

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Heaven on Earth:

Radical Theology and The German Peasants' War

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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March 2025

ABSTRACT

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Theology's influence in regards to the German Peasants' War of 1524-1525 is often encapsulated in the terms of The Protestant Reformation started by Martin Luther in 1517, but this narrow view does not adequately explain the clear differences in beliefs between Luther himself and the peasantry which he supposedly influenced. To bridge this gap, the following thesis will attempt to demonstrate that an older strain of millenarian Christianity first articulated in Bohemia and eventually imported into Germany, helped to create a popular understanding of God which would run counter to both Luther and The Church. By using primary sources from both Luther and his radical rival, Thomas Müntzer, we will show how figures active during the Peasants' War accumulated these ideas and deployed them in a new context before we examine the effect of these ideas on the peasants' themselves. These sources will demonstrate the central importance of the prior century of millenarian upheaval in shaping the terrain of The Peasants' War. Lastly we will show how the status quo after the Peasants' War was shaped as a conscious rejection of the popular millenarian movement which had briefly reared its head during the conflict. Taken altogether this will shift the theological center of the conflict from Luther to radical elements among the common people.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my partner and family for patiently enduring nine months of rants about Luther, Müntzer, and peasant rebellion.

Introduction

April 16th, 1521, a momentous day in the history of the Protestant Reformation, as Martin Luther, father of the German Reformation, answers a summons to the Imperial Diet in the town of Worms. Here he will answer for years of heresy which began four years prior when he boldly rejected the Church's doctrine of indulgences by nailing his famous *95 Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. Under the protection of his aristocratic allies, Martin Luther would rebuke the Pope's accusations of heresy and defy Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and the most powerful European monarch since Charlemagne. He would leave the Imperial city an outlaw, escaping with his life thanks to the timely intervention of his sponsor, Prince Frederick the Wise, but his defiance would set an example for all who would defy the authority of The Church.¹

This is likely a familiar story to anyone who has studied the Reformation, and it is easy to see why. Charismatic figures clashing over lofty ideals, powerful rhetoric, and a daring escape; The Diet of Worms has all the ingredients for a neat and clean historical event, one which would make official the growing schism between the reformers and the old church. Before Luther faced his sentence, he apocryphally said "Here I stand; I can do no other."² a powerful line that seems to frame the ensuing events of the Reformation as inevitable. But this is not the story of Luther's Reformation, nor is it a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, but of a radical alternative: a union of common people and apocalyptic theology; this was a revolution of the common man that both Luther and the princes, Catholic and Protestant, would fight tooth and nail (or perhaps ink and quill in Luther's case) to see destroyed.

¹ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Reformation: Europe's House Divided*; 1490 - 1700. 1. publ. London: Allen Lane, 2003.

² MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Reformation: Europe's House Divided*, 205.

To tell the story of this radical reformation, we will explore the buildup to the Peasants' War, not only through the eyes of the reformers but of the radicals and their forebears. Perhaps the most emblematic of these radical figures was the preacher Thomas Müntzer, rival to Luther and figurehead of the Peasants' War in Northern Germany. It is fitting then, that on the same day Luther arrived at the Imperial Diet, on the opposite side of Germany, Müntzer would be chased out of the small border town of Zwickau where he had been agitating on behalf of the cities' poor working class. As Luther was shepherd into the protection of his princely benefactors, Thomas Müntzer was chased into the night like a common rogue, shielded by the ultimately futile efforts of common people. Though these two men had shared similar backgrounds, it was at this moment that their paths would diverge, setting the stage for a deadly showdown between their respective bases of support.³

From 1524 to 1525, the Holy Roman Empire, a loose association of feudal territories under an increasingly weak imperial authority, was rocked by a series of overlapping peasant rebellions that sought to resolve grievances with their feudal rulers using the new language of godly law. The small folk who had instigated these rebellions had been emboldened thanks to the example resistance set by figures like Luther, whose rhetoric unwittingly strengthened a pre-existing strain of Christian apocalypticism as espoused by figures like Müntzer, further separating the peasants and their allies from the ideological control of their feudal lords and The Church as well as the reformers who sought to replace it. With the spiritual authority of the Church buckling under the twin assault of both the radicals and the reformers, it became increasingly common for lay folk to interpret God's will themselves. In their hands, ideas of God and his place in the world became a weapon against their masters, both spiritual and temporal.

³ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 87.

Imbued with a newfound will, 300,000 peasants and commoners would rise up in a violent cascade of grievance. Though their attempt to seize the kingdom of Heaven for themselves would succumb to an alliance of Protestant and Catholic princes who had set aside their spiritual differences to secure their temporal dominance, investigating the figures and movements that inspired the peasants nevertheless gives valuable insight into the role of theology as an organizing principle of revolution.

Historiography

In the 500 years since the outbreak of the peasants' war, scholars have debated its importance in terms of its relationship to German nationalism, the Reformation and class conflict, and the development of early capitalism, though much of this scholarship has only emerged in just over the last century and a half. The maxim 'history is written by the victors' is of course, an exaggeration, but it largely holds true for several centuries after the defeat of the peasants by an alliance of Catholic and Protestant princes. Much of this bias is the result of vast disparities in written works between Luther and his princely allies when contrasted with their radical rivals such as Müntzer. As historian and biographer of Thomas Müntzer, Andrew Drummond puts it:

Where there are just enough of Müntzer's letters and printed works to occupy two well-padded volumes, of Luther we have more than seventy volumes; compared with Müntzer's surviving 100-odd pieces of correspondence (and barely fifty of those were written by him), we have over 3,330 of Luther's; against eight printed works from Müntzer, there are sufficient to fill a good fifty volumes with Luther. And Luther's 'table-talks' of later years occupy another six volumes.⁴

Obviously not all of Luther's works were condemnations of Müntzer and the peasants, but the sheer volume of his work was enough to bury the voices of his rivals for hundreds of years of

⁴ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 376.

posterity. Cut down in their prime and representing segments of the population with far lower rates of literacy, it is no wonder the radicals would have to wait for history to uncover their voices. The gravitational effect of Luther's work cut both ways however, as he painted his rivals, most notably Müntzer, as archdevils, manipulating events, when in reality, much like Luther himself, these radicals were forced to adapt to the shifting, and at times contradictory, demands of the people they were attempting to lead.

It would be centuries before the Peasants' War would be thoroughly reexamined by historians who would attempt to frame them in a more favorable light. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, these German historians were experiencing their own moment of revolution, writing in the wake of the Revolution of 1848. Foremost among this new group of scholars was Friedrich Engels of *Communist Manifesto* fame, whose analysis was clearly colored through the circumstances of his own moment writing on the first page of his *Peasant War in Germany* that “Those classes and fractions of classes which everywhere betrayed 1848 and 1849, can be found in the role of traitors as early as 1525, though on a lower level of development.”⁵ additionally, these historians drawing from sources like Luther, tended to exaggerate the importance of radicals like Müntzer as a catalyst for the revolt or romanticize his theology in terms of their own moment, painting the firebrand preacher as a proto-communist, or even more preposterously, an atheist, leading a class war. While some parallels exist, this line of thinking has the unfortunate effect of underplaying the importance of religion, as well as somewhat haphazardly applying concepts of class developed in the 19th century to an oftentimes inappropriate 16th-century context. Historian Andrew Drummond does well to highlight just how much can be missed when disregarding religion:

⁵ Engels, Friedrich. *The Peasant War in Germany*. 3rd ed. New York: International Publishers, 2000, 22.

Let us be quite clear... it is impossible to understand the motivations of anyone in sixteenth-century Europe without acknowledging that their underlying worldview was anchored by a belief in a high divine authority, personified by the Christian God. This God ruled the fate of individuals and the world in general. God ordained military victories and defeats, natural and unnatural disasters, drought, starvation, and times of plenty. God established civil authority and justice. A belief in the divinity underpinned every philosophy and every justification, from civic by-laws to an Apocalyptic call to arms. To imagine otherwise is to do the sixteenth century a gross injustice and to completely misunderstand our ancestors.⁶

Nevertheless, while this era of scholarship has long since become outdated, like Luther, Engels and his contemporaries' analysis has loomed large in the minds of historians, as it is rare to find even modern works that do not attempt to answer or refute the questions and conclusions of these figures.

Foundational to contemporary scholarship on the Peasants' War is Peter Blickle's 'Revolution of 1525' which helps to establish the contours of the social basis of the Revolution, fleshing out the various pressures faced by the German *Gemeinde*, or peasant community, in what he deems a 'crisis of feudalism.' Blickle's work emphasizes the increasing pressures of expanding territorial states imposed on the German peasantry.⁷ He argues, as the princes slowly accumulated power, the peasantry found themselves in debt to both their local feudal lords and the princes, as the overarching authority of the empire crumbled, the peasantry became increasingly unable to intercede on their behalf. Some recent scholarship has taken aim at some of the broader claims made by Blickle regarding the social structures of the peasant villages. A 2001 article by Govind P. Sreenivasan contends that intra-village conflict between comparatively wealthy landowning *bauern* peasants and impoverished *seldner* peasants was a far more

⁶ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 15.

⁷ Blickle, Peter. *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective*. Translated by Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H.C. Eric Midelfort. A Johns Hopkins Paperback History. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr, 1985.

prescient issue to many village communities as opposed to the slow encroachment of the territorial states.⁸ Given the scale of the Peasants' War, neither Blickle's nor Sreenivasan's claims are likely to be conclusively proven, a reality that may point toward the need to pivot away from a monolithic view of the conflict in favor of viewing the theaters of the uprising individually. Such an approach would of course be complicated by the rhetoric of the Reformation, which could unite groups across regional and even class lines, though as we will see, the bonds formed through belief could be as fickle in one instance as they were firm in another.

Additionally, due to a scarcity of sources and research, the role of women in the uprisings is almost completely invisible. In all my research, the number of female figures I encountered could be counted on a single hand and the combined accounts perspectives would likely account for twice that many pages. Though perhaps 100,000 peasant men were cut down during the conflict, their losses are usually framed in simple economic terms rather than social impacts felt by the families they left behind, therefore, until this gap is filled, the historiography of the Peasants' War will remain sorely lacking key insights.

Methodology and Sources

This paper won't seek to rewrite the history of the Peasants' War into a series of smaller conflicts, and the dearth of sources prevents the incorporation of women's perspectives, but our overarching narratives of Luther's Reformation and Müntzer's radical opposition are served adequately by existing histories of the overall conflict and the region of Thuringia respectively, but further explorations of the conflict might seek to gain insights from theaters on the periphery of traditional historiography. What we will attempt to highlight, however, is the influence of

⁸ Sreenivasan, Govind P. "The Social Origins of the Peasants' War of 1525 in Upper Swabia." *Past & Present*, no. 171 (2001): 30–65.

Christian apocalypticism and mysticism as a driving force behind peasant radicalism. Drawing heavily on the work of Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* we can situate Thomas Müntzer's theology as the culmination of centuries of millenarian thought as well as demonstrate that the history of rebellion reaches far back into the 15th century. While the Reformation and the concept of godly law are mainstays of scholarship on the Peasants' War, While Cohn's book charts the course of millenarian Christianity from Bohemia to Germany and Thomas Müntzer, his account focuses almost entirely on these radicals, painting Luther as a foil for such figures and those they represented rather than a complex contributing factor to both the peasants' uprising and destruction.

This paper will attempt to tie elements of Blickle's materially based history of the peasants' war with Cohen's longer history of radical millenarian theology by presenting the life of Thomas Müntzer (using the recent biography by Andrew Drummond) as the conduit that linked elements of the peasant uprising in Germany to a longer history of millenarian theology and rebellion. In doing so, we will demonstrate that the Reformation was not a conflict between Protestants and Catholics, or even an internal conflict between the opportunistic princes of the Holy Roman Empire, but a long and bloody negotiation between the forces and of an extractive status quo and disparate elements of radical opposition, emboldened by increasing confidence of their understanding of the ties between the spiritual and temporal worlds.

This paper draws its primary sourcing from three key sources: Martin Luther; Thomas Müntzer; and the articles of various groups of rebelling peasants. Through Luther, we will see how a Reformation that sought to overthrow the authority of the Church could not be contained to a purely spiritual realm. As his rhetoric was embraced by an increasingly unruly public, Luther and his allies scrambled, unsuccessfully, to adjust their approach. When the peasants rose,

Luther and company found themselves among strange bedfellows as arbiters of the status quo, Protestant and Catholic alike, united to see the rebellion annihilated. Müntzer's lens similarly gives us a tumultuous view of the conflict. Through him, we see how mystic Christianity served to drive radicalism. As he undertook the grueling work of uniting his followers under a common belief, he too found himself outpaced by the masses, and when the conflict broke out, his painstaking work was smashed in a tide of violence. Finally, by engaging with the demands of the peasants, we see that they had their own aims, shaping the conflict through demands and force of arms until their hand had been overplayed. By examining these sources, I hope to shed light on several key questions: 1) In what ways was Luther's Reformation appropriated by different groups, namely the princes and peasants to serve their own material and spiritual needs; 2) How did millenarian tendencies among radicals shape the landscape of both the Reformation and Peasants' War, and finally; 3) to what extent was the Peasants' War a success or failure for the reformers, the princes, the peasants and the radicals?

Thesis and Structure

Theology was a key factor in determining the onset of the Peasants' War, and in particular, the millenarian strain was key in shaping the historical terrain in which both radicals and reformists found themselves operating. Our first chapter will sketch out the contours of millenarian theology as well as demonstrate how its most radical adherents, the Bohemian Taborites influenced the neighboring regions of Germany from the early 15th to 16th centuries. Next, we will examine Martin Luther's role as both a foil to the radicals, as well as an unwitting accelerant. We will then introduce the character of Thomas Müntzer, whose theological evolution, along with his rivalry with Luther and role as a leader in the Thuringian theater of the

Peasants' War, allow us insight into how the historical trends we've explored express themselves in an influential individual. We will then explore the ideology and political situation of the peasants themselves during the conflict before ultimately ending our narrative with the death of Thomas Müntzer. Finally, in a brief epilogue, we will explore how the new status quo created by the reformists was an explicit rejection of the radical ideas they had, in part, inspired. Though no group involved would see their vision of Heaven on Earth materialize, by integrating a more theological view of the conflict with previous understandings, we can shed light on longer historical trends that may have previously been obfuscated.

Part 1: Antecedents

Jan Hus

We began our story with Luther answering a summons from the Emperor only to defy him, digging the heels of the Reformation into a Catholic empire intent on his destruction, yet we ended that same introduction with the promise that such a heroic narrative would soon be complicated. In fact, Luther was hardly the first to provide such an example of resistance, as far back as the 1360s, Czech reformers had likened the antichrist not only as an individual but to a spiritual corruption of the church itself.⁹ By imagining the reign of the Antichrist at hand, these early reformers envisioned their moment as the prelude to the apocalypse, the second coming of Christ, and ultimately, a final reconciliation between the kingdoms of Earth and the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, it is the fundamental basis for the theological doctrine of millenarianism. As it became increasingly understood that the end of days was fast approaching, the faithful searched for any source of spiritual protection, which they would find in the practice of utraquism. Utraquism, meaning ‘under both kinds’ was the simple practice of serving both bread and wine with communion,¹⁰ but, at least in Bohemia, it would become the locus through which grievances were levied against the larger apparatus of the Church.

Growing discontent with the church soon found its voice in the figure of Jan Hus, “a popular preacher whose favourite theme was the corruption and worldliness of the clergy.”¹¹ Over a century before Luther “he proclaimed that when papal decrees ran counter to the law of Christ as expressed in the Scriptures, the faithful ought not to obey them; and he launched

⁹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 294.

¹⁰ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 297.

¹¹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 295.

against the sale of indulgences a campaign which roused nation-wide excitement.”¹² Just as we will explore with Luther, Hus was a far cry from a radical. He too was a reformer who truly believed in the spiritual value of practices like utraquism and the abolition of indulgences. He was not seeking revolution, but reconciliation. Taken on spiritual merits alone, Hus may have had convincing points, but the church was far from a purely spiritual organization. For a millennium it had provided the spiritual justification for the temporal powers of the feudal order. To undermine its doctrine publicly, even over matters as seemingly trivial as taking communion with wine, was to undermine a core pillar of the social order. For his heresy, Hus was excommunicated in 1412 and was subsequently summoned, under the promise of safe conduct, by the Holy Roman Emperor to answer for his supposed heresy. When Hus refused to recant, his promise of safety was shown to be a lie and he was promptly burnt at the stake. The backlash from Hus’s execution was swift, in his name a series of reforms were instituted, and an independent church established.¹³ The temporal authorities of Bohemia leaped at the chance to consolidate power created by religious upheaval. “In effect the existing Church hierarchy was largely replaced by a national church which was no longer controlled from Rome but was under the patronage of the secular powers of Bohemia.”¹⁴

The movement, which called themselves Hussites after his death, represented a crucial turning point in regards to the power of the Church, a precedent had been set that the Church could be forced to concede spiritual authority to further the interests of temporal authorities. In the words of Andrew Drummond:

¹² Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 296.

¹³ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided*, 73.

¹⁴ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 296.

With the Hussite movement, the first bell was tolled for the end of the hegemony of the Papal Church in central Europe. Hussitism went far beyond the bounds of a 'heresy'. A heresy is simply a set of ideas which, to a greater or lesser extent, conflicts with the religious dogma of a predominant religion. Crucially, however, a heresy remains a heresy by losing the battle with its opponent.¹⁵

No longer could the Church and its vassals hope to operate with impunity. A century later, as Luther entered Worms to answer his own accusations of heresy, Charles V would have been wary of the risks of killing Luther and creating another martyr in the image of Hus. Luther, too, would have been familiar with Hus, but as we will see, it is a testament to his hubris that he did not anticipate the upheavals of 1524-25 given the precedent set by his forebear. "This son of the colonial borderlands had little or no experience of the idea of Christian freedom which had been spreading in the lands of the southwest and west, even though he lived very near one of its sources, Bohemia."¹⁶ It is here then, in Bohemia, where we will begin to chart the course of resistance which ran parallel to the Reformation and which culminated in the war of 1524-25.

The Taborites

Clearly, the case of Jan Hus, fiery death notwithstanding, shares much with that of Luther and the Reformation a century later, but what of the radical movement embodied by Müntzer? That story begins in Prague with a handful of fellows being ejected from a window. The First Defenestration of Prague (the Czechs became rather fond of the practice) was the opening act of the Hussite Wars, over a decade's worth of brutal interconnected conflicts that would marry radical millenarian theology to a broad social base of the urban poor and the peasantry. It is here, in the hearts of Bohemian's lowest strata, rather than the minds of learned men like Luther and Hus, where the seeds of the Peasants' War would be planted.

¹⁵ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 40.

¹⁶ Blickle, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, xxii.

But first, some context: In the aftermath of the Hussite reforms, the Czech king, facing pressure from the Pope and the Emperor, instituted a crackdown on Hussitism. Just like Hus's execution, these acts did not snuff out the Hussites and their practices but instead unleashed a new wave of radicalism within the movement.¹⁷ It is in this atmosphere that members of Prague's town council had thrown a stone which struck a Hussite priest leading a procession. The incensed crowd seized the alleged perpetrators and sent them crashing through a window to their deaths in The First Defenestration of Prague. This would be the inciting incident of The Hussite Wars, a series of crusades and civil wars waged both against and between the disparate elements of the Hussites and that would ultimately exorcise the radical elements which haunted the movement. Yet what would rupture the Hussites, now beset by the forces of Rome?

Despite the success of the early Hussite reforms in combating the authority of the Church, the social climate of Bohemia was far from stable, as we can see from an examination of the political situation in Prague. The early wave of reforms allowed Prague's guilds to wrestle power from the city's entrenched patrician class:

The part played by these people was so striking that Catholic polemicists could even pretend that the whole Hussite movement had from the very beginning been financed by the artisan guilds. It would have been truer to say that the general upheaval in Bohemia encouraged social unrest amongst the artisans; and this was particularly the case in Prague....But if it was the guilds that organized and directed the radical movement in Prague, the rank-and-file were largely drawn not from the skilled artisans but from the lowest strata of the population - the heterogeneous mass of journeymen, unskilled workers, indentured servants, beggars, prostitutes and criminals¹⁸

However, if the gains made by these guilds had been made possible by their "rank and file" then these urban workers had little to show for their efforts. "By 1420 the great majority of the

¹⁷ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 297.

¹⁸ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 297-299.

population of Prague, which was between 30,000 and 40,000, seem to have been living - or dying - on starvation wages. The radical wing of the Hussite movement was largely recruited from this harassed proletariat.”¹⁹

Such precarity of circumstance was not limited to the cities, the countryside also harbored an increasingly disaffected group of peasants, though their own anxiety took on a somewhat different form, as, in another historical rhyme with the Peasants War, peasant allegiance to the radical cause was not simply a result of declining circumstances. “Largely thanks to the system of land-tenure which had been introduced by the German colonists and which had spread amongst the Czech peasantry - the dependence of the peasant upon his lord was by no means absolute.... The increase in the royal power in the fourteenth century further impeded exploitation of the common people by the nobility.”²⁰ Consequently, the peasants were not motivated purely out of a sense of exploitation, though that did not mean that their position was secure. Rather predictably, “the nobles chafed under these restrictions; and by the beginning of the fifteenth century a determined effort was being made to deprive the peasants of their traditional rights and to force them into a position of total dependence.”²¹ Far from a stupified mass, these men and women were fully cognizant of the nobilities’ machinations, and “It seems that by the time of the Hussite upheaval the Bohemian peasantry was uneasily aware that its position was threatened.”²²

To complicate this the peasantry were far from monolithic in their anxiety, not all who flocked toward radicalism did so out of a sense of potential deprivation, for some that possibility

¹⁹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 299.

²⁰ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 299.

²¹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 299.

²² Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 300

had already been realized. Just like the starving masses of Prague, “in the countryside too there existed a stratum with nothing to lose: landless labourers, farm hands and many members of that surplus population which could be accommodated neither in towns nor on the land. All these people were more than ready to support any movement which seemed likely to bring succour and relief.”²³ Throughout the coming century, this odd alliance of the urban working class, landless and landed peasants would form the core of radical resistance to the status quo for the simple reason that their interests were never represented in any official capacity beyond a local level. In times of crisis, it was these groups who would invariably discover, not simply that they had nothing to lose, but they had something to gain.

Starting in 1419 the desperate radicals would begin to split from their modern brethren and begin to form an identity of their own. As radical priests fled to the hills preaching against Rome their congregations followed them, and soon settlements were established that sought to exist outside the feudal order and to govern their society through Goodwill toward their fellow Christians.²⁴ “All believers were summoned to leave the villages and towns and flee to the mountains, to escape the wrath of the Lord. Prague, like Babylon the great, was to perish in the flames.”²⁵ It would take more than simple alienation from the current status quo to make such a society function. The eclectic social base of these millenarian-minded Hussites also necessitated a radically different theology from their moderate cousins. Such an ambitious and fraught union would need a powerful *raison d'etre* to keep the centrifugal forces held within the movement from spiraling apart. The Taborites, naming themselves after the biblical Mount Tabor, would

²³ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 300.

²⁴ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 300.

²⁵ Werner, Ernst. “Popular Ideologies in Late Mediaeval Europe: Taborite Chiliasm and Its Antecedents.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 3 (1960): 345.

find it in the same millenarian ideology that had first inspired the practice of Utraquism. The end of days was fast approaching and they would not be caught off guard:

As the extreme Taborites understood it, the Millennium was to be characterized by a return of the lost anarcho-communist order. Taxes, dues, rents were to be abolished and so was private property of all kinds. There was to be no human authority of any sort: 'All shall live together as brothers, none shall be subject to another.' 'The Lord shall reign, and the Kingdom shall be handed over to the people of the earth.' And since the Millennium was to be a classless society, it was to be expected that the preparatory massacres would take the form of a class-war against 'the great'²⁶

For the taborites evolution would not have been understood as a radical departure from history, but rather, a restoration of a sort of primordial equality enjoyed by God's first people. "It was proclaimed, the state of innocence 'as with Adam, Enoch and Elias in Paradise will return; no one will hunger and thirst nor suffer pain in body or spirit, nor adversity.'"²⁷ Additionally, the Taborites clearly identified elements within the existing status quo that were incompatible with their vision of paradise. They preached that "All lords, nobles and knights shall be cut down and exterminated in the forests like outlaws."²⁸ Clearly, the core social elements of the Taborite movement would see these forces as ontologically exploitative, their positions of privilege fundamentally at odds with their project, forces of the Antichrist whose continued existence was incompatible with the Heaven on Earth they fought to bring about. Yet "Above all they absolutely rejected the Church of Rome. Whereas the Utraquists clung in most respects to traditional Catholic doctrine, the Taborites affirmed the right of every individual, layman as well as priest, to interpret the Scriptures according to his lights."²⁹ A century before Luther, the

²⁶ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 308.

²⁷ Werner, Ernst. *Popular Ideologies in Late Mediaeval Europe*, 346.

²⁸ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 308.

²⁹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 308.

Taborites had, at least within their own community, established a priesthood of all believers, more important to their present moment however, was the fact that their movement was irreconcilable with the larger structures of Royal and Church authority, as “they insisted that nothing need be regarded as an article of faith that was not expressly affirmed by Holy Writ.”³⁰ Importantly, in a revolutionary theological evolution, this writ was not limited to the gospel. For the Taborites “the era of written law was at an end; even the New Testament had lost its validity, since from now on ‘the divine law was written in the heart of every individual, and this was all the teaching anyone needed.’”³¹ Such beliefs would be echoed a century later by figures such as Thomas Müntzer.

In the meantime, as Taborites fled to the hills, throwing their lot in with the collectivist communities, both the urban magistrates and nobility, respective enemies of the urban workers and peasantry, joined the Catholics in their effort to stifle the radical cause.³² “All were agreed that utraquist communion should be preserved - but they were also agreed, most emphatically, that the Taborites must be suppressed.”³³ It is here where we see the advantages of an apocalyptic worldview, for as their enemies united against them, the Taborites were seemingly justified in their belief in an imminent apocalypse. “In the very afflictions descending on them the millenarians recognized the long-expected ‘messianic woes’; and the conviction gave them a new militancy. No longer content to await the destruction of the godless by a miracle, the preachers called upon the faithful to carry out the necessary purification of the earth

³⁰ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 301.

³¹ Werner, Ernst. *Popular Ideologies in Late Mediaeval Europe*, 346.

³² Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 303.

³³ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 302.

themselves.”³⁴ Thus the millenarians had connected their theological conviction to a tangible threat to the status quo, the very thing Rome feared when Bohemians first took their bread and wine together.

Despite the grandiosity of their beliefs, the Taborites' vision of Heaven on Earth was limited. As their resources dwindled, beset on all sides by both their former Hussite allies and foreign armies waging Rome's crusade, Taborite campaigns increasingly resembled bandit raids, “The people were assuming that since God dwelt in them they could not sin. They said: ‘A time is coming when there will be such love among men that all things will be common, even women.’”³⁵ Needless to say, those who were not fully alienated by the feudal order did not take such views kindly. Additionally, many of those that had thrown in their lot with the radicals and seen themselves freed from their feudal dues now found themselves subject to the taxes of the increasingly desperate Taborites. “When the funds in the communal chests were exhausted the radicals declared that, as men of the Law of God’, they were entitled to take whatever belonged to the enemies of God - meaning at first the clergy and the nobility and the rich in general, but soon anyone who was not a Taborite.”³⁶ This fundamentally limited view of who constituted God's elect would be a key flaw in their theology. Unable to reconcile themselves with any element of the status quo, they willingly escalated the stakes of their crusade to annihilation.

While the Taborites had successfully rallied tens of thousands to their cause, the immediacy and severity of their demands created a backlash that they were incapable of withstanding. In yet another foreshadowing of the future events in Germany, the Taborites would not be undone by foreign armies alone, but by the moderate wing of their own movement, the

³⁴ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 303.

³⁵ Werner, Ernst. *Popular Ideologies in Late Mediaeval Europe*, 347.

³⁶ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 312.

Hussites. In 1434, the Taborite armies were nearly annihilated by the utraquists who had made common cause with the Catholics in order to secure the gains of their own moderate movement.³⁷ By making a separate peace with Rome and turning against the Taborites, the Hussites had successfully shifted the center of gravity of the larger Hussite movement toward themselves. Without a radical wing to draw a contrast with, one could imagine a world in which Rome could focus their efforts against the moderates, yet the radicalism of the Taborites helped to create a common enemy. This series of events would play out with shocking similarity a century later in the Peasants' War.

The Drummer of Niklashausen

Despite the destruction of the millenarian Taborites as a territorial threat, their theology did not die with them on the battlefield. "All across Europe, from France to Spain, local uprisings had been blamed on the influence of Taborite pamphlets."³⁸ It would come as little surprise that:

Everywhere the rich and privileged, clerics and laymen alike, were obsessed by the fear that the spread of Taborite influence would result in a revolution which would overthrow the whole social order....But it was in Germany that the Taborites had most chance to exert influence, for in 1430 their armies penetrated as far as Leipzig, Bamberg and Nuremberg; and it was in Germany that anxiety was keenest.³⁹

In particular, Germany's urban patricians had become increasingly anxious over the possibility of an alliance between the Taborites and their own oppressed classes. "They pointed out that there were in Germany revolutionary elements which had much in common with the Taborites. It would be all too easy for the rebellion of the poor to spread from Bohemia into Germany"⁴⁰ As

³⁷ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 320.

³⁸ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 316.

³⁹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 316.

⁴⁰ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 318.

we know, this alliance would not come to pass, but the influence of millenarian Christianity on the German borderlands would soon find a locus through which it could once again explode.

Over the next several decades, prophecies predicting the coming of “a messiah who was referred to as the Anointed Saviour and who was expected to inaugurate the Third and Last Age”⁴¹ would spread across the Holy Roman Empire, and “If in Bohemia itself there was less and less scope for such movements, in Germany conditions were singularly propitious for the reception of Taborite influences”⁴² Though at first this anointed savior was believed to be the Holy Roman Emperor himself, the disintegrating authority of the Empire meant that such beliefs were quickly dispelled. The disappointment surrounding the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III soon materialized into further prophecies:

The vacuum at the centre of the state produced a chronic and widespread anxiety - an anxiety which found expression in the folklore of ‘the future Frederick’ but which could also vent itself in sudden waves of eschatological excitement. Amongst its commonest manifestations were mass pilgrimages, reminiscent of the popular crusades and the flagellant processions of earlier times, and no less liable to escape from ecclesiastical control.⁴³

This expectation of a “Future Frederick” created a fertile ground for would-be prophets willing to don the millenarian mantle. Such expectations would soon be met, not in the imperial capital, but in a small farming village. “In 1476 there began at Niklashausen, a small village in the valley of the Tauber, not far from Würzburg, a movement which could almost be called a new People’s Crusade.”⁴⁴ This crusade would be led by one Hans Böhm, The Drummer of Niklashausen.

⁴¹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 320.

⁴² Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 322.

⁴³ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 323.

⁴⁴ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 323.

Böhm itself was a “name which suggests either that he was of Bohemian descent or else that in the popular mind he was associated with Hussite teachings.”⁴⁵ Yet aside from this, there was little to suggest this shepherd youth’s transformation into a millenarian prophet. In his spare time he had performed at local taverns until one day, he burned his instrument and began to preach to the people of Niklashausen.⁴⁶ “Böhm declared that the Virgin Mary had appeared to him surrounded by a heavenly radiance and had given him a message of prodigious importance. Instead of summoning people to dance, Böhm was to edify them with the pure Word of God.”⁴⁷ This direct communication with God through the form of dreams and visions allowed Böhm to bypass the ideological filtering so common among the clergy. According to Böhm’s vision “God had intended to punish mankind most grievously; the Virgin had interceded and God had agreed to withhold punishment; but now men must go in their multitudes on pilgrimage to the Virgin of Niklashausen or else punishment would after all descend upon the world.”⁴⁸ This God of the people demanded not tithes and obedience as the Church professed, but action.

Word of this message spread and the Drummer began to attract a larger following to whom he preached against the abuses of the clergy and of Rome, and by 1474, thousands had begun to make pilgrimage to hear their new savior. “From Niklashausen, and from there alone, the Virgin would bestow her blessings upon all lands... Whoever made the pilgrimage would be absolved from all his sins; whoever died there would go immediately to heaven.”⁴⁹ But Böhm’s project was not limited to mere mysticism, his preachings soon took on a more political valence,

⁴⁵ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 323.

⁴⁶ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 325.

⁴⁷ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 325.

⁴⁸ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 325.

⁴⁹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 325.

“The Emperor supports princes, dukes and knights as they oppress serfs with tolls and duties. The clergy have great incomes, and this should not be so... The fish in the water and the game in the fields should be held in common. The wealth of spiritual and secular princes, dukes and knights should be redistributed to the common people, and then all could have sufficient.”⁵⁰ and so forth. “In the end Böhm emerged as a social revolutionary, proclaiming the imminence of the egalitarian Millennium based on Natural Law.” Additionally, like the Taborites before him, Böhm's theology would appeal to all elements of the lower strata:

The demand for the overthrow of all rulers, great and small, probably appealed particularly to the urban poor.... On the other hand in demanding that wood, water, pasturage, fishing and hunting should be free to all men, Böhm was voicing a very general aspiration of the peasants. The German peasants believed that these rights had in fact been theirs in olden time, until usurped by the nobility⁵¹

As these demands spoke directly to the primary anxieties of the people, it was no surprise that so many saw in him a more legitimate representative of God's will on Earth than the Church. Above all the common people saw in Böhm “a saviour who could bestow on them individually the fullness of divine grace and who would lead them collectively into an earthly Paradise.”⁵² For these people, whose rights and freedoms had slowly been deprived, it seemed only natural that a just god would intervene on their behalf. That the Drummer's call to cleanse the world of its corrupt clergy (there are no recorded instances of attacks on clergy connected to the Drummer's sermons)⁵³ was not grounded in scripture was immaterial to the pilgrims of Niklashausen, not only because the church at this time would not have conducted much of their services in German,

⁵⁰ Arnold, John H. “*Religion and Popular Rebellion, From the Capuciati to Niklashausen.*” *Cultural and Social History* 6, no. 2 (2009): 154.

⁵¹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 327.

⁵² Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 327.

⁵³ Arnold, John H. “*Religion and Popular Rebellion*” 155.

but because the Church, along with the lords, was a direct agent of the peasantry's exploitation.⁵⁴ That one of their own could speak to them in terms that reflected their own lives was proof enough that the Church was a superfluous intermediary. The Drummer's position among the community indicated that rather than speak *to* them, as the Church had, salvation was to be found in a leader who spoke *through* them.

When both secular and ecclesiastical authorities identified the increasingly massive crowds, perhaps as many as 70,000, who gathered to see their radical savior as a dire threat to their social order, they banned pilgrimages and eventually, it was decided that the Drummer was to be arrested. Perhaps sensing his impending capture, The Drummer Prophet of Niklashausen attempted to organize a rebellion urging his followers to return to Niklashausen with weapons, but before this could occur, he was kidnapped in the night by the cavalry of the Prince-Bishop (one could be both in the confusing political system of the empire) of Würzburg. Thousands rallied and marched overnight to their prophet's aid, demanding his release. The Prince-Bishops agents convinced many to leave peacefully, yet many stood their ground.⁵⁵ Eventually "A few cannon-shots were fired over their heads, but the fact that nobody was hurt only strengthened their belief that the Virgin was protecting them; and they tried to storm the town, shouting their saviour's name. This time shots were fired in earnest and followed by a cavalry-charge. Some forty pilgrims were killed and the rest at once fled in helpless panic."⁵⁶ Yet even after this abortive rescue, the Drummer's followers did not lose hope.

The Prince-Bishop prepared for another uprising, but none would come. "During the execution the spectators kept far away from the stake; the common people expecting a miracle

⁵⁴ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 323.

⁵⁵ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 329.

⁵⁶ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 329-330.

from Heaven which would save the Holy Youth and scatter the flames amongst his persecutors,”⁵⁷ Yet no such miracle occurred, the would-be prophet was reduced to dust and his ashes cast into the river to prevent them being used as relics. Pilgrimages to Niklashausen were banned and pilgrims were threatened with excommunication, yet the drummer was still revered. Despite the best efforts of The Church, they could do little to suppress the ideas of mystic Christianity that had spread from Bohemia. “Egalitarian millenarianism had now effectively penetrated into Germany; and more was to be heard of it during the next half-century.”⁵⁸ Though its earliest leader has been reduced to ashes, the embers of rebellion were not yet extinguished.

The Bundschuh

Millenarian ideology and the Taborites’ legacy would not die with Hans Böhm at Niklashausen. In 1502, a group of peasant-led conspirators calling themselves the Bundschuh, “a term meaning a peasant’s clog and having the same significance as the term sans-culotte during the French Revolution,” would organize an attempted uprising against their local bishop in the region of the Upper Rhine. “The leader of the Bundschuh was a peasant called Joss Fritz and many of the rank-and-file were also peasants. But the urban poor, disbanded mercenaries, beggars and the like are known to have played a large part in the movement; and that no doubt is what gave it its peculiar character.”⁵⁹ Like the Taborites and the Drummer of Niklashausen before them, the members of the Bundschuh were rabidly anticlerical. Their rising was spurred “by the

⁵⁷ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 331.

⁵⁸ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 333.

⁵⁹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 333.

excessive taxes levied by an insolvent Prince-Bishop; but its object was nothing less than a social revolution of the most thorough-going kind.”⁶⁰

Unfortunately for the radical peasants and their allies, before they could put their revolution fully into motion, they were betrayed, the only records we have of their demands lying in the tortured confessions of the conspirators. Recorded “by a hostile scribe”⁶¹(pwid36) their most notable demands are fully in line with both their Bohemian forebears and the greater risings that would occur in the wake of the Reformation.

They said that the principal reason for their entering into this association of the Bundschuh was their desire to abolish every remaining yoke of servitude and.... to gain their liberty through the use of arms, as soon as their number had grown sufficiently and they had gained confidence in their ability to win in combat....During and after torture they confessed that it was their intention to annihilate all authority and government....Such great confidence had they in their endeavor that they took it for certain that, once the war had broken out, no subjects would resist them; they believed, on the contrary, that peasants, burghers, and townsmen would freely join their association out of the love of liberty which all men share....They confessed that their main targets were monasteries, cathedral churches, and the clergy in general.⁶²

Though the uprising of 1502 had been stopped before it could begin, many of the conspirators escaped, to organize again, launching uprisings in 1513 and 1517 where similar goals to establish an egalitarian order were expressed.⁶³ There can be no doubt that these same radicals were biding their time in anticipation of the next opportunity to see God's justice done on Earth. Such was the

⁶⁰ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 334.

⁶¹ Baylor, Michael G. *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents*. Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, Mass: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. 36.

⁶² Bishopric of Speyer, “The Articles of the Bundschuh,” in *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War*, ed. Baylor, Michael G. (Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, Mass: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012.), 36-37.

⁶³ Cohn, Norman *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 334.

atmosphere when Martin Luther stepped onto the scene, building a moderate reform movement on the shaky ground of rebellion.

Chapter 2: Reformation

Spiritual Insurrection

In relation to The Peasants' War, Martin Luther holds a similar position to Jan Hus before him in that he provided an example to those seeking to undermine the spiritual authority of The Church. Despite his Herculean efforts in breaking the power of that Church, I argue that Luther's conception of "God" is fundamentally the same as the Roman Catholic Church. While his critiques of Roman doctrine would help erode their dominance in Germany, Luther had no interest in overthrowing the secular hierarchies whose rule the Catholic Church provided spiritual justification. When the flames of rebellion began to lick Luther's feet, his fundamental sympathies with the hierarchical status quo meant that his loyalty to its most powerful representatives, the Princes, was never in question. Yet, when examining Luther's work preceding the Peasants' War, we can identify clear ideological links between his ideas and the demands that would eventually be made by the peasants.

While he would fully articulate his critical views about the right to temporal rebellion years before the breakout of the Peasants' War, his zealous calls for spiritual insurrection would add fuel to the growing pyre of peasant grievances. When the match of rebellion was struck, the flames of the insurrection could not be contained strictly within the spiritual realm. The peasants, to Luther's great dismay, would not be content to wallow in temporal anguish. If Christ's blood had indeed redeemed their eternal souls, why should they have waited until after death for their salvation?

Throughout the years preceding the Peasants' War, we see him modulate his rhetoric according to rapidly changing circumstances, vacillating between appeals to both princes and commoners to take their salvation into their own hands, yet his core beliefs regarding the specific

path to salvation remain unchanged. When confronted by criticism, he never wavered, never compromised, and always doubled down. His rhetorical shifts are therefore less indicative of any sort of hypocrisy on his part so much as they are a signal of his increasing frustration with his failure to communicate his understanding of God to a massive audience with a far different one.

To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation 1520

Even before his showdown with the Emperor at Worms, Luther had already established a powerful body of work attacking the church, though as we have seen with the Bundschuh, his anticlericalism played into the hands of the radicals, even if Luther would not yet realize it. A common through line in Luther's works is the separation, or lack thereof, between spiritual and temporal authority, an idea he expounds upon in his 1520 work *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. Written in an effort to undermine the authority of the Pope and Rome, Luther launches a rhetorical siege of what he identifies as the three key pillars of papal authority: (1) that the Pope was an incontestable and final authority of scriptural interpretation; (2) that the Pope had the sole right to call general councils; and finally (3) that the Pope claimed supreme authority over all secular powers.⁶⁴ To undermine the first two pillars, Luther began by attacking the third which the former two were contingent upon:

It has been devised that the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate, princes, lords, artificers, and peasants are the temporal estate. This is an artful lie and hypocritical device, but let no one be made afraid by it, and that for this reason: that all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe--And Started the Protestant Reformation*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015, 143.

⁶⁵ Luther, Martin. *The Collected Works of Martin Luther: Theological Writings, Sermons & Hymns: The Ninety-Five Theses, The Bondage of the Will, The Catechism*. e-artnow, 2018, 429.

To rectify this, Luther calls on the leaders of the temporal authority to seize that power which the unreformable “Romanists” had usurped, stating, “the temporal Christian power must exercise its office without let or hindrance, without considering whom it may strike, whether pope, or bishop, or priest: whoever is guilty, let him suffer for it.”⁶⁶ In this earlier work, Luther sees himself as a radical, rallying temporal authorities towards confrontation with the Church. However, the elite were far from Luther's only intended audience as further passages of the pamphlet demonstrate.

For example, Luther describes inequity among Christians as a human construct. “If a priest is killed, the country is laid under an interdict: why not also if a peasant is killed? Whence comes this great difference among equal Christians? Simply from human laws and inventions.”⁶⁷ He then connects this with, perhaps, the most important idea expressed in the pamphlet; “we are all priests, as I have said, and have all one faith, one Gospel, one Sacrament; how then should we not have the power of discerning and judging what is right or wrong in matters of faith?”⁶⁸ The implications of a priesthood of all believers are far more radical than Luther could have imagined. Though he was addressing the leaders of the temporal world, the nature of the print industry meant that he was addressing a far larger audience, one that wasn't bound by Luther's narrow conceptions regarding the true path toward salvation.

Using his own logic, the leap between rightful criticism of the Pope and Rome and criticism of temporal rulers was not far: “Thus, too, Balaam's ass was wiser than the prophet. If God spoke by an ass against a prophet, why should He not speak by a pious man against the

⁶⁶ Luther, Martin. *The Collected Works of Martin Luther*, 431.

⁶⁷ Luther, Martin. *The Collected Works of Martin Luther*, 433.

⁶⁸ Luther, Martin. *The Collected Works of Martin Luther*, 436.

Pope?”⁶⁹ If a pious man could speak against a Pope, who purported to reign over his fate in heaven, what could stop him from raising his voice or even his arms against those temporal authorities that sought to control him on Earth? Perhaps even more horrifying to Luther was the notion that that same pious man may no longer find a need for learned men such as Luther. If all believers were priests, what authority could he claim?

A Sincere Admonition to Guard against Rebellion - 1522

As we briefly touched upon in the introduction, Luther had been under Friedrich the Wise’s protection since his appearance at the Diet of Worms in 1521, The Saxon Elector had managed to keep the unruly doctor safe by allowing him refuge at his castle in Wartburg. It was in his absence that his movement had begun to face its first challenges to its authority. While away, more progressive reformers passed the ‘Wittenberg Ordinance’, “which approved the reform of the Mass, promoted iconoclasm, abolished begging, closed the town brothel and established a ‘poor chest’ funded by the discontinued religious endowments.”⁷⁰ Such measures concerned Luther who worried they may be used as justification for the old church to crack down on his movement. Such fears were not entirely unfounded as “Friedrich of Saxony made clear his opposition to the Ordinance, seeing in it a political precedent for devolving major decisions from prince to town. He himself was under pressure from the Imperial rulers, who had issued a mandate in late January which effectively made all Church reforms illegal.” More threatening than the Church to Luther’s control in Wittenberg was the arrival of the Zwickau Prophets, lay

⁶⁹ Luther, Martin. *The Collected Works of Martin Luther*, 437.

⁷⁰ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 107.

preachers, who drew their revelation not through the gospel alone, but through the more mystic traditions of the earlier Taborites, preaching revelation through dreams and visions.

While Luther was away at Wartburg, it was his close associate Philip Melanchthon who met with these new guests to Wittenberg, their critical tone evident as soon as they arrived with one prophet, Markus Stübner, remarking to Melanchthon, “‘There are a lot of Bibles here, but only outwardly, not within, in the soul.’ By the following day, Melanchthon was panicky; he wrote a letter to Friedrich the Wise, asking for his advice on how to deal with the ‘Zwickau prophets’.”⁷¹ Soon, word of these men's arrival reached Luther, who made the decision to travel back to Wittenberg to meet this new threat. While Frederick urged Luther to stay at the Wartburg castle for his own protection, Luther rudely defied the elector and his former savior writing:

I am going to Wittenberg under a far higher protection than the Elector's. I have no intention of asking Your Electoral Grace for protection. Indeed I think I shall protect Your Electoral Grace more than you are able to protect me. And if I thought that Your Electoral Grace could and would protect me, I should not go. The sword ought not and cannot help a matter of this kind. God alone must do it, and without the solicitude and co-operation of men. Consequently he who believes the most can protect the most. And since I have the impression that Your Electoral Grace is still quite weak in faith, I can by no means regard Your Electoral Grace as the man to protect and save me.⁷²

Despite his tone, Luther's first task after returning was in fact to carry out the elector's will, reversing the Wittenberg ordinance. “Under Luther's supervision, images were reinstated, Utraquist practices abandoned, and services conducted in the old way with the proper vestments and the use of Latin.”⁷³ Clearly, Luther's attitude did not preclude him from working in lockstep with the princes.

⁷¹ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 108.

⁷² Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther*, 312.

⁷³ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 110.

After this, Luther's next step was to address the threat of The Prophets. Though already prejudiced against them thanks to the reports from Melancthon, Luther would interview these men himself after which he wrote to an ally of the men "I have had a look at these new prophets and found that, in his wisdom, Satan has shat himself."⁷⁴ Soon after the prophets left Wittenberg and Luther was once again firmly in control of, if not the Reformation as a whole, then certainly its most influential outpost. "The early months of 1522 were arguably the turning point for Luther – the point at which he abandoned any thought of reforming the Church from below, or of giving radical ideas free rein. Instead, he opted to place the reforms effectively in the hands of civil authority and to ensure that he had the backing of at least one branch of the House of Saxony."⁷⁵ Perhaps it is the ease with which he reasserted his control that informed his next major work.

In his 1522 work *A Sincere Admonition to Guard against Rebellion*, Luther made no connection between his own movement and that of the old church writing, "I am not at all displeased to hear that the clergy are in such a state of fear and anxiety; perhaps they will come to their senses and moderate their mad tyranny. Would to God that their terror and fear were even greater! Nevertheless, I think — indeed I am sure and have no fear whatever on this score — that there will not be any insurrection or rebellion."⁷⁶ Evidently, despite a clear ratcheting of tension, Luther firmly, and perhaps naively, believed that a general uprising was nowhere on the horizon.

Such was his confidence, that he wrote "Their [the clergy's] wickedness is so horrible that no punishment is adequate except the wrath of God itself, without any intermediary. For this

⁷⁴ Drummond, Andrew *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 111.

⁷⁵ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 112.

⁷⁶ Martin Luther, "A Sincere Admonition to Guard against Rebellion," in *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War*, ed. Baylor, Michael G. (Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, Mass: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012) 57.

reason I have never yet let men persuade me to oppose those who threaten to use fist and flail”⁷⁷

Indeed, in addition to the Church's position as a feudal landholder, thanks to Luther's *95 Theses*, the peasants saw the Roman clergy as responsible for defrauding them with the heretical sale of indulgences. Doubtless Luther interpreted the increasing antagonism between clergy and peasantry as a measure of support for his platform of spiritual reform, but the practically minded peasants were likely more upset they had been promised and sold salvation that, as the gospel showed, indulgences had no right to grant. The promise of indulgences was shown to be a lie by Luther, the peasants were left to meet out their frustrations upon Rome's hapless representatives.

Luther clearly saw these frustrated masses as rallying behind his message, yet, as was becoming his habitat, he appealed to the temporal authority in order to make sure that the peasants' frustrations were being directed towards the spiritual authority and no further:

Although the hand [of rebellion], therefore, will not get far, and there is, hence, no need for me to restrain it, I must nevertheless instruct men's hearts a little. As regards the hand, I leave matters to the temporal authorities and nobility. They should, of course, take action, each prince and lord in his own territory, by virtue of the obligations incumbent upon such duly constituted authority; for what is done by duly constituted authority cannot be regarded as insurrection. . . . But we must calm the mind of the common man, and tell him to abstain from the words and even the passions which lead to insurrection, and to do nothing in the matter apart from a command of his superiors or an action of the authorities.⁷⁸

Luther concludes that he is forever an ally of the enemies of rebellion, using language we might “associate with modern terrorism”⁷⁹ in that “insurrection lacks discernment; it generally harms the innocent more than the guilty. Hence, no insurrection is ever right, no matter how right the cause it seeks to promote. It always results in more damage than improvement. . . . I am and always will be on the side of those against whom insurrection is directed, no matter how unjust

⁷⁷ Martin Luther, “A Sincere Admonition to Guard against Rebellion,” 57.

⁷⁸ Martin Luther, “A Sincere Admonition to Guard against Rebellion,” 57-58.

⁷⁹ Baylor, Michael G. *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012.

their cause. . . .”⁸⁰ While this line may reek of hypocrisy when we consider Luther's own spiritual insurrection against the Catholic Church, it helps to illuminate the clear distinction, in his mind at least, between temporal and spiritual rebellion. That Luther himself muddled the waters between these two realms in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* makes more sense when we consider the intended audience - the nobility. Luther's vision of the Reformation was clearly one of top-down reform. He tactically sanctified the actions of temporal authorities as he correctly identified them as his greatest allies in his spiritual war with Rome. Yet, these authorities weren't the only ones who had access to Luther's ideas, and for that reason, Luther again addresses the temporal authority to police the actions of the rabble who might misinterpret his message.

The final lines of *A Sincere Admonition* are perhaps the most revealing as Luther plainly states his beliefs regarding who has the right to articulate their frustrations and why: “Therefore, there is no need for you to demand an armed insurrection. Christ himself has already begun an insurrection with his mouth, one which will be more than the pope can bear. Let us follow that one, and carry on.”⁸¹ In other words, Luther, as the “mouth of Christ,” had already begun the only rebellion that mattered, that of the Reformation and the overthrow of the Roman authority and the Pope, whom Luther saw as the literal Antichrist and a great poisoner of human souls. When viewed through this lens, Luther's views begin to make more sense. He is less a hypocrite than a man who is working towards the completion of a spiritual goal using the temporal means at his disposal. It is, therefore, no wonder that he so often defaults to appeals to those that possess the greatest of this temporal power: the princes, lords, and nobility.

⁸⁰ Martin Luther, “A Sincere Admonition to Guard against Rebellion,” 58.

⁸¹ Martin Luther, “A Sincere Admonition to Guard against Rebellion,” 59.

In the coming year, before the onset of the Peasants' War, which we have shown was unanticipated by Luther in *A Sincere Admonition*, he would shift his message away from the elite and towards the common man, stoking the flames of insurrection despite himself.

Rights of The Christian Congregation 1523

By 1523, Luther's confidence in the Princes' ability to carry out his preferred reforms was waning, fearing the influence of those aligned with the old Church might undo his reforms.⁸² His new pamphlet, *Rights of The Christian Congregation*, therefore marked a departure from his earlier works as he called upon the laity to resist the power of corrupt bishops and church officials themselves. Perhaps anticipating that the rights he described would be applied in a manner Luther disagreed with, he begins the work accordingly: "First, it is necessary to know where and what the Christian congregation is, so that men do not engage in human affairs"⁸³ Where in his earlier works Luther's bombastic rhetorical approach often muddled the waters between temporal and spiritual affairs, but in this work we see him deliberately attempt to curb such misunderstandings. A clear example of this lies in the following passage where Luther calls on congregations to resist temporal laws, but preempted with the specific caveat that this only applies to the right of the congregation to appoint its own leaders:

Second, in this matter of judging teachings and appointing or dismissing teachers or pastors, one should not care at all about human statutes, law, old precedent, usage, custom, etc., even if they were instituted by pope or emperor, prince or bishop, if one half

⁸² Baylor, Michael G. *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War*, 65.

⁸³ Martin Luther, "The Rights of a Christian Congregation," in *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War*, ed. Baylor, Michael G. (Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, Mass: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012) 66.

or the whole world accepted them, or if they lasted one year or a thousand years. For the soul of man is something eternal, and more important than every temporal thing. . . .⁸⁴

That such measured language is bookended by a reminder that temporal suffering is nothing in the face of eternal, spiritual salvation again shows how Luther's views are being chiseled down to their truest meaning. That in the following year, the Peasants' War would break out demonstrates that Luther's ideals, while massively influential, were not broadly understood in terms he could understand. His rhetoric could not bridge the gap between understanding imposed by radically different sets of material circumstances experienced by the peasants and himself. Again, despite this more measured approach for Luther, he still cannot help himself raising the stakes of this resistance to salvation itself:

Thus we conclude that wherever there is a Christian congregation in possession of the gospel, it not only has the right and power but also the duty — on pain of losing the salvation of its souls and in accordance with the promise made to Christ in baptism — to avoid, to flee, to depose, and to withdraw from the authority that our bishops, abbots, monasteries, religious foundations, and the like are now exercising. For it is clearly evident that they teach and rule contrary to God and his word.⁸⁵

It is no wonder that such an urgent and monumental call to action would inspire a drastic response, even if it was in a context of rebellion which Luther found detestable, as his calls for the Christian community to be able to elect their own ministers would later become one of the central demands of the peasants in the war to come.

Against the Murdering and Robbing Hordes of Peasants

In the early years of the Reformation, Luther was in full command of his message, but during the Peasants' War, his charisma and good fortune would reach their limits as forces beyond his

⁸⁴ Martin Luther, "The Rights of a Christian Congregation," 66.

⁸⁵ Martin Luther, "The Rights of a Christian Congregation," 67.

control asserted themselves. During the Peasants' War, Luther's ideas would escape his own designs to be wielded by those who would apply his ideas to theological frameworks alien to Luther. By the end of the Peasants' War, Luther and his allies had triumphed, yet historian Andrew Pettegree writes of Luther's role in the conflict as “the first occasion wherein Luther was truly mastered by events.”⁸⁶ Though we will engage with the peasants and their demands in far greater detail in later chapters, this foreshadowing of the moderate reaction to even moderate petitions will help demonstrate that by the time of the Peasants' War, figures like Luther were fully committed to the principles of top-down reform. Though he may have at times paid lip service to the abuses of the princes, at every critical moment, it was their power that he would legitimize.

Luther's incendiary condemnation of the peasants' *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes* was one of the first of his works to fall out of Luther's direct control. Initially planned as an addendum to his more measured work, *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles*, printers quickly realized an opportunity and published the work as a separate pamphlet, dropping the original title *Against the Murdering and Robbing Hordes of the Other Peasants* in favor of the much more incendiary one that was published.⁸⁷ Luther devotes much of this work to empowering temporal authorities, regardless of their position in regard to the Reformation, to mercilessly crush the peasant uprisings. Whereas before the temporal authority was to cleanse the nation through rejection of spiritual corruption, the circumstances of rebellion necessitated that all leaders make common cause against the temporal corruption of insurrection:

First, I will not oppose a ruler who, even though he does not tolerate the gospel, will smite and punish these peasants without first offering to submit the case to

⁸⁶ Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther*, 270.

⁸⁷ Baylor, Michael G. *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War*. 130.

judgment. He is within his rights, since the peasants are not contending any longer for the gospel, but have become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious murderers, robbers, and blasphemers, whom even a heathen ruler has the right and authority to punish.⁸⁸

Luther follows the logic of doing one's duty to apocalyptic ends, using the same millenarian logic the peasants would use to justify their uprising against them. While they believed God's arrival on judgment day necessitated temporal reform, to Luther, temporal suffering was itself the spiritual fire that cleansed Christian souls for salvation. Never one to mince words, he states a dire reality in plain terms: "These are strange times, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed better than other men with prayer!"⁸⁹

Though by this time, his thoughts on the right, or lack thereof, to rebellion had already been made clear, the deeply political nature of the work was appreciated by few among the common people. Conditions once again demanded that he appeal to the sword. "Therefore, dear lords, here is a place where you can release, rescue, help. Have mercy on these poor people! Let whoever can, stab, smite, slay. If you die in doing it, good for you! A more blessed death can never be yours..."⁹⁰ Perhaps more than anything, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes*, demonstrates that to Luther, Heaven could not be made on Earth. If salvation required bloody sacrifice in the here and now, Earth could be surrendered to the devil in exchange for eternal life in the hereafter. Such a violent vision of temporal life may have made perfect sense to Luther, who was free to ponder God's plans in relative comfort, but such a view would have been irreconcilable to the peasants, whose spiritual alienation was already secondary to their temporal

⁸⁸ Martin Luther, "Against the Murdering and Robbing Hordes of Peasants," in *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War*, ed. Baylor, Michael G. (Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, Mass: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012) 132.

⁸⁹ Martin Luther, "Against the Murdering and Robbing Hordes of Peasants," 133.

⁹⁰ Martin Luther, "Against the Murdering and Robbing Hordes of Peasants," 134.

suffering. While newly empowered by Reformation ideas, the peasantry was ill-equipped to understand Luther's ideas on the terms he wanted them to. They may have spoken the same language, yet the vast chasm between their material experience of reality gave the same words vastly different meanings. When their vision demanded action, a man as stubborn as Luther had little choice but to cast his support for their opponents, whomever they may be.

An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants 1525

Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes was written before the final and bloody defeat of the most radical peasants under the leadership of Thomas Müntzer at Frankenhausen, but published afterward. This unfortunate timing meant that the rollout of Luther's most bloodthirsty screed coincided with wholesale massacres of peasants and the execution and torture of survivors, including Müntzer himself. For the first time, Luther's ideas would be disseminated not only by his allies but by his Catholic enemies, who reprinted *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes* in the Catholic enclaves of Cologne, Dresden, and Ingolstadt, "Luther's Catholic opponents could no doubt sense that this was a work that damned Luther and the peasants equally"⁹¹

Even Luther's allies found the content of *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes* to be distasteful, but despite the backlash, in classic fashion, Luther doubled down on his former position, stating "I must warn those who criticize my book to hold their tongues and to be careful not to make a mistake and lose their own heads; for they are certainly rebels at heart..."⁹² He continues by accusing his critics of being in league with the rebels and equating their calls for

⁹¹ Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther*, 268.

⁹² Martin Luther, "An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants," 138.

mercy and sympathy with the tacit support of rebellion and calls for the Princes to silence these voices before they too cascade into rebellion. “Those who are fellow-travelers with rebels sympathize with them, feel sorry for them, justify them, and show mercy to those on whom God has no mercy, but whom he wishes to have punished and destroyed. For the man who thus sympathizes with the rebels makes it perfectly clear that he has decided in his heart that he will also cause disaster if he has the opportunity.”⁹³

Preempting criticism he continues; “If anyone says I am being uncharitable and unmerciful about this, my reply is: This is not a question of mercy, we are talking about God’s word. It is God’s will that the king be honored and the rebels destroyed; and he is as merciful as we are.”⁹⁴

If we are to draw anything from Luther's ideas in the years prior to and during the peasants' war, it is that Luther wasn't a cynical operator. His words and beliefs always aligned with his ultimate goal of seeing the Reformation topple the authority of Rome. His changes in rhetoric only occurred when he believed his message was being misinterpreted. Furthermore, Luther never acceded to the arguments and demands of others.

Fundamentally, Luther's belief in salvation solely in the hereafter blinded him to the more temporal concerns of the peasants. A priesthood of all believers in charge of their own salvation is not a recipe for measured action. While Luther's battles may have been intellectual, the struggle for the peasants translated to physical hardship, far more tangible than abstract ideas about the minute distinctions between spiritual and temporal authority. If the peasants had rights as Christians as Luther argued, their manifestations of those rights were bound to morph into temporal demands.

⁹³ Martin Luther, “An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants,” 138.

⁹⁴ Martin Luther, “An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants,” 138.

Why Luther's spiritual goals always coincided with the material interests of temporal authorities is a question Luther himself never seems to have interrogated. Despite his fierce opposition to the Catholic Church, his vision of God was fundamentally similar. Both Luther and Rome saw the Christian god as one of strict hierarchy. Had he stopped to consider that those on the very bottom of that hierarchy might have a radically different interpretation, he may have been much more careful about the content and scope of his message in the early days.

Though he didn't seek to create distance between man and God, by desacralizing its earthly representatives in the form of the Catholic clergy, he had inadvertently created a vacuum that his preferred substitute in temporal rulers could not adequately fill. No longer could one trust that through subservience alone their souls could be saved. The question of what souls would be granted entry into the Kingdom of God or be eternally damned now burdened not just scholars and monks, but the laity. What Luther could not comprehend was that a priesthood of all believers would not sit idly by while learned men and nobility worked out the specifics of the new order for themselves. Redemption demanded action, and just as Luther waged a crusade against the avatar of his spiritual alienation—the Pope—the peasants would wage their own against the facilitators of their temporal alienation, the secular lords. Luther realized too late that the masses simply didn't experience God in the same way he did, they simply lacked the proper education, or perhaps full enough bellies, required to accept that their temporal suffering was divinely ordained.

Though his credibility amongst the common people may have been hurt, Luther's loyalty to the princes during their time of crisis had bought him legitimacy. For the first time, they openly adopted his policies of reform. As for Luther himself, in the aftermath of the War and his controversial role, he would write to a colleague; “[H]e that will not understand, let him not

understand; he that will not know, let him be ignorant; it is enough that my conscience pleases Christ.”⁹⁵ Nothing could better encapsulate Luther's stubborn commitment to his personal conception of heaven and salvation.

⁹⁵ Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther*, 269.

Chapter 3: Radicalism

Thomas Müntzer

As demonstrated by the example of the Taborites, the Drummer of Nikelhusen, and the uprisings of the Bundschuh, peasant resistance was hardly a novel concept by the time of the Reformation, yet the rising of 1524 and '25 did possess novel characteristics in both their scale, and in certain theaters, a radical theological coherence that stands in stark contrast with some of its antecedents. Additionally "One of the most significant social characteristics of the Revolution of 1525 was its attractiveness to the urban lower classes, a phenomenon which became ever more evident as the revolt spread northward."⁹⁶ It is here where we will explore the case of Thomas Müntzer, a preacher who was emblematic of a more radical vision of the Reformation. Though he would not start the failed revolution, it is his radical theology, tied to the social struggle of the peasants that presented the most coherent alternative to the socially conservative Reformation embodied by Luther. Despite their rivalry in the lead-up to The Peasants' War:

It was as a follower of Luther that Müntzer first broke away from Catholic orthodoxy; and all the deeds that have made him famous were done in the midst of the great religious earthquake which first cracked and at length destroyed the massive structure of the medieval Church. Yet he himself abandoned Luther almost as soon as he had found him; and it was in ever fiercer opposition to Luther that he worked out and proclaimed his own doctrine...What Müntzer needed if he was to become a new man, sure of himself and of his aim in life, was not indeed to be found in Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone. It was to be found, rather, in the militant and bloodthirsty millenarianism.⁹⁷

If understanding Müntzer's significance to the radical tradition means understanding his influences, his early life shows us little that might indicate his later trajectory. In fact, that so little is known has created the opportunity for embellishment, as early historians added dramatic

⁹⁶ Blickle, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, xx.

⁹⁷ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 337.

details that seemingly work backward from his part in the failed revolution of 1525. Frederick Engels reported in 1850 that “It is said that his father died on the scaffold, a victim of the wilfulness of the Count of Stolberg.”⁹⁸ The truth, however, is far more mundane “Thomas Müntzer was born in Stolberg in Thuringia in 1488 or 1489. He was born not - as has often been stated - to poverty but to modest comfort; and his father was not hanged by a feudal tyrant but died in bed in the fulness of years.”⁹⁹ It is likely that Müntzer was descended from a family of miners, putting him in the same middling social milieu as Luther (Müntzer theology), Müntzer after all was among the privileged few able to receive a university education. It is here in his education where we find our first tenuous link to the millenarian upheaval of the Bohemian movement a century prior, in 1506 Müntzer first attended the University of Leipzig which “was founded in 1409, initially to accommodate the German academics and students who had been forced to flee Prague during the initial stages of the Hussite reforms.”¹⁰⁰ We know little of his University years or early adulthood but, “When he first comes clearly into view, in his early thirties, Müntzer appears neither as a victim nor as an enemy of social injustice but rather as an ‘eternal student’, extraordinarily learned and intensely intellectual.”¹⁰¹ Perhaps it was this curiosity which drove him towards the theology of the common man.

Zwickau

In 1520, Müntzer, while still a nominal ally of the reform movement at Wittenberg, had yet to make much of a name for himself. He had bounced between postings in small towns,

⁹⁸ Engels, Frederick, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 50.

⁹⁹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 336.

¹⁰⁰ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 44.

¹⁰¹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 336.

drawing the ire of the clergy, and, on occasion, the consternation of Wittenberg Reformers who were wary of his more confrontational approach to reform. While he was not yet the radical we would know him to become, these early postings do point towards one notable difference between himself and many of his contemporaries “The fact that Müntzer did not call upon the Gospels or the Bible to act as witness...indicates an early divergence between Müntzer and the official Wittenberg line.”¹⁰² (Drummond 55-56) Despite this, Müntzer was still a welcome presence within the larger reform movement, though these loose friendships would soon sour.

Already somewhat of a rabble-rouser, Müntzer’s theology would take a turn towards radical millenarianism after taking up a posting at Zwickau on the Bohemian border in 1520. As we discussed in Luther's chapter, this was the home of the Zwickau prophets, whose intrusion into Wittenberg in 1522 prompted Luther's return from his refuge in Wartburg Castle. It should surprise no one then, that our future firebrand had rubbed elbows with these men. But what made Zwickau such fertile ground for radicalism? Zwickau was a wealthy Imperial city, largely independent from the feudal authority of smaller nobles and the territorial Princes. “As a result, the burghers of Zwickau exhibited a highly independent attitude towards the Papal Church, and numbered among the very first conquests of the Wittenberg reform movement.”¹⁰³ (Drummond 64) Just as in Prague a century prior “The presence of such industry and wealth inevitably gave rise to vociferous groups of artisans and poor craftsmen and women, each demanding a say in the democratic management of town affairs.”¹⁰⁴ These artisans provided Müntzer with another glance into the popular millenarian Christianity which had migrated from Bohemia as “among

¹⁰² Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 55-56.

¹⁰³ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 64.

¹⁰⁴ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 74.

the weavers in Zwickau were many followers of German and Bohemian spiritualism who drew their inspiration from the Taborite wing of the Hussite Reformation.”¹⁰⁵

Foremost among these men, and no doubt the most influential on Müntzer was the weaver and lay preacher Nikolas Storch:

Storch himself had been in Bohemia and it was essentially the old Taborite doctrines that were revived in Storch’s teaching. He proclaimed that now, as in the days of the Apostles, God was communicating directly with his Elect; and the reason for this was that the Last Days were at hand. First the Turks must conquer the world and Antichrist must rule over it; but then - and it would be very soon - the Elect would rise up and annihilate all the godless, so that the Second Coming could take place and the Millennium begin.

It seems “As soon as Storch had enabled him to find himself Müntzer changed his way of life, abandoning reading and the pursuit of learning, condemning the Humanists who abounded amongst Luther’s followers, ceaselessly propagating his eschatological faith amongst the poor.”¹⁰⁶ This commitment to empowering Zwickau's downtrodden radicals eventually broke out into sectarian violence in the city, as supporters of the Old Church and Müntzer's followers came to blows. This ratcheting of tensions would eventually raise the eyebrows of those in Wittenberg who cautioned against any unnecessary ruffling of feathers lest their movement become discredited amongst the city's notables.¹⁰⁷

Unsurprisingly, these warnings would go largely unheeded by Müntzer, and his followers continued to agitate. Eventually, the town council had had enough and elected to relieve him of his post, though the drama of his expulsion was not yet over:

The weavers gathered en masse to give him a guard of honour on his way out of town. But things got out of hand; a riot ensued, in the course of which an impressive total of fifty-five weavers were arrested and held in prison overnight;

¹⁰⁵ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 74.

¹⁰⁶ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* 338.

¹⁰⁷ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 84-86.

and in the end Müntzer had to leave under cover of darkness. In an historical irony, on that very same day, 16 April 1521, on the other side of Germany, Martin Luther, well protected by his aristocratic supporters, had entered Worms to appear before the Emperor Charles V and the Imperial Diet.”¹⁰⁸

After April 16, both men seem to disappear, Luther, as we know now, was falsely kidnapped by his sponsor, Frederick the Wise, and offered protection in Wartburg Castle, while Müntzer journeyed over the border into Bohemia into where the radical movement was born. “The diverging geographical paths of the two reformers reflected their diverging theological and political paths – the one into the protection of the ruling class, the other into the historical territory of lower-class rebellion.”¹⁰⁹ Soon, these two visions of God will no longer be able to be reconciled.

Prague

After a short exploratory mission to the city of Zatec, where Taborism still held sway, Müntzer would soon set his sights on Prague itself.¹¹⁰ Though Müntzer would gain access to the city under the cover of the reform movement, and “was permitted to preach in a variety of chapels and churches, even in the great central Týn Church.... however, he seems to have been ejected from this comfortable accommodation after the university authorities realised that their guest was not necessarily a respectable ‘Martinian’.”¹¹¹ Before he returned to Germany, he put together what was to be his first full articulation of theology.

¹⁰⁸ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 86-87.

¹⁰⁹ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 89.

¹¹⁰ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 91.

¹¹¹ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 95.

Though this manifesto was never published, it points to the influence of the Taborites and the common people in his thoughts. He begins by acknowledging his stay in the city of the “saintly fighter Jan Hus”¹¹² (Drummond 98) before, in classical radical fashion, declaring “no self-absolved priest and no spirit-claiming monk has ever been able to show the basis of faith in even the smallest degree. I state freely and briskly that I have not heard one donkey-farting doctor whisper the least fraction or trace of the order of God and all creatures, let alone proclaim it out loud.” After disparaging the priests, Müntzer wasted no time hammering home the core tenets of his new theology:

Where the seed falls on good ground, that is in the heart which is full of the fear of God, that is then the paper and parchment upon which God writes the real spiritual word, not with ink, but with His living finger . . . And there is no more certain testimony which proves the Bible than God’s living word, which the Father speaks to the Son in the hearts of men. All the Elect can read this word.¹¹³

Here we see a culmination of influences intersect, as Müntzer articulates the doctrine of interpreting God’s will through one’s own faculties in a manner similar to how the Drummer of Niklashausen interpreted his visions or how Storch, himself likely influenced by that same strain of millenarian revelation, saw in every member of the elect an ability to receive God’s commandments. Müntzer then seemingly takes aim at figures like Luther, whose lawyerly approach to the word of God has in fact blinded them to the living revelation:

I affirm and swear by the living God: whoever does not hear the real living word of God from the mouth of God, and does not distinguish between Bible and Babel, he is nothing more than a dead thing. But God’s word, which penetrates heart, brain, skin, hair, bone, marrow, juice, strength and power, must come to us differently, and not in the way our foolish, scrotal doctors babble about.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 98.

¹¹³ Thomas Müntzer, “Prague Manifesto” in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 99.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Müntzer, “Prague Manifesto” in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 101.

Müntzer then breaks into another familiar trope, prophesying a final conflict that purges the world for the elect. “All villainy must urgently be brought to light. Oho! how ripe are the rotten apples! Oho! how ripe are the Elect! The time of the harvest is here! For this, God has sent me to his harvest. I have made my sickle sharp, for my thoughts are eager for truth and my lips, skin, hands, hair, soul, body and life curse the faithless.”¹¹⁵

Münter ends his tract with the words, “Thomas Müntzer wishes to pray to no dumb God but to a speaking God.”¹¹⁶ This is the most pure summation of Müntzers theology up to this point. Not only does the *Prague Manifesto* represent a clear break with the Reformation in Wittenberg, but it clearly articulates the idea of a living gospel, one which can be reinterpreted to suit the changing needs of man, and perhaps most importantly, is open to collective interpretation rather than that of “stare doctors.”¹¹⁷ Müntzer’s God is not chained and made “dumb” by immovable words, but rather, a living force that intervenes in the hearts and minds of humanity through revelation. That such divine revelation was open for all to interpret.

Despite finally realizing the contours of his theological vision, Müntzer and the radicals’ position at this time was far from favorable. Both his trip to Prague and the Zwickau Prophets’ journey to Wittenberg had ended in failure. “After two unsuccessful attempts to influence the course of the reform movement, Müntzer’s immediate problem at the end of 1521 was to find a home for the winter.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Thomas Müntzer, “Prague Manifesto,” 103.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Müntzer, “Prague Manifesto,” 103.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Müntzer, “Prague Manifesto,” 103.

¹¹⁸ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 112.

A Final Farewell

After Müntzer's return to the German territory of Thuringian, it is exceedingly difficult to say with any certainty where he stayed. A letter to Luther's aid and first contact with the Zwickau Prophets, Phillip Melanchthon, indicates that he may have briefly resided in the city of Erfurt before being driven out due to the interference of one Johann Lang, an ally of Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation who collectively had been pushing out more radical elements since the disturbance caused by the Zwickau prophets in Wittenberg earlier in the year. More important than the clue at Müntzer's physical whereabouts however was his final, open break with Luther and his reformist allies. Indeed, Müntzer's radical tendencies had long chafed against the more conservative of the reformers as is made clear from his expulsion from Zwickau and Prague, yet in those instances he had been operating, at least nominally, as their associate. Now, there could be no doubt that Müntzer had begun a

Müntzer's letter to Melanchthon uses much of the same language of the aborted Prague Manifesto, chastising Melanchthon, and by extension, all of Luther's allies for their veneration of the scripture without applying it to the living needs of man. After a brief salutation, he begins, "I reproach you in this, that you worship a dumb God, without knowing whether you are elect or damned . . . It is indeed your error, dearest, that everything has been undertaken in ignorance of the living word . . . Man does not live by bread alone, but in all the words which proceed out of the mouth of God: you see – 'out of the mouth of God' and not from books."¹¹⁹ His emphasis on the mouth of God again points to Müntzer's belief in a living, speaking god, alive outside the dead pages of the scripture. Müntzer continues: "Indeed, the distress of Christians is imminent... Dear brother, stop your delays, it is time! Do not delay, the summer is nigh. Do not reconcile

¹¹⁹ Thomas Müntzer, "Letter to Melanchthon," in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 116.

with the damned, for they will prevent the word from acting with great strength. Do not seek admiration from your princes, for then your audience will be subverted.”¹²⁰ Here we again see the millenarian influence on Müntzer as well as his belief that the princes are not of the elect and are in fact a poison pill for the entire cause of reform. If Luther's abduction from Worms and Müntzer's simultaneous expulsion from Zwickau a year prior had represented a symbolic split between the radicals and the reformers, it would be with this letter that Müntzer would officially notarize the schism, leading to a far more personal rivalry with Luther as well as a ratcheting up of tensions between their respective movements.

Needless to say, Müntzer's advice was not headed by Melanchthon or his master. The influence of the letter was then obviously minimal and contains nothing novel in regards to the evolution of Müntzer's thought, yet outside of the words contained within the letter, there lies one notable detail about Müntzer's writing. “Apart from one letter to Luther in 1523, this was also his last major letter in Latin, the language of the academics.”¹²¹ Despite the powerful and combative language of Müntzer's letter, this small detail of language is perhaps the most indicative of the split between Müntzer and the Wittenberg Reformers. From this point, Müntzer would no longer expend effort making rhetorical appeals in the cloistered language of the clergy and academics. As we will soon see, Müntzer would resist all efforts to debate his detractors behind closed doors, God's revelation was open to all.

¹²⁰ Thomas Müntzer, “Letter to Melanchthon,” 116.

¹²¹ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 114.

The Spirit of Allstedt

After bouncing between small posts for over a year, encountering friction with the moderate Wittenberg reformists at every turn, Müntzer would finally find refuge in the Saxon town of Allstedt. This new post was ideal for Müntzer. The sleepy town of Allstedt was small enough to avoid the interference of Wittenberg, yet the obstinance of the local nobility who still gave their loyalty to the old church made the area ripe for the kinds of reforms Müntzer had been piecing together during his year of wandering. Almost as soon as he arrived, Müntzer would initiate a broad overhaul of the Latin mass and the liturgy. The speed at which Müntzer instituted his reforms indicates that he had been working towards such a goal far before his arrival at Allstedt and it was through this simple first step that Müntzer would begin the work of making his radical Theology accessible to the common man. But why begin a revolution with something as seemingly inconsequential as a hymn? “The answer is quite simply this:”

that church services constituted the one forum in which the main body of the populace encountered theological ideas. Academic debate on the rights and wrongs of ‘good works’, or the provenance of belief, would pass far above the heads of uneducated people, but participating in church services had some immediate bearing on their lives. It was the sole occasion on which any message concerning the works of God might be transmitted. Up until the 1520s it would have been impossible to exploit such an opportunity for education, because much of the business of celebration was conducted in Latin, or in whatever might pass for Latin in the mouth of some half-educated cleric. The sacraments and rites were simply so much necessary magic, and incomprehensible to the people.¹²²

It was this very incomprehensibility of the Latin Mass that Müntzer aimed to eliminate through not only conducting services in vernacular German but by increasing audience participation through hymns purposefully composed to connect their lives to Müntzer's vision.

Müntzer was well aware of the educational problems faced by the peasantry; in his pamphlet of late 1524, *An Explicit Exposure of False Faith*, he wrote that the ‘poor man cannot learn to read because he is troubled for nourishment, and they

¹²² Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 128.

preach unashamedly that the poor man should let himself be skinned and scraped by the tyrants. So how can he learn to read the scriptures?’ The only alternative option available to the illiterate and the needy was a ‘living’ witness; and Müntzer provided the theoretical justification for such a witness.¹²³

At the same time Müntzer was radically overhauling how the common people would interact with theological ideas, “Luther had long since rolled back the earlier changes to church services....The Latin Mass had been reintroduced to Wittenberg in 1522, and in 1523 Luther was defending the use of Latin and the retention of old practices, mostly for fear of upsetting Friedrich of Saxony.” Here again, we see the interplay between theology and political realities and how Luther and Müntzer were being pulled away from a common vision of reform by the centripetal forces of their respective bases of support. Luther may have spoken of a priesthood of all believers, but his actions said otherwise, it was Müntzer, by sharing the living word of scripture through liturgy, who would carry on the work of giving the common folk a say and stake in their spiritual destiny. “It should be understood, then, that these reforms constituted the gearing mechanism between Müntzer’s revolutionary theology and the forces of social revolution.”¹²⁴

When Müntzer’s preaching in Allstedt drew the unwanted attention of the local Duke, Ernst of Mansfeld, who sent his soldiers to stop pilgrims from making their way to Allstedt to hear the words of their new preacher, Müntzer petitioned once more to justify himself to Frederick the Wise, writing:

I have often thought how I should like to cast down the iron walls before the poor in spirit, and I have seen that Christianity cannot be rescued from the jaws of the raging lion unless one promotes the pure clear word of God and removes the

¹²³ Drummond, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 202.

¹²⁴ Drummond, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 129.

bushel or lid that conceals it, and one deals with the Biblical truth before the whole world... to sing and preach it unhidden and tirelessly.¹²⁵

His petitions would not be limited to letters however, in the summer of 1524, he would have the chance to present his project directly to the Princes themselves when, on the return to a trip to the town of Halberstadt, “Duke Johann, his son Johann Friedrich, and an assortment of important courtiers...accompanied by a troop of 200 horsemen”¹²⁶ arrived in Allstedt and stayed a night in its castle. When Müntzer himself proposed a meeting, the curious princes obliged, likely intrigued by the unruly preacher. The curiosity was no doubt exacerbated by a warning from Frederick the Wise to Duke Johann warning his fellow prince to carefully scrutinize any material printed by Müntzer.¹²⁷ Intrigued, the princes accepted Müntzers proposal and received his sermon in which he essentially proposes an alliance between the common people and the rulers, offering the princes the position as the Elects’ vanguard against the Papists and while peppering them with not-so-subtle threats, such as:

Christ our Lord says, Matthew 18[:6], “Whosoever does evil to one of these little ones, it is better for him that a millstone be hung about his neck and that he be thrown into the depths of the sea.” He who wishes, twisting and turning here and there, can gloss over this. But these are the words of Christ. Now, if Christ can say this about someone who does evil to one of the little ones, what should be said about those who do evil to a great multitude in their faith? For this is how arch-villains act, who do evil to the whole world and make it deviate from the true Christian faith, and who say that no one shall know the mysteries of God.¹²⁸

He then offers the princes an alliance, offering his own services as he continues:

¹²⁵ Thomas Müntzer, “An Explicit Exposure of False Faith,” in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 202.

¹²⁶ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 168.

¹²⁷ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 168

¹²⁸ Thomas Müntzer, “Sermon to the Princes,” in *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War*, ed. Baylor, Michael G. (Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, Mass: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012) 71.

Therefore a new Daniel must arise and interpret your revelation for you. And this same new Daniel must go forth, as Moses teaches, Deuteronomy 20, at the head of the troops. He must reconcile the anger of the princes and that of the enraged people. For if you were truly to experience the shame of Christendom and the deception of the false clergy and incorrigible rogues, then no one could imagine how enraged at them you would become.¹²⁹

Here Müntzer is seemingly oblivious to the fact that they had already chosen a far more cooperative (if not quiet) ally in Luther. He concludes his sermon, “He to whom is given all power in heaven and on earth [Christ] wants to lead the government, Matthew 28[:18]. To you, most beloved, may God grant eternal protection. Amen.”¹³⁰ It should surprise no one that the princes had no interest in leading Müntzer's vision of heaven on earth. His millenarian vision offered them nothing they did not already possess.

Though we spent nearly our entire section on Luther criticizing his fundamental misunderstanding of the Peasantry, Müntzer's *Sermon to the Princes* demonstrates his own profound misunderstanding of the Princes. Perhaps his success at Allstedt had instilled a newfound confidence after so many years moving from place to place, or perhaps his belief in the imminence of Christ's return drove him to extend an olive branch, but regardless “the mismatch between his aspirations and reality reflects the huge gap between the aims of the German radical reform movement and the actual social and political conditions in which these aims were nurtured. There was, of course, no way that the princes of Saxony would ever form an alliance with Müntzer.”¹³¹ In any case, the Princes took Müntzer's not threatening sermon surprisingly well, simply riding on, no doubt amused at their encounter.

¹²⁹ Thomas Müntzer, “Sermon to the Princes,” 71.

¹³⁰ Thomas Müntzer, “Sermon to the Princes,” 73.

¹³¹ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 174.

Despite achieving little with his *Sermon to the Princes*, Müntzer was far from finished organizing his project in Allstedt, only a few weeks later, he took the monumental step of forming a defense league, justifying such an organization in the following terms: “There must be organised a simple league, so that the common man may unite with pious administrators only for the sake of the gospel . . . [It] should only be a warning to the godless that they should cease their raging so that the Elect may learn the knowledge and wisdom of God with all proofs.”¹³² Soon perhaps 500 Allstedters, including the town council (who signed with the understanding that their fellow elect would continue their payment of taxes) had joined Müntzer's league.

Unfortunately, this league would show itself to be largely for show. When Müntzer was summoned and summarily dismissed from his post by representatives of the Saxon elector, the league could do little to stop the proceedings. His print shop shuttered and his position lost, he climbed the village walls at night and once again, our radical preacher had become a vagabond. In Allstedt Müntzer “left behind any idea that the Saxon princes could be guided by the radical theologians.”¹³³ The path beyond the Allstedt walls would lead Müntzer from his former position of radical reformer towards that of fully fledged revolutionary.

With that one mind, we once again return to lessons learned before we plunge into the Peasants' War. Müntzer, like Luther, had not created the demand for his ideals but rather shaped himself to fit the mold of a radical leader. His contact with radical groups in Zwickau and Prague in particular pulled him further into an orbit of radicalism that was increasingly incompatible with the reform movement in Wittenberg. Next, though many of his works would go unpublished, limiting the scope of his impact, there was a popular demand for his ideals, and his

¹³² Thomas Müntzer, “Letter to Zeiss,” in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 177.

¹³³ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 191.

synthesis of millenarian theology with practical programs demonstrates that his ideology represented a genuine alternative to the program of reform envisioned by Luther. Finally, though he clearly possessed the mind for movement building, as we will soon see, the forces with whom he made common cause would be largely powerless against the counterstrike of the status quo they sought to overthrow.

Part 4: Revolution

Mühlhausen

Müntzer's next refuge after his latest exile would be the Imperial City of Mühlhausen. In a letter back to Allstedt, Müntzer makes clear that he has no intention of ceasing his preachings, writing "I should have kept quiet like some dumb dog? But why then should I make a living from preaching? . . . Perhaps I should have just let it all crash down on me and suffer death, so that the godless could do what they wanted with me and afterwards boast that they had strangled Satan? No, certainly not! The fear of God in me will not yield to the insolence of another."¹³⁴ Though writing from a place of deep frustration, it is clear that he has far from given up the fight. His theological belief that revelation was only revealed through suffering must have convinced him he was still on the righteous path. Luther, likely somewhat responsible for Müntzer's dismissal from Allstedt, as always, vehemently disagreed:

Luther warned the authorities in Mühlhausen about the teaching of this 'false spirit and prophet who goes about in sheep's clothing but underneath is a ravening wolf'. He informed them of Müntzer's past in Zwickau and Allstedt, where he had proved 'what kind of tree he is, for he bears no other fruit than murder and riot, and provokes bloodshed'. And he advised the council to probe Müntzer's theology with the greatest care.¹³⁵

Unfortunately for Luther, the town council was in no situation to act on his warning largely thanks to the actions of one radical preacher, Heinrich Pfeiffer. "Born with the family name of 'Schwertfeger', Pfeiffer perhaps adopted his new name, meaning 'piper', in recognition of the leader of the 1476 peasant revolt in Niklashausen, who had various nicknames including 'der Pfeiffer'."¹³⁶ Pfeiffer, like Müntzer, had been expelled from Mühlhausen around the same time

¹³⁴ Thomas Müntzer, "Letter to Allstedt Town Council," in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 210.

¹³⁵ Drummond, Andrew. *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 217.

¹³⁶ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 220.

and for the same reasons as Müntzer in Allstedt, though an appeal to Prince Johann would see him reinstated; Saxon Princes were full of surprises. Mühlhausen was therefore already experiencing upheaval as Müntzer arrived. Indeed, the city was fertile ground for insurrection, “half the population of the town - a larger proportion, so far as is known, than in any other German town at that time - consisted of paupers, who in times of crisis always showed themselves ready for radical social experiments.”¹³⁷ Such terrain should be familiar to us, as the situation in Mühlhausen closely mirrored that of Prague before the outbreak of radicalism there a century earlier. In any case, Müntzer soon found himself working alongside fellow radicals, and soon the city became a hub for those sympathetic to the radical cause.¹³⁸

Through the efforts of Pfeiffer and Müntzer, these radicals had even elected a new town council to the elation of the town's poor, and in particular, its weaving guild. Such was the popularity of the new reforms, that when the old town council, backed by the city's wealthy residents attempted to reassert their power, their hired muscle defected to the radicals' cause.¹³⁹

Interestingly, Müntzer left soon after, though he would return in force in the coming year.

Müntzer's reason for leaving Mühlhausen was to travel to Nürnberg, where he published his last great pamphlet. *A Highly Provoked Vindication and a Reply to the Spiritless Easy-Living Flesh in Wittenberg who has Sullied Wretched Christianity with his Falsification and Theft of the Holy Scriptures* (a mouthful to be sure) was, as the name suggests, an all-out assault on Luther, the cacophony of insults leveled at him include, among others, “the most ambitious Doctor Liar”, ‘the sycophantic scoundrel of Wittenberg’, ‘the easy-living opinionist’, ‘Doctor Ludibrius’ (ridiculous), ‘the godless Wittenberg flesh’, ‘the spiteful black raven’, ‘Father Tread-Softly’, ‘the

¹³⁷ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 349.

¹³⁸ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 223.

¹³⁹ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 225-227.

proud, inflated, spiteful dragon’, ‘Esau’ – or quite simply, but no less abusively, ‘monk,’” already give us quite the picture. Aside from the long list of insults however, the pamphlet makes many attacks similar to what we've seen in the *Prague Manifesto* and Müntzer's parting letter to Melancthon, but it does make one powerful additional argument against Luther, “The fact that you were able to stand before the Empire at Worms is all thanks to the German nobility, whose mouth you have smeared well with honey, because they fully expected that you would make them some gifts of the Bohemian kind with your preaching – that is, hand over monasteries and religious foundations to them – as you are now promising the princes.”¹⁴⁰ Perhaps with the events at Mühlhausen so closely mirroring that of the Czech reforms a century prior, Müntzer may have identified Luther with the Hussites who betrayed their millenarian brethren, whatever drove him to make the comparison, the message was clear: Luther's entire public career had played right into the hands of the Princes. After finishing this last vitriolic work, Müntzer left Nürnberg and headed southwest, headfirst into the initial stirrings of the Peasants' War.

Godly Law

While Müntzer and Pfeiffer had been sparring with town councils and publishing pamphlets, a fully fledged rebellion had already sparked in the Southern region of Upper Swabia. This was the traditional territory of The Bundschuh, and it is doubtless that survivors of previous uprisings were now contributing to the startling spread of this latest revolt. They had chosen their timing well, the vast majority of the Empire's mercenary armies were deployed battling Turks in Hungary or otherwise their fellow Christians in Italy, in any case, they wouldn't be available until

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Müntzer, “A Highly Provoked Vindication and a Reply to the Spiritless Easy-Living Flesh in Wittenberg who has Sullied Wretched Christianity with his Falsification and Theft of the Holy Scriptures,” in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 232.

the following Spring after the Empire's victory over the French in Italy. In the meantime, the nobility was forced to parley with the rebels. "The authorities dragged out these negotiations through the winter to gain time to regroup their armies and meet the rebellion with force in the spring. The lengthy discussions, however, also enabled the peasantry to spread their cause to other areas."¹⁴¹

While thus far we have concerned ourselves with the theology of the reformers and radicals through Luther and Müntzer, it is here in 1524 that we'll return to the conditions of the peasants themselves. In the years since the Bundschuh and risings, little had changed in terms of the economic and political prospects of the German peasantry. It is important to establish some context for the political and economic tensions which had come to dominate the lives of the peasantry at the dawn of the 16th century. Though the feudal system of the Holy Roman Empire was still fully intact:

A hundred years had sufficed to disentangle the overlapping possessions and intertwined rights of landlordship. In short, although in 1400 a village might have had three, four, or even more lords, often with nearly equal shares of the village, a century later the weight had shifted to the advantage of one lord, who was now the dominant landlord and usually the local ruler despite the vestigial claims of other lords.¹⁴²

Just as we saw when Frederick the Wise rolled back the reformist ordinance at Wittenberg, these territorial rulers possessed increasing authority over the daily lives of his subjects. "The peasant now lived closer to his lord, and fell more easily under the grip of the administration; in short, he was now more effectively controlled.... lordship had become government."¹⁴³ Whereas in the previous centuries, the confused feudal structure had allowed peasant villages a degree of

¹⁴¹ Drummond, Andrew. *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 244.

¹⁴² Blicke, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, 47.

¹⁴³ Blicke, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, 49.

self-rule, “gradually, through the fifteenth century, the farmer’s position worsened, and this process accelerated in the decades before 1525 because usage rights were restricted, services were increased, and tax burdens fell with full effect on farming enterprises.”¹⁴⁴ Such pressures did not simply affect the pocketbook:

These economic difficulties had a social impact, especially because the landlord, as seen in the early sixteenth century, was not a party about whom one could legally complain. Rents had not been increased, old customs had not been injured, and consequently forceful demands could not be presented to the government since they could not be legally justified. Without a basis in law the peasant of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did not make demands; at most he made humble petitions.¹⁴⁵

This is where the notions of godly law, as spread by Luther and his fellow reformers, but existing in a more radical form since Niklashausen, became so incendiary. The peasants now possessed a mechanism through which they could justify their demands. As we saw from earlier rebellions in the 15th century and the early years of the 16th, peasants had long used the idea of “old law” as a defense from new taxes or feudal duties, yet “From the lords’ perspective, their policies were perfectly in accord with ancient tradition and territorial custom. This blocked any sort of compromise and left the peasant in a defensive position from which only the divine law could free him.”¹⁴⁶ Therefore, with godly law, the common people were no longer forced simply to react to the impositions of feudal lords and the territorial state, they now possessed a framework through which they could now go on the legal offensive. In the context of the growing insurrection, these new notions are best articulated by the widespread *Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants*. This document, published in the spring of 1525, quickly became the standard on which many similar peasant constitutions were based. Even when the specific

¹⁴⁴ Blickle, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, 51.

¹⁴⁵ Blickle, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, 51.

¹⁴⁶ Blickle, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, 92.

demands of the articles did not match local contexts “either because feudalism was still too stable or because the early modern state had already leached out the inner strength of feudalism, the superstructure of the godly law could be stripped off and made independent of the original demands, and thus be used to support demands with quite a different content.”¹⁴⁷ Regardless, notions of godly law are evident within the document:

In the printed editions of the Articles, the margins are cluttered with references to chapters of the Bible, each reference providing scriptural justification for their ‘humble plea and request’. It was only in the early months of 1525 that formal religion began to play a major role in underpinning the demands of the lower classes; significantly, the justification by biblical reference marched in lockstep with the adoption of standardised demands – here was the Reformation in synthesis with revolution.¹⁴⁸

What's perhaps most surprising about the articles is their moderate tone, which was a far cry from the millenarian understanding of Müntzer or the Taborites. Nevertheless, taken together, the moderate tone betrays a radical attack on the social order. The majority of the articles relate to demands we have seen time and time again over the last century. Rights to hunt and fish along with access to woodlands and pastures make up a fourth of the demands, a further half demand either the abolishment or renegotiation of feudal dues and obligations or otherwise redefine feudal justice leaving us with three demands of which we can now comment.¹⁴⁹ Our first article shows the influence of the reform movement on the rebels, who state “First, it is our humble desire and request, and the intention and conviction of us all, that henceforth we want to have the

¹⁴⁷ Blicke, Peter, *The Revolution of 1525*, 92.

¹⁴⁸ Drummond, Andrew. *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 247.

¹⁴⁹ Sebastian Lotzer and Christof Schappeler, “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” in *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War*, ed. Baylor, Michael G. (Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, Mass: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012) 76-82.

authority and power for a whole congregation to elect and appoint its own pastor.”¹⁵⁰ Nothing earth-shattering here, but not for long:

Third, until now it has been the custom for us to be regarded as a lord’s personal property. This is deplorable since Christ redeemed us all with the shedding of his precious blood — the shepherd as well as the most highly placed, without exception. Thus, Scripture establishes that we are and want to be free....Without a doubt, as true and just Christians, you will also gladly release us from serfdom, or show us from the gospel that we should be serfs.¹⁵¹

While the other articles which demanded economic and legal reform left much room for negotiation, the complete abolition of serfdom represented an incredible threat to the social order, one that left authorities, whose economic dominance was predicated on serfdom, little choice but to violently reject. Finally, our last unusual article highlights the importance of godly law as the foundation of the articles’ demands. “Twelfth, it is our conclusion and final conviction that if one or more of the articles we have composed here is not in accordance with the Word of God, we will retract these articles, if they can be shown to be improper according to the Word of God. We will renounce them if they are explained to be false on the basis of Scripture.”¹⁵² A somewhat underwhelming article that nonetheless highlights the importance of theology as a core pillar of the peasants’ understanding of their project.

It should be obvious from these articles, which were broadly representative of the tone of peasant demands throughout Germany, that their project was far more practical than that of the millenarian Taborites a century earlier. This does not mean that their demands were at all accepted by the status quo and were roundly rejected, as we will see from Luther’s response.

¹⁵⁰ Sebastian Lotzer and Christof Schappeler, “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” 77.

¹⁵¹ Sebastian Lotzer and Christof Schappeler, “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” 78-79.

¹⁵² Sebastian Lotzer and Christof Schappeler, “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” 76-82.

Therefore the Twelve Articles and documents like it represent a middle ground between the millenarian ideals of figures like Müntzer and top-down reform imagined by Luther. Godly law as conceived by the peasantry took an entirely different meaning from what it meant to the Protestant princes.

Luther's Response

Always ready to assert himself into a controversy, Luther himself could not resist the call to criticize the articles laid out in the twelfth article and would respond to each of the twelve articles and the broader context of the growing insurrection. Though the situation on the ground was quickly spiraling beyond Luther's ability to control it, his *Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles* helps to encapsulate the views of moderate reformers at the time. He begins unsurprisingly “What pleases me the most about these articles is the twelfth, where the peasants offer to accept better instruction gladly and willingly, if something is lacking or necessary to be added in their document.”¹⁵³ Luther then lays blame for the uprisings at the feet of men such as Müntzer, though we know his influence to be largely absent from the region, continuing “A great part of God’s wrath has already come, for God is sending many false teachers and prophets among us, so that through our error and blasphemy we may richly deserve hell and everlasting damnation.”¹⁵⁴ He even suggests that his work had already articulated a superior framework for reform, continuing, “I would have formulated other articles against you that would have dealt with all Germany and its government. I did this in my book To the German Nobility, when more was at stake; but because you made light of that, you must now listen to and

¹⁵³ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles” in *The Annotated Luther: Volume 5, Christian Life in the World*, ed. Hillerbrand, Hans Joachim. (Minneapolis [Minnesota]: Fortress Press, 2017) 296.

¹⁵⁴ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles,” 301-302.

put up with these selfish articles. It serves you right for being a people to whom nothing can be told.”¹⁵⁵ Luther's tone for much of his *Admonition* is entirely unconstructive and self-important, he says little that he has not already thoroughly outlined in earlier works, yet his repudiation of the all-important third article provides the most insight into the irreconcilable differences between his theology and that of the common man, writing:

You assert that no one is to be the serf of anyone else, because Christ has made us all free. That is making Christian freedom a completely physical matter....This article would make all people equal and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom; and that is impossible. A worldly kingdom cannot exist without an inequality of persons, some being free, some imprisoned, some lords, some subjects, etc.¹⁵⁶

If such an argument is to be accepted, the line between Heaven and Earth is forever permanently drawn. The same logic precludes any of the broader social reforms outlined by the peasants. Godly law therefore has no bearing on the solidity of temporal hierarchy. Luther continues “The other articles, which discuss the freedom to hunt game animals and birds, to catch fish, to use wood from the forest, the obligation to provide free labor, the amount of rents and taxes, the death tax, etc., are all matters for the lawyers to discuss. It is not fitting that I, an evangelist, should judge or make decisions in such matters.”¹⁵⁷ It shouldn't be surprising at this point that Luther would attempt to disconnect the peasants' call for the abolition of serfdom from the articles, as they too factor in the hierarchy that separated the peasants from their lords. In the words of Peter Blickle, “An abolition of serfdom should not be isolated from the other articles. Instead of being a merely theoretical objection, the attack on serfdom must be seen in the context of other articles demanding an end to the death tax and to restrictions on freedom of movement

¹⁵⁵ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles,” 307.

¹⁵⁶ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles,” 325-326.

¹⁵⁷ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles,” 327.

and freedom to marry—all of which flowed from serfdom.”¹⁵⁸ Therefore, by hand waving eight of the peasants' articles as simply outside the purview of an “evangelist,” Luther has further undermined his ability to defuse the conflict. Though the peasants had invited theologians such as Luther to critique their articles, “peasants wanted not only to hear the gospel but ‘to live accordingly,’”¹⁵⁹ a truth that Luther again thoroughly rejected, writing “The gospel needs no physical place or city in which to dwell; it will and must dwell in hearts.”¹⁶⁰ Yet if Luther's theology could not help the peasants to see their wish realized, then it had made itself superfluous, perhaps an idea he has himself been grappling with as he concludes his refutation of the Twelve Articles in a somewhat defeated tone: “Please remember that you have gladly offered to receive instruction on the basis of Scripture. So when this reaches you, do not be so ready to scream, ‘Luther flatters the princes and speaks contrary to the gospel’” he concludes, “First read and examine my arguments from Scripture. For this is your affair; I am excused in the sight of God and the world.”¹⁶¹ Luther's response, as he predicted, had little effect on the rebels, but the contours of his arguments would be indicative of

Thuringian Rebellion

When Müntzer returned to Mühlhausen from the Southwest, he brought rebellion with him. In his absence, Pfeiffer had instituted many of the radical reforms Müntzer had made in Allstedt. Soon after his arrival, a general call was put out and a militia of several thousand men was assembled. However, their military proficiency and commitment were perhaps not at ideal

¹⁵⁸ Blickle, Peter. *The Revolution of 1525*, 68-69.

¹⁵⁹ Blickle, Peter. *The Revolution of 1525*, 93.

¹⁶⁰ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles,” 323.

¹⁶¹ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Response to the Twelve Articles,” 327.

levels. “The people of Mühlhausen were quite happy to destroy the buildings and icons of the old religion, and pleased to accept the new reformed religion, but they were not yet ready to take seriously Müntzer’s Apocalyptic vision, or even the more mundane likelihood of armed retaliation from the ruling houses of Saxony.”¹⁶² Despite the less-than-inspiring state of the town's militia, Pfeiffer and Müntzer's political reforms were far more successful, helping elect a so-called Eternal Council and fully doing away with the old church.¹⁶³ Mühlhausen was the ideal example of the radical Reformation, it was not to last.

Rebelling cities all over the region had emulated Mühlhausen. “The classic cycle of urban revolt, installation of reformed preachers, and the overthrow of councils... was played out in Fulda, Eisenach, Erfurt and elsewhere. The townspeople, and particularly the lower classes, played a major role in the Thuringian events.”¹⁶⁴ As the scale of the Thuringian uprising grew Müntzer even appealed to his old supporters in Allstedt, writing:

May the pure fear of God be with you, dear brothers. How much longer will you sleep, how much longer will you resist God’s will because you think He has forsaken you? . . . Stop flattering those perverted fantasists, those godless evil-doers, but rather begin now and fight the Lord’s fight!... It is time, the evil-doers are running scared like dogs . . . On, on, onwards, for the fire is hot! Do not let your sword grow cold, do not let it hang loose in your hands! Smite cling clang on the anvil of Nimrod; cast down their towers! As long as they live, it is not possible to be emptied of the fear of Man. You can be told nothing about God as long as they rule over you. On, onwards, while you have daylight. God marches before you, so follow, follow! God . . . will strengthen you in the true belief without the fear of Man. Amen. Thomas Müntzer, a servant of God against the Godless.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 267.

¹⁶³ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 263-265

¹⁶⁴ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 278

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Müntzer, “Letter to the Miners,” in *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Drummond, Andrew. (First edition hardback. London: Verso, 2024) 274.

This letter, apart from being a recruitment tool, demonstrates that the millenarian moment that Müntzer had so long dreamed of was, in his eyes, finally at hand. Despite Allstedt's current council's cooperation with Wittenberg, hundreds nevertheless answered the call. If they shared in the millenarian vision, we cannot know, regardless they would now fight and die for Müntzer's vision of Heaven

Meanwhile, the princes of neighboring Saxony watched in deep concern as the Thuringian rebels swelled in number and began targeting the estates of local nobility, yet sectional differences prevented swift action:

The Albertine Duke Georg and the Ernestine princes Friedrich and Johann could not come to an agreement on who was to have the privilege – and in alliance with whom – of putting down the unrest in Thuringia: the political and religious structures were so closely intertwined that neither princely party trusted the other with control of the repression. Friedrich the Wise, in particular, was nervous of permitting his Catholic cousin Georg to take any steps against the rebellious towns, lest that endangered the religious reforms which Friedrich himself had championed.¹⁶⁶

It was only after the death of Frederick the Wise and the arrival of Philipp of Hesse, fresh off the suppression of the uprising in his territory that the Saxon electors began to rally their forces.¹⁶⁷ Such was the state of affairs when the city of Frankenhhausen called for aid.

With the forces of the Protestant Philipp and the Catholic Georg converging on Frankenhhausen, Müntzer had promised his support, though the Eternal Council of Mühlhausen elected only to provide volunteers. Even so, Müntzer still managed to rally over a thousand men, even though they were forced to finance their provisions. Of these, 300 were selected. While there could be no doubt about these men's commitment, their skill at warfare remained

¹⁶⁶ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 277.

¹⁶⁷ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 297

untested.¹⁶⁸ Soon these men along with Müntzer joined the contingent of Frankenhäusen, altogether numbering some 8000 where they faced the combined armies of Duke Georg and Philipp of Hesse numbering 2800 cavalry and a further 4000 infantry.¹⁶⁹

The peasant army was assembled on a hill outside Frankenhäusen in a crude wagon fort. Though they outnumbered the Saxon forces, they were hopelessly outmatched. The peasants offered their opponents a ceasefire, which was quickly met with an ultimatum: their own lives in exchange for Müntzer's. Müntzer gave a speech in which he assured his comrades that God assured them victory, a promise that seemed all the more real after the appearance of a rainbow, the symbol of the peasants' flag.¹⁷⁰ Whether this miracle convinced enough of the men present is not known, the princes grew tired of waiting for a response and opened fire.

Meeting a fate reminiscent of the Niklashausen pilgrims fifty years prior "The peasants had made no preparations to use what artillery they had nor even to escape. Indeed they were still singing 'Come, Holy Spirit' - as though expecting the Second Coming at that very moment - when the first and only salvo was fired."¹⁷¹ The barrage set the rebels scattering only to be cut down by the princes' cavalry. In the end "Half of the adult male population of Frankenhäusen was put to the sword."¹⁷² Müntzer himself was not among the 7000 souls that had been cut down.¹⁷³ He successfully fled the battlefield into the city, only to be discovered by a soldier who caught him red-handed with the bag of letters that identified him. As for Müntzer himself, he was

¹⁶⁸ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 290-292.

¹⁶⁹ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 302.

¹⁷⁰ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 357.

¹⁷¹ Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 357.

¹⁷² Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 307.

¹⁷³ Drummond, Andrew, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, 307.

dragged before the Princes, Protestant and Catholic alike questioned and tortured before eventually being executed in Mühlhausen after its subsequent subjugation and there ended the short-lived Thuringian rebellion. The princes not content with Müntzer and Pfeiffer's heads on stakes, imposed one final humiliation on the people of Mühlhausen by reinstating the Latin mass.

Such was the slaughter that a soldier named Assa Von Kram who had participated in the butchery approached Luther later that year at the coronation of Prince John as Saxon Elector asking the preacher how he could kill as a follower of Christ. Luther's lengthy response published months later offers us little not already expressed by Luther, but it serves as an alt summation of the theological logic that undergirded the princes' violent crackdown. "In thinking about a soldier's office we must not focus on the killing, burning, striking, hitting, seizing, etc. This is what children see with their limited and restricted vision when they regard a doctor as only a sawbones who amputates the hand or the leg, but do not see that he does this in order to save the whole body."¹⁷⁴ Here Luther seemingly tells our troubled soldier that his own conscience is an obstacle toward realizing God's will, that the pangs of guilt felt after cutting down fellow Christians are akin to childish misunderstanding. Such a view seemingly severs one's conscience from God, his will to be understood through static laws and duties that are conveniently aligned with the laws of secular authorities. We have no way of knowing if Von Kram found solace in Luther's reply. Neither did it matter if others were convinced by his arguments. Words were no longer necessary to prove that "the Revolution of the Common Man and the Lutheran Reformation had become two different, largely incompatible movements."¹⁷⁵.

¹⁷⁴Martin Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved" in *The Annotated Luther: Volume 5, Christian Life in the World*, ed. Hillerbrand, Hans Joachim. (Minneapolis [Minnesota]: Fortress Press, 2017)

¹⁷⁵ Blicke, Peter. *The Revolution of 1525*, xxiii.

Epilogue

Detente with the Devil

Though Luther's reputation had taken a dire blow after the Peasants' War, it is undeniable that it was his project that triumphed over rival radicals like Müntzer. The Wittenberg Reform movement, under the supervision of the territorial Princes, would dictate what it meant to be a Protestant. To explain the end, in many ways, we will return to where we began. In 1530, in an effort to restore religious unity throughout his empire, Charles V would once again summon an Imperial Diet, this time in the city of Augsburg.

Martin Luther's most loyal ally and colleague, Phillip Melanchthon, would attend, drafting the core tenets of the reformed faith. Ironically, despite being an articulation of the Lutheran Faith, Luther himself was left out of the proceedings, still officially an outlaw after his last altercation with the Emperor at Worms almost a decade prior. Despite this, there can be no doubt Luther trusted his friend for the task, writing a year prior in 1529:

I was born for this purpose: to fight with the rebels and the devils and to lead the charge. Therefore my books are very stormy and warlike. I have to uproot trunks and stumps, hack at thorns and hedges, and fill in the potholes. So I am the crude woodsman, who has to clear and make the path. But Master Philip comes after me meticulously and quietly, builds and plants, sows and waters happily, according to the talents God has richly given him.¹⁷⁶

With the rebels laid low and their leaders' heads on pikes, perhaps it was now time for a more subtle approach, nevertheless, Melanchthon would not have written anything liable to be disagreeable to Luther.

The first of the Confession's provisions which we could relate to the Peasants' War is relatively obvious given Luther's grudging deference to the Saxon Princes both during and in the

¹⁷⁶ Pettegree, Andrew, *Brand Luther*, 194.

lead-up to the Peasants' War, stating: "Christians... are obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin."¹⁷⁷ Though this provision is fully in line with years of Luther's thought, there was of course a great irony that this provision was written in the company of the Emperor who had exiled Luther for following his beliefs. It's hard to imagine the irony was completely lost on those present.

Next, we turn our attention to a provision that clearly defines Lutheranism against the millenarian tendencies of the Peasants' War's radicals, which states: "Rejected are some Jewish teachings, which have also appeared in the present, that before the resurrection of the dead saints and righteous people alone will possess a secular kingdom and will annihilate all the ungodly."¹⁷⁸ Though Luther himself had used millenarian language early in his career, in this article we see the explicit rejection of the millenarian vision, no doubt a final repudiation of men like the Zwickau Prophets and Müntzer himself. Now, with Lutheran ideals being officially sanctioned, there could be no doubt that he no longer subscribed to such dangerous ideas. Millenarianism must be flatly rejected.

The last provision of the Augsburg Confession of concern to us lies in the following provision which seemingly codifies Martin Luther's more conservative views regarding liturgical reform. Luther and his fellow moderate reformers would have been well aware of the consequences of changing the common people's expectation of their Church, with the following line seemingly precluding the radical liturgical reforms instituted in Allstedt by Müntzer. "It is taught to keep those that may be kept without sin and that serve to maintain peace and good order in the church, such as specific celebrations, festivals, etc.... However, people are also

¹⁷⁷ Philip Melanchthon, "The Augsburg Confession" in *The Augsburg Confession : With Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide*, ed. Kolb, Robert. (First edition. Lanham: 1517 Media, 2024) 84.

¹⁷⁸ Philip Melanchthon, "The Augsburg Confession" 88-89.

instructed not to burden consciences with them as if such things were necessary for salvation.”¹⁷⁹

When contrasted with Müntzer's project of theological education in Allstedt, it is hard to see any daylight between the Lutherans and the Papists. The people could have the gospel, yes, but only so long as their understanding of it would not cause them to question their political reality and their place in it, mirroring Luther's paternalistic response to the soldier, Assa Von Kram, and his view of the common people as a whole. With the articles of the Augsburg Confession laid out, the Lutheran camp had fully articulated its faith, treading a delicate balance between both the old faith and the popular Christianity that had just been vanquished only a few years earlier.

25 years later the articles of faith expressed in the Augsburg Confession would form the basis of The Peace of Augsburg, in effect, a treaty between the Schmalkaldic League, a network of Protestant principalities who had joined together in a military alliance, and the forces of the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor. The primary consequence of The Peace was that it established the right of the Princes to follow Lutheran doctrine as outlined in The Augsburg Confession, as well as making the official religion of each German territory the same as its respective prince. The Peace has dozens of provisions, but of particular interest to this paper is the twenty-fourth, establishing the “Right of Emigration for Reasons of Conversion.” It reads:

If however any subjects of Ours, the electors, princes, and estates adhering to the old religion or the Augsburg Confession should wish by reason of their religion to move with their wife and children away from lands, principalities, cities, or villages belonging to Us, the electors, princes, and estates of the Holy Empire, and settle elsewhere, such emigration and immigration shall be permitted, allowed, and generally uninhibited, as shall the sale of goods and properties [to pay] for an appropriate manumission from serfdom and death-duties, as has been customarily practiced everywhere since ancient times [...]. But nothing [in this provision] shall be taken to abolish, suspend or otherwise detract from the customary rights and privileges of the authorities with respect to serfdom.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Philip Melanchthon, “The Augsburg Confession” 80.

¹⁸⁰ Buschmann, Arno, ed. *Kaiser Und Reich: Klassische Texte Zur Verfassungsgeschichte Des Heiligen Römischen Reiches Deutscher Nation Vom Beginn Des 12. Jahrhunderts Bis Zum Jahre 1806*.

Though emigrants technically possessed the right to pay for their release from serfdom, in practice this meant little. Indeed “Those minorities who had practised their religion until 1552 were granted a right of emigration (*ius emigrandi*), with the right to sell their property and secure release from serfdom. Although research is at an early stage, it is likely that the concession was worthless.”¹⁸¹ Peace and freedom had been won for the princes, yet for the serfs the gospel could only be bought with money they simply didn't have. The Peace is therefore a perfect encapsulation of the limits of Luther's vision of top-down reform. Having won their own freedom, the princes were unable or unwilling to spread God's message beyond their own holdings. The culmination of Luther's project would not be the destruction of the church and the defeat of the Antichrist at the hands of The Elect, but a stalemate between protestant princes and The Empire, divine mandates halted by earthly political exigency.

Translated by David M. Luebke. Originalausg. DTV Wissenschaft. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984, 215-83.

¹⁸¹ Brady, Thomas A, Euan Cameron, and Henry Cohn. “The Politics of Religion: The Peace of Augsburg 1555.” *German History* 24, no. 1 (2006): 97.

Conclusion

Key Findings

In our first chapter, Antecedents, we established several key points regarding the history and influence of millenarian thought reaching back into the 15th century. The first: is that Reformers like Jan Hus (and later Luther) could be powerful figureheads, even without their own direct input. These moderates could only see their goals realized after a far more radical movement had forced the status quo to accede to the moderates in order to defeat a far more pressing threat to the social order. The second: while unique in scale, the Peasants' War was hardly the first explosion of popular anger within the Holy Roman Empire, or even German-speaking lands. Peasants along with their allies had long agitated against the impositions of their lords and social betters. Third, on the eve of the Reformation, radical elements of the common people had already articulated a clear opposition toward Rome, as well as a parallel interpretation of Christianity which drove them to unite the spiritual world with their own. Next, in the Chapter Reformation, we found that Luther's project became more conservative as it tried to walk the thin line between the princes and the radicals, only to continually find itself erring on the side of the latter. In our Exploration of Müntzer in our chapter Radicalism, we discovered how Müntzer accumulated millenarian influence over his journeys, becoming in many ways an inverted image of Luther, and how he attempted to build his own movement which took advantage of both the radical tradition and the space created by the reformists. Finally in our chapter on the rebellion itself, we linked the demands of the peasants back to our Antecedents to demonstrate the long-standing precedents for resistance, as well as how these demands were roundly rejected by Luther and incorporated into parallel fights by Müntzer before being ultimately crushed by the princes who had long been consolidating their own power, in a

trend that paradoxically contributed to the uprising and their ability to crush it. Finally, in the Epilogue, we learned that the new balance of power in the Holy Roman Empire was shaped as a conscious reaction to the radical tradition.

Significance and Contributions

So what are we to make of millenarianism, Müntzer, Luther, and the plight of the peasants? If you zoom in to take a snapshot of the Peasants' War, you may find its causes in the charismatic figures of Luther and Müntzer, yet as we begin to zoom out, both in time and space, we begin to see a far more dynamic scene. As the millenarian Christianity of Bohemia collides with the confused feudal status quo of the German principalities, conclusions drawn at the smaller scale begin to fall apart. Luther alone did not create the Reformation, nor did the Reformation lead directly to the Peasants' War. In the same way, Müntzer was not an architect of the Peasants' War so much as he was frantically attempting to cobble together a patchwork of blueprints borrowed and adapted from others. Though he was just one man, we see through him how the synthesis of these 'blueprints' created a theology that was a continuation of the movements and figures that came before him. In contrast, Luther's obstinance to acknowledge the complexity of the historical terrain he tread left him exasperated when he could not transmit his own understanding to those he wished to lead, luckily for him, his allies were not limited to the realm of rhetoric and the argument against the peasants was won with the cannons and halberds of the princes' armies.

The primary goal of this thesis was to incorporate millenarian Christianity into the historical terrain of the Peasants' War. Though it is nearly impossible to find an account of the conflict that does not attribute the influence of the Reformation, few have attempted to frame the uprising as the crusade of an alternate form of Christianity. The historiography of the conflict has

created somewhat of a false dichotomy between the Reformation and the material conditions of the peasantry as competing causes of the Peasants' War. The millenarian Christianity which spilled over the Czech border into Germany represents a possible synthesis of this dialectic, as it demonstrates how the spread of theology is deeply intertwined with the social bases it emanates from. Thus, when Luther's theological vision, backed by the Princes, found itself losing the popularity contest with the millenarian vision, embodied by Müntzer, it was forced to violently exorcise its rival through its superior strength of arms. By telling the story of this vanquished vision of Heaven on Earth, hopefully, I have added a small, but meaningful wrinkle to the historical terrain of the Peasants' War.

This is not to say that the Taborite tradition was a primary cause of the conflict, Peter Blickle's research, among others, lays out a plethora of material and political pressures pushing against the common people of this time. Rather the weight of this tradition undoubtedly weighed on the brains of figures like Thomas Müntzer, and, had Luther been more aware of its influence on the people he tried to rally this cause, he may have had an easier time consolidating power in the time of crisis, rather than being relegated to the sidelines.

Figures like Müntzer and Luther were chosen as the primary narrative drivers of this paper not only because they so clearly articulate their beliefs, but because they are the product of a moment as much as they are an influence on it. So too were the peasants molded into a force that could attempt to advocate for itself. Though not all peasants were millenarians, its influence can be seen in the popular adoption of godly law which helped them to find their voices and organize on their behalf. Additionally, though the peasants themselves were not millenarians in the same sense as Müntzer, their opponents saw little daylight between the two and elevated their

response accordingly. Their reaction again demonstrates how theology and its interpretation was a key factor in the outcome of The Peasants' War.

Unanswered Questions and Future Research

In the introduction, I mentioned the role of women in the Peasants' War was an area in dire need of research. Though I cannot begin to imagine how such research might intersect with the millenarian tradition specifically, without a more thorough account of how a full 50% of the population viewed the events leading up to the Peasants' War, or indeed, their participation in it, it is hard to imagine our view of the conflict as anywhere near complete. Additionally, in many villages, male populations were left decimated. Just as it's impossible to understand the impact of theology without understanding how it might've affected women, it is impossible to even glimpse the full scale of the social impact of the Peasants' War without an understanding of how women rebuilt without so many of their husbands, sons, brothers, and neighbors.

Next, in the Antecedents chapter, we mentioned that rebellions all across Europe had been blamed on the spread of Taborite pamphlets. Further research and comparison between these rebellions and the Peasants' War could help to demonstrate (or counter) some of the claims made in this thesis in numerous ways. Though this thesis found that the differences in the impact of millenarian theology between the more politically consolidated Kingdom of Bohemia and the politically fragmented German principalities were minimal, this could have simply been a consequence of their proximity to each other. If the consequences of the same Taborite theology on rebellions in France or Spain were demonstrated to be similar to the conclusions of this thesis, it would strengthen our claim that these ideas accelerated the process of rebellion. Alternatively, if the opposite could be shown, it could weaken our claims by showing that millenarian theology's appeal to the lower classes is weakened in foreign contexts. Research would then

need to be conducted to demonstrate more specific similarities between the conditions of the peasants in Bohemia and Germany.

Final Reflection

The Peasants' War and the story of the Reformation as a whole are difficult to tell because history tends to organize itself around great figures and moments, Luther, Worms, Müntzer, and Frankenhausen, yet a history told through such dramatic snapshots elevates itself almost beyond reality. Despite this, we began our narrative with two charismatic men and the moments that would set them drifting towards the social bases of moderate Reformation and radical millenarianism; now, some seventy-odd pages later we can reframe this split, not as two men departing, but of two different visions of heaven accelerating on a violent collision course. Neither figure had the fortune to choose their circumstances, and in the end, one lay dead and the other, no doubt disappointed at the fruits of his victory, but the conflict demonstrates perfectly the limits of a single figure's ability to push against the weight of history.

In both their struggle and that of the peasants we see how theology flows from material circumstances before taking on a life of its own, prompting the faithful to see their own interests as one in the same with a larger whole. Luther believed in a God of hierarchy and order. For Müntzer that same hierarchy and order represented a fundamental obstacle to his own God's promise of salvation. In between these diametrically opposed visions stood the peasants and princes, their conflict indelibly marked by the inescapable gravity of these competing visions of Heaven in the hereafter and Heaven on Earth.

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