BOOK REVIEWS

Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War. By Lyndal Roper. New York: Basic Books, 2025. 544 pp.

Luther and the Peasants. Religion, Ritual, and the Revolt of 1525. By Kenneth G. Appold. New York: Oxford University Press, 2025. 224 pp.

Among the many consequences of the Reformation, the most tragic was the mass uprising known as the Peasants' War of 1525. Historians have estimated that as many as 100,000 peasants were slaughtered by the armies of the German nobility, and most regard the uprising as marking the end of the Reformation as a popular movement. The interpretation of the Peasants' War has been contested among German historians from both sides of the political spectrum, from the earliest studies written in the context of the revolutions of 1848 through the many publications in both East and West Germany commemorating the 450th anniversary in 1975. The 500th anniversary of that uprising provides the occasion for two new studies that move beyond the framework of political revolution to consider peasant culture and the role of religion in shaping this mass movement. The two books reviewed here approach their subject from very different angles, reflecting the disciplinary background of their authors. Lyndal Roper is a scholar of social, cultural, and gender history, while Kenneth Appold is a church historian familiar with theology and the theoretical approaches applied within religious studies. Their books are in many ways complementary, and they provide a fresh perspective on the largest popular uprising in Europe before the French Revolution.

A Summer of Fire and Blood is one of those rare works of history that can be read profitably by a general audience as well as by historians specializing in the period. Roper draws on existing studies of the Peasants' War, but her work is far more than a synthesis. As her detailed footnotes testify, she draws deeply from the extant sources

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to present her own interpretation of events and of the uprising's significance. The structure of the book contributes significantly to its readability. Her account develops much like a classic tragedy, with the four "acts" named after the four seasons. The action moves from the hope and excitement that developed within a largely peaceful mass protest in the autumn 1524, through the movement's growth over the winter and spring of 1524–1525, to reach its bloody climax in the summer of 1525, when within a few short weeks the lords' armies massacred the peasant bands.

Roper begins each section with a narrative chapter describing the major developments of the season. This narrative is followed by one or more analytical chapters that explore concepts important for understanding the motives and actions of the peasants. Two factors fundamental for the shape of the uprising were the peasants' rootedness in the natural landscape and the complicated nature of lordship in early modern Germany. To this the Reformation brought a new understanding of freedom and of "godly right," understood as equity. The Reformation also unleashed a current of anti-monasticism that was both religious and economic in nature. Through the spring of 1525, peasant bands targeted undefended monasteries and convents, relying on their stores of food and wine so as not to live off the local population. The growth and movement of those bands fostered a sense of brotherhood and collective loyalty; Roper observes that there was little place for women, although they were involved in the movement.

Roper also describes the regional differences within the movement, with the greatest focus on Thomas Müntzer's role in Thuringia, although ultimately she questions whether the peasants there could have been inspired by his theology. She discusses Luther's reaction to Müntzer and his writings against the peasants, but she calls the peasants "the heroes of this book" (43). In contrast, Appold's goal is to better understand Luther's harsh anti-peasant works, written in the spring of 1525. This leads him to consider the differences between the reformer's thought world and that of the peasants. As he states in the introduction, his book is not a history of the Peasants' War but should instead be seen as "a contribution to the history

of theological discourse" (8). The challenge he faces is to reconstruct the religiosity of illiterate peasants.

Appold concentrates on developments in the Allgäu (the area to the east of Lake Constance bordering on the Swiss Confederation) as best revealing the disjunction between two different thought worlds. The Twelve Articles, the most important statement of peasant demands, reflected the peasants' understanding of the gospel as establishing social peace, the common good, and equitable use of natural resources. These values were closely associated with agrarian life, but they did not accord with Luther's understanding of the gospel as the reconciliation of the individual with God.

Appold points out that each side accused the other of undermining the social order: the peasants expected lords to heed their obligations to their subjects within a properly functioning feudal system, while the lords demanded unconditional obedience from the peasants. He also examines the role of violence in the uprising. Peasant violence was directed against property, especially monastic institutions, and the seizure and redistribution of goods was a form of justice that returned what had been unjustly taken from them. Although the lords accused the peasants of violence, they themselves were the ones guilty of bloodshed, slaughtering the peasants in battle and imposing summary executions and harsh punishments afterwards. Drawing on studies of ritual and of popular religion, Appold describes peasant religiosity as non-verbal and shaped by ritual, communal in nature and manifested in social peace. This differed from the internalized, individual, and explicitly verbal theology of the Reformers. The uprising pushed Luther to focus more strongly on the internal effects rather than the social impact of the gospel. He saw the peasant uprising as part of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan and a challenge to his personal authority, and he interpreted the crushing defeat of the peasants as both God's judgment on them and the vindication of his own authority.

Despite their very different approaches, the two books converge at certain points, reflecting the larger concerns of present-day historical scholarship, especially the shift away from examining political goals to a deeper interest in peasant culture. Earlier scholars downplayed

the role of religion in the Peasants' War, whether due to the focus of Marxist scholars on material causes or of Protestant church historians' desire to absolve Luther of blame for the uprising. Both Roper and Appold see religion as central to the movement, however, and they tease out how the largely illiterate peasants understood reformatory teachings, although they come to somewhat differing conclusions. Both authors stress the importance of trying to understand the peasants' mentality in other ways as well, for instance by drawing attention to their relationship with the natural world and to the importance of collective identity. They also highlight the collapse of authority in southern Germany in the first half of 1525, as peasants replaced older feudal oaths of obedience to their lord with oaths of obedience to the peasant bands. Both note the role of emotions in the uprising, Roper by examining the positive experience of brotherhood that united the peasants, and Appold by looking at the fury and bloodlust of the lords evident not only when they put down the uprising but also in the atrocities they committed afterwards. Roper describes the large-scale destruction of religious houses by the peasant bands as an important step towards secularization and asserts that the uprising changed the Reformation from a popular movement to one that strengthened the power of secular authorities. Appold sees Luther's new concern with the reform of ritual, especially that concerning the sacraments, as a way to assert his theological authority over peasant religiosity.

For those with little knowledge of the Peasants' War, Roper's *The Summer of Fire and Blood* provides a masterful introduction that is both scholarly and eminently readable. Appold's study of *Luther and the Peasants* requires more background knowledge, but it is a stimulating work that helps readers see the very different religious worlds inhabited by Luther and by the peasants. Read together, the books work in stereo, providing a greater depth of understanding than either can provide by itself. They demonstrate the value of anniversary commemorations for inspiring new scholarship.

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