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PEASANT WAR  
IN GERMANY

By  
FREDERICK ENGELS

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# THE PEASANT WAR IN GERMANY



*Translated from the German by*  
MOISSAYE J. OLGIN

## INTRODUCTION

FOUR hundred years have passed since the great Peasant War in Germany. It differs from similar peasant uprisings of the Fourteenth Century in Italy, France and England, in that these uprisings were of a more or less local character and were directed against the money economy then in the process of development, while the Peasant War, unfolding in the epoch of early capitalism which was creating a world market, was intimately related to the events of the Reformation. This more complex historic background, compared with the background of the Fourteenth Century, rendered more complex the class grouping whose struggle determined the whole course of the Peasant War. The rôle of proletarian elements also becomes more pronounced compared with earlier uprisings.

It was natural that, with the growth of a democratic movement in Germany, especially after the July Revolution in France, attention should be directed towards the study of the great Peasant War. A series of popular brochures and works examining individual phases of the movement made their appearance, and in 1841 there was published the monumental work of Zimmermann, which, to the present time, remains the most detailed narrative of the events of the Peasant War in Germany.<sup>1</sup>

It was also natural that the German communists, confronted with the necessity of determining how far the peasantry could be relied upon as a revolutionary factor,

should have carefully studied the history of the Peasant War. Their attention was particularly drawn to the leaders of the Peasant War, one of whom was Thomas Muenzer. It is characteristic that as early as 1845, Engels, in one of his first articles for the Chartist "Northern Star," called the attention of the English workers to this "famous leader of the Peasant War of 1525," who, according to Engels, was a real democrat, and fought for real demands, not illusions.

Marx and Engels, who very soberly regarded the rôle of the peasantry in the realisation of a *social* revolution never underestimated its rôle as a revolutionary factor in the struggle against the large landowners and the feudal masters. They understood very well that the more the peasantry falls under the leadership of revolutionary classes which unite it, the more capable it is of general political actions. Led by the revolutionary proletariat, supporting its struggle against capitalism in the city and the village, the peasantry appeared to be a very important ally. This is why Marx and Engels, during the revolution of 1848-49, mercilessly exposed the cowardly conduct of the German bourgeoisie, which, currying favour with the Junkers and afraid of the proletariat, had refused to defend the interests of the peasantry.

It was with the aim of instructing the German bourgeois democracy that in 1850, Engels, supported by the factual material collected by the democrat, Zimmermann, wrote this splendid account of the German Peasant War. First, he gives a picture of the economic situation and of the class composition of Germany of that time. Then he shows how out of this soil sprang the various opposition groups with their programmes, and gives a colourful characterisation of Luther and Muenzer. The third chapter contains a brief

history of the peasant uprisings in the German Empire from 1476 to 1517, that is, to the beginning of the Reformation. In the fourth chapter we have the history of the uprising of the nobility under the leadership of Franz von Sickingen and Ulrich von Hutten. The fifth and sixth chapters contain a narrative of the events of the Peasant War as such, with a detailed explanation of the main causes of the peasants' defeat. In the seventh and last chapters the significance of the Peasant War and its consequences in German history are explained.

Permeating the whole of Engels' work is the idea of the necessity of a merciless struggle against the feudal masters, the landlords. Only a radical abolition of all traces of feudal domination, he said, could create the most favourable conditions for the success of a proletarian revolution. In this respect Engels was in full harmony with Marx, who wrote to him later (August 16, 1856), "Everything in Germany will depend upon whether it will be possible to support the proletarian revolution by something like a second edition of the Peasant War. Only then will everything proceed well."

Quite different was the conception of Lassalle, who overestimated the significance of the uprising of the nobility, idealized Franz von Sickingen and Ulrich von Hutten, and treated the revolutionary movement of the lower plebeian strata too contemptuously. In his opinion, the Peasant War, notwithstanding its revolutionary appearance, was in reality a reactionary movement. "You all know," he said to the Berlin workers, "that the peasants killed the nobles and burned their castles, or, according to the prevailing habit, made them run the gauntlet. However, notwithstanding this revolutionary appearance, the movement was, in substance and principle, *reactionary*."



The Russian revolutionary populists, especially the adherents of Bakunin, often identified Lassalle's view of the peasants with the views of Marx and Engels. In this they followed Bakunin's lead, who wrote the following:

"Everybody knows that Lassalle repeatedly expressed the idea that the defeat of the peasant uprising in the Fourteenth Century and the strengthening and rapid growth of the bureaucratic state in Germany that followed it were a veritable triumph for the revolution." According to Bakunin, the German communists viewed all peasants as elements of reaction. "The fact is," he added, "that the Marxists cannot think otherwise; worshippers of state power at any price, they are bound to curse every people's revolution, especially a peasant revolution, which is anarchic by its very nature, and which proceeds directly to annihilate the state."

When Bakunin wrote these lines, there was already in existence the second edition of Engels' work on the Peasant War, with a new preface (1870), in which the inconsistency of Liebknecht and other contemporary German social-democrats on the agrarian question was criticised. In 1875, the third edition appeared, with an addendum which emphasised still more the sharp difference between the views of Marx and Engels on the one hand, and Lassalle on the other.

It must be noted that in the last years of his life, Engels devoted much labour to the study of the Peasant War, and was about to recast his old work.

In 1882 he wrote a special addition to his *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, devoted to the history of the German peasantry. On December 31, 1884, he wrote to Sorge: "I am subjecting my *Peasant War* to radical reconstruction. It is going to become a cornerstone of German history. It

is a great piece of work. All the preliminary work is almost ready."

The work of preparing the second and third volumes of *Capital* for publication, prevented him from carrying out his plan. In July, 1893, he wrote to Mehring, "If I succeed in reconstructing anew the historic introduction to my *Peasant War*, which I hope will be possible during this winter, I will give there an exposition of my views" [concerning the conditions of the breaking up of Germany and the causes of the defeat of the German bourgeois revolution of the Sixteenth Century].

When Kautsky was writing his book on the forerunners of modern socialism—it appeared in parts—Engels wrote to him on May 21, 1895: "Of your book, I can tell you that the further it proceeds, the better it becomes. Compared with the original plan, Plato and early Christianity are not sufficiently worked out. The mediæval sects are much better, and the later ones, more so. Best of all are the Taborites, Muenzer, and the Anabaptists. I have learned much from your book. For my recasting of the *Peasant War*, it is an indispensable preliminary work.

"In my judgment, there are only two considerable faults:

"(1) A very insufficient insight into the development and the rôle of those elements entirely outside of the feudal hierarchy, which are déclassé, occupying almost the place of pariahs; elements that form the lowest stratum of the population of every mediæval city, without rights and outside the rural community, the feudal dependence, the guild bonds. This is difficult, but it is the *chief foundation*, since gradually, with the decomposition of feudal relations, out of this stratum develops the predecessor of the proletariat which, in 1789, in the faubourgs of Paris, made the revolution. You speak of the proletarians, but this expression is

not entirely exact; when you count among your 'proletarians' the weavers, whose significance you picture very correctly, you may rightly do so, only beginning from that epoch when the déclassé non-guild journeyman weavers made their appearance and only in so far as the latter were in existence. Much work is still required in this connection.

"(2) You have not sufficiently taken into account the situation of the world market, in so far as one could speak of such a market at that time, and the international economic situation of Germany at the end of the Fifteenth Century. However, only this situation explains why the bourgeois-plebeian movement under a religious cloak, having suffered defeat in England, the Netherlands and Bohemia, could achieve a measure of success in Germany in the Sixteenth Century. This was due to its religious cloak, whereas the success of its bourgeois *contents* was reserved for the following century and for the countries which had utilized the development of the world market that had in the meantime taken another direction, namely, Holland and England. It is a great subject, which I hope to be able to treat briefly in the *Peasant War*, if I only succeed in taking it up!"

Death—Engels died several days after the writing of this letter (August 5, 1895)—prevented him from completing this work.

D. RIAZANOV.

Moscow, July, 1925.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THIS work was written in London in the summer of 1850, under the vivid impression of the counter-revolution that had just been completed. It appeared in 1850 in the fifth and sixth issues of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, a political economic review edited by Karl Marx in Hamburg. My political friends in Germany desire to see it in book form, and I hereby fulfil that desire, since, unfortunately, it still has the interest of timeliness.

The work does not pretend to present independently collected material. Quite the contrary, all the material relating to the peasant revolts and to Thomas Muenzer has been taken from Zimmermann whose book, although showing gaps here and there, is still the best presentation of the facts. Moreover, old Zimmermann enjoyed his subject. The same revolutionary instinct which makes him here the advocate of the oppressed classes, made him later one of the best in the extreme left wing of Frankfurt.

If, nevertheless, the Zimmermann representation lacks internal coherence; if it does not succeed in showing the religious and political controversies of that epoch as a reflection of the class struggles that were taking place simultaneously; if it sees in the class struggles only oppressors and oppressed, good and evil, and the final victory of evil; if its insight into social conditions which determined both the outbreak and the outcome of the struggle is extremely poor, it was the fault of the time in which that

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book came into existence. Nevertheless, for its time, and among the German idealistic works on history, it stands out as written in a very realistic vein.

This book, while giving the historic course of the struggle only in its outlines, undertakes to explain the origin of the peasant wars, the attitude of the various parties which appear in the war, the political and religious theories through which those parties strove to make clear to themselves their position; and finally, the result of the struggle as determined by the historical-social conditions of life, to show the political constitution of Germany of that time, the revolt against it; and to prove that the political and religious theories were not the causes, but the result of that stage in the development of agriculture, industry, land and waterways, commerce and finance, which then existed in Germany. This, the only materialistic conception of history, originates, not from myself but from Marx, and can be found in his works on the French Revolution of 1848-9, published in the same review, and in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

The parallel between the German Revolutions of 1525 and of 1848-9 was too obvious to be left entirely without attention. However, together with an identity of events in both cases, as for instance, the suppression of one local revolt after the other by the army of the princes, together with a sometimes comic similitude in the behaviour of the city middle-class, the difference is quite clear.

"Who profited by the Revolution of 1525? The princes. Who profited by the Revolution of 1848? The big princes, Austria and Prussia. Behind the princes of 1525 there stood the lower middle-class of the cities, held chained by means of taxation. Behind the big princes of 1850, there stood the modern big bourgeoisie, quickly subjugating them

by means of the State debt. Behind the big bourgeoisie stand the proletarians.”

I am sorry to state that in this paragraph too much honour was given to the German bourgeoisie. True, it had the opportunity of “quickly subjugating” the monarchy by means of the State debt. Never did it avail itself of this opportunity.

Austria fell as a boon into the lap of the bourgeoisie after the war of 1866, but the bourgeoisie does not understand how to govern. It is powerless and inefficient in everything. Only one thing is it capable of doing: to storm against the workers as soon as they begin to stir. It remains at the helm only because the Hungarians need it.

And in Prussia? True, the State debt has increased by leaps and bounds. The deficit has become a permanent feature. The State expenditures keep growing, year in and year out. The bourgeoisie have a majority in the Chamber. No taxes can be increased and no debts incurred without their consent. But where is their power in the State? It was only a couple of months ago, when a deficit was looming, that again they found themselves in the most favourable position. They could have gained considerable concessions by persevering. What was their reaction? They considered it a sufficient concession when the Government *allowed* them to lay at its feet nine millions, not for one year alone, but to be collected indefinitely every year.

I do not want to blame the “national liberals” of the Chamber more than is their due. I know they have been forsaken by those who stand behind them, by the mass of the bourgeoisie. This mass does not wish to govern. 1848 is still in its bones.

Why the German bourgeoisie has developed this remarkable trait, will be discussed later.

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In general, however, the above quotation has proved perfectly true. Beginning from 1850, the small States were in constant retreat, serving only as levers for Prussian and Austrian intrigues. Austria and Prussia were engaged in ever-stronger struggles for supremacy. Finally, the fearful clash of 1866 took place. Austria, retaining all its provinces, subjugated, directly and indirectly, the entire north of Prussia, while leaving the fate of the three southern States in the air.

In all these grand activities of the States, only the following are of particular importance for the German working class:

First, that universal suffrage has given the workers the power to be directly represented in the legislative assemblies.

Second, that Prussia has set a good example by swallowing three crowns by the grace of God. That after this operation her own crown is maintained by the grace of God as pure as she claims it to be, not even the national liberals believe any more.

Third, that there is only one serious enemy of the Revolution in Germany at the present time—the Prussian government.

Fourth, that the Austro-Germans will now be compelled to ask themselves what they wish to be, Germans or Austrians; whom they wish to adhere to, to Germany or her extraordinary transleithanian appendages. It has been obvious for a long time that they will have to give up one or the other. Still, this has been continually glossed over by the petty-bourgeois democracy.

As to other important controversies concerning 1866 which were threshed out between the “national-liberals” and the people’s party *ad nauseam*, coming years will show

that the two standpoints fought so bitterly simply because they were the opposite poles of the same stupidity.

In the social conditions of Germany, the year 1866 has changed almost nothing. A few bourgeois reforms: uniform measures and weights, freedom of movement, freedom of trade, etc.,—all within limits befitting bureaucracy, do not even come up to that of which other western European countries have been in possession for a long while, and leaves the main evil, the system of bureaucratic concessions, unshaken. As to the proletariat, the freedom of movement, and of citizenship, the abolition of passports and other such legislation is made illusory by the current police practice.

What is much more important than the grand manœuvres of the State in 1866 is the growth of German industry and commerce, of the railways, the telegraph, and ocean steamship navigation since 1848. This progress may be lagging behind that of England or even France, but it is unheard of for Germany, and has done more in twenty years than would have been previously possible in a century. Germany has been drawn, earnestly and irrevocably, into world commerce. Capital invested in industry has multiplied rapidly. The position of the bourgeoisie has improved accordingly. The surest sign of industrial prosperity—speculation—has blossomed richly, princes and dukes being chained to its triumphal chariot. German capital is now constructing Russian and Rumanian railways, whereas, only fifteen years ago, the German railways went a-begging to English entrepreneurs. How, then, is it possible that the bourgeoisie has not conquered political power, that it behaves in so cowardly a manner toward the government?

It is the misfortune of the German bourgeoisie to have come too late,—quite in accordance with the beloved German tradition. The period of its ascendancy coincides with



the time when the bourgeoisie of the other western European countries is politically on the downward path. In England, the bourgeoisie could place its real representative, Bright, into the government only by extending the franchise which in the long run is bound to put an end to its very domination. In France, the bourgeoisie, which for two years only, 1849-50, had held power as a class under the republican régime, was able to continue its social existence only by transferring its power to Louis Bonaparte and the army. Under present conditions of enormously increased interdependence of the three most progressive European countries, it is no more possible for the German bourgeoisie extensively to utilize its political power while the same class has outlived itself in England and France. It is a peculiarity of the bourgeoisie, distinguishing it from all other classes, that a point is being reached in its development after which every increase in its power, that is, every enlargement of its capital, only tends to make it more and more incapable of retaining political dominance. "*Behind the big bourgeoisie stand the proletarians.*" In the degree as the bourgeoisie develops its industry, its commerce, and its means of communication, it also produces the proletariat. At a certain point, which must not necessarily appear simultaneously and on the same stage of development everywhere, it begins to note that this, its second self, has outgrown it. From then on, it loses the power for exclusive political dominance. It looks for allies with whom to share its authority, or to whom to cede all power, as circumstances may demand.

In Germany, this turning point came for the bourgeoisie as early as 1848. The bourgeoisie became frightened, not so much by the German, as by the French proletariat. The battle of June, 1848, in Paris, showed the bourgeoisie what could be expected. The German proletariat was restless