Essay Questions Concerning  
the German Peasants’ War

Suggested planning and writing time – 35 minutes

Directions (for students): You are encouraged to spend 5 minutes organizing or outlining your answer.

To complete this exercise successfully, you will need to write an essay that:

- Contains a relevant thesis (argument).
- Responds to all parts of the assigned question.
- Supports your thesis with specific evidence.
- Is clearly and effectively organized.

1. Analyze the causes of both popular rebellion and calls for religious reform in the Holy Roman Empire during the first quarter of the sixteenth century.
Essay Based on Primary Source Documents Concerning Unrest in the Holy Roman Empire, 1500-1525

Suggested writing time – 45 minutes

Directions (for students): This task requires you to respond to the essay prompt provided and is based on the following 12 primary sources, which have been edited for the purpose of this exercise. The assignment is designed to evaluate your ability interpret historical documents and images and use them to support an argument. To complete this exercise, you will write an essay that:

- Contains a thesis (argument) that addresses the prompt and is supported by evidence from the documents.
- Utilizes at least 7 of the documents.
- Responds to all parts of the assigned question.
- Analyzes the documents by organizing them into relevant and appropriate groups. Do not simply summarize the documents individually.
- Contextualizes both the sources of the documents and the authors by discussing point of view, bias, and/or tone.

1. Analyze the impact of ideas about religious and political reform in the Holy Roman Empire during the first quarter of the sixteenth century, and explain contemporary perceptions of the unrest.

   Background: Beginning in the late fifteenth century, rural and urban dissatisfaction in the lands of the Holy Roman Empire sparked conspiracies of violence, numerous petitions for reform, and armed revolt, often referred to as the Bundschuh rebellions, named for the laced shoe of rural peasants, which came to symbolize popular protest. Demands for change in the early sixteenth century coincided with the start of the Reformation and contributed to widespread rebellion during the German Peasants' War, 1524-1525.
Source 1: Confessions of Rebellious Peasants taken in the Bishop's Court in Speyer, 1502

The peasants said that the principal reason for their entering into this association of the Bundschuh was their desire to abolish every remaining yoke of servitude and to gain their liberty through the use of arms. They chose Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, and St. John as patron saints. They had resolved to pillage monastic and ecclesiastical possessions, also the property of the clergy, and to divide the booty among themselves. They wished to humiliate the servants of the Church and to reduce them in number by killing and driving out as many as possible.

Source 2: Title Page Image of Pamphilus Gegenbach's The Bundschuh: This Booklet Tells of the Evil Undertaking of the Members of the Bundschuh, How It Began and Ended, and Its Consequences, 1514

*The item on the lower left is the Bundschuh, and the images on the peasant flag on either side of the illustration of the Crucifixion represent the coats of arms of the papacy and the Holy Roman Emperor.*
**Source 3: Popular Grievances Presented to the Duke of Württemberg at the Duke's Assembly, 1514**

We ask that the councilors and secretaries of the duchy be chosen from among honest, pious, knowledgeable, and competent persons who should be concerned only with advancing the honor of God and the common interest rather than seeking their own advantage, as they have been doing in the past by means of the imposition of new taxes and burdens profitable to themselves but painful to the country.

**Source 4: Martin Luther, German theologian, Ninety-Five Theses, 1517**

21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences* a man is freed from every penalty, and saved.
27. They who say that so soon as the penny jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out of Purgatory preach human, not divine, doctrine.
28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money-box, gain and greed can be increased, but the result of salvation is in the power of God alone.
32. They who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of indulgence will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers.

*Deeds sold by the church and authorized by the papacy promising forgiveness of sins and reduction of time in Purgatory, the destination of souls whose sins needed to be purged before going to Heaven.

**Source 5: Woodcut illustration by an unknown artist appearing in a pamphlet written entitled About the Great Lutheran Fool, written by Thomas Murner, Roman Catholic Franciscan friar, 1522**

*The title of the illustration is *Greasing the Bundschuh*, with the subtitle, “How Luther greases the Bundschuh so that he remains pleasing to the simple man.” The word "schmieren" means both "to grease" (to make boots waterproof) and "to bribe."
**Source 6: Thomas Müntzer, preacher and theologian, The Constitutional Draft, late 1524**

The people of each region shall come together and make a league. The time has already come when God will no longer suffer the secular lords' flaying, fleecing, fettering, shackling, grinding, binding, and other tyranny. They deal with the poor folk as Herod with the innocent children. So that this be stopped, the people must come together to make an ordinance according to God's Word.

*New Testament king who ordered the death of all male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem in hopes of killing young Jesus of Nazareth.*

**Source 7: Illustration for the published play The Indulgence Seller by Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, Swiss writer and statesman, 1525**

*The last name of the clergyman selling indulgences in the play is given as "Hinterlist," which means "fraud."*

**Source 8: Articles of the Peasants of Stühlingen, presented in a lawsuit against the lords before an Imperial Court, early 1525**

59. We are by right born free and it is no fault of ours or of our forefathers that we have been subjected to serfdom, yet our lords wish to have and keep us as their own property, and consider that we should perform everything that they ask. It is our plea that you adjudge that we should be released from serfdom, and no one else be forced into it, in which case we will perform for our lords what we are obliged to perform, according to the ancient customs.
Source 9: Wendel Hipler, University-educated former secretary to an imperial count turned soldier serving with a peasant army, "Agenda for the Peasant Parliament," May 1525⁹

We should agree on the time and place for drawing up the reforms. Item, who should be summoned and appointed—scholars, townsmen, or peasants—and how many. Item, that the princes, lords, and nobles shall be allowed to appoint a number of councilors to put the opposing case. Item, what persons should present all the necessary grievances on behalf of the common man such that the grievances may be abolished in every way.

Source 10: Title page image of Martin Luther, Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants, May 1525¹⁰

*The peasant banner reads "Love God," and the reference under the image is from the Book of Psalms in the Bible: "His mischief will recoil upon himself, and his violence will fall on his own head."

Source 11: Extract from the Chronicle of City of Windsheim, May 1525¹¹

Some women assembled and chose a female captain and plotted to storm the Windsheim convent at nightfall, and afterwards to fall upon the houses containing consecrated things and to plunder them. When the clock struck 1 a.m., around sixty women, most of whom would expect to be called respectable, assembled, some with hatchets, kitchen knives, and other tools, but their action was averted by the valiant efforts of the town council.
Source 12: Proposed Design, "Monument to the Victory over the Peasants" by Albrecht Dürer, German Renaissance artist, 1525\textsuperscript{12}

\*Dürer's notes on his design read: "If someone wishes to erect a victory monument after vanquishing rebellious peasants, he might use peasant paraphernalia – like hoes, pitchforks, flails, etc. – atop of which sits an afflicted peasant with a sword stuck into his back." The base reads "In the Year of Our Lord 1525," and the numbers along the left side represent dimensions in feet for the components of the monument.


3As quoted in Strauss, Manifestations of Discontent in Germany, 151-53.


5Document 7 in Baylor, The German Reformation and the Peasants' War, 56.


7Document 9 in Baylor, The German Reformation and the Peasants' War, 60.

8Document 13 in Baylor, The German Reformation and the Peasants' War, 74.

9As quoted in Scott and Scribner, German Peasants' War, 258.


11As quoted in Scott and Scribner, German Peasants' War, 226.