Roper, L. (2025) *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War*. Basic Books.

Review by Jack Metzgar

The are hardly any workers in this book – not in the modern sense of workers as free wage labor, workers hired for a specified period of time for a specified wage. There are some artisans in the towns, some in powerful guilds that set their own wages and conditions just as shopkeepers set their prices, and some copper and silver miners who worked for a wage while workmates were serfs. But with a few, important exceptions, these toilers did not participate in the Peasant War in Germany in 1524-25.

Peasants, of course, worked, very long and hard, but they were not part of what for the past few hundred years we have called the working class. They were a very different breed altogether, living in a very different social system at a very different time. But for all that, reading *Summer of Fire and Blood* by English scholar Lyndal Roper resonated with many aspects of the contemporary working class. It was a large majority of the population, for example, and when it knew it had power in numbers, it was indeed very powerful. Like large portions of the American working class, it was inspired by religious fanatics who had a not-always-intentional political edge to them. And when they organized themselves into roving armies, they were ingeniously creative in making do with what they had – though that would turn out to be a military mistake as what they had was no match against men with superior gear on horses. Still, the making-do ingenuity is recognizable.

There are other more subtle resonances. The German peasants were almost uniformly illiterate, and while Roper is diligent in trying to figure out what they thought and felt, she is reliant on allies from towns – innkeepers, artisans, some rogue nobles and knights, but above all renegade priests and monks. These were often leaders, and especially the outlawed clergy made rousing speeches that inspired peasants to action. But still, we never hear from the peasants themselves, either during the war or in the bitter aftermath. We do not know what they thought and felt, how they interpreted their experience, except through what preachers were popular in their area.

This is actually not that different from today, when the American working class is uniformly literate, but seldom speaks for itself. Despite modern polling, which atomizes and then aggregates responses to pre-formed questions, social media, and voting results, the working class, when it is not ignored, is a vacuum most often filled by middle-class professional projection. The German monks in the 16th century saw the peasants as crude and incapable of complex thinking or feeling as they were isolated in their monasteries, just as so many of our opinion-makers today feel free to make up social-psychological characteristics they claim are shared by millions of people of whom they know few, if any.

The issues the war was fought over, however, could not be more different. Though Roper is masterful at consistently showing the complex entanglement of religious and economic issues, it is easier to treat them separately here. The peasant war was very much a part of the Protestant Reformation, which was kicked off with Martin Luther's 95 Theses against the Roman Catholic

Church in 1517. Though Luther focused on the Church's sale of indulgences and other corruptions, he started a stream of thinking that de-emphasized the role of the priest, insisting that common people could and should develop personal interpretations of the Bible. He translated the holy book into German, which was often read to and discussed by peasants with priests and monks who were becoming Lutherans. There was an egalitarian and sometimes a democratic vibe in much of the preaching by outlaw priests, though Luther himself bitterly opposed the peasant uprising and defended the political status quo. A few of the key religious issues that sparked individual rebellions were peasant (and many town folk) demands for parishes to choose their own priests, for congregants to drink communion wine themselves rather than having the priest drink for them, and for recognition that the bread and wine of communion were symbolic of Jesus Christ, not the actual substance of the Savior.

These issues became entangled with economic ones because monasteries often owned vast tracks of land, which serfs worked on and paid steep "tithes" with their produce. Serfs, who also worked for noble land-owners, were not slaves. Their masters could not sell them or their children. But, besides the produce they owed the land-owner, they were obligated to perform tasks for him, often quite extensive; could not move off the owner's land; and their children had to marry someone from among the serfs which were beholden to their landowner. While the peasant war did not advocate the abolition of serfdom, it sought limits to all these and other practices. One especially salient one was to be able to hunt and fish on the landowner's land, from which they were forbidden. As with their other demands, this had a religious rationale in that God had created the land and the waters for everybody to use (if not to own).

From the winter of 1524 into the summer of 1525, the peasants had the upper hand. At first they organized gatherings by simply marching through the countryside and gathering peasants as they went. In most places, they asked people to sign on to a set of shared principles, which the peasants numbering in the hundreds and later the thousands would then take to towns, asking them to sign on, which many of the small towns did. Eventually, however, as their numbers grew, they attacked, pillaged, and burnt both monasteries and castles owned by nobles. The pillaging was sometimes simply draining a monastery's kegs of wine and sometimes outright individual theft of jewels and other valuables, but more often the theft was organized to be shared among the peasant army as it marched to the next place. During these months, peasants would leave their land for a few weeks at a time, return to till the land, and then mass again with larger and larger armies. There was violence, but very few killings – though one, the Weinsberg Massacre, killed 27 captive knights and became a key motivator for the nobles' slaughter of peasants in the summer of 1525.

It took a while for the German princes and the Austrian government to organize their forces, but when they did, the peasants were no match. As many as 100,000 peasants were killed in a series of full-dress battles in central Germany, and almost nowhere were any of their economic demands conceded, even in part.

Despite the huge differences between then and now, them and us, I see continuities in the peasants' will to fight for enhanced control over their lives – and in the relative modesty of their demands. They did not aspire to overthrow the feudal system and escape entirely from their serfdom. They risked (and lost) their lives fighting for better wages and conditions. Working classes historically have not been dreamers of grand schemes, but as today, given the opportunity they will fight

valiantly for more autonomy and concrete improvements. Over time, their accomplishments argue that the arc of history bends toward justice. It is well to remember that.

Reviewer Bio:

Jack Metzgar, a retired adult educator at Roosevelt University in Chicago, is a founder and past president of the Working-Class Studies Association. He is the author of *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* and *Bridging the Divide: Working-Class Culture in a Middle-Class Society*.