

The German Revolution of 1525

IN THE spring of 1525, the lands that now form the southern half of Germany, together with most of Switzerland and Austria, were the scene of a massive insurrection by the peasantry and the lower urban classes. This uprising was the culmination of decades of unrest caused by the gradual erosion of traditional rights, the wilful abolition of laws by the landlords, and a slow re-imposition of the feudal burdens upon the peasantry.

The people of the towns joined with the peasantry for slightly different reasons, seeking the establishment of new rights and laws to defend themselves against the excesses of early capitalism. The material revolutionary force that provided the engines for this movement was capital.

Engels described this epoch as follows: 'The Reformation — Lutheran and Calvinist — is the No. 1 bourgeois revolution, the peasant war being its critical episode. The decay of feudalism and the development of towns are two processes furthering decentralisation, whence the direct requirement of absolute monarchy as a power that would cement nationalities'.

His book *The Peasant War in Germany* today still provides us with an illuminating account of the causes, events and results of that uprising, despite the very incomplete sources available to him between 1850 and 1874. Since then, the historians, particularly in East Germany since 1945, have uncovered vast reserves of documents which have aided in understanding the significance of those events.

1975, in particular, produced a good crop of studies to mark the 450th anniversary of the uprising. Entire volumes of historical and theological periodicals were given over to debate the nature of the events, the role played by Reformation thought, the contribution made by the various rebel leaders. This study by Blickle, a Swiss his-

The Revolution of 1525, Peter Blickle. Johns Hopkins University Press 1983, £17. Review by ANDY DRUMMOND

torian, is one of the fruits of that debate.

It has now been translated by two Americans who recognise the crying lack of an English history of 1525. They rightly point out that the usual description of those events — 'the German Peasant War of 1525' — is not at all accurate, since it took place in an area that included Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France, it involved both the rural and urban populations, it was both a short war



LUTHER

and a long political development which peaked between 1524 and 1526.

Although they hope to fill the gap with this book they themselves have to provide a quick resume of the actual events, since Blickle assumes that the reader will have a working knowledge of these events. You would be better advised to turn to Engels for a fuller description.

Within the limits which are set, Blickle's description of the social preconditions of the revolution of 1525 is thoroughgoing, if in places hindered by his express intention of returning to the 'traditional historical method [that] was all too often considered old-fashioned'. All too often, the reader wishes for the self-same 'high theoretical level' of analysis which

Blickle renounces in his introduction.

One burning theoretical question which needs an answer is: 'Whose revolution?' Blickle argues for the term 'the revolution of the common man' for the particular period of his research, defining 'the common man' as 'the peasant, the miner, the resident of a territorial town; in the imperial cities he was the townsman ineligible for public office', and then promptly extends membership to everyone — 'insofar as the common man constituted the counterpart of the lord, we should really speak of a rising of the common man'. (p. 124)

The revolutionary events between 1524 and 1526 certainly swept up virtually all elements of society — indeed in 1522 the imperial knights staged an uprising in defiance of the territorial princes — but, by and large, the demands of that movement were primarily bourgeois: parliamentary rights, reform of the legislature, more rational taxation etc. Only in certain pockets did the demands of the lower peasantry and the urban poor break out of those bourgeois aspirations.

We must therefore dampen Blickle's enthusiasm and point out that his 'common man' was **involved** in these events, but that the main revolutionary thrust was bourgeois, and it is precisely in those areas of Germany which Blickle does **not** discuss that a more radical revolutionary tendency briefly flourished: in Thuringia under the leadership of Thomas Muntzer.

Blickle's study is divided into three sections — the causes, the goals and the consequences of the uprising of 1525. Let us look at these in turn.

Central Europe, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, was undergoing a revolutionary economic convulsion, engendered by the qualitative increase in capital previously amassed as a result of trade. Money now became a commodity which could buy labour-power, and through labour-power, could be increased.

It manifested itself in many forms

— as capital in small mining concerns, in small-scale industry, brewing and weaving, in money-lending. Engels, in his notes on Volume 3 of *Capital*,¹ provides an excellent account of how merchant and banking capital was transformed in the 15th to 17th centuries into industrial capital as new markets were opened up, and how the formation of capitalist surplus value emerged when the merchants began to purchase the labour-power of the artisans. In addition, the supply of money was increased as the silver mines of Saxony and Bohemia were developed, sometimes by the princes who owned the land, sometimes by the monopolies and companies run by families such as the Fuggers.

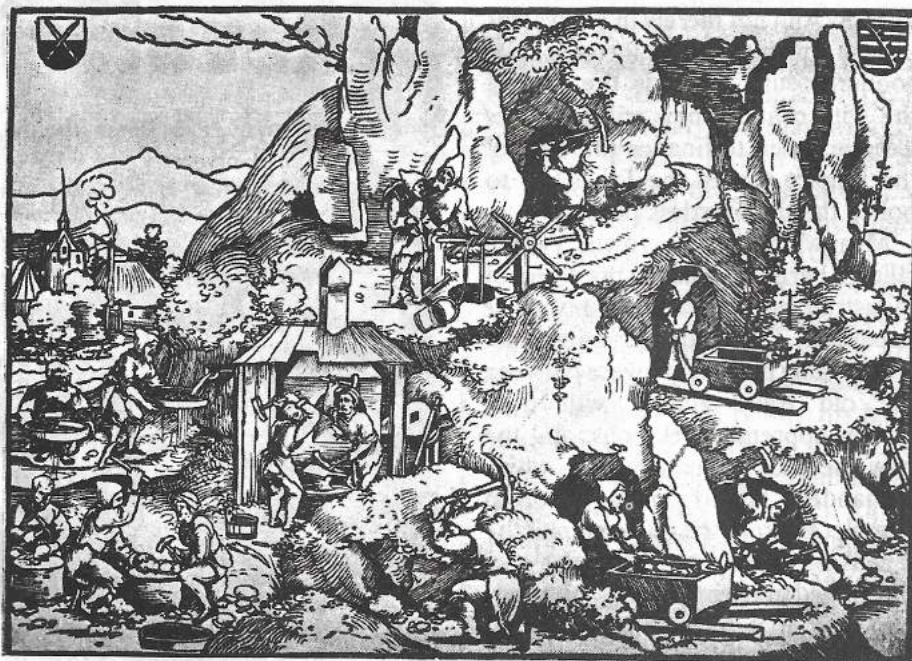
Even, as Marx notes in Volume 1 of *Capital*, 'the original capital for industry . . . came in part directly out of the state treasury', since the taxes fleeced from the lower classes and burghers was cycled on to the bankers as the nobility purchased land and mercenary armies, and financed their own splendour.

The increased circulation and power of money filtered into every crevice of society. 'Revolutionary merchant capital not only created modern absolutism, but also transformed the medieval classes of society according to its needs. The lust for gold and silver, the commodity that buys everything attacked the countryside.' (Franz Mehring, *Absolutism and Revolution in Germany*, New Park, 1975, p.3)

This is what caused the 'late medieval agrarian crisis' now described by Blicke.

Firstly, early urban industry required vast quantities of timber for building, for fuel, and in the mines for pit-props. This timber was in plentiful supply, but the forests of Germany were traditionally communal property. Any peasant could go into the forest and gather wood for his own needs, and according to village guidelines. But when timber was in demand and could be exchanged for money, the feudal landlords found it more convenient to appropriate the woods to themselves, and sell it over

¹ Engels, Supplements and Addenda to *Capital*, Volume 3, Part 1. Law of Value and Rate of Profit. 1895.



Mining operations in Germany about 1528, woodcut by Sebald Beham

the heads of the peasants. And since the woods now 'belonged' to the lords, the peasants could no longer enter the woods with impunity.

Secondly, late medieval towns demanded an increased supply of exploitable labour. The availability of labour in towns had been drastically affected by the visitations of plague during the 14th century, and the population figures remained stagnant during the 15th. So, labour-power had to be drawn from the countryside, with many younger members of peasant families, caught in the trap of inheritance laws and customs, who could not make a living on the land.

But this movement of labour from country to town immediately conflicted with the interests of the feudal lords: in essence, feudalism functioned by fleecing the peasantry. The more peasants, the greater the pickings. It was really of very little concern to the lords that many of their peasants could barely scrape a living, so long as they could be taxed, either in kind (cattle, chickens, crops or land) or in money.

So the feudal authorities everywhere began to impose laws restricting the movement of their subjects, and demanding harsh reparations from the community for anyone who did move.

A third tendency in this period was for the lords to consolidate their land-ownership. Often, as a result of centuries of power-struggles, political deals and feudal obligations, the lands owned by one lord might be scattered like pieces of broken china across vast areas of territory. During the latter half of the 15th century, the lords began to buy and sell such dependencies, to do deals amongst themselves and centralise their property around their residence.

This meant firstly that they had more power over their tenants and serfs, and secondly that, amidst all the negotiations, the traditional communally-owned land of the villages was bought and sold over their heads. Forests, pasturage, lakes and rivers were expropriated, and the peasants suffered severe penalties if they tried to 'trespass' on such areas. Blicke describes serfdom as 'the appropriation of peasant land'; with the land went all the traditional peasant rights, and very often the basis of the peasants' survival.

As if all this were not enough, the timeless burdens of the peasantry, which encompassed a tax on practically every social activity from birth to death, together with forced labour, were increased by the simple but revolutionary practice of changing the

method of payment — from 'in kind' to cash. And not merely in equivalent in cash, but usually an increase. For good measure, towards the end of the 15th century, new military taxes were imposed to finance the wars of the Empire against the Turks and to police the now-restless peasantry.

Meanwhile, in the towns (which Blickle barely mentions) the effect of industrial capital was certainly more apparent. The main struggles that were taking place there were between the old trade guilds, with their master-apprentice relations, and the new methods of manufacture which demanded labour-power divorced completely from the ownership of the means of production. Struggles also developed between the new labourers and capitalists, to establish legal protection of conditions.

'The immediate producer, the worker, could dispose of his own person only after he had ceased to be bound to the soil, and ceased to be the serf of another person. To become a free seller of labour-power, who carries his commodity wherever he can find a market for it, he must further have escaped from the regime of the guilds, their rules for apprentices and journeymen, and their restrictive labour regulations.

'Hence the historical movement which changes the producers into wage-labourers appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and it is this aspect of the movement which alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But on the other hand, these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.' (*Capital*, Volume 1, p.875, Penguin)

The struggles between the various class interests in the towns manifested themselves politically in struggles for representation and control of the town councils, and the power in many a town in the early 16th century passed from the old patrician families



'Occupations of peasants', about 1470, northern Italy

to the new bourgeois class.

In the towns, the economic power of the new capitalists was greater than it was in the country. By 1525, many towns had already gained a considerable measure of bourgeois democracy, and the events of that year were often played out between the dispossessed commoners and the bourgeois who had gained their political goals.

Obviously, the inroads into traditional rights in the country, and the progressive political struggle in the towns aroused the lower classes. The peasantry had a deeply-ingrained sense of justice, and so the lords had to provide a legislative cover for all their activities. This cover varied from forged 'ancient' documents proving their right to common land, to the full terror of the feudal penal system.

But these attacks and the reimposition of the feudal burden could not continue for long. They bore within them the seeds of their own downfall. As Blickle says: 'The added economic burdens struck a world of village and family that was already charged with tension. Since the flight from land to city had halted, a growing population struggled for the parcelling out of an inelastic supply of arable land. In regions with partible inheritance, society was levelled downward, while in regions where

only one heir was permitted, the growth of a rural lower class sharpened the contrast between rich and poor.' (p.88)

The usual safety-valve for bad times — unrestricted access to water, fish, game, and timber — no longer existed, while the political rights of the community had virtually been extinguished and complaints could no longer be channelled through the usual village courts.

Thus, sometimes as a result of bad harvests, sometimes after quite innocent gatherings, peasant unrest flared up again and again, between 1476 and 1524, particularly in the Black Forest region, which was the centre of the 1525 uprising. And since the dividing line between town and country was still very ill-defined, the unrest in the countryside spilled over into the suburbs and poorer sectors of the towns and cities.

But one final element needed to be added to light the fuse to this keg of powder, and that was the philosophical justification for revolt. Blickle does not really explain how the quantitative build-up of oppression and rebellion switched over to the qualitative period of revolt, but it is clear that the ideas of the Reformation were decisive — 'fettered by his own concept of law as whatever was customary and reasonable, the peasant

could only demand what he could legally justify. What he needed was the equivalent of the "common imperial and ecclesiastical law", and he finally found it in 1525 in the divine law.' (p.86)

The dialectical relationship between town and country becomes apparent here, since it was in the towns — the universities as well as the weavers' sects — that the new progressive ideas were worked out. In the mainstream of the Reformation, Luther's ideas were reflections precisely of the social and economic crisis, as were the ideas of the many radicals and Humanists of that epoch. These ideas were spread by the newly developed medium of moveable print.

This is not the place to analyse these ideas, but suffice it to say that they truly lit the road of bourgeois aspirations: control of the economy and a rationalisation of the economic burden of the medieval Church. It was the historical task of the towns to abstract the social crisis and to provide the theories that would overcome it, albeit in the guise of religion.

Between 1517, when Luther first

spoke out against the medieval Church, and 1525, German universities, churches and market-places seethed with old and new doctrines of the equality of men before God, the terrors of a God-forsaken world and the search for a divinely-guided social order; and it was the popularisation of these views which finally tipped the scales towards revolution.

Having defined the material causes of revolt, Blicke comes unstuck in his attempt to derive revolutionary intentions from the objective implications of the peasants' main set of demands — the 'Twelve Articles' of Swabia. 'Both the alternative offered by the Christian Association the existing structures of authority in Upper Swabia and the Salzburg Assembly's plan for the early modern state were revolutionary.' (p.125)

In fact, the demands of the Swabian rebels were economic in nature, and were nowhere set down as a revolutionary solution to the crisis. The peasantry simply wanted rid of the worst abuses of feudalism and participation in the election of representative assemblies working within the feudal state. The only glimpse we

have of thoroughly worked-out constitutions which challenged the feudal system are in Tyrol (where the peasantry had far more rights to start with) or in the towns, or after 1525.

Engels correctly saw that, with the adoption of these 'Twelve Articles' by the insurgents, 'the moderate, conciliatory element still had the upper hand among the peasant troops'.

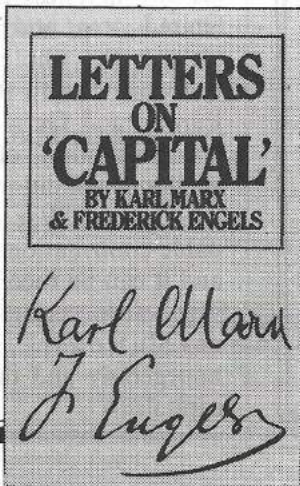
Blicke apparently believes that revolution is the process of presenting an alternative constitution for the government of an existing economic order; perhaps that is why his book concentrates so much on the main areas of the uprising (Swabia and Tyrol) and so little on those peripheral areas such as Franconia and Thuringia where the most revolutionary events took place, new revolutionary town councils were in fact set up, and where the miners joined with the peasants and urban lower classes in a far more radical revolt against feudalism and the Church.

In Swabia and Tyrol, the main goals were the restitution of old rights, the abolition of the worst tithes and taxes, and some measure of democracy in

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the election of preachers. With these goals, the insurgents found themselves persuaded time and again into sitting down with the feudal authorities for discussion that invariably came to nothing (while the princes used the time to gain military advantage). The field ordinances worked out to organise the peasant armies were ad hoc rules which no one had any intention of turning to permanent laws, although Blickle suggests that they represented embryonic Utopian systems.

When all the fighting was over, and the peasantry tricked, betrayed and massacred, what were the political

results? Blickle tries to show that the demands of the peasants were often fulfilled, especially those referring to the organisation of the Church, and that the political scene remained largely unaltered. This was far from being the case; certainly, individual princes were willing to embrace the new religion, since many of Luther's ideas suited their own purposes. But in general, the feudal oppression was made legal and binding, the peasantry defeated and only able to express their discontent in fanatical religious sects, some of which carried the flame of revolution for decades, kindling localised uprisings — for example, the Anabaptist 'Kingdom' of Munster in

1534-35, where a primitive communism was adopted for many months.

But as Engels explains, 'the princes alone gained from the Peasants War', and provincial centralisation proceeded apace. Because the peasant uprising failed, so did the revolution of the early bourgeois in their attempt to create parliamentary democracies and a unified German nation; some towns even found their recently-won constitutions taken away again.

'The German burgherdom made its revolution — which in the spirit of the times had a religious form, that of the Reformation. But how wretchedly!' wrote Engels. Although the Reformation had made many reforms possible in the towns, the whole essence of the Protestant religion made it impossible for the lower classes to gain anything from these reforms.

The German lands were loosed from the control of the Roman Church and the Empire, and the territories of the great princes were turned into minor absolutist states, which meant that the German bourgeois became cut off from his fellows, particularly since the discovery of the Americas and the route round the Cape shifted the fulcrum of European trade away from the old trans-German routes.

Perhaps if the peasantry had won, the power of bourgeois democracy would have been greater — but certainly, with the great engines of revolution defeated, there was little the bourgeoisie could do on their own, for at least 300 years.

Blickle's book does not embrace the current state of knowledge on the events of 1525. Its main failings are in his unwillingness to look up from a limited area and a limited period towards the whole unfolding of the Reformation era throughout central Europe and Germany. Nonetheless, his description of the social and economic conditions which led up to the Peasant War constitutes a valuable contribution to our knowledge, and it can be recommended to those who wish seriously to study the revolutionary epoch of the bourgeoisie and the history of early capitalism.

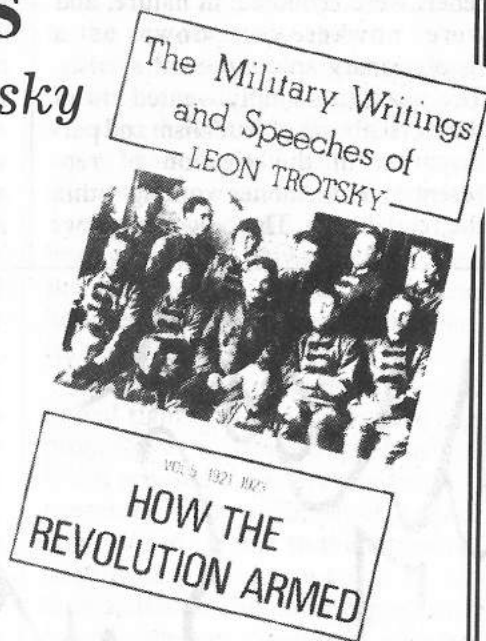
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