

The Protestant Revolt in Germany

To understand the Protestant Reformation in Germany it is important to pay attention to the activities of the Protestant princes who backed Martin Luther, as well Luther himself. The revolt started when the University of Wittenberg, which had recently been founded by Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, published and distributed Luther's ninety-five theses opposing Indulgences. Frederick was leader of the House of Wettin, a dynasty whose princes controlled Saxony, Anhalt, Thuringa, Hesse, and Brandenburg. These realms were among the first German states to embrace Lutheranism. Frederick the Wise is the best-known of Luther's supporters, but he died relatively early while many of his relations carried on the fight by declaring themselves Protestants and confiscating Church property within their realms. The first to do so, Albert of Prussia, was Frederick's nephew and the last grandmaster of the Teutonic Knights. He declared himself a Lutheran and dissolved the order, seized its property, and made himself the first Duke of Prussia.

Thirty-eight years after Luther wrote his treaty on Indulgences, Charles V signed the Peace of Augsburg, consenting to almost all the demands of the Protestant Princes and agreeing to recognize Lutheranism within his realm. Such a concession would have been unthinkable a generation previously. In the intervening years, only a few battles had been fought between the Protestant and Catholic princes in Germany, and the emperor had worked for years to resolve the dispute peacefully. But in the he was convinced that trying to end the rebellion by force would be futile. Rather than plunge his realm into Civil war, Charles conceded to allow each Prince to "choose" his own religion. He then divided his Empire and abdicated the throne. How had the Lutheran heresy spread so far that it could not be contained in one generation, and why did the emperor conceded with scarcely a fight?

To understand the triumph of Lutheranism it is necessary to look outside of Germany. While the doctrines of Luther spread insidiously throughout his realms, the Emperor was involved in wars in Italy, the Mediterranean and in the Balkans. He was aware of the Protestant threat, but hoped the problems in the Church could be resolved by an ecumenical council. Above all, Charles needed peace with his German subjects, however rebellious, because he was besieged on all sides by other enemies. Ottoman aggression in Hungary and pirate attacks in the Mediterranean threatened all of Europe, but instead of uniting Christendom, the Emperor's rivals in both Catholic France and Lutheran Germany used the crisis to their own advantage. Meanwhile Charles's hopes for a Council to resolve the Protestant heresy peacefully were impossible to fulfill because of ongoing wars in Italy.

The timeline below shows important events related to the spread of Lutheranism in Germany, including conflicts both within and outside of Germany. It helps to show that wars outside of Germany helped to enable the Protestant heresy to take root and spread without effective resistance for two generations. Wars and battles related to the Protestant Reformation within German dominions are shown in blue, while those that in red involved conflicts outside of Germany.

- 1502 **University of Wittenberg** founded by **Fredrick III, Elector of Saxony**.
- 1517 Luther posts **Ninety-five Theses** on the sale of Indulgence.
- 1519 **Charles V** elected King of the Romans, Holy Roman Emperor.
- 1521 **Suliman the Magnificent** begins a forty year campaign of aggression in the Balkans.
- 1525 **Teutonic Knights** dissolved, territory seized. Grandmaster becomes first Duke of Prussia.
- 1525 **German Peasant War** — 100,000 rebels killed. Luther sides with nobles.
- 1526 **Battle of Mohacs** — Ottomans conquer half of Christian Hungary.
- 1527 **Italian War, Sack of Rome** by mutinous German troops of Charles V, Pope taken prisoner.
- 1529 **Siege of Vienna** by Ottomans, but Austrians resist and drive them back to Hungary.
- 1530 **Augsburg Confession** — summary of Lutheran beliefs, basis of Protestant Theology.
- 1531 **Schmalkaldic League** — Protestant Princes form military alliance against Emperor.
- 1536 **Italian War** of 1536-38.
- 1542 **Italian War** of 1542-46.
- 1545 **Council of Trent** — convenes its first session, repudiates Luther on justification and grace.
- 1546 **First Schmalkaldic War**. — Protestant Princes Revolt.
- 1551 **Italian War** of 1551-59.
- 1552 **Second Schmalkaldic War** — Protestant Princes Revolt Again, force recess of Council of Trent .
- 1555 **Peace of Augsburg** — Charles V and German princes agree on "Cuius regio, eius regio".
- 1556 **Charles V** divides his Empire and abdicates the throne.

The Protestant Revolt is usually presented as a religious reform movement, but in practice, it was a gigantic transfer of wealth and power from the Church and religious orders to secular rulers, financiers, and nation states. It is somewhat misleading to focus too much on religious leaders when prominent noblemen and ministers had enormous vested interest in the outcome of the dispute. The Protestant Princes of Germany forced a religious settlement that resulted in the transfer of a great deal of Church property to themselves, and many of those who joined the Revolt were irreligious or indifferent to the fate of Christendom. Luther was a minor theologian who could not have opposed the Emperor for a week without the support of his powerful sponsors, yet he is credited with instigating a rebellion that shattered Christendom. Had the Protestant Revolt been primarily a religious conflict, rather than a political power struggle, it could well have been resolved in a University debating forum. Perhaps a closer look at those who most benefited financially and politically from the Reformation is in order.