

An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants

Martin Luther
(June or July 1525)

The publication and distribution of Luther's Against the Murdering and Robbing Hordes of Peasants coincided with the defeat of the main peasant armies in a series of battles that turned into one-sided slaughters of the rebellious forces. Afterward, some princes and lords also imposed cruel punishments on the survivors. The severity with which the lords suppressed the insurrection led many to sympathize with the peasants and to criticize Luther for what they saw as un-Christian harshness toward the peasants. After hesitating, Luther decided to reply to his critics.

To the honorable and wise Casper Müller, chancellor of Mansfield, my good friend. Grace and peace in Christ.

I have been obliged to answer your letter in a printed book because the little book that I published against the peasants has given rise to so many complaints and questions, as though it were un-Christian and too hard. Indeed, I had intended to plug my ears and to let those blind, ungrateful creatures who seek nothing in me but causes of offense smother in their own vexation until they had to rot in it....

First of all, then, I must warn those who criticize my book to hold their tongues and to be careful not to make a mistake and lose their own heads; for they are certainly rebels at heart, and Solomon says, "My son, fear the Lord and the king, and do not be a fellow-traveler with the rebels for their disaster will come suddenly and who can know what ruin of both you and them will be?" Proverbs 24:21-22. Thus we see that both rebels and those who join them are condemned. God does not want us to make a joke out of this but to fear the king and the government. Those who are fellow-travelers with rebels sympathize with them, feel sorry for them, justify them, and show mercy to those on whom God has no mercy, but whom he wishes to have punished and destroyed. For the man who thus sympathized with the rebels makes it perfectly clear that he has decided in his heart that he will also cause disaster if he has the opportunity. The rulers, therefore, ought to shake these people up until they keep their mouths shut and realize that the rulers are serious.

If they think this answer is too harsh, and that this is talking violence and only shutting men's mouths, I reply, "That is right." A rebel is not worth rational arguments, for he does not accept them. You have to answer people like that with a fist, until the sweat drips off their noses. The peasants would not listen; they would not let anyone tell them anything, so their ears must now be unbuttoned with musket balls till their heads jump off their shoulders. Such pupils need a rod. He who will not hear God's word when it is spoken with kindness, must listen to the headsman, when he comes with his axe. If anyone says I am being uncharitable and unmerciful about this,

The Peasants' Revolt started in Essex on 30 May 1381, when a tax collector tried, for the third time in four years, to levy a poll tax. Richard II's war against France was going badly, the government's reputation was damaged, and the tax was 'the last straw'. Portrait of King Richard II. The peasants were not just protesting against the government. Since the Black Death, poor people had become increasingly angry that they were still serfs, usually farming the land and serving their king. Whipped up by the preaching of radical priest John Ball, they were demanding that