

the way for. Ultimately, this book is valuable for anyone interested in the financial economics of slavery and the role the Dutch central bank played during this era.

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Peter Seibert, *Die Niederschlagung des Bauernkriegs 1525. Beginn einer deutschen Gewaltgeschichte* (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 2025). 304 pp. ISBN 9783801206918.

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The Peasants' War of 1525 is regarded as the largest pre-modern mass uprising in Germany, perhaps in Europe. In the year of its 500th anniversary, currently many historical accounts are published. For example, the rebellion is characterized as a struggle for scarce ecological resources or as a media event. In particular, actor-centred approaches, which devote special attention to the ritual and symbolic logics of violence on the part of the peasant bands, are booming. In contrast, Peter Seibert's book focuses on the violence of the feudal lords. The literary scholar Seibert wrote his dissertation in 1978 on insurrectionary movements in rhymed literature around 1500. After many decades, he now returns to his beginnings to a certain extent, but adopts a completely different perspective. The book is neither a literary analysis nor a work of historical scholarship in the narrower sense, but rather a historical-political manifesto based on what he himself admits is a 'biased reinterpretation' of the sources.

In the Peasants' War, says Seibert, "broad parts of the population attempted to intervene in history in a marvellous way". Never again in German history had there been "such social creativity and power of the lower social classes". However, the Peasants' War was cruelly suffocated "in the blood of its protagonists" after a short time. According to Seibert, this profound experience represented a "traumatic catastrophe" that had not yet been overcome and had also had a decisive impact on the future: "What followed the catastrophic defeat of the peasants was an oppressive state (Untertanenstaat) of the worst kind. [...] The brutality of the rulers finds many historical continuations and finally culminates in German fascism" (all quotes p. 17f.). Before the three topics addressed – the great uprising, its cruel suppression and its long-

distance effects – are developed in the following chapters, the book contains a preliminary remark on the historiography to date (“Who owns the Peasants’ War?”). It contains pointed but highly disputable theses about the relationship between politics and historiography.

In the first main chapter, the uprising of 1525 is described comparatively briefly, but all the more vividly: Inspired by the Reformation and under the slogan of “divine law”, the lower classes had interfered in public affairs and rebelled against their oppression by the feudal lords. Within a short time, the peasants had organized themselves democratically on a grassroots level in large groups and elected their captains. At the ‘Peasants’ Parliament’ in the imperial city of Memmingen in March, the rebels discussed and adopted both the order of their ‘Christian union’ and the central list of demands in the ‘Twelve Articles’; a second Peasants’ Parliament in Heilbronn at the beginning of May could have given German history a completely different direction if the ideas formulated there had been realised. Basically, as Seibert’s account conveys, the principles of “liberty, equality and fraternity”, that would only become reality with the French Revolution, were already being considered at the time (54).

This heroic panorama is evocative, but it significantly understates the complexity of the events and the actors. There was hardly any idea of real ‘parliamentary’ deliberation among the peasants, and the Twelve Articles composed by the pious furrier Sebastian Lotzer were, according to recent research, at most only marginally the subject of the one-day meeting in Memmingen. Those who speak of grassroots democracy fails to recognize the high degree of peer pressure and threats that were at work in the peasant bands. And how far the peasants’ demands are from the revolutionary programmes of the French Revolution in terms of content becomes more than clear on closer inspection: Where ‘freedom’ or ‘equality’ were proclaimed in 1525 (incidentally, by no means for the first time), their conceptional meaning differed greatly from modern ideas. Finally, when Seibert ascribes to the peasants that they were the first to “put measures against the fragmentation of Germany on the agenda, while the territorial lords pursued precisely this fragmentation” (63), then such an anachronistic assessment is surprisingly close to the standards of national history according to Wilhelm Zimmermann in the nineteenth century or Günther Franz in the twentieth century, who Seibert correctly characterizes as a Nazi ideologue.

The remaining chapters of the book are dedicated to the end of the dream of a democratically organized society through the bestial cruelty,

vengefulness and greed of the feudal lords (67f.). A ‘massacre chronicle’ describes the clash between the princely armies and the peasant bands, fuelled by Luther’s calls for ‘mass murder’. Another chapter describes the bloody victor’s justice after the defeats, a third the fate of mass flight and expulsion. A special chapter focuses on “Women in the Peasants’ War” as actors and victims. Seibert always mixes general overviews with in-depth examples. In many cases, he makes direct use of the relevant source editions, while secondary literature is only used sparingly and selectively.

Quite a few of the interpretations are dubious: the “Windsheim Women’s Revolt” of early May 1525 is used as an example of female agency (180), while in the relevant source it is portrayed as a staging by their men. Often the underlying moralizing narrative stands in the way of a differentiated analysis. Throughout the book, the peasants appear as idealistic fighters for the noble, albeit hopeless, cause, while the lords react with bloody oppression – “solely for the ruthless preservation of their rule” (88). The author does not do justice to the aims of the peasants with such a distorted picture, nor does he do justice to the military behaviour of the rebellious peasant bands. Alternatives to violence, as actually realized with the Treaty of Weingarten in mid-April 1525, are only mentioned in passing and in a distorted way (75); other treaties are not mentioned at all.

Finally, it is highly irritating that the thesis of the serious long-distance effect of the Peasants’ War into the twentieth century is merely postulated in the book, but not at all elaborated in any detail. It seems to be a foregone conclusion that after the Peasants’ War there was “peace in the graveyard” (238) for centuries and that the defeat in the Peasants’ War thus represents one of the “great catastrophes in German history” (266). It is no coincidence that such formulations are reminiscent of the great minds of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Zimmermann or Alexander von Humboldt, right down to the wording. The fact that more recent early modern research has found a lively culture of protest and resistance in the early modern period after 1525 is of no concern to Seibert; the lack of major revolutionary mass uprisings over the centuries is evidence enough of the seemingly inevitable slide towards National Socialism. Overall, Peter Seibert’s book represents the vitality of old narratives and judgements, which appear immune to all new research approaches.

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