deutsche Protestantismus im Revolutionsjahr 1918/19*, Politik und Kirche: Studienbücher zur kirchlichen Zeitgeschichte, vol. 2 (Witten, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> Erich Marcks, *Luther und Deutschland: Eine Reformationsrede im Kriegsjahr 1917* (Leipzig, 1917), 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

history.<sup>34</sup> Germany's defeat in 1918 utterly robbed the Luther-to-Bismarck narrative of its plausibility. Historical interest in the Reformation collapsed and did not revive for more than forty years.<sup>35</sup> With the Great War the story of Germany "from Luther to Bismarck," once the hegemonic narrative of how modern Germany came to be, came to an end. For Gerhard Ritter it meant that "the end of our people in world history has arrived!"<sup>36</sup>

### III

The National Socialists had their uses for Martin Luther but not for his reformation, and their regime's influence on historical writing deepened the Protestant Reformation's long exile from the story of

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<sup>34</sup> With the qualification that his nationalist ecumenism anticipated one type of Christian ecumenism in Germany during the interwar period, especially during the 1930s. Not untypical is the following remark, which the Catholic scholar Joseph Lortz wrote for Luther's birthday in 1933: "Denn von der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung her ... erhebt sich so fordernd und absolut das Verlangen nach einem innersten Eins sein der Nation, daß der Nationalsozialismus, will er sich nicht selbst untreu werden, das Gegeneinander der Konfessionen überwinden muß" (quoted in Gabrielle Lautenschläger, "Neue Forschungsergebnisse zum Thema Joseph Lortz," in Rolf Decot and Rainer Vinke, eds., *Zum Gedenken an Joseph Lortz [1887–1975]: Beiträge zur Reformationsgeschichte und Ökumene* [Stuttgart, 1989], 299).

<sup>35</sup> The chief exceptions are Paul Joachimsen's writings on humanism and the Reformation, Karl Brandi's publications on the Emperor Charles V, and Günther Franz's book on the Peasants' War, plus progress on some editions of sources. It is perhaps a measure of the level of scholarship during these decades that Gerhard Ritter, who wrote nothing of original merit on the Reformation, for years edited the principal journal in the field, the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*. His scattered studies are collected in Gerhard Ritter, *Die Weltwirkung der Reformation*, 4th ed. (Darmstadt, 1975). On Ritter, see Klaus Schwabe, "Gerhard Ritter—Werk und Person," in Klaus Schwabe and Rolf Reichardt, eds., *Gerhard Ritter: Ein politischer Historiker in seinen Briefen* (Boppard, 1984), 1–170. My own views on Ritter are presented in "Continuity in Gerhard Ritter, 1923–1950," in Hartmut Lehmann and James Van Horn Melton, eds., *Paths of Continuity: Central European Historiography from the 1930s through the 1950s* (New York, 1993), 109–17.

<sup>36</sup> Ritter wrote to his parents from Heidelberg on June 21, 1919, quoted in Schwabe and Reichardt, eds., *Gerhard Ritter*, 211, no. 18.

German history. The smashing of their Germany led to the creation in 1949 of two more Germanies, and as the years went by, until the early 1960s, the Protestant Reformation still stood, as silent as Banquo's ghost, at the table of German history.<sup>37</sup> So unnoticed had the subject become that in the early 1960s church historian Bernd Moeller was moved to complain that Reformation history had degenerated into what he called "an antiquarian exercise."<sup>38</sup>

Just at this time something was stirring, not in Moeller's Germany but further eastward, where the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was searching for a national identity. The need to ground this identity historically created the first new place for the Protestant Reformation in a postwar narrative of German history.<sup>39</sup> Its birth announcement arrived in early 1961 in the Thuringian town of Wernigerode, a very short distance from Moeller's study in Göttingen. There the Leipzig historian Max Steinmetz presented a list of theses—not ninety-five but a mere thirty-four—on the German Reformation. Following the lead of Friedrich Engels a century before, Steinmetz incorporated the Reformation into what he called "the early bourgeois revolution."<sup>40</sup> He

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<sup>37</sup> See Winfried Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945*, 2d ed. (1989; reprint, Munich, 1993); Ernst Schulin, ed., *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg (1945–1965)*, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs: Kolloquien, vol. 14 (Munich, 1989).

<sup>38</sup> Bernd Moeller, "Problems of Reformation Research," in Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards Jr. (Philadelphia, 1975), 3–4.

<sup>39</sup> Dietrich Staritz, "Geschichte der DDR," in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ed., *Moderne Deutsche Geschichte*, rev. ed., 11 vols. (Darmstadt, 1996), 11:206–11.

<sup>40</sup> Originally published as Max Steinmetz, "Die frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland 1476 bis 1535: Thesen zur Vorbereitung der wissenschaftlichen Konferenz in Wernigerode vom 21. bis 24. Januar 1960," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 8 (1960): 113–24; also in Gerhard Brendler, ed., *Die frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland: Referat und Diskussion zum Thema Probleme der frühbürgerlichen Revolution in Deutschland 1476–1535*, Tagung der Sektion Mediavistik der deutschen Historiker-Gesellschaft vom 21.–23.1.1960 in Wernigerode, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1961), 7–16. There is an English translation in Robert W. Scribner and Gerhard Beneke, eds., *The German Peasant War of 1525—New Viewpoints* (London, 1979), 9–18. On the professional situation, see Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft*, chap. 11; Jan Herman Brinks, *Die Geschichtswissenschaft auf dem Weg zur deutschen Einheit: Luther, Friedrich II. und*

strove thereby to embed the Reformation, as he said, in "a convincing analysis of the economic situation and social stratification in the Holy Roman Empire" by making it part of a larger movement that lasted from 1476 until 1535. At the movement's high point stood not Luther, who had betrayed the common people, but the theologian Thomas Müntzer. In Steinmetz's theses the Protestant Reformation came once more to stand at a turning point in German history.

Over the next two decades the interpretation of the German Reformation as an early bourgeois revolution became one of the most distinctive concepts of historical scholarship in the GDR.<sup>41</sup> From today's standpoint it can be seen how hauntingly Rankean this concept was, with its tale of a national movement meeting early, stiff resistance, followed by a swift collapse. One might say that Steinmetz installed the Marxist motor of class conflict in the stately Rankean carriage of the Protestant Reformation as a failed German national revolution. Yet there was a difference: What failed in 1525, Steinmetz wrote, was "the first attempt of the popular masses to create a unified national state from below."<sup>42</sup> This certainly was not Rankean, for, as Marx said of Hegel, Steinmetz found Ranke standing on his head and stood him on his feet.

Despite the canonical status it gained in East German historiography, Steinmetz's concept of the Reformation as early bourgeois revolution proved unstable. Soon historians, some of them his own students, began to subject it to a threefold critique: First, they rejected Steinmetz's identification of premodern burghers as the forerunners of a modern bourgeoisie; second, they integrated Germany's reformation into European history via the theory of social

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*Bismarck als Paradigmen politischen Wandels*, Campus Forschung, vol. 685 (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 132–9; and Werner Berthold, "Zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft der DDR: Vorgeschichte, Konfrontationen und Kooperationen," in Schulin, ed., *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft*, 39–54, who emphasizes Gerhard Ritter's part in making the split final between the historians of the two Germanies.

<sup>41</sup> Andreas Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach* (Detroit, 1985), chap. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Thomas A Brady Jr., "The Common Man and the Lost Austria in the West: A Contribution to the German Question," in E. I. Kouri and Tom Scott, eds., *Politics and Society in Reformation Europe: Essays for Sir Geoffrey Elton on his 65th Birthday* (London, 1987), 143.

revolutions; and third, they developed a new appreciation for the role of religion in the German Reformation.<sup>43</sup> These revisions came to their peak during the Luther jubilee of 1983, which restored Martin Luther and his Reformation to a positive place in the official narrative of German history.<sup>44</sup> However, it was a place deeply constrained by a need to relativize all of history. "Our understanding of history, too," wrote one leading scholar in the GDR's premier historical journal, "must be historicized."<sup>45</sup> That is approximately what Erich Marcks had said in 1917 about the confessional division of Germany.

Across the border in West Germany, too, the 1960s were a time of new intellectual and scholarly departures. Although they employed different concepts, here, too, historians began to clear space for the Protestant Reformation in the story of German history. Furthermore—and this will surprise no student of German-German relations—their thinking tended to converge with East German ideas. Coursing across the same ground of premodern German history, now freed from its long servitude to the story of Prussia's making, they rediscovered the Holy Roman Empire, the framework into which they called the Protestant Reformation to new life. Like the East Germans, they placed the Reformation not at the genesis of the present era, its place in the Luther-to-Bismarck narrative, but at the middle of the long history of what they called "Old Europe." They meant the entire span of centuries between 1200 and Napoleonic times, when Germany, like the rest of Europe, had been organized socially by legally defined status groups, called "estates," rather than by economically determined classes of the modern kind.<sup>46</sup> At the end of

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<sup>43</sup> See Brent O. Peterson, "'Workers of the World Unite—for God's Sake!' Recent Luther Scholarship in the German Democratic Republic," in James D. Tracy, ed., *Luther and the Modern State in Germany*, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. 7 (Kirksville, Mo., 1986), 77–100.

<sup>44</sup> Of which the most characteristic scholarly fruit is Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* (Berlin, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> Walter Schmidt, "Zur Entwicklung des Erbe- und Traditionsverständnisses in der Geschichtsschreibung der DDR," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 33 (1985): 196.

<sup>46</sup> Dietrich Gerhard, *Old Europe: A Study of Continuity, 1000–1800* (New York, 1981). For the present state of discussion on corporate society, see Winfried Schulze, ed., *Ständische Gesellschaft und soziale Mobilität*, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs: Kolloquien, vol. 12 (Munich, 1988).

this era stood the triple revolution—demographic, industrial, and French—that had introduced modern times. This periodization complemented the story of Europe as it was then being refashioned in France by the powerful school of history associated with the journal known as the *Annales*. Not coincidentally, it also agreed with a broad consensus of social historians about when the modern age began.<sup>47</sup>

When this new wind had blown away the worn fragments of the old national narrative, it exposed in premodern German history something quite bizarre. There lay the ramshackle old country that called itself "the Holy Roman Empire." The empire's political multiplicity, which the Rankeans had despised as both regrettable cause and shameful proof of German weakness, now came to be regarded as honorable proof of German political Vitality.<sup>48</sup> In this setting the Protestant Reformation found its new place in a story of German history, where it came more and more to be seen not as the beginning of modernity but as the culmination of changes that had begun in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

As social historians groped toward this new vision of the Protestant Reformation, its analog appeared in the study of Reformation thought. In a brilliant book published in 1963, the

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<sup>47</sup> Most of the grand developmental narratives of recent decades have been written in English. The subject is discussed and the most important publications are cited in my "The Rise of Merchant Empires, 1400–1700: A European Counterpoint," in James D. Tracy, ed., *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires, 1450–1750* (Cambridge, 1991), 117–60. On this periodization, see also "Introduction: Renaissance and Reformation, Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Era," in Thomas A. Brady Jr., James D. Tracy, and Heiko A. Oberman, eds., *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1994–5), 1:xiii–xxiv. For German history, it is enough to point to the entirely unproblematic division between early modern and modern Germany history in the "Enzyklopädie Deutsche Geschichte," which will appear in ca. 100 volumes from R. Oldenbourg Verlag. See my review essay, "Early Modern Germany in *The Encyclopedia of German History*," *Journal of Modern History* 71 (1998).

<sup>48</sup> The most important of these ideas, perhaps, was that "the state slowly developed out of the quite un-statelike ruling structures and relationships of the Middle Ages" (Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "The Rise of the State as a Process of Secularization," in Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *State, Society and Liberty: Studies in Political Theory and Constitutional Law*, trans. J. A. Underwood [New York, 1991], 26).



Dutch historian Heiko A. Oberman argued that Martin Luther and his Catholic opponents shared the common heritage of late medieval theology, what he called—echoing a famous fellow countryman—the "harvest of medieval theology."<sup>49</sup> It was the bell that signaled an incoming tide.<sup>50</sup>

As Oberman wrote these words, social historians were grappling with a similar idea. They were trying to understand the implications for German history of another discovery about Europe. It was that premodern Europe had undergone a long sine wave of population and economic movement. It had three peaks—in the thirteenth, sixteenth, and eighteenth centuries—interrupted by two depressions—in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this context, the Protestant Reformation could be seen as having coincided with the economic peak between the two great depressions. It could be viewed either as ending the late medieval crisis or as beginning the crisis of the seventeenth century, but it had nothing to do with the demographic and economic revolutions of the eighteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

And so the Protestant Reformation's long banishment to the shadows of German history came to an end, and by the 1970s it had gained a new place in a new narrative. Or in a pair of new narratives, for it became the hinge of two distinct concepts of premodern Germany's development. The first, called the communalization thesis, sees the Reformation as the culmination of late medieval German history; the other, called the confessionalization thesis, sees

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<sup>49</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963). The concept is formulated in a broader way in his "Reformation: Epoche oder Episode," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977): 56–111.

<sup>50</sup> Formulated thus by Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford, 1987), 3: "There has been a growing recognition on the part of Reformation scholars that neither the events nor the ideas of the sixteenth century may be properly understood unless they are seen as the culmination of developments in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries."

<sup>51</sup> Frantisek Graus, *Pest—Geißler—Judenmorde: Das 14. Jahrhundert als Krisenzeit*, Veröffentlichungen der Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte, vol. 86 (1987), 555. This is the most forceful statement of the argument for a general crisis. The doubts that have been voiced are summarized by Ernst Schubert, *Einführung in die Probleme der deutschen Geschichte des Spätmittelalters* (Darmstadt, 1992), 5–9.

it as the inception of early modern German history. Neither concept, however, sees the Reformation in direct relation to German history since 1800.<sup>52</sup>

The communalization thesis, which is associated with Peter Blickle, holds that communal institutions grew rapidly in villages and towns during the late medieval agrarian crisis, then gained a predominantly religious voice during the popular phase of the Protestant Reformation, and thereafter waned before the rising power of the absolutist territorial state.<sup>53</sup> The communal narrative thus makes the early Protestant Reformation and the Peasants' War of 1525 the hinge of premodern German history. It is the point at which town and land briefly unite under the concept of a "people's reformation," a term Blickle takes from the Soviet historian M. M. Smirin.<sup>54</sup> The communalization thesis restores the Protestant Reformation to a central place in German history, although not to its original place, which was at the moment of birth of modern Germany.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> They comprise two of the three outstanding German contributions to early modern European historical studies since the 1950s. The third is the protoindustrialization thesis.

<sup>53</sup> The first full statement is in Peter Blickle, *Die Reformation im Reich* (Stuttgart, 1982). The whole picture is laid out in his *Deutsche Untertanen: Ein Widerspruch* (Munich, 1981).

<sup>54</sup> Peter Blickle, *Die Gemeindereformation: Die Menschen des 16. Jahrhunderts auf dem Weg zum Heil* (Munich, 1985), 15–17; in English, *The Communal Reformation: The Quest for Salvation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1992), 2–5. Blickle discusses Smirin's concept most fully in "Bauer und Reformation: Positionsbestimmungen," in Peter Blickle, ed., *Zugänge zur bäuerlichen Reformation, Bauer und Reformation*, vol. 1 (Zurich, 1987), 11–12.

<sup>55</sup> See Thomas A. Brady Jr., "From the Sacral Community to the Common Man: Reflections on German Reformation Studies," *Central European History* 20 (1987): 229–45. The easiest way into this discussion is via the excellent review articles by Tom Scott, "The Peasants' War A Historiographical Review," *Historical Journal* 22 (1979): 693–720, 953–74; "Peasant Revolts in Early Modern Germany: Review Article," *Historical Journal* 28 (1985): 455–68; and "Community and Conflict in Early Modern Germany: Review Article," *European History Quarterly* 16 (1986): 209–17. The communalization thesis is expanded to Europe in three volumes edited by Peter Blickle: *Landgemeinde und Stadtgemeinde in Mitteleuropa* (Munich, 1991); *Resistance, Representation, and Community* (Oxford, 1997); *Gemeinde und Staat im Alten Europa*, Beihefte der *Historischen Zeitschrift*, n.s., vol. 25 (Munich, 1998).

The second narrative, which is formed around the confessionalization thesis, is associated with Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard. They argue that the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counterreformation were not contrary forces but rather two related strands of a single shift away from medieval forms toward confessions. Post-Reformation Germany experienced a first, church-centered phase of confessional formation between 1550 and 1650, and a second, state-dominated phase of confessional consolidation between 1650 and 1800.<sup>56</sup> Although this view leaves the Protestant Reformation itself more-or-less continuous with the late Middle Ages, it sees the following era as structured by the three Christian confessions—Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed or Calvinist—on a roughly equal footing.<sup>57</sup> They resemble three trains headed for the same destination—the modern world—on parallel tracks but offset schedules, with the Calvinists usually in the lead.<sup>58</sup> Although initially the confessionalization thesis unfolded in a Weberian framework of state-building and modernization, more recently the argument has emphasized that its effects were sacralizing, not secularizing, and the

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<sup>56</sup> The most systematic statements for Germany are developed by Heinz Schilling in "Die Konfessionalisierung im Reich: Religiöser und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Deutschland zwischen 1555 und 1620," *Historische Zeitschrift* 146 (1988): 1–45. Very important for the Catholic side of this thesis are the programmatic articles of Wolfgang Reinhard, "Gegenreformation als Modernisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977): 226–52; "Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters," *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 10 (1983): 257–77; and "Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State: a Reassessment," *Catholic Historical Review* 75 (1989): 383–404.

<sup>57</sup> Schilling, "Die Reformation—ein revolutionärer Umbruch ... ?" 26–7, reviews the classic German Protestant view of the Reformation as a revolutionary shift and correctly identifies Hegel as its author.

<sup>58</sup> It seems to have escaped comment thus far that this argument extends to some degree a path blazed by Erich Marcks. See Marcks's "Die Gegenreformation in Westeuropa: Das Zeitalter der religiösen Umwälzungen," in Walter Goetz, ed, *Propyläen-Weltgeschichte*, 10 vols. (Berlin, 1929–33), vol. 5. When this massive collective history was revised after World War II, Gerhard Ritter produced for it a very similar section that appeared separately as *Die Neugestaltung Europas im 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1950).

forms of behavior it encouraged were collective, not individualistic.<sup>59</sup> The argument depends heavily on the differences between medieval and early modern (called "Tridentine") Catholicism for its plausibility.<sup>60</sup> It has enjoyed considerable if not universal acceptance among historians of other European countries.

Since its re-entry into the active field of historiographical discussion during the 1960s, therefore, the Protestant Reformation has gained roles in not one but four narratives of German history. It became, first, part of an early bourgeois revolution; second, the inheritor of late medieval theology and religious thought; third, the culmination of the communal movement; and fourth, the origin of confessionalization. The four narratives have two assumptions in common: 1) The Protestant Reformation is to be seen as a social and religious movement between the late medieval crisis and the early modern consolidation of state and society; 2) the Reformation's most important context is European rather than merely German. This is how the history of the Protestant Reformation in Germany is being written today.

There are dissenters from this consensus, and one bears a familiar voice: When, thirty-five years ago, Moeller called on historians to take the Reformation seriously, they responded with such great enthusiasm that, as Robespierre said of the upper classes who began the French Revolution, he has long since repented of his provocation.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Moeller recently proposed to restrict the very concept of the Protestant Reformation in Germany to a single, brief moment: the German burghers' reception between 1519 and 1522 of Luther's message.<sup>62</sup> By his account, this interaction neither grew out of the late

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<sup>59</sup> Schilling explicitly criticizes the "Weberian dogmatism that has been fruitless for many years" in "Die Reformation—ein revolutionärer Umbruch ... ?" 35n19.

<sup>60</sup> From this side comes its applicability to the world beyond Europe. See Wolfgang Reinhard, "Christliche Mission und Dialektik des Kolonialismus," *Historische Zeitschrift* 109 (1989): 353–70. For the (largely favorable) reception of the confessionalization thesis outside of Germany, see Marc Venard, ed., *Le temps des confessions (1530–1620/30)*, vol. 7 of *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, 12 vols. (Paris, 1992) and Marc Venard, *Réforme protestante, réforme catholique dans la province d'Avignon au XVIe siècle*, *Histoire religieuse de France*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1993).

<sup>61</sup> Berndt Hamm, Bernd Moeller, and Dorothea Wendebourg, *Reformationstheorien: Ein kirchenhistorischer Disput über Einheit und Vielfalt der Reformation* (Göttingen, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

medieval communal and religious movements, nor did it prefigure anything in the modern world.<sup>63</sup> The only historical connection Moeller will allow for Luther's message is to what he calls "original Christianity." Acutely aware of the methodological problem this creates, he makes the neutralizing declaration that "history does not make somersaults, and Luther was no miracle-worker who fell to earth from heaven."<sup>64</sup> Yes, but then whence did he come, and whither did his reformation go?

Moeller's desire to dehistoricize Martin Luther's reformation contains one quite useful point: The radical modern historicization of the Protestant Reformation as an event that exhausted its content in its own time, or at least in times now long past, has left little or no room for a living bond between that event and the present. Our burial of Luther and his reformation in the very deep past makes us complicit with all those who build walls between the Germans' present and their deeper past. As Troeltsch said so well, the past is either connected to the present as history or it is disconnected as antiquarian lore. There was a time when the German shucking-off of the deeper German past might have been seen as a German peculiarity. This is no longer a possibility.<sup>65</sup>

#### IV

Why has it become so difficult for Germans to reach and their recent history into their deeper past? The most obvious answer is because German history lacks something comparable to the familiar tracks of old political institutions that form the continuity of many

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<sup>63</sup> Thirty-five years ago, Bernd Moeller advanced a quite different view in the closing sentence of his seminal study on the imperial free cities and the Reformation: "In the modern, Anglo-Saxon form of democracy," he wrote in 1962, "a piece of medieval civic life returned to Germany" (see Moeller, *Reichsstadt und Reformation*, 76; this concluding sentence was excised from all subsequent editions).

<sup>64</sup> Hamm, Moeller, and Wendebourg, *Reformationstheorien*, 23.

<sup>65</sup> See Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism, 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994); Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, the Holocaust and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Steven L. Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: The Historians' Feud, France, 1789–1989* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995).

other national histories. This is not a problem of twentieth-century making, and in part the alleged connection between Luther and Bismarck, between 1517 and 1871, meant to fill this gap. That old narrative, however, possessed a doughty bridge, called Prussia, which its framers, chiefly Ranke and Treitschke, chose to help lift German history out of the terrible bog of late medieval and early modern political particularism. They wanted a continuity based on the one institution they trusted, the state, and the abortive national reform around 1500 did not fill their bill. What did fill it was the miraculous rise after the Thirty Years' War of the shattered, impoverished territorial state of Brandenburg into the fierce military monarchy of Frederick the Great and the mighty nineteenth-century state of Prussia. The growth of Prussia offered a safe passage through the bog of German particularism.

The framers of the Luther-to-Bismarck story of German history have frequently been criticized, even pilloried, for their fixation on the state as the central agent of history. This is an easy criticism to make, for their choice looks quite foolish from a late twentieth-century perspective. The state now seems the worst possible choice as a thread of continuity in modern German history. After all, no political arrangement of the German-speaking world since 1803 ever endured beyond the span of a human lifetime.

Yet it is easy to misjudge the creators of the myth of Prussia as the natural agent of unity for Germans and for German history, for, in a political sense—the only sense they recognized—German history had no continuity. To understand this we must shift our gaze back to the political geography of the Holy Roman Empire, which was cruelly characterized by Voltaire as "neither holy, Roman, nor an empire."<sup>66</sup> He had a point, and the point was later recognized by James Bryce, a Belfast man who later became British ambassador to the United States. Bryce wrote about the Holy Roman Empire that it was "above all description or explanation; not that it is impossible to discover the beliefs which created and sustained it, but that the power of those beliefs cannot be adequately apprehended by men

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<sup>66</sup> Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet), *Essai sur l'histoire générale et sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (Geneva [?] 1757), chap. 70: "Ce corps qui s'appelait et qui s'appelle encore le saint empire romain n'était en aucune manière ni saint, ni romain, ni empire."

whose minds have been differently trained, and whose imaginations are fired by different ideals."<sup>67</sup> As he wrote those words in the year of Gettysburg, the Holy Roman Empire was only sixty years in its grave.

Except to the specialists, the Holy Roman Empire's shapes and histories have in modern times never looked less bizarre than they did to Bryce. A map of the empire at almost any point in its post-medieval history is a colorful rag bag of alien shapes and names. There are a few familiar names, though. There is an Austria, but it looks nothing like the dwarfish Republic of Austria we know. And we can discover a slimmed down Bavaria and perhaps vaguely locate Saxony. Prussia is there, but it lies up on the Baltic coast, not around Berlin where we know it should be. Beyond these largest entities, our map of the empire creates nothing but trouble in our search for recognition. Strewn across its landscapes are many purple blotches; they represent some odd things called "ecclesiastical territories." Then there are the bright red dots for the imperial free cities, scattered as if broadcast across the land. Further, if we dig down deeper yet, we encounter a riot of wildly strange, unidentifiable petty states: imperial free abbesses and prince-provosts, heads of military-religious orders and free knights, and even some free peasants, such as the thirty-nine free villages and hamlets on the Leutkirch Heath in Upper Swabia, whose folk appointed their sheriffs and judges and acknowledged no lord but the emperor.

How do we frame a political narrative through this riot of archaisms? The Holy Roman Empire makes Imperial China seem a paragon of simplicity and continuity. We social historians normally try to work from the small to the large, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, but what larger story of German history can be constructed out of these odd little entities? We could try, and here are some possible titles: *German History: From the Leutkirch Heath to the Federal Republic*; or *The Teutonic Knights and the Story of the German Nation*; or perhaps *The Upper Swabian Imperial Abbesses and the Modernization of Germany*. It is no wonder that in the face of such bewilderingly archaic complexity readers of German history may shout relief upon opening the late Thomas Nipperdey's book about the nineteenth century.

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<sup>67</sup> James Bryce, *The Holy Roman Empire*, rev. ed. (New York, n.d [1864]), 388.

There, on the first page, stands his brilliant opening sentence: "In the beginning was Napoleon."<sup>68</sup>

Why do we have this problem? The more general problem of discontinuity in German history is aggravated by, but is not the same as, the desire for historical amnesia with respect to twentieth-century Germany. The reasons for the latter are so obvious that today any effort to sweep the catastrophic barbarism of recent German history into Birrell's "great dust-heap" provokes immediate and savage criticism. The larger question of continuity, however, which I broached at the outset, impinges on the fate of that old narrative of German history from Luther to Bismarck. The problem here is not that the loss of one narrative produced an intolerable gap in German history as the story of the German nation. That narrative shared the common aim of national narratives, which is to get people to abandon their particular pasts for another, presumably superior one.<sup>69</sup> The Luther-to-Bismarck narrative belonged to a German program of national acculturation that had counterparts in other countries: in the French program to turn peasants—who were not coincidentally Bretons, Corsicans, and Occitanians—into Frenchmen, in the British one to turn Irish, Scots, and Welsh into Britons. The programs often ran fairly smoothly, as historians and publicists applied the filters of language, race, and religion to the deeper past and extracted from them elements for their national narratives.<sup>70</sup>

What was different in Germany was the perceived need to fashion a genealogical narrative for a state that embodied no obviously compelling historical arguments for unity, not even conquest. In the absence of a real institutional continuity, resort was had to a symbolic one. Not to language, for the new Germany included only parts of the German nation in that sense; and not to race, which in the nineteenth century was more problematic yet. But to "culture," which chiefly meant religion, to which, as a consequence of the past experience of

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1860: Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (Munich, 1983), 11.

<sup>69</sup> Fundamental: James J. Sheehan, "What Is German History? Reflections on the Role of the Nation in German History and Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981): 1–23.

<sup>70</sup> Classic statement: Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983).



confessionalization, all other aspects of culture were keyed. To speak of a "culturally unified state" (*Kulturstaat*), as the German liberal Protestants did, fooled no one. They meant an overcoming of the divided confessions and their churches by a national religion. There was nothing pathological about the perception of this need, for religion lay at the root of most national identities, including that of the United States, and lay at the very core of others, such as the British nation.<sup>71</sup>

Germany's peculiarity in this company lay not in the project of a culturally unified state but in the fact that it already possessed two national religions. The smaller, Catholicism, was still very large and, just as important, very well organized. Many German Protestants believed, to be sure, as many other nineteenth-century Protestants did, that Roman Catholicism was on its last legs. But they were wrong, and this miscalculation cost them dearly. What the German Catholics lacked in numbers, they made up for in superior organization and cohesion, whereas the Protestants' greatly superior position was neutralized by their inferior organization, poor strategy, and serious inner divisions. Under these conditions, the project of acculturation predicted by the Luther-to-Bismarck story could not succeed. It deepened and hardened disunity rather than overcoming it.

The German Protestant bourgeoisie was not singular, of course, in allowing desire to overcome good judgment and prudence. Very similar mistakes were made in Britain, and their price was the loss of most of Ireland and the crippling of the remainder.<sup>72</sup> The British, however, enjoyed one great advantage—the Irish Sea—that protected them from the worst consequences of their Irish policy. German Protestant elites had no such luck, although it must have occurred to some that their new Germany might have been happier had it been smaller.

Yet this is hardly the whole story. In my opinion, the German failure was even more deeply rooted in the political legacy of the Reformation era, which had added religious "two-ness" to the late medieval heritage of political "many-ness." This odd condition long occupied in the German-speaking world the moral and imaginative space in which other

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<sup>71</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, Conn., 1992).

<sup>72</sup> Patrick O'Farrell, *Ireland's English Question* (New York, 1971), 145–60. The two British politicians who were saved from this mistake by their ability to subordinate desire to policy were Sir Robert Peel and William E. Gladstone.

countries translated religious and linguistic communities into national identities. The only school of historical interpretation to recognize this connection was East Germany's Marxist-Leninist school, which saw that although the Protestant Reformation's failure did not create German political multiplicity it did help to preserve and harden that condition. In West Germany, by contrast, where postwar political stability depended on depoliticizing confessional differences, such a subject could hardly be examined candidly.

The point to be drawn from this line of reasoning is that the national state was precisely the wrong political model for the peoples of the old Holy Roman Empire. It required something those peoples did not have, namely, a cultural and religious unity, out of which the moral ideal of the nation might have been forged. When the heirs of Schleiermacher spoke of the need to achieve a "cultural state," they meant just this kind of unity, a longing for which the French Revolution and Napoleon had seared into the souls of Clausewitz, Fichte, Schleiermacher, and their whole generation.

The two principal religious confessions, the Reformation era's legacy to modern Germany, form its most important living links to the deeper German past. Their influence on German public life has been neither constant, equal, nor symmetrical. The high culture of modern Germany initially was a disproportionately Protestant culture, except in art and music. The point has been made often, and it still can be made. "One who was born a Protestant, as I was," wrote the late Thomas Nipperdey, "and who does not take this to be an accident of birth but accepts it deliberately, is inclined to set a high, positive value on the constitutive significance of Luther and Lutheranism for the history of modernity in Germany, for the formation of personality and behavior, of society and culture."<sup>73</sup> These words express one truth, and they conceal another. Whereas the confessions have always chosen as signifiers those marks that most distinguish them from one another, the religious geography of Central Europe has made them powerful parts of one another's histories, apart from their common history, for close to five centuries. They have borrowed, often silently,

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, "Luther und die Bildung der Deutschen," in Hartmut Löwe and Claus-Jürgen Roepke, eds., *Luther und die Folgen: Beiträge zur sozialgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der lutherischen Reformation* (Munich, 1983), 27.

forms from one another, and the issues between them have had to be redefined again and again. To take but one example, the slogans "big German" and "little German," once fighting words, have been made entirely archaic by the dismemberment of Austria after World War I and the extinction of Prussia after World War II.

I do not mean to suggest that the German confessions have become interchangeable, merely that their common history, which began with the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counterreformation, has not yet ended. It has, however, undergone very deep changes. When today the talk is of European integration, German Catholics no longer begin to rhapsodize about Charlemagne. Nor do German Protestants any longer cast Martin Luther as the model German burgher or, to quote Gerhard Ritter, "the eternal German."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the political peace between the Christian confessions has become a linchpin of postwar Germany's stable political culture.

In conclusion, in Germany the post-Reformation confessional system, based on the coexistence of two great religious bodies, is just about the only legacy of the Holy Roman Empire that has endured into the late twentieth century. Almost two hundred years ago, Schleiermacher declared it to be intolerable; and more than one hundred years ago, Ranke declared it to be obsolete, and Treitschke prophesied its imminent demise. They all were wrong, for the social formations we call "confessions" have proved the most permanent creations of the past 500 years of German history. I do not mean to suggest that this system has endured unchanged, nor that it will endure for all time, nor would I wish to deny that the twentieth century has deeply altered its influence and significance for German life. Yet the confessional system has outlasted every German state—the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg monarchy, the Kingdom of Prussia, the Second German Empire, the Weimar Republic, National Socialism, and the postwar twins of the Federal Republic and the GDR. That is

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<sup>74</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *Luther: Gestalt und Symbol* (Munich, 1925), 151: "Er ist wir selber: der ewige Deutsche."

an impressive record. And though we cannot know if it will outlast the present German state, the very question makes me think of Achilles and the tortoise.

**Profiles of a "New Grand Narrative" in Reformation History?  
Comments on Thomas A. Brady Jr.'s Lecture**

*Heinz Schilling*

"In the beginning there was Ranke"—with this variation on the Bible and on Thomas Nipperdey one could summarize the interpretation of Reformation historiography presented in Thomas A. Brady Jr.'s lecture. As a counterpoint, my commentary begins with a thesis that is somewhat less pointed: "At the end there is Thomas A. Brady Jr." Both theses require further explication. In a dual sense Professor Brady stands at the end of this tradition in German Reformation history—on the one hand, he is without doubt a Rankean; on the other, he is one of the leading critics of this historiographical tradition.

Brady is a Rankean in the sense that he always fights for the need to see the "big picture" of history and historical development, and to make sure that history can and must be made sense of. It is in this Rankean mode that he steadily adheres to macrohistorical approaches: "In our field the search is on for 'processes,' which are far more enticing than mere trends or dynamics. This search suggests a reality which the historian encounters rather than invents. Whenever one of these processes—themselves not realities but models for organizing the painfully limited knowledge we have about some aspects of the past—is singled out as the conduct of the 'true dynamics' of history, we approach the cradle where a new Grand Narrative is given birth."

This passage from Brady's introduction to the *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600* is strong and clear. It is a statement for which a

German historian such as myself is particularly grateful, confronted as I am by European proselytizers of new concepts coming from the United States who then radicalize these concepts in an either-or fashion: either micro- or macro-history, either state-building or cultural history, either social discipline or "societal negotiation" (*gesellschaftliches Aushandeln*).<sup>1</sup>

The programmatic sentences quoted above also mark the obverse of Brady's Rankeanism—his skepticism toward every "history direct to God," which attributes an ontological or even eschatological quality to history and historical processes, and his awareness that historical knowledge necessarily remains partial and fragmented, and consequently needs construction of meaning and models of interpretation. In this context, historiographical achievements are intellectual constructs that compete with one another but not ontological approaches intended to converge with divine truth.

To a large extent Brady's criticism of the historiographical tradition of the nineteenth century refers to theological and ecclesiastical history. In this context Brady acts according to the general wisdom among historians that religious and ecclesiastical history is far too important to be left to church historians. To the extent that he contributes—though critically—to the discussions of church historians, Brady becomes part church historian himself. This is evident in his critical debate of the Luther renaissance of the first decades of the twentieth century as well as in his famous concluding remarks at the 1989 conference of American and German historians of the Reformation. In accordance with the idea of historiographical constructiveness just mentioned, Brady argues for the "task of constructing a history of Christendom," drawing together "theology"

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy, eds., *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1994–5), 1:xv. On the discussions among German early modernists, see Heinz Schilling, "Disziplinierung oder 'Selbstregulierung der Untertanen'? Ein Plädoyer für die Doppelperspektive von Makro- und Mikrohistorie bei der Erforschung der frühmodernen Kirchengeschichte," *Historische Zeitschrift* 264 (1997): 675–91.

and "social history" as well as offering explanations on the basis of models and theories.<sup>2</sup>

Brady's argument develops between the two poles of Rankeanism and Anti-Rankeanism. It is impossible to comment on the whole variety of perspectives he has opened up and the points he has raised. I thus confine myself to three remarks: on Brady's historiographical analysis; on his views on the German focus on modern history; and, in somewhat more detail, on the changing significance of the Reformation in the context of world history, including a short reflection on the possible profile of a new "grand narrative" of that event.

### *Some Remarks on Postwar Reformation Research in Germany*

I begin with two observations on Germany's Reformation historiography since the 1930s. The first is concerned with Bernd Moeller's study *Reichsstadt und Reformation*, which Brady, in passing, rightly characterizes as a "seminal study." I believe much can be said in terms of this book constituting the innovative new beginning of German Reformation historiography after World War II rather than Max Steinmetz's *Deutschland von 1476 bis 1648*.<sup>3</sup> Moeller's book opened the way for a radical historicization of the German Reformation and for the integration of the religious and theological structures and processes into their wider historical, including sociohistorical, context. The impact of this new approach to German as well as international Reformation research is proven by dozens of case studies on the urban Reformation and lively debates on theory and method. Moeller's book, the international dissemination of which was strongly supported by the English translation by Brady and H. C. Erik Midelfort, marks the beginning of a big success story: the integration of church and general history—including social history—that characterizes the mainstream of Reformation research today, be it in

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<sup>2</sup> Hans R. Guggisberg and Gottfried G. Krodel, eds., *Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa/The Reformation in Germany and Europe: Interpretations and Issues* (Gütersloh, 1993), 689.

<sup>3</sup> Max Steinmetz, *Deutschland von 1476 bis 1648 (von der frühbürgerlichen Revolution bis zum Westfälischen Frieden)* (Berlin, 1965).

the history or theology departments of German universities.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation was, incidentally, proliferated by more than a half-dozen interdisciplinary conferences organized by the Society for Reformation Research. Among the offshoots of this integrative approach are the concepts of "communalization" and "confessionalization," which, together with "protoindustrialization," Brady praised as "the three outstanding German contributions to early modern European historical studies."<sup>5</sup>

My second comment is concerned with the historiographical position that Brady attributes to Gerhard Ritter. It is most clearly formulated in the following quotation: "It is perhaps a measure of the level of scholarship during these decades that Gerhard Ritter, who wrote nothing of original merit on the Reformation, for years edited the principal journal in the field, the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*."<sup>6</sup> I will refrain from discussing this evaluation with regard to Ritter's research and historiographical achievements, although the synthesis *Die Neugestaltung Deutschlands und Europas im 16. Jahrhundert* doubtlessly had its own merits.<sup>7</sup> In my view it is more important to stress Ritter's influence on the change in scope and emphasis of German Reformation history, which laid the foundation for international cooperation in this field. In 1938 the journal was totally reshaped along these lines and consequently gained a modern profile. It was Ritter who broadened the scope of the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* from German national Reformation historiography in the wake of Ranke toward an investigation of the "Weltwirkungen der Refor-

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<sup>4</sup> Bernd Moeller, *Reichsstadt und Reformation* (Gütersloh, 1962); an enlarged and annotated second German edition was published in 1987. For the English-language edition, see Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Philadelphia, 1972; reprint, Durham, N.C., 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Brady, "Protestant Reformation in Germany," 24n52.

<sup>6</sup> Brady, "Protestant Reformation in Germany," 18n35.

<sup>7</sup> First published in 1941 in vol. 3 of the *Neue Propyläen Weltgeschichte* under the title: "Die kirchliche und staatliche Neugestaltung Europas im Jahrhundert der Reformation und der Glaubenskämpfe" (Berlin, 1941). In 1967 it was published separately by Ullstein Verlag as *Die Neugestaltung Deutschlands und Europas im 16. Jahrhundert: Die kirchlichen und staatlichen Wandlungen im Zeitalter der Reformation und Glaubenskämpfe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967).



mation" (the global effects of the Reformation). The editorial in the November 1938 issue, signed by Gerhard Ritter, Heinrich Bornkamm, and Otto Scheele, is an astonishing document, especially considering the nationalist attitude of the period in general and that of Ritter and his co-editors in particular.

Admittedly, this editorial, too, starts from a Rankean national base but decisively widens its perspective in geographical as well as methodological terms:

The Reformation is a major achievement of the German mind, and its historical understanding must be preserved by the whole of the German people. However, this task can be accomplished only by using a historiography that is based not on specialized and fragmented research but on a universal approach. It cannot be reduced to "church history" or "secular history" or "political history." The *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* is not concerned with the history of the Protestant churches as such, but rather with the history of the period of the Reformation and the following epoch before the Enlightenment, which was mostly determined by religious interests.

And the final sentence stresses the editors' intention to bring about "truly modern Reformation research that unites theological, political, legal, socioeconomic and philosophical methods."<sup>8</sup>

Ritter's program of 1938, adopted again shortly after World War II (ARG 1951), is one of the turning points in Reformation historiography that Brady intended to identify. After the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* had been re-established in the early 1950s in cooperation with Roland H. Bainton and Harald J. Grimm of the American Society for Reformation Research, it was Ritter's program that made it what Brady calls the "principal journal in the

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<sup>8</sup> Original: "Die Reformation ist zugleich eine Großtat des deutschen Geistes, deren geschichtliches Verständnis im ganzen deutschen Volk lebendig erhalten ... werden muß. Einer solchen Aufgabe ist aber nur eine Geschichtsschreibung gewachsen, die auf dem breiten Fundament einer universalhistorischen, nicht spezialistisch zersplitterten Forschung ruht. Sie darf weder als 'Kirchenhistorie' noch als 'profane' oder 'politische' Historie verengt werden.... Gegenstand [des ARG] ist nicht die Geschichte der protestantischen Kirchen als solche, sondern der Reformationszeit und der Epoche vorwiegend religiös bestimmter Interessen bis zum Aufklärungzeitalter hin." And the final sentence stresses the intention of the editors to bring about a "wahrhaft moderne reformationshistorische Forschung, in der sich theologische, politische, juristische, sozialökonomische und philosophische Betrachtungsweise miteinander zu vereinigen hat" (Gerhard Ritter, Heinrich Bornkamm, and Otto Scheele, "Zur Neugestaltung unserer Zeitschrift," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 35 [1938]: 7).

field." Without this change in program, modern Reformation research, with its universal and comparative approach, is hardly imaginable. In a certain way, Ritter's program of 1938 anticipates Brady's 1990 appeal for the integration of "theology" and "history"—however without privileging "social history."

*Deep or Shallow German Past and the Consequences of Reunification*

I share Brady's view of the disastrous tendency to reduce German history to the last hundred or two hundred years, or to even only the last fifty years. However, did Germany's past deepen after the reunification of 1990?

I see some signs of recovery from this historical amnesia. Consequently, I hope that the sociopsychological belated-nation syndrome of the nineteenth century will not be repeated in the twenty-first century as a syndrome of a nation or European region "without a real past." This hope stems from two developments that at first glance seem to be mutually exclusive but that are in fact complementary: first, a rising interest in the history of the Old Reich as a type of proto-national history of the Germans; second, a growing consciousness that European unification is at hand and that the Germans not only have to take care of a strong single European currency, but also have to contribute to the historical and cultural identity of a united Europe.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See especially the writings of Georg Schmidt: *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (Munich, 1995), 94ff; "Integration und Konfessionalisierung," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 21 (1994):1–34; "Konfessionalisierung, Reich und deutsche Nation," in Anton Schindling and Walter Ziegler, eds., *Die Territorien des Reichs im Zeitalter der Reformation und Konfessionalisierung: Land und Konfession 1500–1650*, 7 vols. (Münster, 1997), 7:171–200.

From the perspective of this European orientation, the growing interest of the German public in the Old Reich is not a reappraisal of national history in the sense of nineteenth-century historiography. Rather, it is an interest in the specific German contributions to European historical, political, and—last but not least—legal and social culture as one of the most vital roots of the modern European constitutional and welfare state.

I believe that the coming unification of Europe behooves Germany to deepen its knowledge of the past beyond reassessments of the history of the German Democratic Republic and National Socialism. We need at least to go back to the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, when the political and cultural differentiations of modern Europe were shaped. This is even more necessary because most partners in the union not only experienced their "golden ages" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but also saw the rise of their specific political and cultural identities in the early modern period.

### *The Problem of the Universal Meaning of the German Reformation*

The German Reformation lost much of the fascination it held for Ranke and his historiographical successors due to the integration of early modern German history into a comparative European perspective. This change was even more profound because, in the wake of the growing secularization and dechristianization of the German societies—eastern as well as western—during the 1970s and 1980s, the Reformation had already lost its significance for many, if not most Germans. They no longer defined their religious, cultural, or psychological identities as for or against Luther, as was the case in nineteenth-century as well as in Adenauer's Germany. Consequently, for the first time it was possible to question one of the most influential axioms of German historiography—the quality and character of Luther's teachings and actions as main agents in the transformation of Europe from medieval to early modern times and, in the long run, as key factors in bringing forth the *Neuzeit*, the modern period.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The following is based on my article "Reformation—Umbruch oder Gipfelpunkt eines *Temps des Réformes*?" in Bernd Moeller, ed., *Die frühe Reformation in Deutschland*

In historiographical terms, the unchallenged position of the Reformation as the beginning of modern German history has come under attack since the 1970s in a kind of pincer movement by late medieval studies on the one hand and confessionalization research on the other.

Because Brady has discussed the historiography of confessionalization in detail, I will concentrate on the offensive by the medievalist battalions. By introducing the late Middle Ages I will broaden the historiographical framework by another one or two hundred years. One of the most fruitful—although not always adequately acknowledged—changes in German historiography after World War II has been the shift in focus within medieval historiography from the high Middle Ages to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which has generated intensive research. This was accompanied by a high level of professionalization and internationalization of German research in this field and by growing interest in the theoretical problems and approaches of the social sciences.

Thus, historians of the late Middle Ages such as Hartmut Boockmann, Kaspar Elm, Erich Meuthen, Peter Moraw, and Klaus Schreiner and theologians such as Bernd Hamm and Heiko A. Oberman have shown that after the late fourteenth century there were decisive new developments in constitutional, legal, and political life, but most significantly in the organization and constitution of the Church, in piety, popular religion, and theology, and with regard to social groups and religious movements (for example, the Beguines). The reformations and confessionalizations of the sixteenth century clearly were based on these late medieval developments. This is true for the Lutheran and Reformed churches as well as for the Catholic reformations and confessionalizations.

Especially from the viewpoint of Rome, which was considered the essence of backwardness by Protestant historiography in the nineteenth century, the German Reformation no longer can be regarded as the catalyst of change and the focus of the modern age. It was rather the opposite, a type of—as Volker Reinhard puts it—

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*als Umbruch* (Gütersloh, 1998), 13–34, and on my forthcoming synthesis *Die neue Zeit: Europäische Geschichte 1250–1750* (Berlin, 1999). See also Heinz Schilling, "Die Reformation—ein revolutionärer Umbruch oder Hauptetappe eines langfristigen reformierenden Wandels?" in Winfried Speitkamp und Hans-Peter Ullmann, eds., *Konflikt und Reform: Festschrift für Helmut Berding* (Göttingen, 1995), 26–40.

"reaction to a modernization crisis," triggered by this "change that the Pope and the Curia in Italy experienced since the middle of the fifteenth century and which aroused confusion and alienation not only north of the Alps."<sup>11</sup>

The Reformation—this consequence must be drawn from the recent studies on late medieval history—no longer can be regarded as the decisive turning point in German history: not in church history, and even less from the perspective of general history. The centuries before Luther were not a mere "pre-Reformation" but an epoch that by itself generated vital changes in the organization and constitution of the church and Christianity as well as in piety and religious life in general. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries no longer can be described, as Johan Huizinga once put it, as "the waning of the Middle Ages" but must be understood as a process of "intensified formation" ("gestaltete Verdichtung") or, as Erich Hassinger suggested in the 1950s, as the formation of the modern era ("das Werden der Neuzeit").<sup>12</sup>

Complementary to this new evaluation of the centuries before Luther, confessionalization research—which I cannot discuss in detail here—has shown that social change in ecclesiastical as well as secular matters was not at all concentrated in the decades 1510–1530, which is pretended by the "Reformation-as-revolutionary-change" perspective as well as by the "early-modern-bourgeois-revolution" model. Quite the contrary, social change accelerated mostly in the last decades of the sixteenth century. This is true for Germany as well as for other European countries.

Taking into account the results of both fields of research—on the late Middle Ages and on confessional Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—I repeat the statement in one of my earlier lectures: "We have lost the Reformation, ground up between the

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<sup>11</sup> Original: "Reaktion auf eine Modernisierungskrise" triggered by a "Gestaltwandel, (den in Italien) Kurie und Papsttum seit der ... Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts erlebt (hatten und) der nicht nur nördlich der Alpen Verstörung und Entfremdung erregt hat" (Volker Reinhardt, "Der Primat der Innerlichkeit und die Probleme des Reiches: Zum deutschen Nationalgefühl der frühen Neuzeit," in Bernd Martin, ed., *Deutschland in Europa: Ein historischer Rückblick* [Munich, 1992], 88–104).

<sup>12</sup> Erich Hassinger, *Das Werden des neuzeitlichen Europa 1300–1600*, 2d ed. (Braunschweig, 1964).

'intensified formation' of the late Middle Ages on the one hand and the actual post-Reformation process of formation and modernization in the age of confessionalization on the other."<sup>13</sup> "We have lost the Reformation" of course does not mean that the Reformation was of no significance at all. I only want to demonstrate that it is necessary to re-evaluate the historical position of the German Reformation. In my view we can achieve this only by widening our perspective chronologically as well as geographically. The German Protestant or Rankean approach must be transformed into a European comparative one. And within this wider perspective the German Reformation looks more like a phase—albeit a very important one—within a long-term epoch of reformations than like a revolutionary turning point.

This European perspective is anti-Rankean in a specific sense: Ranke's interpretation of the Reformation became dogma not only with regard to German national history, as a universal interpretation, it became axiomatic in European historiography generally. As Konrad Repgen writes in his chapter on reform in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, the tendency to interpret the Reformation in the context of world history as the most significant event of the sixteenth century started already in the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> But only after Ranke's *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* (1839) was this interpretation generally accepted by both the academic world and the general public. Furthermore, Ranke employed the term "Reformation" for the first time as a concept to divide history into periods, not only in German history but in history in general, in its transnational, metaphysical meaning.<sup>15</sup>

It is in this historiographical context that we can perhaps trace Gerhard Ritter's "Weltwirkungen der Reformation"—insufficiently translated as "the global effects of the Reformation" because the

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<sup>13</sup> Original: "Uns ist die Reformation abhanden gekommen, zerrieben zwischen vorreformatorischer 'gestalteter Verdichtung' des späten Mittelalters einerseits und nachreformatorischem 'eigentlichen' Formierungs- und Modernisierungsschub im konfessionellen Zeitalter andererseits" (Schilling, "Reformation—ein revolutionärer Umbruch").

<sup>14</sup> Konrad Repgen in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols. (New York, 1996), 3:392–5.

<sup>15</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*, 6 vols. (Berlin, 1839–47).

spiritual connotation of the German word *Wirkungen* (ongoing influences) is thereby lost. The periodization of world history and national histories using the Reformation as a dividing line became common, even universal, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even today this periodization seems nearly unassailable. This seems to be true especially with regard to the English-speaking world, as I learned during a recent discussion with a board of editors for a sixteenth-century series, when the American editor changed the title from *Die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben im Zeitalter der Konfessionalisierung* to *Die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben im Jahrhundert der Reformation*, arguing that only the term "Reformation" would attract English and American readers and sell books.<sup>16</sup>

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In concluding my reflections on the profile of the—in Professor Brady's words—"new grand narrative" of the German Reformation, I would like to advocate a European comparative approach beyond the national tradition of the nineteenth century, represented by Ranke and Ritter, and in a certain respect also by the Marxist historian Max Steinmetz, who invented the idea of the early bourgeois revolution (*frühbürgerliche Revolution*) to give Germany the glory of a national revolution, albeit an abortive one. At the end of the twentieth century and with European unification at hand, Ranke's universalist interpretation of the German Reformation can be identified as a kind of extrapolation of the specific German and Protestant experience to divine providence. And Steinmetz's "*frühbürgerliche Revolution*" can be understood as the secularized version of the very same hypostasis of "national" German into a universalist perspective of a chain of social revolutions, beginning with the German Peasants' War and a German national Reformation movement. Ritter, it is true, designed an impressive program of interdisciplinary approach to the Reformation and favored a broad perspective, that is, the perspective

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<sup>16</sup> Ulrich Hinz, *Die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben im Jahrhundert der Reformation: Das Münstersche Kolloquium*, Spätmittelalter und Reformation series, n.s. vol. 9 (Tübingen, 1997). A similar case is Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner, eds., *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation* (Cambridge, 1996), which covers the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

of world history. But he, too, understood the *Weltwirkungen* above all as proof of the "Großtat des deutschen Geistes" (major achievement of the German spirit). And, notwithstanding all transconfessional declarations, in his view the German spirit could not be but Protestant. This type of hypostasis of national events or characteristics to universalist revelations is antiquated.

Contemporary Europe has overcome its national period, that is, the time of aggressive and competitive nation-state nationalism of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Consequently, the classical history of nations is dead, at least in its peculiarly egoistic nineteenth-century form, with its view of each and every European country as nations "direct to God." That antiquated notion has been replaced by comparative interest in the plurality of European national histories in the early modern period.

Europe also has overcome its confessional and ideological period. Therefore, the German Reformation as well as the early modern history of Germany and of the other European nations must be studied within a wide comparative framework, without the metaphysical hypostasis of national events or qualities, of a specific mentality, spirit, or confession. The idea of a special German contribution to the course of world history, be it spiritual or materialistic, is obsolete, as is the idea of a monopolistic key role played by Protestantism on Europe's path into the modern period.

What we need now is "a comparison of societies" (*Gesellschaftsvergleich*) in a multidimensional way and with a chronological framework that no longer describes the German Reformation and the decades around it as an epoch-making event but that views the centuries from ca. 1350 to 1650 or 1700 as the "incubating time" of modern Europe.<sup>17</sup> The agenda of this new history should include the following:

- comparisons of structures and processes within regions or states—state-building, the rise of early modern society, the church-state

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<sup>17</sup> At Berlin's Humboldt University a research team that covers all of European history, from the Greeks to the twentieth century, currently is discussing the theoretical and methodological implications of a European *Gesellschaftsvergleich* (comparison of societies). See Hartmut Kaelble and Jürgen Schriewer, eds., *Gesellschaften im Vergleich: Forschungen am Sozial- and Geschichtswissenschaften*, Comparative Studies series, vol. 9 (Frankfurt am Main, 1998).



relationship, cultural and political identity or identities, toleration and minorities, and so forth;

- synchronic and diachronic comparisons of the different European Reformations between c. 1350 and 1650, including confessionalization, as part of this overarching process of fundamental change in European and world Christianity;
- comparisons of individual confessions but with other religions and with groups holding different world views, ideologies, and philosophies of life, including Christian denominations, Judaism, Islam, and early atheism or agnosticism;
- and, last but not least, a comparison between civilizations that focuses on the role and profile of religion and the type of church-state relationship in Europe, or more exactly, Latin Europe, on the one hand, and other world civilizations on the other, beginning with eastern Greek or orthodox Europe—the approach of Max Weber that in my view, in contrast to his thesis on Calvinism and capitalism, is still unsurpassed.

But besides this new comparative approach and narrative, the traditional "Reformation-as-universalist-revolutionary-turning-point" narrative will always remain of interest to scholars of modern European, especially German, history. It must be studied not as an historical reality of the sixteenth century but as one of the great European myths. It is a kind of national foundation myth, similar to those of the Renaissance and the Humanists—the myths of the Anglo-Saxons, the Batavi, the Gauls, the Goths, and so forth. The myth of the Protestant Reformation was as much the founding myth for the "belated nation" as was that of the "Grande Revolution" for the French Republic.

Without re-entering the debate on Adolf Hitler's spiritual ancestors, briefly alluded to by Brady at the beginning of his annual lecture, I think everyone can agree that there are worlds of difference between this Reformation myth, created in the nineteenth century, and the new parvenu Nazi myths, which constructed a tradition from Luther to Friedrich II of Prussia, to Bismarck, and then on to Hitler.

Of course, for obvious reasons, Germany's history is the most sensitively public and morally impacted of all recent European histories, and the most carefully scrutinized. My subject is the place of the Protestant Reformation in modern narratives of German history. In the past, this sixteenth-century event formed the opening chapter of what may be called (to give it its. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris, 1922), 34. Reformation Day Protestant Reformation Reformation History Middle Ages History History Class Teaching History Martin Luther Reformation Renaissance And Reformation Tapestry Of Grace. If he had not defied the Catholic Church and the German Emperor, Luther would have been taken prisoner and burned at the stake. Portrait from 1532. Charles Alwyn.