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A NEW HISTORY OF THE GERMAN PEOPLE

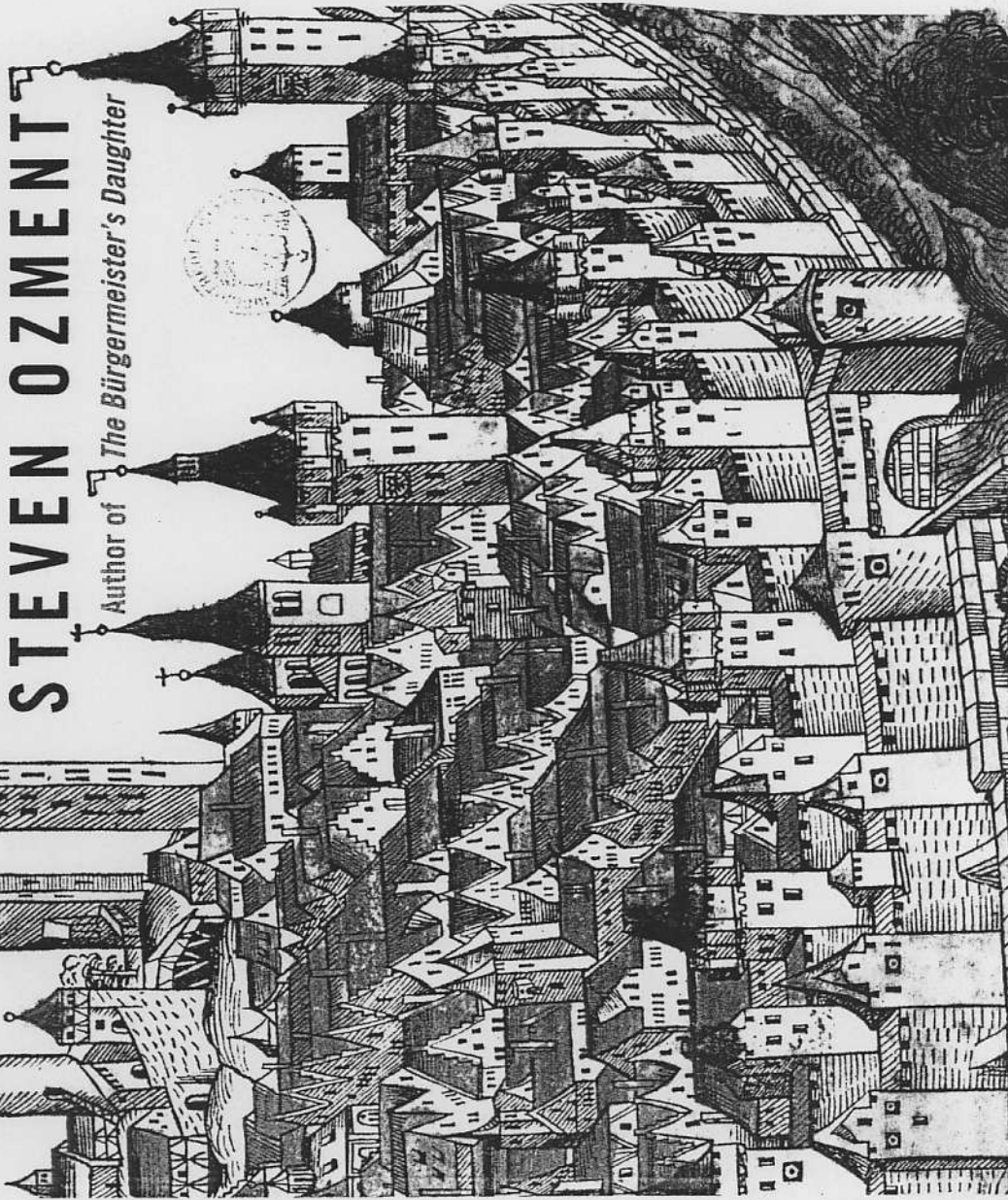
A Mighty Fortress

STEVEN OZMENT

Author of *The Bürgermeister's Daughter*

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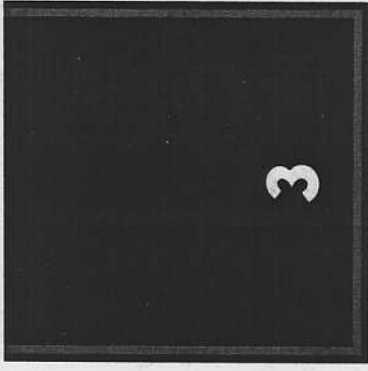
he word "German" was being used by the Romans as early as the mid-first century B.C. to describe tribes in the eastern Rhine valley. Nearly two thousand years later, the richness and complexity of German history have faded beneath the long shadow of the country's darkest hour in World War II. Now award-winning historian Steven Ozment, whom the *New Yorker* has hailed as "a splendidly readable scholar," gives us the fullest portrait possible in this sweeping, original, and provocative history of the German people, from antiquity to the present, holding a mirror up to an entire civilization—one that has been alternately Western Europe's most successful and most perilous.

A Mighty Fortress boldly examines Germany's tumultuous twentieth century in light of its earliest achievements as a prosperous, civil, and moral society, tracing a line of continuity that began in ancient times and has endured through the ages, despite its enemies and itself. Ozment's story takes us from the tribes of the Roman Empire and the medieval dynasties to the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification. He shows that the Germans are a people who desire national unity yet have kept themselves from it by aligning with autocratic territorial governments and regional cultures. From Luther, Kant, Goethe, and Beethoven to Marx, Einstein, Bismarck, and Hitler, the country's leading figures have always tried to become everything and more than what ordinary mortals could be. In fact, Germans living centuries apart have shared in different ways a common defining experience that is unique to their culture: a convergence of external provocation and wounded pride, and an unusual ability to exercise great power in response to both.

In this work of penetrating, virtuoso scholarship, Steven Ozment captures the soul of a nation that is at once ordered and chaotic, disciplined and obsessive, proud and uncertain. Epic in scope, refreshing in its insights, and written with nuance, acumen, and verve, *A Mighty Fortress* presents the history of the Germans as the story of humanity writ large.

of humanity writ large.

0010-2



MAN AND GOD

Germany in the Renaissance and Reformation

IN THE EARLY sixteenth century Martin Luther and his followers defended the right of German Christians to worship in ways other than those sanctioned by the pope in Rome. In doing so they reminded Germans of two older and still continuing conflicts. The first dated back almost three centuries and pitted the German princes against their political overlord, the Holy Roman Emperor. The second, emerging in the fifteenth century, set those same princes against lesser, but also independent, political entities—knights, imperial and territorial cities, and countless rural villages in between. In both conflicts the princes were spectacular winners.

In their contest with the emperor, the rulers of the larger states reached a favorable standoff in 1356, when Czech emperor Charles IV conceded German strength and imperial weakness by affixing his golden seal to a new German constitution. Known as the Golden Bull, it gave the princes what they had wanted since the demise of the Hohenstaufen empire: semiregal rights within their respective

lands. Thenceforth seven German princes, four secular and three ecclesiastical, elected the emperor on terms they negotiated—and without the involvement of the pope.¹

In the century and a half between the Golden Bull and the Protestant Reformation, the German princes showed little interest in national unity. Rather, they used their new political clout to make their own states stronger, subjecting the lesser nobility, townspeople, and peasants to princely law and culture. Not coincidentally that political conflict reached its crisis point at the same time the Protestant Reformation was emerging.

Religious reform found a welcoming home in the newly besieged German cities and towns. Perhaps three thousand existed in the late fifteenth century, the vast majority small (two hundred had populations of more than one thousand, only a few twenty thousand or more). Sixty-five were free imperial cities, owing allegiance to the Holy Roman Emperor rather than to more immediate territorial powers. But whether imperial or territorial, all had fixed obligations to their respective rulers based on founding charters or special contractual agreements. Wittenberg, the birthplace of the Reformation, for example, was the main residence of the electoral prince of Saxony, who, as its overlord, was owed hospitality (lodging and board), taxes, and conscripts for his army.

During the course of the sixteenth century, fifty of Germany's sixty-five imperial cities adopted the Reformation, and more than half did so permanently. In territorial cities and towns minority Protestants might coexist side by side with majority Catholics, while a smaller number suppressed the Reformation altogether after a brief stint. Many more, especially those with populations above one thousand, embraced the Reformation for the long term.²

Local grievances against the Roman Church and a desire for communal sovereignty attracted urban populations to Protestant reforms. Viewing themselves as oases of republican government within a desert of autocratic rule, self-governing townspeople believed themselves to be morally superior to the landed nobility

and royalty. They had gotten where they were not by birth, fortune, or military force, but by native ingenuity and the skills they acquired through productive work.³ Urban chroniclers expressed the cities' self-esteem by beginning their histories with Adam and Eve. Belief in specialness intensified in the free imperial cities, each a self-conscious part of a transregional and transhistorical empire, whose universality was palpable in the imperial traffic and residences along its streets. Given such self-importance, the native spokesmen for late medieval cities assailed threatening princes and peasants with the same epithets the clergy used ("Turks" and "Hussites") to indict spiritual predators.⁴

Self-portrayed as the hub of the universe, whose air set one free, the sixteenth-century city was a place of heightened security and opportunity. Yet its councils and magistrates also acted as oligarchs and sovereigns, as *Oberen* and *Herren*. And to noblemen and peasants living outside city walls, no political entity in the late medieval world was more egotistical than the city that thought itself a world.⁵

The noble lords and princes dismissed the cities' vaunted constitutions as legal instruments tailored to local power. To the extent that every city and village could act as its own supreme court, royal lawyers reasoned, there would be no equal justice across a land. When, in the fifteenth century, princes overrode local laws with new territorial codes, they did so in the name of fairness, presenting themselves as the advocates of one law for all. For the subdued, such arguments were mere pretexts for naked aggression, what Gerald Strauss has called "creeping death by state regulation."⁶ The new codes began to be implemented in earnest in 1495, after the new imperial supreme court (*Reichskammergericht*) made Roman law the guideline for all secular courts of the empire. In Roman law the highest authority within a land became the supreme authority over it, which is why Roman law became the legal tool for centralizing European regimes. The decades of Renaissance and Reformation in Germany were also those in which this embittering political and legal conflict occurred.

The late medieval German city was a mix of opposites, and in this respect, too, what an older historiography called the "protoplasm" of the modern German state.⁷ On the one side was vexing *Verordnungsfreudigkeit*, the need to put everyone unambiguously in his place down to the clothes one might wear, the sections of town one might inhabit, and even the words one might properly speak—all reflections of a society more fearful of anarchy than of tyranny. On the other side were consoling security and freedom, which in late medieval and early modern Germany meant physical safety and material prosperity. When, in 1520, Martin Luther famously defined the "freedom of the Christian" in a treatise of the same title, he did not talk about "one person, one belief," or any right to worship as one pleased. He instead described a condition in which one might live as both "a lord over all and a servant to all." By that he meant a life beyond the spiritual fray, safe from sin, death, and devil, internally secure enough to act confidently on both one's own and one's neighbors' behalf. Here was a spiritual and moral parallel to the freedom and security urban populations sought in their cities, and that those fleeing persecution and joblessness in the countryside hoped to gain there as well.

As territorial and urban governments tightened their hold in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, besieged cities, towns, and villages saw an ally in the Lutheran revolt. The latter's call for biblically informed, self-regulating Christian communities, free of foreign papal influence and exploitation, seemed to many across the social spectrum a precise spiritual counterpart to the civil struggle to maintain local republican institutions in the face of overreaching urban oligarchs and territorial princes. Luther even spoke of the church as a *Gemeinde*, a neighborly community of fellow believers, who were spiritual equals and took moral responsibility for one another's welfare—not a Church pyramiding from lowly laity through the clergy and the pope to the saints in heaven.⁸

German cities were not the only contemporary societies to perceive an affinity with the Protestant Reformation and to embrace it

for purposes other than those foremost in the reformers' minds. Some imperial knights saw an ally in the Reformation, as did the common man in the countryside.⁹ Across the confessional divide, it is a telling commentary on the reformers' priorities that they aided and abetted the causes of the cities, the countryside, and the princes indiscriminately, both biting and kissing the political hands that fed them in all three venues. They did so because everything they wanted to accomplish rested on the survival and success of their respective ecclesiastical institutions.

THE FIRST PROTESTANT PRINCE

No one person had more to do with the Reformation's survival and success than Saxon elector Frederick the Wise. His defense of Luther after 1517 allowed the Reformation to merge with a German national movement that preceded and embraced it. The result was a more self-aware and culturally unified Germany, in spite of the new confessional divisions the Reformation created. Why did this most devout of German Catholic princes become a young heretic's protector?

Frederick's court chaplain and cabinet secretary, Georg Spalatin, created the vital link between the two. Before joining the Wittenberg court in 1509, he had studied law and theology at the universities of Erfurt and Nuremberg—the former home of the religious order of Observant Augustinians Luther joined in 1505, the latter that of leading humanists. In 1511 Spalatin was instrumental in bringing Luther to Wittenberg, and he also played a key role in making Willibald Pirckheimer's Nuremberg humanist circle the Reformation's first publicists. In Spalatin, Germany's native religious and educational reform movements found an influential friend at the pinnacle of Saxon government, willing and able to facilitate their national merger.

Like other great princes of German history, Frederick was both

a man of his time and of the future. Visitors and guests hunted with him in the rich game preserves surrounding his favorite retreat at Castle Lochau, where incredible numbers of game and fowl were bagged (208 bears, 200 lynxes, and even larger numbers of wolves, boar, deer, and fowl reported by a single hunter in one autumnal hunting season).¹⁰ The same visitors also jousted with the elector on the tournament fields of Wittenberg, scenes immortalized by court painter Lucas Cranach (and, later, Pablo Picasso, who redrew Cranach's sketches during his own transition to cubism).¹¹ After sport, there were lectures and sermons in the new university, founded at the turn of the century, and in the refurbished castle church.

As one of the first German princes to be liberally educated, Frederick knew enough Latin to translate a classical text and collect bons mots from Seneca, Terence, Cicero, and Cato. The humanist influence on his upbringing could be seen in Cranach's wall decorations in Wittenberg castle, wherein Perseus freed Andromeda from a sea monster, the Hesperides watched over a garden of golden apples, and the Argonauts searched for the Golden Fleece.¹² At twenty-two the newly crowned Frederick lobbied the imperial coronation of Germany's first poet laureate, the rakish Conrad Celtis, a great fan of Roman historian Tacitus and leader of a cultural campaign to bring Apollo to Germany. Frederick corresponded with Desiderius Erasmus and his Italian publisher, Aldus Manutius, also Germany's leading Christian Hebraist, Johannes Reuchlin, whom he protected from Dominican zealots intent on destroying Jewish writings and punishing their Christian friends. Dürer was on Frederick's payroll as early as 1489 and twice painted his portrait, the first time with Celtis and later, in a commissioned altarpiece, as one of the three kings who greeted Jesus on his birthday. At the annual Leipzig fair, Wittenberg was the reputed best buyer, and modern art historians refer to Frederick's collection as the "Wittenberg canvas Renaissance."¹³

The Believer

Traditional religious piety was an equally great princely passion, and a vital point of contact with Luther. Several times a pilgrim, including a journey to Jerusalem in 1493, Frederick revered Saint Anne, the patron saint of travelers in distress, whose invocation, "Help me St. Anne," he had imprinted on Saxon coinage.¹⁴ During his Jerusalem pilgrimage Frederick collected numerous relics, the beginning of what became northern Europe's largest relic collection, which included an arm bone from his namesake, Saint Frederick, a gift from the bishop of Utrecht. Late in the second decade of the sixteenth century, the collection peaked at more than nineteen thousand pieces arranged in ten galleries in the castle church, which, when properly toured and revered, promised pilgrims 1,902,202 years of absolution for unrepented sins, time that would otherwise be spent in the purifying fires of purgatory.¹⁵

Luther hated the great relic collection and the even greater indulgence it promised. He waited to post his famous Ninety-five Theses until Frederick had departed Wittenberg for the 1517 autumn hunt in Lochau, and then did so on the day of the collection's highest veneration (All Saints'). When, however, the crafty indulgence peddler John Tetzel, on the instructions of the archbishop of Mainz, began selling the famous indulgence for the rebuilding of Saint Peter's in Rome on the borders of electoral Saxony, Frederick was as offended as Luther—albeit over the political intrusion rather than any religious impropriety. In 1518, after the Church moved against Luther, Frederick stopped the indulgence traffic in his hands, as the action was also a challenge to his authority. In the same year he saved Luther from deportation to Rome and a likely death.¹⁶

Ruler

A lifelong bachelor, Frederick was called "Wise" because of his ability to keep the peace. Before astutely managing the Luther affair, he had survived the challenge of competitive peers, among them Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. Fatalistic by the end of his reign (1525), Frederick had a reputation as a "man of the middle," which was reflected in his personal motto: To the Best of My Ability and Always Forward Slowly.¹⁷ Spalatin, who was also Frederick's biographer, believed the elector's mettle had best been proven during two great challenges of his reign: the honest brokering of the election of Charles I of Spain as Emperor Charles V in 1519, and his equally deft handling of the Protestant revolt in the early 1520s.

In the imperial election two other rulers competed with Charles for the imperial crown: Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France, and everyone knew that Frederick's vote would be the most decisive. The king of England was the first to offer a bribe, which, if Spalatin may be believed, Frederick ignored.¹⁸ In this competition the nineteen-year-old king of Spain had all the advantages. The grandson of deceased emperor Maximilian, he was heir to both the crown of Spain and kingdoms reaching from Sicily to Austria. Pope Leo X feared the emergence of a new Spanish-German monarchy greater than the empire of Charlemagne, and initially joined others in backing the king of France, whose assets, however, paled by comparison.

Taking their best shot at Charles, the papacy, the French, and the Swiss turned to Germany's favorite son, Frederick. Papal legate Cardinal Cajetan, who had recently grilled Luther in Augsburg, unveiled that option to the fifty-six-year-old elector. The notion had also crossed Frederick's mind, only to fade before two sobering facts: his lack of the resources to rule an empire, and the likelihood of a losing war with Charles and the dissolution of the German electoral college, should he try.

Under no conditions could the electoral college be lost by the

Germans. Its power gave Germany gravitas in the European world, enabling the princes to wring huge financial and political concessions from imperial candidates. Indeed, that election was an occasion on which Germans might welcome foreigners out to take advantage of them. The electoral college also gave Germans their best hope for functional unity and a pragmatic peace, if not early nationhood.

According to Spalatin, Frederick arrived in Frankfurt to find three of his fellow electors prepared to vote for him. If Frederick merely cast his own vote (in the election of the emperor, the minority capitulated to the majority, which reported a unanimous vote), he would enable a German seizure of the imperial crown. The seven electors, dressed in ermine-lined red mantles and berets, voted on June 27, 1519. As Spalatin told it, Frederick joined three other electors in voting for himself, thus becoming the Holy Roman Emperor—but only for three hours and within the closed chambers of the electors! Before reporting out a unanimous vote for Charles, Frederick explained to his fellow electors why even the strongest German prince could not be emperor and redirected his own vote and theirs to the king of Spain.

Because no public record of these events exists (there are only Spalatin's admiring biography and the rumors emanating from Frederick's circle), the story remains the stuff of legend, and very flattering to Frederick. Taking it for fact, some historians see in his presumed capitulation another twist of fate in the snakebitten history of Germany. If the Saxon elector could have ruled successfully as Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, the smaller German empire of 1871 might have become reality three centuries earlier.¹⁹

After the election the Saxon princes suffered an indignity at the hands of the Spanish. In an evident gesture of gratitude for Frederick's support, the new emperor proposed a marriage between Frederick's nephew and godson, future Saxon elector John Frederick, and Charles's sister Catherine. The Wittenberg court received the formal commitment letter in 1521. Neither Frederick nor young

John Frederick's father, Prince John, had been inclined to pursue the marriage, which, portended more Spanish Hapsburg meddling in Saxon politics. However, a Spanish Hapsburg proposal of marriage could not lightly be refused.

In the end the protestations of the Spanish queen mother, who did not want her daughter to leave her side—certainly not for a distant German prince—saved the Saxons from the match. Still, the Germans had been insulted by the rude turn of events, which gave the Saxon princes a new grudge to nurse, one that would cost the Spanish emperor dearly when the Protestant Reformation erupted in Saxony.²⁰

A desire to keep Spanish Hapsburg might and Roman papal influence as benign as possible within Germany lay behind Frederick's defense of Luther. Beyond traditional piety and the need to protect his subjects, there was Luther's popularity to consider. Should the emperor and the pope succeed in executing the superstar of Wittenberg University, Frederick's authority and the peace of his land would suffer along with Luther. When, in April 1521, Luther, a condemned heretic, was summoned to the Diet of Worms to answer for his teachings, the elector of Saxony attended that meeting also, as a guardian angel.²¹

Anticipating Luther's condemnation at Worms and the political fallout in Saxony, Frederick acted to save Luther's life by placing him in protective custody at Wartburg Castle. There, hidden from his enemies for a year, Luther translated the New Testament into German and plotted the Reformation by mail. At the conclusion of the Diet, the vast majority of German lands and cities joined electoral Saxony in refusing to sign off on its proceedings and to publish Luther's condemnation in their lands.

Although Frederick had sufficient political reason for standing by Luther, the evolution of his religious piety in response to Luther's teachings cannot be discounted. In 1522 he acronymically displayed a new motto on the sleeves of his winter clothes: The Word of God Is Eternal (*VDMIA—Verbum Dei Manet in Aeter-*

num).²² By that year Frederick knew Luther's teachings well enough to ponder them on their merits and to judge them as that Word. He had also long recognized Luther's right, by power of his doctor's beret, to teach Holy Scripture and test the truth of traditional Church doctrine. Even before Luther had come on the scene, Spalatin reported Frederick's "great displeasure and wonder" at the disrespect shown God's Word, insisting that "matters of faith should be as clear as an eye," by which he meant biblically transparent and pure. Reluctant to preempt impending religious violence, Frederick declared himself ready to lead a hermit's life rather than unwittingly challenge God's will in history. Such personal piety led him in 1523 to impede early action against Thomas Müntzer, who later led a peasants' revolt. Ten months before that revolt, in July 1524, Frederick gave the then incendiary preacher an audience with the Saxon princes, allowing him to make the case for a radical egalitarian reconstruction of society in place of Luther's moderate program of reform.²³ When, in the spring of 1525, peasant armies mustered against him, Frederick, professing his belief that divine providence overrode the will of princes, vowed to accept peasant dominion over his land if it proved to be God's will.²⁴

Last Words

Between spring 1524 and spring 1525, Frederick retreated from public life to Castle Lochau. On the day before he died, Spalatin, by then his constant companion, recalled the famous prince sitting on a stool fitted with wheels so that he could roll around the residence. His brother, John, visited him daily in full armor, as he waited to engage a forming thirty-two-thousand-man peasant army. Near the end Frederick sent for Luther, who was then traveling in Thuringia and could not come to his bedside.²⁵ After taking down his last will and testament, Spalatin asked his prince if he was "buried," to which Frederick replied, "Only by pain."

Those were Frederick's last recorded words. After receiving the

Eucharist in the new Lutheran manner, with both bread and wine, apparently for the first time, he died in his sleep on May 5. Ten days later Saxon and Hessian forces slaughtered the peasant army at Frankenhäusen. Among Frederick's final requests had been that the triumphant princes "be merciful to the peasants" and not burden them with long, harsh monetary penalties. Had he lived, Spalatin believed he would "certainly have given [them] some relief." Frederick likely made that request with a stinging pamphlet of Luther's in mind. A few months earlier, Luther had blamed the peasants' uprising on the tyranny of the princes, calling the revolt and its anarchy a just divine punishment for their tyranny. In contrast to the elector, Luther the cleric and the miner's son called for the "merciless punishment" of the peasants in the aftermath of their revolt, a judgment he based on both Scripture and Saxon law.²⁶

Embalmed and placed in a coffin preserved with tar, Frederick's body was delivered to the castle church in Wittenberg five days after his death. At the service Luther's colleague, Wittenberg humanist and professor of Greek, Philipp Melancthon, read a Latin tribute, followed by one in German by Luther, a consoling sermon on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians.²⁷ At the burial the next day, Luther preached still another sermon, thus twice having the last word over the body of the patron and protector with whom he had never had a live exchange in life, all communication between them having gone through Spalatin.

A GERMAN REVOLT

In much modern scholarship and punditry, Martin Luther has become the man who put miters on princes. He is also said to have been obsessed with the devil, the imminent coming of Christ, and a Reformation that could occur only at the end of time—a man and a movement detached from society and politics. Those same preoccupations are alleged to have turned him against the progressive

0010-8 77
Man and God

antiauthoritarian movements of the age: the burgher-artisan protests in the cities, the peasants' revolt in the countryside, and new separatist religious groups—all promising medieval Germany a modern escape from its benighted politics and morals.

Contemporaries knew a very different man and Reformation. During his formative years, from 1518 to 1528, Luther was as devoted to German nationalism and civic reform as he was to the restoration of biblical Christianity. When, in 1520, he appeared on the European stage for the first time as a graphic image, Nuremberg humanists and the Wittenberg court were behind it. Luther and Dürer, who signed his paintings "Albrecht Dürer, German," were never to meet.²⁸ They touched one another only with their works and through mutual friends in Wittenberg and Nuremberg.

Through the mediation of Spalatin, Luther's early writings circulated widely among German intellectuals. Dürer had early access to them as a charter member of Pirckheimer's dinner group, known after 1517 as the Staupitz Society after Luther's mentor Johannes von Staupitz.²⁹ In a joint effort to educate Germans and bolster German standing in the outside world, particularly among the Italians and the French, the members of the group devoted themselves to the recovery, preservation, and export of German history and culture. A select gathering of Nuremberg scholars, lawyers, merchants, and politicians influential beyond the city, the group met regularly to discuss pressing issues of the day.³⁰

Dürer was among the first Germans to read Luther's Ninety-five Theses in the 1519 German translation of group member Kaspar Nützel—sponsorship that put Luther's protest directly into the service of the German national movement. In March 1518 Luther sent Dürer a letter of thanks, possibly for a print of a recent drawing of Christ's Passion, both conveyed by Spalatin. Two years later Dürer wrote Spalatin to thank Frederick the Wise for "a little book of Luther's," possibly one of the Reformation tracts of 1520, which presented his teachings and reforms to a popular audience. As Luther was now a controversial national figure, Dürer also begged

Spalatin to take steps to ensure the safety of "this Christian man who has helped me out of great distress." The latter referred to the depression and melancholy that had beset him in 1514-15 after his mother's "hard death" and, less traumatically, a thankless, payless year in the employ of Emperor Maximilian I. Saluting Luther, Dürer expressed a wish to immortalize him in a work of art.³¹

With that letter Dürer sent three copies of his recent etching of Frederick's old adversary, the new cardinal, Albrecht of Mainz, apparently as an example of how he would memorialize Luther, given the chance. Albrecht was another Dürer patron, then best known in Saxony as the highest-ranking German church official behind the Saint Peter's indulgence. Wishing to go ahead with an official court portrait of Luther, Spalatin passed a copy of Dürer's Albrecht on to Wittenberg court painter Cranach.

To prepare the court-requested etching of Luther "in the Dürer style," Cranach first copied Dürer's Albrecht—however, not with any intention to flatter either the cardinal or his painterly rival. He portrayed the cardinal as a pudgy, apathetic youth with little resemblance to Dürer's mature and confident prince of the Church. By contrast Cranach's Luther was a muscular, righteous monk with a large chip on his shoulder.³² The jarring juxtaposition of images suggests that Cranach's competition with Dürer, friendship with Luther (his daughter's godfather in 1520), and remembrance of Albrecht's role in the indulgence controversy had created their own personal acids.³³ That Cranach refurbished the cardinal's residence in Halle three years later—a commission undertaken at the same time he was drawing cartoons of the pope for the Reformation—makes clear that ideology did not trump patronage among the age's artists.³⁴

This early conjunction of Saxon art, politics, and religion around the persons of Spalatin, Dürer, Luther, Cranach, and Frederick the Wise began the torrent of organized religious dissent that became the German Reformation. The two movements, the new religious

and the older political, spoke with one voice at the Diet of Worms in April 1521. There, the German estates, none of which was yet Protestant, presented Emperor Charles V with 102 "oppressive burdens and abuses imposed upon, and committed against, the German empire by the Holy See of Rome"—a national laundry list of political, economic, ecclesiastical, and spiritual complaints, echoing many of Luther's.³⁵

This was not, however, the moment for German grievances to roll themselves up into a juggernaut. The success of national reforms would be commensurate with the reformers' tact and discipline—which brings us back to Cranach's provocative etching of Luther. Having commissioned it, the electoral Saxon court now deemed it too incendiary for the times and instructed Cranach to personify a less angry Germany in a new etching of Luther.³⁶ The result was a Luther placed within a traditional saint's niche, with an open Bible in hand, a reformer apparently ready to listen and ponder, perhaps even to doubt and heed—a Luther the princes could work with.³⁷

The Cranach workshop, with others, created multiple propagandistic images of Luther for groups the court and the reformers wished to win over. Luther freely cooperated in the venture, allowing his physical image to be portrayed as the politicians wished, so long as accompanying biblical verses and evangelical captions gave prominence to his spiritual message.³⁸ For patricians and well-to-do burghers, Luther appeared as the bearded Junker Jörg, the translator of the New Testament into German. For the intellectuals there was the learned professor in a ballooning doctor's beret. For the learned and simple alike, Hans Holbein depicted Luther as the German Hercules, proceeding to club to death the Dominican inquisitor of Cologne, Jakob Hochstraten, and add his body to a great pile of slain generals in the pope's scholastic army of occupation, from Aristotle to John Duns Scotus. Finally, for all Germans ready to expunge predatory foreigners from German soil, Luther,

Bible in hand, was portrayed side by side with the Franconian leader of knightly resistance, Ulrich von Hutten, sword in hand, under a banner that read "Christian Liberty."³⁹

The contributors to the Reformation's propaganda and success—the humanists, the Saxon court, the reformers, and the artists who served all three—recognized the degrading effects of papal power on German politics and the cure of souls: what the politicians called Rome's "burdens and abuses" and the religious reformers its "lies and fabrications." German lawyers, humanists, and theologians all searched the German past for traditions and examples to set against foreign critics, mainly Roman, in a reaffirmation of German sovereignty and cultural equality.⁴⁰

While still an obscure figure, Luther became part of that search, one small contribution to which was an anonymous mystical work he discovered, edited, and published under the title *A German Theology*. In the preface to the complete edition, he praised it as having "led the German people to God where books in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew had not"—proof, he further claimed, of the superiority of German theologians over Roman, Greek, and Jewish. He pointedly cautioned ill-intentioned foreigners not to mistake the simplicity of Germans for weakness.⁴¹ This pamphlet was another native root for Germans to cling to and a reminder of a still unhealed, historically wounded German pride. Its publication was an early step toward the integration of the new religious protest against Rome with those of an older national movement, then also recovering German history and culture.

THE NEW THEOLOGY

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

—MARTIN LUTHER, 1521⁴²

Memorable expressions of self-transcendence and self-abasement fill German art and literature, philosophy and theology, and political tracts and speeches. At one end of the spectrum is the sweet nihilism of the medieval mystics, who wanted to lose themselves altogether in the being of God "like a drop of water in a vat of wine," becoming "One Single One."⁴³ At the other are the modern supermen, who would individually overcome an imperfect world or collectively transform it into a thousand-year Reich. The medieval Church made heretics of the former, while the present-day world continues to pick up the pieces of the latter's fabled utopias.

Man in His Own Image

The thinkers of the German Renaissance and Reformation, both Catholic and Protestant, pondered the predicaments of soul and society more deeply than those of any other German century prior to the nineteenth, when such matters again came under scrutiny to revolutionary effect. In the sixteenth century the result was a portrayal of human nature and destiny that would remain at the center of German Protestant thought and culture for three centuries. The age's most famous painter, Dürer, and theologian, Luther, produced the most memorable expressions.

Dürer's immediate world was personally bounded by the fathers of German humanism (Rudolf Agricola) and German Protestantism (Luther), whose careers bookended Dürer's own. Among German Renaissance artists, Dürer drew more self-portraits than any other, and at the turn of the fifteenth century, he painted two, one in 1500,

another in 1502-3, that pointed the way to the religious transition that was the German Reformation.

In the first of these portraits, Jesus Christ is given Dürer's face in what modern art critics have called "a Copernican revolution of the Christ image," precociously marking the birth of modern art and self-perception.⁴⁴ Behind and accompanying this famous incarnation were many eloquent humanistic orations on the dignity of man, a literary and painterly tradition brought to a crescendo by Dürer's 1500 self-portrait.

In the self-portrait of 1502-3, by contrast, Dürer presented a mirror image of himself as he recovered from plague, tapping still another medieval genre—Christ the Man of Sorrows—as he now portrayed himself in all his human impermanence and ugliness. Far from the Christ-bearing Dürer of 1500, the artist appears as a dark nude, man alone facing imminent death with no pretension to strength, beauty, or genius, protected only by his foreskin.⁴⁵

While models of both portraits thematically preexisted Dürer's, Luther's dialectical theology of exaltation and abasement waited just over the horizon and would give them an interpretation that drew Dürer into the Reformation and put Luther prominently on the German stage.

The New German Christian

Five years to the month after receiving his doctorate, in October 1517, Luther sweepingly condemned traditional Aristotelian-based theology, with its focus on good works and self-justification.⁴⁶ The Church on whose doors legend has him posting his famous theses adjoined Elector Frederick's castle. There university classes in law were taught, and its second floor housed the university library, fitting symbols of the intertwined educational, political, and religious movements of the times.⁴⁷

Luther based his protest on a claimed recovery of the true bibli-

cal account of who man is and how he is saved, primary lessons he believed medieval Christianity had lost or perverted. A similar deconstruction of Christianity would not be seen again until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a remarkable succession of Protestant academics, beginning with Immanuel Kant and peaking in Friedrich Nietzsche, subjected Christianity to a similar searching critique. In the sixteenth century Luther's theology was as strong a challenge to the medieval religious universe as the later "death of God" philosophy would be to the reformed Judeo-Christian tradition in the modern world. In addition to creating rival Western Christian confessions, Luther's writings united Germans against the Roman papacy and strengthened German territorial sovereignty along lines championed by the national cultural movement.

Both Luther's theology and that of the Roman Church he attacked directed Christians to the biblical promise of salvation, which the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ secured—saving events that lived on in the preaching and sacraments of both churches. Their ways parted, however, when the two confessions looked to the future, where a risen Christ waited in judgment. How one prepared for and survived that future encounter lay at the heart of the division of German and European Christendom during and after the sixteenth century. Looking forward, the Catholic pilgrim traveled a road from mercy to judgment, comforted by the sure promise of Christ the Savior, yet still facing the scrutiny of Christ the Judge. Medieval theology taught the laity to resolve that conflict by penance, absolution, and good works. And by the fifteenth century, indulgences were readily available to those who still had doubts.

For Luther such notions were abominations traceable to legalistic and ritualistic Judaism, which he believed had undermined prophetic and Psalmic Judaism in antiquity and, through the medieval Church, subsequently corrupted biblical Christianity as well. In Protestant theology, the only righteousness that assured survival on Judgment Day was that of the incarnate, crucified, res-

urrected, and enthroned Son of God, whom faith alone grasped. The Lutheran formula thus directly repudiated the composite medieval formula of faith enriched by love, or good works. Luther compared the all-satisfying moment of faith to the "happy exchange" of a bridegroom and his bride:

As Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31-32] . . . it follows that everything [each has] is [thereafter] held in common, the good as well as the evil. The believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has [grace, life, and salvation], as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has [sin, death, and damnation] Christ claims as his own.⁴⁶

For the contemporary guild theologians, the attribution of saving power to faith alone was the height of ignorance and blasphemy. In 1526 Jacob Hochstraten, the Dominican inquisitor of Cologne, distilled the essence of traditional Catholic teaching on the subject in a ridicule of Luther's "happy exchange":

[Luther] lists no preconditions for the spiritual marriage of the soul with Christ except only that we believe Christ . . . and trust that He will bestow all [that He promises]. Not a single word is said about the mutual love by which the soul loves Christ. . . . Nor do we hear anything about the other divine commandments, to the keeper of which eternal life is both promised and owed.

What else do those who boast of such a base spectacle do than make of the soul . . . a prostitute and an adulteress, who knowingly and wittingly connives to deceive her husband [Christ] and, daily committing fornication upon fornication and adultery upon adultery, makes the most chaste of men a pimp? As if Christ does not take the trouble . . . to choose . . . a pure and honorable lover! As if Christ requires from her only belief and trust and has no interest in her righteousness and the other virtues! As if a certain mingling of righteousness with iniquity and of Christ with Belial were possible.⁴⁹

Luther's marriage of faith was neither a medieval mystical union nor any misreading of faith's traditional role. By comparison with medieval theology, he radically reformulated the definition of a "saved" person this side of eternity. Instead of becoming intrinsically like Christ, the good Christian had rather to recognize and accept his abiding dissimilarity from him, this side of eternity. Yet, in Luther's new definition of the "perfect mortal," God and man were as fully reconciled with each other as they would be in eternity—and without any blasphemous diminution of God, or exaltation of man in the process. Here, precisely as Hochstraten had scolded, there was a "certain mingling of righteousness with iniquity," yet not such as to make Christ an incautious pimp, or the soul a wanton whore. In the German Protestant tradition the believer was righteous and sinful simultaneously, *simul iustus et peccator*—righteous by his union with Christ in faith and sinful by his irradicable finitude and fallen humanity.

This dialectical theology was of one piece with Dürer's juxtaposed portraits of himself as the risen Christ and the death-afflicted man of sorrows. The good news of the Christian Gospel, according to Luther, was that a person is not required to be internally "like" God to be one with him. In the "happy exchange" that repeats itself in lifelong moments of faith, the believer gained the clarity and certainty that God was no fiction and his biblical promise, "all who believe will be saved," no lie.

With that bright spiritual insight came also the dark awareness that the soul, in itself, alone and apart from its divine Bridegroom, remained a hapless creature, capable neither of fulfilling the Law in this life nor of surviving the judgment of God in the next. In Luther's view the German Christian, unlike the Roman, did not see his life on a spiritual continuum from diminishing sinfulness to increasing righteousness. His soul spanned two poles and he led a double life—hopeless and mad in the life he alone could sustain on earth, yet eternally secure in the heights to which his faith momentarily lifted him. German Christians who attained such self-understanding, whether

through a traditional confession or in some secular experience, gained a sense of permanent opportunity. Although a Lutheran formulation, uncountable strains of previous religious experience and insight had been packed into it. Here, in a word, was a theology for a people always starting and stopping in their history, the ultimate pulling-oneself-up-by-one's-bootstraps philosophy, which allowed neither self-contentment nor self-despair. Here was also the cautionary lesson that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe would later immortalize in his retelling of the sixteenth-century German story of Dr. Faustus.⁵⁰

A NEW CIVIC SOCIETY

The new theology critically reassessed not only the problems threatening the soul, but also those facing society at large. In the Lutheran version, Christians, who were "lords over all" in conscience and soul, had a duty to be "servants to all" in their bodily lives and secular vocations. Also pushing the political, social, and domestic extension of the Reformation were the dissent within Lutheran clerical ranks and the demands of peasants and artisans in the name of Christianity and the Reformation.

Given the ink modern scholars have spent to portray Luther's political and social thought as enabling the triumph of the absolute German territorial state, a Lutheran civic society may seem an oxymoron. However, the religious reformers embraced not only the German national movement but also the goal of a just and fair society for all Germans. Before Luther's reforms had changed the ecclesiastical laws of a single town or village, he had published major treatises on political philosophy, poor relief, marriage and family, Jewish-Christian relations, and educational reform.

On two points the competing reformers of the age agreed: Winning meant securing reform in law and institutions, and the most effective way of doing that was to coopt established power. The

Lutherans accordingly portrayed separatism and revolution as a shirking of Christian moral and civic duty—society's abandonment and destruction rather than its internal reform. Both Thomas Müntzer, who led a peasant's revolt, and radical Dutch and German Anabaptists, who created a reign of terror in the city of Münster, understood that well—the former pitching the peaceful adoption of his reforms to the Saxon princes, while the latter came to power by legal means.⁵¹

For the age, the cumulative effects of the reforms pursued in politics, social welfare, domestic life, and education were as consequential as those sought in Church and religion. In the struggle for just laws and honest institutions, God and the devil competed both for individual souls and earthly rule. Luther envisioned two coequal authorities ordained by God to govern the secular and ecclesiastical spheres of life—the princes and lords to oversee body and property, the pastors and priests to safeguard consciences and souls.

For Luther the German problem of the sixteenth century was the devil's success in tempting both rulers and clergy, subjects and laity, to sell their souls and shirk their moral and spiritual duties. The politicians did so by permitting injustice and obstructing the Gospel; the ecclesiasts by false assurances of salvation and improper secular ambition; and the general run of humankind by allowing itself to be so easily fooled and cowed by both. In addition to a foreign, predatory papacy, two other enemies were seen to threaten civic society in the early decades of the Reformation: Catholic rulers who suppressed Protestant religious reforms, and renegade Protestant gospelers and revolutionaries, who urged the common man to take up arms for alleged Christian rights.

In pursuit of his goals Luther, too, fatefully blurred the lines of authority and power he himself had drawn. He did so, first, by inviting the Christian nobility of the German nation, as Christian laity, to take up his cause against an intractable Church. In 1523 he commended the example of a lay congregation in the German town of Leisnig for replacing its Catholic priest with a Lutheran pastor of its

own choice, praising its action as an appropriate rejection of false "human law, principle, tradition, custom, and habit."⁵² If this was a new ecclesiology, it was also a timely rationalization.

Again, in 1528, after Saxon visitations discovered spotty religious knowledge and scant moral improvement among the laity in the country parishes, Luther exhorted the German princes, again as lay Christians, to become "emergency bishops." In that capacity they were to provide the fledgling Protestant churches with the administration, authority, and force required for their proper maintenance and discipline.⁵³ Despite qualifying clauses, which stressed the princes' lay status and the exceptional nature of their new powers, that concession set an ominous German precedent.

When, in 1523, princes began persecuting Protestants, Luther attempted in vain to put the genie back into the bottle, lecturing them on "what they might *not* do."⁵⁴ By 1528 German rulers never again—if ever they had—confined their rule solely to body and property. Luther's weaving together of temporal and spiritual power enabled the new church to survive its infancy and pursue its mission in relative safety. It became a more cooperative state church, empowered and eager to mix large doses of religion into civic life through the new schools, welfare system, and domestic arrangements it helped create.

Schools and Universities

The first transregional unification of the German people was linguistic and cultural, centered around Luther's vernacular sermons, pamphlets, Bible, hymns, and catechisms. Few contemporary Germans were as qualified to oversee the reform of Germany's schools and universities as he. Between 1520 and 1546 one-third of all German-language publications were original or reprint copies of Luther's works. He wrote and spoke a simple, lucid, rhythmic German, which still today sets his writings apart from "the awful

German language," whose fragmented, multisubject sentences go ever so slowly in search of their verbs.⁵⁵ He claimed that language also to be that of the Saxon court, imitated by "all the princes and kings of Germany," thus allowing him to speak to a nation.⁵⁶ That dialect was also an early form of the pan-German language we know today as High German, evolved from composite East Middle and Low German dialects. Luther enriched it with words and phrases of colleagues and students from other German regions—also those of his West Saxon wife, Katherine von Bora, whose fluency he praised above his own.⁵⁷

In 1524 Luther appealed to magistrates and councilmen across Germany to fund public schools for all boys and girls. With the stated goal of creating "men able to rule over land and people, and women able to manage households and train children and servants aright," the new schools provided both new religious and secular education.⁵⁸ Boys received up to two hours a day of formal study and girls at least an hour, the remainder of their day devoted to parentally determined domestic work at home or apprenticeship in a trade.⁵⁹

Trusting neither the common man, who was deemed incapable of what was required, nor the princes, who were accused of being addicted to play, the reformers looked to city governments to provide skilled schoolmasters and -mistresses able to teach children languages, history, and the arts "with pleasure and in play." Recalling his own school days as a hell and purgatory, with frequent "flogging, trembling, anguish, and misery," Luther proposed a global education for German children who now lived in a new world—an education that could put before them, "as in a mirror, the character, life, counsels, and purposes . . . of the whole world, [from which they might] draw the proper inferences and . . . take their own place in the stream of human events."⁶⁰

Another goal of educational reform was to get the German story straight. Due to the lack of properly trained historians, Luther

believed, little was known of the history of the Germans, leaving people in other lands to imagine them to be "beasts, who know only how to fight, gorge, and guzzle."⁶¹

When, in the late 1520s, these ambitious efforts to reeducate the countryside seemed to be a total failure, previously progressive educators reached for the rigor of the old system. The disappointment was apparent in Luther's reaction to the visitation reports, moving him to describe countryside pastors as better fitted to "herd swine and keep dogs than to watch over Christian souls," who seemed to think the new Gospel a message of "carnal liberty."⁶²

The solution was the vernacular catechism, which addressed religious education within the friendlier confines of the family circle as well as the churches. With versions for both children and adults, daily recitations of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer would now bring German souls the enlightenment and protection pastors had failed to deliver.⁶³

It would be wrong to think that the appearance of catechetical drills at home and the return of Aristotle to the lecture halls ended the pursuit of a better education. The happy exchange of faith did not become a hard bargain overnight. Nor with the passage of centuries did the new Protestant establishment surrender its high scholarly standards or return to the scholastic commentaries it had earlier rejected. Over the centuries the pervasiveness of Lutheran and Catholic theology in gymnasiums and universities infused German public education with religious knowledge,⁶⁴ which in turn exacerbated confessional divisions. Yet that same knowledge also made the Germans Europe's most theologically literate people and facilitated both confessions' cooperation with the state.

Some have argued that the Reformation left the majority of Germans in both a religious-secular and medieval-modern time warp, always "questioning and doubting, probing and searching, without fences and security."⁶⁵ That had also been the reformers' critique of the medieval cure of souls and justification for their reforms. Ger-

mans who knowingly turned Protestant in the sixteenth century did so in the principled belief that many traditional spiritual reliefs were bogus, and hence of little use to a devout soul. By comparison, Luther's happy exchange of faith, even in the new disciplinary form of the Lutheran catechism, seemed to Protestants a more credible spiritual transaction.

Poor Relief

At the turn of the fifteenth century, two-thirds of the Saxon population lived in the countryside, and, much as today, the poor gravitated toward the cities where opportunities to work and beg were greater.⁶⁶ As with most medieval social and domestic legislation, traditional care of the poor had a religious inspiration. Hand-to-hand, eye-to-eye almsgiving had been the original biblical model for the penitential Christian, and those extending such personal charity could expect a share of God's blessing on the poor in return. For centuries that belief moved devout Christians to endow clothing, housing, and schooling for the poor as well.

By contrast the new Lutheran church looked on charitable acts as a moral and civic duty, not a spiritual one, and believed that—while pleasing to God—they saved no one. Good works belonged to the recipient, not to the giver, whom God saved for his own merciful reasons, irrespective of his deeds. Such argument helped clear the path to a rationalized system of poor relief, expanding its scope and putting it on a surer economic basis, something desired by both confessions. The result was a landmark shifting of responsibility for the poor from the clergy and the Church to society at large through local and territorial governments.

Lutherans helped create model welfare ordinances that distinguished the worthy native poor from foreign, able-bodied beggars, including itinerant friars, who were turned away from the city gates.⁶⁷ The guiding principle behind such discrimination was an

early version of the formula later adopted by the Diet of Augsburg to resolve the age's religious divisions by allowing the ruler of a land to choose its official religion ("his realm, his religion"). In the welfare version the ruler of a land became responsible for the poor within it ("his realm, his poor"), bound by his oath of office to allow neither the poor of his land to burden that of another, nor alien poor to take from his.

In dispensing charity, both handouts and loans, the recipient's rehabilitation counted most, welfare being looked on as a means to recovery, not a permanent dole. The Wittenberg Ordinance, influenced by Luther and his colleagues, provided for a carefully guarded "common chest," or locked box for the poor. Applicants had to meet community standards of virtue (past behavior and present attitude were scrutinized), and, once back on their feet, repay what they had received. Struggling workers and artisans could apply for low-interest loans, and subsidies existed for training the children of the poor.

Funding initially came from secularized church properties and the confiscated endowments of closed cloisters and chapters. Anticipating the diversion of such funds to other purposes, or their eventual drying up, the ordinance looked to graduated taxes on clergy and citizens as the best way to keep the chest full. Through the efforts of Wittenberg pastor Johannes Bugenhagen, the early Lutheran welfare ordinances found imitators throughout north Germany and in Scandinavia by midcentury.

Marriage and Domestic Life

When in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans made the transition from a society of predominantly single people to one in which marriage became the dominant lifestyle, the Lutheran family provided an attractive model within and beyond Protestant lands.⁶⁸ Motivated also by a personal desire for clerical marriage, the religious reformers recast marriage from an exclusively religious sacrament to a social contract sanctioned primarily by the state,

effectively creating marriage as we know it today.⁶⁹ As with other civic reforms, the reframing of marriage was part of a larger protest against medieval Church and society.

In 1520 Luther scorned the canonists who wrote the unbiblical marriage laws of the medieval Church as "merchants selling vulvas and genitals," condemning their new laws as only "snares for taking money," a reference to the payments required by church authorities to dispense impediments to claimed illicit marriages.⁷⁰ During the Middle Ages the Church inflated the biblical prohibitions of marriage to the fourth degree of affinity and consanguinity, or as far as third cousins. Even godparentage and adoption created forbidden lines of marriage. And the Church recognized interfaith marriages only if the non-Christian spouse agreed to convert.

The Reformation, by contrast, restored the biblical first degree of affinity and second of consanguinity, allowing unions with cousins by marriage beyond the first degree and with blood relations beyond the second. Calling numerous canonical impediments to marriage fabrications, Luther condemned them all as bluntly he did the notion that a Christian could not marry a non-Christian: "Just as I may eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride with, buy from, and speak with a heathen, Jew, Turk, or heretic, so I may marry him [or her]."⁷¹

The reformers also treated certain restrictions on the annulment of failed or unwanted marriages as unbiblical. Over the course of the sixteenth century, they recognized several acceptable grounds for ending a marriage: adultery, impotence (sexual incapacity), polygamy or deception (a concealed first marriage), prolonged desertion, and grave incompatibility. Unlike the medieval Church, which permitted only separation from bed and table and not the dissolution of a marriage, the Reformation sanctioned modern divorce and remarriage for those willing and able to see it through, whose numbers however remained quite small until the nineteenth century. In his definition of a "fully confirmed" marriage, Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer, the most liberal on the subject, included an "assent of hearts" and "plenty of carnal intercourse." Here, the

Reformation anticipated John Milton's defense of the absence of "true companionship" as a proper ground for divorce—what today are called "irreconcilable differences."⁷²

THE REFORMATION AND THE JEWS

In 1523 Luther surprised his contemporaries by writing a friendly overture to German Jews. The immediate occasion was a refutation of Hapsburg archduke Ferdinand's slander of him as one who, like the Jews, believed Jesus's mother was no virgin. Luther seized on the accusation to extend his religious and civic reforms. By pointing out what the New Testament clearly taught, that Jesus was a Jew born of a virgin, he both defended himself against the archduke and carried favor with German Jews, who welcomed the security and opportunity his kindness extended. The result of gentler Christian treatment, he expected, would be the assimilation of Jews into Christian society and the eventual conversion of "some," perhaps "many," to Christianity.⁷³

By the 1530s the Reformation's vision of a culturally and religiously united Germany with magnanimous rulers, justly treated peasants, and assimilated, even baptized, Jews was gone, the casualty of peasant revolts, religious division, and unrealistic expectations. Like his mid-1520s pamphlets against peasants, Luther's writings against the Jews in the late 1530s and early 1540s measured the great distance from the original plan. Having implored Christians in 1523 to pursue the conversion of the Jews with honey rather than vinegar, fifteen years passed before he again publicly addressed the subject of Christian-Jewish relations. With no progress on the immediate home front, reports of Christian casualties abroad moved him to take a harsh stance. In Bohemia and Moravia, he was told, Jews proselytized among Christians, some of whom denied that Jesus was the Messiah, embraced the Jewish law, observed the Jewish Sabbath, and even circumcised themselves.⁷⁴ Instead of winning Jews to Chris-

tianity, Luther now found reason to fear that his earlier kindness had allowed the Jews to steal a march on Christians. Thereafter he viewed German Jews as another in a long history of foreign German predators, no longer the kindred subjects and promising converts he had recommended to fellow Christians in 1523.

The very first line of his longest and harshest tract, entitled *On the Jews and Their Lies*, cited Jewish attempts "to lure to themselves even us [Christians]."⁷⁵ He reports two face-to-face meetings with Jews in Wittenberg, one of which brought three rabbis to his door in the hope of "finding a new Jew in me," as they had heard that Luther was then studying the Hebrew scriptures.⁷⁶ Had the year been 1523, when the Reformation was taking wing, and not 1543, when he believed his reform had peaked and he was counting its disappointments, his German-Christian conscience might not have been provoked so.

The specter of German Jews successfully playing the tempter stirred German memory and suspicion. For a Luther now at the end of his career, there could not have been a more brazen slap in the face than a Jewish attempt to convert him. Both German history and Christian theology fueled the reformer's great presumption in this matter. As a Christian theologian he believed that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70 had been God's passing of the torch from Jews to Christians, thenceforth the "true Israelites." For Luther the German, the insulting, coopting, and bullying of Germans by clever foreign peoples was an older and more upsetting story, reaching back to Roman times, and recently refreshed by his own career struggles against papal Rome in the German Christian world. To document his accusation that the Jews had become another "arrogant, vengeful, foreign presence" in Germany, he drew parallels between Jewish disrespect for Jesus ("a hanged highwayman") and the Virgin Mary ("no virgin") and papal ridicule of himself (a "changeling") and his mother (a "whore and bathhouse attendant"). The Jews, he now believed, had proved themselves to be Korahites (after Korah, an unsuccessful leader of a

dissident rebellion against Moses) and were no longer true Israelites or true Germans.⁷⁷

Luther found it revealing that Jews reviled Gentiles as *Goyim*, which, he pointed out, was no unbiased description of Gentiles, but a deliberate slander, meaning

poor muck-worms, maggots, stench, and filth . . . dirt and nothing . . . benighted heathen . . . a stupid [people] slow to learn. . . . The Jews boast that they are the . . . only noble people on earth . . . in comparison with [whom] we Gentiles are not human, [because] we are not of [their] high and noble blood, lineage, birth, and descent.⁷⁸

In ritual prayers Jewish men thanked God that they had been born Israelites and not *Goyim*, human beings rather than animals or slaves, and males instead females—for non-Jews, a disparaging set of parallels. In such pride and prejudice, Luther heard the boasting of the Greeks (he mentions Plato) and the Italians over their not having been born “barbarians” like the Germans. Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, papists, and, now, in this succession of great cultures, minority German Jews “imagine all the other people in the world [to be] mere ducks or mice by comparison.” The rabbis with their Talmud were no different from the popes with their decretals (decrees), and sectarian Protestants with their Gospel excerpts—all presumptuous religious elites wanting to be “our masters within our own land.”⁷⁹

The convergence of historically wounded German pride with overweening Christian confidence in the history of salvation created Luther’s late writings against the Jews. The one was the fruit of centuries of perceived German diminution to an inferior people, the other that of almost as old an exercise of Christian hubris. “This,” Luther concluded,

is the bone of contention [and] the source of trouble between Christian and Jew. The Jews do not want [and] cannot endure that

we Gentiles . . . whom they incessantly mock, curse, damn, defame, and revile . . . should be their equal before God, and that the Messiah should be our comfort and joy as well as theirs.⁸⁰

In the end Luther wanted the German princes to repay Jewish betrayal with “rough mercy,” an oxymoron meaning their forced recognition that Jesus was the Messiah. Failing that, he wanted them exiled to a land of their own, where they might practice their minority religion without proselytizing or ridiculing the souls of Christians. To that end he recommended burning the synagogues, schools, and houses of nonconverting Jews; confiscating Talmudic writings and banning rabbinical teaching; denying safe-conduct; prohibiting usury and giving existing moneys gained thereby to Jewish converts to Christianity; and, finally, forced labor—“putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or spindle [in the hands of] the idle holy people.” If such measures did not produce Christian conversions, German rulers were then advised to end Germany’s exceptional tolerance by “emulating the common sense of France, Spain, and Bohemia [which had already] ejected them forever.”⁸¹

Luther’s disappointment in German Jews was more than matched by theirs in him. Josel of Rosheim, the spokesman for German Jews in the Holy Roman Empire, declared such words by a Christian scholar to be unprecedented and hardly to have been expected from the author of *Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. German Jews then also had a powerful, self-interested ally in the emperor, who relied heavily on their fiscal resources. Even more helpful to them at the time, and also to the Reformation over time, was the small impact Luther’s harsh words made on his contemporaries. In electoral Saxony a lapsed decree of 1536 that had denied residence and safe-conduct to nonconverting Jews was revived. Martin Bucer prepared a harsh new Jewish ordinance for the land of Hesse, intended to restrict Hessian Jews to lowly jobs. However, in implementing it, Landgrave Philip limited the enforced measures to restrictions on Jewish interest charges, prohibition of new synagogues and Jewish prose-

lytizing, and Jewish attendance at consciousness-raising sermons. Nowhere did any prince burn synagogues, raze Jewish houses, or seize Jewish books, per Luther's recommendation.⁸²

Luther's anti-Jewish tracts lived on in the complete editions of his works, but did not as a rule find their way into Lutheran confessions, catechisms, and hymns. One of the few exceptions was a novel listing of the Jews in the Lutheran Formula of Concord. There Jews appeared as the last in a line of heretics specific to the rise of Protestantism, as if nonconverting Jews were another aberrant offshoot of Lutheranism: "Sacramentalists [Zwinglians], Calvinists, Enthusiasts [Anabaptists], Epicurians [Spiritualists], and Jews."⁸³

In 1523 Luther had opened the door to culturally non-German Germans, only to slam it shut two decades later. Far more influential in the German Lutheran world were the many reformers, including his Wittenberg colleague Justus Jonas and the Lower Saxon reformer Urbanus Rhegius, who, together with most of the political leadership of Protestantism, were prepared to wait indefinitely on the conversion of the Jews and rejected intimidation and coercion.⁸⁴

Before National Socialism no direct link between Christian anti-Judaism and modern racial anti-Semitism existed in a German government program of Jewish extermination. Nor did Luther ever espouse any Manichaean dualism of the "first" and the "last" man, the waxing Aryan and the waning Jew of nineteenth-century German and other intellectuals. For him, it was the fledgling evangelical church, not German Jewry, whose future lay in the balance in the sixteenth century. Although suspecting converted Jews to be disingenuous Christians, it was attitude and will, not blood or race, that made the difference.⁸⁵ Even at the heights to which Luther carried Christian anti-Judaism, and against the background of late medieval Christian persecution and pogroms, Luther's was never the racial anti-Semitism of the National Socialists, a term coined not in the late 1530s and 1540s but in 1879.⁸⁶ Had Luther had his way, nonconforming Jews would have been exiled by contemporary

governments in the same way "stubborn" Anabaptists and other sectarian dissenters to Protestant and Catholic Christianity were exiled. Also, Judaism never became a capital crime in German or imperial law, as happened with Anabaptism in 1529.

Still, Nazis later matter-of-factly conscripted Luther's writings into the Holocaust. As with earlier anti-Semites, they were shown that road not by Luther, but by Jewish converts to Christianity, whose exposés and assaults on their own faith had been assembled by the German Calvinist Andreas Eisenmenger and published in 1711. Entitled *Judaism Unmasked*, this infamous collection of diatribes by Christianized Jews has been called the nineteenth-century anti-Semite's "literary munitions arsenal."⁸⁷ Nowhere in its more than two thousand pages is the name of Martin Luther so much as mentioned.

Today few scholars examine Luther's late writings against the Jews with any hope of finding a qualifying biographical or historical context that might place the theologian and his reform in a less damning light. Rather, appeals have been made to his old age, health, and disappointment over his reform, which was then rapidly losing ground not only to Protestant and Catholic rivals, but, Luther sincerely believed, to opportunistic Jews as well. Another popular explanation has been an alleged obsession with the imminent second coming of Christ, a definitive signal of which was the conversion of the Jews or their removal from the company of Christians.⁸⁸

The truest explanation here is probably the most historical and best documented. From his earliest writings, Luther targeted legalistic Judaism as the corruption of prophetic Judaism and early Christianity, turning original religions of faith and hope into those of ritual observance and good works. By the 1530s he feared a similar fate was befalling his own reform. Because his anti-Judaism was intertwined with a reading of the German past as a history of foreign predation, Luther, without any sense of disproportion, could place contemporary Jews in a long succession of peoples and nations who

had put Germans down. That combination of history and theology also made his anti-Jewish writings especially vulnerable to cooption by the anti-Semites of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸⁹

THE REFORMATION IN MODERN CRITICISM

From Luther's contemporary rival Thomas Müntzer to the dean of American German historians, Gordon A. Craig, the big story of the German Reformation has been the "unhindered expansion" of the absolute German territorial state.⁹⁰ A similar conclusion has been drawn from the Reformation's perceived effects on family life—the new Lutheran family being held up as "the prototype of the unconditionally patriarchal and authoritarian household."⁹¹ Yet, at its inception, the Reformation promised pathbreaking relationships between lords and subjects, Jews and Christians, and men and women. The new theology proclaimed the spiritual equality and freedom of all Christians regardless of social estate, juxtaposed honest peasants to greedy landlords and corrupt clergy, scolded Christians for bullying Jews, and defended a model of marriage based on spousal sharing of domestic authority. Yet, when peasants threatened violence, Luther's response to their leaders was harsh ("suffering suffering, cross cross"), and after they revolted in Saxony and Hesse, looting, burning, and killing their lords, his counsel to the latter was equally pitiless ("smite, slay, stab").⁹² On both occasions he spoke for established Germany.

Such responses have moved modern scholars and pundits to wonder aloud whether the men behind the Reformation sowed a bitter social and political harvest for later German generations. Having failed to win the masses by direct appeal, the Reformation is said to have undermined alternative quasi-democratic, communal self-government by embracing the authoritarian territorial state, thereby putting early German nationhood and parliamentary gov-

ernment permanently out of reach.⁹³ This interpretation of the Reformation as an initially progressive, yet in the end (1525) easily coopted bourgeois movement, mirrors the interpretation of Germany's evolution over the nineteenth century by modern German historians, who also perceive the betrayal of a budding democracy by a weak-kneed middle class.⁹⁴

In weighing the Reformation, modern critics have especially scrutinized the character and work of the still famous contemporaries at its center. Lucas Cranach was sixteenth-century Germany's second most famous painter, a close friend of Luther, a five-term Wittenberg *Bürgermeister*, and one of the city's richest men at his death. Unfortunately for his reputation among modern historians, who detect a sympathetic social commentary in his early art, Cranach lived eighty-one years, long enough to leave a canvas trail that told a different story. Running a gamut from evangelical protests on behalf of the poor to titillating nudes for the bourgeoisie and flattering portraits of the political and commercial elite, Cranach's biography and repertoire are also read as a metaphor for the Reformation's promise and failure.⁹⁵

Dürer's painterly services also straddled the age's political and social fences, and his wealth at his death was even greater than Cranach's. Yet, because he died so much earlier than Luther and Cranach, Dürer did not have to take stands on the unforgiving confessional and political conflicts of later decades. His more positive modern reputation, like that of the early Cranach, also owes something to Friedrich Engels and nineteenth-century Marxists, who placed him quickly in the pantheon of premodern proletarian heroes. Among the graduates of the Dürer workshop were three students who came to be known as the "godless painters" of Nuremberg.⁹⁶ Arrested and interrogated after the Peasants' Revolt for urging workers to strike for higher wages, the three expressed doubts about the powers of God and of the magistrates of Nuremberg—activities and perspectives then associated with the teaching

of the revolutionary Thomas Müntzer. Dürer's sculptor also landed in jail for his support of the Peasants' Revolt.⁹⁷

A more direct link to possible radical sentiments on Dürer's part is a drawing made in 1525, after the princes crushed peasant rebels in Franconia. Appearing in a study of perspective in art, it depicts a possible monument to the revolt, in which a peasant sits atop a chicken coop, a sword thrust prominently into his back, the classic iconography of betrayal, with the accompanying caption: "He who wants to commemorate his victory over the rebellious peasants might use to that end a structure such as I portray here."⁹⁸

Was the drawing an expression of sympathy for the peasants' cause or a repudiation of it? Although modern scholars argue both sides, the more correct interpretation may lie in between. The monument appears to lament the harm brought about by princes and peasants alike, suggesting a graphic parallel to Luther's own pre-revolt plague on both houses, and post-revolt description of robbing and murdering peasants as "mad dogs." At the time of its drawing, Dürer's peers, friends, and associates strongly condemned the rebellion, and his own professional and personal activities during the conflict suggest that he did so as well. While Hessian and Saxon soldiers massacred peasants, Dürer painted portraits of the Fuggers, contemporary banking magnates, and the wife and sister of Margrave Casimir of Brandenburg-Ansbach, a brutal slayer of rebellious peasants who also blinded Anabaptists before exiling them from his land.⁹⁹

Dürer's professional association with Nuremberg's godless painters of course no more means that he shared their atheism and rebellion than his associations with political and social elites mean that he could not sympathize with the peasants' plight. Luther, too, championed justice for the peasants before their attacks on their landlords and mercy for them after they were crushed by the princes.¹⁰⁰ By this measure Luther might have joined Dürer in the Marxist pantheon, although neither he nor Dürer, by any contemporary measure, would have wanted to be enthroned there.

Four hundred years after Dürer's death, the National Socialists involuntarily conscripted him and Cranach into their propaganda. In 1943 Dürer's 1500 *Self-Portrait* even adorned the cover of the National Socialist magazine, *People and Race*, and Hitler publicly praised Dürer and Nuremberg as the "most German" of artists and cities. When the National Socialists cleansed German museums of "degenerate" modern art in the 1930s, the works of Cranach and Dürer were prominent among those that took its place.¹⁰¹

As with his early and late writings against the Jews, Luther's condemnation of the Peasants' Revolt is what his strongest critics today remember most about him.¹⁰² In the early 1520s Protestant pamphleteers promised both burghers in the cities and peasants on the land a new spiritual egalitarianism (the "freedom of the Christian," the "priesthood of all believers") in place of the Church's hierarchical cure of souls. Like the Jews in 1523, the common man, too, heard in the Reformation a timely political message of autonomy and social cohesion. Backing up those overtures were Luther's denunciations of the tyranny of princes and lords and the sheepishness of their subjects:

"Our rulers [are] mad; they actually think they can do whatever they please and order their subjects to follow them in it, while their subjects, in turn, make the mistake of believing that they must obey whatever their rulers command."¹⁰³

Such sympathy for the peasants notwithstanding, he believed that the disputed issues of body and property were matters for the secular courts and not to be freelanced by gospels and revolutionaries. Thus the bracing counsel:

Peasants should fight as a people who will not and ought not endure wrong or evil according to the teaching of nature. [Your grievances regarding] game, birds, fish, wood [and] forests [and the unfair levying of] services, tithes, imposts, excises, and death

taxes [are matters for] lawyers . . . and do not concern a Christian. . . . [You must] let the name of Christian go and act . . . as men and women who want their human and natural rights.¹⁰⁴

That was a proper instruction for a society based on the rule of law, but bitter counsel for the peasants. When peasant leaders subsequently jeopardized the Reformation by tying its religious teachings to sociopolitical revolution, they forfeited any possible chance of holding Luther's support. On the eve of the revolt, Luther, speaking for his society, denounced peasant refusal to pay small tithes as "theft and highway robbery" and scorned peasant appeals to Christ for release from serfdom as "carnalizing" Christian freedom. The classless, godless society envisioned by peasant revolutionaries was not the cohesive civic society the Reformation wanted to build. "Unless there is an inequality of persons, some free, some bound, some lords, some subjects," he lectured, a society cannot survive. But neither could Luther find anything Christian on the princes' side. More than anything else, their repression and tyranny had occasioned the great rebellion and anarchy. His last word to both sides was a plea he knew to be in vain: "[Please] be advised and attack [your differences] with justice, not with force or strife, and do not start an endless bloodshed in Germany."¹⁰⁵

After peasants attacked their landlords in Swabia, Franconia, and Thuringia, Luther—confronted by the specter of a full-scale revolution—exhorted the princes to kill the rebels pitilessly.¹⁰⁶

If, as many argue, his political philosophy raised the German state to new political authority and power after 1525, it was only the latest in a long series of lifts. Had such enhancement been the only thing the Reformation had to offer the princes, its appeal to them would have been small. The German state had grown impressively on its own throughout the late Middle Ages. By the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the princes had become supreme rulers within their lands and were collectively so within the empire by the late fifteenth.¹⁰⁷ Long before there was a Reformation to assist

them, they had reformed local churches and cloisters at their own initiative, punishing clerical abuses and assisting the cure of souls. What the German states gained most from the Reformation was the opportunity to establish an independent German culture and break with the pope in Rome, who, by 1519, had become a more disruptive foreign force in Germany than the still useful and respected Hapsburg emperor.

The defense of Protestant religious freedom gave rise to an interterritorial military alliance, the Schmalkaldic League, and a political-religious war with Emperor Charles V. The war's resolution established German religious pluralism and the confessional division of Western Christendom. After 1555 rulers in lands with mixed religious confessions designated the official religion. In some places old Catholic and new Lutheran communions learned to coexist.¹⁰⁸ Where dissenters found the public worship of their faith forbidden, they might emigrate to a land where it was legal, travel on feast days to neighboring areas where their faith was practiced, hire a visiting priest or pastor to perform desired services on the border of a territory or city, and/or practice their faith quietly in the privacy of their own homes.

The Lutheran embrace of the German territorial state not only enhanced its sovereignty, it also endowed it with an ethical and cultural mission over which the new clergy and duly appointed lower magistrates were duty-bound to stand a vigilant watch.¹⁰⁹ That watch evolved into a principled doctrine of resistance to tyrants among Lutherans facing imperial and papal armies in the mid-1540s, and among French and Netherlands Calvinists fighting similar religious wars in the second half of the century. When in the wake of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, John Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, published his defense of the right of lower magistrates to overthrow tyrants, including princes, kings, and emperors, his work appeared as an anonymous tract published in the Lutheran city of Magdeburg, the fabled center of German resistance to imperial occupation and tyranny.¹¹⁰