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# The Failure of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster

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## The Failure of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster

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PSU Challenge: HST 102 Western Civ/Honors History of Modern Europe

Mr. Matthew Vannelli

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In 1534, the pinnacles of two church towers in Münster, Germany were removed by the city's government. In their stead, platforms designed to hold cannons were installed.<sup>1</sup> The city was in the midst of a siege by Catholic prince-bishop Franz von Waldeck, who opposed the Anabaptist takeover of Münster.<sup>2</sup> For about a decade, this Protestant sect had been loudly encouraging adult believers' baptism as a foundation for the equality of all people. They hoped baptism status would replace existing forms of social organization. In other words, there would no longer be any nobles, serfs, or clergy—just the baptized and non-baptized,<sup>3</sup> all living in “communities of goods,” or communities in which goods were shared in common. The Holy Roman Empire, which had outlawed believers' baptism, found this prospect horrifying.<sup>4</sup> However, they had little to fear, as the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster would fail to establish such equality during its sixteen-month existence. It failed, in part, because it was never set up to do such a thing. The only reason it was able to establish itself was because of sympathizers like Heinrich Redecker, an alderman of the United Guild,<sup>5</sup> a body of wealthy and powerful guild leaders in Münster.<sup>6</sup> As is evidenced by continued inequality that resulted from the inaction of Kingdom leaders, the primary purpose of the Kingdom for these men was always to protect their own freedom, wealth, and power, rather than to promote social and economic equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Stayer, James, and Roth, John, eds. *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*. Boston: Brill, 2006. 239.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 232.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 234-235.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 217.

<sup>5</sup> Stayer, James M. *German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

The catalyst for the frenzy that swept Münster in the 1530s began with a radical preacher named Melchior Hoffman. In 1529, he arrived in Strasbourg, a town in France not far from the German border. Shortly thereafter, he became the leader of a local Anabaptist group, dubbed the “Melchiorites.” At that point, Hoffman had been prophesying for several years of a last judgement that would occur in 1533.<sup>7</sup> After two years in Strasbourg, he proclaimed it to be the “New Jerusalem,” a city that would provide refuge during the coming apocalypse. In 1533, his radical teachings got him imprisoned in Strasbourg for what he anticipated would be a very short time.<sup>8</sup> Hoffman continued prophesying while in jail, writing *Von der reinen Furcht Gottes* (“On the Pure Fear of God”). In this tract, he assured his followers that a pious king would soon rise and prepare the world for Christ’s return.<sup>9</sup> However, Hoffman would die in prison a decade later, his apocalyptic prophecies left unfulfilled.

Nevertheless, Hoffman’s ideas would end up having a profound impact through their adoption by the Münster priest Bernhard Rothmann. Since 1530, when he began advocating for anti-Catholic reforms, he had been steadily rising in popularity among the city’s residents.<sup>10</sup> This popularity continued despite attempted censorship of Rothmann by the Catholic establishment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Stayer and Roth, 219.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>9</sup> Stayer, 124.

<sup>10</sup> Loewen, Harry. *Luther and the Radicals: Another Look at Some Aspects of the Struggle Between Luther and the Radical Reformers*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1974. 96.

<sup>11</sup> Steffens, Erich R. “Monsters of Muenster: Lessons from the Apocalyptic Narrative of the Anabaptist Kingdom.” *Defense Technical Information Center* (AD1053473), 2017. 42.

Hermann von Kerksenbroch a schoolmaster who left Münster as a boy,<sup>12</sup> attests to Rothmann's popularity in his history of the Münster Anabaptists:

Many people, especially those weighed down by debt, revered [Rothmann] like some godhead, hung from his every word, and were convinced that he was driven in his actions by the Spirit of God. Despite official orders to the contrary, they followed him in crowds from the city on account of their eagerness to hear him speak, their desire to do so being so great that they considered that there were no preachers but him and despised, condemned, and cursed the others along with the entire clergy.<sup>13</sup>

The prince-bishop, attempting to quash Münster's Reformation, called for the exile of Rothmann and all other evangelical preachers from the city.<sup>14</sup> This decision failed spectacularly by providing the wealthy members of Münster's trade guilds the perfect opportunity to seize power from the religious establishment.

Heinrich Redecker, a United Guild alderman since 1532,<sup>15</sup> used increased religious tension within Münster to expand the Guild's political power. The primary purpose of obtaining this power was not to implement the Anabaptist ideal of equality, but to uphold civic and religious freedom against the prince-bishop. Since the start of Münster's reformation, the United

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<sup>12</sup> Gresbeck, Heinrich, and Christopher S. Mackay. 2016. *False Prophets and Preachers: Henry Gresbeck's Account of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster*. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Kerksenbroch, Hermann von, and Christopher S. Mackay. 2007. *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness: the Overthrow of Münster, the Famous Metropolis of Westphalia*. Leiden: Brill. 217.

<sup>14</sup> Stayer and Roth, 226.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

Guild had been fighting with Catholic authority over control of the city.<sup>16</sup> When the Catholic prince-bishop attempted to exercise his own power over Münster by ordering Rothmann's removal, Redecker and his fellow merchants defied him by hiding the preacher in their guild house.<sup>17</sup> Due to Rothmann's immense following, it's easy to see why these power-hungry men would have wanted to gain the approval of his supporters. When von Waldeck attempted to force Rothmann's exile by blockading the city until his wishes were followed, the United Guild organized a successful attack and captured one of his delegations.<sup>18</sup> This attack led to the Treaty of Dülmen's ratification in February 1533,<sup>19</sup> ending von Waldeck's blockade. However, the treaty did not significantly advance evangelical interests, mandating that Münster's cathedral and cloisters remain Catholic.<sup>20</sup> The true purpose of the United Guild's involvement in this conflict becomes evident when examining elections that took place just a month after the treaty's ratification,<sup>21</sup> when twenty previous council members were replaced with United Guild leaders.<sup>22</sup> Given that the council consisted of only twenty-four members,<sup>23</sup> this was an incredible

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<sup>16</sup> Steffens, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Stayer and Roth, 225.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 226.

<sup>19</sup> Stayer, 125.

<sup>20</sup> Steffens, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Stayer and Roth, 226.

<sup>22</sup> Stayer, 125.

<sup>23</sup> Stayer and Roth, 226.

victory for Münster's merchant class. Their ploy to gain political support by allying themselves with Rothmann's cause had worked.

Rothmann's switch to Anabaptism occurred around the same time as this election. After being influenced by the Melchiorite Anabaptist Heinrich Roll,<sup>24</sup> who had come to Münster from Jülich in September 1532, Rothmann began to advocate in favor of believers' baptism. He would publish his first Anabaptist writing, *Bekentnisse van beyden Sacramenten* ("Confession of the Two Sacraments"), in November 1533.<sup>25</sup> This pamphlet advocated for a community of goods by connecting it with the Lord's Supper, and cited the radical reformer Sebastian Franck's 1531 work *Chronica* as support. In that piece, Franck draws from the apocryphal Fourth Epistle of Clement to argue against private property, a view that Rothmann affirmed.<sup>26</sup>

This shift in Rothmann's views would draw even more attention to Münster and lay the groundwork for its Anabaptist revolution. Heinrich Roll brought "Confession" to Amsterdam in December 1533, distributing it amongst the Melchiorites there.<sup>27</sup> One of those Melchiorites was a Haarlem baker named Jan Matthijs. After Melchior Hoffman was imprisoned, Matthijs rose as a leader of the Dutch Anabaptists. He assisted in the reintroduction adult baptism in the Netherlands, baptizing Münster's future king Jan van Leiden there in November 1533.<sup>28</sup> When he learned that Münster's growing Anabaptist movement had led to an increased openness

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<sup>24</sup> Loewen, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Stayer, 126.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Stayer and Roth, 221.

towards adult baptism, he sent two followers there to introduce it.<sup>29</sup> Their success in January 1534<sup>30</sup> marked a new chapter in Münster's Anabaptist transformation.

Noting this transformation, the United Guild once again decided to capitalize on radical religious fervor and increase their own power in the city council, where more moderate Protestants were beginning to lose popularity. Amidst rumors in February 1534 that Franz von Waldeck was about to attack the town,<sup>31</sup> alderman Redecker organized a successful military resistance,<sup>32</sup> preventing von Waldeck from immediately taking the city and instead forcing him to embark on a sixteen-month siege. Along with the rest of the United Guild, he then arranged an election on February 23<sup>rd</sup> that resulted in the establishment of an Anabaptist council.<sup>33</sup> The military and political triumph of the United Guild in early 1534 was incredibly significant, marking the beginning of Münster as an independent theocracy. It also demonstrates that Münster's merchant class—and not religious leaders like Matthijs or van Leiden, who had only just arrived in the city<sup>34</sup>—was the true force behind the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster.

The United Guild's various victories spurred many religious radicals into action. The political triumph of the Anabaptists against the wishes of the powerful prince-bishop was taken by some as a literal miracle.<sup>35</sup> Matthijs proclaimed Münster to be the New Jerusalem and

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<sup>29</sup> Stayer and Roth, 222.

<sup>30</sup> Stayer, 127.

<sup>31</sup> Stayer and Roth, 231.

<sup>32</sup> Stayer, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 127

<sup>34</sup> Stayer and Roth, 230-232.

<sup>35</sup> Stayer, 128.



prophesied that the world would end on Easter 1534.<sup>36</sup> As more Anabaptists followed him, Matthijs and van Leiden became increasingly important figures in the town.<sup>37</sup> Both Rothmann and Hoffman advocated for their credibility as prophets, with an imprisoned Hoffman recorded as saying, “In Münster they have a prophet named Jan Mathis who claims that he is one of the witnesses of God. Münster will not be oppressed.”<sup>38</sup> These endorsements helped the new arrivals gain support from both Rothmann’s followers inside Münster and Hoffman’s followers outside of it, making them the revolution’s new public faces.

Their new theocracy would begin with Matthijs implementing the most radical community of goods Münster would ever experience. With an influx of non-Münsterite Anabaptists now immigrating into the city,<sup>39</sup> Matthijs preached that the abandoned belongings of the Catholics and moderate reformers who had fled at the beginning of the siege should be distributed to new arrivals.<sup>40</sup> According to Heinrich Gresbeck, a local cabinetmaker who escaped Münster in 1535 and wrote an eyewitness account of the Anabaptist kingdom, Rothmann took this concept even further by preaching the following:

It’s not appropriate for a Christian to have any money. Be it silver or gold, it’s unclean for a Christian. Everything that the Christian brothers and sisters have belongs to one

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<sup>36</sup> Scribner, Bob. “Practical Utopias: Pre-Modern Communism and the Reformation.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 4 (1994): 743–74. 757.

<sup>37</sup> Steffens, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Hoffman, Melchior. “Interrogation of Melchior Hoffman, 1535.” Quoted in Erich R. Steffens, “Monsters of Muenster: Lessons from the Apocalyptic Narrative of the Anabaptist Kingdom.” *Defense Technical Information Center* (AD1053473), 2017. 59.

<sup>39</sup> Suderman, Henry. “Sometimes It’s the Place: The Anabaptist Kingdom Revisited.” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 40, no. 4 (2017). 126.

<sup>40</sup> Stayer, 134.

person as much as to the next. You shall lack nothing, be it food or clothing, house and hearth. What you need you shall get, God will not let you lack anything. One thing should be just as common as the next, it belongs to us all. It's mine as much as yours, and yours as much as mine.<sup>41</sup>

However, the council only asked for residents to surrender their precious metals and money. Since Matthijs did not hold an official position in town, his authority was dependent on others with power—like the council members—agreeing to carry out his ideas.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, with the prophesied end seemingly near, they abolished money as a medium of internal exchange and placed the city's deacons in charge of distributing abandoned goods.<sup>43</sup>

Despite these reforms, Münster's community of goods featured several notable limitations. Little was taken from original Münster residents, which included the local leaders who had put Anabaptists in power. No attempt was made to interfere with the possession of houses or other immovable property. Moveable property was inventoried, but never actually taken and distributed.<sup>44</sup> While efforts were taken to abolish "buying and selling, working for money, and indebtedness and usury,"<sup>45</sup> as Rothmann put it in his theological writing "Restitution," the council's unwillingness to interfere with the property of upstanding

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<sup>41</sup> Gresbeck and Mackay, 121.

<sup>42</sup> Stayer, 134.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 135-136.

<sup>45</sup> Rothmann, Bernhard. "Restitution," 1534. In *German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. 134.

Münsterites prevented the ideal of economic equality from actually being reached. Inequality would only worsen with the death of one of the city's most prominent radicals.

When Matthijis was killed while riding out to meet besieging forces on Easter 1534,<sup>46</sup> his prophecy left unfulfilled, the other Münster leaders went about undercutting his message of equality by establishing a new elite class. Immediately following his death, van Leiden preached that if the apocalypse was delayed, God would select another prophet to lead Münster. When Easter 1534 came and went without the end of times occurring, van Leiden assumed this role.<sup>47</sup> He then moved to establish a new form of government based on that of ancient Israel, in which twelve elders would lead. In April of 1534, the council was dissolved, with the new group of elders—six of which were former council members<sup>48</sup>—taking charge.<sup>49</sup> This new government institutionalized van Leiden's prophetic role,<sup>50</sup> allowing him to dissolve it a mere five months after its creation and declare himself king.<sup>51</sup> He selected 148 people to be members of his royal court.<sup>52</sup> Heinrich Redecker and Gert Reininck, a member of the council elected in February 1534, were part of this group, along with other political figures who had helped put the

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<sup>46</sup> Scribner, 758.

<sup>47</sup> Steffens, 63-64.

<sup>48</sup> Stayer, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Steffens, 64

<sup>50</sup> Stayer and Roth, 238.

<sup>51</sup> Loewen, 98.

<sup>52</sup> Stayer, 136.

Anabaptists in power.<sup>53</sup> Even after the dissolution of two different governments, Münster's ruling class was largely composed of the same people.

The hypocrisy of creating the privileged minority of a royal court in a supposedly egalitarian society becomes evident when studying the clothes worn in the Kingdom of Münster. When the council of elders was in charge, they advocated in favor of Münster residents wearing simple clothing in order to blur distinctions between different social classes.<sup>54</sup> However, the royal court did not abide by this suggestion, instead adorning themselves in extravagant attire. Kerssenbroch describes King Jan's clothing with great detail in his history of the Anabaptist Kingdom. When listing his normal accessories, he includes: a bejeweled crown made of gold, a bejeweled collar, a golden sword sheath, a royal scepter, and several imposing rings.<sup>55</sup> Kerssenbroch also noted the considerable shift from the relatively humble time of the elders, writing:

The twelve elders and the prophets used to wear simple, humble clothes when supreme power had been in their hands under the old constitution. Now, however, the public and private gold and silver and the sacred chasubles and other silken garments of crimson and purple consecrated to God which had been stolen from the churches were delivered to them.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Stayer and Roth, 243.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>55</sup> Kerssenbroch, and Mackay, 592.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 593.

The economic inequality created by the royal court became painfully obvious when conditions inside Münster began to deteriorate. Since the government had not done much to ensure economic equality beyond seizing money from the populace and canceling their debts, when the siege continued and food rations decreased, the wealthy were better prepared. In his eyewitness account, Gresbeck asserted, “he who was poor remained poor, and he who had something at the end had to grab onto it, even though property was supposed to be held in common. The hunger befell the poor people first, and they suffered great distress.”<sup>57</sup> Since Münster’s government could not obtain food from outside the city and was unwilling to confiscate and distribute it on the inside, They had only starvation rations to dole out to their citizens.<sup>58</sup> Those without any personal stores to rely on went the hungriest, with many attempting to leave Münster and surrender to the other side.<sup>59</sup> While many of these poor people were killed, death would eventually come for all—rich and poor—when Münster was defeated in June 1535. Ironically, the failure of Münster egalitarian society would be a surprisingly equalizing force.

It is important to mention the limitations faced when attempting to study the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster. For one, both Kerssenbroch and Gresbeck’s account demonstrate a clear bias. Kerssenbroch was a Catholic, and was forced to flee Münster because of his religion. Additionally, as he left the city as a child and wrote his history many years later, he does not have much credibility as an eyewitness. The value of his work primarily stems from its reliance

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<sup>57</sup> Gresbeck and Mackay. 188-189.

<sup>58</sup> Stayer, 138.

<sup>59</sup> Stayer and Roth, 249.

on other, now lost primary sources.<sup>60</sup> Gresbeck, on the other hand, was present in Münster as an adult for much longer time than Kerksenbroch, and wrote his eyewitness account only a decade later.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, he is not an unbiased source, seemingly having written his account to restore his own reputation among outsiders and attest to his role in capturing Münster.<sup>62</sup> However, when balanced with the pro-Anabaptist writings of Bernhard Rothmann and the recorded interrogations of imprisoned Anabaptists like Melchior Hoffman, one can begin to gain a more balanced perspective on the Anabaptist kingdom.

It is also important to address the claims that the Münster rebellion was revolution of the common man, and was ultimately controlled by regular citizens.<sup>63</sup> This claim is supported by evidence that points to the massive involvement average Münsterites had in the rebellion. After all, they were the ones responsible for propelling Bernhard Rothmann to fame and electing successively more Anabaptist councils. However, while regular citizens participated greatly in the rebellion, they were not well-represented in its leadership. Ultimately, the wealthy were still in charge.

It is obvious that the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster fell far short of achieving its goals. The composition of Münster's leadership helps explain why the Kingdom's dreams of equality never fully materialized. Most of the leaders were wealthy, and did not want to let go of their wealth. Additionally, many of them sided with Anabaptists simply because they saw Rothmann's

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<sup>60</sup> Grieser, D. Jonathan. "A Tale of Two Convents: Nuns and Anabaptists in Munster, 1533-1535." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 1 (1995). 33.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>62</sup> Gresbeck and Mackay, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Roebuck, Andrew, "The Common Man and the Rise of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster, 1534-1535". *Western Kentucky University* (Paper 3168), 2020. 40-41.

growing following as good allies in the fight for independence from the prince-bishop.

Therefore, these men were not very dedicated to carrying out the actual goals of Anabaptism.

The eventual collapse of their theocracy acts as an an important reminder regarding the hidden motives that can inform religious and political leaders.

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