H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexandra Kess. *Johann Sleidan and the Protestant Vision of History.* Burlington: Ashgate, 2008. xii + 245 pp. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5770-5.

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Published on H-HRE (March, 2010)

Commissioned by Tryntje Helfferich

A Reformation History with Cross-Confessional Appeal

Over the course of the Reformation in Germany, the imperial city of Strasbourg provided several of the key figures who sought to mediate between Protestant and Catholic, most notably the reformer Martin Bucer and the statesman Jacob Sturm. As is generally known, their efforts to bring peace between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Schmalkaldic League ultimately fell short. When it became clear that a reconciliation was not to be achieved, among the projects taken up by the leaders of the league was an effort to provide an account of what had transpired over the course of the Reformation–a history that would cast the Reformers in a proper light and justify the actions of the league, especially the refusal of its members to submit to the emperor. At the urging of Bucer and Sturm, the scholar commissioned for this task was Johann Sleidan (1506-56), the subject of Alexandra Kess's fine study. The work Sleidan produced was *De statu religionis et reipublicae, Carolo Quinto, Caesare, Commentarii* (1555), commonly referred to as *Commentaries*, a work that proved to be a major resource for subsequent histories and a significant effort at "owning" the history of the Reformation for Protestantism.

After an introduction in which she surveys the previous scholarship on Sleidan (who arguably has not received his due in the historiography of the Reformation) and which sets the context for her present contribution, Kess begins with a thorough examination of the life of Sleidan, which encompasses chapters 2 through 4. Chapter 2, focusing on his early career, provides a context in which to appreciate the central subject of this book, his work as a historian. What is particularly striking is the web of contacts Sleidan established in these years while serving as a diplomat in France, and then, in his later years, on behalf of the league and for Strasbourg–connections that Kess argues proved to be especially useful when it came to collecting the source material out of which he would fashion his history, and which would also give him a unique perspective on the subject at hand. Coming as he did from a region that stood on the borders between the empire and France, he was well suited to work within both settings. He served first in France as secretary to Cardinal Jean du Bellay, bishop of Paris, a man who had connections with German Protestants, who were well served through the agency of Sleidan in his additional capacity as a diplomat. Kess ably shows that Sleidan developed in these years as a historian through his translation, from French into Latin, of the chronicle of Jean Froissart (published as *Frossardi, nobilissimi scriptoris gallici, historiarum opus omne* [1537]), but that he also cultivated his interest in history and politics through diplomatic service on behalf of du Bellay. In addition, at this time, he also composed two works, *Oration to the Estates* and *Oration to the Emperor*, both from 1548, and both of which were quickly translated into several languages and constituted Sleidan's first efforts as an author.

These latter works, and his service as a diplomat in Germany under du Bellay, led naturally to Sleidan's recruitment by the Schmalkaldic League as an official historian, but also as a diplomat, the subject of chapter 3. In this phase of his career, Kess notes, he came under the influence of his patrons Bucer and Sturm, who, as noted, recruited Sleidan to write an official history of the league. As he began in earnest his efforts to collect materials for the projected history, the scope of his diplomatic contacts expanded beyond France and Germany and included England as well. Alas, the collapse of the

Schmalkaldic League resulted in the termination of his employment as its historian, but not of his work toward the history of the Reformation. In the immediate aftermath of the league's defeat, he produced Latin translations of French historical and political works by Philippe de Commynes (published as *De Carolo Octavo* [1548]) and Claude de Seyssel (published as *De republica Galliae* [1548]), as well as a composition of his own on law and the state (*Summa doctrinae Platonibus de republica et legibus* [1548]), each of which would be dedicated to leading figures in England (respectively, Protector Somerset, King Edward VI, and William Paget).

Chapter 4 takes up the remaining years of Sleidan's life, exploring why these works were produced and why they were dedicated to English figures. In these years, Sleidan once again served as a diplomat, this time on behalf of Strasbourg, and in these years he completed and published his *Commentaries*. The work was an immediate bestseller that was nonetheless harshly criticized by both Lutherans and Catholics. Kess demonstrates that this was due to the timing of publication, which came in the midst of the sensitive negotiations toward what would become the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. Once that settlement was attained, she argues, the outcry died away and, despite the criticisms, the work was read by substantial numbers from both communities, demonstrating what Kess characterizes as the broad multi-confessional appeal of Sleidan's achievement. Further evidence that the initial outcry against the *Commentaries* was due to the timing of its publication is found in the fact that in the next year Sleidan published a history of the world, *The Four Empires* (1556), which sold well without controversy. He did not live long to enjoy the success of this work, however, as he died rather suddenly later that year.

The heart of Kess's work is found in her close analysis of the *Commentaries*, which constituted the first comprehensive history of the Reformation written by a contemporary, and its reception. These two matters are the focus of chapters 5 through 7. In chapter 5, she examines the sources used by Sleidan, drawing attention to the role his service as a diplomat played in his ability to gather the material, but also in shaping his perspective and approach to the subject. Kess also sets Sleidan's method and style as a historian within the broader context of his age. She scrutinizes two sections of the *Commentaries*, his treatment of the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 and the Council of Trent in 1551/2, noting the prominence given to the actions of politicians and the relatively minimal role of theologians. In general, his history gives more attention to politics and does not seek to serve the interests of polemic. There are shortcomings to this particular emphasis, serving as it does the interests of princes: for instance, the treatment of the Peasants' War casts the princes in a favorable light, even suggesting that they were moved by pity; scant attention is paid to the peasants and the plight that caused them to rise, even though their complaints are acknowledged as valid.

Kess then provides a survey of the reception of Sleidan's work, but also a comparative framework in which to consider his achievements. These topics are considered first in respect to his contemporaries in Germany and then his contemporaries in France (chapters 6 and 7, respectively). Here, Kess demonstrates that, despite the outcry against his work, especially from Catholics, his *Commentaries* provided all parties with substantial material to draw on in the composition of subsequent histories (even in the case of Catholics), once again underscoring her point about the cross-confessional appeal of his work. Her comparison here of Sleidan and Matthias Flacius Illyricus and the latter's *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559) is especially interesting, given the similarities but also contrasts between them in method and purpose. The reception of Sleidan's work in France is also illuminating, suggesting how his work could be viewed as a mediating effort that could aid in the attainment of religious peace (an end that Sleidan's original patrons for his history, Sturm and Bucer, no doubt themselves had in mind).

The study is securely grounded in the correspondence of Sleidan, which is very usefully indexed in an appendix, as well as in contemporary printed materials, including the numerous editions of Sleidan's works. In this respect, the chapter on the French reception of Sleidan is thorough, down to details about the printing history and the various editions–more so than the parallel discussion of the German reception. The work would have benefited from a similar treatment of the latter reception history, though the thoroughness of the chapter on France no doubt reflects Kess's participation in the St. Andrews French Book Project (a participation noted in her acknowledgments). Also, while admittedly the focus of this study is on the two principal contexts in which Sleidan worked (France and Germany), one is led to wonder why there is not some reference to efforts at "owning" the past made by the English at the same time, most especially John Foxe? Considering the broad similarities between his work and that of Flacius Illyricus, and the fact that Kess does note the importance of England and Sleidan's contacts there, surely something more could have been said to round out the comparative framework of Protestant historiography from this era?

These reservations aside, Kess has produced a fine study of a neglected figure from the Reformation–neglected by modern historians, that is, not in his own age, as she demonstrates. She has shown that in an age in which confessional passions were at a constant boil, and in which all parties sought to "own" history for their respective sides and to write it in such a way as to justify themselves at the expense of the opposition, there were those who sought to present a more dispassionate, balanced examination of the events of the age, grounded on the public documents and acts of the principal players. The contemporary reception of Sleidan's work is testimony to his achievement, and we can be grateful to Kess for drawing him back into the light of day in our own time.

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Citation: N. Scott Amos. Review of Kess, Alexandra, *Johann Sleidan and the Protestant Vision of History.* H-HRE, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

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