

Conflicts within cities during the “Peasants’ War” of 1525

by

BENJAMIN HEIDENREICH, Würzburg

The so-called Peasants’ War of 1525 was not an agrarian revolt as the name might indicate. From the very beginning of the unrest, cities and their citizens played not only a decisive role in the founding of an ideological agenda but also served as supporters of the rebellion.¹ In the 1520s, Huldreich Zwingli – the lay priest at Zurich’s Grossmünster Church – motivated the peasants living in surrounding villages to rebel against serfdom and financial hardship. When the unrest started in February 1525, the city of Memmingen in Upper Swabia opened its doors and hosted a meeting for the leaders of the peasants to coordinate their actions. Christoph Schappeler, a significant religious leader of this city and close friend of Huldreich Zwingli, helped write down the “Twelve Articles”: a summary of local grievances. He also legitimated the claims with the help of the Bible and adapted the Book of Exodus to use as a model for change. He argued: if hardship seems intolerable, God will intervene and lead his people to the Promised Land. According to the “Twelve Articles”, history was repeating itself in the year 1525, and the common man who believed in God was now thought equivalent to a member of the Chosen People of Moses’ time in terms of the plight they suffered – only this time, the setting was Germany, not Egypt.²

¹ Due to the involvement of citizens, the term “Peasants’ War” is hardly ever criticized. To avoid misleading associations, Peter Blickle, for example, speaks about the “revolution of the common man”. PETER BLICKLE, *Der Bauernkrieg: Die Revolution des Gemeinen Mannes*, 2012. The following books provide an excellent introduction to the issue in English: PETER BLICKLE, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants’ War From a New Perspective*, 1985; TOM SCOTT, BOB SCRIBNER (Ed.), *The German Peasants’ War: A History in Documents*, 1994. To make the discussion of the “Peasants’ War” accessible for English readers, this paper prefers essays and books published in English.

² BENJAMIN HEIDENREICH, *Ein Ereignis ohne Namen? Zu den Vorstellungen des ‘Bauernkriegs’ von 1525 in den Schriften der ‘Aufständischen’ und in der zeitgenössischen Geschichtsschreibung*, 2018. For the adaptation of the Exodus as a model for change: BENJAMIN HEIDENREICH, *The Adaptation of the Exodus-Narrative During the German Peasants’ War*, in:

In contrast, contemporary historians of the 16th century described the political unrest with the help of negative metaphors. According to their writings, the strife, which started near Memmingen, spread like wildfire and affected nearly all German territories. Others described it as an illness infecting people or compared it to a flood intended to sweep the old authorities away.³ A similarity that these metaphors share is the reference to the short period of time in which the events took place and the involvement of several hundred-thousands of people. In fact, the “Twelve Articles”, published in March 1525, served as the starting point for the unrest in southern Germany. Although this document motivated so many people to join the unrest, the aristocracy already quelled the rebellion by July 1525.⁴

It is important to keep the following points in mind when attempting to draw conclusions about the Peasants’ War in order to form an analysis of the conflicts happening in certain cities at the same time. First, to describe their situation the insurgents used a biblical language, which merged issues of daily life with religious questions thus providing a new strategy of argumentation. Second, the quick succession of the events and the willingness of the people to join the unrest indicates that it was an era of major crisis. Third, the unrest affected villages and cities, but no more than half of the Holy Roman Empire was involved.⁵

Protestantism and Political Rebellion in Early Modernity, ed. ÁGUEDA GARCIO-GARRIDO, ROCÍO G. SUMILLERA, 2019. The “Twelve Articles” were translated several times into English. For example: BLICKLE, *The Revolution of 1525* (like note 1), p. 195–201.

³ JOSEF WÜRDINGER, *Nachricht von dem Bauernaufuhr oder bürgerlichen Krieg des Georg Schwarzerdt*, in: *Collectaneen-Blatt für die Geschichte Bayerns insbesondere für die Geschichte der Stadt Neuburg a. d. Donau und des ehemaligen Herzogthums Neuburg* 43 (1879) p. 1–48, here p. 25; AUGUST SCHÄFFLER, THEODOR HENNER (Ed.), *Die Geschichte des Bauernkrieges in Ostfranken von Magister Lorenz Fries*, 2 Vols, 1883, here 1, p. 3; GÜNTHER FRANZ, *Peter Harers wahrhafte und gründliche Beschreibung des Bauernkriegs*, in: *Die Berichte von Peter Harer und Johannes Keßler vom Bauernkrieg 1525*, ed. WILLI ALTER (Pfälzische Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften in Speyer 88), 1995, p. 5–126, here p. 17–18. This description is a stereotype used by medieval historians to describe an unrest. The work of John Gower († 1408, London) can serve as an example for this assumption. RICHARD BARRIE DOBSON (Ed.), *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 (History in depth)*, 1970, p. 97–98.

⁴ A case study for the area around the Franconian city Rothenburg ob der Tauber is provided by: ROY L. VICE, *The German Peasants’ War of 1525 and its Aftermath in Rothenburg ob der Tauber and Würzburg*, 1984.

⁵ Reasons for the absence of unrest in other territories have been discussed several times without a satisfying answer having been found: WALTER ZIEGLER, *Kein Bauernkrieg im Herzogtum Bayern: Kein Bauernkrieg im größeren Teil des Reiches*, in: *Bauernkrieg in Franken*, ed. FRANZ FUCHS, ULRICH WAGNER (Publikationen aus dem Kolleg “Mittelalter und Frühe Neuzeit” 2), 2016, p. 87–112. The language of the insurgents requires a close analysis so that the social and political background of the writers can be understood. Unfortunately, most of the research on this topic was conducted before the Linguistic Turn: WINFRIED BECKER, “Göttliches

Focusing on regional history as an indicator for specific points of social change, one should pay attention to the region of Northern Franconia. Parts of this area belonged to the territory of the bishop of Würzburg, while other parts were under the rule of the duke of Saxony. Although these two territories shared a border, the episcopal region was heavily affected by the unrest while the area around Coburg was hardly touched. So, the following case study will search for the causes of – or the reasons for – this difference. By doing this, insights can be gained into the social structures that existed in the different cities at this time, and more can be learned about the subjective perception of the living conditions experienced by the citizens in these locations.

This paper focuses specifically on the cities of Ebern and Seßlach, which were governed by Bishop Konrad von Thüngen, and on the city of Coburg, which was only ten kilometers away from Seßlach and which was ruled by Duke Johann von Sachsen. The first two cities had a population of approximately 1000 people each and Coburg a populous of 4000. The economic basis of the three cities was agriculture, with Coburg also being involved in the production of linen. Although the cities each had a city council, important decisions could only be made with the permission of the ruler or his local representative, the bailiff, who was based nearby in a castle. In the case of Coburg, the duke had installed a group of representatives to control the bailiffs of smaller districts in the castle above Coburg, which served as an administrative center of the duke’s territory in Franconia. The distance from Seßlach and Ebern to the capital of the bishop was 100 km, and Coburg was located at the periphery of the duke’s territory with the same distance to its capital.⁶

Wort”, “Göttliches Recht”, “Göttliche Gerechtigkeit”: Die Politisierung theologischer Begriffe?, in: *Revolte und Revolution in Europa*, ed. PETER BLICKLE (*Historische Zeitschrift. Beiheft N. F. 4*), 1975, p. 233–263.

⁶ The following books and articles provide general insights into the history of the cities in the late medieval times and in the 16th century. REINHARDT BUTZ, GERT MELVILLE (Ed.), *Coburg 1353: Stadt und Land Coburg im Spätmittelalter. Festschrift zur Verbindung des Coburger Landes mit den Wettinern vor 650 Jahren bis 1918* (Schriftenreihe der Historischen Gesellschaft Coburg e. V. 17), 2003; ISOLDE MAIERHÖFER, *Ebern: Bild einer fränkischen Kleinstadt*, 1980; ISOLDE MAIERHÖFER, *Ebern. Der Landkreis Ebern in seiner herrschaftlichen Entwicklung bis zum Ende des Alten Reiches* (Historischer Atlas von Bayern. Franken 1,15), 1964; WALTER SCHERZER, *Das würzburgische Hochstiftische Amt Seßlach nach Quellen des 15./16. Jahrhunderts*, in: *100 Jahre Landkreis Staffelstein*, ed. ISOLDE MAIERHÖFER, 1962, p. 99–105; STEFAN NÖTH, *Die Stadtbücher von Seßlach: Aus den Jahren 1485 und 1550* (CHW-Monographien 6), 2005. The following articles focus more closely on the religious landscape: RAINER AXMANN, *Das Coburger Land vor der Reformation*, in: *Jahrbuch der Coburger Landesstiftung* 29 (1984) p. 297–316; RAINER AXMANN, *Pfarreien und Klöster im späten Mittelalter im Coburger Land unter wettinischer Herrschaft*, in: *Coburger Geschichtsblätter* 11 (2003) p. 15–27; ALFRED

The unrest near Ebern and Seßlach started 40 km away to the west on April 12th, 1525, when citizens of Münnerstadt and local peasants stormed the monastery of Bildhausen.⁷ To gain support, they organized themselves as a league of equals and wrote letters to the surrounding communities.⁸ The insurgents explained their issues in the following way:

The divine word and the pure teaching has been captured for a long time with the help of the clergy to harm the sheep of the Lord, that had already been saved. Furthermore, the rulers have placed on us unbearable burdens, which have been getting more intolerable from day to day. Although this practice is against the divine order and we had already pleaded for relief, nothing has changed. God, who has already saved us from hardship before, will not tolerate this practice any longer. Although we are unworthy to act, He has given us now the order to take everything, which is necessary to keep us alive. This implicates that we are still accepting our rulers, but we want them to rule us according to the Bible. Therefore, we admonish you to join our league to help the ideas of Christian liberty and justice to succeed.⁹

This short text captures a wide variety of discourses. To begin with, it is important to mention that the insurgents used vocabulary that is strongly connected to Martin Luther’s most popular pamphlets when they wrote about the Captivity of Christianity and Christian Liberty.¹⁰ For that reason, it is significant to know that they are intentionally using these words with a different meaning – understanding the Bible not only as a spiritual book but also as a book of law. They wanted rulers to act according to the bible: word-for-word.¹¹

WENDEHORST, *Das Würzburger Landkapitel Coburg zur Zeit der Reformation* (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 13, Studien zur Germania Sacra 3), 1964.

⁷ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 1* (like note 3), p. 345–464. Researchers focused especially on the history of events: GÜNTHER FRANZ, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, 1933, p. 325–328; RUDOLF ENDRES, *Franken*, in: *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, ed. HORST BUSZELLO, PETER BLICKLE, RUDOLF ENDRES, 1984, p. 134–153; GÜNTHER WÖLFING, *Der Bauernkrieg im südthüringisch-hennebergischen Raum*, 1989; GÜNTER VOGLER (Ed.), *Bauernkrieg zwischen Harz und Thüringer Wald* (Historische Mitteilungen. Beiheft 69), 2008.

⁸ OTTO GERHARD OEXLE, *Die Kultur der Rebellion: Schwureinung und Verschwörung im früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Okzident*, in: *Ordnung und Aufruhr im Mittelalter. Historische und juristische Studien zur Rebellion*, ed. MARIE THERES FÖGEN (*Ius commune*. Sonderhefte 70), 1995, p. 119–137.

⁹ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 1* (like note 3), p. 347f.

¹⁰ Peter Matheson provides an introduction to the language of the reformation: PETER MATHE-SON, *The Rhetoric of the Reformation*, 1998; and: PETER MATHE-SON, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, 2004.

¹¹ BLICKLE, *The Revolution of 1525* (like note 1), p. 87–93.

The main purpose of this text is, indeed, legitimation, for which the insurgents used two strategies. The first was an argument strongly linked to the “Twelve Articles” and its adaptation of Exodus. The insurgents assert that God will intervene and end their hardship. They claim to have heard his words like prophets and are acting as ordered.¹² Two further issues are also interesting when considering the attitude of the insurgents. They believe that God has already saved them from hardship, which can be seen – according to the “Twelve Articles” – as a special understanding of Christ’s sacrifice: liberation from the slavery of sins is theirs, as is the liberation from worldly bondage.¹³ The other issue of note is the refusal to allow subjects to act as a political body, reflecting the state theory of medieval times that excluded the majority from the political community. According to their text, this theory is no longer valid since God helps His Chosen People to change their living conditions.¹⁴

While this legitimation was first taught by Huldreich Zwingli and then adopted by the “Twelve Articles”, one can find a second level of argument in this text, too.¹⁵ The insurgents refer to the tradition of unrest in Medieval Europe, which can be described as a particular form of aggressive and demanding communication between subjects and lords. In this understanding of unrest, the insurgents escalated the conflict with their rulers because they refused to negotiate with them. Therefore, the occupation of the monastery can be seen as an attempt to gain attention from the bishop. By doing so, the insurgents additionally hoped to gain support from other subjects to escalate the conflict further.¹⁶ Looking more closely at the demands of the insurgents, they are very typical of medieval revolts, too. According to the text, this conflict was initiated due to the rapid decline in living standards, which had to be stopped.¹⁷

¹² HEIDENREICH, *Ein Ereignis ohne Namen?* (like note 2).

¹³ This passage refers to the third article of the “Twelve Articles”. One can see a strong similarity to the teaching of Huldreich Zwingli: BERNDT HAMM, *Zwinglis Reformation der Freiheit*, 1988, p. 14–16, 20–22. The idea of Christian Liberty is linked with the idea of a covenant. JACK WARREN COTTRELL, *Covenant and Baptism in the Theology of Huldreich Zwingli*, 1971, p. 18–126, 265–294.

¹⁴ OTTO GERHARD OEXLE, *Die funktionale Dreiteilung als Deutungsschema der sozialen Wirklichkeit in der ständischen Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, in: *Ständische Gesellschaft und soziale Mobilität*, ed. WINFRIED SCHULZE (Schriften des Historischen Kollegs. Kolloquien 12), 1988, p. 19–51.

¹⁵ To the teaching of Zwingli: HAMM, *Zwinglis Reformation der Freiheit* (like note 13), p. 14–16, 20–22.

¹⁶ HEIDENREICH, *Ein Ereignis ohne Namen?* (like note 2).

¹⁷ Peter Bierbrauer analyzed hundreds of medieval revolts and described their typical development. Starting with specific requests, the unrest could lead to violence if the ruler did not negotiate with the insurgents. PETER BIERBRAUER, *Bäuerliche Revolten im Alten Reich. Ein Forschungsbericht*, in: *Aufbruch und Empörung? Studien zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im Alten*

Indeed, we can distinguish between two patterns of legitimation, a new one and an old one, but it is important to know that it is a mistake to analyze them separately in this paper. On the one hand, the insurgents claimed to be trying to rebuild the broken bond between the subjects and the rulers by negotiating their demands. On the other hand, they only wanted a Christian ruler who acted according to their interpretation of the Bible. An unchristian ruler, who did not accept their beliefs, should be overthrown. Therefore, the occupation of a monastery was not only a symbol or an act of communication; it was also an act in the interest of God – a decision a Christian ruler would affirm.

Even though the analysis of this document helps readers to understand the character of the unrest in a more specific way, one important word remains vague: “burdens” – the ones that the subjects had to carry. It should be asked: what meaning can be ascribed to this word? Is it referring to a tax, a duty or to something else? Since living conditions could differ from place to place in Franconia due to the many rulers in this region, it was important for the insurgents to use an indefinite word to gain as much support as possible. However, to provide an explanation for why Ebern and Seßlach later joined the unrest, it is, of course, necessary to focus on the problems that were present inside the city walls.

I chose Seßlach and Ebern for this case study for two reasons. First, they were located next to the border of Saxony, where a different development took place. So, it is important to figure out why these cities joined the rebellion when Coburg did not. Second, both cities have to be seen as an entity during the Peasants’ War since they acted together most of the time due to a common history and a shared administration.¹⁸

On the same day that the insurgents took the monastery of Bildhausen by storm, an unrest started in Ebern, too. On April 12th, 1525, the inhabitants of the suburb closed the doors of their neighborhood because they were afraid of being attacked by the knights of the bishop. Moreover, they threatened to kill clerks, members of the city council and city officers. Although their information about the forthcoming attack was wrong, this episode provides insights into the

Reich, ed. PETER BLICKLE, PETER BIERBRAUER, RENATE BLICKLE, CLAUDIA ULBRICH, 1980, p. 1–68.

¹⁸ ROLF SPRANDEL, Die territorialen Ämter des Bistums Würzburg im späten Mittelalter, in: *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landesforschung* 37 (1977) p. 45–64. To gain money for the bishop, the two cities were pledged several times to the same creditor during the 15th century: *Staatsarchiv Würzburg*, Stb. 1011, fol. 187r–190v, and Stb. 1012, fol. 518v–520v. In 1509, for example, one person worked in Ebern and Seßlach to collect taxes for the bishop. *Staatsarchiv Würzburg*, *Liber feudorum* 31, fol. 67v.

social conditions of the town.¹⁹ Due to population growth, a suburb of Ebern had been built only a few decades earlier, and this was where poorer members of the city community lived.²⁰ Furthermore, the city council hardly represented this group of people since it consisted of members of the same families over several generations.²¹ To restore confidence between these groups, the inhabitants of the suburbs demanded that all inhabitants swear a new oath to protect every member of the community. According to their opinion, the clerks should become part of this community, too.²² Since the clerks, who lived in the city, were exempt from taxes and duties, this claim stands for a social demand because taxes had to be paid by the community as a whole. More taxpayers could help to reduce individual taxation.

Four factors are important to remember: first, the city-community consisted of several groups, each with a different social and political background, of course. Second, the inhabitants of the suburb did not want to kill their opponents as the source, which was written by a member of the aristocracy, suggests. Rather, they wanted to try to enforce their interests by referring to values commonly shared by communities since medieval times. Indeed, cities were founded to guarantee security with their walls, and their members constituted themselves as equal participants in the political community through an oath to help to enforce the common good.²³ In conclusion, the agenda of this group was to renew the very ideas of a city: it should be a place of security, political equality and the common good. Third, it is interesting that the inhabitants of the suburb did not place demands on the nobility and the bishop even though they were seen as a threat and some of the noblemen owned houses in the city tax-free.²⁴

¹⁹ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 67–69.

²⁰ MAIERHÖFER, Ebern, 1980 (like note 6), p. 55.

²¹ REINHOLD NEEB, *Studien zur historischen Typologie der Stadtentwicklung und der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in Deutschland am Beispiel der Stadt Ebern*, Ufr, 1974, p. 30.

²² SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 67–69.

²³ HANS-CHRISTOPH RUBLACK, *Grundwerte in der Reichsstadt im Spätmittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, in: *Literatur in der Stadt. Bedingungen und Beispiele städtischer Literatur des 15. bis 17. Jahrhundert*, ed. HORST BRUNNER (*Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik* 343), 1982, p. 9–36; PETER BLICKLE, *Kommunalismus. Skizzen einer gesellschaftlichen Organisationsform*, 2 vols, 2000.

²⁴ According to the inhabitants, the nobility and the bishop owned eleven houses, and the priests owned nine. SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 74. In the records of the bishop of Würzburg, members of the families of Lichtenstein (most often), Altenstein, Rotenhan, Schweigerer and Fulbach are mentioned by name as vessels of the bishop who held houses as fiefs. *Staatsarchiv Würzburg, Liber feudorum 21*, fol. 23v, 43v, 49v, 58r, 58v, 110v; *Liber feudorum 29*, fol. 89v, 99v, 122r, 127v, 143v, 164v, 226r; *Liber feudorum 30*, fol. 21r, 30v; *Liber feudorum 31*, fol. 67v, 125r, 175r. Holding not only houses as fiefs but also farms, fields woods and the right to collect taxes, these families had a tremendous influence on the city.

Fourth, in comparison to those causing the unrest in Bildhausen, the inhabitants of the suburb did not justify their actions with the help of the Bible. It seems that this new ideology had not reached Ebern yet.

In the meantime, the city council of Würzburg tried to diffuse the potential for a conflict by asking the bishop to invite all noblemen and representatives of the cities in his territory to an assembly. The cities were supposed to tell the bishop about their grievances so that the bishop could eliminate the causes of the unrest. In the citizens’ understanding, an unrest could be solved through negotiations, as the insurgents of Bildhausen had already suggested. The bishop, who did not believe in a political solution, reluctantly accepted this plan and began to prepare himself for a military solution.²⁵

To air its grievances, the city council of Ebern asked the inhabitants of each quarter to write down their demands. Unfortunately, these lists of grievances are lost. Therefore, only the following articles can be analyzed, which act as a kind of abstract or edited version of the original letter of complaints.

One can distinguish between three groups of demands. The first deals with demands relating to the priests, who lived in the city. The second covers requests referring to tax reliefs, and the third involves those in connection with the consolidation of the city community that, it was believed, could be achieved by citizens having more rights. Particularly the first group of demands shows the strong influence of the “Twelve Articles”. A wave of traditional anticlericalism at this time aimed at dismantling the privileges of the clergy and merged with demands for a new teaching according to the reformation. The city of Ebern demanded the abolition of the tithes according to the “Twelve Articles”. All other tax relief demands were aimed at affecting episcopal taxes concerning mainly agricultural products. It was believed that, like other citizens, priests and noblemen should pay taxes.²⁶

The city-council of Seßlach pursued the same strategy as the city-council of Ebern to prevent a revolt by allowing the inhabitants to confer about their grievances. On April 22nd, the inhabitants complained about tax exemptions for priests and for noblemen and specifically accused the noble family of Lichtenstein of expanding its power at the expense of the bishop.²⁷ The official city

²⁵ HANS-CHRISTOPH RUBLACK, *Die Stadt Würzburg im Bauernkrieg*, in: *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 67 (1976) p. 76–100.

²⁶ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken* 2 (like note 3), p. 72–75.

²⁷ The family of Lichtenstein was strongly criticized. SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken* 2 (like note 3), p. 280–281.

record written down 14 days later demonstrates the adaptation of the “Twelve Articles” – specifically the passage where the authors describe the Bible as a book of law. However, the single demands were justified by the violation of customary rights or violations of the written law. In contrast to the situation seen in Ebern, reducing episcopal taxes is not the main issue of this list of grievances in Seßlach; the people from this city mainly accused the noblemen of, for example, violating their hunting and grazing rights.²⁸

The bishop planned to hold the assembly on May 1st, 1525. However, due to the reluctance of the insurgents, who had already gained support from several thousands of people, the meeting could not take place. In consequence, the city of Würzburg and the bishop blamed each other for this failure. Out of fear of the insurgents, the bishop then decided to leave his capital.²⁹ The resulting vacuum of power led to the city councils in Ebern and Seßlach, that had supported the bishop, losing hope for controlling their inhabitants. Finally, they accepted the request of the insurgents of Bildhausen to join their league. From letter to letter, the language of the city councils now changed towards a theocratic discourse influenced by the “Twelve Articles”. The mayors and city councils were not overthrown but became disempowered. Finally, the cities had to send troops to the camp of the insurgents.³⁰ Although after the defeat the mayors blamed the insurgents outside the cities for forcing them to join the unrest, the inhabitants of the cities had excitedly looked forward to joining the league.³¹ As well as the involvement of the cities in contributing troops, the inhabitants acted on their own and organized themselves to destroy castles and monasteries in the surrounding countryside.³² With bitterness, a chronicler wrote about the city of Ebern, saying that even if the inhabitants sold all their

²⁸ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER (Ed.), *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 283–286. The inhabitants criticized also the tax exemptions for houses owned by noblemen, although this point of critique seems less important than it was in Ebern. In the records of the bishop of Würzburg, only members of the family of Lichtenstein are mentioned as being able to hold several houses as fiefs. Staatsarchiv Würzburg, *Liber feudorum 21*, fol. 30v, 68v; *Liber feudorum 29*, fol. 73v, 77v, 86v, 93r, 154v, 168v, 231v. Especially one record shows that the family of Lichtenstein not only owned houses but also held fields and other goods as fiefs. *Liber feudorum 30*, fol. 174v.

²⁹ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 1* (like note 3), p. 278–279.

³⁰ Finally, the two cities joined the rebellion on May 8th, when a contingent of both cities arrived in Bildhausen. SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 77–80. The military organization of the insurgents copied the tradition that every city had to contribute troops during a conflict involving its ruler (*Landesdefensionswesen*). Staatsarchiv Würzburg, *Standbuch 818*, fol. 1v–4v.

³¹ On May 8th in Tambach, a farmyard of the monastery of Langheim was seized by the subjects. SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 81.

³² SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 81, 289–292.

houses, the revenue would not be sufficient to pay for half of the damage they had caused to castles and monasteries.³³

To summarize a common feature of the perceived burdens of the inhabitants, they noticed a decline in living standards, even if the citizens of Ebern and Seßlach described the causes of this differently by accusing, in the case of Ebern, the bishop of being responsible for the high taxation of agricultural goods and, in the case of Seßlach, the family of Lichtenstein of taking property away from the city. However, a strong commonality can be seen in the negative attitudes of the citizens, especially towards noblemen and priests, who, in their eyes, endangered the values of a city-community and the true Christian Faith. They criticized not only tax exemptions but also the suppression of the Reformation. At the time that the cities joined the rebellion, they immediately attacked the strongholds of clerks and noblemen owning property in the city. The destruction of monasteries and castles outside the towns should, therefore, be interpreted as a result of the conflicts within the cities. Attacking those castles and monasteries in the countryside shifted the local conflicts (only) to a more regional level. The popularity of the unrest among the inhabitants of the towns can be explained by the decreased standard of living and the values that the insurgents shared with the citizens such as the ideas of the common good, political equality, and the conviction that man is responsible for his soul's salvation.

By attacking castles and monasteries, the inhabitants personalized their believed causes of their discontent. The bishop, as sovereign leader of this area, was seen as an ally most of the time. One can draw a comparison with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, in which the insurgents hoped to change their social conditions and society as a whole with the help of King Richard II. Most of the time, the insurgents of 1525 remained faithful to the bishop, too.³⁴ As has been deduced from research, the members of medieval societies knew that social conflicts could be solved through negotiation. In this case, negotiations failed because, on the one hand, the bishop distrusted the insurgents and wanted to suppress their rebellion and, on the other, the insurgents wanted the bishop to accept their interpretation of the Bible uncompromisingly. According to their beliefs, a ruler could only enforce the law but was not entitled to pass a law.

³³ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, *Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 2* (like note 3), p. 67.

³⁴ RICHARD KAEUPER, *War, justice, and public order: England and France in the later Middle Ages*, 1988, p. 369.

Looking more closely to Coburg, three aspects gain attention: the living standard of the inhabitants, the spread of radical religious convictions and the ruler’s behavioral patterns concerning his reaction to unrest.

Ingetraut Ludolphy and others support the hypothesis that the living standard of the subjects of Coburg was better than in other territories.³⁵ This assumption has to be questioned. In 1519, the knights of the duke had already drawn attention to the poverty of the people, who could not – according to their argument – afford to pay a new tax passed by the Reichstag.³⁶ According to Karl August Hugo Burkhardt, an “unrest” occurred in the city of Coburg due to the implementation of excise duties in 1523 that affected beer and wine.³⁷ Unfortunately, Burkhardt mentions only very vaguely that something happened in 1523 without much explanation. By analyzing this incident more extensively, we can gain insights into a latent crisis. First, the term “unrest” seems inappropriate to describe the delivery of a list of grievances from the community to the city council. Second, this list contains more demands than just the reduction of the excise duties. The community also criticized, for example, the ruler’s taxation of bread and the overfishing of waters.³⁸ These taxes had one thing in common: they increased the price of food. According to the people’s argument, the prices of barley and hops had already risen.³⁹ It is, in any case, very likely that Franconia was affected by bad harvests, which had already raised the prices of agricultural goods.⁴⁰

If we compare the list of demands of the citizens of Coburg with the grievances of the citizens of Ebern and Seßlach, we recognize that many of the demands of the latter cities reflect the results of bad harvests, too. The claim for lower excise duties must be seen as a demand that was intended to help the people suffering due to inflation, which, furthermore, led to existing privileges and

³⁵ INGETRAUT LUDOLPHY, *Friedrich der Weise. Kurfürst von Sachsen 1463–1525*, 1984, p. 312–314; AXMANN, *Das Coburger Land vor der Reformation* (like note 6), p. 298.

³⁶ KARL AUGUST HUGO BURKHARDT (Ed.), *Ernestinische Landtagsakten: Die Landtage von 1487–1532* (Thüringische Geschichtsquellen N. F. 5), 1902, p. 138. Lotter’s study about the tax system in Coburg is not helpful for gaining insights into the social situation of the subjects. HERBERT LOTTER, *Das Steuer- und Abgabenwesen des Coburger Landes im Mittelalter und in den ersten Jahrhunderten der Neuzeit*, 1951.

³⁷ Burkhardt only mentions this incident without providing the corresponding archive signature. BURKHARDT, *Ernestinische Landtagsakten* (like note 36), p. 170. For similar complaints prior to 1523: BURKHARDT, *Ernestinische Landtagsakten* (like note 36), p. 135, 138.

³⁸ Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA F 8208a.

³⁹ Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA F 8208a, fol. 3.

⁴⁰ For Upper Swabia, David Sabeian emphasizes the effect of bad harvests on the outbreak of the revolt. DAVID SABEIAN, *Landbesitz und Gesellschaft am Vorabend des Bauernkriegs. Eine Studie der sozialen Verhältnisse im südlichen Oberschwaben in den Jahren vor 1525* (Quellen und Forschungen zur Agrargeschichte 26), 1972, p. 76.

infringements causing tensions. Therefore, the worries in all three cities about public rights of access for fishing and hunting reflected a conflict surrounding the distribution of goods. Members of the clergy, the nobility and the inhabitants of the cities became competitors. In Coburg, the citizens complained they had become paupers while others seemed unaffected. To lift the burdens of the poor, the citizens suggested that the rich should pay more into the community.⁴¹ Reading between the lines, we can identify two values which became slogans of the Peasants’ War two years later: the idea of the common good and the belief that the livelihood of everyone should be guaranteed. The citizens of Coburg wanted to redefine the values of the community in the course of solving their problems. It is obvious that the city council of Coburg did not represent the interests of the community. Most of the demands the community raised were refused or protracted by the council.⁴² The inhabitants of Coburg suffered, as did those of Seßlach and Ebern, from bad harvests and because of the authorities’ refusal to reduce excise taxes: one of the most important sources of income both for the bishop and for the duke.⁴³

At the end of March 1525, envoys of the bishop of Würzburg and of the duke of Saxony met in Coburg. Since Coburg was part of the bishop’s diocese, the envoys from Würzburg could address complaints about the implantation of the Reformation. This meeting is well documented and gives some very rare insights into the enforcement of the new spiritual regime in this area. The episcopal messengers complained in particular about the denial of ecclesiastical fees, the priests’ disobedience against the bishop, the abolition of prebends and the dissolution of a monastery with the help of the city of Königsberg located near Coburg. The following episode must have been particularly galling for the bishop. The dean of this district did not open the letters containing the edicts against Luther; he simply sent them back to the bishop.⁴⁴

It is obvious that the bishop had lost control of this part of his diocese. Furthermore, we see a distribution of roles which is typical of the Early Reformation. The duke, as a sovereign, protected the implementation of the

⁴¹ Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA F 8208a, fol. 7.

⁴² The inhabitants, for example, complained about new members of the council, who they did not believe represented them. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA F 8208a, fol. 6r.

⁴³ According to Schirmer, the taxation of beer and wine was a major source of income for the duke. Likewise, the *Guldenzoll*, a similiar tax, was very significant for the bishop’s budget. UWE SCHIRMER, *Kursächsische Staatsfinanzen (1456–1656). Strukturen, Verfassung, Funktionseliten (Quellen und Forschungen zur sächsischen Geschichte 28)*, 2006.

⁴⁴ Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA D 1702.

new belief, while the actual agents of change were noblemen and citizens.⁴⁵ In 1524, the city council of Coburg implemented a new order for divine service according to the Lutheran belief, but the process of implementing the Reformation was actually not finished.⁴⁶ In 1525, a Franciscan monastery still existed, and a provost still lived in the city.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the events outside the city walls affected the religious landscape of Coburg. On May 4th, the monks decided to close the convent, and one day later, the provost wrote in a letter that he had decided to transfer his property to the city to prevent any unrest. The provost believed that the inhabitants seemed ready to start a rebellion.⁴⁸ During these days, the atmosphere in Coburg must have been extremely volatile.

Like the bishop of Würzburg, duke Johann of Saxony was nervous about a forthcoming rebellion.⁴⁹ To prevent unrest, he pursued a different policy to the bishop. While Konrad von Thüngen raised taxes to finance troops against the insurgents, which seems to have been the straw that broke the camel’s back in terms of sparking a rebellion, the duke tried to de-escalate the conflict.⁵⁰ He suspended the excise duties immediately. The bishop only promised to hear the grievances of his subjects, but the duke seemed to be more trusted by his subjects since he protected the Reformation and acted instantly to reduce taxes.⁵¹ That said, he did not trust his subjects. Like the bishop, he prepared the castles in his territory for war.⁵² Due to the greater distance of his territory from the starting point of the unrest in the south of the Empire, it was easier for the

⁴⁵ JOACHIM BAUER, Die “Weimarer Reformation” unter Johann dem Beständigen und ihre Bedeutung für die reformatorische und gesellschaftliche Neuordnung in Kursachsen, in: Weimar und die Reformation. Luthers Obrigkeitslehre und ihre Wirkungen, ed. CHRISTOPHER SPEHR, MICHAEL HASPEL, WOLFGANG HOLLER, 2016, p. 59–82.

⁴⁶ EMIL SEHLING (Ed.), Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts 1: Sachsen und Thüringen nebst angrenzenden Gebieten, 1902, p. 542–543; RAINER AXMANN, Die spätmittelalterliche Predikatur an Coburg – St. Moriz. Balthasar Düring als ihr bedeutendster Inhaber, in: Jahrbuch der Coburger Landesstiftung 35 (1990) p. 295–314.

⁴⁷ GEORG BERBIG, Reformationsurkunden des Franziskanerklosters zu Coburg, in: Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte 26 (1905) p. 112–133; RAINER AXMANN, Zur Geschichte der Reformation in der Pflege Coburg, in: Ritter, Bauern, Lutheraner, ed. PETER WOLF u. a. (Veröffentlichungen zur Bayerischen Geschichte und Kultur 66), 2017, p. 62–66.

⁴⁸ WALTHER PETER FUCHS, GÜNTHER FRANZ (Ed.), Akten zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs in Mitteldeutschland (Schriften der Sächsischen Kommission für Geschichte 41), 1942, No. 1314, 1330.

⁴⁹ VOLKER GRAUPNER, Die ernestinischen Fürsten im Thüringer Bauernkrieg, in: VOGLER, Bauernkrieg (like note 7), p. 283–298.

⁵⁰ SCHÄFFLER, HENNER, Geschichte des Bauern-Krieges in Ostfranken 1 (like note 3), p. 137.

⁵¹ FUCHS, FRANZ, Akten zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs in Mitteldeutschland (like note 48), No. 252, 261; LUDOLPHY, Friedrich der Weise (like note 34), p. 312–314.

⁵² FUCHS, FRANZ, Akten zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs in Mitteldeutschland (like note 48), No. 560.

duke than for the bishop to hire mercenaries. One letter from the neighboring court of the count of Henneberg tells us about how 500 soldiers arrived in the city.⁵³ Although this number seems exaggerated, the duke might have had a discouraging number of soldiers in his castle above Coburg.

In conclusion, one should understand the Peasants' War as a struggle against excessive taxes and duties, as an approach to implementing new religious beliefs and as an attempt to reorganize society according to the values shared by the inhabitants of villages and towns. The inhabitants of Ebern and Seßlach fought to strengthen the commune as a political and legal institution. Furthermore, the inhabitants tried to eliminate exemptions for the clergy and the nobility and tried to break the influence of the oligarchic city-councils. Their confidence in the values of equality and the common good met with the beliefs of the Reformation inspired by Huldreich Zwingli. His teachings of a society built upon the idea of brotherly love, which already contained the ideas of equality and the common good, and these gave hope to the people that God would lead them to a promised land.

Comparing the economic situation in the territories ruled by the duke and the bishop, the subjects in both areas complained about a decline in the standard of living. Although the denial of ecclesiastical fees in Coburg might have contributed to unburdening the inhabitants, these citizens still complained about intolerable taxes in 1523. Due to bad harvests and the constant need of the duke and bishop for money, the situation of the subjects was critical.

Since it is not the economic conditions which can explain the absence of an unrest in Coburg, one must look carefully at other factors. On the one hand, the implementation of the Lutheran Reformation in Coburg might have satisfied the needs of the inhabitants concerning matters of renewing religious beliefs; on the other, the unrest outside the city was a catalyst for change inside the city since the monastery was abolished at this time.

Because unrest must be understood as a request of the subjects for their rulers to negotiate grievances, it can be argued that a responsive kind of leadership is an important factor when it comes to preventing unrest. In contrast to the bishop, the duke tried to de-escalate the conflict and was more successful in gaining military support. Most likely, these two factors were the most important for preventing unrest in Coburg.

⁵³ FUCHS, FRANZ, Akten zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs in Mitteldeutschland (like note 48), No. 802.

According to a 16th-century aphorism, misrule was the cause of unrest.⁵⁴ Apart from the moral aspect of this proverb, the general meaning of this sentence must be supplemented. The absence of unrest is not an indicator of the well-being of the subjects. Studying regional history can help us to deepen our knowledge of social change – even if it is difficult to see how at first.

Dr. Benjamin Heidenreich
Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg
Institut für Geschichte
Lehrstuhl für Fränkische Landesgeschichte
Am Hubland
D-97074 Würzburg
benjamin.heidenreich@uni-wuerzburg.de

⁵⁴ ERNST GAGLIARDI, HANS MÜLLER, FRITZ MÜLLER (Ed.), Johannes Stumpfs Schweizer- und Reformationschronik 1(Quellen zur Schweizer Geschichte N. F. 1 Chroniken 5), 1952, p. 261–262.