

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA
Friday Film Fest Series

Join us for our next Friday Film Night:

Friday, January 16 at 6.30pm

Riefenstahl—20204

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500 Jahre Bauernkrieg (1525)

German with English Subtitles

Nov 21 | 6.30pm

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania

611 Spring Garden St.

Philadelphia, PA 19123

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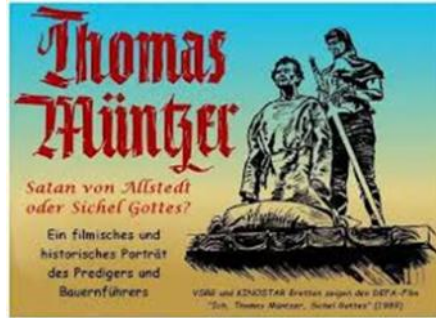
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500 Jahre Bauernkrieg

We would like to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the peasants' war with 2 videos:

1. Thomas Müntzer und der Krieg der Bauern. ZDF 2010

This docudrama chronicles how the young priest Müntzer (1489-1525) turns against the religious and secular order and agitates for a violent uprising of the oppressed peasantry in Germany.



(German with English subtitles) 43 minutes

2. Das Bauernkriegspanorama Bad Frankenhausen – Monumentalbild von Werner Tübke

This DVD documents the history of the Panorama-Museum in Bad Frankenhausen that was built on the site of the last battle of the peasants' war (May 14/15, 1525) and opened on Sept. 14, 1989. The Leipzig art professor Dr. Günter



Meißner gives an intricate interpretation of the various scenes of Tübke's monumental painting.

(German with no subtitles)

then and might be one reason why so many Germans have left the church or are non-religious compared to people in America.

2. By associating the peasants' uprising with the devil and justifying the use of force against them as in accord with God's will, Luther put a lasting stigma on any social revolution in Germany. Therefore, is it a coincidence that Germany never had a successful revolution? The liberation of the peasants, by the way, came nearly three hundred years later as a decree from above. This initiative was part of the Stein-Hardenberg Prussian State reforms that were started in 1807 after the defeat of Prussia by Napoleon in 1806.

3. Luther had the courage to severely criticize the nobles for the social injustices that the peasants had to endure. But when the rebellion became destructive and deadly (although the peasants with their primitive weapons were really no match for the superior firepower of the army), Luther turned against the peasants with language that was shockingly harsh. Luther's essential message seemed to be: You must obey the authorities because otherwise you will destroy the divinely sanctioned social order. It is a tragedy that Luther could not successfully integrate his very real sense of social justice (as evidenced by his balanced peace initiative in particular and many of his other writings in general) with his deepest theological convictions. Had he done so, the haunting trajectory of German history might have been very different.

league with the devil. Gone is the call for reason and kindness. Luther's words against the peasants are ferocious and merciless. It does not take long for the "*Höllenbrand*", hell fire, to erupt on earth.

On May 15th, 1525, eight thousand peasants under the leadership of Thomas Müntzer gathered at the edge of the Kyffhäuser Forest in Thüringen. They formed a "Circle of Wagons" as a defensive tactic. They were surrounded by an overwhelming army coalition of princes. The leaders of this coalition included Landgraf Philip of Hessen, a Luther supporter, Herzog von Braunschweig and Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg, among others. The army demanded the extradition of Müntzer and the unconditional surrender of the peasants.

An initial ceasefire was suddenly broken when the princes launch a murderous cannonade. Eventually six thousand peasants were killed. So much blood runs down the mountain that a street in Frankenhausen is named "*Blutrinne*", a name it bears to this day. Müntzer is captured, tortured and decapitated ten days later. This ends the peasants' war. It is estimated that between 70 000 and 100 000 peasants in all of Germany were killed- an enormous number considering the population of Germany at that time. To most peasants, Luther is now seen as a traitor, and his moral authority over them is shattered.

It is ironic that Friedrich III, the elector of Saxony, also known as Frederick the Wise (who remained catholic but was the main protector of Luther) was in favor of fulfilling the demands of the peasants. He refused to participate in the attack on the peasants, but died on May 5th 1525, ten days before the massacre. His death removed the final barrier to the violent denouement of Frankenhausen.

In conclusion:

1. When the princes who had protected Luther and his reformation were themselves threatened by deadly violence, Luther sided with the princes and aligned his reformation with the state authorities. This model of state-church relations has remained in force since

Luther and the Peasants' War

By Karl Moehlmann

The Reformation Movement lost its innocence in 1525, as Andrew Pettegree, the British historian and expert on the European Reformation aptly notes. This was eight years after Luther challenged the Catholic Church with his 95 theses, five years after he burned the Papal Bull of Excommunication and four years after he defied Pope Leo and Emperor Karl 5th at the Diet of Worms. In *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), Luther wrote: "A Christian is a free man over all things and subject to no one." The oppressed and exploited peasants were encouraged by Luther's bold assertion. His teaching and writing made him into a role model for them.

In March 1525, the peasant leaders published a manifesto called *Twelve articles of the peasants in Memmingen / Schwaben*, demanding a series of basic rights, including:

- The right to choose their ministers.
- The abolition of the "*Kleine Zehnt*" – a tax on small livestock
- The abolition of serfdom – "We are free and want to be free"
- More hunting and fishing rights
- Wood rights
- Reducing "*Frondienste*" – unpaid services to the landowners

This renowned set of articles is considered to be one of the first documents concerning basic human rights in European history. In the wake of this declaration, violence erupted in Southern Germany and in Thüringen and Sachsen-Anhalt, Luther's home and the heartland of the Reformation. Hundreds of monasteries and castles were attacked and plundered.



Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525)

The charismatic preacher Thomas Müntzer became the leader of the rebellious peasants in Thüringen, based in Mühlhausen.

Thousands of peasants were involved, supported by many oppressed people in the cities and even some lower ranking knights like the famous Götz von Berlichingen. The latter was known as the knight with the iron hand, being the hero of Goethe's 1771 *Storm and Stress* play.

Luther reacts to the violence by travelling to the rebellious region in Thüringen and preaching moderation. He tries to prevent the escalation of the conflict. He writes a lengthy response to the Twelve Articles, called *Ermahnung zum Frieden* (Admonition for Peace). It is a remarkable document, combining reasoned discourse with dire predictions. He calls several of the Twelve Articles "*billig und recht*" (justified) and criticizes the oppressive, exploitative nature of the stubborn tyranny of the nobles, as well as their lavish and arrogant life styles.

Moreover, Luther chastises the morally blind bishops and the corrupt monks and priests. He asks the nobles to treat the peasants with "*Vernunft und Güte*", with reason and kindness and stop their "*Toben und Wüten*", their raving and raging. But he also talks to the peasants and asks them either to stop calling themselves "Christians" or to act like Christians. This means to live not by the sword, but rather "*mit dem Kreuz und Leiden*", with the cross and suffering. They must do so even in the face of unbearable injustice. As Paulus in the letter to the Romans (13:1) said:



Martin Luther (1483 – 1546)

"*Jedermann sei untertan der Obrigkeit, die Gewalt über ihn hat.*" "Obey the authorities who have power over you." Luther also admonishes them to stay away from so called "*Mordpropheten*", false prophets who were sent among them by the devil.

Luther's balanced admonition could have been the blueprint for a peaceful solution of a burning social conflict. He desired that both sides refrain from violence and revenge and instead engage with one another with reason and kindness. Otherwise the confrontation would ignite all of Germany into a firestorm of deadly social conflict that no one would be able to extinguish. This admonition cast Luther in the guise of a visionary peace maker. But the spark came and his irenic and prophetic pamphlet is all but forgotten.

On Easter Sunday, April 16th 1525, in Weinsberg, Baden-Württemberg, Graf Ludwig von Helfenstein and his entourage were killed by rebellious peasants. This bloody event is known as the "*Weinsberger Blut-Ostern*". It prompted Luther to turn against the violent peasants with a vengeance. He then wrote the infamous "*Wider die mordischen und reubischen Rotten der Bauern*" ("Wider die mörderischen und räuberischen Rotten der Bauern" - Against the murdering and robbing hordes of peasants) and has it published by the end of April 1525. According to Luther, the peasants have committed three kinds of sins against God:

1. They broke the pledge to be obedient to the secular authorities as God demands it.
2. They sin by inciting unrest, by robbing and plundering monasteries and castles.
3. They sin because they justify their actions with the gospel.

Luther declares in this tract that it is time to end the lawlessness; it is time for the sword and for rage, not for mercy. He encourages the princes to "*zerschmeißen, würgen und stechen*", to smash, strangle and stab the peasants as one would deal with a mad dog. Whoever dies for the authorities is a martyr of God. On the other hand, the peasants who die are condemned to eternal hell fire. They are in

