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Review of Eugene Smelyansky, *Heresy and Citizenship: Persecution  
of Heresy in Late Medieval German Cities*

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EUGENE SMELYANSKY, *Heresy and Citizenship: Persecution of Heresy in Late Medieval German Cities*, Studies in Medieval History and Culture (London: Routledge, 2020), 198 pp. ISBN 978 0 367 41527 3. £145.00

Eugene Smelyansky's book, which grew out of a Ph.D. thesis written for the University of California, Irvine, deals with the persecution of Waldensians between 1390 and 1410 in the cities of southern and south-western Germany—a limitation which is unfortunately not made clear in the much wider title. Smelyansky begins his study with two general chapters. In the first he outlines social developments since the thirteenth century, mainly in the imperial cities; the positioning of the cities in terms of (ecclesiastical) politics during the western schism; and, referring to Bernd Moeller's oft-cited description of the imperial cities as a '*corpus christianum* in miniature',<sup>1</sup> their perception of themselves as self-contained religious and political communities (p. 16). The second chapter concerns the persecution of the Waldensians, largely in the Holy Roman Empire. Smelyansky looks in detail at the events of 1390 to 1404 and introduces—as far as the sources allow—the inquisitors Martin of Amberg, Peter Zwicker, and Heinrich Angermeier.

The following chapters present four case studies. The first deals with the 1393 inquisition Angermeier organized in Augsburg, which was used by Burkhard of Ellerbach, bishop of Augsburg, to gain an advantage in his protracted dispute with the authorities of the former episcopal city, which had become an imperial city in 1316. The city, however, thwarted this attempt by demonstratively reintegrating the repentant heretics into public life. It was only when some of those convicted tried to do a deal with the bishop in order to commute their sentences into fines that the council reacted harshly and condemned five Waldensians to death. The council grasped this chance to establish itself as a righteous authority which was seen to take more effective measures against heretics than the bishop.

Smelyansky's second case study also concerns a trial conducted by Angermeier, this time against Hans Wern, a citizen of Rothenburg Trans. by Angela Davies (GHIL).

<sup>1</sup> Bernd Moeller, *Reichsstadt und Reformation*, 2nd edn (Tübingen, 2011), 51.

ob der Tauber, in the winter of 1394–5. The actions of the bishop of Würzburg, Gerhard of Schwarzburg, also played a part in this case, as he was in dispute with the imperial cities in his diocese and had taken military action against the Swabian League, of which Rothenburg was a member. Angermeier's persecution of the Waldensians gave the bishop a chance to intervene in the internal affairs of his enemies and to target a sensitive spot, their Christian self-understanding. The decisive factor in the trial of Hans Wern, however, were rivalries within the new, upwardly mobile class in Rothenburg, which had established itself in the course of a few generations, distinguishing itself from the old, established families. Both Wern and his opponent, the mayor Heinrich Toppler, were members of this new elite. In order to get rid of his rival, Toppler invited Angermeier to Rothenburg and accused Wern of heresy. The inquisition trial ended in acquittal, but suspicions of Wern persisted. Put on trial again, this time for embezzlement and abuse of office, he was convicted. His reputation and career in tatters, he had to leave town. Thus even an unsuccessful inquisition trial could be effective in a political dispute because of its impact on a person's reputation.

In his third case study, Smelyansky turns to the persecution of the Waldensians in Strasbourg in 1400. There are good records for this, and Georg Modestin has researched it in detail.<sup>2</sup> The case of Strasbourg casts light on the city's awareness of its image. It justified itself in letters to other cities and tried by all means available to limit the extent of the trials, as well-known citizens were implicated. Smelyansky briefly examines the relationship between the city of Strasbourg and its bishops. He plausibly suggests that the actions the city authorities took against the Waldensians were intended to give Bishop Wilhelm II of Diest little excuse to intervene. The sentences imposed in Strasbourg were relatively mild, often resulting merely in the accused being banished. In contrast to how the trial against Hans Wern was conducted in Rothenburg, the reputations of those involved were taken into consideration in Strasbourg. One citizen, Johannes Blumstein, who played a public role as the leader

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Georg Modestin, *Ketzer in der Stadt: Der Prozess gegen die Straßburger Waldenser von 1400* (Hanover, 2007).

of the Waldensians, was able to continue his political and diplomatic career in the service of the city almost without interruption. Damage limitation measures were introduced in Strasbourg. The orthodox image of the city was weighed up against the disadvantages that overly strict inquisitorial procedures against members of the urban elite could bring.

Finally, on the basis of his fourth case study – inquisitions in Fribourg in 1399 and Bern in 1399–1400 – Smelyansky tests his observations in relation to Strasbourg and finds them confirmed and developed in the procedures followed by these cities. In order to retain control, the authorities dispensed with theologically trained inquisitors and resorted to other communication strategies to uncover heresies. Within the cities, inquisitions were set in motion through sermons and calls for denunciations; externally, in relations with other cities, letters and personal meetings were important ways of protecting the reputation of the citizenry while transmitting information. In Bern, the conviction of more than 130 Waldensians resulted in protracted periods of unrest, which the council tried to calm by various measures. The suspects from Fribourg were denounced by representatives of the city of Bern in order to damage Fribourg's reputation. In a letter to the responsible diocesan bishop in Lausanne, the Fribourg authorities left no doubt that the accusations were baseless, and the hitherto energetically pursued inquisition proceedings ended with the acquittal of all defendants due to lack of evidence.

On the whole, Smelyansky's study presents highly convincing findings that will encourage further research. The persecution of real or imagined heretics could be a political instrument in cities which were striving for autonomy, needed to defend their image, or were involved in multiple conflicts with their (former) rulers or between different groups within the city. This offers a new approach to the study of piety, social history, and regional history in the late Middle Ages. Detailed studies like those that Smelyansky has presented in the examples discussed above can and must be undertaken for other cities in different regions.

Only one aspect of Smelyansky's work can be criticized. Despite his thorough bibliographical research, he seems to have missed some of the more recent work on the imperial cities, in particular, the volumes

in the series *Studien zur Reichsstadtgeschichte*.<sup>3</sup> Some of these, which have already applied his approach in a similar way, could have been profitably used for his topic. Nevertheless, especially in the new examples Smelyansky discusses, the book makes an important contribution to the history of heresy in the late medieval German-speaking world. The older research was primarily interested in religious content, spiritual movements, and persecution mechanisms used by the church. But here a pragmatic approach which has already been tested in recent research comes to the fore, making sources from the context of inquisition proceedings useful for investigating social and political history.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Thomas Lau and Helge Wittmann (eds.), *Reichsstadt im Religionskonflikt: 4. Tagung des Mühlhäuser Arbeitskreises für Reichsstadtgeschichte, Mühlhausen 8. bis 10. Februar 2016* (Petersberg, 2017).

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