The Protestant "German Nation": Ulrich von Hutten (1520–21)

Abstract

From the beginning, Protestant criticism of the Pope and his loyal Catholic Church took on patriotic overtones, as, for example, in the polemics of Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523). In his day, Hutten was a much published and widely read humanist author, whose writings united humanism with German nationalism. In the following pieces—one a work of poetry, the other prose—Hutten presents German unity as endangered by the Catholic faith and its orientation towards Rome.

Source

Ulrich von Hutten, *Lament and Exhortation against the Violence of the Pope* [*Klaue und Ermahnung gegen die Gewalt des Papstes*] (1520)

We want to keep it close to home,
Leave me not to fight alone.
Have mercy for the fatherland,
Ye worthy Germans, lift your hand.
Now is the time, we must rise up,
To win our freedom, so help us God,

Come hither, brave-hearts far and wide,
Lend no more credence to the lies,
With which the world they have upturned
And of which we were not forewarned.
To him who would have you believe,
No layman could a prayer lead,
That only priests are educated
Say that God has us created
To understand the books ourselves.
The time has come—off to the shelves!

Unlettered, we were impotent,
All power rested in their hands.
And what they wanted was our faith,
They made the people blind and deaf,
A simple mind was quickly swayed,
The priestly word blindly obeyed.
All preaching was for their own ends,
So be it, if the truth be bent.
To him who told the truth or so preached
A painful lesson they would teach.

Who knows what fate the future holds,

We have converted many souls.
I hope therefore that I'll be spared,
But for death I am prepared.
For truth I'll fight with sword and shield,
To tyranny I shall not yield.
Rather would I my life give
That others may in freedom live,
Their threats to excommunicate,
Cause some men to capitulate,
But that is not my disposition,
With whate'er haste they pursue their mission.

[…]

For money's sake and for our land,
They'd have us from the church be banned.
This is not right and God's will thwarts,
For banning is a last resort.
When no punishments or lessons spent
Can move a sinner to repent
And was he of the risk forewarned
Then it is right that he be scorned.
But nowadays to be expelled
One need merely the truth to tell
This is not godly and not right,
And he who such ills will not fight
Will reap on Judgement Day God's scorn,
Take this to heart: you have been warned.
And do not cease, I plead and pray
Till others come to truth's aid
And with us into battle go
If I will die, no one can know
Those to my right are cowardly
They pursue me furtively
Strange writings they are said to read
And next want to me poison feed
God led me to a place of peace
Where I'd not be murdered in my sleep.

[…]

Now I cry, oh German nation
Have I earned this bitter ration?
No law that I've not fled in haste
And would be rightly to my taste
Because force they now see fit to use

So this I must also oppose
And hope that I will not be made
To fight for truth without your aid.

[…]

Come hither, pious Germans all
With the help of God and truth's loud call
Ye mercenaries and ye knights
And all ye with the will to fight
We superstitions shall dispel
And in their place the truth shall tell
And as not all that is, is good
A price must need be paid in blood
Cry as he might, I shall not share
The burden that is his to bear
Though I myself had shied away
And hoped to find another way
But one must do what seems to fit
The time and target have been set
We've had enough ignominy,
and see but ruse and trickery,
believe no more the things they say,
The truth lies in the light of day.
Do not despair, do not dismay.

[…]

Take heart, ye Germans, join our campaign,
For you have suffered grievous pain;
Numerous as grains of sand,
Idlers live about the land
Of use to none: God, man or beast
Suffering from poverty.

[…]

The lies we shall eradicate,
May truth's bright light now radiate
What was once eclipsed and shadowy.
God save the man who fights with me.
This I hope many a knight will do,
Many a count and many a nobleman, too.
Many a burgher with cause to be
Aggrieved by things in his city,
That I might not rise up in vain.
Well, in God's favor we'll remain.

Who would choose to at stay home?
I've risked my neck with this, my poem.

Ulrich von Hutten, *Germany's Suffering and Hope* [*Deutschlands Leiden und Hoffnung*] (1521)

EHRENHOLD: [....] It is a wretched thing that we Germans suffer and bear this and other matters of this sort. When will there be an end to the bishops' cloaks, annates, pensions, and the myriad robberies? When will the Romans moderate their demands? I fear that that we Germans cannot endure any longer. The unreasonable behavior with which they oppress us grows worse every day; their demands for money have no cease, no method, no measure.

HUTTEN: [It is] as you say. They do not give shape to things; they exercise no moderation in their lives. But methinks the German nation has regained its sight and now recognizes how very unjustly it has been misled and deceived, how the people have been so falsely blinded, and [how] a free, battle-ready nation, a high-spirited people, [how] many proud nobles and princes have been scorned and despised. I now hear many of them speak very frankly about the subject and act as though they want to throw off the yoke of our servitude.

EHRENHOLD: I wish to heaven that that would happen so that we would no longer be scorned by our neighbors and by foreigners.

HUTTEN: So shall it be, unless all my senses deceive me. I see thoughts turning to freedom and associations coming together everywhere. Nobles or other people with a sense of honor are greatly displeased and impatient because the goods that our forbearers once bestowed upon the churches in good Christian belief and faith now go to I-know-not-whom in Rome, and because every year new taxes are imposed several times on us Germans, and a number of new ways and means are devised to carry off whatever money we still have. This sacrilegious audacity has gone so far that they now dare to take by threat and force what they could not obtain through deceit, hypocrisy, and subterfuge. Is that not an unfair, outrageous act of violence? And how could we be taxed any more heavily? How could a people be oppressed more contemptibly and more shamefully, a people that deserves to rule the whole world and to whom it is given to rule? As if they had vanquished us with weapons in war and made themselves due tribute. I therefore have great hopes, because it has now reached the turning point and perhaps will go no further; it will crumble, and we will be saved.

Source: Ulrich von Hutten, *Klaue und Ermahnung gegen die Gewalt des Papstes* (1520) and *Deutschlands Leiden und Hoffnung* (1521); reprinted in Heinz Ludwig Arnold, ed., *Deutsche über die Deutschen. Auch ein deutsches Lesebuch.* Munich: C.H. Beck, 1972, pp. 6–10.

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