

German Peasant Rebellion, 1525

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The Peasant War of 1524–5 was an uprising of several hundred thousand peasants, workers, and artisans in mostly southern Germany but also in Tyrol, Alsace and Lorraine, as well as Carniola, Slovenia. The war, brought on by a combination of several factors, including changes in social and economic structures, heavy taxation by both the nobility and Catholic Church, religious changes engendered by the Reformation, and a crisis of the old feudal system, is often seen as the last medieval peasant revolt in Europe. Marxists, however, interpret it as the first modern revolution.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Germany started slowly to industrialize. Weaving industries, including silk, emerged around southern trade cities, particularly Augsburg and Nuremberg. Other industries, such as fine metals, etching, and woodcarving, provided employment. This in effect increased commerce, and more money was distributed. More and more people moved into cities to find work, and the countryside was developed into farmland to feed the growing population. Yet other parts of Germany had little trade or commerce beyond their regions. Commerce was heavily regulated by the guild system in the cities and the nobility in the countryside. To complicate matters, various currencies used in the fifteenth century also contributed to agricultural economic instabilities. Standards of grain measurement differed from region to region.

Social and economic structures were also changing. A tiered nobility structure in Germany consisted of knights, or lesser nobility, which slowly disappeared through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The middle nobility was also disappearing since the medieval feudal system had shifted the power structure and it lost many of its privileges over the decades. Finally, the princes or upper nobility in Germany were almost independent of the ruling house and possessed sovereign rights. With new trade opportunities and new industries opening up, the taste for luxury items grew among this group and the needed funds were collected by heavily taxing the lower orders, predominantly the peasantry. These payments included the “great tithe” for livestock



Abb. 115. Aufländischer Bauer. Holzschnitt aus: Murner, *Beschwörung des Lutherischen Narren*. Straßburg, Grüninger, 1522.

Referred to as “the last great medieval peasant revolt” and “the first modern revolution,” the German Peasant Rebellion of 1525 was inspired by the Reformation ideas of Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and Thomas Muntzer. Though Luther condemned the rebellion, his teachings, such as the idea of a priesthood of all believers, inspired the peasants by convincing them their cause was divinely sanctioned. Bibliothèque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris / Archives Charmet / The Bridgeman Art Library

and “small tithe” for fruits and vegetables, a *Handlohn* or hand fee on all feudal property if there was a change in ownership, a death duty if either the landowner or tenant died, taxes on cheese and wine in wine-producing regions, as well as an acorn levy. Nobility also owned the right to decide whether peasant pigs could feed in their woods. In addition, an investiture tax had to be paid for every new bishop’s inauguration to cover some of the expenses. A “huff tax” for every cow sold was implemented in 1522, followed by the Turk tax in 1524.

Thus, not only were peasants taxed but their old rights were circumvented. These “old rights” or laws existed only orally but had a long tradition in Germany. Old manorial obligations to the landlords were now converted into direct payments, while “old rights” like hunting, collecting

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firewood on manor lands, or fishing became increasingly restricted. Fishing rights in particular were seen more as a symbol of freedom going back to biblical times. Around the same period, the Catholic Church started to place greater monetary demands on the peasants, increasing the expenses and resulting tensions.

Although the Peasant War of 1525 was mainly an agrarian rebellion, the Reformation had a major influence on the war. In 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, after he translated the Bible into German, and common men began to question "God's will" and the interpretation the Catholic Church offered. Many peasants believed erroneously that the nobility, which embraced and introduced the Reformation, would be on their side. Other church reformers, including Huldrych Zwingli and Thomas Müntzer, further emboldened the peasants with their theories that the common man could have a relationship with God without an indispensable intermediary like the Catholic Church.

Even as it was growing as an opposition force, the peasantry was as fragmented as the nobility. Serfdom itself was rare in most German regions after the Renaissance. However, landless agricultural laborers and so-called cottagers were at the bottom of the spectrum. Because of their lack of property, these day-laborers or migrant workers could freely move to other regions or cities to find work. Leaseholders, who made up the majority of the peasants, rented the land they farmed and consumed most of what they produced, so little money was left to pay the levies and taxes imposed. Particularly in southern Germany, a hereditary law of divisible inheritance existed, making farms smaller and smaller over the generations. Landowning peasants actually had improved their positions throughout the fifteenth century, although they were still required to pay certain taxes and tithes.

Ironically, it was not the landless peasantry that revolted in 1524 but the peasant middle classes, together with the artisans and skilled workers from the cities. Furthermore, doctors, lawyers, even some mayors of smaller towns, as well as monks and lower clergy priests, and a few knights, were on the side of the peasants. In addition there were regional differences in rationale behind the uprisings. In Franconia, at least in the beginning, the revolt was concerned with urban matters of town self-government. Most peasants in

southern Germany were hereditary leaseholders living on fixed-rent farms. An agrarian depression combined with several years of bad harvests had hit Germany in the fifteenth century, with smaller nobility and manor holdings suffering the most. The agrarian economy also underwent structural changes when cities attracted people, causing a population shift and labor shortages in the rural regions. Peasants and landowners had a harder time finding help, and those who were working could demand higher wages. Yet this changed around the mid-fifteenth century when the agriculture population grew and the labor force increased. By the outbreak of the uprising, the southern German regions of Swabia, Franconia, and southwest Germany had fairly dense populations. The rural population, dissatisfied with the political structure in Germany, existed in a confusing overlapping of unevenly defined and unevenly consolidated political sovereignties, with the middle peasantry wedged between the two groups of the growing landless masses and the ever-demanding upper nobility, including the church.

Local peasants began an uprising in the summer of 1524 on the property of Count von Lupfen in the vicinity of Schaffhausen under the leadership of Hans Müller. A loose organization was formed, and the peasants were asked to make a small monetary contribution for the cause. Their demands were simple: there should be no lord but the emperor to whom the taxes were owed, and they wanted to return to the "old rights" discussed above. At the same time, a few hundred miles away in Franconia peasants refused to pay the grain tithe, followed by more insurrection into the fall of that year around Lake Constance and Villingen. These uprisings were again based on grievances over the "old rights" or the denial of them. Over the course of the winter and the early part of 1525, more and smaller, but more radical, uprisings broke out in the same regions. The main revolts took place in the late winter and May of 1525 in the southern and central parts of Germany. The revolts had spread from Swabia and the Black Forest region into northern Switzerland, north to Franconia, Wurttemberg, parts of the Palatine, and all the way to Thuringia.

In the southwest, peasants rallied under the slogan "divine justice" and, through the Memminger Peasant Parliament, presented their demands through the *Twelve Articles*. Modeled

after a Swiss peasant organization, these articles were reprinted in Augsburg and distributed throughout the other German regions. The *Twelve Articles* requested not only the return to the “old rights” but also free access to the forests, hunting and fishing rights, and a suspension of the obligation to pay tithes. Common lands taken by nobility should be returned to the people as communal lands. While these requests clearly show an interest in agricultural concerns, the demand for the gospel to be preached according to the true faith was asking for church reforms. No political demands were made, nor were topics affecting burgher, artisans, or landless peasants incorporated into the articles.

The Swabian League, the armed forces of the nobility which was co-financed by wealthy cities, was assembled to keep the peace and if necessary fight against the revolting peasants. Under the leadership of Truchsess von Waldburg, who was financially supported by the Augsburg Fugger bank, the League eventually assembled 9,000 *Landsknechte* and almost 2,000 armed horsemen. At the end of March 1525, Truchsess and the League marched toward Leipheim where more than 5,000 peasants had plundered and burned church property. The armies met on April 4 and Truchsess was able to defeat the peasants. The city of Leipheim had to pay reparations as punishment for aiding the peasants.

While the League was engaged in Leipheim, several counts and knights were killed further north near Weinsberg by revolting peasants. After this incident, known as the *Weinsberger Bluttat* or blood deed, the peasants were portrayed as vicious and cruel. The Weinsberger peasants eventually joined up with lower nobility and fought side by side with Florian Geyer and Götz von Berlichingen.

In the meantime, the League defeated the Leipheim peasant armies and started negotiations with the Allgau section back in the south, encouraging the false belief that the demands of the *Twelve Articles* would be met. In reality, Truchsess needed time to defeat Berlichingen and his men. This was an easy task, since Berlichingen had abandoned his men a day before the battle. Leaderless and without guidance, the peasants were crushed by the League and almost 8,000 peasants died within two hours. Believing they would not be attacked by

the League, the Allgau section of the peasants prepared to present their complaints to the courts. Before their demands could be heard, the League had broken the armistice and was approaching fast. The peasants, acting in anger, burned down castles and confiscated church property, but they were no match for the League. Hans Müller was able to assemble roughly 12,000 men and at the end of May 1525, marched with his army toward Freiburg. Without major fighting, the city opened its gates while fighting was still continuing on the Alsatian side of the Rhine until the Duke of Lorraine suppressed the revolt.

The peasants were at a disadvantage, not only because they had little or no military training, but also because of poor coordination. The inability to unify and properly communicate with revolting groups in other regions and to form one cohesive group contributed to this shortcoming. While there were exceptions, the majority of conflicts were fought with scythes, axes, flails, and other farming tools. The League was also at an advantage by having armed horsemen, who could cover long distances much faster than a marching peasant army.

Altogether about 100,000 peasants and sympathizers either died in combat or were later executed during the Peasant War of 1524–5. Many survivors were tortured and lost their privileges and property. Cities and villages that aided the revolts lost their rights; their weapons were confiscated and they were forced to pay reparations.

SEE ALSO: German Reformation; Luther, Martin (1483–1546); Müntzer, Thomas (ca. 1489–1525); Zwingli, Huldrych (1484–1531)

References and Suggested Readings

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