

## Primary Source 7.5

**LUTHER'S REACTIONS TO PEASANT REBELLIONS (1525)<sup>1</sup>**

*Martin Luther (1483–1546) was the Catholic priest, monk, theologian, and reformer who shattered the unity of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century by launching the Protestant Reformation. Luther's teachings on the "priesthood of all believers" and worthiness of all trades and professions inspired millions of ordinary people to question the rigid social hierarchies of the time. Movements aimed at devolving authority—both political and ecclesiastical—to the local level emerged and swelled over the next several years. In 1524, massive peasant rebellions in the German lands broke out in opposition to high taxes and oppression and raged into 1525. There is still debate over the causes of the rebellion, but most scholars believe that economic, religious, and social aspects all culminated to spark a revolt against authority in general. The rebellion quickly shifted from a call for reform to an all-out attack on serfdom. The rebels' demands were put forward in the Twelve Articles (see Primary Source 7.5 - [The Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants](#)). Luther was at first sympathetic to the peasants' cause, and he castigated their lords as tyrannical. Yet in the first of the following passages he cast both sides as non-Christians who would be damned to hell if they continued fighting. Contrary to Luther's calls for peaceful negotiations to end the war, however, the second passage depicts how the peasants' uprising turned violent and was brutally put down by German aristocrats. As the rebellion escalated to violence, Luther took a harsher stance on the peasants, whom he now condemned as robbers and rebels to be killed on sight, as illuminated by the third passage.*

*For the text online, click [here](#).*

**Luther's Initial Reaction (May 1525)**

*There should be no serfs, because Christ has freed us all!<sup>2</sup> What is that we hear? That is to make Christian freedom wholly bodily. Did not Abraham and the other patriarchs and prophets have serfs? Read what St. Paul says of servants, who in all times have been serfs. So this article is straight against the gospel, and moreover it is robbery, since each man would take his person from his lord to whom it belongs. A serf can be a good Christian and enjoy Christian liberty, just as a prisoner or a sick man may be a Christian although he is not free. This article would make all men equal and convert the spiritual kingdom of Christ into an external worldly one; but that is impossible, for a worldly realm cannot stand where there is no inequality; some must be free, others bond; some rulers, others subjects. . . .<sup>3</sup>*

*My counsel would be that a few counts and lords should be chosen from the*

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<sup>1</sup> James Harvey Robinson (ed.), *Reading in European History*, 2 vols. (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 2:99–108.

<sup>2</sup> A reference to the demands of the peasants.

<sup>3</sup> Ellipses in the original.

nobles, and from the towns a few councilors, who should settle the matter peacefully. You lords should unbend your stiff minds a bit,—for you will have to do that sooner or later whether you will or no,—and give up a little of your oppression and tyranny, so that the poor man can have a little space and air. On the other hand, the peasants will have to let a few of their articles go, which are screwed up too high. In this way the matter, even if it cannot be treated in a Christian spirit, can at least be adjusted according to human laws and agreements.

If you will not follow this advice, which God would approve, I must leave you to yourselves. But I am guiltless of your souls, your blood, and your goods. I have told you that you are both wrong and are fighting for the wrong. You nobles are not fighting against Christians, for Christians would not oppose you, but would suffer all. You are fighting against robbers and blasphemers<sup>4</sup> of Christ's name; those that die among them shall be eternally damned. But neither are the peasants fighting Christians, but tyrants, enemies of God, and persecutors of men, murderers of the Holy Ghost. Those of them who die shall also be eternally damned. And this is God's certain judgment on you both—that I know. Do now what you will so long as you care not to save either your bodies or souls.

#### **Account of Michael Eisenhart<sup>5</sup> on the Conduct of the Peasantry during the Spring of 1525.**

Through the preachers here in Rothenburg,—namely, Caspar Cristian, a priest, and Brother Melchoir, who married the blind monk's sister and held the wedding in Schwarzman's house,—also especially through the efforts of Hans Rotfuchs, the blind monk himself, and another fellow who gave himself out for a peasant, and through certain citizens here in Rothenburg who adhere to the heresy of Luther and Carlstadt, it has come about that bad, false teaching has greatly got the upper hand, owing also to the dissimulation and concessions of some of the town authorities. Dr. Andreas Carlstadt<sup>6</sup> has appeared in person, preached here, and asked to be received as a burgher.

On March 21, a Tuesday, thirty or forty peasants got together in a mob in Rothenburg, bought a kettledrum, and marched about the town, a part going to Pretheim and a part toward Orenbach. They got together again on Thursday and on Friday, as many as four hundred.

The working classes in the town now begin to revolt. They cease to obey the authorities and form a committee of thirty-six to manage affairs. Cunz Eberhardt and George Bermeter are meanwhile dispatched to learn what the peasants are doing; but the peasants will give no reply, for they say that they have not all got together yet. A letter is received from Margrave<sup>7</sup> Casimir [of Brandenburg].<sup>8</sup> This is

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<sup>4</sup> A person who speaks disrespectfully of scared things.

<sup>5</sup> A citizen of Rothenburg on the Tauber, a river in Franconia, Germany.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541) was a German Christian theologian, radical reformer, and close associate of Luther.

<sup>7</sup> A title of nobility equivalent to marquis, originally a military commander assigned to defend a borderland.

<sup>8</sup> Casimir of Brandenburg-Bayreuth (1481–1527), son of Frederick I.

read to the community. He offers to aid the town authorities and if necessary come in person to reestablish peace and harmony. The community and their committee of thirty-six treat this scornfully and do not accept the offer.

*March 24.* This evening between five and six o'clock some one knocked off the head of Christ's image on a crucifix and struck off the arms.

*March 25.* The town councils are in great danger and anxiety, for they are oppressed by the community and its committee of thirty-six.

*March 27.* The councilors are forced to pledge their obedience to the community, for they are taken out one by one, guarded by members of the committee of thirty-six. Each thought he was going to be killed, but after taking the pledge he was secretly sent home without his companions' knowledge.

*March 26.* Chrischainz, the baker, knocked the missal out of the priest's hand in the chapel of our Lady and drove away the priest from mass. Today the peasants let themselves be seen in the field outside the Galgenthor.

The following Monday, while the priest was performing service in the parish church and chanting "Adjuva nos, deus salutaris noster,"<sup>9</sup> Ernfried Kumpf addressed him rudely, saying that if he wished to save himself he would better leave the altar. Kumpf then knocked the missal on to the floor and drove the scholars out of the choir.

On Tuesday eight hundred peasants came together. Those who would not join them willingly they forced to do so or took their property, as happened to a peasant at Wettring.

On Friday the peasants all gathered, as many as two thousand strong, and camped near Neusitz. Lorenz Knobloch went out to them, and they promised to make him a captain. The same day some of the peasants were sent into the town to give a report of their demands and plans. Meanwhile representatives of the emperor and of the Swabian League<sup>10</sup> arrive with a hope of making peace, but they ride away without accomplishing anything, as did those from Nuremberg.

On this same day all the artisans were to lay all their complaints and demands before a committee. The taxes, wages, and methods of weighing were discussed. The peasants encamped near Santhof. Friday, April 7, Kueplein, during the sermon, threw the lighted oil lamps about the church. Some of the peasants came into Rothenburg and the neighboring towns, everywhere plundering cupboards and cellars.

On Good Friday all services were suspended in the churches of Rothenburg, for there was neither chanting nor preaching except that Dr. John Teuschel preached against emperor, kings, princes, and lords, ecclesiastical and lay, with foul abuse and slander, on the ground that they were hindering God's word.

On Saturday the blind monk, Hans Rotfuchs, spoke contemptuously of the holy sacrament, calling it idolatry and heresy.

On holy Easter there was neither singing nor preaching. Monday Dr. Andreas Carlstadt again attacked the holy sacrament with abusive words. In the night some

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<sup>9</sup> Latin for "Help us, Oh God our Savior."

<sup>10</sup> A defense association for the maintenance of peace controlled by the Imperial Estate assembly of the Holy Roman Empire.

millers attacked the church at Cobenzell and threw the pictures and images into the Tauber.

*April 18.* The reforms of the committee are proclaimed. The younger priests may, and should, marry, and may enjoy their benefices for three years. The old priests shall have theirs for life. There is a struggle between Kueplein and his followers, on the one hand, who want to destroy a picture of the Virgin, and the pious old Christians, on the other, who wish to protect it. Some knives are drawn.

*April 19.* The peasants take three casks of wine from the priest at Scheckenpach and drink it up.

*April 20.* The women here in Rothenburg take eleven measures of grain from the house of Conrad Volemar. George Bermeter [one of the revolutionists] is chosen burgomaster.<sup>11</sup>

On the same day, Thursday after Easter, the women run up and down Hafengasse with forks and sticks, declaring that they will plunder all the priests' houses, but are prevented.

*Friday.* All priests are forced to become citizens, otherwise they would have lost all their goods. They are to take their share of guard duty and work on the fortifications.

On Wednesday (April 26) Lorenz Knobloch was hewn to pieces by the peasants at Ostheim, and then they pelted one another with the fragments. They said he was a traitor and that he wanted to mislead them. Divine retribution! He had said he would not die until he had killed three priests, but, thank God, not one fell into his hands.

*April 30.* The monastery of Anhausen was plundered and burned in the night, also that near Dinkelsbühl. The peasants also attacked the monastery of Schwarzach, and the castle of Reichelsberg was burned.

*May 6.* Early in the morning the great bell rang three times, summoning the people to hear a message from Margrave Casimir, brought by three noblemen, and inviting all to take refuge in Rothenburg under his protection. The greater part refused, and some were noted by the margrave's representative, and afterward lost their heads.

*Monday.* The peasants approach Neuhaus, and next day plunder and burn.

In Rothenburg the citizens are summoned to decide whether, like the neighboring towns of Heilbronn, Dinkelsbühl, and Wimfen, they will aid the peasants. The majority decide to send them guns and pikes, powder and lead.

*May 12.* The clergy forced to take arms like the rest. All monks are compelled to lay aside their cowls<sup>12</sup> and the nuns their veils.

*May 15.* The bell summoned the community. In spite of the protests of the old Christians, they are forced to obey the majority, and Rothenburg that day fell away from the empire and joined the peasants. In the meantime a gallows was erected in the market place as a warning, according to their ideas of brotherhood. Supplies were sent to the camp.

*May 15.* The peasants attack the castle of Würzburg and scale the walls, but

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<sup>11</sup> Master of the town.

<sup>12</sup> A hood or hooded robe worn by monks.

are all killed. The peasants attempt to get possession of Rothenburg by conspiracy, but are ejected without bloodshed.

*May 21.* Certain Hohenlohe peasants burn their lord's castle.

On the next Monday Margrave Casimir proceeds with his forces to subdue and punish the peasants. Hans Krelein the older, priest at Wernitz, was beheaded, with four peasants, at Leutershausen. Seven have their ringers cut off. Likewise at Neuenstat eighteen burghers and peasants are beheaded. At Kitzingen fifty-eight have their eyes put out and are forbidden to enter the town again.

On Friday before Whitsuntide the forces of the Swabian League slay four thousand peasants at Konigshofen.

On Monday after Whitsunday eight thousand peasants are slaughtered by the troops of the League near Biittart and Sulzdorf. In all these battles the League lost not over one hundred and fifty men.

On June 6 messengers are sent from Rothenburg to Casimir to ask for pardon. Next day others are sent to the League, but they are told that they must surrender unconditionally.

On Thursday following, after the League had retaken the town of Wurzburg, they beheaded sixty-two.

After the League had attacked Bamberg they beheaded twenty-one.

On Friday after Corpus Christi,<sup>13</sup> mass was once more chanted in Rothenburg, as formerly.

*June 17.* Vespers, complines, and matins<sup>14</sup> are once more sung.

On June 23 Dr. John Teuschel and the blind monk Hans are taken and shut up, but several others, including Dr. Andreas Carlstadt, who had done most to stir up trouble, secretly escape.

On the eve of Peter and Paul's day Margrave Casimir rides into Rothenburg with four hundred horsemen, a thousand footmen, and two hundred Wagons full of arms and equipments.

Next day four hundred foot soldiers belonging to the margrave and the League divide into two parts. One went to the village of Orenbach, which they plundered, and burned the church to the ground. The other went to Pretheim, a fine village. This they plundered, killing a number of people, including the innkeeper, behind a table. They burned the village, including the church, and carried off six hundred head of cattle and thirty carts full of plunder.

*June 30.* The citizens of Rothenburg are summoned to the market place by a herald and surrounded by pikemen. They are accused of deserting the empire and joining the peasants, and are threatened with the vengeance they deserve.

The names of a number of citizens are read off, and they are beheaded on the spot. Their bodies are left on the market place all day. Some got away through the ring of soldiers: Lorenz Diem, the sexton,<sup>15</sup> Joseph Schad, a tanner, Fritz Dalck, a butcher, and others, but were nevertheless executed.

*July 1.* Fifteen more are beheaded in the market place, including the blind

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<sup>13</sup> Meaning the body of Christ and referring to a feast celebrated 60 days after Easter.

<sup>14</sup> Three of the prayer times in the canonical hours of the church.

<sup>15</sup> An officer in a church charged with maintaining the church buildings and its property.

monk. All the bodies are left on the market place all day, then buried. All of these died without confession or the last sacrament, and did not even ask for it.

### **Luther's Final Denunciation of the Peasants' Rebellion**

In my preceding pamphlet [on the "Twelve Articles"] I had no occasion to condemn the peasants, because they promised to yield to law and better instruction, as Christ also demands (Matt. vii. 1). But before I can turn around, they go out and appeal to force, in spite of their promises, and rob and pillage and act like mad dogs. From this it is quite apparent what they had in their false minds, and that what they put forth under the name of the gospel in the "Twelve Articles" was all vain pretense. In short, they practice mere devil's work, and it is the arch-devil himself<sup>16</sup> who reigns at Mühlhausen, indulging in nothing but robbery, murder, and bloodshed; as Christ says of the devil in John viii. 44, "he was a murderer from the beginning." Since, therefore, those peasants and miserable wretches allow themselves to be led astray and act differently from what they declared, I likewise must write differently concerning them; and first bring their sins before their eyes, as God commands (Isa. lviii. 1; Ezek. ii. 7), whether perchance some of them may come to their senses; and, further, I would instruct those in authority how to conduct themselves in this matter.

With threefold horrible sins against God and men have these peasants loaded themselves, for which they have deserved a manifold death of body and soul.

**First**, they have sworn to their true and gracious rulers to be submissive and obedient, in accord with God's command (Matt. xxii. 21), "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's," and (Rom. xiii. 1), "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers." But since they have deliberately and sacrilegiously abandoned their obedience, and in addition have dared to oppose their lords, they have thereby forfeited body and soul, as perfidious, perjured, lying, disobedient wretches and scoundrels are wont to do. Wherefore St. Paul judges them, saying (Rom. xiii. 2), "And they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." The peasants will incur this sentence, sooner or later; for God wills that fidelity and allegiance shall be sacredly kept.

**Second**, they cause uproar and sacrilegiously rob and pillage monasteries and castles that do not belong to them, cannot be for which, like public highwaymen and murderers, they deserve the twofold death of body and soul. It is right and lawful to slay at the first opportunity a rebellious person, who is known as such, for he is already under God's and the emperor's ban. Every man is at once judge and executioner of a public rebel; just as, when a fire starts, he who can extinguish it first is the best fellow. Rebellion is not simply vile murder, but is like a great fire that kindles and devastates a country; it fills the land with murder and bloodshed, makes widows and orphans, and destroys everything, like the greatest calamity. Therefore, whosoever can, should smite, strangle, and stab, secretly or publicly, and should

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Müntzer (ca. 1488–1525) was a radical Anabaptist theologian and one of the leaders of the peasant rebellions.

remember that there is nothing more poisonous, pernicious, and devilish than a rebellious man. Just as one must slay a mad dog, so, if you do not fight the rebels, they will fight you, and the whole country with you.

**Third**, they cloak their frightful and revolting sins with the gospel, call themselves Christian brethren, swear allegiance, and compel people to join them in such abominations. Thereby they become the greatest blasphemers and violators of God's holy name, and serve and honor the devil under the semblance of the gospel, so that they have ten times deserved death of body and soul, for never have I heard of uglier sins. And I believe also that the devil foresees the judgment day, that he undertakes such an unheard-of measure; as if he said, "It is the last and therefore it shall be the worst; I'll stir up the dregs and knock the very bottom out." May the Lord restrain him! Lo, how mighty a prince is the devil, how he holds the world in his hands and can put it to confusion: who else could so soon capture so many thousands of peasants, lead them astray, blind and deceive them, stir them to revolt, and make them the willing executioners of his malice. . . .<sup>17</sup>

And should the peasants prevail (which God forbid!),—for all things are possible to God, and we know not but that he is preparing for the judgment day, which cannot be far distant, and may purpose to destroy, by means of the devil, all order and authority and throw the world into wild chaos,—yet surely they who are found, sword in hand, shall perish in the wreck with clear consciences, leaving to the devil the kingdom of this world and receiving instead the eternal kingdom. For we are come upon such strange times that a prince may more easily win heaven by the shedding of blood than others by prayers.

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<sup>17</sup> Ellipses in the source.