

# Rising Rents in Sixteenth-Century Germany: A Case Study of Memmingen

Robert Dees  
Independent Scholar

The German Peasants' War of 1525 was the greatest revolt in Europe between the overthrow of the Roman Empire and the French Revolution. One central issue was excessive peasant rents. Nevertheless, a significant current in the historical literature today alleges that rents did not rise prior to or after the Peasant War. Rich documentation from the Memmingen archives shows that in fact rents rose from the time documentation begins, 1448, and continuously throughout the 1500s and into the early 1600s. The grinding inflationary spiral, the notorious "price revolution," means that this must have been true of all of Germany—all lords had to be raising rents furiously or go under; many did both. Rents and war taxes rose to the point that they broke the back of the economy; farmers could not maintain the soil or themselves. This explains the declining grain yields, falling population, economic collapse, famines, plagues, witch hunts, and Thirty Years' War.

THE MEDIEVAL AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION began after the overthrow of the Roman slave regime and accelerated with the collapse of Charlemagne's empire. One hallmark of the feudal system that then arose was the expansion of peasant rents beyond traditional grain rents and labor service to include the tithe and rents on hay, chickens, eggs, wine, watermills, entry fees, and many others, new rents with which the feudal lords appropriated the growing agricultural surpluses. Georges Duby pointed out that the bulk of lords' "revenue came from traditional dues on land up to c. 1080; afterwards, the balance tilted toward taxes on users of woods, mills, ovens, and towards tithes," and "the highest rents did not come from tenancies; it was far more profitable to own mills, a church in a large parish, or better still, tithes."<sup>1</sup>

The town of Memmingen was situated at the cross-roads of important north-south and east-west trade routes. By the mid-1300s, a monastery of the Holy Ghost Order had become the dominant landowner in the town's surrounding area. This

Robert Dees is the author of *The Power of Peasants: Economics and Politics of Farming in Medieval Germany* and two excerpts, published separately, *The Malthus Fraud* and *A Brief History of England: 4000 BCE–Yesterday*.

<sup>1</sup>Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 223; and Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 213. See also Rodney H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Clarendon, 1975), 232, 233; and Paul Freedman, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 194, 203.

stood in the way of the rising merchant class, which solved the problem by seizing the monastery and its holdings in the mid-1300s as part of the wave of guild revolutions sweeping south Germany. Thereafter, it became an agency of the Memmingen city council known as the Poor Needy (*arme dürftige*) Foundation; the city council appointed its trustees. It administered the surrounding territory, buying and selling whole villages, land, farms, and the people who worked them; imposing and collecting rents; deciding and inflicting judicial punishments, admitting and expelling migrants. The foundation had partial interests in many surrounding villages, but primary sovereignty in fifteen (nineteen from 1580 to 1601), stretching from Arlesried and Egelsee in the north down through Brunnen and Woringen in the south. Important decisions were brought before the city council for decision. The area controlled by Memmingen and its foundation encompassed roughly forty-nine square miles (127 km<sup>2</sup>), a little more than double the area of the island of Manhattan in New York City.

By the early 1500s, Memmingen was one of the four richest cities in south Germany;<sup>2</sup> in the 1525 German Peasants' War, representatives of three peasant armies met there and drafted the Twelve Articles listing the key peasant demands. The foundation's meticulous books record relentlessly rising rents from the time documentation begins, 1448, and then throughout the 1500s and into the early 1600s.<sup>3</sup>

During the Peasants' War, the Memmingen peasants objected that "some of our holdings are so heavily burdened [by rents] that we cannot retain them all."<sup>4</sup> The demand to reduce rents appeared in nearly three-quarters of the articles raised during the war.<sup>5</sup> Once the peasants were defeated, rents and debt continued to rise throughout the century to the point that, by the end of the century, the soil was depleted and production fell. This fact is essential to understanding many aspects of Germany's crumbling economy and subsequent declining births, famines, plagues, witch hunts, and Thirty Years' War.

Nevertheless, a significant current in the historical literature today contradicts the peasants' claims. David Sabean, in his widely cited study, insisted that rents "remained stable," "did not rise prior to the Peasants' War," and made up about 30 percent

<sup>2</sup>Raimund Eirich, *Memmingens Wirtschaft und Patriziat von 1347 bis 1551: Eine wirtschafts- und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung über das Memminger Patriziat während der Zunftverfassung* (Weisenhorn, DE: Anton H. Konrad, 1971), 42; Ascan Westermann, "Memminger Handel und Handelsgesellschaften um die Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit," in *Memminger Geschichtsblätter (MMGBL)* (1920): 21.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Dees, *The Power of Peasants: Economics and Politics of Farming in Medieval Germany* (Houston, TX: Commons Press, 2023).

<sup>4</sup>Tom Scott and Bob W. Scribner, eds. and trans., *The German Peasants' War: A History in Documents* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991), 80.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Blickle, "The Economic, Social and Political Background of the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants of 1525," in *The German Peasant War of 1525*, ed. Janos Bak (London: Frank Cass, 1976), 65.

of production.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Govind Sreenivasan alleged that “the long-term stability of ground rents is now widely accepted” and even that “the predominant pattern throughout Upper Swabia was a steady *reduction* of a lord’s claims on his serfs.”<sup>7</sup>

In fact, in the context of the renowned “price revolution”—the grinding inflation that began by the 1480s and ravaged the entire next century, combined with the crushing defeat the townspeople and peasants suffered in the Peasants’ War—every lord *had* to be raising rents furiously or go under.

#### GRAIN RENTS

Between 1448 and 1620, traditional grain rents in the village of Steinheim rose 44 percent, cash rents quadrupled, chicken and egg rents more than doubled, and that of serf hens soared sixty-seven times over (fig. 1).<sup>8</sup>

In 1624, the foundation scribe tallied how much the foundation had raised rents in the village of Dickenreishausen since purchasing it in 1472. He calculated that grain rents more than tripled, hay money increased 5.5 times over, chickens and hens seven times, eggs nearly three times, and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

When the foundation purchased the village of Steinheim in 1448, Jerg Endras held one of the larger farms.<sup>10</sup> He paid a rent of five malter of rye, two of oats, and one of husked spelt wheat. He also paid eight shillings cash, four chickens, and fifty eggs every year, all due on St. Martin’s Day (11 November).<sup>11</sup>

By 1491, the rents had increased on what appears to be this same farm, also held by a Jerg Endras—possibly a son or grandson. The amount of plowland had not changed, but the pasture had increased from fifteen to twenty jauchart, an increase of one-third; the hay money rent per jauchart on this land rose more than ninefold, however. Grain rent increased by two-thirds, rent chickens rose 50 percent, and eggs doubled.<sup>12</sup> This rise in the grain rents on individual farms continued throughout the 1500s, from the time systematic records began in the early 1530s until collections collapsed during the Thirty Years’ War.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup>David Warren Sabeau, *Landbesitz und Gesellschaft am Vorabend des Bauernkriegs* (Stuttgart, DE: Fischer, 1972), 30, 63; Sabeau, “The Social Background to the Peasants’ War of 1525 in Southern Upper Swabia” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1969), 6, 105.

<sup>7</sup>Govind Sreenivasan, “The Social Origins of the Peasants’ War of 1525 in Upper Swabia,” *Past & Present* 171 (May 2001): 50 (emphasis added); see also generally Govind Sreenivasan, *The Peasants of Ottobeuren, 1487–1726* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup>Memmingen City Archive, collection D (hereafter MM D) Bd. 1/28 (1448 Kaufbrief); MM D Bd. 1/452–612 (Steinheim, 1573, 1620); MM D Bd. 1/043 (Steinheim, 1573–1621). A variety of currencies and monies of account were used in the Memmingen territory; in this article, all have been converted to decimal pounds heller.

<sup>9</sup>MM D Bd. 1/24, 59v.

<sup>10</sup>MM D Bd. 1/40 (1449 Steinheim)

<sup>11</sup>MM D Bd. 1/28 (1448 Kaufbrief); and MM D Bd. 1/40 (1449 Steinheim).

<sup>12</sup>MM D Bd. 1/28 (1448 Kaufbrief); and MM D Bd. 1/42, 7r–8r.

<sup>13</sup>MM D 102; MM D Bd. 1/95 (1526); MM D Bd. 1/99; and MM D Bd. 1/451–596.

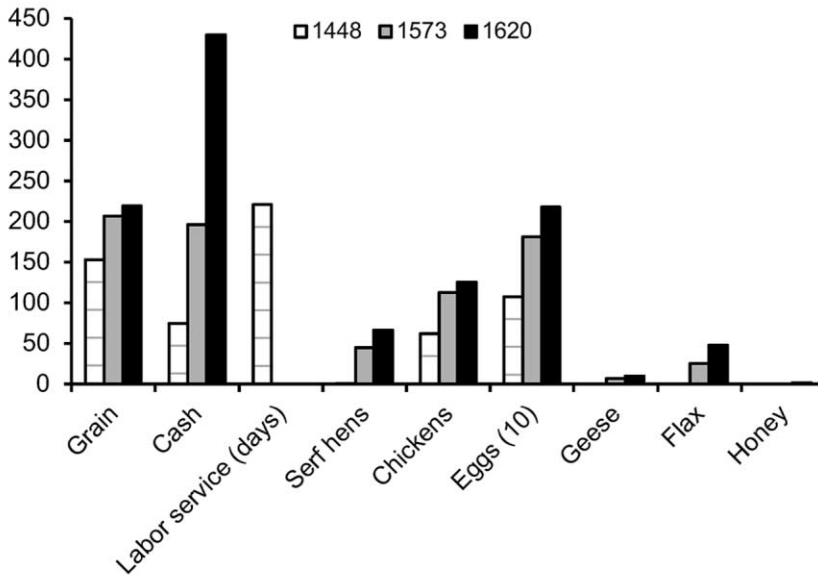


Figure 1. Nominal rents in Steinheim 1448, 1573, 1620.

These rising rents were imposed on declining gross production. The grain rent for three villages, Woringen, Steinheim, and Dickenreishausen, increased 14.9 percent from 1550 to 1630.<sup>14</sup> Average annual production of grain in the territory as a whole, however, for the decade leading up to these two dates dropped 15 percent; a 15 percent rent increase was being clawed out of 15 percent less production. As the tithe was ten percent of the harvest, the declining tithe receipts in figure 2 track falling production.<sup>15</sup> In the neighboring Biberach territory, a 25 percent increase in grain rent was being demanded out of a 32 percent plunge in yields.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>MM D Bd. 1/452–612; MM D Bd. 1/1421 (1630); Dickenreishausen MM D Bd. 1/24, 59v; Steinheim 1448 *Kaufbrief*; MM D Bd. 1/28, *Copial Documentorum*, Steinheim, 2r–7v; Woringen *Kaufbrief* 1417 Memmingen City Archive, collection A (hereafter MM A) 101/1; 1516 Rent register MM D Bd. 1/56; and *Aus einem alten Gültbuoch* in MM D Bd. 1/33. The amounts shown as collected from Woringen from 1550 have been reduced by 20 malter, the amount the foundation collected for protection money, as this was paid not by the peasants but by the abbot of Kempten out of the tithe collected that year. See Augsburg State Archive, Fürststift Kempten, Archiv Akten (hereafter ASA FKAA) 1060.

<sup>15</sup>The tithe receipts in years for which actual data are available are shown on the solid line. Figures for the years for which the foundation's total tithe receipts are missing have been imputed (dotted line) using the correlation coefficient from the sum of the receipts from two major villages, Dickenreishausen and Steinheim,  $r = +0.91$ . The sources for this tithe chart are MM D 19/5; MM D 21; MM D 238/1A (1512); MM D 243/10a–245/2e; MM D Bd. 1/452–616; and MM D Bd. 1/1421 (1629).

<sup>16</sup>Dees, *Power of Peasants*, 1353.

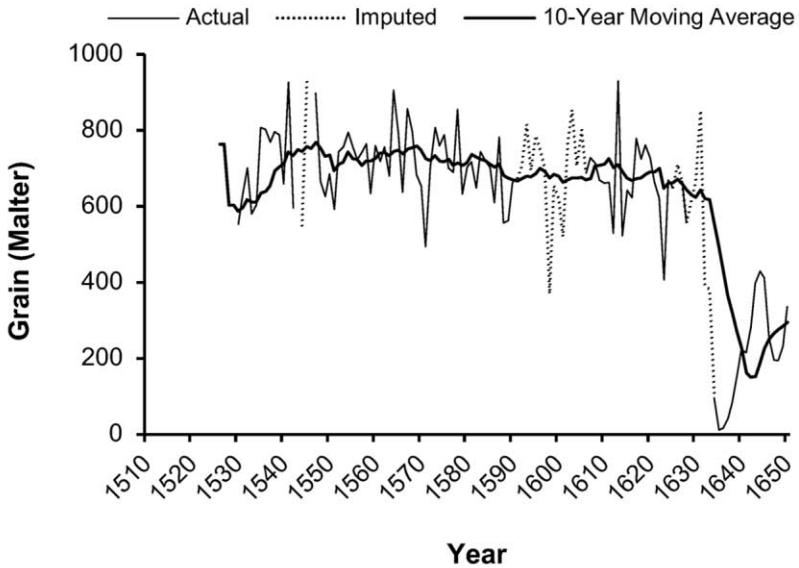


Figure 2. Memmingen foundation tithe receipts.

Looked at from another angle, as a result of rising rents and falling harvest, grain rent alone as a percentage of the total harvest rose from 17 percent in the decade that began in 1528 to 23 percent in the decade ending in 1625 (fig. 3),<sup>17</sup> a 35.3 percent increase. The most significant rent rises, however, had been imposed before 1525.

In addition, a 10 percent rent was imposed on gross grain production—the large tithe—and a small tithe on hay and garden produce.<sup>18</sup> Thus grain rent and tithe alone took more than 30 percent of the harvest, and there were many more rents and taxes the peasants had to pay.

#### OTHER RENTS AND TAXES IN CASH AND KIND

Hay money was a cash rent on the farmer's meadow; the rent on the farmer's house and garden was collected in eggs and chickens.<sup>19</sup> During the 1500s, a shift

<sup>17</sup>Grain rents: MM D 102; MM D Bd. 1/95 (1526); MM D Bd. 1/99; MM D Bd. 1/451–596; tithe: MM D 19/5; MM D 21; MM D 238/1A (1512); MM D 243/10a–245/2e; MM D Bd. 1/452–616; and MM D Bd. 1/1421 (1629).

<sup>18</sup>MM D Bd. 1e/268, 6 June 1597. See also MM D 26/6; ASA FKA 1059; and ASA Fürststift Kempten, Archiv Bände 1360, fol. 115. For a fuller discussion, see Dees, *Power of Peasants*, chap. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Franz Ludwig Baumann, *Geschichte des Allgäus*, 3 vols. (Aalen, DE: Scientia, 1971–73), 2:645; Hermann Fischer, *Schwäbisches Wörterbuch* (Tübingen, DE: H. Laupp, 1904–36); see also DUBY, *Rural Economy*, 217. In the Abbot of Kempten's account books for rents collected in Woringen, this was called "grass money" (*Graßgeld*); ASA FKA 2179.

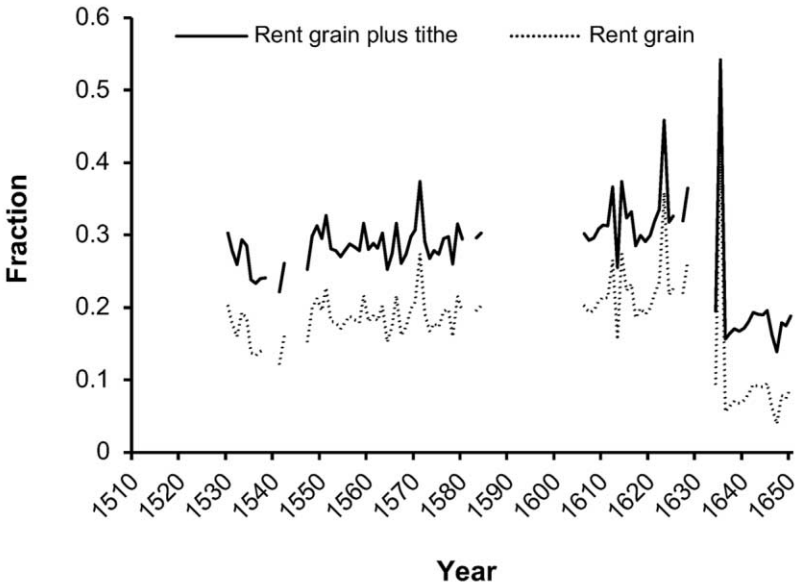


Figure 3. Grain rent and tithe as a proportion of the actual harvest in the Memmingen territory.

toward collecting cash rents on homes and other plots of land expanded considerably. The total hay money collected by the foundation in 1515 was £522.75. It peaked in 1631 at £2,174.75, more than four times as much.<sup>20</sup>

The number of rent chickens and eggs paid by the peasants of Steinheim and Dickenreishausen more than doubled. In addition, new categories of rents in kind were introduced: geese, flax, and honey. Serf hens doubled as recognition of the subject's serf status and also a rent in kind. The 1449 rent register lists only one serf hen due in Steinheim, although many of the peasants were serfs. In earlier years one serf hen was generally expected only from the head of household,<sup>21</sup> this payment came to be applied to both husband and wife in a single household. Thus, in 1573, the farm held by Jerg Fackler paid one serf hen, although Fackler and his wife Barbara Bishöfin were both serfs.<sup>22</sup> By 1620 this farm was paying two serf hens.<sup>23</sup> In 1573, forty serf hens were due in the village, and by 1620, fifty-eight, despite falling population.<sup>24</sup> Instead of giving the foundation an actual hen, the

<sup>20</sup>MM D 102/1-3; MM D 98/2; and MM D Bd. 1/1258-1458.

<sup>21</sup>See also Heinrich Zirkel, "Die Leibhenne in Schwaben," *Schwäbische Blätter* 5, no. 3 (1954): 70.

<sup>22</sup>MM D Bd. 1/75.

<sup>23</sup>MM D Bd. 1/043.

<sup>24</sup>See Dees, *Power of Peasants*, esp. figures 7.1 and 10.2.

farmer could pay this obligation in cash. Foundation cash income from this source soared more than a hundredfold between 1590 and 1620 (fig. 4).<sup>25</sup>

From 1448 to 1620, the egg rent owed by the Steinheim villagers, payable at Easter, more than doubled from 1,080 eggs to 2,185. These increases tended to be imposed on the larger farms and generally were raised when a new tenant took over; the egg rent on Michael Beppel's large farm doubled from one hundred to two hundred eggs for the next tenant.<sup>26</sup>

By 1573, the foundation was collecting an annual rent of seven geese from five Steinheim farmers and twenty-six pounds of combed flax from eight farmers. These were new rents that had not been levied in any of these villages prior to 1516. By 1620, the rent was ten geese from eight farmers and forty-eight pounds of flax from seventeen farmers (fig. 1). In addition, two farmers were now paying one tankard of honey each. New forms of rent appeared in other territories as well.<sup>27</sup>

When the Poor Needy Foundation bought the village of Steinheim in 1448, the bill of sale specified that "every Steinheim farmer shall each and every year serve five days plowing with a team and three days in the winter, again with a plow team as needed. Every cottager shall serve seven days a year."<sup>28</sup> The 1449 rent register reminded many farmers that they "also owe military service as is the old custom."<sup>29</sup> In 1525, the Memmingen peasants objected, "we have hitherto been long and greatly aggrieved by services, which have multiplied and increased from day to day."<sup>30</sup>

Forced labor services, however, are rarely very productive. Over time, most were converted into cash payments. In 1505, when Hans Wespach was granted a farm in Steinheim, he owed twelve shillings (£0.6) "military service." This label disappeared from the Memmingen documents in favor of simply "service," or more frequently, "service money." Labor service money collected by the foundation more than doubled from the 1530s to the decade before the Thirty Years' War, then continued to increase into the 1620s until the war-induced collapse.<sup>31</sup>

In Steinheim, the amount paid by the individual larger farmers did not change from the time these records began in 1543 through 1620; each paid £1.25 per year.<sup>32</sup> What changed is who had to pay. In 1547 (the year of the Schmalkaldic War), twenty-eight additional names appeared on the list for this village, paying six shillings each (£0.3), the lowest payment category. Whereas previously only those who had a plot of land were subject to this rent, it appears that at this point

<sup>25</sup>MM D 102/1-3; MM D 98/2; and MM D Bd. 1/1258-1458.

<sup>26</sup>MM D Bd. 1/043. The entry is not dated, but the script appears to be from the 1580s.

<sup>27</sup>See Sreenivasan, *Peasants of Ottobeuren*, 138 and following.

<sup>28</sup>MM D Bd. 1/28.

<sup>29</sup>MM D Bd. 1/40, 2r and following.

<sup>30</sup>Scott and Scribner, *German Peasants' War*, 79.

<sup>31</sup>MM D 102/1-3; MM D 98/2; MM D Bd. 1/1258-1458; and MM D Bd. 1/130.

<sup>32</sup>MM D Bd. 1/92-179.

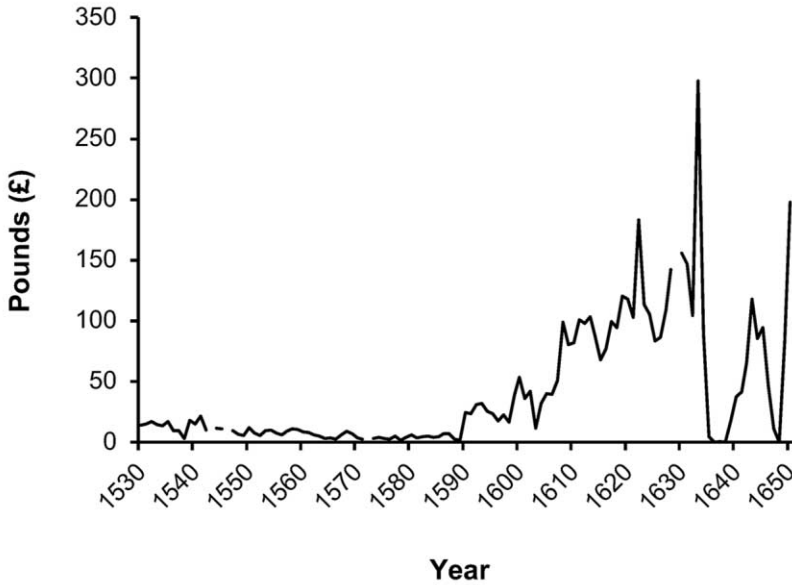


Figure 4. Foundation hen money income.

it was imposed on the landless village laborers. So, the number of Steinheim villagers subject to this rent jumped from thirty-four to sixty-three, and the total amount due increased 45 percent. The war soon ended, but the extension of labor service continued.

The Memmingen city council restricted the sale of wine in the villages to certain taverns, which were charged with collecting a wine tax.<sup>33</sup> This tax made up more than one-third of the city administration's real income in 1596 (fig. 5).<sup>34</sup> When the city council purchased the village of Woringen in 1516, the bill of sale noted that the tavern paid a wine tax of the "thirteenth tankard."<sup>35</sup> There were thirteen tankards in a viertel, so this was a tax rate of 7.69 percent.<sup>36</sup> Abolishing "all excises on beer, wine, and mead" was one of the demands raised in 1525.<sup>37</sup>

In March 1604, the tax rate was doubled to two tankards per viertel, 15.38 percent. Foundation wine tax collections from the villages increased by a factor of 3.39

<sup>33</sup>Rolf Kießling, *Die Stadt und ihr Land* (Cologne, DE: Böhlau, 1989), 475.

<sup>34</sup>MM D 24; MM D Bd. 1/1258-1457; MM D 102; and MM A 315/3. The amount the city borrowed that year was excluded from this calculation.

<sup>35</sup>MM D 82/1 (1516).

<sup>36</sup>Another document the same year says that the tax rate in Woringen was being raised to 3 pennies per viertel for 20 years (MM A 101/1). But records for the following year show 1/13th being collected (MM D Bd. 1/56).

<sup>37</sup>"Friedrich Weigandt's Draft of an Imperial Reformation," in Scott and Scribner, *German Peasants' War*, 262.

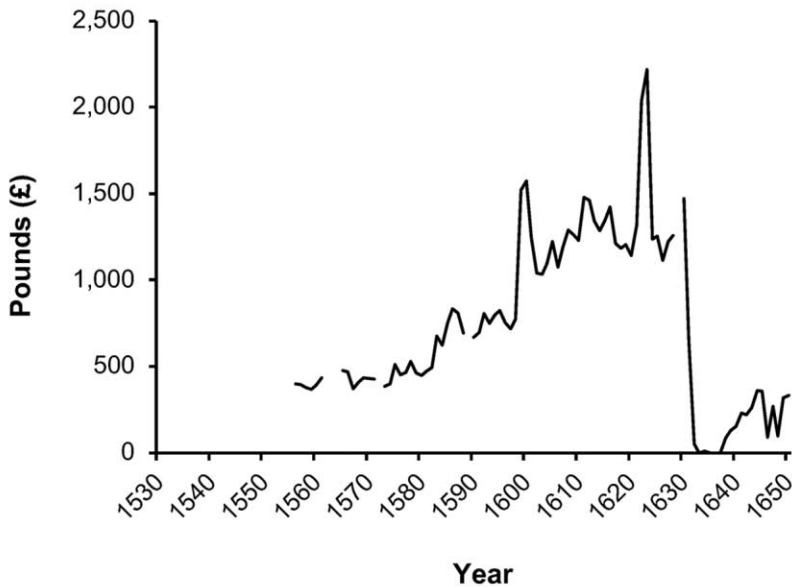


Figure 5. Wine tax collected by the foundation.

between 1556–61 and 1608–17, although amount of wine consumed fell more than 30 percent.<sup>38</sup>

The death tax, another levy imposed after the 1100s, was a major factor in the peasant revolts in Upper Swabia in the late 1400s and in the war of 1525.<sup>39</sup> In the 1525 peasant uprising, one of the peasant articles demanded “Eleventh, we want to have the custom called death taxes totally and completely abolished.”<sup>40</sup>

The death tax was paid by the heir. Ambrosy Weckerlin was required to pay £21 on his deceased brother-in-law’s inheritance, to be paid in one month.<sup>41</sup> The amount received by the foundation from death taxes increased by a factor of more than ten by 1618 as compared to the 1530s, then soared to a running average of more than twenty times the earlier figure (fig. 6).<sup>42</sup>

Subjects also had to pay taxes to immigrate into the territory. In 1600, eight couples had to pay a tax of £14 each to be admitted into Steinheim. Most could pay

<sup>38</sup>MM D 24; MM D Bd. 1/1258–1457; MM D 102; MM D 24; MM A 315/3; and MM D 102.

<sup>39</sup>Sabean, “Social Background,” 147; and Sabean, *Landbesitz*, 94.

<sup>40</sup>Günther Franz, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges* (Darmstadt, DE: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 178. See also Scott and Scribner, *German Peasants’ War*, 256–57.

<sup>41</sup>MM D Bd. 1/266, 237v (19 Jan. 1558).

<sup>42</sup>MM D 102/1–3; MM D 98/2 (Auszug); MM D Bd. 1/1258–1458. The “factor increase” is the ten-year running average of an index, where one equals the average of the years 1530–38.

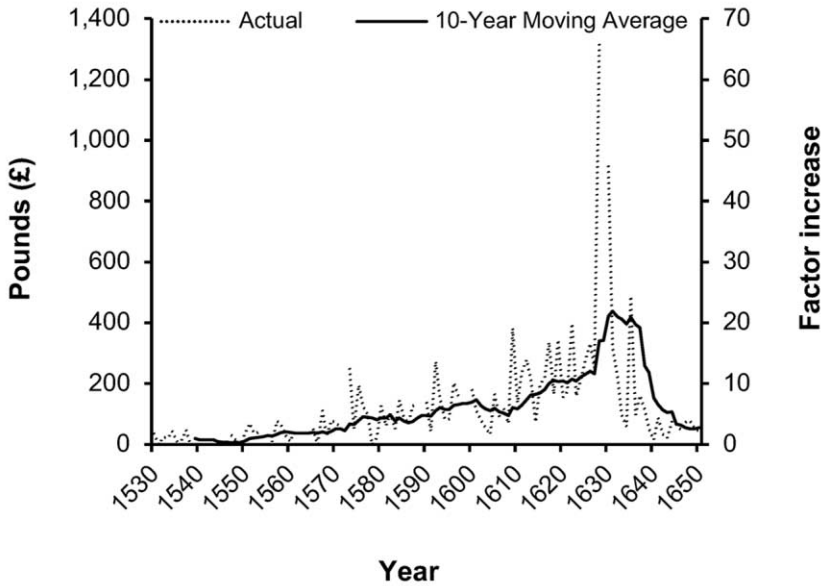


Figure 6. Foundation income from death taxes.

no more than £1.75 down; the remainder to be paid over time. Five years later, Matheus Schwarz and his wife still owed £5.25, and Hans Scheffeler and his wife £3.5.<sup>43</sup> Whereas subjects had long been required to get permission to live in the territory, it appears that this tax was first demanded in the late 1500s.<sup>44</sup>

Emigrants also had to pay a departure tax, probably introduced after 1348, when many lords were shoring up declining revenues and restricting peasant migration. In 1630, Hans Schwegelen of Dickenreishausen paid £9.275 “departure tax for his brother Georg Schwegelen of Erkhaim,” and Anna Schönmetzerin of Woringen was required to pay £2.625.<sup>45</sup>

In 1504, the village of Steinheim was levied a war tax of £70 and required to provide four men for military service.<sup>46</sup> In 1532, the city council levied another war tax on the surrounding countryside.<sup>47</sup> That decade, the city paid £5,262.25 in “Turk taxes” to fund the emperor’s war against the Turks.<sup>48</sup>

The war taxes to various regional alliances and the emperor in the first half of the century grew to crushing proportions. Figure 7 gives a hint of the burden that

<sup>43</sup>MM D 24/3 (1600, 1614, 1620). This source contains dozens of such entries.

<sup>44</sup>For example, MM D Bd. 1/266 (29 Dec. 1557; 17 Mar. 1560).

<sup>45</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1420, 44r, 44v (1630). The rate of this tax in the Memmingen territory is not known. In neighboring Kempten, it was 10 percent. Baumann, *Geschichte*, 2:656.

<sup>46</sup>MM D Bd. 1/263, fol. 130 (1504).

<sup>47</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1261 (1532 vol., entry of 23 Jan. 1533).

<sup>48</sup>MM A 315/3.

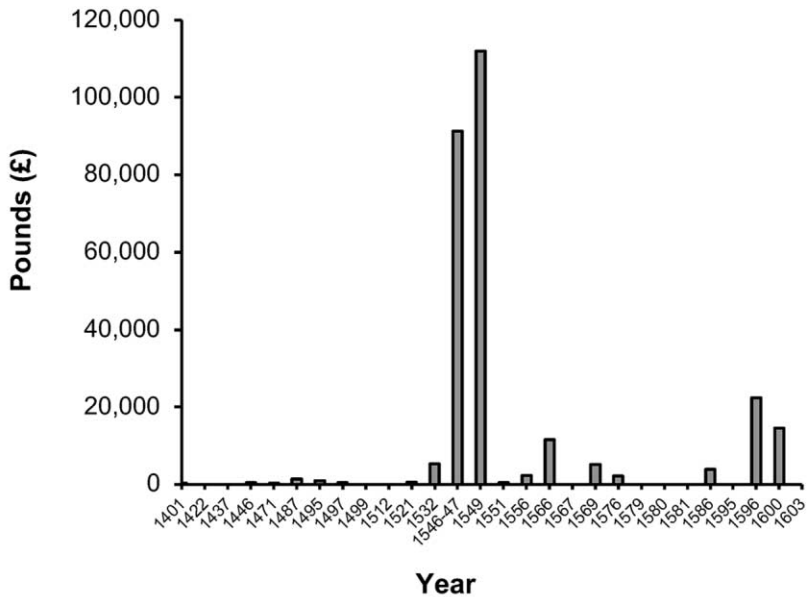


Figure 7. Imperial and regional war taxes and reparations levied on Memmingen (very partial).

war inflicted, although the totals for many years are missing.<sup>49</sup> Years for which there is evidence of a war levy, but for which the total is not known, are indicated with a date on the x axis. For other years, the assessment was in kind and does not appear on this chart; in 1532, for example, Memmingen was assessed 20 mounted and 134 foot soldiers. The mid-century war costs dwarfed the rest of the century, and the trend in the second half of the century was considerably higher than in the first.

Starting in 1521, imperial taxes were calculated in “Roman Months.” One Roman Month equaled the amount necessary to pay a month’s wages for around 4,000 cavalry and 20,000 infantrymen, or 128,000 gulden in 1521.<sup>50</sup> Between 1519 and 1555, Imperial Diets levied 73.5 Roman Months in war taxes, averaging two per year. Between 1556 and 1606 it levied 409, eight per year, 55 percent of them in the final twelve years alone, eighteen per year. Add to this the taxes levied by the regional Circle governments, and the subjects of the Swabian Circle had to pay 412

<sup>49</sup>Peter Eitel, *Die oberschwäbischen Reichsstädte im Zeitalter der Zunftherrschaft*. (Stuttgart, DE: Müller & Gräff, 1970), 12; Peer Frieß, *Die Außenpolitik der Reichsstadt Memmingen in der Reformationszeit* <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Reformationszeit> (1517–1555) (Memmingen, DE: Heimatpflege Memmingen, 1993), 217; Karl Zeumer, ed., *Quellensammlung zur Geschichte der deutschen Reichsverfassung in Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Tübingen, DE: Mohr, 1907), 195, 198, 259; and MM A 315/3, 318/3.

<sup>50</sup>Winfried Schulze, *Reich und Türkengefahr im späten 16. Jahrhundert* (Munich, DE: C. H. Beck, 1978), 179, 311.

Roman Months in the twelve years between 1594 and 1606, thirty-four per year.<sup>51</sup> The records are incomplete for Memmingen, but what is available suggests that the burden of war taxes was crushing; one study argued that these imperial taxes were the *cause* of the economic downturn late in the century.<sup>52</sup>

#### ENTRY FEES AND SITTING MONEY

By the 1100s, lords were imposing “entry fees,” usually a year’s rent, when a new tenant took possession of a farm.<sup>53</sup> When the Poor Needy Foundation bought Steinheim in 1448, entry fees were collected on six of the seven full farms and four of the smaller ones.<sup>54</sup> On seven farms, the entry fee was £3.2, on one it was £1.6, on another £0.5, and finally, young Conrad Kaiser paid £16. Entry fees could not be collected from farms in which the farmer had inheritance rights. From the time the foundation bought Steinheim to the Thirty Years’ War, the record is punctuated with bills of sale as the foundation bought out the farmers’ household and farm plots that it did not already own. Acquiring these plots allowed for additional increases in rent, including entry fees. In the early years, entry fees were not levied on the smallest plots. This, too, would change.

Figure 8 shows foundation income from entry fees.<sup>55</sup> The trend line is based on the average for 1530–39. Although the figures for the 1530s seem low compared to subsequent years, in all likelihood they represent a very significant increase over the 1450s. By 1600, the foundation was collecting five times as much as in the 1530s, and in the early 1620s more than ten times. Ledger entries for Woringen indicate that when each farmer was charged an entry fee in the 1510s, he paid it all at once,<sup>56</sup> the highest was £52.47. As these fees soared, even the largest farmers could not pay them in a lump sum and had to pay in installments over time. When Enderlin Kaiser took over his father’s farm in Steinheim in 1525, he paid £31.5 the first year, then £21 per year for the next two years for a total of £73.5.<sup>57</sup> In the 1525 uprising, the Memmingen peasants demanded that entry fees be abolished.<sup>58</sup>

In 1555, Enderlin Pfadler’s widow of Dickenreishausen came with her brother and other men before the foundation trustees to ask permission to marry Michael Seyboldt of the same village. The lords consented and granted Seyboldt the farm.

<sup>51</sup>Winfried Schulze, *Bäuerlicher Widerstand und feudale Herrschaft in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, DE: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), 68.

<sup>52</sup>See Dees, *Power of Peasants*, figure 7.22, 641; and Thomas Robisheaux, *Rural Society and the Search for Order in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. 177, 203.

<sup>53</sup>Duby, *Rural Society*, 241.

<sup>54</sup>MM D Bd. 1/40, 2v.

<sup>55</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1258–1384; MM D 102/1–3; MM D Bd. 1/174 (1629).

<sup>56</sup>MM D Bd. 1/56.

<sup>57</sup>MM D Bd. 1/265, 5r.

<sup>58</sup>Scott and Scribner, *German Peasants’ War*, 79.

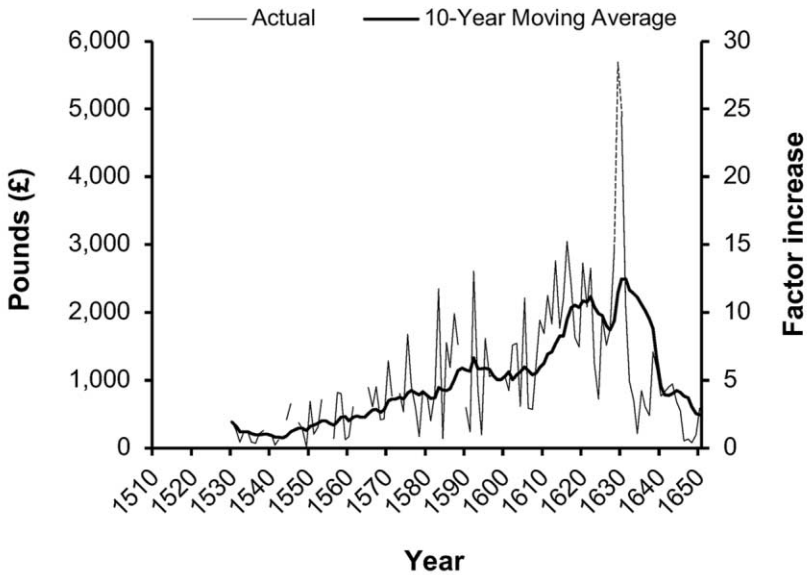


Figure 8. Entry fees collected by the foundation.

An entry fee of £70 was charged, half to be paid in cash immediately, the balance to be paid off in £17.5 annual installments. The trustees claimed that this was a low entry fee for this size farm but that the previous tenant still had not paid off his £105 entry fee. In such cases, the subsequent tenant had to assume and pay off the balance. This was the third largest farm in the village and the previous tenant had held it for seven years. By the 1550s, entry fees had become so onerous that they meant long-term debt even for the largest farmers.<sup>59</sup>

In the early 1570s (famine and plague years) several farms changed hands. When Michael Bepel took over a full farm he paid a £245 entry fee. When this farm changed hands again in 1620, an entry fee 2.5 times as high was demanded.<sup>60</sup> For comparison, the typical 1448 entry fees were equivalent to one or two malter of rye; those in 1628 were twenty-two to thirty-two times the price of a malter of rye.

The amounts paid, of course, were only part of the problem for the farmers. The back debt in entry fees soared to more than £14,000 in 1628.<sup>61</sup>

The four Holy Days of Easter—referred to as the Four Days—signified the end of one agrarian cycle and the beginning of the next; winter was past and the new farming year was beginning; old grants of tenure were terminated and new ones made. The foundation's account books followed this rhythm, running from one

<sup>59</sup>MM D Bd. 1/266, 219v (16 May 1555); and Bd. 1/43 (Dickenreishausen).

<sup>60</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267; and MM D Bd. 1/43.

<sup>61</sup>MM D 24; MM D Bd. 1/1258–1457; and MM D 102.

Easter to the next. When a tenant who did not hold inheritance rights to his farm died, the farm reverted immediately to the foundation. Widows and orphans had to beg permission to stay on the farm. In many cases, permission was granted only until the Four Days before they were ejected.<sup>62</sup>

From the perspective of the foundation, these dispensations postponed granting the farm to the next tenant and collecting the entry fee, not to mention the frequently higher rents, constituting a loss. So, a new rent was imposed, “sitting money,” which farmers’ survivors had to pay for being allowed to stay in their own home—briefly. In the mid-1400s, many farms had been inheritable or granted for “three lives,” that of the farmer, his wife, and children, or at least one child. Eliminating the farmers’ inheritance rights and cutting tenure to “one life,” that of the farmer, allowed the foundation to impose entry fees, raise rents more often, and levy this new rent.

#### PARISH RENTS

In addition to the various rents that the peasants paid to the lords of Memmingen, they also paid rents to the local pastor. The tithe had been imposed by Charlemagne in 779 CE as a second layer of rent, on top of the traditional grain rents, to support the parish churches and the church and secular lords who owned them.<sup>63</sup> But the Memmingen foundation had taken the tithe from the Steinheim pastor immediately upon purchasing the village in 1448, a wide-spread practice in the late 1400s.<sup>64</sup> So to support the pastor, new parish rents were established out of a combination of rents on bits of property and new “traditional” rents. These constituted a third layer of rent; in 1573, this burden totaled more than the heavy war taxes.<sup>65</sup>

#### THE FIGHT FOR THE FOREST

The thicket of conflicts over access to the forest was so dense in the Memmingen territory—as everywhere—that entire volumes have been written just on this topic.<sup>66</sup> The following discussion provides the briefest overview of the general lines of development.

Medieval farming can be compared to the peasant’s three-legged stool: one leg was the village proper, with its homes, barns, and gardens; a second was the surrounding plowland and pasture; and the third was the commons, which mostly

<sup>62</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (Woringen, 9 May 1571; 17 Oct. 1571).

<sup>63</sup>On the origins of the tithe, see Dees, *Power of Peasants*, 163–67.

<sup>64</sup>MM D 67/4 (1448); MM D Bd. 1/28(1448), 2r–7v; Peter Blickle, *Die Reformation im Reich*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, DE: Eugen Ulmer, 1992), 29; Blickle, *Communal Reformation* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>65</sup>See Dees, *Power of Peasants*, in fig. 10.7.

<sup>66</sup>See, for example Zückert, *Allmende und Allmendaufhebung* (Stuttgart, DE: Lucius & Lucius, 2003); and Hans Eschenlohr, “Die Waldwirtschaft der freien Reichsstadt Memmingen” (PhD diss., Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität Munich, 1921).

meant the forest. All were necessary for the system to function; saw off one leg and the whole had to collapse. An “essential fact” was that “until the end of the nineteenth century, the amount of manure that a farmer could put on his fields was a function of the amount of livestock he had and the area of permanent pasture, heath, or forest where this livestock could pasture. The fertility of each field depended closely on the demography and the social relations.”<sup>67</sup>

The forest was critical for grazing cattle, pigs, and other livestock, which were sources of food and draft power as well as producers of the manure that fertilized the fields. It also contained the single most important natural resource: wood. After 1400, the lords steadily reconsolidated their control over the land and the people.<sup>68</sup> By 1438, the problems this produced were recognized even in circles close to the emperor’s court, whence originated the most widely read reform tract of the 1400s; “many a good estate in the country has been so burdened with dues and interest payments that it has been confiscated by the creditor, and *its pasture and wood and field interdicted to the peasants*, even though they are taxed and driven mercilessly to do excessive work and made to serve day and night.”<sup>69</sup>

By the late 1400s, most of the forests belonged to the landlords. In 1500, the Memmingen lords prohibited the peasants from hunting in the forest.<sup>70</sup> The ordinance was reissued in harsher forms in 1509, 1511, and 1516.<sup>71</sup> Peasants were not allowed to shoot even wild game that foraged in their fields; one of the Twelve Articles included “for we must suffer the dumb animals wantonly and unnecessarily to devour our crops.”<sup>72</sup> Conflicts relating to use of the forest accelerated in the years leading up to the 1525 uprising.<sup>73</sup> Three of the ten articles put forward by the Memmingen peasants dealt with access to the forest, including asking that those that had once belonged to the communes be returned and that fines over infractions be eliminated. Another article objected to restrictions on hunting game and fish.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>67</sup>Pierre Morlon and François Sigaut, *La troublante histoire de la jachère* (Dijon, FR: Educagri éditions-Éditions Quae, 2008), 39.

<sup>68</sup>See, for example, Baumann, *Geschichte*, 2:719.

<sup>69</sup>“The Reformation of Emperor Sigismund,” in Gerald Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent in Germany on the Eve of the Reformation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971, 1985), 24–25 (emphasis added); see also Tom Scott, ed. *Society and Economy in Germany, 1300–1600* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 199–200.

<sup>70</sup>Zückert, *Allmende*, 35; Ludwig Mayr, “Die freie Birsch von Memmingen, gen. Booser Hart,” in *MMGBI* 3, no. 6 (June 1914): 41–42; and Kießling, *Die Stadt und Ihr Land*, 340. See also Fritz Wagner, *Die Wälder Memmingens* (Memmingen, DE: Verlag Memminger Zeitung, 1992), 11.

<sup>71</sup>Mayr, “Die freie Birsch,” 3.6:42.

<sup>72</sup>Article 4 of the Twelve Articles, Scott & Scribner, *German Peasants’ War*, 255; see also Article 4 of the Memmingen peasants, 79; Baumann, *Geschichte*, 2:662, 665.

<sup>73</sup>See Zückert, *Allmende*, 43; and Günther Franz, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Darmstadt, DE: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 25.

<sup>74</sup>Scott and Scribner, *German Peasants’ War*, 79–80. A list of grievances raised by Memmingen-area peasants, broken down by village, can be found in ASA Reichsstadt Memmingen MüB 26½; see discussion at Blicke, “Nochmals,” 303 and following.

Throughout the area of the uprising, “hardly a peasant grievance list neglected to demand emphatically logging rights, hunting rights (with the usual argument about damages by wild game), pasturage rights, and the right to graze the forests.”<sup>75</sup> But the peasants lost in 1525, so the price the lords demanded for peasants’ access to the forests steadily increased as the century wore on.

In 1580 the foundation was still charging £0.2 per klafter for firewood;<sup>76</sup> by 1588 the fee had almost tripled to £0.58.<sup>77</sup> As a result, in 1543 the foundation collected £27.67 wood money from the Steinheimers for around 138 klafter of wood; in 1630 £101.83 for about 175 klafter, nearly triple the per unit cost.<sup>78</sup> “Probably every single Upper Swabian monastery in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries increased its revenues significantly by selling wood, and of course, the same was true of the nobility.”<sup>79</sup>

Restrictions and fees for grazing livestock were also increased in the course of the century.<sup>80</sup> In addition to the forests, the lords took control of the ponds and streams that ran through them. This meant that villagers were made to pay to fish and for irrigation water from this formerly communal property.

In 1490, Mark Glantzman was appointed water warden in Steinheim. The grant stated, “Everyone in Steinheim who needs or wants to irrigate must pay the water warden eight pennies [£0.07] per jauchart with no back talk. Furthermore, it shall be known that no one is to irrigate on his own. That is forbidden on a fine of one pound heller.”<sup>81</sup> In 1516, this ban was extended to include watering, fishing, or crabbing.<sup>82</sup> Nearly a century later, in 1598, “the headman and four, for themselves and the whole community of Steinheim, most humbly pray that because the Heimertingen water was removed and taken [from them], then that water money, [£63], should also be dropped, and henceforth only the old water money of [£13.125] taken.” This “most humble” request was refused, so they had to continue paying fees for water they no longer got. The next year, the Steinheim villagers were back, asking to be excused from the hay tithe on certain meadows that, apparently, had been irrigated with this now-lost Heimertingen water. The foundation trustees responded that henceforth the village would have to pay “not more than” £42 annually hay tithe, in one lump sum.<sup>83</sup> The water they needed to irrigate the meadows and grow the hay had been cut off, but they still had to pay for the water and the tithe.

<sup>75</sup>Peter Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants’ War from a New Perspective*, trans. Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H. C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 73.

<sup>76</sup>MM D 21/2 (1580).

<sup>77</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (1588).

<sup>78</sup>MM D Bd. 1/92, 93 (1543); and MM D Bd. 1/175 (1630).

<sup>79</sup>Blicke, *Revolution of 1525*, 38–39.

<sup>80</sup>See Dees, *Power of Peasants*, chap. 7.

<sup>81</sup>MM D Bd. 1/263, fol. 73 (1490).

<sup>82</sup>MM D Bd. 1/264, 109r (1516).

<sup>83</sup>MM D Bd. 1/268 (Steinheim, 14 June 1598, 26 Sept. 1599, 19 Oct. 1599).

The rent for fishing rights in Steinheim tripled in less than fifty years, from £8 in 1543 to £24 after 1580.<sup>84</sup> Misdemeanor fines added another heavy burden, as the average soared more than fivefold between 1530–38 and 1580–1610.<sup>85</sup>

#### DEBT

This list of rents is not complete; it includes only those for which an adequately systematic record survives to be able to track over time. By the early 1570s, rents and debt paid by the peasants took some 60 percent of their gross production in average years and 80 percent in famine years—a crippling burden. Debt alone took at least 26 percent in average years and 36 percent in famine years, and probably much more.<sup>86</sup> As production stagnated, rent increases continued, debt spiraled upward, and these proportions increased. Not only was it impossible for the farmer to make any improvements to his farm, the degeneration of his land, livestock, equipment, and self were inescapable. These rent increases weighed all the more heavily as they were inflicted upon a declining rural population;<sup>87</sup> fewer people were scratching heavier rents out of declining yields from exhausted soil. Unable to pay, they were forced to turn to debt. The soaring debt loads alone provide a more accurate picture of the condition of the peasantry than, for example, Peter Blickle's claim that the "peasant's economic position *improved* ... during the sixteenth century."<sup>88</sup> In addition to rents, debt was just another way that the lords appropriated the peasants' production.

Assuming a 5 percent interest rate, which was standard at the time, the total debt owed by Steinheim villagers in 1448 was £2.83, which was equivalent to 2.58 malter of rye.<sup>89</sup> The biggest debt, Jerg Endras's £0.833, was worth about three-quarters of a malter of rye that year. Endras and Wilhelm Näger both held large farms; the others appear to have been cottagers.

By 1516, peasant debts in neighboring Woringen were higher. The average annual outstanding cash debt to the foundation alone for 1516–18 was £990.94. For comparison, average annual cash rents collected in 1517 and 1519 (including the cash values of chickens and eggs) were £264.86. In addition, villagers owed a grain debt averaging 273.84 malter on a total average annual rent of 226.76 malter for 1517 and 1519.<sup>90</sup> So the villagers were 3.74 years behind in their cash rents and

<sup>84</sup>MM D Bd. 1/92, 93, 101, 112, 119, 129, 132, 139, 149, 266.

<sup>85</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1258–1457.

<sup>86</sup>Dees, *Power of Peasants*, esp. fig. 10.7.

<sup>87</sup>Dees, *Power of Peasants*, esp. figs. 10.2–10.4, 10.10–10.12.

<sup>88</sup>Blickle, *Revolution of 1525*, 174, see also 187; and Peter Blickle, *Die Revolution von 1525*, 3rd ed. (Munich, DE: R. Oldenbourg, 1993), 262 (emphasis added).

<sup>89</sup>The 1448 bill of sale listed the peasants' rents and also their debts. MM D Bd. 1/28 (Steinheim 1448 Kaufbrief). The spot price of rye in mid-December 1448 was £1.1 per malter. Christoph Schorer, *Memminger Chronick*, facsimile ed. (Kempten, DE: Verlag für Heimatpflege, 1964), 14.

<sup>90</sup>MM D 80/11.

1.2 years behind on their grain rent. This works out to a cash equivalent total debt of £941.17, 332 times greater than the 1448 Steinheim debt of £2.83. These are major debts on the eve of the uprising and mark a qualitative change in the condition of the peasantry compared to 1448. These figures do not include private debt (to lenders other than the foundation) of which there is also evidence. Some villagers appear also to have owed money to the abbot of Ottobeuren.<sup>91</sup>

Cash debts arose for a variety of reasons. When Michael Hestelin took over his father's farm in 1566, he was saddled with his father's debts.<sup>92</sup> Entry fees drove several farmers into debt that year. Another took out £20 to pay a misdemeanor fine. Meanwhile, a weaver in the city had to take over a debt from Peter Miller, who had died in the foundation poorhouse;<sup>93</sup> the weaver may have been the guarantor on Miller's original loan. The practice of naming guarantors among the debtor's neighbors was common.

On 11 April 1581, Mathias Haug was charged £10.5 for his wife's death tax and told he had to pay by Pentecost—about a month away.<sup>94</sup> Jerg Braun, a cottager in Dickenreishausen, needed cash in 1620 and offered to sell the foundation a meadow he owned. His offer was refused; instead, he was loaned £70 at 5 percent annual interest.<sup>95</sup>

In 1560, Jerg Zick held the largest of the half farms in Woringen, along with the village tavern. In addition, he served as village headman. Nevertheless, he was deeply in debt. He started that year with a cash debt of £175 and a grain debt of over fifteen malter on a grain rent of roughly eight malter per year. By the end of 1562, his outstanding debt was still £166.625.<sup>96</sup> This seems to have been a particularly serious case, as it came before the Memmingen city council. He promised to make progress that year. Just in case, Jerg Heselin was to stand as guarantor for the debt.<sup>97</sup> Apparently he did not make enough progress, as by July 1564 he had been ordered “to clear out of the village within four weeks” and never to return. His plea to be readmitted to the village was “absolutely and totally rejected. And the same goes for his wife,” the city council responded.<sup>98</sup>

Even large farmers fell into debt. In 1560, the foundation loaned Conrad Hayler £52.5 and took over his preexisting loan of £164 from another Memmingen foundation. His consolidated farm in the Woringen forest served as collateral; this was one of the larger farms in the village. When Michael Bachmair was granted one

<sup>91</sup>Robert Stepp, “Die Herrschaft Woringen im Mittelalter,” in *MMGBl* 1 (1952–53):10–14; 2 (1954/55/56):1–4; 3 (1959):12–17, 3:16.

<sup>92</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (30 Jan. 1566).

<sup>93</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1328, 144v–48v.

<sup>94</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (11 Apr. 1581). Pentecost fell on 14 May that year.

<sup>95</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1406, 113r (1620).

<sup>96</sup>MM D Bd. 1/112, 113.

<sup>97</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (Woringen, 24 July 1562).

<sup>98</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (Woringen, 18 July 1564).

of the big farms in Steinheim in 1590, he could not pay the £157.5 entry fee, so it was recorded as a loan.<sup>99</sup>

In 1620, a separate set of books was set up to keep track of “entry fee debts, misdemeanor fines, death taxes, serf fees, and other debts.” It recorded individual entry fee debts over the next decade as high as £743.75. In 1630, Paul Negelin of Woringen still owed £17.5 on an entry fee of £105 that had been imposed seven years earlier.<sup>100</sup>

The manner in which the foundation scribes recorded debt was inconsistent and confusing. Some types of debt were separated into different categories for reasons that are not clear; other times these various categories were grouped together. Some outstanding debts to the foundation were entered as “cash on hand.” The amounts shown in figure 9 do not include cash debts that were sometimes incorporated into the foundation’s annual cash-on-hand figure.<sup>101</sup> The totals in different sections of the income and expenses books correspond until 1598, then diverge sharply. At that time, how debt was recorded was changed. So, these figures should be viewed with caution; they offer pieces of the whole and give an idea of general trends but are not a precise or complete picture.

Total cash debts owed to the foundation more than tripled between 1515 and 1530 from £1,022.14 to £3,299.91, then spiked with the price of rye in 1568 and continued to rise until the foundation’s financial crisis in the late 1590s, when the collapsing economy, soaring military expenses, and routine graft and embezzlement by foundation officials produced a cash crisis, forcing the foundation to sell off at a significant loss four villages and their territories purchased only twenty years earlier.

The difficulty many farmers were having paying their basic rents by the 1590s is illustrated by the amount of hay money and labor service money collected and owed.<sup>102</sup> The last time collections exceeded debt in these two categories was in 1549, but after the big increases in hay money rent in the early 1550s, debt always exceeded collections. Between 1551 and 1597, debt surpassed collections by two-thirds, and at times more. In 1592, overdue hay money and labor service money peaked at nearly £4,200, more than double the £1,912 actually taken in that year in these two categories.

These and other cash-debt categories then plummeted right at the time of the foundation’s economic crisis in the late 1590s (fig. 10).<sup>103</sup> Part of the foundation’s response appears to have been to call in all outstanding debts. By 1600, back debts in hay money and labor service money were all but cleared; collections more than quadrupled debt. Clearing these debts meant requiring farmers to pay off all back debts and thenceforth to pay on time—or turn to private lenders.

<sup>99</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1313, 140r, and Bd. 1/1368, 114r (Expenses, 1590).

<sup>100</sup>MM D Bd. 1/174.

<sup>101</sup>MM D 102/1–3; MM D 98/2; and MM D Bd. 1/1258–1458.

<sup>102</sup>MM D 102/1–3; MM D 98/2 (Auszug); and MM D Bd. 1/1258–1458.

<sup>103</sup>MM D 98/2; MM D 102/1–3; and MM D Bd. 1/1258–1458.

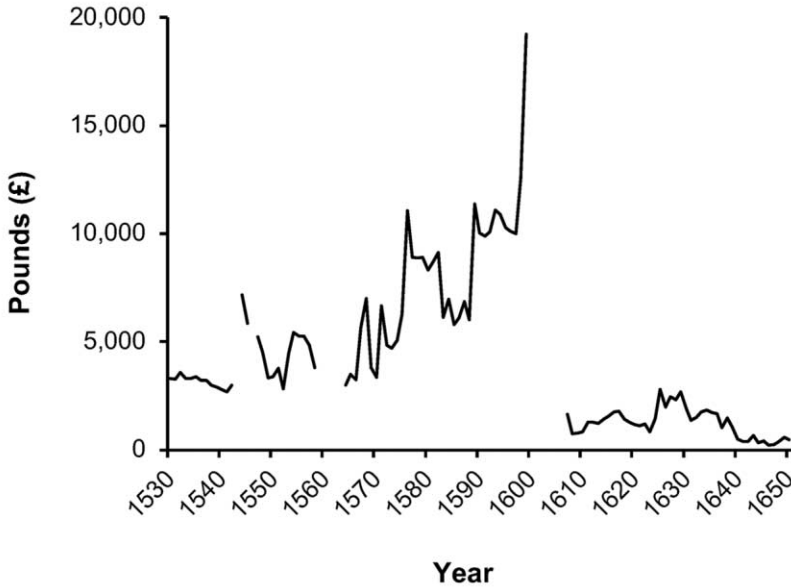


Figure 9. Cash debt owed to the foundation.

Debts were passed on even when the subsequent tenant was not a relative or an heir.<sup>104</sup> Frequently, the farmers' heavy debts put the foundation in a position to buy out the few remaining scraps of land the farmers still had inheritance rights to. In 1615, the foundation bought four jauchart of land for £2,100, but kept half the sale price to pay off the seller's outstanding debt.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to cash debts, peasants also fell behind on their grain rents. In 1520, Urban Pfadler was getting too old to work his farm; his son Hans was granted permission to farm it on condition that, in addition to the rents, Hans pay two malter every year on his father's debt until it was paid off. But "when his father departs in death, the farm and all its belongings fall free and back to the monastery and will be granted again as the trustees and farm master see fit."<sup>106</sup> The foundation typically noted both the amount of grain due and its cash equivalent.<sup>107</sup> Jerg Mayer had owed four viertel of rye for a decade.<sup>108</sup>

After the Steinheim farmers had paid their rents on the 1570 harvest, Hans Fackler, the village headman, still had a grain debt of two malter of rye on the largest

<sup>104</sup>MM D Bd. 1/270 (Steinheim, 22 Jan. 1612).

<sup>105</sup>MM D Bd. 1/1401, fol. 116 (1615).

<sup>106</sup>MM D Bd. 1/265, 4r.

<sup>107</sup>This was the practice with peasant grain debts to the village parish, as well; see for example MM D 39/13 (12 Nov. 1587).

<sup>108</sup>MM D Bd. 1/452 (nn).

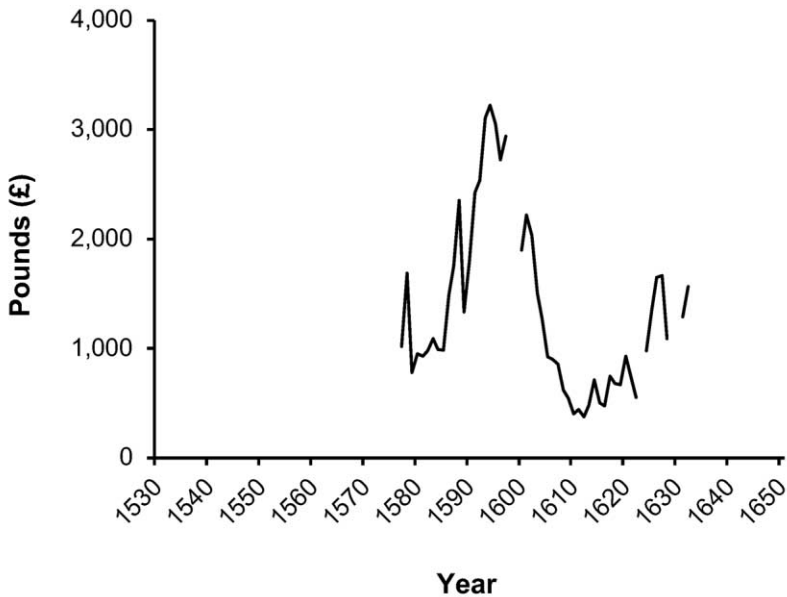


Figure 10. Back interest debt owed to the foundation.

of the half farms. Balthus Schalck, who held the second largest, had had to borrow eight viertel of oats during the year until the harvest came in. After paying his rents, he still owed 1.75 malter of rye and a malter of husked spelt. Hans Glanzmann, with the third-largest farm in the village, finished the year with an outstanding debt of two malter of rye, 2.88 malter of oats, and one malter of husked spelt on a rent of eighteen malter of grain; fully one-third of his grain rent was overdue. That year, the Steinheimers paid nearly 202 malter of grain rent and ended the year with 52.45 malter grain debt.<sup>109</sup>

Jerg Nagel held one of the biggest farms in Woringen. Nagel began 1570 with a debt of 3.5 malter rye and then borrowed another 4.04 malter of rye and oats before the end of the year on a grain rent of eleven malter.<sup>110</sup> He had been warned before the harvest that he “shall pay the old rye debt in eight days and also the loaned oats as soon as they are brought in. Once again, he shall not sell so much that he cannot pay his rent and overdue grain. If he violates this, he will find out that he will be evicted on the Four Days.”<sup>111</sup> He was warned again in November.<sup>112</sup> What happened next is not recorded, but two years later he no longer held this

<sup>109</sup>MM D Bd. 1/502, 0v–8v (1570).

<sup>110</sup>MM D Bd. 1/502, 55v (1570).

<sup>111</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (16 Aug. 1570).

<sup>112</sup>MM D Bd. 1/267 (8 Nov. 1570).

farm. It appears that in order to reduce his debt load he traded down to a smaller farm.<sup>113</sup> Clearly, it was not only the small farmers who were in the hole.

Requests for loans were not always granted. In 1544, Hans Glanzmann held the third largest farm in Steinheim. His plea for one malter of rye was “rejected because he is already in debt in grain and money.”<sup>114</sup> Figure 11 tracks the total grain debt to the foundation.<sup>115</sup>

The mid-1520s—during the uprising—clearly were very difficult years, and those conditions continued. Hard years recurred in the 1550s, 1560s, and 1570s. The totals are not available for much of the 1590s. However, it is clear that, as with cash, grain debt rose in waves through much of the century then plummeted after 1600, suggesting a trend similar to that of the cash debts. The foundation was not able to eliminate outstanding grain debts as completely as it could cash debt. The onset of war then drove grain debt to unprecedented heights.

#### FLAT RENTS?

Historically, farmers have put up with astonishing levels of oppression; they have rebelled very rarely, only when their condition has become utterly unbearable. The peasant uprising known as the Jacquerie of 1358 in France lasted twelve days; the Peasant Revolt of 1381 in England less than two months; both were restricted to small regions. The German Peasants’ War of 1525 was the greatest revolt in Europe between the overthrow of the Roman Empire in 476 and the French Revolution of 1789. For a year and a half multiple armies warred across central and south Germany and southward through Austria almost to Italy. The simple fact of this massive rebellion is proof of the depth of peasant suffering.

For those who need written evidence, this was provided by the hundreds of peasant articles presented during the uprising detailing their harsh conditions. For those who dismiss peasant testimony, even opponents of the peasants clearly stated the causes. Sebastian Franck acknowledged, “this particular insurrection grew out of a protest against oppressive tithes, death duties, forced labor, tributes, interest payments, and serious grievances.”<sup>116</sup> Martin Luther wrote, “We have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops and mad priests and monks, whose hearts are hardened, even to the present day; ... as temporal rulers you do nothing but cheat and rob the people so that you may lead a life of luxury and extravagance. The poor common people cannot bear it any longer.” And, “the people cannot tolerate it very long if their rulers set confiscatory tax rates and tax them out of their very skins.”<sup>117</sup>

<sup>113</sup>Compare MM D Bd. 1/119 (Woringen, 1570) with MM Bd. 1/43 (Woringen, 1572).

<sup>114</sup>MM D Bd. 1/266, 135v (1544).

<sup>115</sup>MM D 99/1; MM D 102/1; MM D Bd. 1/451–596; and MM D Bd. 1/95 (1526).

<sup>116</sup>Quoted in Strauss, *Manifestations*, 169.

<sup>117</sup>Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia,” in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Christopher

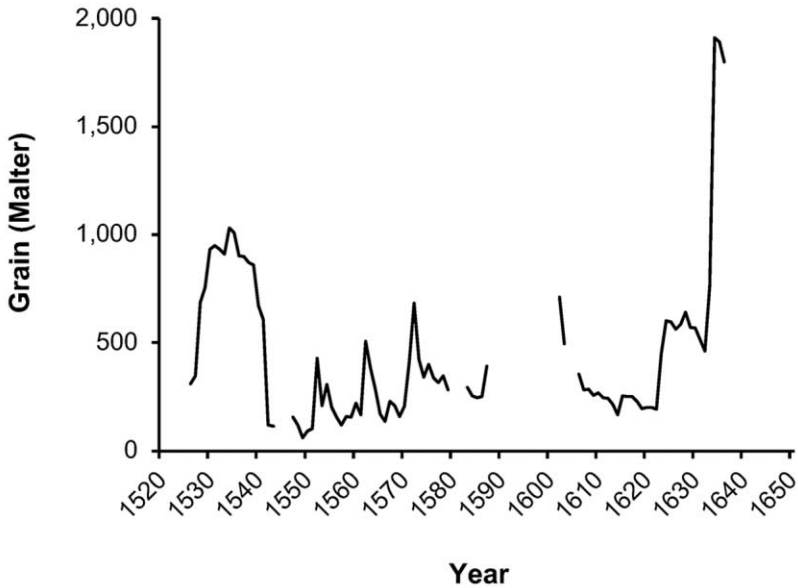


Figure 11. Grain debt owed to the foundation.

That was the situation in 1525. Increasing rents and the servitude necessary to collect them were the key issues in the war. After defeating the peasants, the lords took full advantage of their victory. The rent increases and debts documented in this study are taken from the books of the foundation that collected them; adding them up is simple arithmetic. These are facts, confirmed by the Memminger scribe who calculated that the foundation had increased grain rents three times over, cash rents 5.5 times, chickens and hens seven times, and so forth.<sup>118</sup>

Nevertheless, a parade of modern historians has claimed that none of this is true. Sabean alleged that “as for the tenant-farmers, their economic position remained relatively good up to the Peasants’ War.”<sup>119</sup> These historians insist that in fact rents were not rising—before or after 1525.<sup>120</sup> Apparently, Luther and Franck and other eyewitnesses didn’t know what they were talking about, and the greatest uprising in a thousand years took place simply because the peasants couldn’t do basic arithmetic, so didn’t understand that their rents were not really rising.

Boyd Brown (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–86), 46:17–43, 19, 23.

<sup>118</sup>MM D Bd. 1/24, 59v.

<sup>119</sup>Sabean, “Social Background,” 188; and Sabean, *Landbesitz*, 115.

<sup>120</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 137.

Sabean researched the nearby Weingarten monastery. His study claims that rents “remained stable” and “did not yet rise significantly prior to the Peasants’ War,”<sup>121</sup> and the actual cause of the Peasant Wars’ “was a sharp and continuing rise in population.”<sup>122</sup> Sabean presented the Peasant Wars’ as a classic Malthusian crisis of overpopulation, though without crediting his source or providing a shred of evidence that “overpopulation” existed or provoked anything.

The flaws in Sabean’s analysis include: (1) the small group of farms he selected to study is biased, and (2) the rents he analyzed are only partial. Despite this biased and partial selection, (3) the rents he did include did not remain stable, but jumped 58 percent. (4) He ignored debt completely, and (5) the evidence does not support any claim of significant population increase during this period.

Sabean chose not to compare whole villages over time, as was done in this study and others, but cherry-picked certain individual farms to include in his investigation. “Out of a large number of documents only a few farms can be traced. Sometimes they are traceable *only because the similarity of rents* makes it possible,” he noted. But wouldn’t this tend to skew the selection in favor of those with little or no increase, excluding those with larger increases? In his original dissertation, he acknowledged as much, stating “the evidence is scattered and *reflects a certain bias*.” This warning, however, appears to have been dropped from the published book.<sup>123</sup>

Sabean wrote that rents could be traced on seventy-one farms between 1458 and 1531, but gave data on only twenty-eight of them. Even within this narrow selection, his own data shows not that “rents remained stable,” but precisely the opposite. On average, the rent quadrupled on the thirteen farms whose rent increased. Add in the fifteen for whom Sabean alleged there was no increase, and the rent for the group as a whole jumped 58 percent (fig. 12).<sup>124</sup>

Furthermore, Sabean’s calculation was based not on all the rents, fees, fines, and debts, but only on a few of the traditional grain and cash rents; it is an incomplete picture. In his text we find mention of additional impositions including chickens, eggs, hay tithe, labor service with a horse, wagon money, grain or cash rents to the forester, headman, schoolmaster, and sick house keeper, labor service to the local sheriff, and also hay money and labor service to the imperial sheriff, small tithe, and war taxes. On top of this came death taxes, which amounted to the serf’s best clothes, best animal, and *one-third* of all other property if the serf had married

<sup>121</sup>Sabean, *Landbesitz* 30, 24; see also 20, 31. In English, see Sabean, “Social Background,” 53, 37; see also 6, 37, 44, 45, 53–54, 83–84.

<sup>122</sup>Sabean, *Landbesitz*, 114, see also 20, 84, 100, 113; Sabean, “Social Background,” 186, see also 5, 37, 60, 129, 158–59, 185; and David Warren Sabean, “Probleme der deutschen Agrarverfassung zu Beginn des 16. Jahrhunderts. Oberschwaben als Beispiel,” in *Revolte und Revolution in Europa: Historische Zeitschrift*, ed. Peter Blickle, NF 4 (Munich, DE: R. Oldenbourg, 1975), 132–50, 136.

<sup>123</sup>Sabean, “Social Background,” 53 (emphasis added); compare Sabean, *Landbesitz*, 30.

<sup>124</sup>Sabean, *Landbesitz*, 32–34; and Sabean, “Social Background,” 55–58.

<b>Farms with rent increases</b>			
	1458 Rents	1531 Rents	Factor increase
1	24	678	28.25
2	24	752	31.33
3	48	500	10.42
4	396	675	1.705
5	144	740	5.14
6	190	822	4.33
7	72	629	8.74
8	84	883	10.51
9	144	460	3.19
10	432	730	1.69
11	204	620	3.04
12	264	555	2.10
13	96	431	4.49
Subtotal	2122	8475	3.99
<b>Farms with (allegedly) no rent increases:</b>			
14	512	512	
15	505	505	
16	285	285	
17	380	380	
18	1238	1238	
19	520	520	
20	630	630	
21	478	478	
22	640	640	
23	260	260	
24	752	752	
25	435	435	
26	1490	1490	
27	274	274	
28	500	500	
Subtotal	8899	8899	
<b>Total (1–28)</b>	<b>11021</b>	<b>17374</b>	<b>1.58</b>

Figure 12. Rent increases in Weingarten (partial)

another of the abbot's serfs; if the marriage was to someone who was not the abbot's serf, *one-half* of all freehold property.<sup>125</sup> He noted that the death tax was so effective in completely expropriating the farmers' land that eventually the lords "came to own the bulk of the land, [so] the heriot [death tax] amounting to a percentage of immovable property became meaningless."<sup>126</sup> On the war tax, Sabeau admitted that "long term or repeated levies could add up to quite a bit."<sup>127</sup> He acknowledged that this was "a major cause of peasant unrest,"<sup>128</sup> but appears to have left all these other charges out of his totals.

And most important, there is no mention of debt; were these really the only peasants in history with no debt? Sabeau claimed that "adding in all the other dues mentioned in the estate survey as well as a tithe ... the average for all farms is thirty per cent" of their harvest.<sup>129</sup>

Even the narrow, shallow, partial, biased, cherry-picked selection of data he provided disproves his conclusion—these alone jumped 58 percent; taking all the rents and debt into account makes it absurd. Nevertheless, his book has become a widely cited, standard reference in the field.<sup>130</sup>

Similarly, Govind Sreenivasan asserted that in the early 1500s "rents remained fixed at fifteenth-century levels.... The outcome ... was a generalized *improvement* of the status of the peasantry in the century before the Peasants' War ... the long-term stability of ground rents is now widely accepted."<sup>131</sup>

Sreenivasan acknowledged that "a truly bewildering variety of impositions were levied upon the peasantry,"<sup>132</sup> but does not specify what nor how much these were, nor does he appear to have included these in his totals. In addition to leaving

<sup>125</sup>Sabeau, *Landbesitz*, 49–55, 88–89; and Sabeau, "Social Background," 85–94, 136–37.

<sup>126</sup>Sabeau, *Landbesitz*, 95; and Sabeau, "Social Background," 149.

<sup>127</sup>Sabeau, *Landbesitz*, 55; and Sabeau, "Social Background," 94.

<sup>128</sup>Sabeau, *Landbesitz*, 94; and Sabeau, "Social Background," 147.

<sup>129</sup>Sabeau, *Landbesitz*, 63; and Sabeau, "Social Background," 105.

<sup>130</sup>For example, Wilhelm Abel, *Die Wüstungen des ausgehenden Mittelalters*, 3rd rev. ed. (Stuttgart, DE: Gustav Fischer, 1976), 129–32 (10–34 percent); Burkhard Asmuss, "Das Einkommen der Bauern in der Herrschaft Kronburg im frühen 16. Jahrhundert," *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 43, no. 1 (1980): 45–91, 69–70 (24.6–36.3 percent); Blickle, *Revolution of 1525*, 37, 71–72; Blickle, *Die Revolution*, 256; Peter Blickle, *Von der Leibeigenschaft zu den Menschenrechten: Eine Geschichte der Freiheit in Deutschland* (Munich, DE: C. H. Beck, 2003), 92 (one-third); Friedrich-Wilhelm Henning, *Landwirtschaft und ländliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, vol. 1, *800 bis 1750* (Paderborn, DE: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1979), 185; André Holenstein, *Bauern zwischen Bauernkrieg und Dreissigjährigem Krieg* (Munich, DE: R. Oldenbourg, 1996), 34–36 (20–30 percent); Werner Rösener, *Peasants in the Middle Ages* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 140 (one-third in 1200s); Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 137–38 (22–27 percent); Troßbach, in Rolf Kießling, Frank Konersmann, and Werner Troßbach, *Grundzüge der Agrarwirtschaft*, vol. 1, *Vom Spätmittelalter bis zum Dreißigjährigen Krieg (1350–1650)* (Cologne, DE: Böhlau, 2016), 204–11 and Tab. 8, 18 (22.85–33.8 percent); and Zückert, *Allmende*, 50.

<sup>131</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 22; and Sreenivasan, "Social Origins," 45, 50, citing several others (emphasis added).

<sup>132</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 131.

out many of the rents the peasants paid, he further belittled the real rent increases by looking not at the actual amounts of grain, chickens, eggs, and so forth, but by converting these to what he claimed was their “rye value,” then deflated all rents, including grain, according to the inflation in the cash price of rye.

In order to compare prices of commodities over time, economists put together price indexes. Typically, these consist of a basket of a large enough selection of commonly purchased items so that extreme aberrations in one will not bias the whole index. This is useful, for example, for comparing how much bread cost in 1700 as compared to today, given changes in productivity, wages, and so forth. The US Consumer Price Index (CPI) includes dozens of goods and services. One index—the Phelps Brown and Hopkins index—exists for this period and, if used properly, can give a rough idea of constant real values.

But indexes can also be used to deceive. Rye, essential for survival, saw extreme price rises. Imagine that good farmer Steffan comes to pay his rents to the collector:

STEFFAN: I’m here to pay my chicken and egg rents. Last time I paid 10 chickens and 100 eggs. How much are they this year?

HERR HUMPELN: I have good news for you! Your rents have fallen by 40 percent, so this year you owe 14 chickens and 140 eggs.

STEFFAN: I’m not following you. Fourteen and 140 are more, not less.

HERR HUMPELN: You thickheaded farmer! If I convert your chickens and eggs to their cash value and use the soaring price of rye to correct for inflation, then I can jack up your rents but on paper make it look like they’ve fallen.

STEFFAN: So how much do I owe?

HERR HUMPELN: I told you, 14 chickens and 140 eggs.

Farmer Steffan could not perform the hocus-pocus of converting his chickens and eggs into their cash value, deflating this using the rye index, and paying only 6 chickens and 60 eggs. He had to physically remove 14 clucking chickens and 140 fresh eggs from his family’s dinner table and hand them to the rent collector, which is more, not less. The same was true of his rising grain rents. For the landlord, the falling value of the currency meant that the cash value of these goods inflated; from the farmer’s perspective, the real weight of the rents had increased. Sreenivasan’s methodology doesn’t reflect reality for either.

Sreenivasan documented a huge shift in the composition of the Ottobeuren monastery’s income. In 1528, the traditional rents in kind made up nearly two-thirds; by 1620, these rents all were still being collected. Indeed, their amounts had increased, but their proportion of the total had fallen to one-third; growth in new income sources made up the balance. Now more than 50 percent of the monastery’s revenue came from sources that did not appear in the 1528 books. In 1527, the monastery had a negative balance; the next year, it barely broke even. By 1621, the monastery’s nominal income soared to more than forty-eight times

what it had been in 1529. Even after putting these numbers through the rye-value wringer, the 1621 value was twenty-eight times that of 1529. “By the 1620s the monastery was racking up surpluses of 12,000–16,000 gulden, a sum greater than their entire revenue in the earlier period.”<sup>133</sup> If rents were stable, where did all this new revenue come from?

First, he added up what he claimed were the rents in 1544. He provided not the actual amounts paid in grain, cash, eggs, and so forth, but what he called the “seigneurial dues as a proportion (%) of the harvest,” counting only the traditional grain rents, cash rents, tithes, and entry fees. He alleged that, based on these percentages, “the total burden imposed on the peasantry ranged from 22 to 27 percent of the grain harvest.” After apparently ignoring many other rents and all of debt, he asserted that this burden “certainly left enough for the village to meet its nutritional needs, not to mention the unknowable quantum of income from other sources.”<sup>134</sup>

He recalculated these quantities for 1621, once again providing only the alleged percentage of the harvest, making it impossible to compare the actual rent increases or amounts being collected. Based on these calculations, he stated that “the burden of seigneurialism had risen only slightly, from 20–25 percent of the harvest in 1544 to 26–30 percent in 1621” and that “the monks were collecting only slightly more of the peasant’s harvest” in the early 1600s. Sreenivasan claimed that “although the nominal value of cash rents collected from the peasantry *increased* by some 94.6 percent between 1544 and 1619 ... the real value of the cash rents actually *declined*,”<sup>135</sup> thanks to his rye-value conversion. If production was flat, entry fees jumped by ten times, and cash rents doubled, how does the proportion of the total taken decline?

This time, farmer Steffan’s wife Barbara comes to the rent collector.

BARBARA: Herr Humpeln, I’m here to clear our debts. Years ago, we fell £8 behind on our rent. Then £25 more, then £25 more, then last year £25 more. That means you owe me £20, right?

HERR HUMPELN: *Have you lost your mind, woman?* You owe me £83, plus interest makes £100!

BARBARA: But Steffan told me about your trick. If you deflate our debt by the inflation in the price of rye, you can make huge increases look like decreases.

HERR HUMPELN: *Pay up now*, £100, or I’ll sell your son to the pope as a galley slave and your daughter to the Turks!

<sup>133</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 138 and table 3.8.

<sup>134</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 137–38, table 3.7.

<sup>135</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 140; 141, table 3.9, 143.

Sreenivasan documented various categories of debt soaring from 5.5 times to 20 times over between 1529 and 1603, then claimed that “after deflating for increases in the price of grain, it turns out that peasant indebtedness remained remarkably stable ... by the early 1620s debt levels were actually *lower* than they had been a century earlier.”<sup>136</sup> And Herr Humpeln owes Barbara £20. Sreenivasan claimed that the farmers were making a killing on the side trading textiles, but their soaring debts disprove this hypothesis.<sup>137</sup>

More recently, in the first volume of a multi-tome opus, *Fundamentals of the Agrarian Economy*, coedited with Rolf Kießling and Frank Konersmann, Werner Troßbach ran what he called a “simulation” based on one of the “large concerns” in one village and concluded that in 1524 “the portion of rents in kind in (grain) net raw income, at 25 percent, lay somewhat higher than in the region of the Weingarten cloister,” citing Sabeian. He claimed that by 1601, “as at the Ottobeuren Imperial Abbey,” citing Sreenivasan, the “feudal quota” had “risen slightly,” to 28.9 percent, but that the nominal increase in the price of goods meant that “despite a higher feudal quota, a *rising* peasant purchasing power emerges,” citing not original sources, but Sabeian and Sreenivasan. Troßbach claimed that in the course of the century, large peasants in south Germany “by 1560, thanks to *fixed rents*, achieved a certain affluence”—citing for support only Sreenivasan. “These favorable economic conditions for large peasant farms can be observed in most regions of the Old Empire west of the Elbe.”<sup>138</sup>

Troßbach’s “rising peasant purchasing power” is based on the claim that farmers paid less than 30 percent of their production in rents and therefore had much surplus to sell on the market. Once again, did these peasants pay nothing in hay rents, parish rents, chickens, eggs, wine taxes, labor service, wood sales, death taxes, military service taxes, and war taxes? Were these (and Sabeian’s) really the only farmers in history with no debt? *Fixed rents*? How did his lords escape the effects of the price revolution?

The array of rents, taxes, fines, fees, and services that appeared after the Feudal Revolt around the year 1000 became a hallmark of feudal lordship. Indeed, some lords collected more from these other impositions than from the traditional rents.<sup>139</sup> In Memmingen, 55 percent came from these other sources and debt. In the adjacent territory of Kronburg, only 40 percent of the lord’s revenues came from traditional landlord rents, fully 60 percent came from the dizzying array of pretexts claimed under judicial, personal, and other powers.<sup>140</sup> One study pointed

<sup>136</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 142, fig. 3.10, 91, 120, 123, 142, 181 and table 4.3, 143 (emphasis added); see also 33, 62, 77, 143, 181, 187–92, 196 (on who the creditors were), 346.

<sup>137</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 109, 137, 139–40, 267, 269.

<sup>138</sup>Troßbach, in Kießling, Konersmann, and Troßbach, *Grundzüge*, 198–201, 204, 207–8 (emphasis added).

<sup>139</sup>Duby, *Early Growth*, 223; and Duby, *Rural Economy*, 213.

<sup>140</sup>Dees, *Power of Peasants*, fig. 10.7; and Burkhard Asmuss, “Die Einkünfte der Herrschaft Kronburg im frühen 16. Jahrhundert,” in *MMGBl* (1979): 88–121, 111.

out that when lords exchanged serfs, they remained subject to “sovereign, tax, military, and judicial powers, [military] quartering and contributions; serfdom for himself and his wife and children, labor service, special taxes, departure taxes, criminal fines, rent, interest, and fees; death, best animal, and best clothing taxes, also all other rights and jurisdictions.”<sup>141</sup> The feudal lords never forgot these additional rents, but these are the exactions that these historians left out.

Troßbach and many of these historians then argue, without evidence, that the large farmers must have been doing well, and then imply that this was the case for everyone else as well. But as we saw in the sections on cash and grain debt, this was far from true. Several of the largest farmers had serious debt problems, and some lost their farms as a result. These historians’ “Gone With the Wind” portrait of the master-serf relationship, this fantasy of low, flat rents, prosperous farmers, and a thriving textile industry in the late 1500s makes the falling grain yields, declining births, shrinking family sizes, famines, plagues, and witch hunts incomprehensible. Perhaps it is for this reason that several of these historians, including those whose studies straddle the entire period of the Thirty Years’ War, such as Sreenivasan, Kießling, Troßbach, and Blickle, note the war in passing, but offer no coherent explanation for the most catastrophic event in German history. Nor can they; their portrayal of the state of the German economy in the early 1600s makes the crisis inexplicable.

#### CONCLUSION

The facts are laid out in the charts above, using numbers taken from the foundation’s books. Rents were rising sharply already before 1525, igniting the most massive uprising in Europe in a thousand years. The experience in Memmingen of rising rents was typical, as other objective studies confirm. In Bavaria between 1480 and 1618 peasants’ rents to their landlords increased 300 to 400 percent, and what they paid to the Bavarian state in taxes increased 2,200 percent.<sup>142</sup> In the territory of Hohenlohe, the counts’ real income from rents—even adjusted for inflation—more than doubled just between 1550 and 1619,<sup>143</sup> which means that what the peasants actually paid rose much more.

One final point. Some of these “30 percent” historians claim that this level of rent “was completely unremarkable.”<sup>144</sup> Adam Smith, however, who actually understood something about agriculture, noted that even a 10 percent tithe “is found to be a very great hindrance to improvement. A tax, therefore, which amounted to

<sup>141</sup>Quoted in Blickle, *Von der Leibeigenschaft*, 216.

<sup>142</sup>Schulze, *Bäuerlicher Widerstand*, 69.

<sup>143</sup>Robisheaux, *Rural Society*, 169.

<sup>144</sup>Sreenivasan, *Peasants*, 137; see also Troßbach, in Kießling, Konersmann, and Troßbach, *Grundzüge*, 199–211.

one-half must have been an effectual bar to it.”<sup>145</sup> Indeed, not only was improvement impossible, farmers forced to pay these crushing rents and debts that in fact took 60–80 percent of their yield could not even maintain production, as proven by the falling yields. This explains the crumbling economy, declining birth rates, famines, plagues, witch hunts, and Thirty Years’ War.<sup>146</sup>

See Addendum next pages.

<sup>145</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 3.2.13.

<sup>146</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Dees, *Power of Peasants*.

## ADDENDUM

The above article was submitted in the fall of 2024 and published in early 2025, the 500th anniversary of the German Peasant War. Many new studies appeared for that occasion; two of the most prominent include Oxford Professor Lyndal Roper's *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War* and Gerd Schwerhoff's *Der Bauernkrieg: Geschichte einer wilden Handlung*. Unfortunately, these are no improvement on those discussed above.

Roper alleges that “the 1500s were a period of economic upswing” and “relative prosperity,” prices for peasant produce were rising, rents were not increasing, and serfdom was “more a matter of status than a serious problem . . . scarcely oppressive . . . but hardly worth risking revolt over.” If this were true, why did this most massive uprising in Europe between the overthrow of Rome and the French Revolution even take place? Roper herself wonders, “This may seem a puzzling backdrop for an uprising as momentous as the Peasants’ War.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed—it becomes incomprehensible and inexplicable. Roper offers no evidence to support her claims, and they are as false as those of the historians discussed above. It was the peasants who told the truth, describing their harsh reality in hundreds of articles. The lords’ own records show that they aggressively raised rents and debt before and after the war; the economy was declining; prices for farm produce rose

---

1. Lyndal Roper, *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants’ War*. New York: Basic Books, 2025, 48-49, 50, 52, 410n24.

only because of inflation but fell in real value; and serfdom was brutally harsh.<sup>2</sup> Now this massive uprising makes perfect sense. The victory of the feudal lords meant that all these problems grew steadily worse after the war.

Instead, Roper recycles the old claim that “peasants, miners, and townsfolk . . . believed they were fighting for the gospel,”<sup>3</sup> placing religion at the center of her story to such an extent that at times her book reads more like a theological treatise. Her alternate reality requires ignoring the long-documented fact that 95 percent of the individual peasant articles made no mention of religion.<sup>4</sup> Those that did, such as the Twelve Articles, were largely written by preachers and intermediaries, often working for the authorities. Roper also joins the parade of historians who suggest that what problems there were with the economy were caused not by the lords’ greed—but by the weather.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the “Little Ice Age” never happened.<sup>6</sup>

Prof. Gerd Schwerhoff opens his book, *Der Bauernkrieg: Geschichte einer wilden Handlung* (The Peasant War: History of a Wild Episode) by informing the reader that he cannot be bothered even to investigate the causes of the Peasant War—one of the basic responsibilities of a historian. The reason he skipped this essential task becomes clear throughout his text: he doesn’t think it had any legitimate causes. Ignoring the hundreds of peasant articles and copious rent registers from the period (again, too much bother to research), he makes the ludicrous claim that “there is no objective evidence of genuine

---

2. Robert Dees, *The Power of Peasants: Economics and Politics of Farming in Medieval Germany*. Houston: Commons Press, 2023, chapters 6-9.

3. Roper, *Summer of Fire*, 179.

4. Peter Blickle, *Die Revolution von 1525*, 3d., expanded edition. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1993. 146, Anhang II.

5. Roper, *Summer of Fire*, 40.

6. Dees, *Power of Peasants*, chapter 15: “The Little Ice Age Never Happened.”

material impoverishment, nor was the subjective mindset of the subjects . . . characterized by fundamental dissatisfaction.” A happy revolt? He then contemptuously dismisses this tremendous uprising as nothing more than a “wild episode” (*wilde Handlung*) by peasants, an opinion that also is not original; he simply parroted that of a feudal lord of the time—not the most objective source. It was not a revolution at all, he asserts, because it fails to meet his invented standards for what qualifies as a “real” revolution: (1) “visionary plans for the future that can win majority support,” (2) “clearly defined political parties”, (3) “the determination to achieve one’s goals even by force,” and (4) “a shared ethical framework for action.”<sup>7</sup>

With this, Schwerhoff rewrites all of human history, as no revolution before the twentieth century meet his high standards. The American and French Revolutions—now demoted—certainly did not. The string of “revolutions” that swept Europe in 1848 didn’t even come close. Nor did that decisive turning point in Western civilization: in 508 BCE when the people of Athens rose up, overthrew the would-be tyrant Isagoras, inaugurated Athenian democracy and the glories of Classical Greece, and set Europe on a radically different trajectory from Asiatic despotism. These all must now be reduced to mere “wild episodes” by unruly peasants, along with every other historical stepping-stone long understood to mark genuine advances in civilization. Thus according to Professor Schwerhoff’s criteria, there was not a single revolution before 1900. If that were true, of course, we would all still be Stone-Age savages, bonking each over the head with wooden clubs. Just stating this inescapable conclusion exposes the absurdity of Schwerhoff’s assessment of one of the most important events in German history.

Schwerhoff too piously recites the catechism that the Peas-

---

7. Gerd Schwerhoff, *Der Bauernkrieg: Geschichte einer wilden Handlung*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2024, 83, 583-84.

ant War “was driven”—not by the courage of the peasants and righteousness of their cause, not by their harsh conditions, but—“by the momentum of the Protestant movement.”<sup>8</sup>

Having failed to understand (or simply ignored) the actual causes, these historians do not even ask what long-term effects this crushing defeat had, much less attempt to explain them. In fact, the defeat of the Peasant War guaranteed the continued decline of the German economy. The peasantry—some 95 percent of the population—was held in ever-more stringent bonds of serfdom, blocking the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which requires free labor to develop. As a direct result, Germany did not advance into the “early modern territorial state,” as many claim, but rather sank into another 300 years of feudal stagnation. Grain yields fell and with them the population and the overall economy. The resulting growing social tensions produced witch hunts and regional wars until the whole collapsed into the Thirty Years War. *The Thirty Years War was the inescapable result of the defeat of the peasants in 1525.*<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the English peasants had won their freedom from serfdom and relatively secure land tenure. With this they were able to produce the agricultural surpluses that powered the growth of the merchant class, commerce, cities, and England’s rise to world domination. In both cases, the fate of the peasants was decisive.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Dees  
April 2026

---

8. Schwerhoff, *Bauernkrieg*, 583.

9. Dees, *Power of Peasants*.

10. Dees, *Power of Peasants*, chapter 12.