The implications of the Reformation on modern society are both far-reaching and hotly contested. Indeed, the work of German reformer and theologian Martin Luther, in particular, remains a contested topic in the historiography of the era. Of the many events of the Reformation in which Luther took part in shaping, none was more revolutionary than the German Peasants’ War of 1525. While many agree that a connection between Luther’s ideologies and the revolt exists, the extent of this relationship remains debatable. Martin Luther’s connection to the German Peasants’ War diminishes in proportion with the radicalization of the movement, and the perversion of Luther’s doctrine of spiritual freedom proves to be the motivating factor behind this shift. The socio-economic factors in Germany during the mid-fifteenth century will provide the context for the connection between Luther and the peasants; a discussion on the relation between the literatures of both parties will show the nature of Luther’s influence on, and departure from, the revolt itself. After that, this paper will delve into the specific events that motivated Luther to reveal his shifting stance on the actions of the peasantry. This will ultimately lead to an examination of the essence and source of the peasants’ radicalization and the role that the distortion of Luther’s theology played therein.

Recent social and economic changes motivated both Martin Luther and the German peasants to express their dissent. Following the demographic decline and economic contraction of the late medieval era, Germany began to experience significant shifts in the other direction around the year 1450. Though the economic expansion was widely regarded as a good thing for Germany, the increase in long distance exchange, levels of production, and population came at a
disadvantage to the commoners. The expansion of the German population during the mid-fifteenth century, in particular, had direct social and economic implications on the peasants—most notably, that of widespread inflation. As real wages deteriorated, and price inflation outpaced wage increases, the purchasing power of money fell—a fact that the German nobility and landlords were quick to take advantage of. For instance, both ecclesiastical and secular lords raised the rents and entry fees (fees taken upon possession of land) for the commoners. Additionally, the nobility were careful to re-establish the limitations and obligations on personal freedom that had passed to peasant communities in recent history, specifically those on the reacquisition and usage of land. Both of these factors were influential in creating an environment of mounting social tension within German villages wherein growing economic gaps became more and more obvious as the sixteenth century approached.

The peasants also experienced economic pressure from the emerging banks and merchant capitalist firms, on whom much of the blame for the economic expansion was placed. Here is where we find the connection to Luther. Luther harbored a strong distaste for exploitation in business. In his treatise, On Trade and Usury, he wrote, “What good is there in trade? How can it be without sin when such [greed] is the chief maxim and the rule of the whole business? On this basis trade can be nothing else than robbing and stealing other people’s property.” Published in June of 1524 (within months of the inception of rioting), the treatise is unmistakably connected

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2 Ibid.
5 Baylor, 5.
to the German Peasants’ War. The same socio-economic setting that had inspired the peasants to condemn the established authorities for their profit-motivated, self-indulgent actions had also stirred Luther to protest. By extension, then, if we identify the self-indulgence of the sacral-temporal authorities as a motivating factor for Luther, his 95 Theses can be seen in a similar context. This is to say that Luther’s objection to the sale of indulgences is not so dissimilar from his objection in Trade and Usury—both addressed the exploitative practices of social institutions. Given that 95 Theses is seen as Luther’s first declaration of protest, the connection between Luther and the peasants is that both were first compelled to act out against the social establishment by the same motivations against capitalist behaviour.

In regard to inspiration, the peasants owe much to Luther for having served as the source of many of their early goals. This becomes especially apparent when comparing the ideological content of both parties. Written in 1520, Luther’s Address to the Nobility of the German Nation is the clearest exposition of his ideology on the matters of authority between Church and State. As Luther saw it, the Church heretofore had maintained control over who had authority in the spiritual sphere and its matters, suggesting that the papal party (or “Romanists”) had worked to build “three walls” as checks against reform. Luther identified these hypothetical “walls” as the concerted effort in maintaining a division between the spiritual and temporal estates, the papal authority over the interpretation of scripture, and the papal authority to call a council. In his attack on these walls, Luther broke down the notion that the spiritual estate held authority over the temporal, while also shifting spiritual interpretation away from the papacy to the laity.

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9 Ibid.
Understandably, these notions resonated strongly with the German peasantry. Evidence of this can be found in the *Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants* (1525), a list of grievances that operated as the main political manifesto to the commoners.\(^{11}\) Even in the first article, echoes of Luther’s *Address* are immediately obvious: “it is our humble petition and desire […] that in the future we shall have power and authority so that the entire community should choose and appoint a minister.”\(^{12}\) This desire to extend religious authority to the “entire community” is noticeably reminiscent of Luther’s argument for the priesthood of all believers championed in *Address*. Moreover, the peasants’ notion of eliminating power distinctions between the clergy and the laity also shows a striking similarity to the Lutheran ideology of the freedom of the Christian man. Seeking to “emancipate” the laity, the third of the *Twelve Articles* acknowledges the pre-existing lack of freedom for the peasants: “it has been the custom hitherto for men to hold us as their property.”\(^{13}\) Having been defined by serfdom for centuries, and reminded of their limitations with recent socio-economic events, the peasants certainly held freedom as paramount. Therefore, Luther’s argument for the freedom of the Christian man outlined in his *Address* was likely a point that resonated strongly for the peasants. Given these similarities, it becomes hard to believe that the peasants who wrote the *Twelve Articles* did not come into contact with the central ideas of Luther’s *Address*. Indeed, Manfred Hannemann’s work on the diffusion of Reformation ideology supports this, suggesting that Luther’s ideas were often disseminated and accepted in cities and villages in the form of public sermon.\(^{14}\) Thus, if the *Twelve Articles* stand as a monument to the original grievances that lead to the German Peasants’ War, one could then

\(^{11}\) Blickle, 18.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 390.
argue that Martin Luther’s *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation* justified the peasants’ grievances, becoming the model on which they based their protest.

Though the aforementioned doctrines of spiritual freedom did lead to the manifestation of dissent among German peasants, their expression of this dissent was a point of contention for Luther. To Luther, the peasants were fundamentally disconnected from his ideology, and the nature of his reactions to the peasant conflict speaks volumes to the shifting relationship between him and the peasants. The first instance of this came in the form of Luther’s *Admonition to Peace Based on the Twelve Articles* (April 1525). Here, Luther adopts a passive approach in addressing both the nobles and the peasants. While he did agree that the princes and clergy had lived their lives according to stupidity and vanity, Luther was careful to maintain distance from the peasants.\(^{15}\) In a friendly tone, he admonished the peasants to remain patient, suggesting that they had no right to make themselves judges of the morality of their superiors’ decisions.\(^{16}\) The fundamental break from his religious platform, then, rested in Luther’s belief that the peasants had no right to rise against lawfully constituted authority.

Following his visit to Nordhausen in the months following the publication of *Admonition to Peace*, Luther’s tone and position took a drastic turn. While Luther had originally felt that his teachings could still satisfy the peasants’ grievances, his receipt of boos from the crowd in Nordhausen showed that his confidence was misplaced.\(^{17}\) Along with other accounts of violence in the surrounding area, the Nordhausen affair ultimately motivated Luther to express his discontent with the peasant movement in his tract, *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants* (May 1525). Compared to his *Admonition to Peace*, Luther adopts a much angrier tone

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 54.
in condemning the actions of the peasants here. To Luther, the time for moderation had passed, condemning those who had robbed and slain their fellow men as subject to “death in body and soul.” Motivated by the belief that the peasants’ violent actions constituted nothing short of blasphemy, Luther saw violent measures as the only effective way to overthrow the peasants. While Luther had not actually said anything new in terms of his opinions toward the ideological basis of the movement, his tone and call to military response stand in stark contrast to the complacency in Admonition.

This marked shift in response to the violence of the German Peasants’ War sheds light on the disdain that Luther held for what can be seen as the radicalization of those ideologies upon which the Reformation was based. Both the efforts of certain individuals and existing social factors were ultimately to blame for this disconnect from Martin Luther. With respect to the former, Thomas Münzer is most responsible. A German reformer in his own right, Münzer was originally a supporter of Luther and his ideologies. Indeed, Münzer and other “Radical Evangelicals” agreed with Luther on many ideas, such as the rejection of papal authority, anticlerical opposition to certain traditional church practices, the unfettered preaching of the “word of God,” and salvation by scripture. However, the fundamental difference between Luther and the radicalism of Münzer hinged upon the complete rejection of governmental authority and structure and the use of revolutionary violence in disposing of that authority. Given the similarities, the question arises as to why the radical agenda was more enticing to the peasants than to Luther. Again, many social and economic factors are to blame for this, but the

19 Ibid.
20 Baylor, 8.
21 Crossley, 44.
lack of organization and centralization are most significant. Over the course of the entire revolt, many different peasant groups arose to present their own unique list of demands.\textsuperscript{22} As a result, there was no real unity amongst the peasant cause, making the revolt incredibly difficult to organize and, thus, easier to influence.\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, radicalization was also encouraged by the social circumstances surrounding the illiteracy of the peasantry. Due to this, the information they received about the new teaching was largely second-hand and often came in the form of public sermons.\textsuperscript{24} Itinerant preachers, mostly concerned with converting the illiterate populace, carried the message from village to village, and often did not have strong academic backgrounds.\textsuperscript{25} This meant that Luther’s message was easily susceptible to distortion given the inability to consistently reiterate and confirm the original message. Furthermore, preacher bias—whether through conscious manipulation of the message or oratorical misplacement of emphasis—was a relevant factor in the peasants’ interpretation of Luther’s message. In this sense, these social factors allowed violence-motivated individuals to develop a strong platform. The prevalence of these individuals served to bolster the peasants’ anger toward their oppressors.\textsuperscript{26} Luther’s connection to the German Peasants’ War, then, can be seen more as a misinterpretation of his ideology wherein the prevalence of radicalization distorted it into a “gospel of social unrest.”\textsuperscript{27}

Given the broader context and early goals of the conflict, it is clear that Martin Luther’s ideology had a strong influence on the peasants and the subsequent conflict. However, upon the introduction of radicalism into the peasant agenda, a fundamental disconnect arose between both parties. This disconnect between reform and radicalism highlighted the potency of religious

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Hannemann, 119.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{27} Thomas F. Sea, “Imperial Cities and the Peasants’ War in Germany,” Central European History 12 (1979): 5.
sanction for social unrest in Europe during the Reformation. The implications of this disconnect on the course of history that followed cannot be overstated, especially in the case of Germany. For one, that same fragmentation which had plagued the peasant conflict would go on to help the Reformation flourish both within Germany and abroad.28 Furthermore, with the subsequent rise in “evangelical movements,” Sacramentarian groups such as the Anabaptists went on to replace Münzer as ideological figureheads of radicalism.29 While all of this is true, what remains most arresting for historians looking back on Luther’s shifting interpretation of the German Peasants’ War was his perspective on the radical energy that his ideas generated. Leopold von Ranke’s claim that that the conflict was “the greatest natural event in the history of the German Nation” aptly captures Luther’s feeling of helplessness in the face of the radical energy that fueled the social unrest—as well as his sense of that energy’s importance.30 Essentially, Luther had let the genie out of the bottle, recognized his mistake, and tried to put it back in to no avail. This inability to stop radical energy from distorting theology for political ends is a narrative that has continued from the German Peasants’ War as one of the most pertinent to modern history.

28 Baylor, 17.
29 Ibid.
Bibliography


