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# The Distance from Reformation to Counter-Reformation

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*Abstract:* The Reformation marked the end of Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. Instead of generating the true spirit of Christ, that is, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the Reformation made thousands suffer on account of their religion. The tragedy of the Reformation was the unresolved tension which arose from the fact that the interpretation of the fundamentals of faith was left to an unsure and changing Church government and its theologians. The Council of Trent took it as its mighty task to safeguard the Old Faith from the devastating attacks of the innovation and to restore Catholic faith and ecclesiastical discipline. Trent could valiantly defend her hierarchical constitution and successfully repel the religious subjectivism of the reformers. Thus the Reformation which threatened to destroy the Catholic Church gave the impetus for a counter-reformation, i.e., to the religious revival and Catholic restoration. Though the Reformation was religious in character, it had far-reaching effects in all fields. Thus it helped in the shaping of the modern world, along with other movements. The question whether Reformation helped the modern people or not could be answered from the effects it produced in different lands and at different times. Reformation paved the way for Catholic restoration or Counter-reformation.

*Keywords:* Renovation, Restoration, Reformation, Religious wars, Religious subjectivism and Council of Trent.

## Introduction

Reformation is a many-sided event contributed by the religion, politics, humanism and the economics of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was part of the shift in European thought and experience which had begun in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, at its core it was a religious movement launched to a great extent by Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. When the protagonists of Reformation saw it as a recovery of the pure revelation of primitive Christianity, the Catholic Church of the time saw it mainly as a rejection of Christian truth like the Gnosticism of the second century, a very threat to its foundations. But the modern understanding is that it was a *felix culpa*, since the reformers sought for the pure gospel and succeeded in presenting it to the Christians in the face of grave deformations.

### 1. Religious Innovation

In the beginning Luther's revolt appeared to be a purely personal religious aberration. But gradually it developed into a religious and political revolution of different dimensions. The multifarious effects of the Reformation are given by Bihlmeyer-Tuechle in the following lines:

Instead of effecting the real reform of the Church, it assumed the form of an actual revolution aimed at the complete annihilation of the Church herself. It opened the door to religious individualism and religious subjectivism over the authority of the dogmas, the sacraments and the hierarchy. These fatal consequences of the innovation reached their culmination only in the movement called the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The Reformation officially began in 1517 when Martin Luther challenged the Roman Church on the matter of Indulgences. While Luther had no idea of the impact which would make on the German society and European nations, this event turned the course of history. The Reformation marked the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern

times. ‘Starting from religion, it gave, directly or indirectly, a mighty impulse to every forward movement, and made Protestantism the chief propelling force in the history of modern civilization’.<sup>2</sup>

Religious, economic and political factors that had been brewing for centuries set the stage for the Reformation. Systems were corrupt, monasticism and scholastic theology had declined and mysticism was on the upswing.<sup>3</sup> At the same time there was a revival of the Greek and Roman classics; men with a spirit of enquiry and independence were discovering the new world; printing press had been invented and the Greek New Testament republished. The renaissance was also a factor in that it challenged people to use their minds. These things were all part of God’s plan to bring about the greatest religious revival in the western Christendom.

### **1.1 *Reformatio is renovatio***

The word reformation (*reformatio*) was used in all realms of the political, cultural and ecclesiastical life in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to the historian Peuckert *reformatio* was a key of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In Church history *reformatio* also meant *renovatio* (renewal) in the double sense of ‘back to the original form’ and ‘a new start’.<sup>4</sup> Luther does not often use the word ‘reformation’, but it appears nonetheless in the course of his first public moves.<sup>5</sup> He used it to sum up his programme of *metanoia*, i.e., the restoration of the ancient Christian truth by living the word of the Bible. Since corruption had extended into the very essence of the Church according to the view of the Reformers, ‘the reformation’ was the watchword of a religious movement for renewal (*renovatio*) which did not aim at creating a breach, much less at political revolution.<sup>6</sup>

## **1.2 Passion for Reform**

That was the time when the personality of Erasmus of Rotterdam reigned without a rival, scholar and supreme stylist, the man who, for a generation, influenced educated Europe as no other man before his time and he influenced the world chiefly by his passion to reform what was amiss in the general presentation of the traditional Catholic religion.<sup>7</sup> His great memorials are the first printed edition of the Greek N. T. and his many editions of the Church Fathers. Though dogmatically correct, his grasp of the Catholic faith was indeed often endangered by his lack of practical and speculative interest in dogma. His scriptural principle allowed in theory the authority of the Church, but in practice worked only with an eye to the magisterium of scholarship. His malicious criticisms of monks and bishops, like his *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*, reinforced the tendency then widespread to hold inwardly aloof from the Church, and paved the way for the Reformation.<sup>8</sup>

The great reformers were not just inspired by the abuses, but this pitiable condition made it easier to fall in with their grave criticism. The credibility of the Church had suffered a lot. The theses of the reformers repeated reproaches or demands which had long been heard. Many well-educated, including monks, made common cause with the reformers out of a desire to lead a real religious life.<sup>9</sup> A reformation in the sense of a radical critique had become historically unavoidable. The provincial or national churches which had been supported by the papacy in pre-reformation times, for political and economic ends, made intervention in Church affairs by the local rulers easier.<sup>10</sup> So too the city councils had gained more and more hold over the Church, which made it easier for them to intervene in the church affairs and to seize church property and dissolve monasteries.

## 2. Religious Subjectivism

The doctrine of justification was the central point of Luther's theological system. To this doctrine of 'justification by faith alone' was soon added a 'denial of freedom of the will'. According to him everyone who has 'fiduciary faith' was certain of salvation. His new doctrine which he named as 'my gospel' later became known as the material principle of Protestantism or according to him the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.<sup>11</sup> But Luther could not realize the consequences of his confused teaching which would result in a conflict with the Church.<sup>12</sup> His discovery made a clash with the existing system inevitable.

He did not perceive that he was taking the road to religious subjectivism and shallow spiritualism; nor that his doctrine that salvation is the work of God alone to the exclusion of all created means, implied the rejection of the sacraments, the priesthood, sacrifice, indulgences and hierarchy; in a word, the entire order of the divinely established Church.<sup>13</sup>

The basic problem of Luther is that there is no unity in his theological formulation. This problem is rendered acute by the use of paradox. There seems to have been a strict unity only in the kernel of his doctrine, i.e., of justification as propounded and constantly held by Luther with the inclusion of a specific notion of God, Christology, Soteriology and Anthropology. His sacramental doctrines and ecclesiology are more on the periphery, where Luther often wavered.<sup>14</sup> Calvin was more orderly and consistent in the doctrine of faith. Zwingli aimed above all at the simple and intelligible in doctrine and spirituality. Luther meant by justification a really new creation. Behind the expression *simul justus et simul peccator* (just and sinner at the same time) is the fellowship of the Christian with Christ. Sin is here the absence or lack of fullness in love. Righteousness and new life already grow in secret. But in spite of the moral seriousness, the insertion of morals into theology was far from sufficiently successful.<sup>15</sup>

Zwingli saw a society strictly ruled by law as the ‘situation’ for the service of the glory of God. In Calvin, a sense of election displaced the notion of justification, bringing with it strong moralistic traits. ‘If Luther is seen outside the polemical situation, where he appears as interested solely in justification by faith to the elimination of justice by works, agreement with him on a magisterium does not seem hopeless, in spite of all his condemnations of the papacy’.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Religious Wars**

One of the shameful consequences of Protestant revolutions in the different nations of Europe was that it gave rise to a number of wars in the name of religions, which can rightly be called as religious wars. Though a kind of peace was established among the different princes of Germany in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg it was only a temporal truce, which could not check the outbreak of wars in the name of religions in Europe.

#### ***3.1 Peace of Augsburg of 1555***

It was a treaty between the Catholic princes and the princes of the new Confession concluded on 25 September 1555<sup>17</sup> to establish religious peace in Germany. Princes, imperial cities and knights subject to the empire were granted the right of choosing either of the two recognized religions of Catholicism and Protestantism. The princes were also entitled to impose the religion of their choice upon their subjects. This right was based on the resolution adopted at the Diet of Speyer of 1526,<sup>18</sup> where was passed the rule *cuius regio, ejus religio*. The lower nobility and all other subjects were thereby obliged to obey the orders of their rulers. However, they were granted the right of migrating without loss of honour or property. The minorities of the different faith, since the introduction of the new faith, were to be tolerated. The spiritual jurisdiction of the

bishops in Protestant domains was transferred to the reigning princes. As far as church property was concerned, Protestants could retain all foundations, monasteries and churches which had been in their possession at the time of the Treaty of Passau of 1552.<sup>19</sup> An equal number of judges of both religions were to sit in the imperial courts.<sup>20</sup>

Bihlmeyer-Tuechle is of the opinion that the Peace of Augsburg consummated the religious schism in Germany and determined the relationship of the two faiths for many years. They opine that it was not a compromise, much less a peace. Neither side was satisfied, and the concessions granted, contained the seeds of new and serious conflicts. That is the reason why Pope Paul IV protested seriously telling that this treaty was a violation of the ancient and inalienable rights of the Church.<sup>21</sup>

### ***3.2 Rule of Intolerance***

An immediate and unfortunate effect of the Reformation was intolerance which expressed itself in persecutions and religious wars. Instead of generating the true spirit of Christ, that is, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the Reformation made thousands suffer on account of their religion. Civil war broke out in Switzerland under Zwingli. In Germany, Lutheranism resulted in civil strife until the Treaty of Augsburg restored peace in 1555.<sup>22</sup> In France too, civil war broke out between the Huguenots, who were Calvinists, and those who preferred Catholicism followed by the French monarchs. Many of the Huguenots had to leave France after suffering badly. The Edict of Nantes of 1598 issued by King Henry IV restored peace in France. These civil wars were a hindrance to security, material prosperity and cultural advancement.

As a result of the Reformation, revolts and wars broke out, causing loss of life, property, prestige and power. Most important among them was the war between Spain and the Netherlands. A large number of Dutch people who had become Calvinists rose in opposition to Philip II, the ruler of the Netherlands. A terrible war took place and Holland was finally recognized as an independent state only in 1648, fifty years after Philip's death. The second important one was the Anglo-Spanish war. During the rule of Elizabeth, Protestantism was re-established in England. Philip II then sent a vast fleet of warships, the Armada in order to carry out his will forcibly. However, the valor of the English seamen as well as the violent storms, succeeded in repulsing and destroying the Armada.

In 1618, a war broke out in Germany between the Catholics and the Protestants, which lasted for thirty years.<sup>23</sup> Hence it is known in history as the 'Thirty years War'. This soon spread like a great fire into an international war being not only religious, but also political and economic. The various treaties of 1648 that brought the war to an end are called the Peace of Westphalia. It placed Calvinists on an equal footing with Lutherans and Catholics. Further all Church property would continue to be in the possession of those who owned it in 1624.

#### **4. Religious Divisions in the European Christendom**

It may be said that the kernel of the Reformation is its positive preaching, which thrust forward to simple structures, the words of Scripture and the common priesthood of all believers. Faith was at the centre, faith in the 'man on the Cross'. In spite of the 'sola Scriptura', the ancient Creeds and the ancient Councils were retained as obligatory. This search for the sources led in fact to a fundamental weakening of tradition and continuity.<sup>24</sup> The apostolic succession was not preserved, which is not just a question of the interpretation of the sacrament of Orders. It mainly concerns the magisterium.



The tragedy of the Reformation was the unresolved tension which arose from the fact that the interpretation of the fundamentals of faith was left to an unsure and changing Church government and its theologians.<sup>25</sup> Since there was no ultimate court of appeal a subjective principle came in which made for growing divisions. The Reformation was radically a Christian, religious reform which did not restrict itself to morals.<sup>26</sup> Later this essential priority of religion over morals was largely lost sight of.

Since Luther is the full and true expression of the Reformation, the tensions and contradictions can be most readily disclosed by an examination of his own life. But even this is problematic as he was affected by the situation and his partner in the dialogue. Though he was well acquainted with the scholasticism of the medieval period, he developed no system. Theology was for him *sapientia experimentalis*.<sup>27</sup> In his confessions of faith, throughout his preaching, he preserved much in common with the ancient church.

## 5. Social and Cultural Effects

As consequent to the Protestant movements the European societies witnessed thorough changes in many fields, especially the socio-cultural and religious fields. The religious schism due to the Reformation produced much distress in Germany resulting even in a frightful social revolution known as the Peasants' War of 1524. 'It is true that there had been repeated uprisings of dissatisfied peasants in southern Germany since the end of Middle Ages. But these disturbances had been confined to small sections of the country and had easily been suppressed'.<sup>28</sup> But the so-called Peasants' War of 1524<sup>29</sup> was on a larger scale and was also more dangerous.

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While the apparent causes were of an economic and social nature, it cannot be denied that the religious revolt with its incessant attacks on the old Church, the hierarchy and

monasteries gave impetus to this new insurrection. The peasants were not particularly interested in Luther's theology; but the spiritual and temporal had become inextricably mingled in the whirlpool of events and the 'freedom of the Christian' as proclaimed by Luther could also too easily be understood in the sense of absolute independence of temporal and spiritual landlords and freedom from oppressive taxation and compulsory labour for the lord of the manor.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note that the chief demand of the peasants was the right of the people to choose and dismiss their pastors. They again demanded that those thus chosen were obliged to preach the gospel 'purely and simply, without any human additions'. They further demanded the abolition of taxes and serfdom and the free use of water, woods and pastures which they consider as 'divine rights' based on the Old Testament.<sup>31</sup>

### ***5.1 Stimulus to New Trends***

While evaluating the effects of the Reformation, the religious realm must be carefully distinguished from the cultural. The religious fruitfulness is unquestionable. The establishment of the Reformation was always the great stimulus of religious movements and trends.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless the effects of the Reformation were also multivalent. Many lines lead to the Enlightenment and Idealism, even though the end product here was often the total inversion of the starting point.<sup>33</sup> Faith was deepened and enriched, but weighed down by the contradictions of the confessions. Hence the most far-reaching effect of the Reformation was the division of the Church. On the Catholic side this meant a loss of powerful forces, a retreat on to the defensive, a restriction on freedom. Few Catholics are found in the first flight of thinkers of modern times. But the positive effects on the Catholic Church were also notable: the Reform and the theological explanations of Trent. Catholic theology in its present form would be unthinkable without the impulses, questions and examples from the Protestant side. But it can also be noted that certain principles of the Reformation

were better preserved on the Catholic side than by their direct heirs.<sup>34</sup>

The cultural effects of the Reformation have at times been exaggerated. Much had already been there in Catholic life and came only to fruition on the Protestant side. An exclusive primacy of the religious element could also be inhibiting. Thus cultural consequences were often rather permitted than aimed at. Nonetheless, the great release of spiritual forces also meant the release of great cultural drives: a paradox comparable to the cultural fruitfulness of the medieval monks' flight from the world.<sup>35</sup>

## **6. Secularizing Tendencies**

The spread of Reformation was rapid and not merely superficial. The real force was the spirit of God's word. Since Luther first came forward as the reformer of the ancient Church, the split which was beginning was not noticed. It was only for this reason that the establishment of the Reformation in a way which split the West was possible. It was also helped by the politics and Church politics of the rulers, who had a Christian responsibility in the matter, according to Luther. Since the ministers of the Church had no concern except with spiritual matters, Luther had no fundamental objections to secularizations. Apart from strengthening in this way the local rulers, Luther who thought in terms of a patriarchal agrarian culture, displayed no great political drive, while the ecclesiastical principles of Calvin, on the contrary, became a supreme political force.<sup>36</sup> The many dedicated champions of the Reformation who were ready to accept persecution and death for their faith did much to spread the Reformation. The emigrants in particular formed many new communities in many places. The spirit of faith in the leaders could sweep the masses along with them.

## 7. Spirit of Nationalism

Owing to the Reformation, the hands of the rulers were strengthened against the Church. Thus it was a boon to the rulers. In the name of the Reformation, Henry VIII deprived the pope of any powers over the English Church. The German princes were happy to be free from the control of the pope. The kings of Europe could now build their countries according to the pattern of their choice. The spirit of nationalism was given a fresh impetus by the Reformation.

New ideas arose in the economic field where there were healthy changes. People were free from medieval ideas and the tyranny of the Orthodox Church. Thus they could pursue certain economic activities such as money lending, which was criticized in the past. Owing to the Reformation old ideas were discarded and the moneylender was given a status in the society. By annihilating the economic power of the medieval Church, the Reformation paved the way for the rise of capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

In Protestantism, freedom of conscience gave the impulse to deeds of daring in non-religious fields. The tolerance and the freedom preached during Reformation was a limited affair, as very harsh measures were often taken against the Catholics and fanatics. Luther emphasized the use of vernacular languages and also the need of school reform. The Reformation was to a great extent a movement affecting the schools, rooted and carried on by outstanding achievements in education. As Hampson reviews, in all these fields though Luther had good intentions, he had no competence.<sup>38</sup>

## 8. Counter-Reformation

Restoration of Catholicism in Europe was effected in many ways. The process of reviving the religious life and restoring

the Catholic faith could be called as Counter-reformation against the Protestant Reformation.

### **8.3 Religious Revival**

Religious life or monastic life was the most seriously affected realm due to the new trends in faith in the beginning of the modern period. One can rightly say that there was no other time when the religious and ecclesial life so disastrously affected. This is very explicit in Germany, the place of the outbreak of the Protestant revolution, where a multitude of religious condemned their vows and embraced the new doctrine. The south European countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal were the less affected nations of Europe. In 1537 Pope Paul III formed a reform commission of cardinals and bishops with in view of initiating reform movements. From the Orders themselves there were initiatives to reform the life of the monks and launch new ways of administration of temporalities. This time there started also a number of new religious Congregations, Institutes and Societies intended for the reform of the Church. Montgomery writes about the role of France in effecting the revival of Catholic life in Europe:

Besides these reforms of already existing Orders, a large number of new congregations for the practical performance of the works of mercy were established between the opening of the Council of Trent and the middle of the seventeenth century. This fact gives evidence of the revival of Catholic life which began with the Council of Trent. From the end of the sixteenth century, France, spiritually renewed, took the lead in fostering religious life and became a nursery of sanctity and a school of genuine mysticism.<sup>39</sup>

### **8.2 Catholic Restoration**

The role of the newly founded religious Congregation of the Society of Jesus in bringing about the religious reform of the post-reformation period is praiseworthy. Its members took

a leading role in the ecclesiastical reform of the sixteenth and the subsequent centuries.

Endowed with papal privileges, the Jesuits devoted themselves for the catholic reform in many and varied ways. The Society of Jesus, inspired by the militant and chivalrous spirit of its founder, strove with tenacity of purpose to conquer the world for Christ. During the second half of the sixteenth century it proved to be a strong support of the Catholic reform movement and a driving force in the Counter-Reformation and Catholic Restoration.<sup>40</sup>

There are even certain accusations that the Society of Jesus was formed to fight against Protestantism in Europe. Regarding the same Bihlmeyer-Tuchele opines:

While it is incorrect to assert that the Society was founded specially to combat Protestantism, the circumstances of the times forced the Jesuits to do valiant battle with both Lutheranism and Calvinism; for which reason they incurred the lasting hatred of the entire Protestant camp. It was due to the efficiency and sacrifice of the Jesuits more than anything else that Protestantism was checked in southern and western Germany and that regions which seemed lost to the Church were regained. It was chiefly by means of education that the Society was able to exert a powerful influence and strengthen the Catholic cause.<sup>41</sup>

It was the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which took it as its mighty task to safeguard the Old Faith from the devastating attacks of the innovation and to restore Catholic faith and ecclesiastical discipline. Though the Council could save the Catholic Church in many countries it could not restore the unity of faith in Western Europe. Trent clearly defined and proclaimed the Catholic faith in opposition to new false doctrines and through its reform decrees a programme for the religious and moral renewal of the clergy and the people. Trent could valiantly defend her hierarchical constitution and successfully repel the religious subjectivism of the reformers. Thus the Reformation which threatened to destroy the Catholic

Church gave the impetus for a counter-reformation, i.e., to the religious revival and Catholic restoration.

## Conclusion

Though the Reformation was religious in character, it had far-reaching effects in all fields. Thus it helped in the shaping of the modern world, along with other movements. One cannot accuse the reformers for their good intentions or the clear conscience. The results of Reformation vary from country to country and from person to person. The goal of the Reformation, a purified Christianity in the one Church, was but not attained. This goal is a permanent task. It cannot be brought out by men, but it cannot be granted without them. The question whether Reformation helped the modern persons or not could be answered from the effects it produced in different lands and at different times. Reformation paved the way for Catholic restoration or Counter-reformation. Both sides are to be blamed in for not preserving the unity of the Church in Europe.

## Notes

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- 5 *Weimarer Ausgabe* I, p. 627, as is quoted in K. Adam, *The Roots of Reformation* (Paris 1957) 187.

- 6 R. H. Fife, *The Revolution of Martin Luther* (New York 1957) 203.
- 7 Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Reformation* (New York 1960) 72.
- 8 R. H. Fife, *The Revolution of Martin Luther* (New York 1957) 201.
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- 10 J. Lortz, *The Reformation, A Problem for Today* (Westminster 1964) 126.
- 11 Karl Bihlmeyer & Hermann Tuechle, *Church History*, vol. III (Modern and Recent times) (Westminster 1966) 10.
- 12 J. H. Hayes, *History of Europe since 1500* (New York 1956) 80
- 13 Karl Bihlmeyer & Hermann Tuechle, *Church History*, vol. III (Modern and Recent times) (Westminster 1966) 11.
- 14 Hubert Jedin (ed.), *History of the Church*, vol. V (London 1980) 38-39.
- 15 Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions* (Cambridge 2001) 107.
- 16 *Sacramentum Mundi, An Encyclopaedia of Theology* vol 5 & 6, ed. by Karl Rahner, Cornelius Ernst and Kevin Smyth (Bangalore 1975), 232.
- 17 See for details K. Brandi, *Der Augsburger Religionsfriede* (1927) and N. Paulus, *Religionsfreiheit und Augsburger Religionsfriede* (1912).
- 18 For the details of the Diet of Speyer of 1526 see W. Friedensburg, *Der Reichstag zu Speier 1526* (1926) and T. Brieger, *Der Speierer Reichstag 1526* (1909).
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- 20 See for details Hubert Jedin (ed.), *History of the Church*, vol. V (London 1980) 296-297.



- 21 Karl Bihlmeyer & Hermann Tuechle, *Church History*, vol. III (Modern and Recent times) (Westminster 1966) 58.
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- 24 *Sacramentum Mundi, An Encyclopaedia of Theology* Vol 5 & 6, ed. by Karl Rahner, Cornelius Ernst and Kevin Smyth (Bangalore 1975), 234.
- 25 J. Lortz, *The Reformation: A Problem for Today* (Westminster 1964 ) 126.
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- 28 Karl Bihlmeyer & Hermann Tuechle, *Church History*, vol. III (Modern and Recent times) (Westminster 1966) 31.
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- 31 W. Wibbeling, *Martin Luther u. der Bauernkrieg* (Nuremberg 1925) 37. For more on the Peasants' War see O.H. Brandt, *Der Grosse Bauernkrieg* (1925), W. Stolze, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (1907), H. Hantsch, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (1925) and R. Krebs, *Der Bauernkrieg in Franken* (1925).
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