



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Saskia Limbach, *Government Use of Print: Official Publications
in the Holy Roman Empire, 1500–1600*

by Christine Vogel

German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLIV, No. 1 (May 2022), 90–5

ISSN 0269-8552

SASKIA LIMBACH, *Government Use of Print: Official Publications in the Holy Roman Empire, 1500–1600*, Studien zur europäischen Rechtsgeschichte, 326 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 2021), xviii + 347 pp. ISBN 978 3 465 04425 3. €79.00

In December 1511 Ulrich, duke of Württemberg, sent out invitations to a horse race to be held near Neckarweiningen on 11 May of the following year. The duke, notorious for keeping a ruinously expensive court, promised 'kurzwyl unnd geselschafft' (entertainment and companionship) and offered the victor prize money of 32 gulden and a silver cup. And he naturally turned to the new medium of his times in order to reach the greatest possible public for this event. He commissioned the printer Thomas Anshelm to produce an invitation directed plainly and simply to everyone: electors and princes, spiritual and secular lords of the Holy Roman Empire, counts, barons, knights, officials, citizens, and commoners were all invited (pp. 24–5). We do not know how many people actually turned up in the end, but the invitation itself has been preserved as one of the thousands of broadsheets from the sixteenth century that are today held by libraries, museums, and archives.

For Saskia Limbach, this invitation is a good example of early modern official printed material commissioned by a government—something that has long been neglected in the research. Her study, based on her Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of St Andrews in 2017, looks at official publications in the sixteenth century. It thus fits into a recent trend in research on the history of the book that attempts to take a more differentiated view of the connection between power and book printing in the early modern period. The older research was mainly interested in the emancipatory and subversive character of early modern book printing, and looked at pamphlets, illustrated leaflets, and printed material of an oppositional nature, regarding the printing press as primarily a vehicle for progress and enlightenment. For some years now, however, more interest has been taken in the productive interaction between new media technology and the expansion of power, while relations between book printers

Trans. by Angela Davies (GHIL)

and publishers and the established political and religious authorities are being examined beyond the topics of censorship and repression.¹

In her investigation, Limbach concentrates on two cleverly chosen case studies. First, she looks at the Duchy of Württemberg, which went through a period of instability at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and was at times under the overlordship of the Habsburg emperor. From 1535, the dukes Ulrich and Christoph gradually developed it into a model Protestant territory. Limbach's second case study is of the Free Imperial City of Cologne, a Hansa city whose convenient location on the Rhine allowed it to become one of the biggest trade metropolises in the German-language area. Ruled since the Middle Ages by a Council newly elected every year, it was the only large Imperial city that remained Catholic. By juxtaposing Württemberg and Cologne, Limbach contrasts not only two fundamentally different models of early modern rule—rule by territorial princes, and rule by an Imperial city council—but also two domains of differing sizes and two confessional cultures. In the context of questions about the various governments' communication strategies and the conditions under which printers worked, this experimental structure is convincing.

Limbach approaches her material from two sides. First, she is interested in how governments used media; that is, she asks what documents were printed, what criteria played a part in these decisions, and what the governments' intentions were in having their ordinances, announcements, justifications, and invitations printed. Second, she adopts the perspective of the book market and the printers who worked with governments. Here the focus is on commercial aspects. Under what circumstances was it worthwhile for a printer to accept government contracts? What advantages and disadvantages did official print jobs have for entrepreneurial printers, as well as for those who gave out the jobs? What were the print runs, what formats were preferred, what profits could be made, and what risks were involved? The structure of the work reflects this dual approach. The first two chapters are devoted to the Duchy of Württemberg, taking first the government perspective

¹ For a recent overview of the research, see Helmer Helmers, Nina Lamal, and Jamie Cumby, 'Introduction: The Printing Press as an Agent of Power', in *eid.* (eds.), *Print and Power in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)* (Leiden, 2021), 1–17.

and then that of the printers, while chapters three and four deal in the same way with Cologne.

In the case of the dukes of Württemberg, Limbach demonstrates the huge significance that the printing of large-format placards and smaller pamphlets had for rulers, especially at times of political crisis. In his defeat of the Poor Conrad rebellions and disputes with the Habsburgs, Duke Ulrich used broadsheets and pamphlets to justify himself and to mobilize outside powers to support him. But the dukes used the new medium of printed books especially when extending their territorial rule, developing their administrations, and communicating within their domains. The dukes had several hundred copies printed of individual decrees and ordinances, as well as of collections and publications of broader scope, such as Württemberg's ordinances (*Landesordnungen*), which were reissued five times before 1600 and expanded each time; a commentary relevant to the Duchy on the Imperial Police Ordinance; and the *Württembergische Große Kirchenordnung*, the Protestant ecclesiastical law of 1559. Copies were then distributed to officials in the ducal territories. Yet it was not always easy to find printers in Württemberg to take on the many jobs that needed to be done. Opening a print-works in Württemberg was a risky business because with the exception of the university town of Tübingen, the Duchy itself had no significant market for books, and the large printing centres such as Augsburg, Strasbourg, and Frankfurt with its book fair were not far away. Official print jobs were, as a rule, very small, and although they could be produced quickly and independently of the market, they were not lucrative enough on their own. In some cases, they had to take second place to more profitable jobs in larger and commercially successful print-works, and this sometimes resulted in long delays. It was only at the height of confessionalization that Tübingen was able to support a long-term print-works, which over several generations profitably printed official material for the dukes. They had so many jobs to commission because they printed not only decrees and police ordinances, but also church ordinances, declarations of Protestant faith, catechisms, and other reforming material (pp. 100, 106).

Things were very different in Cologne. The commercial metropolis on the Rhine was also a communications hub, and in the sixteenth century became the most important centre for Catholic printing in

the German-language area. Limbach lists more than a hundred print-works that existed there during the first 140 or so years of book printing (pp. 160–1), but only nine of them worked for Cologne’s Council. Contrary to what has been assumed so far, the Council only began to distribute its ordinances and announcements in print very late, from the 1560s. Until this time, the traditional oral channels of communication—public gatherings, town criers, and above all the *Gaffeln* (Cologne’s corporations and guilds), from whose members the Council was elected—had sufficed. A greater influx of religious refugees from the Netherlands and the threat of war in its conflict with the archbishop meant that from the middle of the century the Council increasingly had to use public notices and printed ordinances to maintain law and order. For most of Cologne’s printers, however, these jobs were much less lucrative than the flourishing business of printing religious literature and confessional polemics. Unlike in the Protestant Imperial cities and territories, in Cologne it was not the secular authorities who were responsible for this branch of business, but the ecclesiastical authorities such as the cathedral chapter, the archbishop, and the various resident religious orders. Limbach emphasizes that Protestant Imperial cities such as Augsburg and Nuremberg produced a much greater range of official government publications (pp. 162–3). By this point at the latest, however, it becomes clear that the category of ‘government publication’, at least as defined somewhat cursorily in Limbach’s introduction (p. 21), does not do full justice to the varied practice of early modern rule in the age of confessionalization. In Catholic areas, the religious bodies long continued to be authorities—some retaining their own jurisdictions—and in every case they had propagandist communication needs that did not differ substantially from those of Protestant rulers. For example, a printer who counted the Jesuit order that had moved to Cologne in 1544 among his clients could depend on business that was as profitable as that of Tübingen’s printers, who published reformers’ writings for the duke. To make a substantial profit from the Cologne Council’s publications, by contrast, a printer either had to specialize—like Jaspar von Gennep, for example, who printed illustrated coinage regulations, having invested in the appropriate woodcuts in the middle of the century (pp. 185–6)—or rise to become a member of the city’s political establishment and, like Maternus Cholinus, be elected to the Council

himself (p. 208). In both cases, however, their commercial profitability was a precondition for their successful and long-lasting co-operation with the Council, not its result.

Among the strengths of Limbach's work are its systematic structure, which ensures clarity and stringency; its close reading of the material, which also shows in the numerous illustrations; and the concise and clear presentation. Thanks to her careful archival research, the author can often reconstruct production processes in astonishing detail, based on price lists, account books, and other administrative papers. In many cases, she can provide precise information on prices, costs, and the size of print-runs. Limbach has chosen to keep information about the political context to an absolute minimum, allowing it to appear in her account only when it is necessary to explain conditions governing production and decision-making processes, but then every time. Paradoxically, this has the effect that on certain topics readers receive both too much and too little information. Thus—and especially when general statements are made—there are repetitions and redundancies, for example, when the uses governments made of printed books are discussed, or the function of the Court or Council printer, a role introduced around 1600, is explained (pp. 13, 69, 73, 216). On the other hand, the exceptionally conflict-ridden reign of Duke Ulrich—which saw revolt, exile, and the regaining of power by military means—is nowhere shown in overall context. Instead, it is discussed selectively in several places, and in each case individual and partial aspects are mentioned. The problems of this method become apparent when Limbach describes Duke Ulrich's 1543 regulation on carrying arms, which prohibited travellers from carrying firearms without exception, as a 'rather harsh restriction', and contrasts it with his son Christoph's more liberal regulation of 1551 (p. 49). But the threat resulting from the tense political situation, which prompted Duke Ulrich's strict weapons' ordinance, is only described many pages later in the context of a different issue (pp. 65–6).

Limbach's main interest, however, is not a cultural history of the political, but a history of the book. The official publications she investigates are mostly broadsheets, sometimes multi-page pamphlets, and much more rarely, as in the case of Württemberg's ordinances, thick books. They therefore overwhelmingly belong to a genre of literature which has survived only patchily and has hardly been studied. Thus

the reconstruction of a coherent and complete corpus of texts for investigation is a scholarly achievement that deserves recognition in its own right. In the course of her research, Limbach identified numerous texts that were listed neither in the *Catalog of Printed Works of the 16th Century Published in German-Speaking Countries* (VD16) of the Bavarian State Library, nor in the *Universal Short Title Catalogue* (USTC). In addition, she was able to clarify some dates and, partly as the result of painstaking work comparing woodcuts and initials, to identify for the first time which printers produced a number of known and unknown texts. She has documented the results of this basic research in an appendix numbering more than eighty pages, which lists almost 400 sixteenth-century official publications from Cologne and Württemberg, with references to all known copies and, where available, the relevant links. Limbach's work must therefore be seen as supplementing existing work on police ordinances.² It is thus very well placed in the publication series of the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, and will be an indispensable reference work for future research on the book and media history of the sixteenth century.

² Achim Landwehr and Thomas Simon (eds.), *Repertorium der Policeyordnungen der Frühen Neuzeit*, vol. iv: *Baden und Württemberg* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001); Klaus Militzer (ed.), *Repertorium der Policeyordnungen der Frühen Neuzeit*, vol. vi: *Reichsstädte: Köln*, 2 pts. (Frankfurt am Main, 2005).

CHRISTINE VOGEL is Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Vechta. Her areas of research include the history of early modern media and the cultural history of diplomacy. She is currently pursuing a major research project on French diplomats at the Ottoman court during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among her many publications are *Der Untergang der Gesellschaft Jesu als europäisches Medienereignis (1758–1773): Publizistische Debatten im Spannungsfeld von Aufklärung und Gegenklärung* (2006); (ed. with Bernd Klesmann and Patrick Schmidt) *Jenseits der Haupt- und Staatsaktionen: Neue Perspektiven auf historische Periodika* (2017); and, most recently, (ed. with Florian Kühnel) *Zwischen Domestik und Staatsdiener: Botschaftssekretäre in den frühneuzeitlichen Außenbeziehungen* (2021).