

The german states: the reformation

Business



In 1524, in response to heavy taxes and several crop failures that threatened starvation, as well as resentment over the medieval feudal system, a peasant revolt began in Stalingen, in the German states. The revolt quickly gained support from poor townspeople and artisans as well as serfs, including two well-known Protestant leaders, Thomas Muntzer and Huldrych Zwingli, but was heavily opposed by the extremely influential Martin Luther. Ultimately, the Swabian League army ruthlessly put an end to the revolt, with over 100,000 peasant casualties, but discontent would continue to fester in the German states until it erupted in violence once again, in the form of the Thirty Years' War. Resentment had been building up in the German states over heavy taxes impressed upon the peasantry for hundreds of years before the revolt in the 1520s.

A series of crop failures and the religious and social upheaval caused by the Protestant Reformation as well as the cracks in peasant society already caused by the Great Schism provided the spark needed to set fire to that resentment and begin a more widespread rebellion. The German states were a hotbed for rebellion in the 1500s. Cracks were still present in the peasant mentality from the Great Schism in 1054; the Protestant Reformation, begun by Martin Luther and his 95 Theses, widened and deepened those cracks. Peasants had begun to question the clergy already, and wonder if their economic stress and even the horrible years of the Black Death were perhaps caused by God's wrath at the split of his church and the rampant corruption in the Catholic church, particularly during the reign of Pope Leo X. Leonhard von Eck, in a report to the Duke Ludwig of Bavaria analyzing the motivation behind the peasant revolt noted that much of their motivation

was inspired by Lutheranism and the Bible. To a people whose lives were constant hardship and misery, and who clung to the idea of a blissful heaven as their reason for being, the idea that the clergy could cost them their afterlife was maddening and infuriating.

Thus the seeds of rebellion were planted, until finally watered by economic distress in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth. As the 16th century dawned, the German states entered a period of economic hardship. The value of money decreased about half, and prices rose across the board—in Thuringia, the price of wool nearly doubled. Unfortunately for peasants, lords and nobles responded to their new expenses by increasing taxes on their serfs, who were already struggling enough to get by. This was one of the peasants' biggest concerns and reasons for revolting.

As described in the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants, the list of demands the serfs had for their lords, by Sebastian Lotzer and Christoph Schappeler, two leaders of the revolt, the peasants wished for easier duties and more of a partnership between lord and serf, requiring compensation for peasant labor. This went hand in hand with the call for an end to feudalism, particularly “manorialism”, the subset of feudalism that most of Europe followed, which put peasants at a heavy disadvantage. The Peasant Parliament of Swabia demanded, just two days after the Twelve Articles was published, in the Articles of the Peasants of Memmingen, that their lords release them from serfdom—as “good” Christian lords should do. Crop failures in the beginning of the 1500s in Stuhlingen proved the final straw for the German peasants. The threat of starvation, as is typical in history, lit the flames of rebellion.

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The noble Count Wilhelm, in a letter to the Duke of Prussia in 1526, towards the end of the rebellion, expressed the ferocious greed of the peasants, describing the disturbing way in which they sacked the houses of nobles and clergy alike, eating everything in sight and consuming all they could. At first it seemed as though the peasants could win. Many nobles gave in to them, such as Christoffel von Lichenenstein, who swore an oath of fealty to the peasants, then later pleaded for leniency from the ruthless retribution of Count Wilhelm von Henneberg, and the peasantry won a victory at the town of Weinsberg. Unfortunately, this victory was also a great defeat; the senseless murder of the nobles there, particularly that of the Duke, drew the ire of Martin Luther, who condemned the blood revolt in a scathing discourse called *Against the Murdering Thieving Hordes of Peasants*. Without the support of the extremely influential theologian, the revolt was doomed to failure. The Swabian League sent an army to deal with the revolt and retribution was both swift and brutal.

At the Massacre of Franklahausen in April 1525, anywhere from 3000 to 10000 peasants were killed, caught off guard by the armies of the Duke George of Saxony and Phillip I of Hesse, as well as Thomas Muntzer, one of the leaders of the revolt. By August of 1526, the revolt had been put down, though scattered fighting remained, and the Imperial Diet of Speyer had decreed a return to the “natural” order of the medieval European world. The motivation of the German Peasants’ Revolt very closely resembles that of coal miner strikes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wages were painfully low, taxes high, and the work dangerous. Miners had little to no say in the management of the company they worked for and were often

forced to work ridiculously long hours just to make enough for provide food for their families.

As wages spiraled lower and prices soared higher, the conditions became too much and strikes broke out in England and Germany, starting in 1889 and continuing until 1921. In both cases, the reigning authority failed to realize the fundamental lesson to retaining power over the repressed poor. In nearly all cases, what finally causes a revolt or violence, is the threat of starvation. Starvation brings hopelessness, and hopelessness breeds anger, frustration, and recklessness—all the necessary ingredients for a rebellion, and in plentiful supply.