

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

## Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

---

Bachelor of Divinity

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

---

6-1-1953

### German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages and its Effects on the Reformation

Walter Rosin

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir\_rosinw@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Rosin, Walter, "German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages and its Effects on the Reformation" (1953). *Bachelor of Divinity*. 374.

<https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv/374>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Divinity by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

GERMAN SOCIETY AT THE CLOSE OF THE MIDDLE AGES  
AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE REFORMATION

---

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Historical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

---

by  
Walter L. Rosin  
June 1953

Approved by:

Thos. Stoyer.  
Advisor

A. M. Reinhardt  
Reader

BV  
4070  
Cb9  
B3  
1953  
v.3  
c.2

51514

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. FACTORS AFFECTING THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF GERMANY . . . . .	5
III. THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF GERMANY AT THE CLOSE OF THE MIDDLE AGES . . . . .	13
IV. EFFECTS OF THE GERMAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE ON THE SUCCESS OF THE REFORMATION . . . . .	39
V. CONCLUSION . . . . .	46
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	49

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Ever since the age of the Reformation historians have written the story of this and the preceding period from varying viewpoints. In an effort to explain the origin of the German Reformation and account for its success a number of elements have been emphasized. Foremost among these is the religious element.

There can be no doubt that the religious element is the most important factor to consider in a discussion of the Reformation, for the Reformation in Germany was essentially a religious movement.<sup>1</sup> Even before Luther the corruption of the church and its clergy had caused men to become dissatisfied with the church as it existed. The various reform movements of John Huss, Wycliffe, and others and the reform councils which were held before this time bear witness to this fact. Luther's dissatisfaction was more concerned with the corruption of the doctrine of the church than with the conditions manifested in the outward life of the clergy and his work brought about a clash with the Roman Catholic Church which resulted in the Reformation. The great em-

---

<sup>1</sup>G. E. Hageman, Sketches from the History of the Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), p. 129.

<sup>2</sup>Hereafter when the word "Reformation" is used the Reformation in Germany is to be understood.

phasis which has been placed on the religious element in the period of the Reformation and that period immediately preceding it has been correctly placed. The Reformation was essentially a religious movement with religious causes and religious effects.

Perhaps second in importance to the religious element in the causes and reasons for the success of the German Reformation is the political element. Much of the dissatisfaction with the existing church originated with the attempts of the church to control large sections of land and to direct national and international policies through its claim to control of the double sword. The success of the Reformation is therefore due to a large extent to the political situation which prevailed at the time. The coming election of the new emperor of the Holy Roman Empire caused the church authorities to move much more slowly in their efforts to halt the advance of the Reformation than they ordinarily would have, for the papal authorities needed the support of the electors and particularly that of the ruler of Electoral Saxony in order to have their candidate elected. The fact that Germany was not a united country but was under the control of various rulers governing certain sections of the land increased the possibilities for the success of the Reformation.

Still another element which has been emphasized in discussions of this period is the economic factor. Germany at this time was still involved in a change in economic system from barter and services in kind to a money economy. The

rivalry for goods, territories, and markets, brought about many changes to which the church was opposed, not for spiritual or scriptural reasons, but because of purely materialistic motives. All of this increased opposition to the church and its position and helped to bring about and assure the success of the Reformation.

A fourth element which was involved in the cause of the Reformation and the assurance of its success was the social element. In nearly all histories this is one element which has either been entirely neglected or at least has been relegated to a secondary position. All the other factors have been emphasized at the expense of the social element. It was not until comparatively recent years that the social factor was subjected to examination and given its rightful place among the elements involved in the Reformation. It is for this reason that there is very little information available on the subject.

A discussion of the social elements involved in the Reformation is a rather difficult task because all the other elements which have been listed are involved in the formation of social classes. Much of the importance of the religious, political, and economic elements lies in the fact that they have all been involved in the formation of these classes of society. Because of this, any discussion of the social aspects of the Reformation must necessarily include these factors and their influence on the formation of the social classes which were present at the time of the Reformation.

The purpose of this thesis will be to discuss the social conditions prevalent at the close of the Middle Ages which are involved in the German Reformation, the role which they played in bringing it about, and also to trace the effects which the social factor had in assuring the success of the Reformation.

During the period of the middle ages the social structure of Germany as well as that of the other European countries consisted of a feudal society. The land was controlled by a number of barons or nobles possessing large estates and was operated by peasants, who, in many cases were little better than slaves. In the century immediately preceding the Reformation at the close of the middle ages this social system had begun to experience a change.

The series of religious wars which were fought to re-establish control of the Holy Land had a profound effect on the feudal social system existing in Germany. In the early years many of these barons and nobles went on the crusades to the Holy Land and many of them lost their lives. This left a large number of peasants free and with no one exercising control over them.

In addition to this a large number of people were able to buy their freedom. At times entire towns bought their freedom from one of the nobles who wished to go on a crusade.

## CHAPTER II

### FACTORS AFFECTING THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF GERMANY

The social structure of Germany received its form as the result of a number of factors. One of the most important and earliest of these was the crusades. During the period of the crusades the social structure of Germany as well as that of the other European countries consisted of a feudal society. The land was controlled by a number of barons or nobles possessing large estates and was operated by peasants, who, in many cases were little better than slaves. In the century immediately preceding the Reformation at the close of the Middle Ages this social system had begun to experience a change.

The series of religious wars which were fought to regain control of the Holy Land had a profound effect on the feudal social system existing in Germany. In the early crusades many of these barons and nobles went on the journeys to the Near East and many of them lost their lives.<sup>1</sup> This left a large number of peasants free men with no one exercising control over them.

In addition to this a large number of people were able to buy their freedom. At times entire towns bought their freedom from one of the noblemen who wished to go on a cru-

---

<sup>1</sup>S. J. Roth and Wm. A. Kramer, The Church Through the Ages (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1949), p. 330.

sade and was in need of funds to carry out his purpose.<sup>2</sup>

The stimulation of trade caused by the crusades brought about a demand for the products of the peasant farms, which, together with the rise in prices caused by the increase in trade, made it possible for many of the serfs to buy their freedom. In contrast to the nobles, the income of a farmer was flexible and if he was ambitious his income was likely to increase.<sup>3</sup> This made it possible for some men to buy their freedom from their overlords. Such a condition was, however, quite rare.<sup>4</sup>

Free tenants increased rapidly throughout the country and by 1300 several millions of serfs had gained freedom.<sup>5</sup> Some of this was due to the steady increase of population throughout the country. Because of the crowded conditions in certain sections of the country, many of the serfs emigrated to different portions of the country or settled on some of the wasteland and reclaimed it for use. In order to keep the serfs in his territory a noble was often forced to soften the conditions of the peasants, commute the services to fixed rent, and at times even resort to emancipation.<sup>6</sup> The rapid

---

<sup>2</sup>James W. Thompson, "An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages," The Century Historical Series (New York: The Century Co., 1928), p. 794.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 801.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 747.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 799.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 797.

rise of the towns was also a powerful factor in the freeing of the peasants. Labor became so much in demand that many serfs were tempted to flee and when they had once been in a town for a year they received their freedom.<sup>7</sup> The result of all these things was obviously an increase in the power of the common people and the development of a large section of society composed of free men.

Another result of the crusades and the loss of noblemen in these crusades was the increase of wealth and land and the concentration of these things in the hands of a few. Many peasants who found themselves without the protection which the barons had provided for them. In order to regain this protection they were willing to trade their freedom in return for the protection of another nobleman. This created a smaller though more powerful group of noblemen who controlled larger sections of the country.

As a result of these crusades, a trading class began to develop in Germany as well as in the other countries of Europe. Men returning from the crusades brought with them spices and other items which were rare and very much in demand. In order to provide these goods a number of people entered the trading profession providing these items in return for money. Wealth no longer consisted of land, and the trading class, no longer interested in land and its accumulation, began to concentrate in larger groups in the towns, thus in-

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 781.

creasing their size and influence.

A second important element affecting the change in social structure was the Renaissance. The effect of the Renaissance in Germany was different from that in Italy and some of the other European countries. In Germany it was adopted and used, not so much as a means for increasing personal knowledge, as an instrument for reform in education, in the church, and for raising the standard of living.<sup>8</sup> It was in the field of education that the Renaissance had a particularly great influence in Germany.

The desire for learning formed a class of students who received much of their education in the schools of Italy where they had gone to attain the New Learning. These students supported themselves by begging, and in this way were able to obtain an education, which, when they returned to Germany, had formed them into a group of irreligious people with the same spirit as that of the Italian Humanists.<sup>9</sup> However, if we judge from later developments, this characteristic was true of only a minority of students.

As the influence of the Renaissance increased in Germany the desire for education took root in the towns. Princes and burghers attempted to rival each other in the setting up of schools. Lindsay says that within one hundred fifty years seventeen universities were founded in the cities throughout

---

<sup>8</sup>Thomas M. Lindsay, A History of the Reformation (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), I, 57.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

Germany.<sup>10</sup> Many of these schools were supported by taxes collected from the townspeople, all of whom took pride in their schools. A new development was the setting up of schools for the education of girls.<sup>11</sup> The opportunities for education drew students from all parts of Germany to the various towns in which the universities were established, adding a new element to the begging class which already frequented the roads of Germany.<sup>12</sup>

The founding of schools throughout the country raised the percentage of literate people and this together with the printing of books at a later date caused many people to begin to ask questions. The clergy were no longer able to occupy all the important offices and the nobles and princes began to engage men who had received secular education as lawyers and counselors. Although the clergy still held the most important offices in the national government, they no longer enjoyed a monopoly of the education which was necessary for the conduct of the government.<sup>13</sup> The increase of education in Germany gave rise to a larger educated class which began to break down the barriers which had separated the clergy from the laity.

The increase of education and the element of humanism

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> John Fulton, "The Reformation," *Ten Epochs of Church History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), IX, 24.

began to make society more individualistic.<sup>14</sup> Society became anthropocentric rather than theocratic and man was recognized as the measure of all things. Education urged the people to do their own thinking and work for an increase in the standard of living for themselves.

The introduction of democratic theories also deeply affected the thought and actions of the social classes of Germany. Southwestern Germany was most greatly affected by this element. Its nearness to Switzerland inspired the peasants living in this area to revolt against the existing authority and demand a voice in the government. The success of the Swiss peasantry in their revolt had shown them that man for man they were as good as any of the knights or barons and being a larger class they were able to enforce their demands.<sup>15</sup> The revolt against authority, which in many cases was successful, helped to swell the number of free men and increase the power of the common people.

A final influence which affected the social structure of Germany at this time was the rise of industry. Although the Industrial Revolution is often placed by many historians in the eighteenth century, its origin can be traced to the fifteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The rise of towns in the Middle Ages and

---

<sup>14</sup>Jeremiah O'Sullivan and John F. Burns, Medieval Europe (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1943), p. 614.

<sup>15</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>16</sup>O'Sullivan and Burns, op. cit., p. 673.

the rise of industry throughout Germany are very closely related.

Up until the eleventh century the life of the common people was closely associated with the land, but during this time commerce and industry began to develop. Much of this was due to the close contact with the Mediterranean lands which had been established during the crusades.<sup>17</sup> This increase in trade with the foreign lands also stimulated the production at home because merchants were now looking for articles to exchange for their imports.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of industry caused large numbers of free men to flock to the towns to obtain employment. This movement helped to raise the social standing of many of the people and the real power of the country moved into the hands of a larger group of people. In addition to this it helped to increase the unrest and dissatisfaction among those who were unable to obtain employment. Another result of this movement was that people began to understand that by banding together they would be able to realize more of their ambitions than they could ordinarily achieve. The beginnings of the urbanized social-minded group can be traced back to the twelfth century where the commercial and industrial processes had their or-

---

<sup>17</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 727.

<sup>18</sup>James H. Breasted and James H. Robinson, Outlines of European History (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1914), I, 500.

igin.<sup>19</sup> The great impetus which the industrial movement received in the fifteenth century developed and increased the power of the workers tremendously.

---

<sup>19</sup>O'Sullivan and Burns, op. cit., p. 673.

The Middle Ages is almost impossible because of the various conditions in the different sections of the territory comprising Germany. The statement that is made is likely to be open to controversy, for what is true of one portion of the country may be entirely wrong when applied to another portion of the land.

Feudalism is the term which is commonly given to the social system which was in effect during the Middle Ages. As the Middle Ages progressed, however, it experienced gradual modifications which resulted in a transformation of society at the close of this period immediately preceding the Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

The obvious trend in nearly all countries was a trend toward centralization. This condition was at work in Germany as it was in other countries. In countries such as France and England, however, this trend had advanced until power was concentrated in the hands of Parliament or in the monarch. In Germany and Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century there had as yet been very little progress toward a unified

<sup>2</sup>See also O'Sullivan and Burns, op. cit., p. 673. (New York: P. W. Colver and Co., 1904), p. 673.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF GERMANY AT THE CLOSE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

A short description of the society found at the close of the Middle Ages is almost impossible because of the varying conditions in the different sections of the territory comprising Germany. Any statement that is made is likely to be open to contradiction, for what is true of one portion of the country may be entirely wrong when applied to another section of the land.

Feudalism is the name which is commonly given to the social system which was in effect during the Middle Ages. As the Middle Ages progressed, however, it experienced gradual modifications which resulted in a transformation of society at the close of this period immediately preceding the Reformation.<sup>1</sup>

The obvious trend in nearly all countries was a trend toward centralization. This condition was as true of Germany as it was of other countries. In countries such as France and England, however, this trend had advanced until power was now concentrated in the hands of Parliament or in the monarch. In Germany and Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century there had as yet been very little progress toward a unified

---

<sup>1</sup>Jeremiah O'Sullivan and John F. Burns, Medieval Europe (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1943), p. 698.

nation.<sup>2</sup>

The land was composed of what the French called the "Germanies," several hundred states of varying sizes that were controlled by men of different ranks. This together with the independence of such cities as Nuremberg, Frankfort, and Cologne and the tiny possessions of the knights form the picture of the disunified Germany present at the time when the Reformation began in this country.<sup>3</sup> In reality the title Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire had very little meaning, for the emperor was only the nominal ruler of the empire. Under the rule of Frederick III the Holy Roman Empire had become a laughing stock and its claim to supervise Christendom had been entirely set aside.<sup>4</sup> Actually the empire was in the control of certain ruling families who governed smaller sections of the country, many of which were as large as the united kingdoms of England and the Netherlands.

The emperor was at the mercy of the more powerful nobles of the land who served as electors. Since the rulership of the Holy Roman Empire was not hereditary these men met at the death of an emperor in order to elect a new man to fill the position. This placed the emperor to a certain extent at the

---

<sup>2</sup>Thomas M. Lindsay, A History of the Reformation (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), I, 30.

<sup>3</sup>James H. Breasted and James H. Robinson, Outlines of European History (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1914), p. 574.

<sup>4</sup>F. W. Bussell, Religious Thought and Heresy in the Middle Ages (London: Robert Scott Roxburghe House, 1918), p. 819.

mercy of these seven men. The other nobles were also powerful factors in the decisions and actions of the emperor, for he was dependent upon them for financial support and for the recruitment of military forces.

The emperor was influenced to a great extent not only by these men, but he was also under the influence of the pope. As the nominal ruler of all Christendom the emperor was bound by oath to protect the church, which meant the church controlled by the papacy. It was still popularly believed that the emperor held his position by divine right, and the pope as Christ's vicar on earth alone had the right to place the crown upon his head. This same condition was true also with regard to all other rulers, and in this way the pope was able to control the actions of the various rulers, including the actions of the emperor. Before the coming of Charles V and the establishment of his authority the emperor had had very little power of his own, being almost completely subject to the two forces of the nobles and the papacy.

We see therefore that the government of Germany presents a very disunified picture at this time. The only groups of people who would have been able to unite the country of Germany were the nobles and the emperor.<sup>5</sup> The nobles were the princely rulers of various sections of the country who had received their power either by inheritance or by conquest. It was in the hands of these nobles that the power of the country

---

<sup>5</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 37.

had been gradually concentrated over a period of years. In order to unite the country a feeling of mutual confidence would have had to be present between the nobles and the emperor, a thing which never occurred until the later years of the reign of Charles V.<sup>6</sup> The two elements were opposed in their theories of government, the nobles demanding that the government should consist of an oligarchy while the emperor believed that it should be autocratic. Lindsay has an accurate description of the situation. He says,

The princes were resolved to keep their independence, and their plans for unity always implied a governing oligarchy with serious restraint placed upon the power of the emperor; while the emperors, who would never submit to be controlled by an oligarchy of German princes, and who found that they could not carry out their schemes for an autocratic unity, were at least able to wreck any other.<sup>7</sup>

This vast empire which was one in name was hopelessly divided and the only two elements who could form an organized central government were the elements which prevented it.<sup>8</sup> The electors who chose the emperor were selected from the families of the nobles and so the election of an emperor was dependent on them. When the emperor had been elected, however, he considered himself as the autocrat to whose will these electors and the other nobles must submit themselves.

At the close of the Middle Ages the condition of the

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

nobles was becoming poorer all the time. The economic revolution was to their disadvantage from the very beginning while at its inception it was an aid to some of the other social classes of Germany.

Many of the nobles rented their land to the peasants for long terms at fixed rates without making provisions for any change which might arise in the cost of living. Consequently when the prices rose at this time and their income remained stable they found themselves in financial difficulties.<sup>9</sup> In order to alleviate this condition the nobles turned to the coining of money to increase their incomes. It was a right which belonged to them and they guarded it jealously. In many cases they resorted to the debasing of the metal and the issuing of new forms of money and in this way profited greatly from the privilege which they had. In the end, however, it helped to bring about the downfall of this social group, for the distress which this practice brought about among the tradesmen and peasants caused many of them to turn to the use of royal currency.<sup>10</sup> In this way local circulation of money was suppressed and the nobles lost one of their most profitable privileges. They gradually became impoverished and in an effort to keep up appearances many of them were forced to sell their rights to certain properties. The nobles declined both

---

<sup>9</sup>James W. Thompson, "An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages," The Century Historical Series (New York: The Century Co., 1928), p. 800.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 798.

in number and influence, but many of the oldest feudal families remained as a proud but poor aristocracy and a powerful factor in the government of the land.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these nobles, who were secular princes, the land was in control of a number of clergymen. In complete agreement with the double sword theory of the papacy, these bishops held both secular and ecclesiastical offices. In addition to their ecclesiastical duties these clergymen controlled large sections of land and were as powerful as any of the secular princes. In the majority of cases the territory which they controlled was larger than that governed by the secular princes.

The clergymen did not only rule over certain sections of the land, but a number of them were also influential in the election of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, serving as electors. Because of the great cost of assembling a national Diet in Germany, some of the national affairs had gradually passed into the hands of the men known as electors. They were the rulers of the most prominent sections of Germany and since 1356 had been given certain privileges by the Golden Bull which made them more powerful than their fellow noble rulers. One of these privileges was that of electing the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The men to whom this privilege was given were the Archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier, and the rulers of the Palatine, Brandenburg, and Saxony. The King of

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 800.

Bohemia was permitted to serve as the seventh elector when a new emperor was to be chosen.<sup>12</sup> Due to the presence of the three archbishops among the electors, both the land and the emperor were also in this way brought under the control of the church.

A fourth group found throughout the land of Germany was the class of the knights. The knights formed the lowest class of a sort of military hierarchy which was present during the Middle Ages. They were men, who, because of their military service, had been released from serfdom and had been given a position of rank.<sup>13</sup> Germany was the only land in which these men were not originally of noble birth but had risen from serfdom.<sup>14</sup> Gradually they came to be considered among the nobility and aristocracy of the country and during the early part of the Middle Ages, particularly during the age of the crusades, were very prominent men. With the invention of gunpowder and other methods of warfare, however, the situation became such that their services were no longer needed. Brass cannon and balls were already being made in 1326, and by 1350 three German towns were engaged in manufacturing gunpowder. By 1500 it was clear to everyone that the services of the knights were no longer effective in the protection of castles

---

<sup>12</sup>Lord Acton, "The Renaissance," The Cambridge Modern History (London: Cambridge University Press, 1902), I, 291.

<sup>13</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 708.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

because gunpowder had done away with armor, bows and arrows, and spears and javelins.<sup>15</sup>

Unable to find employment in their profession of waging war, these men gradually became impoverished and developed into a class wandering around the countryside dissatisfied with the position which had now been assigned to them. Having been used to lives of prestige they were unwilling to accept their present position in life or to turn to any other kind of work. The great economic changes which took place at this time affected the knights as much as and perhaps more than any other group. The small sections of land which they controlled were insufficient to support them. In order to gain a livelihood by the only means which they knew, war, they turned to the practice of highway robbery. Their hatred was particularly shown to the merchant class whom they held responsible for their lot in life. Lindsay says,

Men like Ulrich von Hutten were prepared to justify the robber knights because they attacked the merchants, who, he said, were ruining Germany.<sup>16</sup>

In his book dealing with German society during this period Bax states that such men as Ulrich von Hutten and Franz von Sickingen were the leaders in these highway robberies.<sup>17</sup>

These knights were for the most part found in the Rhine country and could not be controlled by the nobles of var-

---

<sup>15</sup>Breasted and Robinson, op. cit., p. 551.

<sup>16</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>17</sup>E. Belfort Bax, German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1894), p. 9.

ious territories. They claimed that they were not subject to the nobles but owed their allegiance only to the emperor.<sup>18</sup> This meant that because of the disunity of the country they were practically without control. They became the greatest element of disorder within the country of Germany and their deeds were an expression of the unrest which was to be found among the lower nobility.<sup>19</sup> Being dissatisfied themselves they became leaders of the other dissatisfied elements in the country. When these men returned home from their crusades and their wars to their home territory they became objects of admiration for their fellow townsmen and countrymen who followed their leadership willingly. The fact that they were skilled in the waging of war was an additional factor in their being chosen as leaders of the revolts. As to their importance Lindsay says, "It has scarcely been sufficiently noted how most of the leaders in the plebeian risings were disbanded landsknechts."<sup>20</sup> In any other country such a condition would not have been tolerated, but in disunified Germany there was no one who could force control upon the knights.

By far the most important and the largest portion of the population of Germany consisted of the peasant class. They formed the basic element in German society. These people had

---

<sup>18</sup>John Fulton, "The Reformation," Ten Epochs of Church History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), IX, 24.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 110.

been affected greatly by the change from German to Roman law within the country of Germany and their condition had undergone many changes as a result of this. Before the introduction of Roman law the peasants had been living in what might be described as rude plenty and were troubled only by the various exactions of labor by their landlords.<sup>21</sup> They had been living under a traditional law which was based on the system of clans and in which there was a supreme leader to whom the members of the clan looked for counsel and advice. Before this time,

. . . law for the medieval man was the product of experience and tradition. It was custom, the accretion of generations in the past and silently accepted by the men of the present. Even the prince could not contravene this customary law. Customary law was the supreme law, and any modification of it had to be accepted by the governing class, by the major or senior pars. [Italics in the original.] The king himself was not above the law, for he was of the noble class and contributed to the law of his kind. He, too, was subject to the customary law of the land. His authority was far from that of being a despot. The maxim of St. Augustine that an unjust law was not law reenforced this doctrine of "natural rights," which were distinguished from positive law.<sup>22</sup>

Under this system the peasants were entitled to certain privileges of which they were deprived with the introduction of the Roman law. The idea of private property made all land the property of the noble with the right to dispose of the property as he wished. In some cases this property also in-

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>22</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 706.

cluded the peasants. The traditional rights of hunting and fishing and the use of communal land were denied to the peasants and the land was considered the property of the ruler to whom all living on the land owed their allegiance. Under this system nearly all privileges were denied to this social group. Their life was no longer controlled by tradition but by written laws and the nobles were represented by lawyers who were prepared to defend them on the basis of these laws. The change imposed much hardship on the peasants and they were reduced to a state of serfdom which had ended in nearly all other countries.<sup>23</sup> This condition created restlessness among the peasants. They were unable to protect themselves from the bands of soldiers, knights, and robbers who inhabited the country and the fact that their noble was not able to provide this protection for them in many cases created greater resentment.<sup>24</sup> The greatest cause for the unrest, however, was the resentment of the peasants to the change in law which was in direct contradiction to the old classical German tradition.<sup>25</sup>

The conditions which the change to Roman law brought about and to which the peasants protested are reflected in the various articles which were presented as a basis for ne-

---

<sup>23</sup>Fulton, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>24</sup>Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), V, 778.

<sup>25</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 706.

gotiation with the nobles. In speaking of these demands of the peasants, Bax lists the following:

1. The obligation to hunt or fish for the lord was to be abolished, and all game, likewise fishing, was to be declared free.
2. They should no longer be compelled to hang bells on their dogs' necks.
3. They should be free to carry weapons.
4. They should not be liable to punishment from huntsmen and forest rangers.
5. They should have neither to mow, reap, hew wood, nor carry trusses of hay nor firewood for the use of the castle.
6. They should no longer carry dung for their lord.
7. They were to be free of the heavy market tolls and handicraft taxes.
8. No one should be cast into the lord's dungeon or otherwise imprisoned who could give guarantee for his appearance at the judicial bar.
9. They should no longer pay any tax, due or charge whatsoever, the right to which had not been judicially established.
10. No tithe of growing corn should be exacted, nor any agricultural corves.
11. Neither man nor woman should be any longer punished for marrying without the permission of his or her lord.
12. The goods of suicides should no longer revert to the lord.
13. The lord should no longer inherit where relations of the deceased were still living.
14. All bailiff rights should be abolished.
15. He who had wine in his house should be at liberty to serve it to whomsoever he pleased.
16. If a lord or his bailiff arrested any one on account of a transgression which he was unable to prove with good witnesses, the accused should be set at liberty.<sup>26</sup>

Claims such as these were later condensed into the Twelve Articles which were presented to Luther at the time of the Peasants Revolt in 1525. Notable among these Twelve Articles is number nine which demands that justice and right be as of old time.<sup>27</sup> These protests show that, to say the least, the

---

<sup>26</sup>E. Belfort Bax, The Peasants War in Germany 1525-1526 (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., Lim., 1899), pp. 41-43.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

change to Roman law was most distasteful to the peasant class.

It is very difficult to give a description of the life of the peasant, for the conditions varied to a great degree throughout the country. In certain sections of the land the life of these peasants who lived together in villages was a hard and dull existence.<sup>28</sup> The land which was worked by the people surrounded the village and was usually divided into seven parts, These were,

(1) the lord's demesne, which was strictly his own and was farmed partly by special serfs of the demesne and partly by serfs of the village, whose service was exacted; (2) the lord's close, which was a portion of the demesne rented out to the villein or tenant farmers; (3) the tenures of the serfs of the manor, scattered in strips of virgates or yardland over the three areas of arable land; (4) the hay meadow; (5) the woods; (6) the waste; (7) the domain of the parish priest, or "God's piece" as it was sometimes called.<sup>29</sup>

In the morning the peasant would go out to work his land and would continue at it until sundown when he would return to the village to eat his evening meal and retire. For this reason he came to call his land the Morgenland or Tag-werk.<sup>30</sup>

The land which the peasant worked always took second place to that owned by the lord which was always given the first and best attention. It was the first to be plowed, sown, and reaped and the first to be saved in case of a storm or some other calamity. Even at his death the lord had first

---

<sup>28</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 742.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 738.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 744.

claim on the property of a peasant and took the best animals of the peasant as a heriot or death tax.<sup>31</sup>

From this description it would seem that the peasants' lot was a hard one, and in most cases this was true. There were, however, compensations mainly in the form of protection from violence and robbery and in exemption from military service.<sup>32</sup>

This description of the condition of the peasants applies in the main to those living in the north and north-eastern Germany where they had been reduced to this condition of serfdom. In the south and southwest their condition was much the same as it had been before the introduction of the Roman law.<sup>33</sup> However, in this section the restlessness was even greater due to the example of the peasants in France and Switzerland who had revolted and gained their complete independence.<sup>34</sup>

Toward the end of the Middle Ages the life of the peasant was undergoing many changes. Serfdom was disappearing rapidly and opportunities for the peasant were increasing. Much of this was due to the change to a money economy and the increase in commerce which raised the price which a peasant received for his produce. This in turn raised the peasants'

---

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 740.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 745.

<sup>33</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 94

<sup>34</sup>Fulton, op. cit., p. 20.

standard of living. Other factors which brought this about have been mentioned in the previous chapter. Conditions among the peasants as they were found in the thirteenth century would have been unheard of in the years previous. At this time the peasants were travelling throughout the country working on various manors at harvest time and even striking for higher wages at a time when they knew that their demands would be met because it was necessary for the landowner to have his crop harvested.<sup>35</sup>

All that has been said shows that although the social system which prevailed in Germany at the Beginning of the Reformation may still be described as feudal, it was nevertheless not static.<sup>36</sup> It was a system which was gradually undergoing modifications which would have their influence in bringing about the Reformation and assuring its success.

A description of the social structure of Germany would, however, not be complete without the consideration of the towns which were rising and growing in importance at the close of the Middle Ages. What has been said in description of the social conditions of Germany is true only of the outlying districts of the country. Between the town and the country there was a strong line of demarcation, and the concentration of the population within the small area of the

---

<sup>35</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 806.

<sup>36</sup>Jeremiah O'Sullivan and John F. Burns, Medieval Europe (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1943), p. 698.

walls which enclosed the town created a society of peculiar character and unity.<sup>37</sup>

These towns are to be distinguished from the many peasant-villages which were scattered throughout the country. The exact origin of these towns is not known and various theories have been proposed in order to explain the way in which they arose. James Thompson speaks of seven theories which are at least plausible.<sup>38</sup> Of these, one of the most widely held is that the town sprang from the German free village community or Mark. This theory holds that the towns were simply a gradual growth and development of some of the local villages. Other theories are that of the origin from the manor, the market-law theory, the immunity theory, the garrison theory, and the theory of the origin from the guilds. It is dangerous and impossible to defend any particular theory to the exclusion of all others, for what may be true of one part of the country is not necessarily true of the other. The chief factors in the origin of a town can often be determined, but it can only be said that the towns were the result of social and economic forces of the time.<sup>39</sup>

Each town was an independent economic unit and controlled the trade and industry within its own domain. In many of the other countries this condition had changed and trade had

---

<sup>37</sup>Oliver J. Thatcher and Ferdinand Schwill, Europe in the Middle Ages (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), p. 613.

<sup>38</sup>Thompson, op. cit., pp. 766-769.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 771.

come under the control of the central government, but in Germany, where the country was still not unified, each town was in direct control of all its affairs.<sup>40</sup>

With the increase of trade, men were encouraged to manufacture products which could be used in exchange for the commodities which were brought in from the Middle East at the close of the crusades. But with the increase of manufacturing the nobles began to place taxes and other restrictions on the towns which made progress impossible. As a result, particularly during the twelfth century, a large number of insurrections took place, the main issue of which was a demand on the part of the towns for charters in which the rights of both nobles and the towns were to be definitely stated. The result of these insurrections was that the towns were given power to collect their taxes for payment to the nobles and were allowed to administer their own government and justice or were given their freedom entirely.<sup>41</sup> The rise of the towns was quite rapid and in the course of time most of the nobles became reconciled to the town movement and in many cases even promoted it. It was one of the methods by which they retained their serfs in their territory and was at the same time a source of income in the form of taxes.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>41</sup>Breasted and Robinson, op. cit., p. 500.

<sup>42</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 782.

The freedom of control which the towns enjoyed carried with it the responsibility for the protection of the town. The population of the towns, particularly those considering themselves completely independent of control by the nobles, did not look to the lords for protection. The burghers themselves composed the army of defense.<sup>43</sup> The allegiance of a burgher belonged not to a noble but to his town. This independence of the towns and the leagues which they formed made them a powerful group within the country. Nevertheless, they were made particularly subject to the taxes imposed by the church and whenever possible by the nobles in whose territory the towns were found.

The government of the towns was founded upon an aristocracy which consisted of the descendants of the original families of the towns or the leaders of the guilds. Positions in the guilds which had been determined on a democratic basis had gradually become hereditary and many of these men became members of the aristocracy which controlled the town.<sup>44</sup> In this way the towns, exclusive and independent, became narrow-minded and self-seeking and prevented the unification of Germany as much as any of the nobles or princes.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the aristocracy in the towns there was the

---

<sup>43</sup>Thatcher and Schwill, op. cit., p. 613.

<sup>44</sup>Bax, German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup>Fulton, op. cit., p. 20.

large and powerful class of merchants. This group of men developed as a result of the trade which received its impetus after the crusades. The rare goods which were brought to the attention of the Europeans as a result of the crusades became objects of desire among the nobles of the land. Certain men entered the business of trading and provided the capital for the expansion of business. The discovery of the new lands at this time also constituted a new incentive for the expansion of trade and provided a means for quick profit.<sup>46</sup> In time these men banded together and formed trading companies which reaped enormous profits. Lindsay as an example tells of a certain native of Augsburg who invested 500 gulden in one of these trading companies and within seven years received a return of 24,500 gulden on his investment.<sup>47</sup>

The merchants of the town also increased their wealth in other ways. They invested in property within the walls of the town and as the population of the towns increased the value of the lots and houses rose until these men became a wealthy renting class, bringing upon themselves the hatred of the common people in the town.<sup>48</sup>

The rapid rise of the merchants, however, brought upon them the resentment of the nobles in particular who oppressed them in every way possible. The fact that they grew wealthy

---

<sup>46</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>48</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 785.

while the nobles became poor caused much jealousy to arise between these two classes. The merchants were especially subject to the whims of the Free Nobles who considered themselves sovereign powers with a right to do as they pleased within their own dominions, even when these consisted of only a few hundred acres.<sup>49</sup> This, together with the activity of the knights, constituted the greatest danger for the merchants, even greater than that which they encountered in their travels to other countries. Lindsay describes the activities of these Free Nobles and knights as follows:

He could impose what tolls or customs dues he pleased on the merchants whose heavily-laden wagons entered his territories. He had customary rights which made bad roads and the lack of bridges advantages to the lord of the soil.

.....

Worse than all were the perils from the robber knights, men who insisted on their rights to make private warfare even when that took the form of highway robbery, and who largely subsisted on the gains which came, as they said, from making their "horses bite off the purses of travellers."<sup>50</sup>

In order to lessen the perils which they encountered, many of the towns banded together to form leagues for defense. The most important of these was the Hanseatic League consisting of approximately seventy cities, with the town of Lübeck as its leader. This league, which consisted of both inland and port cities, wielded a tremendous influence both

---

<sup>49</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

in Germany itself and in the countries with which its members came in contact. It was engaged especially in the fur trade with Russia and with the manufacturing of certain products in England. It was so powerful that in some of the Scandinavian countries the king was not even permitted to take his throne until his position had been ratified by the leaders of the Hanseatic League. Its main purpose was, however, protection for the merchants, and with its close-knit organization of both inland and port cities it was able to a large extent to protect commerce on land and sea during the time when it was in existence. It achieved its greatest influence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and gradually declined in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries until it received its death blow in the Thirty Years War.<sup>51</sup>

With the protection which they received from such organizations as the Hanseatic League the number of merchants gradually increased in spite of the many dangers and they gained a great deal of power in Germany. In their position of importance they began to build better houses, purchase more luxuries, and provided their children with a good education. Already in the fourteenth century books were being written which were designed to fit the needs and tastes of the merchant class.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Georg Weber, "Das Mittelalter," Lehrbuch der Weltgeschichte (Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Engelmann, 1888), II, 613-614.

<sup>52</sup>Breasted and Robinson, op. cit., p. 509.

Although the merchant group in the town was the most wealthy and powerful, the greater part of the population of the towns was composed of artisans and workmen. One group consisted of the agriculturalists who cultivated the fields surrounding the town. The artisans were composed of the weavers of cloth, the tanners, the goldsmiths and silversmiths, the cobblers, and the manufacturers of many other items of luxury and necessity. These trades were usually handed down from one generation to another and so the skills were usually limited to the families in which they originated. This tradition made the entrance into a trade very difficult.

The entire town was organized around a system of guilds which represented every calling within the locality in which the town was located. Immediately after his allegiance to the town, every person owed allegiance to his guild. The exact origin of these groups is not known, but there was every reason for them to arise. The desire to create a monopoly on a certain product, the need for rules and standards, the desirability of limiting the number of workers were all factors in the organization of these societies.

The guilds were organized on four levels. There were the merchants who formed the large companies such as the vintners, spicers, grocers, and mercers. Next in the order of decreasing power were the traders who produced nothing but sold the products of others. The third group consisted of those who manufactured and sold their products, such as the bakers and

the tailors.<sup>53</sup>

No doubt, one of the early objects of the guilds was that of acquiring privileges and establishing monopolies. They were jealous of competition within their respective towns, but encouraged the reduction of competition from other towns by selling their products at a reduced price in other territories.<sup>54</sup>

Monopolies were also created by limiting the output of various products and by limiting the membership in the guilds. While at the beginning the trades were open to anyone who wished to enter them, the guilds gradually developed into an oligarchic organization into which it was difficult to gain entrance. Before he could begin manufacturing for himself, a worker had to pass through three stages of training and the number of persons in training for a certain craft was limited by the guild in its charter.<sup>55</sup>

In order to become a master workman, a man had to spend several years in the home of a master workman as an apprentice. He was not paid for his work during this time, but when he entered the second period of his training, that of a journeyman, he was able to earn some wages which were paid to him by the master workman. After a period of years in such a position,

---

<sup>53</sup>J. N. Larned, Larned's History of the World or Seventy Centuries of the Life of Mankind (New York: World Syndicate Company, Inc., 1915), p. 615.

<sup>54</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 791.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 790.

he was finally permitted to carry on business by himself as a master workman.<sup>56</sup> In this way the guilds became exclusive organizations and their leaders formed part of the aristocracy of the city.

The guilds were also the social organizations of the Middle Ages and concerned themselves with the education and recreation of their members and with the improvement of their standard of living. They were the charity organizations of that time and often set up almshouses or lent money to their members without interest. In addition to this, they supplied the fighting forces for the protection of the cities. Men for the defense of the city were recruited from the ranks of the guilds and each guild maintained its own fighting equipment and used its free hours to train its members for the defense of the town.<sup>57</sup>

Because of their many functions, the guilds soon became independent of the old patrician aristocracy, but often in their place became subject to the aristocracy of the guild leaders.<sup>58</sup>

The importance of the guilds can hardly be overemphasized, for it was around these organizations that the entire social and industrial life of the city was centered. Their in-

---

<sup>56</sup>Breasted and Robinson, op. cit., p. 502.

<sup>57</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

fluence, however, waned toward the end of the period of the Middle Ages when the new discoveries brought about a change in trade and commerce and left room for new individual and corporate enterprises.<sup>59</sup> This was another area in which the social structure of Germany was beginning to change and was no longer as stable as it had formerly been.

The highest example of the medieval towns is to be found in the imperial cities. These were towns which dated their origin back to Roman times and which had increased tremendously in population and influence during the Middle Ages. These imperial cities were the direct vassals of the emperor and were for this reason called either free or imperial cities.<sup>60</sup> In these towns the power rested in the body of men who were descended from the original inhabitants of the town and these men gradually formed a sovereign body which made the laws and made war and peace. In reality the imperial cities formed separate republics which maintained their independence for many centuries.<sup>61</sup> They must therefore be counted among the states of Germany. Despite their great influence, they were not permitted to send representatives to the German Diet until 1487.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>60</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 734.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Breasted and Robinson, op. cit., p. 576.

The town movement is one of the most interesting and important phenomena of this period in German history and plays a most important part in assuring the success of the Reformation. More than any other movement it marks the transition from the medieval period to modern times in Europe.<sup>63</sup>

At the close of the Middle Ages then, the country of Germany was in the midst of a tremendous social change. Conditions were unstable and the entire land seemed to be filled with a restlessness and antipathy of one group for another. An excellent description of this condition is given by Thatcher and Schwill. They say,

As we cast our eye in a comprehensive survey over the Germany of this epoch we are not struck by a pleasant picture. We observe the impotent national government; we are disgusted by the selfish and usurping electors, princes, and bishops, who, though averse to imperial authority, cannot preserve order within their dominions and put an end to the desolating private warfare; we note the knights, especially strong in South Germany, who, without respect for peace and law, try to replenish their exhausted pockets by highway robbery from the burghers; we observe these conditions and by them note at what a hopelessness of social disorder the feudal system had arrived. But the picture is not yet complete. There are still the cities to take into account, and these are the points of light illuminating at frequent intervals the dark chaos. With their commercial initiative, their artisan skill, their democratic spirit, their civic love of law, they represent the vigorous germs of the modern and political system, which will be ready to supplant the old medieval order at its expected passing.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 765.

<sup>64</sup>Thatcher and Schwill, op. cit., p. 566.

## CHAPTER IV

### EFFECTS OF THE GERMAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE ON THE SUCCESS OF THE REFORMATION

From what has been said, it will be noted that on the eve of the Reformation Germany was filled with discontent on all sides. There was enmity between the great trading companies and the capitalists who were against the guilds, the poorer classes against the wealthier, and the nobles against the towns.<sup>1</sup> All of this had a profound effect upon the success of the Reformation when it came about in Germany.

The rise of the middle class at this time created a group which was to a great extent at enmity with the papacy. The middle class rose mainly in the towns where the education was at a higher level than it was in the greater part of Germany. These advantages in education created a group that was willing to do its own thinking and was no longer willing to accept without question the teachings of the church. The scientific theories which were being put forth and the new discoveries did not agree with the teachings of the church and when these teachings of the church were proved to be wrong and were learned by the more educated, their faith in the church was shaken and their respect for it weakened. The rise of the middle class also created a group that was self-sufficient and was no longer willing to submit to authority

---

<sup>1</sup>Thomas L. Lindsay, A History of the Reformation (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), I, 112.

without question. A feeling of independence seemed to be spreading throughout this group especially in the cities where the educational advantages were greater, and this independent feeling evidenced itself in the large number of strikes which took place during this time. In some cases entire cities were emptied of their workers who were no longer satisfied with their working conditions.<sup>2</sup> Although it was not the doctrine of the Reformation that attracted these groups, their feeling of independence and their spirit of enterprise placed their sympathies on the side of any group that would break with the tyranny of the papacy.

More important than the middle class in assuring the success of the Reformation was the class of the peasants. Since they formed the largest segment of society their influence was more likely to be felt than that of any other group. The fact that the peasant class was no longer as submissive as it had formerly been caused some of the leaders opposing the Reformation to be very cautious before taking any steps which might antagonize them.

On the eve of the Reformation they were a group filled with restlessness as was stated previously. Long before the most prominent of the peasant wars, that of 1525, there had been serious uprisings among this class of people.<sup>3</sup> Bax

---

<sup>2</sup>Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), V, 778.

<sup>3</sup>John Fulton, "The Reformation," Ten Epochs of Church History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), IX, 20.

has a number of interesting accounts dealing with these uprisings and their leaders.<sup>4</sup> They had been taking place at various intervals from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries under the banner of the Bundschuh which they adopted for their symbol, and were a result of the oppression which the church and the nobles attempted to force on them. In many cases these peasants were not alone in their revolts against the intolerable conditions of the time. They were often aided by the landsknechts or poor nobles and their number was swelled by these impoverished persons and the unemployed men of the city.<sup>5</sup>

This group was definitely in sympathy with the Reformation because many of them considered Martin Luther as their champion. As proof for this we need only cite the instance when they brought the Twelve Articles of protest to Luther for his approval. To the peasants, the church represented a tyranny that was most difficult to tolerate and in Luther they saw a leader who could free them from the yoke of the papacy. That they were opposed to the papacy and all that it represented can be seen from the fact that if we analyze the causes and themes of the rebellions there is always one item which appears over and over again, and that is the hatred for the priests, who were placed in the same category as the Jews.

---

<sup>4</sup>E. Belfort Bax, German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1894), pp. 43-91.

<sup>5</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 96.

This would seem to indicate that much of the hatred between the peasants and the priests was due to the extortion of the priests whose tithes and other taxes placed a heavy burden upon them.<sup>6</sup> Lindsay cites an example of the mistreatment of the peasants as practiced by the Abbots of Kempton who illegally enlarged their domains, falsified title-deeds, and prevented those who opposed them from coming to the Lord's Supper.<sup>7</sup> Incidents such as this naturally led the peasants to a hatred for the church and its officers and offices.

The large size of this group and its readiness to revolt at any opportunity which presented itself made caution necessary on the part of the papacy and the national government. It was impossible for either Charles V or the pope to apprehend Luther and place him under the inquisition because as champion of the peasants his arrest would have immediately made the country subject to such a revolt as would have been either impossible or very costly to bring under control. It was for this reason that earlier and more severe measures were not taken against the Reformer. This delay gave the Reformation an opportunity to gain strength until, when more severe military measures were taken by Charles V, the Reformation could no longer be stopped.

Nor is the influence of the nobles on the success of the Reformation to be underestimated. In order to keep order in

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

the country the favor of these men was needed both by the emperor and the papacy. The need of the papacy became especially clear in the election of Charles V as emperor. In order to have the candidate whom he desired elected, the pope was forced to curry the favor, in particular, of the Elector of Saxony in whose domain Luther, who was the most famous instructor whom the Elector had in the university he had founded, lived. The Elector was unwilling to deliver Luther because he knew that much of the increase in the enrollment at his university was due to the presence of Luther. In order to retain the favor of this Elector, the pope could not demand that Luther be given over to the inquisition.

The fact that the nobles were virtual rulers over their own territories made it possible for them to protect the reformers who were living in their sections of the country. The emperor was either unwilling or unable to take these men by force and enforce the demand of the papacy that they be given up for trial.

Another important factor in connection with this was that Charles V at this time had not yet gained the power which he held at a later time and was still in dire need of the financial and military support of all the nobles of Germany. He was engaged in campaigns against the Turk, who was approaching the borders of Germany and against Francis I of France who had been his closest opponent at the time when Charles was elected emperor. The German nobles were interested in these campaigns because they had no love for France

and were always willing to help defeat this country, and their safety was involved in the campaign against the Turk. They were, however, unwilling to render the aid which the emperor requested unless they were granted certain accessions. Without the aid of the nobles it would have been impossible for Charles to obtain the necessary funds and forces to carry out his campaigns. In order to retain the favor of the nobles, Charles, unable to condemn Luther immediately, was forced to grant a hearing before the German Diet. The delay which was the result of the struggle for power between these two social classes was also an important factor in permitting the Reformation to gain strength before any attempt was made to quell the movement by force.

Finally, the rise of the towns and imperial cities during this period played an important role in the success of the Reformation. The concentration of population in small areas made the dissemination of information with regard to the Reformation much more rapid. With the large groupings in the city it became much easier to convince larger sections of people of the truth of the doctrines of the Reformation than would have been the case if the population had been scattered throughout the countryside as was the case earlier in the Middle Ages.

The loyalty of the citizens to their individual city made it possible for the cities to introduce the Reformation against the will of the emperor. Being independent of both

noble and emperor, the common people were able to determine for themselves what religion was to be practiced within their city walls. This was another factor which gave the Reformation an opportunity to gather strength until the emperor with all his forces was able to bring about submission to his will. By that time the seeds of the Reformation were so deeply rooted that it was impossible to destroy them.

waiting for an opportunity to break with the existing authority. The peasants of the country were chafing under their burdens; the knights were dissatisfied with their conditions; the cities were dissatisfied with the restrictions which were placed on them by the church and the nobles; the nobles were engaged in quarrels among themselves; and the emperor was handicapped by the little respect which was shown for his position and authority by the nobles.<sup>2</sup> The seeds for an outbreak were scattered throughout Germany and were to be found to a great extent in the friction which existed between the classes.<sup>3</sup>

There were various causes for this unrest, among them the rise of education, the oppression practiced by the nobles in the change from traditional to Roman law, the rise of the popularity of democratic theories, the rise of the towns, and

<sup>2</sup>Thomas L. Sizer, *A History of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 115.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Pater and Ferdinand Schmitt, *Europe in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 615.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen that there was universal unrest in Germany in the period immediately preceding the Reformation. All classes of society in Germany were filled with dissatisfaction for their lot in life and seemed to be waiting for an opportune moment to break with the existing authority. The peasants of the country were chafing under their burdens; the knights were dissatisfied with their conditions; the cities were dissatisfied with the restrictions which were placed on them by the church and the nobles; the nobles were engaged in quarrels among themselves; and the emperor was handicapped by the little respect which was shown for his position and authority by the nobles.<sup>1</sup> The germs for an outburst were scattered throughout Germany and were to be found to a great extent in the friction which existed between the classes.<sup>2</sup>

There were various causes for this unrest, among them the rise of education, the oppression practiced by the nobles in the change from traditional to Roman law, the rise of the popularity of democratic theories, the rise of the towns, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Thomas L. Lindsay, A History of the Reformation (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), I, 112.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver Thatcher and Ferdinand Schwill, Europe in the Middle Ages (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), p. 615.

the economic revolution which took place at this time. The last mentioned was perhaps one of the greatest factors in causing the discontent. No one understood the reasons for it, but one social class held the other responsible for it. Its results were manifested in the crowds of beggars on the streets of the towns, the bankrupt nobles and knights, the ruined peasants, the unemployed, the begging friars, and the wandering students.<sup>3</sup> Lindsay says of this condition,

It was into this mass of seething discontent that the spark of religious protest fell - the one thing needed to fire the train and kindle the social conflagration. This was the society to which Luther spoke, and its discontent was the sounding-board which made his words reverberate.<sup>4</sup>

The ecclesiastical conceptions were too narrow to accommodate this new society which was being formed. In every way the church attempted to retain the status quo and found it an impossible task. The medieval social system found its perfection in the church and in the change of the social system the greatest conflict was with the church and with the limitations which it had imposed on the society of the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> To quote Thatcher and Schwill,

. . . since there was no freedom with the church, its bondage had to be broken to secure the future. Herein lies the immense significance of the fifteenth-century Renaissance and the Reformation.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Thatcher and Schwill, op. cit., p. 587.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

Had the Reformation not occurred, Germany might have experienced such a revolution as had never occurred before that time and has never occurred since.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), V, 778.

See, S. Keller, The Reformation in Germany 1517-1525.  
London: Paul Chapman and Co., 1919.

Directed, James H. and James R. Buchanan, Outline of  
European History. I. Boston: Hine and Co., 1918.

Osborn, F. W., Religious Thought and Morals in the Middle  
Ages. London: Robert Hart, Aldershot, 1912.

Palton, John, "The Reformation," Von Europa in History.  
History. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.

Rayson, G. B., Sketches from the History of the Church.  
St. Louis: Cassell Publishing House, 1914.

Larned, J. N., Larned's History of the World by Events  
Comprising the Life of Man. III. New York:  
World Syndicate Company 1911, 1912.

Leitch, Thomas M., A History of the Reformation. I. New  
York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.

O'Sullivan, Jeremiah and John P. Curtis, Medieval Europe.  
New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1913.

Schaff, Philip, History of the Christian Church. V.  
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.

Smith, Frederick, The Age of the Reformation. New York:  
Henry Holt and Company, 1916.

Thatcher Oliver J. and Frederick Sewall, Europe in the  
Middle Ages. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910.

Thompson, James M., An Economic and Social History of the  
Middle Ages. The Century Historical Series. New  
York: The Century Co., 1910.

Wahr, George, Lehrbuch der Weltgeschichte. II. Leipzig:  
Verlag von Neumann Neudamm, 1911.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alcot, Lord. "The Renaissance," The Cambridge Modern History. I. London: Cambridge University Press, 1902.
- Bax, E. Belfort. German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages. London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1894.
- Bax, E. Belfort. The Peasants War in Germany 1525-1526. London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1899.
- Breasted, James H. and James H. Robinson. Outlines of European History. I. Boston: Ginn and Co., 1914.
- Bussell, F. W. Religious Thought and Heresy in the Middle Ages. London: Robert Scott Roxbourgh House, 1918.
- Fulton, John. "The Reformation," Ten Epochs of Church History. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.
- Hageman, G. E. Sketches from the History of the Church. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.
- Larned, J. N. Larned's History of the World or Seventy Centuries of the Life of Mankind. III. New York: World Syndicate Company Inc., 1915.
- Lindsay, Thomas M. A History of the Reformation. I. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.
- O'Sullivan, Jeremiah and John F. Burns. Medieval Europe. New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1943.
- Schaff, Philip. History of the Christian Church. V. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.
- Smith, Preserved. The Age of the Reformation. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920.
- Thatcher Oliver J. and Ferdinand Schwill. Europe in the Middle Ages. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896.
- Thompson, James W. "An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages," The Century Historical Series. New York: The Century Co., 1928.
- Weber, Georg. Lehrbuch der Weltgeschichte. II. Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Engelmann, 1888.