

The Reformation and the Peasants' War:
A Morally Obsessed Rebellion

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Introduction

When asked about whether the values held by the commoners in the Holy Roman Empire during the Peasants' War were influenced by the theological reforms of the Protestant Reformation, one could give many answers. One could argue that the commoners' values were absolutely influenced by the Reformation and the ideas promulgated by Luther and Zwingli. Others could argue that the essence of the commoners' plight was no different in the Peasants' War than during the Bundschuh rebellion of 1502. Both arguments have merit. Thus, there arises the problem of having to approach this matter of the influence of the Reformation on conventional thought more economically than other matters might warrant – economic simply meaning the dreadfully unresolved comparison of similarities and differences between commoners' paradigms. Certainly, there were differences. But were those differences affective enough of common thought to necessitate stating that the Peasants' War was influenced by the Reformation in any real capacity? Answering this query is the purpose of this essay.

Through the cross-examination of sources from Speyer and Württemberg before the Reformation and sources from post-Reformation Stühlingen and upper Swabia, one significant difference, with dozens of implications, will be addressed. It shall be found that the Reformation invigorated the peasants with a new sense of moral focus, allowing their rebellion to address issues beyond the realm of economics. Likewise, the sense of moral focus held by the peasants resulted in a refutation of clerical bargaining attempts – something that 20 years prior was still widely accepted as being permissible.

Literature Review

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Holy Roman Empire was on the verge of hemorrhaging. Because of the famine, drought, and pestilence brought about by the little Ice Age, peasants had gained unprecedented amounts of economic power.¹ In the late 15th century, nobles levied heavier taxes, and in parts of Europe, re-established Roman Common Law, which allowed for the presence of serfdom and replaced the feudal tendency toward tenancy.² The prosperity and comfort shared by the 1st and 3rd estates during the 14th and 15th centuries was replaced with tension and social dissonance.

This dissonance led to what can be described as continuous discourse between the third and first estates. There was continuous bargaining for rights and liberties on the part of the peasant class.³ If the Reformation did affect the peasants' motives for bargaining, then, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that the documents of bargain would reflect such affectation. However, some historians have, in recent years, called into question whether the Reformation affected the process of bargaining at all.

In his 2001 article for *Past & Present*, Govind P. Sreenivasan argues that the primary influence for the Peasants' War in Upper Swabia in the 1520s was not a sense of revitalized morality brought about by the Reformation.⁴ Instead, he argues that the Articles of 1525 merely

¹ Norman Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages: A Completely Revised and Expanded Edition of Medieval History, the Life and Death of a Civilization* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993): 480.

² Michael G. Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2012): 4–5.

³ Thomas F. Sea, "The Swabian League and Peasant Disobedience before the German Peasants' War of 1525," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 1 (1999): 89–111.

⁴ Govind P. Sreenivasan, "The Social Origins of the Peasants' War of 1525 in Upper Swabia," *Past & Present*, no. 171 (2001): 33–34.

reflected the bargaining for economic liberties that took place between the peasant class and the nobility.⁵ Likewise, he argues that the Peasants' War only occurred because of a lapse in the control of the rural oligarchy – the facilitators of bargaining.⁶

Prior to this economically focused reading of the events, Henry Cohn argued in a 1979 article for *Past & Present* that Luther's teachings built upon the calls for anticlericalism in the 15th century and acted as a definitive point of change for peasants who had grown weary of the abuses of both religious and secular authorities' abuses.⁷ Luther's words acted as inspiration for those who hungered for change. In this way, the impetus to carry out a restructuring of society was present before the Reformation, but was exacerbated by it, resulting in a revolution. Thus, the view has been promulgated that the Reformation did affect the peasants' mentalities when it came to bargaining for liberties.

In his 1987 article for *Social History*, Adolf Laube builds upon Henry Cohn's "Anticlericalism in the German Peasants' War 1525" to argue that the Reformation was indeed an era of social reform.⁸ He, too, argues that while sentiments of anticlericalism had been present since the mid-15th century, the Reformation, which juxtaposed itself against the abuses felt by those who bore the economic brunt of the consequences of the crisis of the late Middle Ages.⁹

⁵ Sreenivasan, "The Social Origins of the Peasants' War of 1525 in Upper Swabia," 33–34.

⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

⁷ Henry J. Cohn, "Anticlericalism in the German Peasants' War 1525," *Past & Present*, no. 83 (1979): 1–3.

⁸ Adolf Laube, "Social Arguments in Early Reformation Pamphlets, and Their Significance for the German Peasants' War," *Social History* 12, no. 3 (1987): 362.

⁹ Laube, "Social Arguments in Early Reformation Pamphlets, and Their Significance for the German Peasants' War," 362.

Thomas F. Sea, much like Sreenivasan, takes a more skeptic view towards the influence of the Reformation. In a 1999 article for *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, he argued that the peasants' appeals to nobles (particularly the Swabian league – a conglomerate of middle-management types loyal to the German Princes who often bargained with peasants to ensure that social order was maintained) were not a new phenomenon in the slightest.¹⁰ He argues that for the most part, they followed the same pattern of plights as those that came before them in the second half of the 15th century.¹¹ Thus, the article argues that peasants' plights did not reflect a monumental change brought about by the advent of the Reformation.

If the plights of peasants in upper Swabia were essentially the same in 1524 as those made known in the late 15th century, why then did the situation in 1524 end in such novel catastrophe? Might there be factors – such as the Reformation – that contributed to the resolution between peasants and Princes taking on a bloodier character in 1525? Might the plights themselves give insight into the ways in which priorities might have been affected by the Reformation?

Pre-Reformation Peasant Plights

In the plights of peasants from pre-Reformation times, emphasis is often given to economic issues needing to be resolved. Indeed, in “The Articles of the Bundschuh in the Bishopric of Speyer” from 1502, calls are made for reductions on governmental limitations on

¹⁰ Sea, “The Swabian League and Peasant Disobedience before the German Peasants’ War of 1525,” 89–93.

¹¹ Ibid, 89–90.

such things as hunting and fishing.¹² It is stated that “They [the peasants] demanded that hunting, fishing, grazing, lumbering, and every other thing that had become a princely prerogative be returned to the public.”¹³ Likewise, the articles of the Bundschuh called for a reduction of fees levied by the government as well: “They would no longer pay interest, remit tithes or taxes, nor pay tolls or dues of any kind.”¹⁴ These calls for economic reform, seem to be quite common as, in 1514, we see that similar calls for reform were presented to Ulrich, Duke of Württemberg.¹⁵ Concerning the issue of hunting animals responsible for the destruction of crops, the peasants wrote, “Our gracious lord ought furthermore to make a law concerning wild game on our properties, especially for the summer months from Easter to autumn, when the poor man’s fields and products are commonly destroyed by game and no remission is allowed him in the payment of rent and dues.”¹⁶ Likewise, they sought many reforms to the laws authorizing foresters to seize public lands for themselves, to monopolize the sale of brushwood, to let pigs run rampant and eat crops of acorns, and to hunt game for their own benefit without consequence.¹⁷ Clearly, economic reform is something that was evident within the plights of peasants before the Reformation.

¹² “The Articles of the Bundschuh in the Bishopric of Speyer,” In *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2012): 38.

¹³ “The Articles of the Bundschuh in the Bishopric of Speyer,” 38.

¹⁴ Ibid, 38.

¹⁵ Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War: A Brief History with Documents*, 40.

¹⁶ “The “Poor Conrad” Movement in Württemberg,” In *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2012): 42.

¹⁷ “The “Poor Conrad” Movement in Württemberg,” 42–43.

The plights were more than just calls for economic reform, however. Within “The Articles of the Bundschuh” it is stated that there is a desire to humiliate the servants of the Church and reduce them in number by killing and driving out as many as possible.”¹⁸ Additionally, “they had decided among themselves to take by force of arms all the freedoms they desired and would henceforth refuse to tolerate any man’s dominion over them.”¹⁹ Finally, the peasants of Speyer resolved that, “it was their intention to annihilate all authority and government.”²⁰ Obviously, there was a very anti-authority – both secular and religious authority – bent to the peasants motives. However, it is not obvious that their hate of the clergy was prompted by anything but clerical attitudes and abuses of tithes. While such things would be addressed to a fuller extent by the likes of Martin Luther, they were at play during 1502.

The peasants did, however, have a sense that they were enacting a sort of a moral justice through their usurpation of the traditional power structures. Indeed, they are quoted as saying, “Whoever undertook to resist them would be killed mercilessly as a disobedient and seditious enemy of divine justice.”²¹ While this sentiment will be reflected in the rebellions of 1525, very little is given as justification for this claim (which may be the result of the fact that the person recording these ‘articles’ was in opposition to the rebellion).²²

¹⁸ “The Articles of the Bundschuh in the Bishopric of Speyer,” 37.

¹⁹ Ibid, 38.

²⁰ Ibid, 37.

²¹ Ibid, 38.

²² Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War: A Brief History with Documents*, 36–38.

Within “The “Poor Conrad” Movement in Württemberg,” a similar anti-authoritarian bent is also detectable, though, to a lesser extent than in “The Articles of the Bundschuh.” The peasants of Württemberg are much keener on striking deals with authority figures than eradicating all government. Indeed, the peasants state,

We ask that the councilors and secretaries of the chancellery [of the duchy of Württemberg] be chosen from among honest, pious, knowledgeable, and competent persons who must not be related to one by blood or friendship (as has been the custom in the past and still is at present). They should be concerned only with advancing the honor of God and the common interest of our gracious sovereigns and their country rather than with seeking their own advantage, as they have been doing in the past by means of the imposition of new taxes and burdens profitable to themselves but painful to the country...²³

Such a statement infers that the peasants were concerned with the good of the whole. The peasants were not entirely opposed to authority but would challenge their superiors when they became corrupt. These two sources, then, respectively provide a good view of proto-magisterial rebellion.

Plights from 1525

Two of the most important documents within the Peasants’ War are indubitably the “Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen” and “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants.” An examination of any differences between these sources and the sources analyzed in the previous section should provide an indication as to whether the Reformation affected the peasants’ mentality in 1525.

In the “Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen” – grievances submitted by peasants to Lords of the Black Forest Territory in June of 1525 – many of the interpretable motives for

²³ “The “Poor Conrad” Movement in Württemberg,” 41.

rebellion remain the same as those that existed prior to the Reformation.²⁴ If one looks at articles 14-16, they will find that the same economic issues present in 1502 and 1514 are still prevalent in 1525. In article 14, the peasants lament about their own restriction from using woodlands.²⁵ In article 15, the peasants address the nobility's disregard for their crops, asking that vassals not ride through fields or destroy whatever they please whilst hunting.²⁶ This echoes earlier sentiments found in article 28 within "The "Poor Conrad" Movement in Württemberg" that call for fields to be left alone by the nobility.²⁷ Likewise, in the "Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen," the peasants seek reform for the nobility's seizure of waters from public lands.²⁸

In article 59, however, the peasants of Stühlingen call for the abolition of serfdom.²⁹ While this is more extreme than the calls of the Peasants in Württemberg and less extreme than those of the Bundschuh, it is not accompanied by any sort of Reformation-inspired justification. Indeed, the justification given is that, "We [the peasants] are by right born free and it is no fault of ours or of our forefathers that we have been subjected to serfdom."³⁰ It is plain, though, that the discontent shared with the previous generation for the current abuses of government was unchanged.

²⁴ Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents*, 75.

²⁵ "Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen," In *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2012): 76.

²⁶ "Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen," 76.

²⁷ "The "Poor Conrad" Movement in Württemberg," 42.

²⁸ "Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen," 76.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 76.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 76.

There are other similarities, as well, as the peasants of Stühlingen did not wish to cast off all taxes and dues but do seek to know the origin of those to which they had been subjected.³¹ This is in line more with the plights of the “Poor Conrad” movement than with those of the Bundschuh. Thus, if one were to simply take into account the “Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen,” and juxtapose them with the plights of pre-reformation peasants in the Holy Roman Empire, it would be quite difficult to find a difference that resulted from the Reformation.

To use only this source as evidence when examining the peasants’ plights in 1525 would be foolhardy, however, as many more exist. Chief among these *others* is “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants.” In the Spring of 1525, peasants from Baltringen, the Lake of Constance, and the Allgäu banded together and formed a parliament tasked with addressing the abuses they suffered at the hands of their superiors.³² The grievances they compiled were edited by Sebastian Lotzer, a lay preacher, and Christoph Schappeler, an evangelical preacher from Memmingen.³³ In “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” it is disclosed that rebellion and warmongering are not the goal of the peasants. Indeed, the introduction states, “the gospel is not a cause of rebellions or insurrections, because it speaks of Christ the promised Messiah, whose words and life teach nothing but love, peace, patience, and unity so that all who believe in Christ become loving, peaceful, patient, and united.”³⁴ Obviously, this call for pious peace is quite different from the call of the Bundschuh to “annihilate all authority and

³¹ “Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen,” 76.

³² Sebastian Lotzer and Christoph Schappeler, “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” In *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2012): 77.

³³ Lotzer and Schappeler, “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” 77.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

government.”³⁵ Likewise, the peasants offer up justification with biblical basis for their actions – something that was neither present in the plight of the Bundschuh or the plight of the “Poor Conrad” movement. In the introduction, the peasants state that they are not seditious at all but are merely seeking justice by trying to change corrupt laws which violate the divine laws set down in Scripture.³⁶ Such a measured defence of their articles, informed by Biblical teachings, was very different from the plights that preceded the Reformation.

The articles address many topics that had at that point not been the concern of social movements. In the first article, the peasants call for the liberty to appoint and remove their own pastors – a plight that is distinctly post-Reformation.³⁷ In the second article, the peasants state that tithes must be given back in ways that benefit the community, and that no pastor should use tithes to increase his own personal wealth.³⁸ Article three addresses the issue of Serfdom. The Peasants state that because each man was freed from the bonds of sin by the sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth, all men are free, and serfdom should be abolished.³⁹ Here it is evident that the Peasants of Upper Swabia shared some of the same goals as those from pre-Reformation times but that they were far more concerned with living in accordance with the scriptures. Seeking out social

³⁵ “The Articles of the Bundschuh in the Bishopric of Speyer,” 37.

³⁶ Lotzer and Schappeler, “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” 77.

³⁷ Ibid, 78.

³⁸ Ibid, 79.

³⁹ Ibid, 80.

reform inspired by, or otherwise justified by Scripture alone was a uniquely Protestant phenomenon and was no doubt inspired by the teachings of Martin Luther.⁴⁰

Conclusions

Through the examination of sources from both pre- and post-Reformation peasant revolutions, it is clear that, while the ideas promulgated by Reformers may not have affected all peasants who sought to bargain with their lords for more liberties in the Holy Roman Empire, they certainly affected some communities. Especially in Upper Swabia, the Reformation inspired peasants to argue for the right to appoint and depose their own pastors, to be freed of serfdom (because all men were free and equal in relation to Christ), and to be the beneficiaries of their own tithes, among other things. All of this, they justified with Scripture. When, before the Reformation, justification for social reforms did not often involve Scripture, it becomes clear that the peasants were indeed inspired by the teachings of people like Martin Luther, adopted a more focused view of Scriptural morality, and used that morality as a justification for their rebellion against the nobility.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," In *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2012): 53.

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