

The Goals and Motivations of the Peasants in the German
Peasants' War

By: Donovan Mefford

The German Peasant's War was a conflict that took place in Germany during the early years of the Reformation, and it lasted from 1524 to 1526. Likely emboldened by the Reformations' challenges to both religious and secular authorities, peasants organized in various regions of Germany and delivered demands for economic, societal, and religious reforms to their lords. After delays and refusals from the nobility, the peasants took up arms against their lords, but the huge revolt was ultimately crushed. A concept discussed by Martin Luther and his contemporaries was the idea of Christian freedom. To the German peasants, Christian freedom meant that as believers all Christians are essentially equal and should deal with each other in a proper manner, their idea of which can be gathered from primary sources. The German Peasants' War has been the source of much controversy among scholars, especially regarding the motivations and goals of the revolution. Some Marxist and socialist historians see it as an early bourgeois revolution, while others have seen it as an early attempt to move towards a parliamentary democracy¹. Thankfully, we can hear the voices of the peasants through the many documents from the period, such as the Twelve Articles of the Peasants and commentaries from contemporary writers, which can help us to draw conclusions about the motivations and goals of the myriad participants in the War. Those documents point towards the conclusion that the German Peasant's War was fundamentally about securing the rights and freedoms of individuals and communities, and we can know this because of the grievances listed by the rebels, the wide range of social standing among participants and the propositions for political reforms that would prevent oppression.

There are no lack of sources documenting the grievances that the peasants had with their various masters, both the secular and ecclesiastical. The Articles written by the peasants of Stühlingen, the area where the German Peasants' War first broke out, contains 62 complaints which were meant to be used in a lawsuit against their lord. These complaints are largely about the rights of peasants and serfs and actions taken by their lord against his subjects. The first demand in the article says that no one who has a fixed place of residence should be imprisoned in civil cases. They also claim that the lord should not be allowed to prohibit his subjects from marrying people who are not his subjects. The complaints go on to include issues concerning military service, commonly held land, inheritance, judicial reform, etc.² In other words, "Were not the peasants... trying rather to protect what they already held – their farms, their rights of common, their livelihood, their inheritance – from encroachments both judicial and fiscal by their lords?"³ Another document records peasants lodging complaints against their prince-abbot who was infamous for coercing people into serfdom, and who restricted free movement and marriage. The prince-abbot's responses deny outright many of the peasants' claims to certain rights and customs.⁴ Furthermore, within a decade of the German Peasants' War, a Catholic chronicler stated that, "It can be concealed from no one that the origin of the peasant

¹ Tom Scott and Bob Scribner, eds. And trans., *The German Peasants' War: A History In Documents* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991), 1-2.

² "Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen, before 6 April 1525," in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants' War*, 65-72.

³ Tom Scott, *The Early Reformation in Germany : Between Secular Impact and Radical Vision* (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 71.

⁴ "Grievances of the Subjects of the Abbey of Kempten," in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants' War*, 73-78.

uproar...lies with the transgressions and oppressions of the clergy and nobility who have serfs.”⁵ All of the complaints in those articles are derived from the peasants’ perception that their rights and freedoms were being stripped away, and this is freely admitted to by at least one contemporary Catholic chronicler.

Notably, the Articles from Stühlingen do not include any appeals to religion as a justification for their complaints, and they do not show much concern for the right to practice the emerging protestant religion as they please. In fact, the Reformation’s connection the German Peasants’ War seems tenuous in the cases examined so far. However, the same Catholic chronicler mentioned above does not fail to assign at least some of the blame for the conflict to Luther and Zwingli, saying that, “it was a powerful weapon in their [the rebels’] arsenal that they [the preachers] constantly declared and pretended to the common man ‘Christian freedom... the hour has come when you will be saved and rid of your burdens.’”⁶ This is an accurate interpretation of the importance of religion as a cause of the German Peasants’ War. The Reformation ideas of Luther and others served as an excuse for peasants to also move righteously against the church in addition to their secular lords.⁷ We see the peasants use appeals to religion in just this way in the Twelve Articles, the best-known record of the peasants’ complaints, when they call for the lords and clergy to review their complaints and explain that if it “be demonstrated to us to be incompatible with the Word of God, then we will abandon them.”⁸ We can see in just this one line how the Reformation served as a justification for peasants to fight for their rights and freedoms but was not itself a reason to go to war.

One might wonder whether the fact that the peasants demanded certain ecclesiastical reforms, such as in the first and second of the Twelve Articles⁹, in addition to the secular complaints, contradicts the idea that religion was only a way to justify the peasants in bringing their complaints to their lords. However, even in cases where the peasants demanded things like the right to select their own pastor it seems clear that it comes from a desire for equality and freedom from existing oppressive authorities. To understand that rebellion of the peasants was not motivated by religion, one only needs to look at the preceding century. In that century peasants frequently refused to pay tithes and rents or other services they were required to render, and, according to Thomas Sea, “They did this because they disputed their lords’ versions of their obligations.”¹⁰ These earlier acts of defiance lacked the unity of the German Peasants’ War. This was because Luther’s preaching against the organized hypocrisy of the church provided a unanimous platform for the peasants. They took the ideas of individual liberty in Christianity and

⁵ “A Catholic Commentary: from the Reformation Chronicle of Johannes Salat,” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 95.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Adolf Laube, “Social Arguments in Early Reformation Pamphlets, and Their Significance for the German Peasants’ War,” *Social History* 12, vol. 3 (1987): 362.

⁸ “The Twelve Articles,” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 257.

⁹ “The Twelve Articles,” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 253-54.

¹⁰ Thomas F. Sea, “The Swabian League and Peasant Disobedience before the German Peasants’ War of 1525,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no 1 (1999), 91.

applied it to their social life.¹¹ We see reiterated once again evidence that the peasants wanted freedom and rights, not religious reform.

Beyond the grievances of the peasants, one can look towards the diverse cast of rebels that sided with the peasants to understand that the war was being fought for the ideal of fundamental rights and freedoms. To start, there are a plethora of social distinctions and tensions even between the various types of farmers. According to Govind Sreenivasan, “The demands of rural ‘communities’... disproportionately reflected the narrow interests of village oligarchs,”¹² who were often wealthy tenant farmers as contrasted to the worse off cottagers. Despite the power dynamic, these two groups worked together to present a united front against the lords because they both stood to gain from gaining more rights and freedom.

It was not just peasant farmers in small towns who were passionately pursuing their rights and freedoms but all those living in cities as well. There is record of cobblers, locksmiths, butchers, clerks, and smiths all taking part in the rebellion.¹³ In the city of Frankfurt, the people wrote out many articles that detailed similar desires to those of the peasants. However, in Frankfurt they also composed articles that deregulated guilds and established a common chest that could be used to help the poor in the city.¹⁴ In the articles from Erfurt, the citizens argued chiefly for reforms that would allow them to have a voice in the governance of the town. When they make requests such as, “The council shall present an account of all income and expenditure,”¹⁵ or, “All forms of commercial activity should be free to every citizen who so desires,”¹⁶ it is easy to see that all the people, not just farmers, are trying to create a more free and equitable society. Given the vast differences between urban and rural life today it is easy to assume that the situation was the same at this time in Germany. However, in the 1520s town and country were very much intertwined, and the differences between town and country were usually easily overcome by the appeal to Christian freedom.¹⁷ Now we have examples of both rich and poor in town and city working in tandem to resolve a set of grievances, which clearly demonstrates a desire for greater rights and freedom.

In many cases, local officials and mayors were on the side of the peasants, but the same could not generally be said of the nobility. However, it should be noted that many imperial cities likely only supported the rebel cause because their ruling councils saw no other option. The tensions between rich and poor in imperial cities likely would have resulted in internal revolts if they had responded violently to the peasant rebellion.¹⁸ With regard to nobles, there is one document that reports a nobleman who joined with the peasants out of an apparent commitment to their cause. He urged the rebellion to spread to the gates of every lord so that they would be

¹¹ C. W. C. Oman, “The German Peasant War of 1525,” *The English Historical Review* 5, no. 17 (1890), 67.

¹² Govind P. Sreenivasan, “The Social Origins of the Peasants’ War of 1525 in Upper Swabia,” *Past & Present*, no. 171 (2001), 33

¹³ “Report on the Offenses of Certain Refugees,” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 217-18.

¹⁴ “The Frankfurt Articles,” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 172-3.

¹⁵ “The Erfurt ‘Peasant Articles,’” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 175.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Scott, *The Early Reformation in Germany*, 102-3.

¹⁸ Thomas F. Sea, “Imperial Cities and the Peasants’ War in Germany,” *Central European History* 12, no. 1 (1979), 8.

unable to come to each other's aid.¹⁹ It stands to reason that if even one member of the demonstrably self-interested nobility²⁰ joined with the rebels out of legitimate commitment to their cause, then it must have been because they agreed with the principles of the rebels; namely that they are due certain rights and freedoms.

Perhaps the most resounding arguments in favor of the thesis that the German Peasants' War was undertaken to secure the rights and liberties of communities and individuals are the multiple proposals for governmental reforms that would safeguard those rights. There are the "Twelve Articles" which would have implicitly established the Word of God as the principle against which laws are judged permissible or not. Then there is the imperial reformation program which would have introduced many rights that we are familiar with today. There were even proposals for something resembling an egalitarian republic founded on religious principles.

The Reformation essentially established, at least for some, the Word of God as a guiding political principal, and this is seen very well in the "Twelve Articles." Despite the implication that the validity of peasant grievances can only be denied on the basis of being incompatible with the bible many scholars do not see the "Twelve Articles" as revolutionary. Instead, they claim that, "the moderation of the twelve articles appears astonishing. Except the method by which they were put forward – armed insurrection – there is nothing wild or revolutionary in them,"²¹ or that they, "had nothing to say on the social problems and the ideas of political reconstruction."²² Strictly speaking these assessments are mostly correct, but, as has been pointed out, the revolutionary part is implicit. The articles specifically claimed they did not seek to overturn the existing hierarchy, but using the Word of God as a political principle inspired many other takes on political reform, most of which have a utopian feel and communal focus.²³ By passing the law through the filter of the Word of God the peasants would have created a system that ensured that their rights which were endowed to them by their creator would not be infringed upon.

The imperial reformation program, put forward by Friedrich Weigandt, lacks the religious sentiments of many of the other proposals created by the peasants. Instead, the imperial reformation calls explicitly for a political restructuring. It would enforce the separation of church and state by forbidding any member of the clergy from participating in the secular government, such as on councils or as lawyers in court. Most relevant to the issue at hand, however, is that Weigandt prescribes that, "All secular princes, counts, lords, knights, and nobles should be reformed so that the poor man will not be so harshly oppressed by them, contrary to Christian freedom."²⁴ Weigandt also lays out plans for extensive judicial and coinage reforms, and ultimately wants the emperor to become a stronger executive. All of the reforms suggested by Weigandt have the clear purpose of safeguarding the rights and freedoms of everyone below the nobility, so much so that many of its articles are intuitively analogous to principles found in the United States Constitution which is often praised as a safeguard of our rights and freedoms.

¹⁹ "A Noble Who Joined the Peasants," in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants' War*, 206.

²⁰ "The Nobility," in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants' War*, 197-214.

²¹ Oman, "The German Peasant War of 1525," 73.

²² E. Belfort Bax, *The Peasants War in Germany: 1525-1526* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 77.

²³ "The Constitutional Draft Ascribed to Thomas Müntzer," and "A Revolutionary Tract," in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants' War*: 264-5, 269-76.

²⁴ "Draft of an Imperial Reformation," in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants' War*, 259.

There is another document that draws upon the bible for justification to be discussed. An anonymous pamphlet, “To the Assembly of Common Peasantry,” was printed in 1525 and detailed the circumstances under which it is acceptable to revolt and overthrow the secular authorities. The author emphasizes the idea that a ruler should work towards the good of the community and argues that imposing additional taxes is grounds for removal from office: “All those lords who, out of the desire of their hearts and their evil and willful heads, selfishly arrogate to themselves...taxes, customs, and excise and whatever may serve the...common territory, these are the true thieves and declared enemies of their own country.”²⁵ Essentially, he calls upon the Christians to make sure their rulers are behaving in accordance with the Word of God. And if the lords do not do this it is up to the people to present a united front and remove them from office.²⁶

The documents that have been examined here all seem to point towards the German Peasants’ War as being a sort of proto-modern revolution. One might notice that the arguments found in “To the Assembly of Common Peasantry” sounds much like a precursor to the sort of issues that led to the founding fathers drafting the Declaration of Independence. The complaints and goals of the peasants as stated in their various articles are nearly identical to many of the complaints that would be listed over 250 years later by French peasants in the “Cahiers des Doléances” on the eve of the French Revolution. In fact, guided by the idea of Christian freedom, the German peasants of the 1520’s seemed to have been pursuing an early sense of liberty, equality, and fraternity that would become a slogan of the French Revolution. I suspect that it was the failure of the German Peasants’ War to secure any of the peasants’ more significant agenda items that resulted in more than another two centuries of widespread serfdom in Western Europe. Furthermore, these documents show that the revolutionary ideals pursued in America in the 1770’s and France in the 1790’s had less to do with the ideas of the Enlightenment than they did with desires that are common to nearly everyone. In this sense the German Peasants’ war stands as a precursor to both of these much more famous revolutions in terms of cause and motivation, although not necessarily with regard to their respective end goals.

It is evident now from the examination of documents from the German Peasants’ War, that it was fundamentally about securing the rights and freedoms of individuals and communities, and we can know this because of the grievances listed by the rebels and how the Reformation ideals affected them, the wide range of social standing among participants, and the propositions for political reforms that would prevent oppression. The German peasants in 1525 had been under increasing political and economic pressure for some time, and the Reformation was simply the spark that lit the flame. The peasants showed incredible sophistication with their demands, and even more so with their ideas for new governments. The ideas they were pursuing were so popular that they were able to put aside tense class relations in order to achieve their goal. The German Peasants’ War has certainly earned a place in the history of revolutionary traditions, although not necessarily an indigenous German one as has been claimed by some.²⁷

²⁵ “To the Assembly of Common Peasantry,” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 271.

²⁶ “To the Assembly of Common Peasantry,” in Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 269-76.

²⁷ Scott and Scribner, *The German Peasants’ War*, 1.

Bibliography

- Bax, E. Belfort. *The Peasants War in Germany: 1525-1526*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1968.
- Laube, Adolf. "Social Arguments in Early Reformation Pamphlets, and Their Significance for the German Peasants' War." *Social History* 12, no. 3 (1987): 361–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4285630>.
- Oman, C. W. C. "The German Peasant War of 1525." *The English Historical Review* 5, no. 17 (1890): 65–94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/546556>.
- Scott, Tom. *The Early Reformation in Germany : Between Secular Impact and Radical Vision*. Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. Accessed December 4, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Scott, Tom and Bob Scribner, eds. and trans. *The German Peasants' War: A History in Documents*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991.
- Sea, Thomas F. "Imperial Cities and the Peasants' War in Germany." *Central European History* 12, no. 1 (1979): 3–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4545853>.
- Sea, Thomas F. "The Swabian League and Peasant Disobedience before the German Peasants' War of 1525." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 1 (1999): 89–111. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2544901>.
- Sreenivasan, Govind P. "The Social Origins of the Peasants' War of 1525 in Upper Swabia." *Past & Present*, no. 171 (2001): 30–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600813>.