



Factors That Led to The Success of Lutheranism In Germany

German Princes and German Identity

The German princes were beginning to assert their political independence from Rome and the Holy Roman Emperor. Germany's emerging political identity was fueled by its growing wealth in commerce and industry and the rise of its business class, the burghers, who were beginning to pursue their own interests. This new spirit of nationalism was to influence German society and its relationship to the Roman Church. Secular interests were taking precedence over religious matters. Germany's newfound confidence and independence were to challenge papal and imperial authority and set forces in motion that were to affect European society during the Protestant Reformation. The force of Martin Luther's personality was certainly a factor. Luther appeared at a decisive moment in history. It was the growing interests of the princes and towns, however, that spurred and sustained this growing movement that would challenge the dominant religious and political authority of the Catholic Church. The Reformation was in part a secular movement and the rise of nationalism and economic rivalries led to its success. The growth of commerce and materialism in Germany, the emergence of German nationalism, and the German princes all played a decisive role in aiding the Reformation.

The Reformation stimulated by Germany's emerging status and political power would, however, set back Germany's unification for centuries. The Reformation that would bring Germany decades of religious conflict and centuries of cultural and economic decline hindered German unity and did little to contribute to German democratic institutions.

Indulgences to the Rise of Nations

The German Reformation's immediate cause was the issuance of indulgences by the papal agent Johann Tetzel upon the direction of Pope Leo X in 1517. It was this sale that prompted Martin Luther to post his Ninety-Five Theses on October 31, 1517. These theses were translated from Latin into German, printed, and circulated throughout Germany. Soon a growing protest, founded in decades of papal oppression and abuses, was formed. In 1519 Luther was questioned by Church officials and debated with prominent

theologians, and he openly questioned both the pope and the Roman curia, the Church council. In 1520, Luther wrote *An Appeal to the Christian Nobility*, calling on the German princes to take the initiative in the religious revolt. Pope Leo excommunicated Luther in 1521, and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms placed him under the ban. Luther, however, was protected by the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. Within the next few years, Lutheranism spread throughout Germany and soon members from all classes joined the movement.

In 1531 the Lutheran princes, who had protested Charles' order against heretics, joined in the League of Schmalkald, which Charles ruthlessly put down. From then on, these dissidents were called Protestants. Charles' action, however, was not effective, as Protestant zeal increased, and the League continued to meet. In 1555 the Peace of Augsburg provided that each prince establishes the religion in his territory. Lutheranism was now firmly established in north and central Germany and Scandinavia.

Changes: economic, political, and social – the seedbed for the Reformation

The German Reformation had its unique beginnings. Germany before the Reformation was prospering. All classes, except for the knights, were enjoying a better standard of living than ever before. Population throughout Germany had risen, education had spread, literacy was growing, and the princes, bishops and the Holy Roman Emperors were patrons of scholarship and the arts. The humanist movement in Germany was welcomed by the aristocracy, the intellectual community, and the German church.

Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pius II, wrote in 1457 that "Never had Germany been richer, or more resplendent, than today...Without exaggeration it may be said that no country in Europe has better or more beautiful cities." Nuremberg with its sculptures, churches, and architecture represented this growing German cultural spirit. Augsburg was Germany's financial and commercial center and the hub of trade with Italy.

Humanism and the simplification of the Faith

German humanism, however, contrary to its Italian counterpart, was more conservative in theology. Germany's Renaissance, apart from cultural differences, had no classical past. German humanism was a revival of its early Christian roots rather than of classical Roman and Greek antiquity. In religious matters it sought to simplify the Catholic faith. The very issues of the Reformation, which included sale of indulgences, worship of relics, immorality of clerics, the authority of the pope, were denounced by the German humanists before Luther.

"If I am not mistaken," argued Wimpheling, "the conciliar fathers wished to see the true Gospel of Christ preached everywhere...if every priest...were to serve God and celebrate the Eucharist, if popes and emperors, if the whole Church were to draw rich benefit from this holy work, the most efficacious office of them all." Desiderus Erasmus, who profoundly influenced the German humanists, further denounced ecclesiastical abuses in his *In Praise of Folly* when he wrote, "What shall I say of such as cry up and maintain the cheat of pardons and indulgences?...Or what can be said bad enough of others, who pretend that by force of such magical charms...they shall procure riches, honor, pleasure...after death a sitting at the right hand of our Savior and His Kingdom." Humanists, like Erasmus and Wimpheling, therefore, helped to ready the mind of Germany to take up Luther's challenge against Tetzl and the popes. Humanism, with its extension of literacy and education, contributed to the questioning of traditional beliefs. In addition, educated people disliked the superstitions connected with pilgrimages, relics, indulgences, and other practices. Unfortunately, the German humanist movement became lost in the upheaval of the Reformation that centered its teachings of personal salvation in heaven and discouraged classical studies and human fulfillment on earth. In promoting the Reformation, Germany reverted to intolerance and prejudice.

Pathway to Independence: Banking, Commerce and Mining

A major growth, meanwhile, was proceeding in German industry and commerce. Although industry was still in handicrafts, it was controlled by new entrepreneurs who were to comprise a rising merchant class, which came to power in Germany as it had in the rest of Europe. The social structure was changing. A new class of men were looking to trade and manufacturing instead of land to improve their livelihood. Money, rather than the aristocracy of birth, controlled the economy. The business class, with this new money economy, soon dominated the cities, and expanding trade provided new opportunities to the emerging burgher middle class. The mining industry was also making progress. Great profits were made from the mining of silver, copper, and gold, and the royalties paid from mining to the territorial princes gave them the financial independence that they needed to resist both the pope and the emperor. These economic changes transformed German society and the national spirit reflected these changes. As a result of this growing money economy, a new class of financiers became a major political power. Christian family firms, primarily the Fuggers, were controlling the flow of money within and without Germany, and with this money came power. Centered in Augsburg, which became the financial capital of Europe, the Fuggers raised their firm to supreme status by loaning money to the princes of Germany, Austria, Hungary, and to the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. They were described as the financiers of the Habsburgs. The Fuggers now surpassed the Medicis, the Italian banking family, and had more funds at their disposal than any other banker in Europe. When loans defaulted, the Fuggers received revenues of mines, lands, or cities. From these investments, the Fuggers became the richest and most influential family in Europe, and a major political force. Jakob II was the culminating financial genius of the family, and from him the free-market era in Germany is dated. So powerful had the Fuggers become that in 1519, when Charles V borrowed 543,000 florins from them to become emperor and delayed repayment, Jakob Fugger II did not hesitate to send him a clear reminder.

These financiers knew who had the power and these men who financed princes, popes, and emperors would not be dictated to by a foreign power located in Rome.

Changing Geo-Politic

There was a changing geo-politic in play within Germany. Many cities, not under the territorial jurisdiction of the princes, prospered from the growth of unimpeded trade. These imperial free cities included Strasbourg, Metz, Augsburg, and Worms, among many others. These free cities became thriving centers of industry, commerce, and the arts. They were labeled “free” because they were governed by guilds controlled by the new business class, the burghers. These cities made their own laws, sent representatives to the provincial and imperial diets, and acknowledged no political obedience except to an emperor who was too indebted to them for financial and military help to restrict their activities. These cities were developing centralizing governments, in which the guild representatives played important roles, and emerged as virtually independent states. Like the princes, these free cities cherished their independence and sought to preserve their secular interests. Economics more than religion was their primary concern. They were to play an important role in the Reformation. Population was concentrated in these centers, and the dissemination of ideas by the printing press could be more effective in an urban setting. These free cities would be the first to side with Luther against the Church to protect their economy and secular interests.

German Independence from All the Old Ways

It was against this background that the German Reformation began. This growth of trade and commerce brought about a new awareness of being German. Germans were becoming too vigorous and prosperous to tolerate the medieval restraints of feudalism and the demands imposed by Rome. With this prosperity came a new confidence and a proud sense of German nationality. German cities were flourishing, German ideas were thriving, and German princes were relishing their new financial and political independence. Previously fragmented territories suddenly became proudly independent states interdependent upon one another as never before and bound together economically. As the Roman pope and Holy Roman Emperor

sought to maintain their authority, the new German spirit resisted. It was this new political and economic climate that fostered Lutheranism.

National Kings, Investiture, and the German Experience

As noted in the first presentation, the “Investiture Controversy” was not simply about who named and appointed a bishop or abbot. It was about power, politics and profits. Nationalized churches and the supremacy of the state over church affairs existed in France, Spain, and England long before Luther. Italy and Germany, however, did not experience this trend toward a nationalized church since they lacked effective national monarchies – both of these “countries” were highly divided

The monarchies of France and England had little money diverted from their treasuries to Rome. In Germany, on the other hand, clerical and papal abuses would supply ample incentive for religious reformers. Anti-clericalism and anti-papalism were bound to flourish in a society that allowed the clergy excessive power and wealth. The German Experience was much different.

Weaknesses in the “German Experience”

When we refer to “Germany” in the modern sense, there is a latent image of a strong, unified people and a technocratic, efficient central power. In the years before the Reformation, the German tradition of princely territorial sovereignty was too strong to allow a centralized, absolute monarchy, and imperial power was too weak. Germany had failed to provide a cohesive government that was able to protect Germany against the fiscal and legal claims of Rome.

Every social group in Germany perhaps felt the economic liabilities of its connection to Rome more than the moral. German resentment of Roman economic exploitation and Roman attempts to dominate Germany politically and culturally played a large role in the birth of Protestantism. Economic resentment, when combined with social and religious issues, proved too overwhelming to be contained.

Weakness Even in the Face of a Morally Questionable Opponent

Furthermore, the ethical and moral reasons for this Church fund-raising were questionable. It was the general opinion in Germany that in the matter of taxation, the Roman Curia, a council that acted as a parliamentary body of the Church, placed unbearable burdens on the population. Numerous new indulgences were published without the consent of the German bishops and tithes were raised for a crusade, only to be diverted to another subject. German grievances against Rome from a financial point of view were getting more vocal and more frequent. “The Italians,” wrote Archbishop Berthold von Hennesberg in 1496, “ought to reward the Germans for their services, and not drain the sacerdotal body with frequent extortions of gold.”

When in Doubt, Tax the Germans – A European Tradition

But Rome was not the only “taxing authority” among German society. Even Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian (1508-1550) resented that the pope drew a hundred times more revenue from Germany than he himself could collect – and besides in 1510 the HRE Maximilian was at war with Pope Julius II. For a time, he even considered the separation of the German Church from Rome. Maximilian would have had no objection to the establishment of a Germanic national church with only the loosest of ties with Rome. However, Jacob Wimpheling, the humanist and advisor to Maximilian, warned against separation on the basis that he could not expect persistent support from the princes, who were jealous of imperial power.

If such a separation had been accomplished, the course of Germany’s history would have been changed – the numerous revolts and civil wars within Germany after the Reformation might have been minimized – perhaps even the 30 Years War avoided. Germany would have followed an example similar to that of England under Henry VIII. A national church would have probably unified Germany and continued its cultural progress, as it did in England. Germany’s political situation, however, was different. The political struggle between the emperor and the princes was too strong and the emperor had limited authority. This

tug of war between the emperor and the princes would prove beneficial to Luther many years later, but detrimental to Germany's unification and progress.

Caught in the Middle – Those Subject to Taxes

But who was specifically the target of Imperial and Papal fund raisers? To answer that one needs to consider the social strata of all who would be caught in the taxing nets of the “outsiders” – the Pope and his ostensibly all-Italian Curial mafia, or , the gaping maw of the Holy Roman imperial court.

Princes. Many rulers of Germany's various principalities functioned as autocratic rulers who recognized no other authority within their territories. Princes had the right to levy taxes and borrow money as they saw fit. The growing costs of administration and military upkeep impelled them to keep raising demands on their subjects. The princes also worked to centralize power in the towns and estates. Accordingly, princes tended to gain economically from the ruination of the lesser nobility, by acquiring their estates. This ignited the Knights' Revolt that occurred from 1522 through 1523 in the Rhineland. The revolt was suppressed by both Catholic and Lutheran princes who were satisfied to cooperate against a common danger".

To the degree that other classes, such as the bourgeois, might gain from the centralization of the economy and the elimination of the lesser nobles' territorial controls on manufacture and trade, the princes might unite with the burghers on the issue.

Lesser nobility. The evolving military technology of the Late Medieval period began to render the lesser nobility (the knights) militarily obsolete. The introduction of military science and the growing importance of gunpowder and infantry lessened the importance of heavy cavalry and of castles. Their luxurious lifestyle drained what little income they had as prices kept rising. They exercised their ancient rights in order to wring income from their territories.

The knights became embittered as their status and income fell and they came increasingly under the jurisdiction of the princes, putting the two groups in constant conflict. The knights also regarded the clergy as arrogant and superfluous, while envying their privileges and wealth. In addition, the knights' relationships with the patricians in the towns was strained by the debts owed by the knights. At odds with all other social classes in Germany, the lesser nobility was the least disposed to change. In general this group would side with the Princes.

Clergy. The clergy were the intellectuals of their time. Not only were they literate, but in the Middle Ages they had produced most books. Some clergy were supported by the nobility and the rich, while others appealed to the masses. However, the clergy was beginning to lose its overwhelming intellectual authority. The progress of printing (especially of the Bible) and the expansion of commerce, as well as the spread of renaissance humanism, raised literacy rates. The Catholic monopoly on higher education was accordingly reduced.

Over time, some Catholic institutions had slipped into corruption. Clerical ignorance and the abuses of simony and pluralism (holding several offices at once) were rampant. Some bishops, archbishops, abbots and priors were as ruthless in exploiting their subjects as the regional princes. In addition to the sale of indulgences, they set up prayer houses and directly taxed the people. The clergy that did not follow Luther tended to be the aristocratic clergy, who opposed all change, including any break with the Roman Church.

The poorer clergy, rural and urban itinerant preachers who were not well positioned in the church, were more likely to join the Reformation. Some of the poorer clergy sought to extend Luther's equalizing ideas to society at large.

Patricians. Many towns had privileges that exempted them from taxes, so that the bulk of taxation fell on the peasants. As the guilds grew and urban populations rose, the town patricians faced increasing opposition. The patricians consisted of wealthy families who sat alone in the town councils and held all

the administrative offices. Like the princes, they sought to secure revenues from their peasants by any possible means. Arbitrary road, bridge, and gate tolls were instituted at will. They gradually revoked the common lands and made it illegal for peasants to fish or to log wood from these lands. Guild taxes were exacted. No revenues collected were subject to formal administration, and civic accounts were neglected. Thus embezzlement and fraud became common and the patrician class, bound by family ties, became wealthier and more powerful.

Burghers. The town patricians were increasingly criticized by the growing burgher class, which consisted of well-to-do middle-class citizens who held administrative guild positions or worked as merchants. They demanded town assemblies made up of both patricians and burghers, or at least a restriction on simony and the allocation of council seats to burghers. The burghers also opposed the clergy, who they felt had overstepped and failed to uphold their principles. They demanded an end to the clergy's special privileges, such as their exemption from taxation, as well as a reduction in their numbers. The burgher-master (guild master, or artisan) now owned both his workshop and its tools, which he allowed his apprentices to use, and provided the materials that his workers needed.

Plebeians. The plebeians comprised the new class of urban workers, journeymen and vagabonds. Ruined burghers also joined their ranks. Although technically potential burghers, most journeymen were barred from higher positions by the wealthy families who ran the guilds. Thus their "temporary" position devoid of civic rights tended to become permanent. The plebeians did not have property like ruined burghers or peasants.

Peasants. The heavily taxed peasantry continued to occupy the lowest stratum of society. In the early 16th century, no peasant could hunt, fish, or chop wood freely, as they previously had, because the lords had recently taken control of common lands. The lord had the right to use his peasants' land as he wished; the peasant could do nothing but watch as his crops were destroyed by wild game and by nobles galloping across his fields in the course of chivalric hunts. When a peasant wished to marry, he needed not only the lord's permission, but had to pay a tax. When the peasant died, the lord was entitled to his best cattle, his best garments and his best tools. The justice system, operated by the clergy or wealthy burgher and patrician jurists, gave the peasant no redress. Generations of traditional servitude and the autonomous nature of the provinces limited peasant insurrections to local areas.

Vested Interest of German Society – Apart from Religious Reform

The previous post pointed to the broad resentment of German society to the eternal taxation be it from the Church or from the Imperial Courts of the Emperor. There were other economic factors also in view: land, wealth and revenue. But consider the latter category. Perhaps revenue is from the sale of land, animals, crops, or other items; but perhaps revenue is the very stream of taxes causing resentment – and your class thinks it belongs to them. One person's vested interest may very well be another's burden.

Princes wanted what the free imperial cities already had, independence from the Church. They witnessed their territorial resources diverted to Rome to finance the Italian Renaissance, and their resentment and frustration intensified. A power struggle began in which the secular interests of the princes conflicted with the religious demands of the Church. Not only were the princes opposed to the papacy, but historically they were opposed to the imperial authority of the emperor as well. From the beginning, the impulse to reform the Church had mingled with the political intrigues and alliances of the time.

In August 1520, Luther very cleverly appealed to the German princes in his *Appeal to the Ruling Class* (also called the *Appeal to the Princes*). It was to be his most effective political writing. In it, Luther wrote, "The distress and oppression which weigh down all the Estates of Christendom, especially of German...have forced me even now to cry aloud that God may inspire someone with His Spirit to lend this suffering nation a helping hand." In Luther's writings, the princes could find religious justification for their political aims. As Luther put it, that prince who left the welfare of the Church to the Romans was violating his obligations as a German prince: "...In such a case, is it not the duty of every citizen to call

the rest?” These princes were not primarily concerned in the power of the intellect or the advancement of humanism, nor were they concerned with the divine inspirations of Luther, but rather their main concern was with their interests and maintaining their political power. Political expediency outweighed religious convictions and theological issues.

In addition, the German nobility began to covet Church wealth that they saw as belonging to them. Philip Melanchthon, the German humanist and theologian wrote that “Under cover of the Gospel, the princes were only intent on the plunder of the churches.” The German church was the richest in Christendom and it was estimated that nearly a third of the whole landed property of the country was in the hands of the Church. In the eyes of the Princes, the Church infringed on their wealth and thus the Princes would be inclined to a religious reform that would allow them to confiscate ecclesiastical wealth. In conjunction with Luther’s movement, inflation, military costs, and the inflexibility of the nobility’s revenues made secularization of Church properties more attractive than ever before.

Luther appealed to the **Knights/lesser nobility** on the same basis – and they too wanted access to Church lands, wealth, and revenue (*taxes*)

The rising **burgher business** class and the poor also resented their monies being diverted to Rome. They saw the higher ecclesiastical orders, prelates, and bishops enjoy wealth, which many of them displayed openly. As a result, these actions provoked the indignation of the people, the jealousy of the upper classes, and the anger of the general public. Businessmen resented Church monasteries claiming exemption from taxation as well because in many cases the Church itself was the competition in manufacturing and trade.

The **peasants** resented everyone above them – and that included everyone – because everyone of them found a way to tax the work of the peasants. But they particularly hated the annual tithe levied by the Church on their harvests. To the peasants, the Lutheran movement meant not only freedom from Rome, but also from the landowners who they felt forced them to work and yet remain to live in poverty. The peasants were as interested in political freedom as in religious reform. Long before Luther, tension was building. Discontent cut across class lines.

When Luther proclaimed in his Appeal to the Ruling Class, “All classes...are now oppressed by distress and affliction, and this has stirred not only me but every man to cry out anxiously for help,” he was voicing the sentiments of the German people. Fundamentally, Luther succeeded because his ideas appealed to people of all classes. His words caught their mood and captured their growing frustrations with a Church that disregarded their general welfare.

Outside the theologians, THE issue at this time was over material concerns rather than over religious differences. And it been this way for a long time. In 1457, Martin Heyer, Chancellor to Archbishop Dietrich of Mainz, wrote to Cardinal Piccolomini, the future Pius II, of the wrongs suffered by Germany: “...The Germans have been treated as if they were rich and stupid barbarians, and drained of their money by a thousand cunning devices...” All in German social classes were now focused on protecting their vested financial interests specifically against the Church. Rejection of Rome, therefore, was a further move toward financial and political independence.

Printing in the German Language: Going Viral in 1520

The development of the printing press, furthermore, aided Luther’s success. For all the reasons described in previous posts, the time was ripe for change. There was no other European nation that was more ready – it just needed a tipping point. Many point to the printing press as the tipping point, but the real tipping point was that Luther quickly moved to publishing in the German language. His ideas were no longer limited to the intellectual elites and Church scholars. He bypassed that “battlefield” and attacked in a language all the people – high and low born alike could understand – German.

Printing in German made Luther’s ideas more accessible and assured that they were recorded in permanent form. Even though Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses in Latin, unknown to Luther, the

printing presses of Wittenberg printed it in German. It reached thousands of Germans. Within a few months, the theses became the talk of Germany; the pent-up anti-clericalism of generations thrilled at having a voice. Luther quickly understood the advantage and soon abandoned Latin and wrote in German. It is estimated that Luther's tracts were responsible for propelling German literacy. The printing press made it accessible and relatively inexpensive. Between 1517 and 1520, Luther's 30 publications probably sold well over 300,000 copies.

Luther had not set out to be a revolutionary; his initial intention had been to reform the Church from within. Encouraged, however, by the general support of the Germans and such learned men as Melancthon, Andreas Carlstadt, and von Hutton, Luther changed course. In 1520, he wrote to his mentor George Spalatin, "I have cast the die...Now I no longer fear, and I am publishing a book in the German tongue about Christian reform, directed against the pope, in language as violent as if I were addressing Antichrist." The use of the vernacular for his words was critical in solidifying the support of the German people and appealing to their new spirit of nationalism.

And by the way, the printing industry, moreover, had an economic stake in encouraging religious conflict by publishing Protestant propaganda. Luther now not only had the support of the princes, the peasants, and the burghers; Luther now had support of the printers themselves.

Too Late

There is an old expression: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. That did not apply in the German Reformation. The enemy (Rome) was Luther's best friend. Rome was their own worst enemy.

When Leo X announced the renewal of indulgences in order to finance St. Peter's Basilica, there were a plethora of voices from Emperor Maximilian to his own Roman Curia who warned the pope that the idea was feeding accelerant into a smoldering fire of revolution among the German social classes. His own Papal Nuncio to Germany reported to Pope Leo that the Germans were only waiting for "some fool" to open his mouth against Rome. Some fool did: John Tetzel attempted to peddle indulgences in Saxony where the Elector of Saxony had already forbidden their sale. In the eyes of the German princes, nobles, knights and burghers, Rome had infringed upon Saxony's territorial rights. And Rosa Parks would not give up her seat on the bus. This infringement of rights was not the initiating act, it was the hinge, the tipping point.

When Pope Leo acted against Luther, it was already too late. Luther was already under the protection of Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony. It was the political and social connection that helped Luther avoid becoming the next Jan Hus or the Florentine Dominican Savonarola.

In the battle between Church and state, Frederick was the true hero. He had such a strong sense of duty to his subjects that neither the Roman curia, nor the imperial court, nor even Luther could shake his commitment to their welfare and spiritual concerns. Luther's *Appeal to the Ruling Class*, written in 1520, appealed especially to Frederick's long-standing commitment: "Therefore, when need requires it, and the pope is acting harmfully to Christian wellbeing, let anyone who is a true member of the Christian community as a whole take steps as early as possible to bring about a genuinely free council." Frederick would become a leader among the princes in the revolt against ecclesiastical power.

By the way, it didn't hurt that Emperor Maximilian needed Elector Frederick's vote to ensure the election of his successor, Charles V. Consequently, Frederick's political clout was increased and he gained imperial support in his case for Luther. Emperor Maximilian had additional concerns and he was not above playing one group against another. He was waging a crusade against the Turks and now more than ever he needed German revenues. Maximilian, furthermore, seeing in Luther a card to play in diplomatic contests with Rome, advised Frederick to "take good care of that monk." These "ultra montaine" political circumstances favored the Reformation.

When Charles V was elected Emperor, one key promise was extracted from him: no German would be tried and condemned with a fair trial in Germany. In 1520, when Rome finally begins to respond to Luther, he is under the protection of Frederick and can not be summoned and sent to Rome, where the Reform would have quietly died in a prison cell. Papal inquisitors had to speak to Luther in Augsburg, Germany. While they considered what to do, Luther was spirited away to Wartburg Castle.

The window closed. The Reformation took hold in the north of Germany.

The German Reformation was successful at its onset because at the core it was a secular, rather than religious, movement.

When the Reformers become the Target: Revolts

The Knights Revolt

The Knights' Revolt (27 August 1522 – 6 May 1523) was a short-lived revolt by several German Protestant, imperial knights, led by Franz von Sickingen, against Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. It has been called the Poor Barons' Rebellion as it inspired the bloody German Peasants' War of 1524–1526.

You'll note the Knights were not listed above as one of the "classes" in pre-Reformation Germany. The knights were basically small armies for hire by whoever would pay. Today we would likely call them mercenaries. When they were not hired by the nobility, burghers, or whoever, they were free to terrorize cities and castles throughout Germany. It was an industry that made the leaders of the knights very rich.

In the years before the Reformation the imperial knights were in a period of constant decline. The encroachment of urban-dominated trade and industry on traditional agriculture, combined with rising interest rates and declining land values, harmed the knights financially, while the increasingly wealthy cities of the Holy Roman Empire had become powerful enough to resist attacks. The growing power of the higher nobility, or the princes, helped by the introduction of Roman law which was sweeping away previous Common law, hurt the knights politically. On top of this, their importance in combat was declining with the advance of military technology and tactics.

There was no strong central government in Germany to collect custom duties on trade - and hence to engage/employ the Knights. Instead, income from trade flowed directly back to the feudal lords located in the various principalities and fiefdoms throughout Germany. With Germany divided into a patchwork of small kingdoms and fiefdoms, governmental power lay securely under the control of local feudal lords. In order to bring about the reforms they wanted, the knights needed the united support of both the cities and the peasantry. However, this united support proved to be elusive. The peasantry distrusted the knights almost as much as the higher nobility. Only a plan that included a total abolition of serfdom, bondage, and the privileges of the nobility could induce the peasantry to join the knights in the struggle for reform.

In 1522, while the Holy Roman Emperor was in Spain, Franz von Sickingen convened a "Brotherly Convention of Knights." The Convention elected him as their leader, and resolved to take by force that which the knights had been unable to obtain through their poor representation in the German Reichstag. The target chosen by the knights to start their revolt was Richard von Greiffenklau zu Vollrads, Archbishop of Trier, a staunch opponent of Luther and his supporters. The excuse used for the attack was an unpaid ransom by two city councillors to another knight who had captured them some years ago. Sickingen's declaration of war was full of religious rhetoric designed to encourage the people of the city to surrender and overthrow their archbishop, and so save the knights the trouble of a siege. Unfortunately for him, the people of the city did not revolt against Richard, and Richard proved to be an able soldier. In addition, the Count palatine and the Landgrave of Hesse came to Richard's aid. After seven days siege, including five assault attempts, Von Sickingen ran out of gunpowder, and retreated

Most of the knights and their significant supporters had their castles confiscated. The knights were now generally bankrupt as a result of the Revolt's inability to change their situation in the face of increasing inflation, declining agriculture, increased demands by the princes, and the inability to live by legal 'highway robbery'. Most knights thereafter lived as petty feudal masters, making a living by taxing their peasants hard. They had no real independence now, and those that did rise above their status did so by acting as competent managers, priests, and generals for the princes. A few, such as Florian Geyer, refused to give in, and assisted the peasants in their own rebellion a few years later.

Twelve Articles of the Peasantry

The Protestant Reformation sparked the Twelve Articles of the Peasantry that listed a variety of demands that stood against the ruling classes – Catholic and Protestant. These included the freedom to choose their own ministers, abolition of serfdom, relief from the lesser tithes, the ability to fish and hunt, restoration of common lands, impartiality of the courts, abolition of death duties and preventing landlords from collecting feudal dues. The revolt was led by radical Reform leader Thomas Müntzer (Anabaptist before they were Anabaptists) and resulted in the deaths of well over 100,000 peasants.

Thomas Müntzer (ca. 1489 – 27 May 1525) was an early Reformation-era German theologian, who became a rebel leader during the Peasants' War. Müntzer was also an Augustinian monk who was particularly well versed in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. He quickly joined the Lutheran Reform movement, but quickly found himself at the fringe of even the Reform movement itself. He seems to have quickly worn out his welcome at each Reformed posting he accepted. In 1521 he authored the "Prague Manifesto," an angry, anticlerical, apocalyptic work which rails at any variety of items he felt still needed reform. In this same time period he began to declare that in some areas Luther was wrong or had not gone far enough. Müntzer formally declared against infant baptism (*making him the first noteworthy Reformer to take what would later be known as the Anabaptist position – paradoxically his views on the Blessed Virgin Mary were even more esteemed than the Roman Catholic Church*).

In 1524, Müntzer delivered his "Sermon to the Princes," a sermon given to Elector (Duke) John of Saxony and his advisors. Elector John was a supporter and protector of Luther, knowledgeable of the Lutheran reforms, and found Müntzer propositions alarming. Those propositions were calling for radical deconstruction of society, and that the same questioning of authority promoted by the Lutheran Reformation should be applied to the economic sphere. Müntzer promoted a new egalitarian society which would practice the sharing of goods. His ideas were important to Friedrich Engels who described Müntzer as a revolutionary socialist leader who chose to use religious language – the language the peasants would best understand. Engels was a 19th century German social scientist, author, political theorist, philosopher, and along with Karl Marx, father of Marxist theory, and co-author of the "Communist Manifesto."

As a result of this event, combined with Luther's "Letter to the Princes" of early July 1524, which attacked Müntzer and Andreas Karlstadt, Müntzer and other radical reformers were called to a hearing before Duke John of Saxony. He and the others were disciplined and their printing presses suppressed.

In August 1524, Müntzer became one of the leaders of the uprising known as the German Peasants' War. During that war, Müntzer was eventually captured, tortured and decapitated.

The Communist regime in East Germany held Müntzer in high esteem. He was pictured on the Five Mark note in East Germany.

Andreas Karlstadt

Andreas Karlstadt was a priest and scholar, holding doctorates in theology, canon law and civil law. He was archdeacon of the Diocese of Wittenburg and Dean of the university there. He was the man who handed Martin Luther his doctorate. Where the new trend in theological thinking was being spurred by the nominalist movement and the writings of Erasmus, Karlstadt was one of the new scholastic scholars more

given to the world of Aquinas and Bonaventure. His 1515-16 stay in Rome for canon and civil law studies exposed him to the wide-spread corruption and depravity of Rome and Roman Curia was shocking and marked a turning point in his life's journey.

Karlstadt quickly accepted Luther's early leadership, as well as Luther's theological and ecclesial propositions, but soon began to institute his own more radical reforms in his parish in Orlamünde. That church became the model of what would be seen as the "congregationalist reformation." Church music and art were set aside, liturgical vestments destroyed, liturgy was reduced to one reading, an extended homily, and a passing communion service. Well before Luther, Karlstadt preached clerical matrimony, and like Müntzer, rejected infant baptism. Karlstadt denied the physical but affirmed the spiritual presence of Christ in the communion – something Luther never did. Karlstadt was at the forefront of the Protestant iconoclast movement and was active in remove or destroying Marian shrines.

Finding his views closer to the Swiss reformers, Karlstadt fled to Zurich and Basel. His positions were influential on the thinking of the early Anabaptists and John Calvin.

The 30 Years War

One political issue to spring from the Protestant Reformation was warfare. The Thirty Years War was the most violent and brutal war fought in Europe prior to the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century. These were a series of wars that involved most European countries but were fought primarily on German soil. The religious fervor of the Reformation was what made the wars extremely bloody, as hatred brewed hot. Though the 30 Years War is known as a religious war, the battles were further complicated by dynastic rivalries between the French and the Swedes to chisel away at the German Holy Roman Empire's strength, which was controlled by the Hapsburgs -- a powerful royal house of Europe that sat on the Holy Roman Empire's throne from 1438 to 1740. Historians all agree that roughly six million people died in the 30 Years War.