

## Biographies of a Reformation. Religious Change and Confessional Coexistence in Upper Lusatia, c. 1520–1635. By Martin Christ.

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The history of the Reformation has been centre stage for many years due to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's famous 95 Theses in 2017 and the rich flow of projects and conferences, including the REFO500 umbrella project that was set up to mark the jubilee. Martin Christ's monograph stands out from this rich crop on two accounts—biographical and regional. Both of these strengths feature prominently in the title and make it possible for the author to add novel insights to the history of Early Modern Christianity.

*Biographies of a Reformation* is grounded on one of the oldest and most organic genres of historiography: surveying the past with the measuring rod of the human lifetime. Re-telling the lives of persons important in shaping the fate of a community has been a key exercise in memory-building since time immemorial and part of the toolkit of professional historians since antiquity. It regained popularity in the Renaissance and, in a more academic manner, from the eighteenth century onwards, showcasing the lives of outstanding personalities, usually men of power and/or erudition, a genre that has remained very much alive. In recent decades, group biographies have redirected the focus, applying the prosopographical method to learn about the operation of institutions via the lives of their officeholders or assembling collective biographies to understand the inner dynamics of social groups.

Martin Christ's work takes the genre to yet a new level by aiming to interpret a spiritual and religious movement of the Reformation through the lives of its selected protagonists—unique individuals and representatives of intellectual career patterns at the same time. This approach is well-chosen, illuminating, and refreshing. The geographical scope of Christ's research was likewise a fortunate choice. Upper Lusatia, a lesser-known region within Central Europe, was a margraviate in the North-Western border area of Bohemia, ruled but very rarely visited by the king of Bohemia. It was home to a variegated Slavic and German population who lived in

the hilly rural landscape as well as in its six main urban centres that formed a league from 1346 onwards. In other words, it was a borderland in a political, social, and, as the book shows, religious sense alike.

Although the selection principles of the nine main characters presented in the volume—complemented by a dozen others in supporting roles—were not laid out explicitly, the persons whose names head the eight chapters of the book can be regarded as a representative sample in many ways. Geographically, their places of employment cover five of the six members of the Upper Lusatian town league: Bautzen, Görlitz, Zittau, Lauban and Kamenz—the first two featuring more prominently due to their greater size and weight. Only the smallest town, Löbau, lacks a man and a chapter of its own, but it appears incidentally throughout the book.

As to their religious convictions (confessional adherence may be a premature term), besides four Lutherans (Lorenz Heidenreich, Bartholomeus Scultetus, Sigismund Suevus and Friedrich Fischer) as representatives of the dominant religious group in Lusatia, Christ has included three Catholics (Johannes Hass, Andreas Günther and Johann Leisentritt) as well as a Zwinglian (Oswald Pergener) and a preacher accused of crypto-Calvinist tendencies (Martin Möller). The chronological range of their working lives covers practically a century from the appearance of Lutheran teachings to the end of the ‘Bohemian period’ of Upper Lusatia in the 1620s, although none of them lived to see the Saxon takeover of the region in 1635. It is only in their social (and gender) makeup that the group is off-balance, consisting only of men from the elite (apart from the additionally featured ‘protestant visionary’ cobbler Jacob Böhme from Görlitz). This focus on the elite, however, was necessary for showcasing persons with an intellectual impact and, closely connected to that, a significant written output in the abundant and very thoroughly studied source material of the period. Regarding this choice, there is still a balance between the four members of the secular elite plus five clerics and preachers.

The lives of these people do not simply stand side by side: they talk to each other—just as some of them did in real life, adding up to an entangled story of religious change and syncretism, a major trait of the Lusatian reformation proven convincingly by the book. An accomplished historian, Martin Christ has made each person stand for more than himself; each instead acts as a magnet, attracting a rich set of associations of facts and ideas. Thus, Heidenreich’s and Pergener’s lives allow the author to sketch out the early appearance of reformatory ideas; Günther’s life offers a focus on civic welfare, town economy and civility; Scultetus’s person binds in diplomacy and schooling as well as science (astronomy and cartography) and calendar-time; Leisentritt’s biography leads to a discussion of rituals connected to the turning points of life; Möller’s accusations of dissent usher in the presentation of other heterodox views; while the examples of Suevus and Fisher take us to the

experience of shared spaces and divided liturgies. Furthermore, the lives also stand for an abundance of sensory associations, from the visual (woodcuts, altars, church interiors), aural (the sound of hymns and church bells), olfactory (incense and the Mount of Myrrh) and even palatal (tasting the communion under both kinds, but also the food prepared by the nuns of Lauban for the town's Lutheran clergy). To sum up, Martin Christ has eminently succeeded in presenting the religious pluralism of Upper Lusatia through the plurality of lives that all speak, in their own ways, of showing preference for coexistence rather than distancing.

Martin Christ's book appeared in OUP's *Studies in German History* series, but it covers a broader scope and especially relevance than the German lands. The discussion of Upper Lusatia expands our knowledge of Central Europe and benefits from being set in this broader landscape. The embeddedness of the story into that of Central Europe starts at the very top, with the Habsburg kings of Bohemia. The first of them identified here, Ferdinand I, had among his siblings the almighty Emperor Charles V as well as Mary of Hungary, wife and then widow of the last medieval king of Hungary and Bohemia, Louis II, and later governor of the Netherlands. Although as a young queen, she embodied much of the same spirit and sentiment as the protagonists of this book, she had court preachers who entertained Lutheran sympathies and commissioned polyphonic compositions on Luther's psalms. Ferdinand himself was much more rigid in his personal views, but his engagement with more pressing worries, particularly the Hungarian–Ottoman war front, contributed to his leniency or simply lack of attention to other, less disturbed parts of his realm. His successors, apart from Rudolf II, likewise spent very little time in Prague, which accounted for the tacit acceptance of more flexible interpretations of religious doctrines.

On the level of the book's protagonists, a careful reading reveals that many details of their births, schooling, and later careers connected them to various parts of Central Europe. Leisentrit was born in Olomouc, the seat of Moravia's Catholic bishopric; he studied at the University of Kraków while Günther studied in Prague; Suevus took up positions in Tallinn, Toruń and Wrocław before or after his tenure in Lauban, whereas Scultetus's scholarly networks and correspondence reached all corners of Central Europe, even as far east as Moscow, where he considered taking up a position as court cartographer—just to name the most prominent connections. Being part of Bohemia inevitably meant taking sides concerning the Bohemian Reformation and the Hussite heritage, which divided even the protestants—the Zwinglian Pergener being the only full supporter in Christ's sample. The Utraquist traditions the Catholic Leisentrit experienced in his youth may have impacted his more open-minded views as well. Finally, the painter Matthäus Crocinus, whose image of Bautzen's St Peter's Church decorates the book's cover, was an exile from Bohemia after the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War.

On a third level, Upper Lusatia shared many of the same issues with ethnic plurality and religious change as other parts of Central and East Central Europe. This often resulted in similar solutions of shared church spaces and entangled intellectual currents, as Martin Christ has shown. Features parallel to those of Early Modern Hungary, a region that was beyond the direct reach of the Lusatian intellectuals, may point to deeper mechanisms of adaptation, conflict avoidance, or cross-fertilisation. One can find in both regions parish churches used in common by both Catholics and Lutherans, although in Hungary, the division concerned mostly the hours of the day rather than space. Likewise, Catholic friaries and nunneries operated undisturbed under the patronage of Lutheran town councils. The visual appearance of church interiors in Transylvanian Saxon towns that adopted Lutheranism from the 1540s took on a syncretistic character. In the shadow of the religious tolerance attributed to the much-celebrated but often misinterpreted Act of Turda in 1568, a possible parallel volume on 'biographies of a Transylvanian Reformation' would likewise present a number of difficult personal choices and conflicts in that rapidly changing environment. The series of examples could be followed on end.

In the last couple of decades, research into the history of religious coexistence has rightly called for a redefinition and refinement of the confessionalisation paradigm. For instance, in 2017, Cornel Zwierlein proposed to define this as an "empirical project of constantly asking and verifying how the actual ritual practice and held beliefs compared to theologically normative expectations."<sup>1</sup> Martin Christ's new volume does exactly this. Analogies and more extreme examples added to the Upper Lusatian ones from other 'decentralized power structures' of Central Europe do not distract from the uniqueness of the *Biographies of a Reformation* but rather make it more relevant, fitting into a broader trend of nuancing grand narratives on the ground.

## Literature

Zwierlein, Cornel. "»Konfessionalisierung« europäisch, global als epistemischer Prozess: Zu den Folgen der Reformation und zur Methodendiskussion." In *Reformation und Recht. Zur Kontroverse um die Kulturwirkungen der Reformation*, edited by Christoph Strohm, 1–51. Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck, 2017.

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1 Zwierlein, "»Konfessionalisierung« europäisch, global als epistemischer Prozess," 10.

