

Peasants' War -- Revolting Peasants Fighting For The German Dream

In order to understand Germany's Peasants' War (1524-1526) you have to go back to the Middle Ages. Yes, I'm aware that medieval Germany was "wrapping it up" so to speak, I mean early Middle Ages; back to the days of Charlemagne.

The romanticized version of medieval life that we have created in our minds, our novels, and our television isn't what it was really like. Disease was rampant, food could be scarce, there were high infant mortality rates, and unless you were of "noble" birth; life was pretty harsh. OK, even if you were on the better end of the socioeconomic scale, life was hard.

Thanks, I like indoor plumbing and electricity. These guys lived without them. See, didn't I tell you life was hard?

Outbreak Of The Peasants' War

But, anyway, Germany's peasants weren't getting their fair share of the American Dream. I mean, German Dream. Whatever. [Protestant Reformation](#) was in the air, and the serfs of medieval Germany were fighting for better. That was their side of the story.

On the other side was the Swabian League. These were members of the nobility (princes, dukes, counts, and a bunch of other titles) who felt their feudal system slipping away.

Historians still debate on whether the Peasants' War was a political one, an economic one, or even a religious one. I think it appears to be a mixture of all of them.

By 1524 the Feudal System was firmly established (told you, you got to go back to the early Middle Ages). Princes and Dukes (add more titles here, ha-ha) were getting rich off the labor of its serfs (the peasants). Although by this time, labor was a real hot commodity. So, for a while the peasants could "charge" more for their goods and services.

This did lead to better economic times for the serfs, but it wasn't enough. The final straw came when the "Lady of the Manor" in Stühlingen demanded her people to get her snail shells.

That's right, folks, snail shells. It was the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back."

It didn't take long for more than a thousand peasants to come up with a list of grievances protesting everything from death taxes to Feudal dues.

From one countess to the streets of the [Black Forest](#) (then the [Rhine](#), [Bavaria](#), and [Lake](#)

[Constance](#) region), peasants started to rise up and outright revolt against the established authority within weeks.

I bet if they had the internet back then it would have only taken hours. ;-)

It didn't matter that the peasants didn't have the money to fund themselves. It didn't matter the peasants didn't have the military knowledge or cavalry against the Swabian League. They were fed up, just like Martin Luther.

Oh, Mr. Luther. It was your 95 Theses nailed to the Castle Church in [Wittenberg](#) that kind of fueled this along. The reform you were asking for kind of spilled over, didn't it?

I know, after the Weinsberg Massacre (where Wildenberg Castle was set ablaze) you said the revolt was too much.

What's the Weinsberg Massacre?

It was skirmish over by the Kloster Schöntal (which had been won by the Peasants), where they forced the Duke to run a gauntlet of pikes. Bloody. Gruesome. Cruel.

Without the backing of Luther, it appeared the Peasants' War wasn't going anywhere. But, it did last for a while longer.

One of the bloodiest battles was the Massacre of Frankenhausen, which took place near [Bad Frankenhausen](#) between the end of April and into May, 1525. The Peasants stormed the castle and *Rathaus*; and by the time the whole thing ended thousands on both sides were killed (after the Duke broke his truce). The Peasants' leader, Thomas Müntzer was one of the dead, after he was tortured that is.

Terrible, isn't it?

One of the most lop-sided battles of the Peasants' War was the Battle of [Böblingen](#). I'm still trying to figure out how the Swabian League managed to kill 3,000 fighting Peasants from [Württemberg](#), and only managed to lose 40 guys. Dumbfounding.

That's not to say the Peasants didn't have their fair share of victory. At the Siege of [Freiburg im Breisgau](#) (Austrian territory that time), the Knights Hospitallers (an order like the Teutonic Knights) lost to the Peasants. The same Peasants went on to sack, attack, and lay claim to many Abbeys within the Black Forest.

The Cessation Of The Peasants' War

It's reported that by September 1525 all battles were terminated and the Peasants' War found to its end.

When all was said and done, a third of all the fighting men (100,000) were dead. The Peasants had failed in their attempt to change the status quo; and life continued on pretty much the same before these battles began.

But, does it ever?

No, I didn't think so, either.