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## The Common Man and the Rise of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster, 1534-1535

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THE COMMON MAN AND THE RISE OF THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF  
MÜNSTER, 1534-1535

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty in the Department of History  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

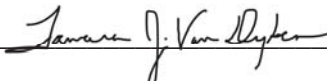
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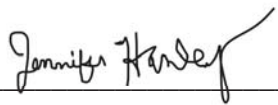
By  
Andrew Roebuck


May 2020

THE COMMON MAN AND THE RISE OF THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF  
MÜNSTER, 1534-1535

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THE COMMON MAN AND THE RISE OF THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF  
MÜNSTER, 1534-1535

Andrew Roebuck

May 2020

46 Pages

Directed by: Tamara Van Dyken, Jennifer Hanley, Alexander Olson

Department of History

Western Kentucky University

This essay studies the causes of the rise of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster, with special emphasis on the actions and agency of the common people. The analysis begins with the two main primary sources, Hermann von Kerssenbrock and Henry Gresbeck, whose accounts provide firsthand knowledge of how events in Munster led to the Anabaptist takeover. Care is taken to read beyond some of the biases and assumptions made by those authors to gain the clearest insight for what really happened.

The essay looks at Anabaptism itself, including what it meant to be Anabaptist from the perspectives of participants and their opponents. This includes relatively modern writers and how historians' take on the topic has changed over time. Important to this study is the way that 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptism was not "normalized" until centuries later, effectively pushing out and ignoring some of the early trends in the faith.

The discussion then turns to the city of Munster itself in the decade before the establishment of the Anabaptist Kingdom, relying on Kerssenbrock to provide details that provide some powerful insight on what role the common people of Munster played in city government and major events.

Finally, I attempt to place Munster and its revolt in the proper context of the larger German empire at the time. I make comparisons to other, well-known peasant and common citizen uprisings around Germany, especially the Peasants' War of 1525. These other events provide context for how common people used their ability to influence

change in their local society. The examples also show that none of these events happened without the influence of others, including Munster and their list of demands made in 1525.

The paper concludes that there is evidence to support the idea that the Anabaptists rose to power in Munster through the intentional actions of the common citizens, despite the traditional narrative that puts all the blame on the shoulders of a select few. While a few individuals drove policy once the Anabaptist Kingdom was in power, evidence suggests that those individuals didn't gain power through coercion or tricks, but rather they were representatives of the changes the common people hoped to see in their city.

## THE COMMON MAN AND THE RISE OF THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF MÜNSTER, 1534-1535

The Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster (1534-1535) has appeared in many accounts of the Reformation, whether as the primary focus of a study or a passing mention due to the unusual nature of the story and radical actions of the participants. The radical group's rise to power in the city is typically treated as a relatively isolated event, something created by the actions of a select group of individuals bent on gaining power by whatever means necessary. This isolation from the story of the larger Reformation is generally clear regardless of the purpose of the author, and places the events in Münster beyond the scope of the established history of the Reformation – it doesn't quite fit in as a part of the traditional narrative.

A main theme of the story of Anabaptist Münster, and one of the main aspects of this study, is the determination of how and why this event came to be within the context of the Reformation. Just as important is determining why the story has been told and remembered the way it has by the sources, why they had such perspectives, and how the early sources shaped modern historians' take on what happened. As with any complicated historical event, the story of the Anabaptists in Münster has many contributing factors. I argue that the existence of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster was not an outlier, as even the primary sources suggest, but rather an event representative of the agency of the common people throughout Germany and Europe at the time. Instead of being tricked or pulled along into revolt and radical religious revolution, I suggest that the common people of Münster were actually the driving force that intentionally put the Anabaptist sect in power. Their role has been diminished in the

historical record over time as historians continue to blame a select few individuals for what happened in Münster.

To properly set the scene for what happened in Münster in 1534-35, we need to look further back into the history of the city to understand how and why it seemed so prepared for (and accepting of) Anabaptism and the eventual Anabaptist Kingdom. Münster highlights a few of the ways in which common people played a part in the struggle to determine religious orthodoxy and practice during the early stages of the Reformation. They were involved with the struggle that would have, before the Reformation, included only participants from the religious and political elites, but not the common people. Circumstances in Münster set the scene for a time during which the common people were able to dictate the evolution of their city's theology and social structure. While others, namely the preacher Bernard Rothmann, did the heavy lifting in sorting out specific tenets of faith and practice, the people put him in a position to do so. In a way, then, he was given the role as a representative of the people.

The historical treatment of the rise of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster began with two men that lived in Münster and witnessed the Anabaptist group's rise to power. Herman von Kerssenbrock and Henry Gresbeck provide the most important primary accounts of what took place in the city of Münster before, during, and after the Anabaptist Kingdom. Both were eyewitnesses and were able to share their personal experiences.

These primary sources play a large role in establishing the traditional narrative of what happened with the Münster Anabaptists and what it meant within the greater context of the Reformation. Both men work hard to cast the group as outsiders – a dangerous



group working hard to undermine the work of the “good” people of Münster.

Kerssenbrock continually describes participants on the Anabaptist side as particularly bad, while devoting quite a bit of time to Bernard Rothmann and his role in bringing Lutheranism and then Anabaptism into Münster. Additionally, anyone opposing the Catholics (Kerssenbrock was a Catholic) or the traditional power structure in the city is cast in a negative light. For example, when the common people revolted in 1525, those doing so were a “raging commons” out to manipulate the town council by force.<sup>1</sup>

However, in another part of his work, Kerssenbrock explains how integral the common people were to the makeup and election of the council itself. While there may have been separate factions of common people involved in both sides, Kerssenbrock does not differentiate, instead allowing himself slight contradictions to fit his narrative.

Throughout his book, he consistently positions the Anabaptists as antithetical to everything “good” and “normal.” For Kerssenbrock, a young Catholic living and schooling with a somewhat wealthy family in Münster, “normal” would have very much meant the traditional power structure – that is, a government system run by Catholic clergy in nonreligious positions. For example, the Prince-Bishop that was in charge of the area around Münster – a clear fusion of religious and secular titles. Anything contrary to that, be it religious or societal, would necessarily be revolutionary or seditious. His disdain for common people is evident throughout his work – when describing the events of 1526, he writes of them, “the commons, who always strain after novelty and cannot tolerate either concord or poverty, could not keep themselves within

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann von Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness: The Overthrow of Münster, Famous Metropolis of Westphalia*. Translated by Christopher Mackay (Boston: Brill, 2007), 187.

the limits set out for them by those responsible for the peace.”<sup>2</sup> Later, they have changed from a “raging commons” to “human dregs” intent on destroying the city.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth noting that when the first events in this paper took place in Münster, in 1525, Kerssenbrock was only about five years old. Born in 1520, he was still just a teen when the Anabaptists forcefully ran the Catholics out of the city. While Kerssenbrock would have been able to see what was happening firsthand, a fuller understanding of what had happened would have been influenced by others in his life. As a child and young man, he learned from the wealthy Catholic family, one that would have not shared in the desires of the common citizens in the issues and demands they laid out to the town council. He would have grown up learning and sharing their disdain for the poorer classes of people in Münster. Given that and the fact that Kerssenbrock wrote his account so many years later, it makes sense that he would remember the common people of the time in a very negative light. To him, they likely *were* a faceless mob attempting to overthrow order and reason within the city.

Similarly, Gresbeck casts the instigators as outsiders. However, unlike Kerssenbrock, Gresbeck remained in the city for almost the entirety of the reign of the Anabaptist Kingdom. If he placed most of the blame on the people that remained in the city while others were driven out and Anabaptist power was established, Gresbeck might have implicated himself as part of the problem. Since the main focus of his work appears to be to clear himself of any wrongdoing, Gresbeck has to avoid grouping himself with the people that put the Anabaptists in power. As a result, Gresbeck constantly points to

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<sup>2</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 204.

<sup>3</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 206.

foreigners, mostly from places such as Holland and Frisia, as the sole source of the problem. While Rothmann is also a major player in Gresbeck's book, almost exclusively referred to by a derisive nickname given to him by Gresbeck, the foreigners are presented as the biggest problem. Gresbeck's case is helped by the fact that the two major leaders of the Anabaptist Kingdom, Jan Matthys and Jan van Leyden, came from outside Münster as the new movement was gaining power. Like Kerssenbrock, Gresbeck often portrays the main instigators in Munich as opposing "normal" thought and practice, once again positioning them as outsiders.

Due to their perspectives as eyewitnesses, Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck provide us with the most thorough and valuable perspectives on the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster, as well as events in the city that allowed the group to obtain and hold power. Taken at face value, they show that the Anabaptists were a radical group of outliers bent on revolution and sedition. As their stories go, the Münster Anabaptists were a unique group that stood against everything good and normal in German society. Because of their position as eyewitnesses, and as the foundation for much of our understanding of the Münster story, the two men have largely dictated how the story is understood within the larger framework of the Reformation. What both men tend to leave out of their narratives is how other Protestant movements were carried out in other parts of Germany, as well as how the local authorities dealt with them. This is somewhat understandable, given the somewhat narrow focus of both accounts.<sup>4</sup> The isolation of Münster in the two accounts

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<sup>4</sup> Kerssenbrock does refer to other pockets of Anabaptists in the region surrounding Munster, in the context of groups being sent from Munster to spread the word of Anabaptist "success" in the city. According to Kerssenbrock, there were large groups of Anabaptists that tried to travel to Munster, but they were all intercepted by authorities and none made it to Munster. So, Kerssenbrock at least acknowledges that there were others out there, but doesn't spend time researching their story.

tends to make the Anabaptists appear more radical than they probably were. Isolating their actions from the greater context of the Reformation ignores the fact that the citizens of Münster would have been aware of similar events playing out in surrounding areas. Standing alone, the radical religious interpretations stand in huge contrast to the prevailing power structure of the day. Because of their preeminence as sources, Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck's perspectives have largely informed most accounts of the Anabaptist episode in Münster, which often describe the Münster Anabaptists as the work of just a few individuals.

Quite a bit of work has already been produced on the story of the Anabaptists in Münster. There are books, articles, and even podcasts dedicated to telling the story. Anabaptist Münster tends to come up, even if briefly, in almost every work on general Reformation history. Some offer it as an interesting story, others to demonstrate just how radical some fringe groups could become. One consistent theme in these works is the attempt made by primary sources, then echoed by secondary sources, to position the author as far as possible from what happened in Münster. Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck, as mentioned above, consistently position themselves in the narrative as observers highly opposed to the actions of the Anabaptists. Given what happened in Münster, how radical and violent it became, and what became of the main conspirators, it stands to reason that contemporaries would want to make sure that they weren't implicated in any way. In Gresbeck's case, his life, or at least freedom, was likely at stake. Contemporaries of Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck, including Obbe Phillips (a resident of Münster), Menno Simons, and David Joris all continue the theme of describing the Münster Anabaptists in a way that could only frame them as an aberration. Like Gresbeck, it is likely that the

safety of these men may have been at stake when they made their statements about the Münster Anabaptists. Any positive comments toward the radical group could have brought severe consequences.

Thomas Brady's *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400-1650* is an excellent, detailed summary of Germany and surrounding areas as the Protestant Reformation emerged and gained popularity. Published in 2009, Brady's book is extremely recent for Reformation scholarship, and represents historians mentioning Anabaptist Münster within a much broader work about the Reformation itself. He presents the common idea of a select few being responsible for Anabaptist Münster, describing the events as "a coup carried out with little popular support by some wealthy families and a local group of radicals."<sup>5</sup> He goes on to specifically state that "Anabaptist Münster did not represent a revolution of the poor and oppressed, for behind the coup stood from first to last a faction of substantial local burghers."<sup>6</sup> In Brady's description, the Anabaptist episode in Münster was a major event carried out by relatively few participants. In this telling, the actions of a few select individuals outweigh those of the many, leaving their efforts largely ignored. Brady supports the primary sources in his dismissal of the work of the common citizens, placing the blame on a select few that brought the coup to reality. While I agree that a select few may have dictated Anabaptist theology and policy after gaining power, I think this perspective tends to ignore what led to the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster. It was the common people that set the conditions for the coup to be successful. Even if a select few can be credited with actually carrying

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas A. Brady Jr, *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400-1650* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 205.

<sup>6</sup> Brady, *German Histories*, 206.

it out, they alone would have been unable to create the conditions necessary for the Anabaptists to take over the city.

William Estep, writing his detailed early history of the Anabaptists in the 1960s, notes that the two Jans (Matthys and van Leyden) were “unscrupulous opportunists” who “manipulated a guileless people.”<sup>7</sup> He argues that the Münster Anabaptists took the Old Testament too seriously and were far removed from typical Anabaptism. Unlike Brady, who writes a general history of the Reformation, Estep is writing a history specific to the Anabaptists. Estep appears sympathetic to Anabaptists, or at least more so than traditional works before him, by telling their story largely from their own perspective. Interestingly, as I will discuss later, Estep’s work in the 1960s may have helped to normalize Anabaptist theology, establishing a set of beliefs and practices that were then applied backwards in history. By placing sixteenth-century Anabaptists within that framework, he positions the Münster Anabaptists as outsiders, contributing to the traditional understanding of an unusual radicalism in the city. While Estep provides one of the most thorough histories of Anabaptism in the sixteenth century, I believe this relegation of Münster Anabaptists to “outsider” status overstates the idea of the existence of a “normal” Anabaptist ideology at the time. There appears to be a high level of fluidity to Protestant ideology so early in the Reformation, making it very difficult to pin down a “normal” ideology for something as new, widespread, and disorganized as the Anabaptists. In a sense, Estep creates the “normal” against which he then places the Münsterites.

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<sup>7</sup> William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville: Broadman, 1963), 106-107.

George Hunston Williams provides a good analysis of historians' approach to Anabaptists in his book *The Radical Reformation* from 1957. He writes, "Modern Christian historians...have long perpetuated the customary burdening of evangelical Anabaptism with the charge of having arisen out of a combination of heresy and sedition."<sup>8</sup> This supports early sources' assessments of Anabaptists as dangerous outsiders. Williams continues, "while historians standing in the Anabaptist tradition itself, because of their pacifism and aversion to both Marxism and secularism, have been primarily concerned to dissociate, so far as possible, the peasant unrest from the Anabaptist witness."<sup>9</sup> Here Williams is noting the tendency of those like Estep to promote groups of Anabaptists practicing pacifism as the "correct" form of the faith, thereby casting aside the more violent or radical groups that might detract from legitimacy in the eyes of non-Anabaptists.

Anabaptists, due in part to the work of men like Estep, are generally known to be pacifists, whose social radicalism led to a withdrawal from society rather than a violent overthrow of the existing structure. He is sure to explain what "typical" Anabaptism means, and how the Münster group did not adhere to many of those ideas. Estep also argues for the innocence of outsiders regarding the events of Münster, and quotes Menno Simons, who was a contemporary trying to distance himself from Münster. He writes that a "remnant of the Münster Kingdom was a declining menace."<sup>10</sup> Other contemporaries writing at the time, such as Gresbeck or Kerssenbrock, also do their best to isolate the Münster Anabaptists as a one-off group, as if they were some sort of religious cult, rather

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<sup>8</sup> George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 118.

than a natural deviation within the competition to determine orthodoxy during a time of immense religious and social change.

The final act in the saga of the Anabaptist Münster was the recapture of the city by the Prince-Bishop and his allies, who proceeded to torture and burn the main Anabaptist leaders captured during the assault. To make a point about the seriousness of their crimes, their bodies were then put in three iron cages hung from St. Lambert's cathedral for everyone to see. Those cages are still hanging from the church almost 500 years later. Given that conclusion, it stands to reason that contemporary authors, especially those who could be somehow connected to Anabaptists or Münster, would write as negatively as possible about those that were involved in the Anabaptist Kingdom. In cases like Henry Gresbeck, one's personal safety or well-being could be determined by avoiding the blame associated with the Münster Anabaptists. Therefore, the primary sources should not simply be taken at face value, but rather studied with a critical eye in their proper context. Their intention in writing was to distance themselves as much as possible from the Anabaptists, and sought to isolate them as an individual aberration. Historian Steven Ozment writes, "nonconformists of the sixteenth century have received favorable press only when they have written their own history."<sup>11</sup> The Münster Anabaptists are a great example of Ozment's point – the participants of 1534-35 found themselves in one of two scenarios after the city had been retaken. Some were killed in the final raid, and the ringleaders were burned at the stakes several months later. For those that did survive, recanting was likely their only means of survival. Some of

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 345.



their earlier writings, like those of Rothmann, survive today, but were printed and distributed well before the city was recaptured. Once the city was retaken, no one provided a contemporary defense of their beliefs or actions, especially in the immediate aftermath. Because the Anabaptist leadership was captured and violently used to make an example, any chance at making a case *for* the Münster Anabaptists was lost. As a result, works like Estep's are important in understanding the general Anabaptist worldview, even while they make the case that Münster was an aberration that didn't fit the typical mold of Anabaptism.

One problem with Estep and others' arguments that the Münster Anabaptists were unique is a key factor that differentiated Anabaptists from other popular Protestant groups of the Reformation. That factor was the lack of a centralized theology or figurehead, especially someone with connections to state or military power, like Martin Luther's relationship with Frederick the Wise, the leader of Saxony who was able to protect Luther from opposition forces. Existing without a similar relationship is something that most likely cost the Anabaptists legitimacy in the eyes of their peers. Because of the scattered nature of Anabaptists, it becomes very hard to place a restriction on who could or could not be considered an Anabaptist. It's hard to say with complete certainty that one single group was so different and isolated from the rest – there are examples of Anabaptists across a wide spectrum of beliefs and behaviors. Estep details how Anabaptism spread – beginning in Zurich, it spread through parts of Switzerland, then north through Germany and into Holland. While some of the most basic ideas of Anabaptism remained the same as it moved generally to the north, regional changes were not unusual, just as with Lutheranism or other newly formed denominations. Münster is

an example of the nature of this type of change, and a representation of how people from different levels of the social hierarchy played a role in determining this new orthodoxy.

The first group of Anabaptists broke away from other Protestants in Zurich, but none of the men there lived long enough or was influential enough to establish himself as a primary influencer of Anabaptist doctrine. The Lutherans, naturally, had Martin Luther acting as a sort of leader or director. Adherents to Lutheranism followed his lead, read his writings, and often practiced a form of Protestantism that he endorsed. Luther published a huge number of writings on the Bible, faith, society, and the Catholic Church, among other things. His work provided his followers with a precedent they could follow in how they lived and acted each day. Regional deviations in theology and its implementation are to be expected during this time – no one had completely worked out what the Reformation would mean, and definitions of Lutherans or other groups maintained a measure of fluidity as specific beliefs and practices were established and later settle. However, a group with a figurehead as powerful as Martin Luther would have at least all shared a foundation in similar ideology based on Luther's work. Luther's writings usually kept his followers relatively predictable, even if their theology and practice varied slightly from his own. Importantly, Luther's Reformation leadership came as a result of his theology and works, and not the other way around. For those that were wary of the changes wrought by Luther's writings and influence, a Protestant group led by a single man was less unpredictable. City leaders encountering Lutherans throughout Germany could, to some degree, know what to expect if the faith became popular in their city. That Lutheranism was a known quantity, and not subject to such sudden and seemingly random changes as with a group like the Anabaptists, made them

less threatening to secular leaders simply hoping to maintain peace in their jurisdiction. Whereas there was generally one overarching foundation of Lutheranism practiced in Europe, it is estimated that there were at least forty independent sects of Anabaptists during the same time.<sup>12</sup> All of them arose not from the teachings of one man, but rather from a core belief that many adopted on their own.

For non-Anabaptists, the term was a catch-all for anyone that believed in adult rebaptism, and while this is technically a correct description, it excludes anything else that a group might have believed. Anabaptists shared a theological foundation with other Protestant groups of the time, such as Lutherans or Sacramentarians. Disappointment in the direction of the Catholic Church and a focus on Biblical text for guidance are ideas all of those groups supported. However, the idea of adult baptism was shocking and radical to many people living in the sixteenth century. Rather than a “reform” of the methods of the Catholics, rebaptism represented a drastic departure from infant baptism, which had been the established Christian norm for hundreds of years. It was only natural for this idea to become the primary identifying factor for any group involved with the practice. This is how outsiders may describe a docile, pacifistic group with the same term as another group that participates in a violent revolt. Because it was so new, what it meant to be a true Anabaptist was not settled, and nothing really stood in the way of a group of believers to call themselves Anabaptist. Since the theology and practice was still in the early stages of development, and lacked a central figurehead, how could any of their contemporaries say that someone identifying as Anabaptist wasn't a true Anabaptist?

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<sup>12</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 253.

Another issue with the work of Estep and the idea of Münster Anabaptists as an aberration is addressed by historian Werner Packull. Packull makes an interesting argument while explaining why Anabaptists like those in Münster are viewed as such outliers. His theory, which I mentioned briefly earlier, is that Anabaptists were “normalized” by historians like Estep working in the 1960s. They established a set of beliefs or actions that identified a group as truly Anabaptist, and then applied the definition backwards through history. As Packull writes, this left groups that fell outside of this definition “at best a lunatic fringe.” He continues, arguing that “scholars barred the way to a historically fuller understanding of the birth pangs of the movement.”<sup>13</sup> The effect is significant for a group like the Münster Anabaptists. Socially, they had already been cast aside as dangerous outsiders that threatened the foundation of sixteenth-century German society – the fusion of the Catholic and secular power structure. Kerksenbrock and Gresbeck each did their best to isolate the Münster Anabaptists from “normal” society, in the context of religion, government authority, and even nationality. By alienating them from Anabaptists as a whole, historians like Estep further isolate the Münster group. As Packull demonstrates, this isolation has often prevented historians from associating the Münster group from others that may have similarly rebelled religiously or socially. To further clarify the point of the fluid nature of early Anabaptism, Packull writes, “Anabaptism was a diverse movement. Not only must regional differences be kept in mind, but the different rhythm with which the movement developed must be cautiously assessed before generalizations are possible.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Werner O. Packull, “In Search of the ‘Common Man’ in Early German Anabaptist Ideology,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 17, no. 1 (1986): 66.

<sup>14</sup> Packull, “In Search of the ‘Common Man,’” 62.

Packull and others often describe Anabaptists as forceful or revolutionary, in direct contrast to the arguments made by those that may have normalized Anabaptist behavior in the 1960s. Writing about the Münster Anabaptists specifically, Henry Suderman writes, “The Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster (23 February 1534 - 24 June 1535) remains an exceptional event in Anabaptist history, but it was not antithetical to early sixteenth-century Anabaptist values and priorities. The Anabaptist Kingdom functioned as a graphic representation of the dominant culture, its hierarchical structure, and its exercise of power through violence.”<sup>15</sup>

In Suderman’s view, historians tend to look at the violence within Anabaptist Münster on its own, without considering how things were handled throughout the rest of Germany or Europe. Captured Anabaptists were often brutally tortured and executed – such punishments were normal for the time, and the Anabaptists’ use of them in Münster should not necessarily be seen as unusual or extreme. Suderman goes as far as saying that the “Anabaptist Theater,” as he calls it, gave its audience (which could be anyone) an opportunity to participate in “the sociological, political, moral, and religious innovations that it dramatized.”<sup>16</sup> This understanding places much more power in the hands of the rank-and-file participants in Anabaptist Münster. They were participating in a sort of revolution, which may have meant different things to different people, based on the context of how their situation fit into the larger world. This suggests again that common people were aware enough of the world around them to comment on their own situation and try to find ways to change it.

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Suderman, “Sometimes It’s the Place: The Anabaptist Kingdom Revisited,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 40, no. 4 (1967): 119.

<sup>16</sup> Suderman, “Sometimes It’s the Place,” 126.

Of particular interest in the history of Münster is the development and evolution of the city council, as well as its relationship to the common people. Kerssenbrock provides a detailed description of the council and its election – twenty-four men were chosen by a group of ten electors. The electors were instructed to choose the members of the council from both patricians and the common citizens. Earlier in Münster’s history, the council only consisted of patricians, but over time, the council became a combination of patricians and commoners. According to Kerssenbrock, the city was originally governed by an understanding of a shared set of responsibilities for each class of representative. By Kerssenbrock’s time, however, the council was made up almost entirely of commoners. He writes that the reason for the change is that the patricians of Münster wanted to establish themselves as part of the knighthood, thus moving higher up the social ladder. Knights often lived in private castles or fortifications outside of cities. Because of their desire to move up in society and be considered knightly, the patricians of Münster pulled away from regular participation in civic responsibilities. Kerssenbrock even notes that in his time, even those patricians that did serve on the council often did so against their will.<sup>17</sup>

The common citizens of Münster were part of the voting body that selected electors, and by the time of the events of this study, they also made up a sizeable portion of the town council. The council was not simply an honorary title, either – Kerssenbrock writes, “This order has great authority in the city. It has the power to establish and disestablish, to pass laws and revoke those that have been passed.”<sup>18</sup> He goes on to list

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<sup>17</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 167.

<sup>18</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 168.

the many ways in which the city council held power in Münster. He then emphasizes the relative peace among the various groups in the city, arguing for a “tight bond of mutual concord among all the orders of society, that this bond could not be broken by any contrivance.”<sup>19</sup> This was, of course, before the “Anabaptist uproar” destroyed what had evolved over time in the city.

Here is a place where the influence of the common people is evident in Münster, hidden in plain sight within a primary source. If the majority of the city council, which we know to be responsible for laws in the city, “has great authority,” and is made up of and voted for by common citizens, then it follows that decisions made by the council are at least nominally representative of that group. By looking at the situation through this perspective, commoners appear to have had direct involvement in the overall government of the city. Kerssenbrock provides all the evidence and arguments to reach such a conclusion, but he either doesn’t see things that way, or simply refuses to give the common people that kind of credit. For example, Kerssenbrock writes extensively of the events of 1532, which include a series of meetings between representatives of the common people and the town council. These meetings took place because the common people had grown suspicious of the council and how it was enforcing, or ignoring, previous agreements stemming from the revolt of 1525. The power of the commons was enough to compel the council to meet and address specific claims in detail. Kerssenbrock includes the assertion that previously the council had ignored requests to meet, but was no longer capable of doing so.

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<sup>19</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 168.

After describing the makeup of the council and its significant connection to commoners, Kerssenbrock tends to leave those details out of the rest of the discussion, describing the common people and the council as very different entities, often pitted against one another. This is significant because the council would have been the entity in position to push back against the spread of Protestantism within Münster. Additionally, Kerssenbrock devotes a lot of time early in his work to Bernard Rothmann and whether he was to be expelled from the city. Gresbeck adds to the discussion on the council and Rothmann when he writes that the town council banned Rothmann from staying in the city.<sup>20</sup> However, the translator (Christopher Mackay, whose translations I am using for Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck) notes that Gresbeck is mistaken. The council included a group that wanted to ban Rothmann, but Mackay writes that his supporters on the council prevented them from doing so.<sup>21</sup>

Bernard Rothmann is one of, if not *the*, most important person the entire story of Anabaptist Münster. Rothmann, a preacher in the city of Münster, adopted Lutheranism in the early 1530s, and his place in the city was indicative of the power struggle in and around Münster. Kerssenbrock's introduction to Rothmann casts him in a negative light from the very beginning. In his writings on the events of the year 1531, Kerssenbrock mentions Rothmann and that "he was responsible for almost all the factionalism and religious dissension in the city of Münster."<sup>22</sup> He mentions that Rothmann's parents were accused of witchcraft, and that all of his ancestors "were generally considered to be of

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers: Henry Gresbeck's Account of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster*, translated by Christopher Mackay (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2016), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 60, n47.

<sup>22</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 213.



bad reputation.”<sup>23</sup> Rothmann himself, according to Kerssenbrock, was fickle and bad-tempered as a child. Of course, Rothmann was around 25 years old when Kerssenbrock was born, so in this case he is either relying on others’ opinions or simply applying his own to something that happened before he was alive. Gresbeck also writes negatively of Rothmann throughout his work, and almost never uses his actual name. Instead, Gresbeck calls him “Stutenberent,” which is a derisive nickname created by combining Rothmann’s first name and the bread he used at his communions. Both Gresbeck and Kerssenbrock mention Rothmann’s role as primary instigator almost immediately upon introducing him to their narrative.

Positioning Rothmann as a villain from the beginning serves a few purposes. First, it attempts to reinforce the notion that the Protestant Reformation as it manifested in Münster wasn’t necessarily a movement of the masses, but something enacted by just a few. Rather than being pushed into a position of power by his supporters, Rothmann is framed as pulling everyone along with him. This way, Rothmann is the main driver of the action, rather than being along for the ride until he is in a position of power.

Placing Rothmann in the story as the primary instigator also serves to isolate the Münster brand of Anabaptism from other sects around the region. Rothmann had a massive role in determining how the Münster theology developed, and the way he’s framed by Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck shape how later historians understand his role. Because Rothmann’s theology was somewhat unusual at the time, given his focus on the Old Testament and an impending apocalypse, historians often suggest that he, and

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<sup>23</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 213.

Münster by extension, are not representative of Anabaptist or Protestant theology of the time. Again, what these accounts leave out is the fact that in the 1520s and 1530s, no one could say with total certainty what it meant to be Anabaptist. At the time, it would seem that Rothmann had just as much right to claim his beliefs were as valid as those of Luther, Zwingli, Hofmann, or others.

When he began preaching in Münster, Rothmann began attracting a large following almost immediately. Kerssenbrock notes that he “began to incite the commons to anger against the clergy.”<sup>24</sup> Here, as is the case in many places, the bulk of the blame for the entire Anabaptist episode in Münster is placed squarely on the shoulders of Rothmann. Additionally, Kerssenbrock places the actions of the common people as a result of what Rothmann did. However, what Gresbeck and Kerssenbrock often gloss over is the forces that worked to put Rothmann into such an influential position in the first place. It fits the purpose of both men to frame the Anabaptists as an outlier put in power by a select few, rather than supported by a large portion of the common citizens. Mackay supports this in one of his footnotes in his translation of Gresbeck, writing, “Gresbeck’s misrepresentation fits in with his general effort to exculpate the city of Münster as a whole and to shift the blame for the city’s behavior to the foreign interlopers and their local collaborators.”<sup>25</sup> This reinforces the idea that Gresbeck was writing for purposes other than keeping the most accurate account of the facts of what happened in Münster. The list of demands that the common people presented to the town council in 1525 suggest that they had issues with the clergy long before Rothmann gained influence.

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<sup>24</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 214.

<sup>25</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 60, N47.

As a result of Rothmann's growing anti-Catholic popularity, the local Prince Bishop sought to remove Rothmann, apparently with imperial pressure.<sup>26</sup> The bishop removed Rothmann from his cathedral and outlawed him from the city. At this point, had Rothmann's Protestant leaning had been representative of a tiny subset of the population, his part in this story would have likely ended. However, the Münster town council, which at this point in time was largely made up of common citizens, who also played a major role in voting for the town council, decided to protect Rothmann. They returned him to the city and appointed him as the pastor of St. Lambert's church. Importantly, following events in 1525, the town council had acquired enough autonomy in the city to appoint ministers to local churches, rather than the traditional arrangement that would have left that power in the hands of the bishop. The prince-bishop began his response to the growth of reform ideas in Münster by gathering forces in the nearby town of Telgt.<sup>27</sup> Upon discovering this fact, the people of Münster decided to defend their beliefs and city by conducting a nighttime raid on Telgt. According to Kerssenbrock, so many citizens of Münster turned up to participate in the raid that "only" 900-1000 men were finally selected.<sup>28</sup> For a city of Münster's size, this was not an insignificant number. It's likely that as much as 10% of the city's entire population showed up to march to Telgt – if you take women, children, and those too old to fight out of the equation, you are left with a sizeable portion of the city's able-bodied men.

The raid on Telgt took place on the day after Christmas in 1532. The importance for this paper is that so many citizens of Münster took part, or at least tried to do so,

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<sup>26</sup> Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 364.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 365.

<sup>28</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 378.

before Lutheranism or any other form of Protestantism had taken a permanent place in the city, and just before whispers of Anabaptism had arrived. Rothmann had been preaching in the city since the preceding April, but his message had not yet become Anabaptist. The popular raid on Telgt, then, was not born of the “madness” that is said to have infected the city, or through the coercive actions of Jan Matthys or Jan van Leiden. Instead, it was indicative of widespread support for reform ideas in the city. Without that support, it is likely that either Rothmann would have been permanently expelled from the city, or that the Prince-Bishop would have soon eliminated the reform scourge through force. Interestingly, Gresbeck’s account of the Telgt raid is brief and lacks details. Instead, he uses it as an example of how Rothmann is to blame for everything that went wrong in Münster. There is no mention of the numbers involved, as there is in Kerssenbrock’s narrative, which would of course give Gresbeck’s audience the opportunity to draw the conclusion that Rothmann enjoyed some degree of widespread popular support. Additionally, Gresbeck generally writes about what others did, working hard to never implicate himself in anything that might suggest his cooperation with the Anabaptists. The problem with this is that Gresbeck was present in the city for almost the entire duration of the Anabaptist Kingdom. It would have been extremely difficult for him to have seen and known everything he did without taking part in some of it. In the case of the Telgt raid, perhaps Gresbeck felt that knowing too much information would have had an incriminating effect.

Norman Cohn supports the idea of widespread support for Rothmann and Anabaptism before and during the time in which the Anabaptists controlled Münster, writing that the “rank and file were recruited almost entirely from peasants and

artisans.”<sup>29</sup> Cohn echoes Kerksenbrock’s statements about the council, noting that those that ran the council “had the support of the populace,” and that by 1533 the Anabaptists dominated the lives of the lower classes.<sup>30</sup> He also notes the influx of people into the city, describing the “swarms of homeless and propertyless people” that had been attracted to Münster as word of its Anabaptist vision spread throughout the surrounding areas. In light of the revolts of 1525, this supports the idea that the goals of early Anabaptists lined up well with the goals of common citizens.

The Telgt raid indicates significant support for Rothmann long before the creation of the Anabaptist Kingdom. Importantly, the people of Münster took matters into their own hands to protect Rothmann from the Prince Bishop. Had they not done so, the forces amassed in Telgt would have almost certainly overwhelmed the people of Münster and put an early end to Rothmann’s role in this story. There’s a sort of symbiosis between Rothmann and the people that becomes evident at this point, at least in how it relates to this story. Without the help of the people, Rothmann would not have been able to gain or keep his position in the city, which is what enabled him to play a central role in all of the Anabaptist-related events that would follow. Conversely, without Rothmann, this story would have evolved differently. It is possible that the people may have found another Reform minister they could support, but there is no way to know how their specific vision would have deviated from Rothmann’s and affected the outcome of the story. Additionally, had the Telgt raid not taken place, the Prince Bishop may have marched on Münster and reinforced Catholicism, permanently driving off Rothmann in the process.

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<sup>29</sup> Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 254.

<sup>30</sup> Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 258.

Any such possibilities are simply conjecture and are not really useful for this study. What is important is that the people put Rothmann in power and fought to keep him there. Again, this points to a common thread between Protestantism, and especially Anabaptism in this case, and the aims of the various peasant revolts around Germany.

Several peasant uprisings took place from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward. A look at some of them, especially the Peasants' War, help to place the actions of the citizens of Münster within their appropriate context of German and Reformation history.

Martin Luther not only provided the lower classes with the ability to read the bible for themselves, but by doing so also provided peasants with language and ideas that informed the Peasants' War of 1525. His translation of the New Testament into German provided the peasants access to the bible and its ideas that they had never experienced before. As a result, the complaints surrounding the uprising of 1525 were framed in Biblical terms instead of simply social or economic terms. In a world in which the Church and religion played a huge role in everyday life, Luther had given the lower classes the tools they needed to make a scriptural argument to support their list of complaints. In fact, when George Hunston Williams describes the spread of peasant unrest and rebellion from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century through the Peasants' War of 1525, he makes 1517 the clear point of delineation. He writes that over the years preceding Luther's work, the focus of the uprisings was slowly changing from common law to

divine law, and by late 1517 many peasants “imagined their demands sanctioned by Luther’s appeal to evangelical freedom and to the Bible.”<sup>31</sup>

One pre-Luther uprising in Germany was centered in the town of Speyer in western Germany. Over 100 members of a rebellious faction were arrested, and it is estimated that as many as 10,000 people had organized as part of the revolt. The rebellion was betrayed before it could get underway, but the authorities interrogated those that had been arrested to ascertain their goals. “They said that the principal reason for their entering this association...was their desire to abolish every remaining yoke of servitude, and...to gain their liberty through the use of arms.”<sup>32</sup> They confessed to planning to “annihilate all authority and government,” and that their “main targets were monasteries, cathedral churches, and the clergy in general.”<sup>33</sup> According to those conducting the interrogations, the peasants planned to “humiliate the servants of the Church and reduce them in number by killing and driving out as many as possible.”<sup>34</sup> In this situation, as might be expected in Germany at this point in history, the peasants drew no clear distinction between secular and religious authority. Their complaints dealt with their situation in life and society, and from their perspective, religious and secular authority were one and the same. This lack of distinction helps explain why so many common people may have flocked to Protestant or even Anabaptist causes. Rebelling against the Catholic Church and the government was effectively the same thing, and practicing a different faith tradition would have been the most dramatic way of showing

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<sup>31</sup> Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Strauss, *Manifestation of Discontent in Germany on the Eve of the Reformation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 145.

<sup>33</sup> Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent*, 146.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

displeasure with the status quo. In Münster, we see common people supporting Rothmann as he slowly rises to a position of power and influence. Both Gresbeck and Kerssenbrock discuss the people that came from surrounding areas to join the cause, illustrating its widespread appeal.

One of the common demands made in Münster and other areas was the right of the citizens to appoint ministers to local churches, rather than those positions be assigned by a local prince or bishop. In Münster, this led to the continued appointment of Bernard Rothmann as a preacher, despite the Prince-Bishop's desire to have him silenced. This was due to a combination of two things: first, the citizens wanted more control over their spiritual and social lives. Second, one of the main issues at hand during this time was the apparent corruption of the clergy and local rulers. Many believed that appointments to religious office were granted based on prior relationships or bribes, and that the churches suffered as a result. Furthermore, these questionably-appointed men were those also accused of abusing their local power, typically to pursue wealth at the expense of the poorer citizens of the city. An example is in the common complaint about the gathering of firewood. Local rulers or clergy were ruling that the forests were not common ground from which anyone could gather the firewood they needed for fires and warmth. Instead, those individuals controlled the forests, and therefore controlled the supply and price of firewood. They apparently sought to enrich themselves by taking advantage of something that was previously seen as a public commodity. By stating their desire to have more control over their spiritual lives and acting against the Catholic leadership, the citizens of Münster were firmly entrenching themselves on the side of the Protestants. This also indicates the significant level of disconnect between religious leaders and the



common people as the Reformation was in its early, explosive stages. Once the people felt like they could assert themselves, they revealed a deep distrust and level of concern over the clergy and their regular practices. This type of distrust and concern had clearly existed before, as seen with early attempts at revolt around the beginning of the sixteenth century. The success of some of the peasant movements, as in Münster, taught those peasants that they could organize to create change in their world and their situation. It was dangerous, to be sure, but it was not uncommon for those movements to be effective. The population learned that the risk was often worth taking. Martin Luther, by setting off the Reformation, provided the spark to ignite a situation that was waiting to explode.

A dozen years later, the “Poor Konrad” movement took form in and around the city of Wurttemberg (Konrad was a generic name for the common man).<sup>35</sup> Many of the articles set forth by the “Arme Konrad” involved legal issues – how lawyers were appointed, how cases proceeded, and so on. There are also several that dealt with the use of land, which is a common theme throughout peasant uprisings. Lords and nobles exercised free reign over the land, where “the poor man’s fields and products are commonly destroyed.”<sup>36</sup> Once again the gathering of firewood is presented as an issue. This was clearly a point of contention that many felt violated tradition. Many lists of peasant complaints include phrases such as “in violation of the old customs,” “we have always, according to tradition, had the right,” and so on.

One of the most famous post-Luther uprisings was that of the town of Stuhlingen. The *Articles of the Peasants of Stuhlingen* appears in many works involving the Peasant

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<sup>35</sup> Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent*, 151.

<sup>36</sup> Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent*, 152.

War of 1525, which had begun to be felt in Stuhlingen the prior year. What sets this list of articles apart from those from the Poor Konrad movement or the Bundschuh is the language used by those making the demands. Christian theology and doctrine play a larger role, clearly informing many of the arguments. This appears to be connected to a sort of trickle-down effect of Luther publishing a German translation of the New Testament. As more people were able to read, and therefore read the bible, their knowledge and understanding of it would have increased exponentially. Because so much of society and its governance was rooted in Christianity, or at least its named practitioners, gaining insight on the Bible gave the peasants a greater leg to stand on when making their cases to local authorities. We see similar language used in the articles laid out by the common people of Münster in 1525. For lower-class groups all over Germany, the uptick in biblical language is representative of increased knowledge and the ways in which that knew knowledge shaped their understanding of their place in society.

Perhaps the greatest example of post-Luther peasant revolt based in Christian theology is *The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants*. These articles, presented in the spring of 1525, represented the summation of what historian Michael G. Baylor describes as a “rudimentary peasant parliament.”<sup>37</sup> A group of peasants from three local areas met in the city of Memmingen to draft a common list of grievances and demands, and created what Baylor calls the most influential work of the Peasants’ War, and that “it constituted the key manifesto of the entire Peasants’ War.”<sup>38</sup> Importantly, the

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<sup>37</sup> Michael G. Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012, 76.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

groups at Memmingen had the foresight to enlist the help of two local ministers to assist in drafting and organizing the articles. Such men had a more thorough education than the peasants, and were able to craft a well-written, thorough list of articles that not only summarized the peasants' complaints, but did so using language and arguments based on recently developed Christian theology. The primary writer of the *Twelve Articles* was Sebastian Lotzer, who worked in the area as a lay preacher. Being a lay preacher meant Lotzer had not been officially ordained by the Catholic Church, which may explain why he and the peasants decided to work with each other.<sup>39</sup> The other preacher working with the peasants, Christoph Schappeler, provided scriptural references as justification for each of the twelve articles. While Christianity had already been present in daily life and how the common people understood their world, here we see them able to begin using theological arguments to their own advantage in a way they had previously been unable to do.

One of the most interesting arguments made in *The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants* is found in the introduction. It is first explained that part of the purpose of the writing of the articles is to respond to “anti-Christians” who claimed that the Gospel of the Bible is the foundation of unrest and rebellion. The peasants answer this claim by first stating that “the gospel is not a cause of rebellions or insurrections...whose words and life teach nothing but love, peace, patience, and

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<sup>39</sup> An excellent work on lay preaching during the Reformation can be found in historian Siegfried Hoyer's essay “Lay Preaching and Radicalism in the Early Reformation,” found in *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation: Divergent Perspectives*, edited by Hans J. Hillerbrand. One important point that Hoyer offers is that the title of lay preacher was an issue of ordination rather than education. That is, a lay preacher may have had as much, or possibly more, religious education than nearby ordained ministers. Hoyer makes this point to remind the reader that lay preaching was merely unofficial according to the Church, but not necessarily a hobby or amateur pursuit.

unity...how can the anti-Christians call the gospel a cause of the rebellion and disobedience?”<sup>40</sup> Next, they make the statement, “It clearly and simply follows that since, in their articles, the peasants want to be taught and live by such a gospel, they cannot be called disobedient or seditious.”<sup>41</sup> This last point is the most important. Despite their actions possibly suggesting otherwise, the peasants wanted to communicate that they did not see themselves as necessarily rebelling against the state. Rather, they were pushing back against specific individuals that they felt were not properly utilizing the bible in how they ruled. This argument makes the uprising a rebellion against specific actions by specific leaders, which is an attempt to place the peasants outside the typical framework of armed resistance. They weren’t rebelling against the empire or the emperor, just the local princes, bishops, and clergy that were abusing power in what the peasants viewed as an un-Christian manner. An argument can be made that these people were practicing a prototypical form of a separation of church and state, which in itself was a radical notion at the time.

The argument on rebellion, and the fact that the *Twelve Articles* were so widely available and influential, provided lower class citizens all over Germany a unique perspective on how to understand and frame their own movements. The path to a better set of circumstances in life could be paved with an emphasis on new access to theology gained in the few years since Luther had begun his popular work. Because religious and secular authority were so tightly intertwined, a change in religious emphasis could serve as a way to affect societal change in areas that don’t appear to the modern eye to have

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<sup>40</sup> Baylor, *The German Reformation*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> Baylor, *The German Reformation*, 77.

anything to do with spiritual endeavors. That makes it crucial to remember that for those living in sixteenth-century Germany, religion touched everything. For example, the *Twelve Articles* included the common complaints about hunting and fishing rights (Article Four) and the gathering of firewood from common forests (Article Five). In each instance, the peasants' argument was based on scripture and uses language such as "not compatible with the word of God."<sup>42</sup> The use of such arguments, compiled, well-written, printed, and widely distributed, resulted in a list of articles that got the attention of important people across Germany, including Martin Luther himself.

Such was the reach and influence of the *Twelve Articles* that Luther felt compelled to personally write and publish a response. While the articles did not mention Luther by name, his influence can be felt throughout. He addressed both the peasants and the ruling authority in his *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles*. Luther first responds to the Princes and Lords, pointing out that the peasants had a point in where they cast their blame: "We have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops and mad priests and monks... You do not cease to rant and rave against the holy gospel."<sup>43</sup> From the beginning of his public work, Luther appeared unafraid to call out the established leadership for their shortcomings, and this response is no different. In a typical Lutheran response, he acknowledges that many blame the rebellion on the gospel and that it was a result of his teachings. He and his temper essentially tell them to bring it on, writing "Well, well, slander away, dear lords!"<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Baylor, *The German Reformation*, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Baylor, *The German Reformation*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

The fact that someone as influential as Luther had to respond publicly to peasant concerns is indicative of the power that those peasants had begun exerting over events throughout Germany. It also shows that poorer classes of citizens had become a part of the struggle to determine orthodoxy in this new era. They were no longer content to simply be told what the Bible meant and how they should understand it. They had discovered what could be gained through organization and rebellion years before, but Luther's translation of the New Testament had opened up a whole new world to these lower classes. Peasants could now make their cases to local rulers based on the Bible and scripture, essentially using the same type of arguments and language that those same rulers may have employed in their typical sermons or legal decisions. Based on some of these works, it is clear that many lower-class citizens saw Christian doctrine as a means to make social gains. And based on the response of Luther and other prominent individuals, as well as the number of cities that gave in to peasant demands, they were correct. Changes in religious practice or emphasis did appear to be an effective way to force change on the world around them. Many, but not all, tried to do so through means of violence. However, if the case made by the peasants in the *Twelve Articles* is true, these armed uprisings were not necessarily representative of intentional rebellion against the state itself, but more of a retreat from participation in the traditional religious and social structure. Given how intertwined the state and religion were at the time, this is a tricky argument to make. They were able to frame their actions as based in religion and spirituality, arguments becoming increasingly harder to fight against.

Münster was not exempt from the widespread discord spreading throughout Germany. Kerssenbrock describes a faction that emerged in the city in 1525, writing that

“they began to puke out words that roused the commons against the clergy and civic officials.”<sup>45</sup> The “raging commons,” as Kerssenbrock often describes them, frightened the leadership in the city. He writes that the council trembled upon hearing the commons’ uproar, and immediately sought ways to placate them. The Münster group presented to the council a list of demands for changes they sought in the city. As with many similar documents that popped up around Germany during this time, the common people had many complaints against the clergy. The Münster group proposed many changes that dramatically changed the amount of power the clergy had within the city. In doing so, the city gained a fair amount of autonomy, at least when compared to most German cities at the time. The push back against clerical power, by extension, limited the power the Bishop had within the city, and left more of the decision making up to the town council. According to Kerssenbrock, the council was so frightened by the common people and the potential danger they represented that they agreed to give them everything they asked for.<sup>46</sup> Evidence from other armed peasant revolts lends credence to the idea that there may have been a real threat of violence. Since the bishop over the diocese that included Münster lived elsewhere, the council, along with the clergy, represented the leadership of the city. They were understandably afraid of an angry mass of people, and yielded to its demands seemingly without a second thought.

Kerssenbrock lists all thirty-four of the demands made by the citizens of Münster in 1525. As with lists of articles in many other cities around Germany, some of the first articles dealt with the clergy and ecclesiastical power within the city. One of the most

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<sup>45</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 185.

<sup>46</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 195.

important demands that would affect individuals like Rothmann years later was that the people wanted the power to select preachers for churches in the city. The citizens of Münster sought to curb the power of those religious officials, especially when it dealt with business or other practices that directly interfered with the professions of average Münsterites. Article five even states that the ecclesiastics (monks, nuns, priests, etc.) should not participate in any secular business for a profit.<sup>47</sup> There is another article included to make sure the ecclesiastics were accountable to the “public burdens imposed by the city.” In total, the articles that include religious leaders serve as a written means of significantly limiting the power that those leaders had enjoyed within (and often beyond) the city. The Münster articles also include some of those that seem trivial at first glance to the modern perspective. Article twenty-four is about butter sellers and the rent they pay to sell their butter in the public marketplace. Twenty-six through twenty-nine deal with wine and beer production and sales. The Münster demands can be understood as a means to limit religious authority through reforms made on a macro- as well as micro- level. The specificity of some of the arguments indicate that they were in response to very real issues taking place within the city. Taking a stance against a Catholic-dictated status quo indicates either a Protestant mindset, or a willingness to align with similar values to create a similar end result. That is, even someone who didn’t necessarily align with Protestants on religious matters may have offered their support in hopes of affecting their place in society for the better.

The demands put forth by the citizens of Münster (and accepted by the town council), as well as in many other cities in Germany in 1525 and earlier, make an

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<sup>47</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 191.



important point about how the common citizens of Münster understood both their situation in life and how they might change it. First, there is clearly an understanding of the circumstances of the poor classes of citizens and what (or who) put them in such a situation. Articles presented in Stuhlingen, Memmingen, or Münster demonstrate an informed population, even if it wasn't very well educated. These lists of complaints and demands are not those of hapless populations waiting to be seduced by any opportunist that might come along. Rather, they indicate a group of people ready to take whatever action they saw as necessary to improve their position in life. For many, these arguments were based in Christian language. It is hard to overstate the importance of faith and religion in society at this point in history, and it should come as no surprise that arguments made by the lower classes are based on such things.

The events surrounding Bernhard Rothmann and the Anabaptists in Münster began only five to six years after the successful passage of the articles presented to the council and clergy in 1525. Many of the citizens involved in the events of 1525 would have been similarly involved in the subsequent actions of the population. The raid on the nearby town of Telgt is a great example. What Kerssenbrock misses, or simply omits, from his analysis of the attack is how the common people perceived their ability to go out and take action. Based on his writings, he may have really believed that average people were so incompetent that they really couldn't do anything for themselves. Alternatively, continuing to present the commons as incapable of fending for themselves keeps men like Rothmann and van Leyden firmly in the spotlight. Any amount of agency on the part of the common people would have to completely alter how Kerssenbrock analyzes the situation. Kerssenbrock often writes of how the common people might be "stirred up" or

convinced to do one thing or another. However, in the case of something like the Telgt raid, we have a group of people that have learned from their own previous success. They didn't raid Telgt because Rothmann or someone else tricked them into doing so. This was before Rothmann had reached a position of real power, so it is unlikely that he could have falsely convinced so many people to rise to action. Instead, this was a group of citizens with an institutional memory of success in common action.

Without the raid on Telgt, among other actions taken by the citizens of Münster, it is very likely that Rothmann would have been permanently removed from the city and whatever reform took place in the city would have evolved much differently. Anabaptism may have never arrived with such force, if at all. In fact, the Protestant movement itself in Münster would have faced an enormous setback. Rothmann was the leading Lutheran reformer at the time, and his downfall would have reinforced the Catholic presence in the city. How can it be that the Anabaptist revolution of Münster is described as the actions of a select few, when it took a willing population to put men like Rothmann in power? The important lesson here from the Peasant War is the proof of an informed, active lower class of citizens. While some like Kerssenbrock might assert that the public was simply pulled along by the whims a clergy spouting populist rhetoric, evidence from around Germany, as well as from Kerssenbrock's own work, from the years preceding events in Münster suggests otherwise. This demonstrates a public that had learned from the Peasants' War in 1525 – they now knew that significant action could yield significant results. The events of 1525 were something of a warm-up act for the citizens of Münster. They'd gotten a taste of power, and were able to lean on that experience later, once again to dramatic effect.

Historian George Hunston Williams makes a good case for the connection of the Peasants' War and events ten years later in Münster. He writes, "peasant economic unrest...combined with a new sense of the freedom promised by the gospel and a sensitivity to its demand for a holy life, led to the brief but bloody Peasants' War."<sup>48</sup> He then directly draws the comparison to Münster, explaining that once again evangelical and social factors were acting together. The only distinction he really draws is how the two events acted between social and religious factors. He writes that the Peasants' War began as a social protest before adding evangelical elements, while Münster was the opposite. It began as a religious movement that then gained a social and revolutionary side.<sup>49</sup> In both cases, Williams explains, it was a combination of these factors that drove the movements to their radical actions.

Interestingly, while blame for the events in Münster tends to fall on Rothmann and the two Jans, the response to the impact of the Anabaptist episode was concerned with its influence on common people throughout the empire. James Stayer points out that Münster Anabaptists had attempted to spread the word of their teachings far beyond the city. Those Anabaptists believed that they had been given "the sword for an apocalyptic crusade" that would take over the entire world.<sup>50</sup> Gunter Vogler sums up the impact of the situation, writing, "It is true enough that it was out of the question to translate intention into reality, but the authorities deeply feared an extension of the movement to other territories of the Empire."<sup>51</sup> Vogler mentions a letter from the Bishop of Münster

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<sup>48</sup> Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 362.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1972), 239.

<sup>51</sup> Gunter Vogler, "The Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster in the Tension Between Anabaptism and Imperial Policy," in *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation: Divergent Perspectives*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988)

that expressed concerns about the Münster movement making progress with the “common man” in surrounding areas. The ruling class’ concern surrounding Münster and its effect on the common people in the region carried enough significance that a representative assembly meeting at Worms in 1535 collaborated to write a letter directly to King Ferdinand (the brother of Charles V, acting in his place while Charles was traveling and away from the empire). In this letter, they implored Ferdinand for the support of the entire Empire against Münster and the Anabaptists, and did not hesitate to describe the significance of the matter. According to this document, failure to deal with Münster would result in “irreversible disadvantage and damage, secession, uprising, and insurrection of the common man towards Imperial and Royal Majesty, the Holy Roman Empire, and all of its estates, and will finally lead to the ruin and disruption of the Roman Empire and of all authority and honesty.”<sup>52</sup>

Fears of common revolts, as well as memories of the Peasant War from only a decade earlier, were widespread among rulers in Germany, especially those near Münster. The threats to the entire Roman Empire may have been hyperbole, but this indicates the threat posed by the common man to leaders who fell on the wrong side of their wrath. This fear of commoners was born of experience and prior events – why else would the group of estates assembled at Worms use such powerful language to describe the consequences of unchecked commoners? They indicate an understanding that the common people had proven their ability to act for themselves and force change on local leadership.

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<sup>52</sup> Vogler, “The Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster,” 115.

Framed within the context of the history of Münster and the surrounding region, the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster should not be seen as an aberration, but rather a natural outcome of the large number of variables at work during the early years of the Reformation. We see evidence of the influence of the common people of Münster in the years leading up to the Anabaptist takeover, beginning with the town council itself. We know that members of the council were elected by the general population, and that by the time of this story the council was mostly made up of commons citizens. We see the primary sources, especially Kerssenbrock, showing open disdain for these common people, often referring to them with language such as “raging commons.” Kerssenbrock denies those citizens credit for acting of their own accord, even in instances in which his story seems to suggest exactly that. He either truly believes that the common people are incapable of intelligent, organized actions, or his contempt for them is sufficient to write their influence out of the history. In either case, Kerssenbrock (and Gresbeck) provide a biased analysis of how events in Münster transpired, one that has influenced historians’ understanding ever since.

We must utilize a more critical look through their text to develop a better understanding of how events truly unfolded. By doing so, we can see the actions of a motivated group of common citizens who influenced the development of their city and situation through their own actions. Those actions include the selecting of the town council, the list of demands in the 1525, the placement of Bernard Rothmann in a preaching position in the city, and the Telgt raid of 1532. Even after the inception of the Anabaptist Kingdom, both Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck provide examples of individuals

deciding for themselves how they would respond to new policies or procedures enacted by King Jan van Leyden.<sup>53</sup>

The Peasants' War of 1525 and other examples of peasant unrest throughout the region provide a basis of comparison to indicate how actions taken by the people of Münster compare with those taken by others around Germany at the same time. The evidence supports the idea that the citizens of Münster were similar to their contemporaries in how they exerted themselves on the established hierarchy. The people in Münster drafted a list of issues and demands to present to the local authorities that closely resembled those presented in several other cities. The language and rationale given also align with the articles presented in other areas. In this way, then, the citizens of Münster were not unusual or especially unique.

The violent Münster version of Anabaptism is often the most-cited reason for understanding the group as an unusual aberration. However, we see that many of the standards employed to judge the Münster Anabaptists were created later, and only then applied backwards in time to this story. At the time, Anabaptism itself was not a firm set of beliefs or actions. It was one part of a major set of changes not only in Christian orthodoxy itself, but in how that orthodoxy was developed and put into practice. Throughout Germany, and especially in Münster, we see the common people able to participate in these changes in an unprecedented way. By utilizing primary source texts beyond their personal arguments, we reveal how integral the common people were to

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<sup>53</sup> Jan van Leyden's announcement of the official adoption of polygamy was such an occasion. A group of a couple hundred citizens rebelled against this policy, and managed to capture van Leyden and a few other Anabaptist leaders. After doing so, their plan stalled, allowing pro-van Leyden forces to rally and put down the rebellion. Most of them were killed by beheading, with Jan van Leyden himself doing much of that work.

what took place in the city. Placing Münster in its proper place in the context of early Reformation history shows us that its citizens were not that different from others in the region in their thoughts and actions. Therefore, the events preceding the rise of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster should be considered representative of the time and place, and should provide historians with a deeper understanding of the ideas and influence of common citizens at the onset of the Reformation.

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