Armies of the German Peasants’ War 1524–26

Douglas Miller • Illustrated by Angus McBride
**Dedication**

This book is dedicated to Elena Joy Miller.

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Every effort has been made to determine the source of contemporary woodcuts.

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**Museums**

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Beutelsbach: Bauernkriegsmuseum, Altes Rathaus, Stiftstrasse 11, 71384 Weinstadt-Beutelsbach (tel: 00 49 7151-693289)

Böblingen: Bauernkriegsmuseum, Pfarrgasse 2, Zehntscheuer, 71032 Böblingen (tel: 00 49 7031-669481)

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INTRODUCTION

At the bottom was the exploited bulk of the nation, the peasants. No matter whose subject the peasant was—a prince’s an imperial baron’s, a bishop’s, a monastery’s or a town’s—he was treated by all as a thing, a beast of burden, and worse... He could neither marry nor die without paying the lord. Besides his statute labour he had to gather litter, pick strawberries and bilberries, collect snail shells, drive the game in the hunt, and chop wood for his lord. The right to fish and hunt belonged to the master... the common pastures and woods... were almost everywhere forcibly appropriated by the lord. The lord reigned as he pleased over the peasant’s own person, over his wife and daughters, just as he reigned over his property. He had the right of the first night. He threw the peasant into the tower whenever he saw fit... he killed the peasant, or had him beheaded whenever he pleased... Who would defend the peasant? It was the barons, clergymen, patricians, or jurists who sat in the courts, and they knew perfectly well what they were being paid for. All the official states of the Empire, after all, lived by squeezing dry the peasants.

By the end of the 15th century the conditions amongst the peasants in Germany described here by Friedrich Engels in his Peasant War in Germany had brought them to breaking point. In these territories, society was still essentially locked in a feudal pattern. In 1476 there had been insurrections in Begeim, and in 1493 near Sélestat in Alsace, site of the first so-called ‘Bundschi.’ conspiracy (the term for the simple peasant’s shoe of that time, which the rebels took as their symbol of solidarity). This rebellion failed, as did its successors in the bishopric of Speyer in 1502 and at Lehen in Breisgau in 1513. In 1514 the Rems Valley in Württemberg witnessed a movement known as ‘Poor Conrad’, as peasants and urban artisans were provoked by the imposition of unbearable new taxes by their duke; these insurgents too were crushed, and their leaders executed. Throughout the Upper Rhine Valley discontent rumbled on, articulating itself in further conspiracies in 1517 as peasants, miners, urban day labourers, artisans and even mercenary soldiers rose up to rid themselves of the intolerable restraints of a system which had not significantly advanced their condition for centuries. Since the Church was closely associated with the ruling classes, the upsurge in the early 1520s of evangelical reformers preaching against abuses by the Church hierarchy added to the ferment; while some, notably Martin Luther of Wittenberg, urged obedience to secular authority, others had more radical sympathies. A defining moment was soon to come.

During the harvest of 1524 in the county of Stühlingen, south of the Black Forest, the Countess of Lupfen ordered her serfs to collect snail shells so that she could wrap thread around them. This ridiculous
instruction proved to be the final straw; within days, some 1,200 peasants had mobilised, elected officers and raised a banner. As the disturbances spread most of south-west Germany was soon in open revolt. The risings stretched from the Black Forest to Lake Constance, into upper Swabia, the lands along the Upper Danube as far downstream as the borders of Bavaria, and southward to the Alps. Between mid-March and mid-April 1525 there were uprisings in central and eastern Franconia on both sides of the River Main. Between mid-April and mid-May revolts broke out in Württemberg; northern Switzerland; in Alsace and the Rhine valley as far downstream as Mainz; in parts of the Palatinate, Lorraine, and the Franche-Comté and Thuringia. Later in the summer of 1525 what could now be called a revolution spread eastwards into Saxony proper and the Erzgebirge, along the border with Bohemia; it also swept through Salzburg and the Habsburg lands of Tyrol, Styria, and Austria.

When the peasants rose up, their overlords were in no position to make a coherent military response. This was the period of the Italian Wars, which saw military and diplomatic struggles by Charles V – Holy Roman Emperor (1519–56), King of Spain (as Charles I, 1516–56), and Archduke of Austria (as Charles I, 1519–21) – to hold his empire together against increasing Turkish and French pressure, hostility from the Pope, and internal pressures for religious reform. It was also a time of continuous jockeying between the territorial princes who, increasingly, had a need for standing armies. Since the end of the 15th century warfare had become an industry. Armies had become largely professional and included a high proportion of trained and well-armed infantrymen who could be kept in the field for a whole campaign – provided that their con-
tractors had the resources. The maintenance of such armies with their infrastructure of transport, victualling and engineering could drain even the coffers of a kingdom. These German princes, who often made ends meet by renting out mercenary armies drawn from the rootless young, were at the top of the feudal order which the peasants now sought to challenge.

**THE SWABIAN LEAGUE**

Because Charles V’s military capability and attention were fully stretched in Italy against François I at the moment when the Peasants’ War broke out, he appointed his brother, the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, to deal with the rebels in his absence. Ferdinand was keen to address the first wave of uprisings in Austria, but had little desire to take on other insurgents elsewhere in the Empire. Furthermore, he had little authority over the German princes, who had formed their own alliance in 1487. Known as the Swabian League, this comprised those dukes and nobles who belonged to the Company of the Shield of St George, and a number of Imperial Cities which had applied for membership in order to maintain order in the south-west German territories – the region known as Swabia.

Key members were the cities of Ulm, Esslingen, Reutlingen, Überlingen, Lindau, Nördlingen, Memmingen, Ravensburg, Gmünd, Biberach, Dinkelsbühl, Pfullendorf, Kempten, Kaufbeuren, Isny, Leutkirch, Giengen, Wangen and Aalen. In the course of 1488 Augsburg, Heilbronn, Wimpfen, Donauwörth, Weil and Böingen also joined, followed at a later date by the Bavarian states of Wittelsbach and the territories of Württemburg and lower Austria.

In reality the Swabian League was not simply a regional structure. In the years immediately
before the outbreak of the Peasants’ War, the bishops of Bamberg and Würzburg, the Landgraves Philipp of Hesse, Friedrich Philip and Ottheinrich, Duke Ludwig of Bavaria, the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria (governing Württemberg following the exile of Duke Ulrich), and Prince Ludwig, the Elector Palatine, had all become members. This gave the League the capability of mustering an army to control all of southern Germany. Gradually, as the peasant revolts spread northwards and eastwards, the dukes of Saxony and Brunswick also felt compelled to mobilise to defend their principalities.

After Duke Ulrich of Württemburg had been exiled, the League had effectively pawned his duchy to the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria for 210,000 guilders, thus generating a substantial war chest. In addition, there were always the Fuggers and Welsers – wealthy patrician families – who had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and were therefore prepared to advance the necessary finance for military campaigns.

**Military organisation of the League**

The headquarters of the League was based in Ulm. Here supreme command was exercised through a war council, which prescribed the various contingents of troops to be levied from each member. Thus with every new applicant the League’s military capability would theoretically increase. Contemporary documents give a snapshot of the standing contingents drawn up by the Council; this is reproduced in the accompanying Table 1.

The League still relied on the heavy armoured cavalry of the nobility, although the effectiveness of Swiss pikemen during the Swabian Wars of 1498–99 had ushered in a new era in military tactics in which the supremacy of the mounted knight had been placed into question. Indeed, the Peasants’ War occurred at a time when the deployment of squared pike formations with wings of handgunners was in the ascendancy. If horse was to be effective then it needed to be mobile, and if heavy armoured horse was to be effective then it would need both an element of surprise and an opposing infantry force which was not well endowed with pikes. The League’s mobile horse was known as the ‘Rennfahne’– a light cavalry vanguard, identified by the standard of two crossed red swords on a black and white standard. In putting together mounted contingents, the independent cities and towns not under the authority of the regional princes drew heavily on ‘poor knights’– sons of the lower and impoverished nobility, who had no inheritance or social role and hence were often found roaming the countryside as robber knights. Because they were likely to be of no fixed abode and therefore could not afford too costly and weighty horse armour, it is more probable that such freelancers rode in the vanguard where more mobile horse were preferred.
The League foot was drawn from the ranks of the many Landsknechts — mercenary footsoldiers, who offered their services for a monthly wage of 4 guilders. They were organised in regiments or Haufen, which in turn consisted of companies or Fähnlein numbering between 120 and 300 men. Each Fähnlein was so-called because it was identified by its own banner, Fahne. Banners in the League ranks would often be those belonging to the towns and Imperial Cities, which raised mercenaries as part of their contribution to the League army. Each company was composed of smaller sub-units, the basic squad of about ten men being known as a Rotte.

Because each Landsknecht had to clothe, arm and feed himself, such mercenary armies were always accompanied by a substantial train or Tross of sutlers and prostitutes, which itself required some organisation and discipline if it was not to hamper the troops; hence this too acquired its own command structure. Alongside the regimental organisation, the Landsknechts maintained their own informal structure symbolised by the ‘ring’ or general assembly known as the Gemein, and their own court martial presided over by an officer known as the Schultheiss, with the task of policing the ranks given to an officer known as the Provost.

Towards the end of 1524 the League resolved to maintain a small contingent of 200 horse and foot divided between the cities of Ulm and Kempten to deal with any further peasant disturbances. By the turn of 1525, however, the uprisings in the Black Forest, Breisgau, Hegau, Sundgau and Alsace demanded a substantial muster, and 3,000 foot and 300 horse were raised. Leonard V of Eck, the Chancellor of Bavaria and a leading figure in the League’s Council, was keen to move aggressively against the peasants. The League army was stretched, however, since the Archduke Ferdinand was concerned with incursions mounted by Ulrich, the exiled Duke of Württemburg intent on reclaiming his duchy. Given that substantial numbers of mercenaries had crossed the Alps to serve with Georg von Frundsberg in the Italian Wars, the League was faced with a problem in raising a sufficiently sizeable force to put down the peasant revolts.

Strategically it was going to be necessary to buy time. This could only be done by engaging in token negotiations with the peasants over their political demands, in the hope that the League army could be reinforced once Frundsberg’s men had returned from Italy. The task of commanding the League army was given to Georg, Truchs (governor) of Waldenburg, who resided in the Allgäu — one of the centres of the disturbances. When he began his campaign at the beginning of April he had an army of 1,500 horse and 7,000 infantry and 18 artillery pieces. The Truchs appointed Frowin von Hutten as his lieutenant in charge of horse, and Duke Wilhelm von Fürstenberg to command the foot.

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1 See MAA 38, The Landsknechts, and Warrior 49, Landsknecht Soldier 1486—1560.
ORGANISATION OF PEASANT ARMIES

It has been argued that the Peasants' War is somewhat of a misnomer, since the rebel bands in fact included day labourers, artisans, townsfolk, and in some cases disaffected landlords and robber knights, as well as German and Swiss mercenaries. Thus the overall size of the peasant forces is difficult to assess. Peasant bands could be formed from a village, a whole valley, or a complete region such as the Rheingau. Contemporary estimates of size turn out to be unreliable. The Archduke Ferdinand wrote to Charles that the peasants numbered 200,000, and the diaries of Mario Santus put the figure at 300,000. Another source has the peasant army between Constance and Augsburg standing at 100,000. The Tauber Valley Articles of War provide a rather more plausible basis for estimation, showing each band comprising several companies, each of which numbered approximately 500, and thus generating several thousand men per band.

After the battle of Leipheim the Swabian League drew up a register of peasants according to the outlying villages. This resulted in a total of 4,005, with figures ranging between five and 100 men from some 114 different villages; but since the roll was made after the battle it is reasonable to assume that this was an overestimate. Nevertheless, using this as a yardstick it has been calculated that there must have been between 120,000 and 150,000 peasants mobilised throughout much of south-west Germany during the war. Not all served simultaneously, however; and this figure would not include townsfolk, whose participation was also sporadic.

The peasant armies were organised into territorial bands known as Haufen. As already mentioned, the Haufe was a familiar organisational unit in Landsknecht armies, which the peasants took as a model to some extent, dividing each band into Fählein and Rotten. Here, however, any similarity with Landsknecht military organisation ends. The bands varied enormously in size, depending on the numbers of insurgents who combined into an organised force in any locality. At Hersfeld, for instance, the peasant band numbered 4,000; at Frankenhausen it stood at 8,000; and the ranks of insurgents could swell to as many as the 18,000 Alsatian peasants who took the field at the battle of Zabern.

The number of companies could vary within each band. At Weingarten, the Swabian League counted 32 peasant standards (each equivalent to a company). Each company was made up of 500 men, and each platoon or squad contained ten to 15 peasants. The peasant bands generally adopted the same rank titles as the Landsknechts. On the raising of a band there would be the appointment or election of a supreme commander (Oberster Feldhauptmann) and lieutenants (Leutinger). Each company (Fählein) was commanded by a captain and had its own standard-bearer (Fähnrich), sergeant (Feldwebel) and squad leaders (Rottmeister).

Leadership

In many cases the rebels had difficulty in finding a suitable commander with military experience - military command was not automatically taken by the political or clerical leaders who had come to the fore in their movement. In some cases military leaders emerged during the
course of the struggle, as in the case of the miners' leaders Caspar Prassler and Michel Gruber at the battle of Schladming, and Hans Müller of Bulgenbach – himself a former Landsknecht – who was leader of the Black Forest peasants. Other leaders, such as the robber knight Götz von Berlichingen, bore only a dubious and opportunist allegiance to the peasant cause. Discipline and a shared sense of purpose had to be provided by an overwhelming belief in the movement's political and religious goals, which in turn depended on the charisma and integrity of each peasant leader. Membership of what came to be known as the 'Christian Brotherhood'—motivated by a belief in divine justice — took priority over military experience among the peasants in Upper Swabia. In the Black Forest peasants' manifesto it was clearly stated that those who refused to join the Christian Brotherhood would be ostracised.

Great importance was attached to democratic principles in the military command structure, and the 'ring' — whereby the peasants gathered in a circle to debate tactics, troop movements, alliances and the distribution of spoils — was a characteristic of these armies. Nevertheless, there was a hierarchy: the Oschenfurter Articles of War, for example, provided for a supreme commander and a marshal (Schultheiss) of the band. In addition there were the lieutenants, captains and standard-bearers of each company, a master gunner, a master of the wagon-fort, a master of the train, four masters of the watch, four sergeant-majors or Feldweibel to arrange the order of battle, a Weibel for each company, two quartermasters, farriers, quartermasters for the horse, a communications officer, and a pillage master for each company. In the Allgäu band, for example, there were eight companies (Unterhaufen or Fähnlein) based on village musters, which each had their own captain:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village/hamlet</th>
<th>Captain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Günzburg</td>
<td>Ulrich Rapp von Gunburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oberdorf</td>
<td>Puin Probst von Ettwiesen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeg</td>
<td>Hans Biethlin von Seeg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wertach</td>
<td>Endris Albrecht von Oy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staufen</td>
<td>Ulrich Gsell von Immenstadt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isny</td>
<td>Hans Biteroff von Holzleute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altusried</td>
<td>Thomas Scherer von Legau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leutkircher Heide</td>
<td>Michael Huess von Haselburg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Peasant Bands, by region

(After figures from Besang & Hoyer – see Bibliography)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Band</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Commander(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SW Germany/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Swabia:</td>
<td>Allgäu</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>Jörg Schmid ('Knopf') &amp; Jörg Tauber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lake</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>Dietrich Hurlevagen &amp; Hans Jacob Humpis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baiiringen</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>Ulrich Schmid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leipheim</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>Hans Jacob Wehe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Allgäu</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>Florian Greisel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Forest:</td>
<td>Black Forest</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>Hans Müller von Bulgenbach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breisgau-Ortenau</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>Hans Ziller aus Amoltern &amp; Goerg Heid aus Lahr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper Margrave</td>
<td>-?</td>
<td>Hans Hammerstein aus Vohrenbach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Margrave</td>
<td>-?</td>
<td>Klewi Rudi aus Maihderingen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tauber Valley</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>Jacob Kohl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neckar Valley-Odenwald</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>Georg Metzler, Jäcklein Rohrbach, Götz von Berlichingen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bildhausen</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>Hans Schnabel &amp; Hans Schar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alsace:</td>
<td>Neuenburg</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>Hans Kuffer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weissenburg</td>
<td>-?</td>
<td>Bacchus Fischbach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Alsace</td>
<td>-?</td>
<td>Erasmus Gerber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle Alsace</td>
<td>-?</td>
<td>Wolf Wagner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sundgau</td>
<td>-?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thuringia:</td>
<td>Fulda</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>Hans Dallhop &amp; the Preacher of Dipperz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hersfeld</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Werra</td>
<td>c.8,000</td>
<td>Hans Sippel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>c.10,000</td>
<td>Thomas Müntzer &amp; Heinrich Pfeiffer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mulhausen &amp; Thueringen</td>
<td>c.5,500</td>
<td>Albrecht Menge, Jakob Krasusa &amp; Melchor Wiegand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Salza</td>
<td>c.8,000</td>
<td>Buraventura Künschner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frankenhausen</td>
<td>c.8,000</td>
<td>Hans Tunger &amp; Hans Becker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Erfurt</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amstadt</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>Hans Bauer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saalfeld</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austrian Alps:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

9
Each captain had a council of four men whose task it was to negotiate and deal with their counterparts in other companies. In addition there was a sergeant, a scribe, a paymaster and a standard-bearer. Since the peasants were to some extent emulating Landsknecht organisation, they also adopted the discipline of the standard\textsuperscript{2}, which became the all-important symbol for their struggle. It is clear that the roles of the preacher and the standard-bearer were pivotal in the command structure of the peasant bands.

**Composition**

There was much fluidity in the composition of the peasant forces. It has been shown that villages would supply units of men, which were rotated about every two to four weeks. It is said that the peasants of Alsace were organised into four groups which regularly took each others' places, thus allowing men to tend their farms and still serve with the bands one week in four. Similarly, the miners of the archbishopric of Salzburg, for example, were put back to work extracting silver to hire fresh contingents of Landsknechts. Such short-term rotation can only have been detrimental to any attempts to build up cohesion as a fighting force.

\textsuperscript{2} See *Der Bauernkrieg in Oberschwaben*, Elmar Kuhn (ed.)
Those towns which joined the war usually did so under pressure, but would send men or supply firearms, artillery and provisions. A number of urban companies, composed mainly of guild craftsmen and artisans, joined the peasant bands – as in the case of the Tauber Valley Band, which was augmented by units from the city of Rothenburg. Many towns remained neutral, however, and some of the larger Imperial Cities such as Strasburg, Nuremberg and Augsburg – which undoubtedly had large and well-stocked arsenals – refused to support the peasants at the height of the war.

Because of their general lack of military experience, a number of bands – notably the Lake Constance, Black Forest and Allgäu contingents – resorted to recruiting substantial numbers of Landsknechts, as well as Swiss mercenaries or Reisläufner from the northern cantons (Thurgau, St Gallen, Bern, Zurich, Solothurn and Basel). The Swiss were known for their prowess with the pike and their affinity with the peasant cause (there were similar popular disturbances in the Swiss Confederation). Landsknechts served in the peasants’ ranks, and in some cases vice versa. Indeed, those same districts which had provided contingents of mercenaries to serve in the Italian Wars were the centres of peasant revolt. A large number came from Ries by Nördlingen and the area around Lake Constance; the Ries standard even depicted a Landsknecht and a peasant extending a hand to one another.

**PEASANT TACTICS AND STRATEGY**

Given the spontaneous and sporadic nature of the mobilisation, attendant logistical problems, and the absence of any centralised command structure linking the territorial bands, the strategy and tactics of the peasants naturally remained somewhat limited.

The first major logistical constraint was weaponry, which peasants had generally been prevented from owning and carrying since the 13th century. Gradually the laws had been relaxed as the community became increasingly drawn into defending the wider areas around its lords’ estate. In some parts of southern Germany and Austria there had been a tradition of local militias, which meant that the men in some villages owned a polearm, a sword and a breastplate. More generally, however, the only weapons available to the peasant would be a long knife and either a boar spear or a farming implement. Firearms had to be acquired either from plundered castles or from the arsenals of those towns which agreed to assist in their struggle.

The biggest weakness in the peasant armies was the absence of substantial numbers of cavalry. Such mounted troops as existed probably were probably deployed largely on reconnaissance patrols. Similarly, at the outset of the war the peasants had no artillery. This is not to say that they did not recognise its importance or have experience in this area. In the *Art of War* (1521), Machiavelli claimed that peasants made the best soldiers because of their familiarity with the spade.
One of the tactical failings of the peasant armies was their lack of cavalry to counter the *Rennfahne* of the Swabian League. There is only one mention of a detachment of peasant horse, under the command of Claus Pfannschmidt of the Mühlhausen Band in Thuringia. Generally only the commanders of the peasant bands appear to have been mounted, and even this was considered by some to be an infringement of the principle of equality. While mounted peasants must have been deployed in reconnaissance, we have no accounts of peasant horse used in surprise attacks or to penetrate the ranks of the League’s foot. This woodcut shows excellent details of typical costume and gear. (Extract from the *Triumph of Maximilian*, artist probably Albrecht Altdorfer; courtesy Dover Publications)

during peacetime. Numbers of German peasants and artisans would certainly have gained experience during the many campaigns of the first quarter of the 16th century which preceded the Peasants’ War, during which their skills were needed as drovers, forgers and carpenters, and as labourers on field works which would have brought them into close contact with cannon. The Articles of War of the Tauber Valley band specifically provided a place for the artillery in the peasants’ constitution, and ordnance was soon acquired one way or another, either by negotiation with nobles and towns or by plundering castles. However, maintaining artillery pieces and munitions and gathering trained gunners proved to be an abiding problem. At Königshofen, for example, a failure to pay the master gunners of Mergentheim, Wertheim and Mainz led them to desert their positions at a critical stage in the battle.

These limitations had an impact on tactics in the field. In general, as the peasant bands moved through the countryside the monasteries and castles which stood in their path were seen as obvious sources of supply, plunder and weaponry, as well as symbols of the order they sought to challenge. In such situations the peasants took the offensive, although some sieges proved unsuccessful due to lack of effective artillery. In open encounters with the armies of the League much more defensive tactics were adopted, and in only a minority of cases do we find the peasant army prepared to seize the initiative with any degree of success, as for instance at Schladming in Austria.

Much use was made of the wagon-fort, which had been deployed particularly effectively during the Hussite Wars by Jan Zizka (1359–1424). His basic strategy had been to move offensively but to fight defensively, deploying his war-wagons in a circle whenever a suitable defensive position was found. The wagons would be chained together, with the cavalry and draft animals held in the centre. If time permitted, ditches would be dug around the outer edge of the fort, and heavy timbers used to close all gaps between and beneath the wagons. Zizka’s artillery, which was mounted on wheeled carts, was sometimes placed between wagons, but more frequently held in the
interior of the wagon-fort, where they were positioned on mounds of earth so that they could fire over the wagons. Pikemen, crossbowmen, and hand-gunners would then occupy the wagons and take up position in the gaps, using their weapons through loopholes. Wagon-forts could be erected quite quickly; the cavalry would be sent out to sortie, provoking the enemy to attack, and then beat a hasty retreat into the confines of the mobile stockade. As the enemy approached, the firepower within the fort would rake them until the attack faltered, or smashed itself against the wagon wall, when the pikemen and cavalry could be deployed.

Zizka had campaigned extensively in eastern Europe and in eastern and southern Germany, where his tactics undoubtedly made an impression. However, the wagon-fort was by no means unbeatable. It required flat terrain; it was extremely vulnerable if attacked before it was properly established; and once established, it remained vulnerable to artillery fire. Perhaps most importantly, the system was unsuited to offensive deployment. This was a legacy which was apparently unclear to the peasants, who made extensive use of carts and hay wagons to transport their supplies and weapons. There are no contemporary depictions of peasant transport which might shed light on the extent to which any modifications were undertaken to create Hussite-type war-wagons. In situations where rapid deployment was required, the peasants could not emulate the tight defensive formation of the Zizka system, which had been conceived during a period when the power of field artillery had yet to come into its own. Consequently, at the battles of Leipheim, Frankenthal and Böblingen the peasants’ wagon-forts proved no match for the League’s artillery and cavalry.

In strategic terms, the Peasants’ War can be seen as a succession of essentially localised uprisings involving numbers of territorial bands with no overarching command structure. Events revealed the absence of a cohesive political programme, a unified leadership, or any strategic plan for capitalising on weaknesses in the enemy’s camp at critical moments. In addition, the Swabian League was able to make extensive use of agents provocateurs, spies, and uneasy moderates within the peasant leadership, whilst buying itself time at crucial junctures in the campaign by offering token political concessions.

**CHRONOLOGY**

1493 Bundschiuh uprisings in Sélestat, Speyer.

1502 Bundschiuh uprisings in Speyer.

1513 Bundschiuh uprising in Lehen, Breisgau.

1514 ‘Poor Conrad’ revolt in the Rems Valley, east of Stuttgart.

1517 Bundschiuh disturbances in the Upper Rhine Valley.

This hay wagon on display at the agricultural museum in Ahorn, Germany, dates from 1835; yet it bears all the features of a design which had stood the test of time since before the Peasants’ War – note the braces to the wheel hubs. Contemporary woodcuts reveal this to have been a quite sophisticated chassis to which a number of modifications could be made for military use. Planks or wicker panels could be fitted around the inside of the stake body if wagons were needed to carry supplies or weapons. A full wagon could be covered by a tied-down sheet, or hoops might be fitted to provide a higher structure for sheltering troops. During the Hussite Wars these had been converted into the formidable ‘war wagons’ with detachable side panels, and boards suspended underneath the wagon loopholed for prone hand-gunners. We have no pictorial evidence of such converted war wagons during the Peasants’ War, and can only speculate that such protective modifications were indeed undertaken, particularly since the deployment of wagon-forts was a preferred tactic. (Photo Michael Tonn, courtesy Gerätemuseum des Coburger Landes)
1524:
23 June Peasants’ revolt in Stühlingen.
19 September Townsfolk revolt at Mühlhausen in Thuringia.
2 October Stühlingen peasants begin march through Black Forest to join with the Hegau rebels.
Mid-October Klettgauer peasants revoke their obligations to their duke.
Mid-November Thomas Müntzer visits Klettgauer band.
10 December Peasants storm St Trudpert monastery, Breisgau.
24 December Discontented peasants form the Baltringen Band.

1525:
22 January The miners of Schwaz in the Tyrol mobilise.
23 January Peasants at Kempten organise against the abbot.
9 February A delegation from the Swabian League is sent to negotiate with the Baltringen Band in order to win time to mobilise troops.
14 February The peasants of the Allgäu form their own band at Sonnthalen.
16 February The Baltringen Band hand over a list of 300 grievances to the Swabian League; their main demand is the abolition of serfdom.
1 March The famous Twelve Articles are drawn up on behalf of the peasants of Swabia.
Early March The peasants from the region surrounding Lake Constance form the ‘Lake Band’.
6–7 March Representatives of the Baltringen, Allgäu and Lake Bands form the Christian Brotherhood of Upper Swabia.
22 March The Peasants’ War spills over into Franconia.
25 March Representatives of the Christian Brotherhood concede to a court adjudicating their demands.
26 March The Baltringen Band rejects any compromise, chooses a military course of action, and storms the castle at Schemmerberg.
1 April Peasants mobilise in the Würzburg area.
2 April Peasants in the Neckar Valley organise under the leadership of Jäcklein Rohrbach.
2–3 April The Allgäu peasants capture the monastery at Kempten.
4 April Battle of Leipheim – troops of the Swabian League defeat contingents of the peasant army in Upper Swabia; over 1,000 rebels are killed and c.4,000 taken prisoner. This renders the Baltringen Band powerless until the middle of April.
Early April Peasants from the Bishopric of Würzburg, the Rothenburg Band and other elements combine to form the Tauber Valley Band. They call – in effect – for the complete abolition of the feudal system.

6 April The Hegauer Band becomes active.

14 April The peasants of Alsace revolt under the leadership of Erasmus Gerber. Georg, Truchsess of Waldburg, defeats a peasant army at the battle of Wurzach.

Mid-April Odenwald peasants combine forces with their counterparts from the Neckar Valley and the Duchy of Hohenlohe to form the Neckar Valley–Odenwald Band.

16 April The Neckar Valley–Odenwald Band take Weinsberg and sit in judgement over the nobles of the town; peasants indulge in violent acts of revenge.

17 April The Treaty of Weingarten is signed between the Truchsess of Waldburg and the peasants of Upper Swabia: a court is to hear the peasants’ grievances.

18 April The peasants of Limburg revolt. The Werra Band mobilises in south-west Thuringia.

19 April Heilbronn surrenders to Neckar Valley–Odenwald Band.

23 April Hostilities spread into the Rhineland Palatinate.

25 April Stuttgart is occupied by the peasants; uprising in Mainz.

28 April Erfurt is forced to open its gates to the peasants.

28–30 April The Peasants’ War spreads to Switzerland, with a mobilisation of bands in Solothurn and Basel.

2 May The Allgäu revolt re-ignites.

5 May Martin Luther publishes a tract denouncing the peasants.

8 May The peasants take Würzburg.

9 May Beginning of revolt in the Tyrol.

11 May Landgrave Philipp of Hesse occupies Eisenach after recapturing Fulda on 3 May.

Map outlining the route taken by the Swabian League’s army during the war. Supreme military command and the strategic direction of the Truchsess’ campaigns was exercised by a council of war which met at Ulm. (Alexander Moore, after Bensing & Hoyer)
12 May Victory of the Swabian League over a peasant force at Böblingen puts an end to peasant rebellion in Württemberg.
14–15 May Troops from Hessen, Brunswick and Saxony defeat the Franconian peasants’ army at Frankenhans – some 5,000 peasants and townsfolk are put to the sword.
16–17 May The Alsatian peasants surrender to the Duke of Lorraine after defeat at the battle of Zabern, and many are slaughtered.
24 May 12,000 peasants surrender in Freiburg.
27 May After torture and interrogation Thomas Müntzer is executed at Görlitz.
2 June The Odenwald peasants are defeated by an army of the Swabian League at Königshofen.
4 June The peasants of Franconia are heavily defeated at Würzburg.
2 July Salzburg peasants and miners defeat archducal army under Sigmund von Dietrichstein at Schladming.
End of August After several skirmishes, the Tyrolean peasants manage to conclude a treaty which makes numerous concessions.

1526:
February/March Fresh outbreaks of hostilities in the Tyrol.
June The Tyrolean peasant force falls apart.

THE THEATRES OF WAR

Stühlingen, Waldshut and the Hegau
During the harvest of 1524 there was a major disturbance in the county of Stühlingen, to the south of the Black Forest. Some 1,200 peasants mobilised, raised a banner and elected a standard-bearer and officers, designating a Landsknecht soldier, Hans Müller von Bulgenbach, as their leader. Most commentators view this event as the real beginning of the Peasants’ War. While the Stühlingen peasants negotiated the resolution of their grievances with their count, a second flashpoint occurred in Waldshut near the Swiss border, where further groups of peasants had banded under the leadership of a priest named Balthasar Hubmaier.

When it became clear that Waldshut was not prepared to hand over Hubmaier as the authorities demanded, the Archduke Ferdinand ordered the Swabian League to march on the town at the beginning of August 1524. At this juncture the League hoped to gain support

Poor harvests in 1523 and 1524 compounded the logistical problem of keeping thousands of peasants fed for weeks on end. Consequently monasteries, which kept particularly large storehouses – such as Weissenau in Upper Swabia – became the target for plunder. At Anhausen the Tauber Valley peasants were quite systematic in their looting, stripping the monastery of all its timber – including beds, pews and even beams – and all tools and metal, including the two church bells as raw material for casting cannon. This image shows many details, including a group (top left) bustling netting the fish from the monastery ponds. Distributing the spoils was a contentious task and often a major topic for debate in ‘the ring’ – the peasant army’s forum. (Weissenauer Chronik, courtesy Fürstlich Waldburg-Zeilschen Gesamtsarchiv, Schloss Zeil, Sig.ZAMs 54)
from several Swiss cities which were experiencing similar peasant disturbances. Faced with this threat, Waldshut struck an alliance with the Stühlingen peasants, some 800 of whom marched into the city at the beginning of September, thus marking the first significant alliance between rural peasantry and townsfolk.

On 3 September the authorities found themselves in a difficult position. At a meeting at Radolfzell the League commanders had to acknowledge that they had neither the men nor the money to muster the necessary contingents of troops. The vast majority of fighting men were destined for northern Italy, serving under the command of Georg von Frundsberg in the cause of Charles V. Those Landsknechts who did remain on German soil appeared to be in the ranks of Bulgenbach’s band already. The League was thus forced to buy time through negotiation, while its agents could set about undermining the leadership of the peasants with the offer of double pay to their men to serve in Italy with Frundsberg. Once it became apparent that the League was not in a position to take Waldshut, Hubmaier returned to the city. In Stühlingen, negotiations with the duke failed, whereupon the peasants laid siege to his castle for two weeks before withdrawing, frustrated by their lack of heavy artillery.

These disturbances prompted other peasants in the area known as the Hegau into action, and on 2 October they mustered a band and elected a commander with a council of 24 men. On 6 October Bulgenbach marched his troop northwards through the Black Forest. As they moved from village to farmstead they broadcast their grievances, and before long their ranks had swollen to 4,500 men divided into three separate bands. These developments were sufficient to persuade the authorities at Villingen, Überlingen and Rheinfelden to summon a court to hear the peasants’ grievances. On an assurance that these would be properly investigated, the vast majority of insurgents laid down their arms and dispersed.

The experienced soldier Hans Müller von Bulgenbach was not taken in by this subterfuge, however, and in November he and a small band of followers marched through the Villingen area gathering support for their aims. Faced with the onset of winter, Bulgenbach’s force diminished to less than a few hundred; and they were soon scattered by a small troop of League horse and foot at Donaueschingen on 14 December.

**Upper Swabia**

Neither the example of Donaueschingen nor the hearing of the grievances of the Stühlingen and Hegau peasants could quieten the general discontent, however. During the winter months, the dispossessed Duke Ulrich of Württemberg had assembled a force of some 6,000 foot and 300 horse with the aim of reclaiming his forfeited territories. His army, which consisted of Landsknechts and Swiss mercenaries and a troop of peasants under the command of Bulgenbach,
broke camp at Hohentwiel on 23 February and headed north for Stuttgart. This now posed an additional threat to the League and the House of Habsburg.

Duke Ulrich, however, was no great ally of the peasant cause. As events turned out, his march on Stuttgart faltered due to a lack of funds to pay his mercenaries and the withdrawal of his major Swiss contingents, who had learned of the heavy losses incurred by their fellow countrymen at the battle of Pavia in Italy. This victory of Charles V over François I freed up several thousand Landsknechts serving under Georg von Frundsberg, who soon commenced their march back over the Alps in search of new employment. This expected reinforcement of some 4,000 foot
was heartening news for the League – but it would have to be paid for, and their coffers were empty. This crisis was eased by the intervention of the Fuggers and Welsers, wealthy merchant families, who ensured that Georg, Truchsess of Waldburg – the field commander appointed by the League in March 1525 – would have a war chest of some 10,000 guilders. (As we have seen, however, this represented only the basic wages for 2,500 men for one month, leaving aside all other expenses.)

While Duke Ulrich was preoccupying the League, three new peasant bands had mobilised in Upper Swabia. The bishopric of Kempten had seen a number of disturbances over the years, as successive prince-bishops had extended the feudal system throughout much of the outlying district. This had led to an uprising which the League had suppressed in 1492. In 1523 there had been renewed resistance, which simmered on for over a year before boiling into open rebellion in 1525. Following a series of failed attempts to negotiate their demands, the peasants of Kempten formed the ‘Christian Brotherhood’, which a few days later was embraced by the Allgäu Band. The Christian Brotherhood united all peasants in Upper Swabia around the notion of ‘divine justice’. When news broke that the Swabian League was marching on the Allgäu, any thoughts of negotiation with the authorities were soon outweighed by the need for physical resistance. Under the command of Jorg Schmid, the Allgäu Band had equipped itself well and had even acquired numerous cannon.

On 21 February a second band mustered near Rappertsweiler close to Lake Constance. By the end of March its ranks had been swollen by numbers of Landsknechts who had been returning from northern Italy. This so-called ‘Lake Band’ was considered to be the best-equipped peasant army in Upper Swabia; its leadership was actually from patrician stock, in the persons of Dietrich Hurlswagen from Lindau and Hans Jacob Humpis from Senftenau, whose true motives were far from clear.

The third and largest troop of peasants had been gathering steadily since the end of 1524 around the village of Baltringen south of the Danube, and by mid-February some 10,000 men had assembled at Laupheim. In command was an artisan from Sulmingen by the name of Ulrich Schmid, who held the somewhat naïve view that divine justice would prevail without any military action being necessary. His band was nevertheless well-organised – enhanced no doubt by the presence of numbers of Landsknechts, who were well versed in the tactical use of squared formations.

The emergence of these large peasant bands was a source of increasing concern for the Swabian League, particularly given the additional appearance of two further contingents: the 7,000-strong Lower Allgäu Band, which had assembled at Wurzach under the command of the priest Florian Greisel; and the 5,000-strong Leipheim Band to the east of Ulm. The League army seemed in danger of being trapped by a pincer movement between the forces of Duke Ulrich of Württemberg and these combined bands, many of which posed an immediate threat to the city of Ulm – the League’s headquarters. In an effort to buy time, the Truchsess let it be known that the peasants’ grievances would be seriously considered, as long as hostilities ceased.

Meanwhile, radical elements of the Baltringen Band urged their leader Ulrich Schmid to press ahead with their political demands; and
their scribe, Sebastian Lotzer, pulled their grievances together into a manifesto known as the Twelve Articles, which combined radical social and religious demands. At the beginning of March, Ulrich Schmid and Sebastian Lotzer invited the leadership of the Lake and Allgäu bands to a summit in Memmingen to discuss a Christian Brotherhood of all peasants in southern Germany. At this meeting the three bands drew up a set of Articles of War, which laid down the organisational structure, ranks and disciplinary code for the combined forces. One question which remained fatally unresolved concerned the issue of supreme command. Each band was to retain independent commanders, who were nevertheless obliged to maintain regular contact with one another. By the end of March, about 5,000 peasants from some 15 parishes and 117 hamlets and farmsteads were on the move between Ulm, Augsburg and Donauwörth.

Once Duke Ulrich had beaten his retreat from Stuttgart, the Truchsess could concentrate on smashing the peasant rebellion. His army now comprised 1,500 horse, 7,000 foot and 18 field guns. However, when it became known that the mission of his march on Ulm was to destroy the peasants, the Truchsess’ Landsknechts mutinied at Dagersheim; the Memmingen contingent withdrew, as did his Augsburg and Lake Constance units. The Truchsess was able to hold the remaining troops together, but when he reached the walls of Ulm he found that the city fathers were only prepared to allow 600 of his horse to enter its walls. Soon, however, reinforcements arrived from other League members – notably the bishoprics of Bamberg, Mainz and Würzburg, the Duke of Bavaria, Markgrave Casimir of Brandenburg and Landgrave Philipp of Hesse.

The League’s council instructed the Truchsess to make the first move against the Baltringen Band, and numerous skirmishes ensued at Laupheim, Risslissen and Oplingen towards the end of March. On 2 April the Baltringen peasants took up a new position at Grunzheim on the same day that the Truchsess received orders to attack the peasants at Leipheim. On 4 April 1525 came the first decisive battle of the Peasants’ War.

A band of five companies, augmented by 250 citizens from Leipheim, had taken up various positions to the west of the town. Scouts reported back to the League that the peasants at Leipheim were well armed; their commanders had indeed made strenuous efforts to acquire
powder and shot for their cannon. This main
rpeasant force, some 3,000–4,000 strong, had
taken up an advantageous position along the east
bank of the River Biber. To the left was a wood and
to the right a stream and marshland. Behind them
stood a makeshift wagon-fort of overturned carts
between which were positioned ‘hook guns’ and
light artillery pieces.

As in other engagements, the Truchsess used
negotiations as a cover for the continued deploy-
ment of his forces. He dispatched detachments
of Hesse and Ulm horse under the command of
Sigmund Berger across the Danube (Donau) to
the village of Elchingen while he retained the bulk of his army facing
Leipheim. These detachments met some 1,200 peasants pre-occupied
with plunder, and soon dispersed them, taking 250 prisoners. Following a
barrage of fire from the peasants, the Truchsess sent in a vanguard of light
horse and a ‘forlorn hope’ against the fortified peasant position. When
the peasants saw the full strength of the League’s army they began to beat
a tactical retreat. Some 2,000 were able to reach the town of Leipheim,
taking their wounded with them on carts. Others sought to escape across
the Danube; over 400 drowned and a further 500 were cut down by the
Truchsess’ horse, which pursued them to the gates of Leipheim.

After this success the League army remained encamped outside
Leipheim until 11 April. The Truchsess’ Landsknechts demanded their
pay and threatened to take the ordnance and change sides if no money
was forthcoming. However, the Truchsess was able to stave off the
mutiny and his army broke camp, marching south towards Lake
Constance. On 14 April the Swabian League encountered the Lower
Allgäu peasants at Wurzach. Although numbering 7,000, this band
was relatively inexperienced and three salvoes of League artillery
were enough to cause the peasants to disperse in panic, being cut
to pieces by the cavalry waiting beyond the town. Four peasant cannon
were captured.

Meanwhile, the Lake Band had been taking numerous castles during
early April and gaining the support of the towns of Friedrichsafen and
Wollnatingen. Consequently this force was well-equipped with firepower
and with 12,000 men – numerically a match for the League army. On
the morning of 15 April the two armies confronted each other on the
outskirts of Weingarten, and both commenced with an artillery barrage.
Sensing that a frontal attack would result in defeat and running out
of powder, the Truchsess withdrew his troops to a safe position behind
the village of Gaisbeuren. Hearing from his scouts that the peasants
were planning an attack on his camp to raid his artillery park, he kept
his horse and foot on full alert during the night, and even set fire to the
village of Gaisbeuren so that he could monitor the movements of the
peasants. The Lake peasants under Eitelhans Ziegelmuller withdrew,
but not before ordering every man to arm himself with a polearm.
Word was also sent out to seek assistance from the Hegau, Black Forest
and Upper Allgäu bands.

On Easter Sunday there was a ceasefire. As negotiations proceeded
the peasants took up a new but less advantageous position, moving their
artillery down from the slopes to a point directly facing the League army. Frowin von Hutten, commander of the League horse, was eager to deploy his men at this point, but the Truchsess desisted and signalled his willingness to negotiate a treaty with the peasants. It is said that the presence of seasoned fighting men in the ranks of the peasant armies was the deciding factor in dissuading the Truchsess from a frontal assault.

The ensuing Treaty of Weingarten effectively neutralised the Upper Swabian peasants, allowing the League to concentrate its efforts on putting down the disturbances in the Neckar Valley and the Odenwald. This could have been an opportunity for the alliance between Duke Ulrich and the Hegau and Black Forest peasants to block the path of the League army, but it was not taken. Hans Müller von Bulgenbach initially saw these troop movements as constituting an immediate threat to the Black Forest. Band and hurriedly positioned his men at Hufingen, only 20km away from the League army. However, when the Hegau band heard the news that the Truchsess’ men had plundered the surrounding countryside at Radolfzell, they moved south to see the extent of damage inflicted on their homesteads. When Bulgenbach received news from his scouts that the League army was intent on pushing north and not westwards, he turned his attention towards Freiburg.

It was there that the Duke of Baden had sought refuge from the attentions of several peasant bands, most prominent of which was the Breisgau troop, active on both banks of the Rhine. On 17 May four bands numbering 18,000 men and some 20 companies surrounded the city and demanded its support for their cause. For three nights the peasants sent out scouts to find ways into Freiburg so that they could spike its guns. On the 19th they made a surprise assault on the castle hill, taking the blockhouse, and under cover of darkness they dragged the heavy cannon up the slope in order to rain artillery fire down on the city. After tough negotiations the city fathers gave up their defence.

After Freiburg, the Breisgau and Markgrave bands returned to their homelands and managed to negotiate some concessions from their lords, which put an end to hostilities in that part of the Upper Rhineland. Hans Müller von Bulgenbach was not prepared to give up the fight, however, and the Black Forest, Hegau and Klettgau bands fought on until they were finally extinguished in the summer of 1525.

**Alsace**

By the end of April 1525, five well-organised bands
had mobilised in Alsace and the Sundgau and were encamped at a number of monasteries which now lay under their control. The best organised – the Lower Alsace Band – was under the command of Erasmus Gerber. He instructed all those men capable of carrying a weapon to muster in four groups; each group was to take turns at military service – eight days with the band, and three weeks back tending their farmsteads. In the event of emergencies or impending battle all men would be recalled. This system – unique amongst the peasant insurgents – relied on very tight organisation.

On 12 May the Lower Alsace peasants marched from Mauernmuster and occupied Zabern. The band, allegedly numbering 18,000 men, was the largest of the Peasants’ War. To the west, Duke Anton of Lorraine now felt compelled to enter the fray. According to the account of Nicolaus Vollcy de Seronville, the duke’s secretary, he had mobilised an army of 6,000 horse, 5,000 foot and at least 12 cannon. The infantry in the duke’s ranks were a motley crew of Spanish, German, Flemish, Italian and Albanian mercenaries.

The battle of Zabern opened on 15 May 1525 with a cannonade from both armies. Surprised by the peasants’ firepower, the duke withdrew to the slopes of the villages of St Johann and Steinburg. Here the ducal army remained for a day in a well-defended position. Erasmus Gerber had made a tactical assessment of the situation, and requested reinforcements from the outlying peasant bands. These were to approach from the south, but for some of them word arrived late. When the first relief column arrived on 16 May it halted some 6km from the duke’s position, while the second pressed on to engage the enemy outside the village of Lupstein. Bitter fighting ensued and the peasants were forced to retreat – at first behind a hastily deployed wagon-fort, before being driven back further to the village itself.

Confronting the well-defended village, the duke had few tactical options. He ordered his heavy cavalry to transport his hand-gunners to a point as near to the village as possible; under their covering fire his Landsknechts could then mount an assault on the peasant defences. However, they met with stubborn resistance; and the order was given to raise the village to the ground. Meanwhile the peasant units in Zabern could only look on at the massacre which was unfolding at Lupstein.

This drawing depicts the arrival of the army of the Swabian League at Ummendorf, Upper Swabia. In the foreground are light horse – note the mounted crossbowman, centre. The heavy horse at top left are headed by the Truchsess and his commanders followed by their respective banners – three black lions on a golden-yellow field (the Truchsess), a silver elephant on a red field (the Duke of Helfenstein), an eagle of unknown colours (the Duke of Fürstenberg), and the League banner (incorrectly represented here – see Plate E3). (Weissenauer Chronik, courtesy Fürsich Waldburg-Zell'schen Gesamtschule, Schloss Zeil, Sig.ZAMs 54)
They indicated to the duke that they wished to discuss terms for the hand-over of the town. Duke Anton demanded unconditional surrender and 100 hostages; and as this surrender took place, his mercenaries began to strike out uncontrollably at the defenceless peasants. In the ensuing panic many peasants fled back to Zabern, where they were mercilessly cut down by the duke's men. Zabern effectively ended the uprising in Alsace, and the duke began his march back to his residence at Nancy. He found his way barred by some 8,000 peasants from Middle Alsace at Scherweiler on 20 May, but the encounter was brief; it cost some 4,000 peasants and 500 Landsknecht casualties.

**Württemberg**

After Duke Ulrich's failed attempt to retake Stuttgart (February/March 1525) the situation had remained relatively calm in Württemberg. However, when news came of the events in Hegau and Upper Swabia, the peasants of Württemberg began to muster at Bottwar under the command of Matern Feuerbacher, and at Zabergau under Hans Wunderer. From Franconia came Jäcklein Rohrbach with his band, and the Black Forest peasants also pledged their assistance under Thomas Maier. There was suspicion within the peasant ranks of the somewhat moderate stance taken by Feuerbacher, and tensions increased when the force under the more radical leadership of Anton Eisenhut joined them from the Kraichgau. By the end of April these combined bands numbered some 12,000 men.

Following Weingarten the army of the Swabian League had been under orders to march towards Württemberg via Tuttlingen, Balingen,
A VILLAGE MUSTER
1: Peasant captain
2: Peasant standard-bearer with 'Bundschuh'
3: Peasant rebel
PEASANTS STORMING A MONASTERY
1: Landsknecht crossbowman
2: Gaillard peasant
3: Peasant woman
THE TREATY OF WEINGARTEN
1: Georg, Truchsess of Waldenburg
2: Mounted standard-bearer
3: Hauptmann, Swabian League
PEASANT BANNERS
1: Banner of Bundschuh conspiracy, Bruchrain, Untergrombach, 1513/1525
2: Banner of 'Poor Conrad' Band, 1514
3: Hegau banner
4: Banner of Austrian rebels
5: 'Rainbow' banner of Müntzer's Thuringian Band
6: Banner of Rothenburg peasants
7: Banner of Nussdorf peasants
LEAGUE, CITY & PRINCELY BANNERS

1: Banner of Duke Johann of Saxony
2: Banner of Philipp, Landgrave of Hesse
3: Banner of the Swabian League
4: Banner of Georg von Frundsberg
5: Banner of City of Ulm
6: Banner of City of Kempten
7: Banner of Ludwig V, Elector Palatine
8: Rennfahne – standard of the League light horse
1: Free lancer, Swabian League
2: Mercenary, northern Swiss cantons
3: Peasant, Donauwörth Band
1: Peasant gunner with hook-gun
2: Master gunner
3: Miner
FRANKENHAUSEN
1: Thomas Müntzer
2: Landsknecht
3: Drummer

verbis domini maneat in diis
die ist das zeichen des rein
bundes gottes
Tübingen and Herrenberg. Between 2 and 4 May the Truchsessa pitched camp at Rotenburg on the River Neckar. Learning off his plans, the peasant army marched towards the League army and stormed Herrenberg on 10 May, taking the garrison prisoner. The League council met and made preparations for retaking Herrenberg. However, the Württemberg Band anticipated this, setting up three camps to the front and sides of the town with their artillery facing the enemy. Under cover of darkness, the peasants then took up what they thought was a superior position between the towns of Böblingen and Sindelfingen. Forming four units - one large square and three smaller troops - they deployed on the slopes between the two towns, while a wagon-fort was set up on a hill known as the Galgenberg with 18 artillery pieces trained on the approaches of the League army. The ensuing battle of Böblingen was to prove yet another example of the effectiveness of the League horse, which routed the peasants and pursued them for kilometres. The dispersal of the combined Württemberg Band following Böblingen freed the way for the Truchsessa to press ahead to quell the uprisings in Franconia and the Odenwald.

The Truchsessa was intent on exacting revenge for the gruesome execution of the Duke of Helfenstein at Weinsberg in Franconia (see below). Amongst the prisoners taken at Böblingen were the piper Melchior Nonnenmacher, who had played at Helfenstein’s execution, and Jäcklein Rohrbach, the instigator of the Weinsberg bloodbath. Each was chained to a tree and surrounded with brushwood, which was then set alight, with the Truchsessa and his officers personally supervising the roasting of the peasant leaders.

**Franconia**

By mid-March 1525 the unrest in Swabia had spilled over into Franconia. One after another, peasant bands mustered in the Tauber Valley, in the Odenwald and along the River Neckar in the bishoprics of Würzburg and Bamberg, and in Lower Franconia on the border with Thuringia. Rothenburg and the surrounding villages - some 163 of them, apparently - formed the epicentre of this uprising. The speed of mobilisation and superior equipment of the peasant force owed much to the prior existence of the so-called Rothenburger ‘Landwehr’ - a form of local militia. On 22 March the first Franconian company was raised: some 800 men under the command of village heads named Neuffer and Georg Ickelsheimer. At the same time a smaller band under Leonard Metzler and Hans Boheim came together in Brettheim. A day later these
two contingents formed what came to be known as the Tauber Valley Band. These developments encouraged progressive forces within the city of Rothenburg to send contingents out to join what soon became a 4,000-strong band, with its base at Mergentheim. Here, the Tauber Valley Band was joined by Florian Geyer, an excommunicated knight who contributed considerable military and diplomatic experience. On 24 April the band pitched camp at Ochsenfurt, where a set of Articles of War were drawn up to establish a clear system of military rank and organisation, and Jacob Kohl of Eibelstadt was appointed its supreme commander. The Ochsenfurt articles were important, since their enforcement obliged the nobility to yield up their artillery in return for protection of their property; this resulted in the Tauber Valley Band receiving the ordnance of the dukes Albrecht and Georg von Hohenlohe.

A month earlier the peasants of the Odenwald had risen up and assembled at Schupfergrund, adopting the Bundschuh and the crucifix as their emblems and electing Georg Metzler as their supreme commander. On 4 April they marched on the Cistercian monastery of Schöntal at Jagstgrund. Here they were joined by smaller bands of peasants from Limburg and Hohenlohe, and on 6 April by a larger band of Neckar Valley peasants under the command of Jäcklein Rohrbach. This combined Neckar

Battle of Böblingen, 12 May 1525. (Alexander Moore, after Bensing & Hoyer)
On the morning of 12 May the Truchsesser drew up his battle formation facing the peasant position, which was on the slopes of a feature known as the Galgenberg between Sindelfingen and Böblingen. Avoiding a direct frontal assault, he ordered his right flank to advance and take Böblingen town. Having succeeded, his handgunners and light culverin began to fire on the peasant ranks from the flank. Still keeping his horse in reserve, he first took the Galgenberg and routed the peasant 'forlorn hope' before giving the order for his artillery to fire on the main square formation. At this decisive moment the Truchsesser also ordered his horse to attack the peasants on both flanks. Chaos ensued, as the peasants escaping the destruction of the forlorn hope crashed back into the ranks of the main formation, which in turn began to break up. The League horse pursued their fleeing quarry for about 10km, slaughtering some 6,000 peasants and taking six banners, 18 cannon and the complete wagon-fort with provisions.
Valley–Odenwald force came to be much feared under the title of the *Heller Haufen* – ‘the Bright Band’.

At Neckarsulm, the peasants decided to march on the town of *Weinsberg*, the seat of Duke Ludwig of Helfenstein, son-in-law of the late Emperor Maximilian I and a hated figure to his subjects. A castle assault was the last thing the duke had expected, but with the bulk of his horse absent from duty he was unable to resist the peasant onslaught, which was aided by some of the duke’s own townsfolk. The taking of Weinsberg was a major victory for the peasants, but news of the events here spread far and wide for other reasons that damaged their cause in the longer term. They forced the captured duke and his retinue to ‘run the gauntlet’ of pikes between their ranks – a traditional method of execution among the Landsknechts. As mentioned above, this act was ultimately to be avenged by the Truchsessen in the aftermath of the battle of Böblingen. The actions of Jäcklein Rohrbach, who had been at the centre of the events at Weinsberg, were repudiated by the other peasant commanders – Wendel Hipler and Georg Metzler – and Rohrbach was deposed and replaced by the somewhat dubious knight Götz von Berlichingen. Götz was elected supreme commander of the band, although this was by no means unanimously supported by the mass of the peasants. On the one hand, the League considered him an enemy; on the other, he had been involved in suppressing the ‘Poor Conrad’ uprising of 1514. There was an obvious risk that he might use the peasant cause for his own ends.

At the end of April the band marched to Amorbach, being joined on the way by the much more radically disposed Odenwald peasants – who swore that they would kill Berlichingen, and took off to attack and

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4 Readers familiar with World War II German military history will have noted that several of these marginal members of the knightly class were to be taken up by Nazi ideologues as heroic anti-establishment figures. The titles ‘Florian Geyer’, ‘Frundsberg’ and ‘Götz von Berlichingen’ were bestowed on divisions of the Waffen-SS, and a regiment in the ‘Nord’ Division was named for Michael Gaisrmar.
burn down Wildenburg castle. This was a clear contravention of the more moderate Articles of War drawn up by the ‘Bright Bands’, and for several days debates raged in the camp at Amorbach over a new set of articles.

The last of the Franconian bands to mobilise was that of Bildhausen, which emerged in the northern part of the bishopric of Würzburg. The inhabitants of Munnerstadt and Burglauer (including salt miners) took control of the monastery at Bildhausen, which became their headquarters and the rallying point for smaller troops of peasants from Aura, Hausen and Frauenroda. The commanders of the Bildhausen Band – Hans Schnabel and Hans Scharr – were politically moderate, recognising the established order but wishing to address the peasants’ grievances by negotiation with the authorities. Although the Bildhausen Band had a sophisticated military organisation and numbered some 7,000, men it generally remained a passive force, military action only being undertaken by the contingents from Aura.

The events in Lower Franconia were closely related to developments in and around the city of Würzburg. Since 1519 Bishop Conrad III of Thüngen had governed the city. He was moved to action by news that the Tauber Valley Band had mobilised and was heading for the city. The bishop requested military assistance from the nobility; when this brought little response he found himself dependent upon the citizenry of Würzburg. But the townsfolk, like the knights, were unsupportive, considering that the time had arrived to shake off the dominance of the Church in political affairs.

The bishop felt compelled to enter into negotiations with the peasants to buy time while efforts could be made by Duke William of Henneberg – the military commander within the bishopric – to raise an army. The duke made an approach to Duke Johann of Saxony and other Thuringian nobles; some 4,000 guilders had been raised and a route of march devised, when news arrived that the Bildhausen Band
now barred the way and that the Bishop of Bamberg had been forced to make major concessions to the people of his city. On 8 May the peasants entered Würzburg, and after days of fruitless negotiation set about laying siege to the Frauenberg – the castle overlooking the city. The Tauber Valley Band occupied the hill opposite and began to bombard the castle, causing much damage with their train of six heavy cannon, four culverins and 13 falconets. However, the castle was well fortified. After two unsuccessful night assaults by men from Florian Geyer’s ‘Black Band’ and efforts by a team of miners to create a breach, the attacks gave way to a protracted siege, and supplies began to run low in the peasant camp. When news arrived that the Imperial army was marching on the city, Metzler tried once more to negotiate terms of surrender with the garrison of the Frauenberg. He was unsuccessful, and two days later Berlichingen gave the order to withdraw from the city.

Meanwhile, the Truchsessa had entered Franconia by way of Neckarsulm on 28 May. The previous day the Elector Palatine had pitched camp at Furfeld with his Trier contingent of 1,200 horse and 2,000 foot with 24 cannon. This brought the total League force to 13,000 foot and horse with 42 pieces of artillery and 200 wagons. At Neckarsulm, the ‘Bright Band’ attempted to negotiate with the Truchsessa before beating a retreat, leaving two companies to defend the town. During the retreat Götz von Berlichingen disappeared – it is alleged that he crossed over to the League, leaving his band to flounder and break up. At Neckarsulm the Bright Band had called for reinforcements from Franconia, Alsace and the Black Forest/Hegau bands. Some 5,000 Franconians responded, and met the remnants of the Heller Haufen at Krauthiem. However, the League army was in hot pursuit after its relatively easy victory at Neckarsulm on 29 May, and forced the peasants to withdraw to Königshofen, where it inflicted a particularly heavy defeat on the insurgents.

This victory opened up the route for the Truchsessa to Würzburg, but first he had to deal with the Tauber Valley Band, which had left Würzburg and encamped by the village of Ingolstadt. The main band met its fate at Sulzdorf, where it was attacked and routed by the League army. A small troop of 600 men under the command of Florian Geyer withdrew to Ingolstadt, where 200 occupied the church and the remaining 400 took up position in the castle. The Elector Palatine pursued Geyer and, having disposed of the redoubt in the church, turned to the castle; it required three bloody assaults before his men could breach the inner wall. During two days of bitter fighting there were heavy League losses; in the end only 17 prisoners were taken from the peasant ranks, Geyer himself having managed to escape with a small group of men.

On 8 June the Truchsessa triumphantly entered Würzburg, and then pressed on towards Nuremberg via Schweinfurt and Bamberg. In his wake the urban centres of Rothenburg and Kitzingen were placed under the yoke of the Margrave Casimir, who took a merciless revenge on suspected insurgents. After Würzburg, the Elector Palatine made his way back to his homeland, where he received news that an 8,000-strong

5 There is no evidence to suggest that this band had either a black banner or uniform black clothing.
peasant band had occupied the town of Pfeddersheim. With 1,700 horse and seven companies of foot, the Elector marched on the peasants. By sending an advanced party of just two companies and a squadron of horse he misled the peasants into thinking that they were numerically superior, and when these appeared over the brow of the hill overlooking the town they advanced their artillery and wagon train. However, the main columns of the Elector’s army were close behind; they crashed into the peasants, driving them back and killing some 1,500 men. Many retreated to the slopes of the vineyards out of range of the Elector’s men, whereupon he ordered his artillery to bombard the town. On 24 June the peasants and townsfolk of Pfeddersheim finally surrendered.

In the meantime the Allgäu peasants had regrouped and laid siege on the city of Memmingen. The Truchsess was summoned to Ulm, where the League council ordered him to march on the Allgäu band with a fresh force of 1,500 horse and 6,000 foot. After a failed siege, the peasants moved on to the River Leubas where they took up a favourable defensive position. Some 8,000 strong and with seasoned Landsknecht officers in their ranks, the peasants had the advantage of a river to their left and a wooded rise to their right. Conscious of his numerical and tactical disadvantage, the Truchsess sent word for Georg von Frundsberg, who was leading a force of some 3,000 to assist the Archbishop of Salzburg against the Austrian peasants. The engagement at the Leubas River is remembered for a relentless cannonade between the opposing sides. Seeking to exploit their advantages, the peasants attempted to mount an assault on the Truchsess’ camp and artillery positions, but were resisted by swift deployment of Landsknecht pikemen. By evening, reinforcements under Frundsberg were arriving.

That night the situation was suddenly reversed when, unexpectedly, the Allgäu peasants fled their positions, abandoning their artillery. It has been suggested that some of their Landsknecht officers were bribed by their former employers, and it is certain that Kaspar Schneider (formerly under Georg von Frundsberg) and Walter Bach (a former officer with the Truchsess) were the first to leave their positions. Other explanations focus on the peasants’ powder supply having been exhausted during the cannonade. Only the leader of the Kempten peasants, Jörg Schmid, fought on to the end, occupying a favourable position on a hill known as the Kohlberg. The Truchsess desisted from a direct assault, setting fire instead to some 200 villages round about. Starved into submission, the few remaining insurgents surrendered on 23 July, only to be summarily beheaded. Schmid

By the outbreak of the Peasants’ War some degree of consensus had been reached by gunmakers that barrels should be cast in one piece of bronze, muzzle-loaded with iron shot and corned gunpowder. By this time artillery was beginning to be classified according to the ratio of barrel length to bore. Although there had been a proliferation of different types of piece, broadly speaking there were three main classes of ordnance: heavy cannon used for siege work and/or heavy bombardment; longer-barrelled culverins for engaging enemy infantry squares and massed horse; and lighter, more mobile field pieces or ‘quarter cannon’ (light culverins, sakers, and falcons, firing balls of 12-15lbs (continued opposite)
managed to escape, but was captured later and executed in Bregenz.

**Thuringia**

The peasant uprisings in Thuringia, East Hesse and the valleys of the Rivers Unstrut and Saale began later than those in Swabia and Franconia, but were extinguished before the latter. Two bands from Allstedt and Mühlhausen combined to form an ‘Eternal Alliance with God’ under the leadership of Heinrich Pfeiffer and the revolutionary cleric Thomas Müntzer. The band mustered under the famous ‘rainbow banner’ (see Plate D5), and could count on support within a ten-mile radius although its influence reached much further afield, into Franconia and Saxony. A further group known as the Werra Band formed south of Eisenach under the command of Hans Sippel. These bands were arguably the most revolutionary – both in terms of their political programme and the breadth of their composition, with all classes taking up arms – particularly the waged miners. Müntzer’s strategy was to take Mansfeld and its environs and then march through Thuringia to Halle and Eisenach. The task of the Werra Band was to build sufficient support to take the revolution into Hesse, while the Mühlhausen Band engaged the princes of Saxony. Between 27 and 29 April 1525 the Mühlhausen Band mustered at the village of Görmär.

Until early April the Landgrave Philipp of Hesse had focused on the peasant uprisings in southern Germany. It was not until the 23rd that his attention turned to events in Thuringia, which threatened to spill over into his territory. He hurriedly recruited contingents of foot in Marburg and called his horse back from the Swabian League. His army was somewhat small, numbering only 350 horse and 1,500 foot, but it marched eastwards taking Fulda and Hersfeld. Philipp’s initial goal was the Werra Band, but he gradually realised that the real target had to be Thomas Müntzer and the Mühlhausen Band. He wrote to the princes of Saxony that it would require 6,000 foot, 6,000 heavy horse, 15 medium to light artillery pieces, 400 Zentner (20 tons) of powder, and 600 engineers. Philipp’s strategy was to keep the Thuringian bands separated; consequently dukes Georg and Johann of Saxony each had different military objectives. However, because Philipp had limited military resources he asked the Duke of Brunswick to join him at Salza, where a force of 1,700 horse and 3,000 foot combined on 12 May. The plan was to advance on Mühlhausen, but when they heard that Müntzer had left for Frankenhausen they changed their plans.

At the beginning of May, Duke Georg of Saxony had attempted to pull together an army in Leipzig, but his recruiting officers failed miserably. The duke had to take on mercenaries at short notice from Dresden, Pirma, Meissen, Hain and Chemnitz, Oschatz and Röchlitz;
but even so his force comprised no more than 800 horse and two companies of foot (1,000 men). Georg had to pin his hopes on linking up with the other princes; and this he was able to do at Heldrungen, where the Archbishop of Mainz and the Margrave of Brandenburg offered up their respective contingents. Receiving word from Philipp of Hesse, Duke Georg advanced in the early hours of 15 May to a position just outside Frankenhäuser. Conservative estimates place the combined Hesse-Brunswick-Saxon army at 2,300 armoured horse and at least 4,000 foot; at Frankenhäuser they faced some 8,000 peasants.

On the morning of 14 May a small contingent of Hessian troops had been turned back by a hail of hook-gun and light artillery fire from a 6,000-strong formation of peasants positioned behind a wagon-fort. This took Philipp by surprise, since he had expected the peasants to react in the same way as they had at Fulda and Hersfeld – by fleeing at the sight of his troops. His men had to retreat a half-mile to the west of the peasant position. Hastily he sent for reinforcements from the Saxon contingents camped at Heldrungen. The peasants meanwhile took up a new position on an elevation above the town known as the Hausberg, and tried to disrupt their opponents' movements with artillery fire.

Their initial success prompted some officers within the Frankenhäuser Band to initiate negotiations with Philipp, but they found him in uncompromising mood: they were to deliver up their leaders, and he would make a case to the higher authorities to spare their souls. These demands could only be handled democratically in 'the ring'. This camp discussion revealed divisions of opinion, but the appearance of a rainbow provided Müntzer with what he thought was a sign of pre-ordained victory, since the Thuringian peasants' banner bore a rainbow motif.

It has been suggested that Müntzer's sermon to the peasant assembly temporarily distracted them and exposed the wagon-fort, and that this was the moment which Philipp had been waiting for. Now that the Saxon, Brandenburg and Mainz units had finally linked up and the artillery had been positioned to the east of the Hausberg, Philipp ordered his foot to advance from all sides on the wagon-fort (see map, page 42). Under artillery fire this was easily breached, and the peasants were pressed back to the gates of Frankenhäuser. The majority
The forces of the Swabian League exacted swift and painful retribution from the villages that were at the centre of the many uprisings, and peasant communities were punished with confiscation of chattels as a ‘tax’ on their unruly activities. This woodcut is dated 1548, but it gives a good impression of village architecture, a peasant cart and horse furniture. (Johannes Stumpf, Schweizer Chronik)

The Thuringian revolt. On 25 May the city surrendered, and Müntzer and Pfeiffer were taken prisoner; after torture they were beheaded at their camp at Görmar.

The princes were remorseless in taking their revenge on the defeated peasant rebels. Coming within days of one another, the separate defeats at Frankenhausen, Zabern and Böblingen effectively broke the back of the peasants’ resistance. By the summer of 1525 the Swabian League and the territorial princes had crushed the German peasants’ revolt. All that was left were the isolated pockets of resistance in what is now Austria.

The Austrian Alpine regions
When news of the events in Germany reached the peasants of the Tyrol and the Vorarlberg they too sought to address their long-standing grievances. In the spring of 1525 the peasants and miners of Salzburg suddenly rose up in arms, liberated the city of Salzburg and besieged the fortress of Hohensalzburg. There were disturbances in Pinzgau and Gastein, which were important centres of gold and silver mining. Worried about these disturbances spilling over into the Tyrol, the Archduke Ferdinand ordered the nobles of Steiermark and Kärnten to raise a force of 5,000 Magyars, Bohemian and German mercenaries. Under the command of Sigmund von Dietrichstein, this army marched on the mining town of Schladming – a centre of the disturbances. The miners and peasants reacted to the news by assembling a 3,500-strong force at Radstadt under the command of the miners’ leader Michael Gruber. Marching by night, two columns of insurgents surprised Dietrichstein on the morning of 2 July, overpowering his wagons and artillery park and turning the cannon on his cavalry. Schladming was the most significant peasant victory of the Peasants’ War.

The Salzburg contingent in Gruber’s army decided to return to their city with their newly acquired artillery in order to continue their siege on the fortress of Hohensalzburg. In the wake of Schladming, Archduke Ferdinand was obliged to make concessions to the peasants at the Innsbruck assembly; but this was insufficient to placate the peasants in the south. In August a force of some 10,000 Landsknechts under the command of Georg von Frundsberg was dispatched to Salzburg, and a truce was signed in September between the arch-
bishop, Archduke Ferdinand and the peasants.

However, when the princes reneged on the agreement renewed disturbances broke out. Throughout the winter the peasants were able to hold their own, and in the spring of 1526 they were newly mobilised under the leadership of Michael Gaismaier. A combined force of Austrian, Bavarian and Swabian League troops as well as mercenaries of the Archbishop of Salzburg pursued him unsuccessfully during the early summer months of 1526, suffering defeats at Golling, Kitzbühel, Kirchberg and Meuterdorf. At Radstadt, however, he was finally surrounded and forced to withdraw, leading the remnants of his force across the Alps into Venetian territory, which was to serve as his base for numerous incursions during the following year. Gaismaier remained a thorn in the side of Archduke Ferdinand, who finally had him assassinated in Padua in 1532.

* * *

The death of Gaismaier closed the final chapter of the Peasants’ War. In the two years of insurrection it is estimated that between 70,000 and 100,000 peasants and other commoners had lost their lives. Everywhere the populace had been brought back under the political control of their ecclesiastical or aristocratic masters. In the name of revenge the overlords’ mercenaries devastated the countryside even more ruthlessly than the peasant mobs had done. The forced contributions and levies imposed on the villages and smaller towns became permanent, and serfdom was to last until the 18th century. The progress towards the separation of religious and secular powers and the birth of representative forms of government which – however slow – was clearly traceable in Britain, and which culminated in the momentous events of the 1640s-80s, was long denied to the German-speaking world.
THE PLATES

A: A VILLAGE MUSTER
A1: Peasant captain
There are contemporary accounts of how peasant officers dressed. Zimmerman describes the captain of ‘Poor Conrad’ as wearing a white linen peasant’s tunic (Bauernkittel) and a grey felt hat. The simple tunic of linen or wool became established as the garment for working peasants. It was generally knee-length, and buttoned or laced down the front, or down the side in ‘double-breasted’ fashion. The choice of white was no accident; in Germany, as in other European countries during the period, sumptuary laws severely restricted the type of fabric and colours which peasants and townsfolk were allowed to wear. Colours such as red and true white – i.e. bleached, in contrast to the off-white of unbleached fabric – had long been the sole prerogative of the patrician class.

A2: Peasant standard-bearer with ‘Bundschuh’
Occasionally, as in this case, an actual Bundschuh would be hoisted on a pike or polearm in place of a standard; at Oberschüpf, Georg Metzler mustered the Odenwald peasants with a drum and such an improvised standard. The standard-bearer is shown wearing an unprovenced ‘almay rivet’ harness. The headgear is a simple rolled tube of woollen cloth instead of a ‘pot’ helmet, which would normally have accompanied such a harness.

A3: Peasant rebel
Many farmworkers were limited to wearing grey undyed blanket cloth; if dyed, the chosen colours could vary between drab brown, olive green, russet and occasionally cream. Finer fabrics were generally forbidden, as were linings and padding, and short doublets. Based on a Dürr woodcut, this peasant is wearing the ubiquitous fur hat, which could be folded down or turned up at the front or back; contemporary illustrations show a fondness for displaying a single feather. He is set a little apart from many of his poorest contemporaries by wearing drover’s thigh boots, which were often folded down, as here. Weapons immediately available to the peasants were often limited to agricultural implements; this man is armed with a flail or thresher.

B: PEASANTS STORMING A MONASTERY
B1: Landsknecht crossbowman
The presence of Landsknecht soldiers in some of the peasant bands, as well as in the armies which opposed them, is often overlooked but well documented. This veteran wears the characteristic parti-coloured costume of short doublet with slashed and puffed sleeves, laced with ‘points’ to tight hose (see Warrior 49, Landsknecht Soldier 1486-1560 for a full analysis of Landsknecht clothing from contemporary sources). By the 1520s the role of the crossbowman was diminishing as the handgun became tactically more important. The crossbow was, however, one weapon with which peasants were likely to have had experience – either in fulfilling their feudal duties in the hunt, or as a weapon tolerated in the regulations governing militias. There were heavy and light crossbows; some had composite staves crafted from grooved sections of horn, others used steel staves, while the stock was normally of wood with a metal foot-stirrup (for bracing the bow on the ground while winding back the cord) fixed to the nose. This figure carries his cranquin – ratchet rewinding device – slung from his belt behind, and bolts point-up in a rigid hide-covered quiver; his close-quarter weapon is the characteristic shortsword or ‘cat-scrapper’ with S-shaped quillons.

B2: Gaillard peasant
The peasants’ reaction to social injustice often went hand in hand with hatred of the Church hierarchy, who wielded a parallel secular power, and this was inflamed by the preaching of religious reformers who attacked Church wealth and corruption. The peasants of Gaillard wore white crosses on their headgear as recognition marks. The figure is based on a drawing by the contemporary soldier-artist Urs Graf, and shows that some efforts were made to incorporate patterns into the fabric of the tunic – note the checked bands round the upper sleeves. Most peasants carried a knife of some kind, some of them up to half a metre long; here the scabbard has two additional sheaths on the face for prickers or

LEFT The ‘H’ in black on a red cloth background was carried by members of the Bundschuh conspiracy until this was discovered by the authorities in 1517. Other plotters displayed their allegiance by making three diagonal slashes on their sleeve. (Stadtsachiv Freiburg, Sig.C 1 Militaria 96, Nr.7)

Peasant hose dating from c.1480-90, from the Alpirsbach monastery find; they are made of strong, brown-coloured linen twill. Note the integral cod piece. (Photo Adi Bachinger; courtesy Staatliche Schlösser u.Garten Baden-Württemberg, Karlsruhe)
small knives. He also carries a small thatcher’s hook thrust into his belt.

**B3: Peasant woman**

Peasant female dress usually consisted of several layers. A full dress could incorporate a square- or round-necked bodice. In some cases this might be separate and in doublet style, i.e. with a high neck and low standing collar. Where the bodice closed at the front the fastenings were usually hidden; side closures were often laced. There was much less slashing in peasant costume, and sleeves were normally fitted from the elbow to the wrist. The skirt could consist of up to three horizontal bands of linen, rough wool or heavy woven cotton, and there would be several layers of underskirt. Unsurprisingly many peasant women wore aprons, as here. Hair tended to be plaited and worn wound up to the head in various ways, covered by white linen headdresses which could be pinned back in a number of different fashions. Although the majority of peasant women remained at home during the wars, there are instances of direct involvement. At Weinsberg, a rumour spread about a dark-skinned woman with black hair known by the name of ‘Black Hoffmann’ who, dressed in a black cloak and hood and a red girdle and sash, incited the peasants to put the Duke of Helfenstein to death.

**C: THE TREATY OF WEINGARTEN**

**C1: Georg, Truchsess of Waldburg**

The scene depicts the Truchsess ripping up one of the five peasant banners – that of the Combined Upper Swabian Band, bearing a red cross on white on one side and a white cross on red on the other – that were handed over as part of the terms of the treaty. He is depicted wearing a ‘Maximilian’ armour, a style traditionally associated with the late Emperor Maximilian but which flourished between 1500 and 1540. It was distinguished by vertical fluting, which radiated from a central point on the breastplate almost like a scallop shell; the breastplate was notably globose in form. Some of the more ornate suits would have carried gilt edging. (Errata: the peasant banner should measure about 6½ ft on the fly by 4½ ft on the hoist."

**C2: Mounted standard-bearer**

The mounted standard-bearer belonging to the ‘Bauernjörg’s’ retinue is wearing a ‘base’ – a skirt made of padded pleats, sometimes attached to a sleeveless bodice over a skirtless full-sleeved doublet. His armour is a partial Maximilian harness. The fur hat has been slit either side at the front and turned up at the rear; the knee-length boots have been slit up the outside of the calf and laced to make a tighter fit. The standard is that of the Truchsess of Waldburg – three black lions passant guardant on a square field of golden yellow, below a narrow, square-ended strip of scarlet roughly twice as long as the width of the field.

**C3: Hauptmann, Swabian League**

This captain is clad in a three-quarter harness. He holds the typical two-handed sword which was generally carried by the ‘Doppelsöldner’ or picked double-pay troops. A shortsword of the usual S-quillon type is hitched behind his waist at a shallow angle by the usual cord belt. Under his tassels can be seen dark red slashed hose; when unconfined these hung in loops revealing the white underhose.

**D: PEASANT BANNERS**

The flags illustrated here are impressions based on written descriptions from contemporary sources, retold in the seminal account of the war by Wilhelm Zimmermann. Surprisingly, a handful of original medieval flags do survive in continental Europe; but not from the Peasants’ War - the insurgents’ banners would be the first items to be destroyed as the forces of the nobility sought to wipe out the memory of the peasants’ success and eradicate any possible rallying point for unrest. Favoured colours appear to have been white, red and blue with either painted, appliqué or embroidered inscriptions and motifs. The flag would usually be mounted on a staff about 2m long, and was usually rectangular or triangular in shape, measuring perhaps 1.5m to 2m (4½ ft to 6 ft) on the hoist by 6½ ft on the fly. The more hurriedly mustered bands had to make do with anything that could reasonably be attached to a staff. The Ohrenbach contingent, which joined the Tauber Valley peasants at Breitheim after a night’s march, turned up ‘with any piece of cloth or substitute for a flag they could find’.

**D1: Banner of Bundshuh conspiracy in Bruchrain, Untergrombach, 1513/1525**

Joss Fritz, a peasant leader active in the bishopric of Speyer, first commissioned this banner in 1502 but the earlier motif never appeared. The later version depicted here was painted either in Metz or Heilbronn.
in 1513, and was last seen during the disturbances in northern Lorraine in 1525. The obverse bore a shoe and cross on a blue field. On the reverse, left of the crucifix, can be seen the papal tiara and oak branch arms of the Rovere family, and to the right the crown and two-headed eagle of the Holy Roman Empire. Beneath the crucifix and Sts Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist are a kneeling peasant and the words ‘Herr, stand dier gothlichen gerechtigkeit bi’ ('God give us thy divine justice'). Based on a reconstruction by Dietmar Konanz, Untergrombach.

**D2: Banner of the 'Poor Conrad' Band, 1514**
The standard of the Remstal peasants borrowed some of the imagery from Joss Fritz. Here we have a peasant kneeling before the cross encircled by the words ‘Arme Konrad’.

**D3: Hegau banner**
The ‘Bundschuh’ was the single most important motif alongside the crucifix on peasant standards, appearing in most of the theatres of action in southern Germany. Here, it is circled by a red sun and the words ‘Wer frei will sein der sich zu diesem Sonnenschein’ (‘He who will be free must follow this sun’). The Hegau Band united with the Black Forest Band, which had a red, black and yellow standard – precise details of this are as yet unknown.

**D4: Banner of the Austrian rebels**
This bore on one side only the legend ‘Alt-Österreich’ with a small ‘e’ in place of the Umlaut.

**D5: ‘Rainbow’ banner of Müntzer's Thuringian Band**
Probably painted by Philipp Gotzgerodt of Mühlhausen, this banner was carried at the head of the Thüringen peasant bands which marched through Salza and Eichsfeld and encamped at Frankenhausen. The motto in Latin was loosely translated into German which followed beneath: ‘verbum domini maneit in eternum/ die ist das zeichen des ewigen bundes gotes’ (‘This is the sign of our eternal pact with God’).

By the turn of the 16th century quite intricate devices were being invented to enhance the effectiveness of field artillery. The base of this range-finder is curved to sit on top of the barrel; and a movable arm, resembling a sextant, assisted the gunner in determining the precise trajectory for the shot. (Author's photo, courtesy Bauernkriegsmuseum, Mühlhausen)

**D6: Banner of the Rothenburg peasants**
The Weinsberg peasant banner was virtually identical to the Rothenburg flag except for the pitchfork, which was painted with only two prongs.

**D7: Banner of the Nussdorf peasants**
This was one of the few black banners recorded, bearing the Bundschuh motif in white on both sides. The Nussdorf peasants fought against the Elector Palatine's forces at the battle of Pfeddersheim.

Other banners were based on a range of motifs. The Basel standard – the only known surviving standard of the period – depicts peasants and Landsknechts together and the canton's emblem. The peasants of Sundgau had a white standard which bore the words ‘Jesus Christus’ in large letters. The peasants of Moempelgard had a similar banner, but this also bore the Bundschuh motif and the antler heraldic device of Württemberg. The Henneberg banner (probable colour white) is described as having a central crucifix, with an emblem in each of the four corners symbolising those things which the peasants demanded to be free for the common good: a bird, a deer, a fish and a forest. The Bildhausen Band chose a crucifix on the centre of three hills adorned with flowers and surrounded by other decorative devices, with a Bundschuh on either side. The Pfüllingen banner was of white silk, incorporating an image of God with outstretched arms, above the Virgin, and in each corner a deer's antler.

**E: LEAGUE, CITY & PRINCELY BANNERS**
Generally, city banners and those of the nobility were larger than contemporary peasant flags. In some cases the shortened staff would be weighted and ball-shaped at the end to facilitate demonstrations of swinging. See the body text for those military engagements where the following banners would have appeared.

**E1: Banner of Duke Johann of Saxony**
**E2: Banner of Philipp, Landgrave of Hesse**
**E3: Banner of the Swabian League**
**E4: Banner of Georg von Frundsberg**
E5: Banner of the City of Ulm
E6: Banner of the City of Kempten
E7: Banner of Ludwig V, the Elector Palatine
E8: Rennfahne – standard of the League light horse

For colours and heraldry of the Imperial Cities affiliated to the League, preliminary research can be made at the following website: www.ngw.nl/indexgb.htm

F1: Free lancer, Swabian League
This figure is based on the famous painting of St Eustachius by Albrecht Dürer, which should be studied in art historical source books by readers interested in the details. Plate shows over the slashed doublet only as a rondel at the right shoulder and a pauldron on the left, and as partial gauntlets; the breastplate and mail shirt show beneath the doublet. A long sword is worn at the left hip and a rondel dagger behind the right. Lancers often attached an animal’s tail to the tip of their lance.

F2: Mercenary, northern Swiss cantons
The Swiss mercenaries distinguished themselves from their German counterparts by making regular use of the cross of St George when slashing their doublets or hose (Maximilian’s and Charles V’s Landsknechts used the diagonal cross of St Andrew). Sometimes a small red cross would be sewn on to the doublet. This pikeman wears a casquetel helmet acquired on his earlier campaigns in northern Italy. His pike would be 5m (16ft) long.

F3: Peasant, Donauwörth Band
He is armed with a typical knife, perhaps 18ins long, and a “holy water sprinkler”; several contemporary images show the detail of sword or knife blades protruding from burst scabbard shapes. The Donauwörth chronicles tell us that the peasants refused to wear their dull-coloured tunics and dressed instead in white, slashing their hose and stuffing the slashes with blue lining. In addition this rebel has tied around his shirt and hose strips of finery taken from clerical robes pillaged from the nearest monastery. At the monastery of Roggenburg peasants

An example of mass-produced ‘almain rivet’ armour as worn by both peasants and Landsknechts. The more expensive and heavily ‘proofed’ or shot-resistant body armour only began to make its appearance during the first quarter of the 16th century; this thinner, lighter and cheaper armour would have afforded little protection against lead shot from an arquebus. Piercing the front plate, the shot would tear open a wound and widen and flatten as it passed through the body, only to ricochet off the backplate and perhaps re-enter the body. (Photo John Crook, courtesy Winchester Museum)

from the Leipheim Band tore up clerical gowns and standards hanging in the church and used them as ties on their hose. Blesy Krieg, a peasant who confessed his involvement in the sacking of the convent of Oberried near Freiburg, tells of donning priests’ robes, smashing the pyx containing the Host, and cutting the bag which contained the particles of the Host into shreds to make clothes strings from the cord. (See Scott & Scribner, The German Peasants’ War, A History in Documents, 1991)

G1: Peasant gunner with hook-gun
His white shirt shows at the cuffs of his russet tunic, worn with buff hose, a caped hood and turned-down drover’s boots; a vertical fold of the loosely cut boots has been turned outwards and laced up the outside leg to give a snugger fit – a common feature. Hook-guns, which were certainly used during this period, were much more unwieldy weapons than handguns. Contemporary illustrations by Freisleben from the inventories of the Emperor Maximilian’s arsenal give an indication of the size of these pieces, and reveal two variants: with the hook cast into the barrel, or as a wooden attachment to the stock. The hook could be lodged on the edge of a parapet or, as here, on a simple collapsible wooden tripod. Some models of the hook-gun were simply larger versions of the arquebus. A hook-gun would have required two men to carry it into position and possibly a third to carry the tripod.

G2: Master gunner
The master gunner is inspecting a falconet. The bronze barrel is completely countersunk into the top of the carriage, with a tool or ammunition chest fixed above the breech for travelling. (A small heraldic identifying pennant was often fixed to the ‘gable’ of such chests.) Dimensions varied, but a falconet would generally have a 2in. calibre, weigh 500lbs, and require 3lbs of powder to fire a 1.4in. diameter ball – the latter were sometimes hewn from basalt, as a surviving example found on the field of Königshofen testifies. In some cases the trail was fitted with a forked frame so that it could be hitched up to a single horse, thus rendering it a mobile ‘galloper’ gun. The peasants were generally short of munitions for their artillery, and contemporary sources report forays to pick up used cannonballs to fire back at the Imperial forces.

G3: Miner
At work miners wore a close-fitting protective hood, and a tunic cut to the waist at the front but extending at the back in a tail to below the knees. In other cases, as here, a sort of sleeveless jerkin of leather or perhaps padded fabric seems to have been worn separately, with a skirt piece buttoned below the waist. Presumably miners either sat on the ‘tail’ or knelt on it while hewing or while dragging tubs along a shaft. We show the tunic sleeves tied to keep the cuffs
up while working; the hose are tight-fitting – and note the leather kneepads. There is no pictorial evidence for miners ‘in action’, hence we can only speculate that this typical costume may have been worn by those miners drafted in to construct wagon-forts or undertake siege work – as at Würzburg; or to assist gun crews, or in open combat – as at the battle of Schladming.

H: FRANKENHAUSEN

H1: Thomas Müntzer

There is no surviving contemporary depiction of this Thuringian religious leader of the peasants. As a Protestant cleric he would have worn a gown, coif and cap typical of the period in dark colours; it is said that he wore a leather jerkin underneath. We see him here holding the famous ‘rainbow’ banner – see Plate D5 – while preaching to his troops before the battle of Frankenhauser.

H2: Landsknecht

From 1520 onwards payments to footsoldiers for clothing ceased. Hence it is not unreasonable to assume that the German mercenary of the time – especially in the ranks of the peasant bands – was unkempt, shoddily dressed, a martyr to various ailments and infestations, and lacking in some aspect of equipment other than what he had managed to pillage from his last engagement. This soldier is wearing a typical beret-style cap tied tightly to his head by a ribbon, embellished with the feathers beloved of contemporary soldiers. His slashed leather jerkin and short hose are worn under a three-quarter-length cloak, and over one-legged underhose with mismatched shoes. He is armed with the typical shortsword or Katzbalger, and a halberd.

H3: Drummer

Based on the engraving of Acker Concz by Hans Behaim. Generally, armour and mail shirts remained the preserve of the officers and ‘colour party’ within a band. This drummer wears a simple ‘pot’ helmet – blackened against rust – and a mail cape, over his off-white tunic, green hose and leather boots. His weapon is a shortsword about 0.5m long, carried in a blunt-ended leather scabbard with a scabbard. The painted pattern of wavy ‘flames’ on his drum shell was a popular feature in a number of countries.

Revenge was swift and public; this woodcut depicts peasants facing sentence, and hints in the background at the possible range of often hideous methods of execution which awaited them – burning alive, staking to the ground, disembowelment, and hoisting on the wheel, as well as simple hanging. In the wake of the League’s army the south German countryside presented a charnel-house display of corpses, sending a blood-curdling message to would-be insurgents. Master Augustin, Margrave Casimir’s executioner – who was nicknamed ‘Master Ouch’ by the peasants – sent his master a bill for carrying out 80 beheadings, 69 eye-gougings and finger amputations. (Unknown artist)
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24(map)
Armies of the German Peasants' War 1524–26

In the 1520s, a brief but savage war broke out in Germany when various insurgent groups rose to overthrow the power structure. The movement took as its emblem a peasant’s shoe and the collective title of ‘Bundschuh’, and this became known as the Peasants’ War — although the rebel armies actually included as many townsmen, miners, disaffected knights and mercenary soldiers as rural peasants. The risings involved large armies of 18,000 men, and there were several major battles before the movement was put down with the utmost ferocity. This book details the armies, tactics, costume, weapons, particular and events of this savage war.