

9-1-1951

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W. Theophil Janzow

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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### Recommended Citation

Janzow, W. Theophil (1951) "Background for the Peasants' Revolt of 1524," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 22, Article 53.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol22/iss1/53>

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# Background for the Peasants' Revolt of 1524

By W. THEOPHIL JANZOW

**T**HE Peasants' Revolt of 1524 and its causes have been the subject of widespread controversy ever since the days of the revolt itself. Accusations against Dr. Martin Luther as the prime mover of the revolt have been prevalent especially in the literature of those who were otherwise displeased, yes, angered, by Luther's success as a religious reformer.<sup>1</sup> But even historians whom one would judge to be unprejudiced by training or religious bias have pictured the Peasants' Revolt of 1524 as the natural result of Luther's sermons and books.

It is not our purpose to bring direct confutation for these contentions. Nor will an attempt be made to prove that Luther's part in the Peasants' War of 1524 was nil, that there was absolutely no connection between the religious reformer and the social revolution. Our object rather is to place before the reader a comprehensive word picture of developing peasant reaction to feudal serfdom and oppression. It is a picture that takes us as far back as the year 1358, when the revolt of the French Jacquerie took place, and which leads us successively through the major countries of medieval Europe.

When the leading factors and the essential causes of the principal peasant revolts between the years 1358 and 1524 have been reviewed, conclusions present themselves whose bearing upon the Peasants' Revolt of 1524 the honest evaluator cannot afford to overlook.

## I

### THE REVOLT OF THE FRENCH JACQUERIES IN 1358

On September 17, 1356, King John II of France fought the important battle of Poitiers against the forces of Edward III of England and lost. The far-reaching effects of this battle had not a little bearing on the revolt of the peasantry which was to become such a pitiable chapter in the history of France two years later.



In the battle King John II had been taken prisoner by the English. The logical interim ruler was his 19-year-old son, Prince Charles, who now took over the rule of the French kingdom under the title "Lieutenant of the King." At the same time the dissatisfactory outcome of the battle of Poitiers resolved itself among the French populace in the form of a general clamor for reform of the government.<sup>2</sup> It was a situation which grew progressively worse. Before long co-operation between the ruling house and the States-General, which held to the claim that it was representing the people, was at a near standstill.

As a result of the unfriendly tension that existed between the Crown and the States-General, the kingdom quickly fell into a state perilously close to anarchy. Uncontrollable bands roved the countryside, ravaging and plundering wherever they went. On top of the already heavy burdens of the peasants and serfs were heaped the insults and injuries of lawless bands.<sup>3</sup>

When the States-General met in February of 1357, Prince Charles tried to regain his authority and re-establish some kind of order. He was, however, halted in this attempt by a condition which had harassed other French kings before him. There was a lack of adequate funds to subsidize an army which could enforce the king's decrees. Effective central control necessitated a system of regular taxation. This the French people had never had and, at all costs, wanted to avoid. Therefore the French king had always been forced to fall back on the wholly undependable system of temporary subsidies and repeated debasing of coinage. However, both of these measures were so irksome to the tax-free consciences of the French people that the king, with no army to carry out his injunctions, very rarely had any measure of success in collecting even these temporary dues.<sup>4</sup>

In a desperate attempt to re-establish order the Prince finally consented to all reform demands of his antagonists. But it was a conciliatory step which did not last. The ensuing year was marked by cold suspicion, bold intrigue, and finally, in February of 1358, open hostilities and complete governmental chaos.<sup>5</sup>

The peasants had been known generally by the name "Jacques Bonhomme" (Jack Goodfellow), the exact derivation of the name not being known. One explanation is given by Froissart, the con-



temporary chronicler. In the following quotation he claims that it referred to the leader of the peasants:

They made among them a king, one of Clermont in Beauvoisin. They chose him that was the most ungracious of all other and they called him king Jacques Goodman, and so thereby they were called companions of the Jacquery.<sup>6</sup>

While eventful things were taking place in the city of Paris, the Jacquerie was being thrown into ever deeper suffering and oppression. With courts virtually non-existent, the peasant had no place to turn for justice. With financial chaos threatening the entire kingdom as the result of wars and feudal strife, accompanied by debasing of coinage and more frequent taxation, his economic status was at a new low. With lords and nobles overrunning, ravaging, and plundering his land, the peasant finally became desperate. He responded to his unbearable situation with violence and bloodshed.

The first uprising of the French peasantry against their knights and nobles took place on May 28, 1358. On the actual extent of this terrorization, historians differ. The chronicler Froissart embellishes his account of the insurrection with lurid detail. According to his account, brutal atrocities were not the exception, but the rule. Following is an excerpt:

And then they went to another castle and took the knight thereof and bound him fast to a stake, and then violated his wife and his daughter before his face and then slew the lady and his daughter and all his other children and then slew the knight by great torment and brent and beat down the castle. And so did they to divers other castles and good houses.<sup>7</sup>

However, the nobles were quick to resist, and with demoralizing effect. By June 24, 1358, the revolt of the Jacquerie had been suppressed. It was a victory which whetted the nobles' appetite for blood. Vengefully they followed their victory with a massacre about whose historicity there seems to be no doubt. In bloodiness and fury it surpassed even the previous cruelties of the peasant class.<sup>8</sup> The revolt of the French Jacquerie was over, but the ruling class was not satisfied yet. Adding insult to injury, the knights and nobles levied a crushing fine upon all the villages which had taken part in the revolt or assisted the rebels. What had the peasants



gained by their attempt to throw off the yoke of serfdom? Only more oppression and greater economic burdens.

The revolt of the French Jacquerie in 1358 must be placed into the category of those uprisings which grow out of extreme, lengthy suffering and oppression. The definite causes of the insurrection cannot be fully understood unless the historical events which preceded and led up to the year 1358 are taken into careful consideration.

During this period there was almost continuous warfare on the soil of France. It is true, all France suffered. But none suffered as severely as did the peasants. They suffered economically, politically, and socially. Economically the ravages of war had left them destitute. Both French and English armies passed over their lands, taking what they needed for the support of their armies and destroying much of what remained. Upon these hardships were heaped frequent governmental demands for financial aid to carry on the war, e. g., the hearth tax, the salt tax, the sales tax, the changes and debasings of the coinage. Increasing in proportion to the decreasing success of French armies, these economic demands upon the peasantry became unbearable burdens.

Politically the peasants were suffering just as severely. The loss of the battle of Poitiers had thrown the governmental system of all France into near chaos. Left to their own devices, the nobles outside of Paris now went about trying to settle their own disputes and personal animosities by petty warfare. They lived on pillage. They increased their exaction from the peasants, both of service and of money.<sup>9</sup> The peasant, in the meantime, was sinking gradually into an informal slavery, his cries for justice and fair trial muffled by the din of governmental disorder and confusion.

So it was that the French peasants, having watched their economic condition become increasingly unbearable, their political rights gradually disintegrate, and their social status descend into a form of slavery, rose up against the class which appeared most responsible for their sufferings, the nobility. It is important to note, however, that the economic complaint runs through and is the basis of all other complaints voiced by the peasants. It therefore must be considered the major cause of the Peasants' Revolt of 1358.



## II

## THE ENGLISH PEASANTS' REVOLT OF 1381

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 is in one aspect entirely different from the revolt of the Jacquerie in 1358. The French serfs had seen a depressing servility grown into an unbearable burden of suffering and misery. The condition of the English peasants had, on the other hand, been steadily improving during the thirteenth century. Labor services had been lessened, having been replaced in many cases by money rents.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in spite of this difference, it will be seen that the immediate and compelling causes of both revolts were essentially the same.

At the beginning of the 14th century the "Manorial" system, which was based on serfdom, held sway in England.<sup>2</sup> The lord, who owned a large section of land, kept a portion of it for his personal needs and divided the rest among a group of peasants who were then obligated to spend a certain amount of days each year working on the land from which the lord supported himself. The rigid feudal system had set up many rules and regulations by which the serf's personal life was constantly being interrupted by services which had to be rendered to his lord. Nor could a serf avoid this irksome life of forced servitude by leaving his lord's manor and adopting a different method of livelihood; for having been born to the soil, he had to remain a lifelong tiller of the soil.

The long-standing feudal customs were, however, beginning to undergo a marked change as early as a century before the Rising of 1381. The change in the system of feudal obligations began when the lord of the manor recognized that the forced work of his serfs was far less satisfactory than the work of his hired laborers.<sup>3</sup> The more satisfactory arrangement which evolved out of this discovery was that serfs give cash payments in place of service, while the lord hires laborers to do the work which had formerly been done by serfs.

When in the first half of the 14th century the Black Death descended upon England, taking a tremendous toll of lives, the changing conditions of the peasantry were accelerated beyond control.<sup>4</sup> The free laborer, seeing the advantageous position into which the national calamity had placed him, began to demand wages far in excess of those he had received prior to the Black Death.



On the other hand, the Black Death had not given the villein, who by immemorial custom and ancient law was "bound" to the soil, as much of an advantage as it afforded to the free laborer. Therefore, when he saw the condition of the free laborer improving so rapidly, many a villein decided to share that fortune. Fleeing from his landlord's estate did not entail nearly as many difficulties as it had in former times. Laborers were in demand. When the escaped villein offered his services to some distant landlord, few questions were asked.<sup>5</sup>

Forced service had for years been the most irksome obligation of the peasant to his landlord. As soon, however, as he was released from forced service, the serf quickly became impatient with such smaller obligations as paying a fine to the lord when the daughter was given in marriage, having his grain ground only at the lord's mill, and not being able to plead against his lord in court.<sup>6</sup>

These restrictions, incompatible with his new trend of thought, became ever more exasperating and humiliating. In contrast to the resigned attitude of former days there was bred in him the attitude of rebellion. His newfound fortune finds him fondling the idea of more rights, more liberty, and especially more money. Trevelyan has reproduced a portion of the writings of the contemporary satirist, Langland, who accurately pictures this seeming contradiction:

But whilst hunger was their master, there would none of them  
hide, nor strive against the statute however sternly he looked.

But I warn you, workmen, win money while you may, for hunger  
hitherward hasteth him fast; He shall awake with the water floods  
to chastise the wasteful.<sup>7</sup>

It is not difficult to see that when Richard II ascended the throne of England in 1377 at the age of ten, the internal affairs of the kingdom were in an extremely unsettled condition. The whole economic structure of the nation was undergoing a change as the result of the Black Death. At the same time the social structure was being severely shaken. And now, to add to the confusion, the nation's leaders were forced to stare into the vacuum of a depleted national treasury.<sup>8</sup>

When Parliament in the winter of 1380 found it necessary to impose a heretofore unheard of poll tax upon the English people, the immediate result was resistance on the part of the peasants.<sup>9</sup>



Resistance to the poll-tax collectors apparently broke out spontaneously and almost simultaneously in a number of localities. If any district is to be mentioned as the beginning of open resistance, it would be Essex. The charge of indecent conduct in the course of duty is sometimes made against the tax commissioner of that district.<sup>10</sup> Whether true or not, this much is certain that Thomas Hampton, one of the tax collectors, was driven out of Brentwood. When the Chief Justice of the King's Bench was sent to Essex to restore order, he was likewise driven out.

Now the fire of anger was quickly fanned into a blaze of action. Rebellion spread from city to city, from county to county. By June 10 bands of aroused peasants from almost every district in England were marching toward London. Their leaders were the men who had been the foremost agitators of the rebellion, men who assumed such pseudonyms as Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, and Hob Carter as a means of designating their lowly origin.<sup>11</sup> A popular ditty, which quickly became the slogan of the marchers, characterizes the spirit of the peasants:

When Adam delv'd and Eve span,  
Where was then the gentleman? <sup>12</sup>

Marching toward London, the undisciplined bands committed many acts of violence. But there was no indiscriminate massacre of landlords and nobility such as was characteristic of the earlier revolt of the French Jacquerie. Those of the nobility who were personally unpopular were, it is true, murdered without hesitancy. But many others were permitted to go free after having relinquished hated charters and documents.<sup>13</sup>

After two dramatic conferences on the plains outside of London between the leaders of the rebels and the king himself, the peasants felt secure in the supposition that their demands were going to be met. They retreated to their homes. In the meantime, however, the king had gathered a well-equipped army, and now he sent it out into the districts. New charters had been granted to the peasants, but their worthlessness was demonstrated at an early date. With frenzied cruelty and slaughter the king's men hunted out the rebels. The subsequent bloodshed dwarfed even the most savage cruelties of the peasantry. And though, in November of the same year, all rebels except the principal leaders received an official



pardon, the peasants' continued pleas for liberation from bondage were met bluntly with a quotation attributed to the king himself: "Serfs you are, and serfs you will remain."<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes Wycliffe is mentioned as an important factor in the Peasants' Rising of 1381. At one time he and the Lollards were even accused of being the prime movers in the rebellion.<sup>15</sup> He is brought into the picture for only one reason. Five years before the rebellion he expounded the Theory of Dominion — that everything belongs to God, that possession of a part of what belongs to God depends on service, that if service is not performed, the unfaithful steward must be deprived of the gift. From this theory has been drawn the claim that Wycliffe supported Communism, and it has subsequently been said that agitators all over the country used this support as a means to incite the serfs and laborers. But it hardly seems likely that a theory which was buried in a Latin book written ten years before the rebellion should have been used to any great extent to arouse the common people, especially when the public statements of Wycliffe denounced Communism, supported the right of temporal lords to hold property, and were directed solely against the excess luxury of the Church.<sup>16</sup> For this reason Wycliffe must be omitted as a figure of any substantial importance in the Revolt of 1381.

It may be true that many of the poorer parish priests had obtained a distorted version of Wycliffe's Theory of Dominion. Or it may be just as likely that they themselves twisted the theory to fit their own capricious doctrines of Communism and the equality of all mankind. Perhaps Froissart's record is accurate when he describes the inciting activities of one of these rabble rousers, named John Ball, thus:

He was accustomed every Sunday after Mass, as the people were coming out of church, to preach to them in the market place and assemble a crowd around him, to whom he would say: "My good friends, things cannot go well in England, nor ever will until everything shall be in common; when there be all distinctions leveled, when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. . . . Are we not descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? And what can they show or what reasons give why they should be more masters than ourselves? except perhaps in making us



labour and work for them to spend. They are clothed in velvet and rich stuffs . . . but it is from our labour they have wherewith to support their pomp."<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps, we say, these things are true. But if they are true, we are driven to suppose one of two things. Either the theory of having "everything in common" was not popularized as extensively as has been claimed,<sup>18</sup> or its popularity did not reflect the true desires and ambitions of the peasants. For the fact remains that when the rising actually did take place, no such demands were made. Personal freedom and commutation of services were the demands which were actually put forward.<sup>19</sup>

If we are to diagnose accurately the primary cause of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, we must repeat what has been said before. The lot of the English peasant had been steadily improving, both economically and socially, during the century which preceded the revolt itself. Before the Black Death this change had been proceeding slowly through the gradual substitution of money rents for labor services. After the Black Death the condition of the peasant was improving more rapidly because of the sudden rise in prices and wages. The displeasure of the lower classes was aroused when these improvements did not continue along the accelerated pace which they had assumed immediately after the Black Death. This provocation resolved itself into rebellion and insurrection when the upper classes attempted to delay, yes, even to reverse, that process of social and economic improvement. When Parliament began to pass laws to curb the social progression of the peasant class, and when it added as well to their economic burden by passing the hated poll tax, the strain on the chain of toleration and endurance became too great. The chain broke. The result was the Peasants' War of 1381.

### III

#### JACK CADE'S REBELLION OF 1450

The uprising of the lower classes in England in the year 1450 is, it seems, another proof of the theory that rebellions are not usually the result of prolonged oppression to the point that the oppressed have never experienced better days. Revolt is much more liable to raise its ugly head when the underprivileged classes have tasted the



pleasantness of economic, social, and political improvement and are aroused either by the slowness of the process or by conditions which threaten the loss of some of their newly gained advantages.

We know that the condition of the English peasant and workingman had been steadily improving through the years of the fourteenth century. The unfortunate result of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 — unfortunate, of course, from the peasants' point of view — temporarily halted this march toward complete economic, social, and political freedom. However, the voice of the serf, the laborer, the workingman, the lower classes in general, was not to be silenced for long. In the fifteenth century we hear his renewed complaints against the inequity of his treatment, and in 1450 he reinforces his complaints with the force of arms. But before we enter into a study of the revolt itself, we must look at the conditions and affairs which led up to the rebellion.

Henry VI succeeded his father to the throne of England on August 31, 1422. He was only nine months old. Immediately there began a struggle for control of the throne during Henry's minority. The struggle centered in the personalities of two men, Duke Humphrey of Gloucester and Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester.<sup>1</sup> It continued with periodic public manifestations of hostility for 21 years, until Beaufort's retirement from public life in 1443. The last seven of these years, however, Beaufort was in complete control. He had accomplished this *coup d'etat* by taking advantage of the king's ill health.<sup>2</sup> Having obtained the cooperation of the king's household, he could permit or deny access to the king according to his pleasure. His power was thus secured.

With Beaufort's retirement in 1443 a new personality steps forward on the stage of English history. His name is William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, who had been co-operating with Beaufort as steward of the king's household.<sup>3</sup> He continued the system which his predecessor had used to such advantage. Gradually the council was stripped of its powers. Just as gradually Suffolk was assuming more and more authority. His increasing authority, however, brought with it also a heavier burden of problems. Especially — the national treasury was dangerously close to bankruptcy. And to increase the problem the war with France, which had started seven years earlier under Beaufort, was still on.<sup>4</sup> It was draining a dis-



proportionately large sum of funds away from the national economy. The new regent saw that his nation, financially, was on the verge of falling.

On December 22, 1445, Henry VI wrote to the Duke of Anjou and agreed to the surrender of Maine. The responsibility for this letter was placed by the populace on the Earl of Suffolk. When Maine was finally captured by the French in March, 1448, the Earl had been stamped in the eyes of most Englishmen as a traitor.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, other charges of maladministration began to be rumored against him. His vast amount of English landholdings was attacked. Also the unusual number of official positions he held. His unscrupulosity and selfish dealings had long been the bitter complaint of the lower classes in East Anglia, where his ancestral estates were. In short, Suffolk's unpopularity grew to such an extent that finally he was brought to trial. On February 7, 1450, he was formally impeached<sup>6</sup> and sentenced to five years in exile. But on his way to Calais Suffolk's ship was stopped, and he was assassinated by the mutinous sailors of one of His Majesty's ships.

Suffolk's political decline and death were the signal for riots and rebellions to begin. The district of Kent experienced the first of these insurrections, very likely because it had suffered so severely under the tyrannies and extortions of Treasurer Lord Say and Sheriff William Crowmer.<sup>7</sup> Agitators had already been at work for some time when the execution of one of them quieted the disturbances for a few months.<sup>8</sup>

In June, 1450, another agitator arose as the champion of the popular cause. His name was John (Jack) Cade, but he assumed the name of John Mortimer in order to gain a more favorable hearing from the common people.<sup>9</sup> Jack Cade led his army of peasants and laborers toward London. Camping on Blackheath, he sent a list of grievances to the king. These grievances included (1) the re-enactment of the Statute of Laborers in 1446, (2) the unemployment which had been caused in the weaving industry by interruption of the overseas trade,<sup>10</sup> (3) the unfair practices of the court system, and (4) the guilt of the king's counselors in all these matters. Affirmatively the rebels asked for reform of all these abuses.

One of the unusual features of the rebellion was the well-con-



trolled discipline which Jack Cade exercised over his followers. Plundering was forbidden, and severe punishment was meted out to anyone who disobeyed this order. When the reasonable attitude of the rebel leader was observed by the Londoners, the city opened its gates to Cade and his followers.<sup>11</sup> Once inside the gates of London, the difficulty of discipline increased. In order to appease the demands of the rebels, Cade took Lord Say and William Crowmer into custody, and after a quick trial he had them executed on July 4, 1450. Rather than effecting a quieting influence on the mob, these executions increased its restlessness. Cade was no longer master of their riotous dispositions. Riot and plunder broke out in various parts of London. London was in danger of experiencing a re-enactment of the massacre which took place in the days of Wat Tyler. To forestall any such event, Lord Scales, the governor of the Tower, sent out a detachment of soldiers who were able to frighten the rebels into readiness for negotiation. Receiving full pardons for all they had done, they left London on the eighth of July and dispersed homeward.

Two subsequent attempts at insurrection were suppressed, and in February, 1451, came "the so-called 'Harvest of Heads,' that bloody assize by which the last traces of the popular movement in Kent were extinguished."<sup>12</sup>

Since the day of Henry VI's accession to the throne of England until the rebellion in 1450, the government had been in a constant state of turmoil. The prolonged struggle between Gloucester and Beaufort was an all-important factor in this political upheaval. The juggling of power by these ambitious politicians was, to say the least, detrimental to the best interests of the people who were being governed. The king's subjects naturally resented such bad government.

However, it seems that here again, as in the previously discussed revolts, the most determinative factor of the revolt was the economic setbacks which the peasants and laborers were forced to endure.<sup>13</sup> They hated the Earl of Suffolk for his vast amount of landholdings. They executed Treasurer Lord Say and Sheriff William Crowmer because they had been practicing merciless tyrannies and extortions in the district of Kent. And when they finally brought their corrective demands before the king, they asked first



for a repeal of the Statute of Laborers and secondly for a solution to the unemployment problem which had plagued the working class since the interruption of overseas trade. Add to these the ever-present grievance against overtaxation, and it can rightly be claimed that the peasants became restless as a result of the chaotic situation in the political affairs of England, but they rose up in rebellion against the increasing burden of economic and social reverses. Hence the Rising of 1450.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE "BUNDSCHUH"

When the peasant classes of England and France were beginning to see a ray of hope shine through the feudal darkness, the German serf was still in the throes of an almost completely feudal government system. Besides, the German peasant was burdened by an ecclesiastical feudalism which was fully as oppressive as the secular.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it will be interesting to note that in Germany, as in England, the popular movement against feudal tyranny finds its most forceful expression among those peasants and laborers who had seen the light of better days rather than among the serfs whose generation knew nothing but the thralldom of slavery.

The earliest evidences of unrest among the German peasants date back to the second and third decades of the fifteenth century. The actual story seems to begin with the appearance of a formidable peasant army before the gates of the city of Worms on December 20, 1439. The rising was a protest against the oppressive financial ways of the Jews, mainly with respect to usury.<sup>2</sup> The only terms which could induce the angry insurrectionists to withdraw included the stipulation that the time for payment of debts be prolonged and that all excess interest on these debts be canceled.

The next uprising of any importance took place in Alsace in 1468. Actually this was one of a series of feudal wars between lords and town governments, but it is significant because in this case Lord Anselm of Masmuenster had rallied the peasants to his cause by raising a banner which used a picture of the peasant's shoe as its symbol. This appears to have been the first use of the *Bundschuh* banner, and it proved to be so much of an emotional stimulus that it became the standard symbol of the oppressed classes.<sup>3</sup>

In 1476 a leader of the masses comes forward in Franconia who



for the first time instigates a nation-wide movement with a distinct and general purpose. His name is Hans Boheim. He was a sheep herder.<sup>4</sup> A talented rabble rouser, he aroused the peasants with a new ideology on social, political, economic, and religious revolution. He prophesied that the yoke of bondage to both spiritual and temporal lords was coming to an end, that taxes and tributes would be eliminated, and that forests and fisheries would be free to all men. With this "gospel" he soon obtained an immense following.

The movement begun by Hans Boheim did not continue long without interference. A few months after the start of his peasant crusade the Bishop of Wuerzburg sent a band of warriors to Niklashausen, Boheim's headquarters. Boheim was seized, returned to Wuerzburg, and imprisoned. When the peasants heard the news, they set out for Wuerzburg to liberate their leader. But their courage left them when they arrived at the gate of the city. A few rounds of heavy artillery fired from within the city disorganized the peasants, and they returned to their homes. On July 19, 1476, Hans Boheim was burned at the stake. The rising had been quelled.

The rising of 1476 was, however, a definite turning point in the German peasant movement. From the day that Hans Boheim began to expound his radical theories until the Peasants' War of 1524 the rumbling of the peasant voices did not cease. From now on the peasants are led on by a definite purpose and an irrepressible will. This is the period of the *Bundschuh*.

In 1478 the peasants of Kaernten rose up against Emperor Frederick as a protest against increased taxation. A league was formed at Villach with Peter Wunderlich, a peasant, and Matthias Hensel, a blacksmith, as its leaders. Ironically, the league soon found itself in a position where it had to support the emperor. The Turks had invaded Germany on St. Jacob's Day. The peasants were the only group well enough organized to meet them. In the ensuing battle the peasants were mercilessly slaughtered, and the organization was temporarily dissolved.

The next episode in this movement happened in 1486 in the territory of Bayern near the Lech River. According to the small amount of extant material covering this insurrection, a peasant named Heinz von Stein organized the revolt. It was immediately suppressed.



A rebellion broke out in Swabia in 1492. Once again the banner of the *Bundschuh* was used to release the pent-up emotions of the lower classes. The insurrection took place in the territory over which the Abbot of Kempten had control. It is said that the peasants expected respite from oppressive taxation when Abbot John became their landlord, but that the anticipated improvements did not appear. Instead, both feudal dues and taxes were raised. When the famines of 1489 to 1491 followed on the heels of crop failures, the tribute of taxes became unbearable. Following is a list of grievances as reported by a contemporary chronicler:

Item die nachgeschriben clagstück und artikel hand des gotzhus Kempten armlut zu irem g.h. von Kempten zu clagen und zu sprechen, darumb sy sich dann zusammen versammelt haben gehabt.

Des ersten vermainten wir uns beschwert ze sin der stur und des raiszgelts halben. . . .

2. der fryen zinzer halb, die ie und allwegen irn freyen zug gehapt haben und noch hinfur haben sollen nach lut irer fryhait. By solicher irer fryhait will sy ir g.h. der abt von Kempten nit beliben lasses and tut sy fahen, turnen, stoken und bloecken und sy zu unbillichen beschreibungen noeten, zwingen und tringen, das sy sich verschriben müssen, von dem gotzhus nit ze wichen und ze stellen, auch kainen andern schirmherren an sich ze nemen....

3. der aignen lut halben vermainen sy sich beschwert ze sin....

4. so erclagen sy sich und vermainen sich beschart ze sin ab dem, das vor nie gewesen und erhart worden ist, wann ain fryer zinzer ain aigne tochter oder ain frye tochter ain aigen mann zu der ee nimpt, das er oder sy sich dem aigen nach auch zu aigen ergeben müssen, auch kain straf darouf nie gesetzt noch gestanden ist.<sup>5</sup>

The Swabian peasantry pressed their demands under the leadership of a military man named George von Unterarsied. As a result of his insistence the Abbot was persuaded to reach an agreement with the peasants. It was, however, an agreement in which none of the fundamental burdens were removed and which did little more than lay the foundation for future rebellions.

The next rising happened in Alsace in 1493. A widespread organization, whose purpose it was to enroll all the peasants of the Alsace territory, was formed. Again the *Bundschuh* was their banner. Their program included almost all the demands of previous



risings and a number of new ones, too. Among their demands were the following: destruction of the Jews, cancellation of debts, free elections, peasant control over taxation, freedom from all oppressive statutes, freedom from ecclesiastical oppression, the dissolution of monasteries, and the abolition of oral confession. Their plan was to seize the city of Schlettstadt and then to carry on their work from there. But the dream was never realized. The league was betrayed, and many of its members put to death.

In 1502, again in Alsace, peasants in the region about Speyer and the Neckar organized and took a secret oath. This uprising has been called the "Kaese und Brotvolkkrieg."<sup>6</sup> The secret league grew to a membership of approximately seven thousand. Its blue-white banner pictured the *Bundschuh* on one side and a peasant kneeling under the inscription "Only what is just before God" on the other. They purposed, first, to seize the town of Bruchsal. Next, their plan called for the seizure of all lords, both temporal and spiritual, and the burning of the monasteries. Their last object was to seize the city of Speyer itself. Thus they intended to rid themselves of all feudal obligations and to free the woods, lakes, and meadows for the use of all. Before the plot could be carried into execution, the peasants were betrayed by one of their own men. In a fierce rage the emperor ordered the confiscation of all their property, the banishment of their wives and children, and the imprisonment and death by quartering of the rebels themselves.<sup>7</sup>

One of the leaders of the insurrection of 1502 escaped the emperor's grasp. He was the shrewd and clever organizer Joss Fritz. For a time he is silent, waiting. But in the years 1512 and 1513 he reappears on the scene of peasant history as the organizer of another rebellion. Joss Fritz was a man with remarkable powers of persuasion. Going from house to house, he aroused the peasants against their unfair burdens.<sup>8</sup> He maneuvered his own appointment to the job of forester under a lord near Freiburg. He arranged secret meetings in the forests. He obtained the aid of licensed beggars to act as spies. He sent representatives into all parts of Germany to enlist peasants for his cause. He found a painter willing to paint the dangerous sign of the *Bundschuh* upon a banner. Finally the secret leaked out. But the movement was



already spread far and wide along both sides of the Rhine, in the Black Forest, and through the districts of Wuerttemberg. When the government of Freiburg took measures to punish the leaders of the movement, Joss Fritz again escaped. Once more he disappeared from public sight, but in his own shrewd, persistent, and persuasive way he continued to carry his message hither and yon throughout the land.

During the succeeding months and years the rebellious spirit of the peasant and laboring classes bursts forth again and again to break the leash of feudalistic oppression. Again and again the same grievances are aired and the same cause championed.<sup>9</sup> Again and again the heavy heel of suppression falls upon the peasantry, dispersing the masses and killing at least some of the leaders.

In June, 1514, a rising led by Gugel-Bastian from the town of Buehl in Baden was suppressed and its leader beheaded. Again in 1514 a rebellion directed especially against Duke Ulrich of Wuerttemberg broke out. Its impetus came from an organization of poor peasants titled "der arme Konrad." In the same year and in the following year similar risings took place in the valleys of the Austrian Alps, in Carinthia, Styria, and Crain.<sup>10</sup> All of them were suppressed by the nobles, and heavy punishments were meted out. But the cauldron of peasant emotions refused to cool off. It continued to bubble and boil. Finally, in 1524, it happened. The most terrifying and determined eruption of all began. There followed that cataclysmic orgy of revenge and blood in comparison to which all of these earlier revolts were mere preliminary and preparatory skirmishes.<sup>11</sup>

Since the development of the *Bundschuh* extends over such a long period of time and includes a number of separate, individualistic insurrections in various parts of Germany, it is impossible to mention any one cause as the prime moving factor of the entire movement. It is true, one can say that the introductory rebellions were based predominantly on economic grievances. One can also claim that from the days of Hans Boheim to the time of Joss Fritz the social element became so intertwined with the economic aspect of the peasant movement that the two together became the most important factors in this period of peasant history. However, we should also be cognizant of the fact that very frequently a religious



angle entered the picture of these revolts in so far as the spiritual lords and ecclesiastical landowners were attacked and condemned just as severely as the lay nobility. It is not difficult to understand this when we realize that the Roman Church was the greatest of all feudal lords, that it had vast possessions, and that its feudal tyrannies and oppressive exactions were often far more irksome and burdensome than those of the lay lords.<sup>12</sup>

In reviewing the major peasant insurrections which took place between the years 1358 and 1524 one is impressed especially by two things. On the one hand, there are the different conditions and circumstances which characterize each individual revolt. On the other hand, one recognizes a definite harmony of thought and purpose in all of the uprisings, which, when viewed through the telescope of time, are blended into one long, coherent movement — a movement which gradually but determinedly moves forward toward a definite goal, the emancipation of the feudal serf.

The history of peasant revolts from 1358 to 1524 is the story, therefore, not so much of men, as of a movement.<sup>13</sup> When this movement is segmented according to national lines, it is seen that each section of the movement sooner or later reaches a definite climax. In France the movement reaches its peak in the Revolt of the Jacquerie in 1358. England experienced a twofold crest of popular dissatisfaction, in 1381 and in 1450. In Germany the spirit of revolution and rebellion finds its outlet in the repeated insurrections of the *Bundschuh*. But the true climax of the peasant movement is not reached until the appearance of the revolt for which this article wishes to serve as a background, the Peasants' War of 1524.

#### FOOTNOTES

##### CHAPTER 1

1. A. F. Pollard, *The Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. II, p. 174. In the opening words of a chapter entitled "The Social Revolution and Catholic Reaction" Pollard sums up the opinions of these historians by saying that they refer to Luther as "the apostle of revolution and anarchy."
2. A. Coville, *The Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. VII, p. 352. The demand for reform was directed especially against the councilors of the Crown who were accused of dishonesty in administering the affairs of the kingdom.
3. M. Guizot, *The History of France*, Vol. II, p. 115.
4. M. Guizot, *loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 108. A minor insurrection had occurred at Arras on March 5, 1356, when King John II and the States-General had agreed to substitute a salt tax and a sales tax for the unpopular debasing of coinage. Both were equally unpopular.



5. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 120. On Feb. 22, 1358, Stephen Marcel and Charles, King of Navarre, purported leaders of the people's party, marched with a number of their followers to the palace of Prince Charles and murdered the marshalls of Normandy and Champagne before his very eyes. Marcel became temporary dictator of Paris. Charles fled. But he retaliated by gathering an army from the estates of Champagne, which were friendly to him, and with them marched toward Paris.
6. A. Coville, *loc. cit.*, Vol. VII, p. 354, claims the name was derived "from the garment of that name worn by the peasants." M. Guizot, *loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 124, claims they were called this because "they bore and would bear anything." Froissart's quotation is from *The Chronicles of Froissart*, p. 137, ch. 182.
7. *The Chronicles of Froissart*, ch. 182, p. 136.
8. *Ibid.*, ch. 183, p. 137. The account of Froissart is perhaps greatly exaggerated. He says: "The king of Navarre on a day slew of them more than three thousand beside Clermont in Beauvoisin."
9. A. Coville, *loc. cit.*, Vol. VII, p. 354.

## CHAPTER 2

1. Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*, p. 200.
2. G. M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, p. 184.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 186. The free laborer was a former villein who had worked his own land to such advantage that he had been able to purchase his freedom. (Sometimes he was an escaped villein who had gone from outlawry to a career as free laborer.)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 186. The estimated loss of lives in the Black Death is given sometimes at a third, sometimes at a half of the whole population of England.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 191. "The 'flights' of villeins form as marked a feature in the later fourteenth century as the 'flights' of Negroes from the slave States of America in the early nineteenth."
6. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 190
8. David Hume, *The History of England*, Vol. II, p. 150. The expensive raids of the Dukes of Lancaster and Gloucester on French soil were the main causes of the depleted treasury.
9. G. M. Trevelyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 203. Trevelyan says that heavy taxation had long been a complaint of the common people.
10. David Hume, *loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 152, tells that one of the tax collectors offered to produce an indecent proof that one blacksmith's daughter was above the poll tax age of fifteen, in response to which the blacksmith killed the tax collector. But G. M. Trevelyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 210, claims that the source of this story is unreliable.
11. Hence the rebellion is often called Wat Tyler's Rebellion.
12. David Hume, *loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 151.
13. G. M. Trevelyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 215. In this is already seen quite clearly the underlying idea of the rebellion, the provocation caused by the attempts of the nobility to delay the economic and social betterment which the peasantry had been experiencing in the past decades.



14. G. M. Trevelyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 246.
15. H. Maynard Smith, *Pre-Reformation England*, p. 274, records that a generation after the revolt Netter of Walden made this accusation, publishing at the same time a confession of one John Ball ("probably spurious") to that effect.
16. G. M. Trevelyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 200. Wycliffe's Theory of Dominion was originally written in a Latin work, *De Dominio Civili*.
17. G. M. Trevelyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 197, quotes from the *Chronicles of Froissart*, Vol. II, ch. 135.
18. David Hume, *loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 151, claims that it was greedily received by the multitude.
19. G. M. Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

## CHAPTER 3

1. They are described as equally overbearing and unscrupulous, but Beaufort is usually ceded a superiority in administrative talents and political sagacity.
2. K. B. McFarlane, *The Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. VIII, p. 399. King Henry VI, a nervous invalid at the age of fifteen, resided outside London for his health's sake.
3. *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p. 399.
4. *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p. 401. In 1439 Beaufort had met with the Duchess of Burgundy at Calais with the purpose of peace in mind. The negotiations failed mainly because Charles VII, king of France, wanted the king of England to do homage for his continental lands.
5. *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p. 403. Though Henry VI had agreed to the surrender of Maine, the military leaders on the continent refused to follow his instructions, and the French had to take Maine by force. There is no evidence that Suffolk had a hand in the surrender of Maine.
6. *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p. 406. The charges on the basis of which Suffolk was impeached amounted to little more than a repetition of the current gossip.
7. David Hume, *The History of England*, Vol. II, p. 290.
8. K. B. McFarlane, *loc. cit.*, Vol. VIII, p. 407. These agitators had worked under pseudonyms such as "Queen of the Fair" and "Captain Bluebeard."
9. David Hume, *The History of England*, Vol. II, p. 289. Sir John Mortimer had been executed by Parliament in the beginning of Henry VI's reign "without any trial or evidence, merely upon an indictment of high treason given against him."
10. K. B. McFarlane, *loc. cit.*, Vol. VIII, p. 400. The suspension of the Statute of Truces and Safeconducts in 1435 had led to excessive piracy. Irksome "Hosting" regulations were imposed five years later. Together they brought chaos to shipping and a virtual standstill of legitimate international trade.
11. This is the opinion of David Hume, *loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 290. The charge of treachery from within is made by K. B. McFarlane, *loc. cit.*, Vol. VIII, p. 409.
12. K. B. McFarlane, *loc. cit.*, Vol. VIII, p. 411.
13. The historian Kriehn does not agree with this viewpoint. He believes the rising was mainly political. *The New Larned History*, Vol. IV, p. 2715, takes its quotation from Kriehn, *Rising in 1450*, ch. 4, sec. 7.



14. For J. Gairdner's evaluation of the causes of the Revolt of 1450 as given in *Houses of Lancaster and York*, ch. 7, sec. 6, see *The New Larned History*, Vol. IV, p. 2715.

## CHAPTER 4

1. The vast land-holdings of the Roman hierarchy plus its system of multiplex religious obligations angered the lower classes just as much as did the parallel services, dues, and obligations to the secular lords.
2. Wilhelm Vogt, *Die Vorgeschichte des Bauernkrieges*, p. 84.
3. This is the view of Wilhelm Vogt. F. Seebohm, in *The Era of the Protestant Revolution*, places the first appearance of the *Bundschuh* banner in the year 1492.
4. F. Seebohm, *loc. cit.*, p. 62, calls him "the John the Baptist" of the peasant movement. Alternate spelling for Boheim is Boehm.
5. Guenther Franz, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg*, Vol. II, p. 21, quotes from Muenchen HStA, Stift Kempten Litt, fol. 151—53 und fol. 154—55.
6. Wilhelm Vogt, *loc. cit.*, p. 116.
7. Wilhelm Vogt, *loc. cit.*, p. 121, assures us that this order was not carried out literally.
8. F. Seebohm, *loc. cit.*, p. 65. The grievances with which Joss Fritz aroused the peasants were a practical repetition of the demands made in the revolt of 1502.
9. For a contemporary account of some of these grievances see Guenther Franz, *loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 21.
10. F. Seebohm, *loc. cit.*, p. 66, and Wilhelm Vogt, *loc. cit.*, p. 139.
11. Guenther, Franz, *loc. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 73: "Der Bauernkrieg ist nicht ohne die Vorbereitung dieser altrechtlichen Aufstaende zu denken. Alle Forderungen, die in ihnen erhoben wurden, kehren 1525 wieder."
12. F. Seebohm, *loc. cit.*, p. 60, records the words of a contemporary writer on the subject of ecclesiastical oppression: "I see that we can scarcely get anything from Christ's ministers but for money; at baptism, money; at bishoping, money; at marriage, money; for confession, money—no, not extreme unction without money. They will ring no bells without money; so that it seemeth that Paradise is shut up from them that have no money."
13. For a somewhat lengthier treatment of the subject matter contained in this article see W. T. Janzow, *The Peasants' Revolts from 1358 as a Background for the Peasants' Revolt of 1524*, unpublished B. D. dissertation, Pritzlaff Memorial Library, St. Louis, Mo.

Murphysboro, Ill.