Evaluation of Essay Question Exercise

Selected Historical Background

Economic Conditions in the Holy Roman Empire
- After a period of stagnation, dramatic population increases beginning in the later fifteenth century led to the curtailing of economic opportunities for rural and urban commoners:
  - Realities of agrarian subsistence agriculture: required by-employment, access to forests and common lands
  - Rise in prices and decline in purchasing power of wages
  - Reimposition of limitations of personal freedom/serfdom and increase in labor services
  - Increase in fees and rents due to land scarcity; lords' shortening of leases to increase fines and dues, reducing common land
    - Feudal dues accounted for 40% of peasant production, with an additional 10% due in tithing to the church plus taxes between 5 and 10% of assessed wealth
  - Agitation for return to "custom" of looser restrictions
  - Community tensions between the increasingly prosperous elites and the poor
- Commercial expansion in countryside, towns, and cities
  - Pressure on small holders to compete with more centralized initiatives (partible inheritance and its consequences = dividing holdings reduced sustainability)
  - Emergence of capitalist entrepreneurs who helped expand the economy but also engaged in usurious lending, price-fixing, and exploitative labor practices
- Repeated failed harvests in two generations prior to the German Peasants' War, especially in Alsace, Franconia, the Upper Rhine

Religious Conditions in the Holy Roman Empire: the Reformation and its Contexts
- Anticlericalism associated with clerical wealth derived from great estates, tithes, taxes, sales of indulgences, etc.
  - Double affront in cases where the clergy served as landlord
  - Perceptions of clerical greed and incompetence
- Tradition of peasant agitation for living according to the Word of God, associated with the *Bundschuh* movements beginning in the fifteenth century
  - Reformulation of the notion of the "good Christian"
- Martin Luther's assault on the authority and practices of the papal church
  - Luther's doctrine of salvation as an unearned gift of God's grace rather than "purchased"
- Dynamism of evangelical reform, as encouraged by Thomas Müntzer, Balthasar Hubmaier, and other radical preachers, and dissatisfaction with rituals of the old faith
  - Leadership of reform-minded clergy and intellectuals, lay urban elites, nobles
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Political Conditions in the Holy Roman Empire
- Lack of overarching centralized political authority in the Holy Roman Empire
  - The HRE as a multinational state with limited imperial control and in which the emperor was often engaged in foreign war and/or managing other holdings
  - Unrest primarily associated with areas without strong princely government –or– where government was perceived to be tyrannical and arbitrary (particularly the southwest)
- Authoritarian policies of rulers of territorial principalities during an intensified drive for state formation beginning in the fifteenth century led to greater burdens on subjects
  - New uniformity ensured by documentary and legal records (replacing custom and oral culture with Roman law), new administrative and legal bodies, increased taxes and granting feudal dues to bureaucrats
- Rural commune tradition of managing administration of justice and other policies
  - Tensions over participation in communes' assemblies
  - Tensions between commune and local landlords; territorial state sought to replace communal self-government with bureaucracy and standardization
- Influence of later medieval tradition of reform literature calling for political reorganization and of petitioning for redress of grievances, coupled with growth of print culture
  - Example of the Swiss model of self-governing communes, talk of "going Swiss"

Evaluation of Primary Source Exercise

Reminders: A student's thesis should respond to all parts of the question and thus must address both the impact of ideas about **both** religious and political reform **and** contemporary perceptions of unrest with some degree of specificity. The thesis does need not to appear in the first paragraph and may be found in the conclusion. While students can bring in additional information, they must make analysis of documents their main focus and demonstrate cognizance of the meaning and significance of the primary sources provided.

Potential Groupings for Sources:

Authorship groupings
        Clergy/theologians/preachers
        Peasants/peasant leaders
        Official documents/court or town records
        Anonymous/Unclear

Geographic locations of writers/discontent
        Rural
        Urban

Types of sources
        Written documents (accessible to literate audiences)
        Illustrations (accessible to both literate and illiterate audiences)
        Petitions of grievances/Articles
        Court documents/confessions/lawsuits

Sympathetic accounts of the rebels
        Rebels as fulfilling the Word/honor of God
        Rebels seeking to restore custom/tradition (anti-revolution)
        Rebels seeking negotiation through petitions, parliament, orderly political reform

Unsympathetic accounts of the rebels
        Peasants as evil/murderous/thieving
        Violent intent of rebels
                Iconoclasm
                Destruction of goods and property
        Women's participation in violence
                Rebels' unnatural affront to authority

Religious ideas and grievances
        Tithes
        Indulgences
        Greedy clergy
        Widespread anticlericalism
        Connections between Luther's movement and rebellion
                Perception of Luther manipulating commoners/inciting rebellion (Luther in armor)

Political ideas and grievances
        Objections to serfdom
        "Unfair"/bad government
        Lack of political voice for the "common man"
                Desire for political participation/self-government
        Abuse of the "common good"
        Importance/utility of peasant associations/leagues

Economic complaints (as connected to religious and political control of elites over commoners)
        Taxes
        Serfdom
        Tithes
        Indulgences

Women as participants in unrest, urban and rural

Continuities and changes over time
        Enduring emblem of the *Bundschuh*
        Fusing older ideals of Christian commonwealth to (mis)understandings of Reformation message
                as justifying calls for a broader platform of social reform