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EXPLAINING VIOLENCE

REFORMATION, CONFLICT, AND NARRATIVE IN STRALSUND (1525)

Abstract

This article examines the events surrounding the outbreak of iconoclastic violence in the Baltic port town of Stralsund on 10 April 1525 and situates them within broader debates on Reformation typologies and identity formation. Rather than interpreting these events as a delayed or derivative reception of a Wittenberg-directed Reformation, it argues that they reveal a contested and processual form of reform unfolding on the peripheries of the emerging Reformation movement. Drawing on records from a legal case before the Imperial Chamber Court (1526–1531), the study reconstructs how religious meaning and collective identity were articulated through practices, conflicts, and interpretative strategies – most notably in the context of iconoclastic violence – prior to the stabilisation of Lutheran confessional doctrine. By confronting Catholic accusations with testimonies from urban actors, the article demonstrates that early Lutheran identity in Stralsund was shaped less by doctrinal coherence than by social conflict, anti-clericalism, and contested authority. At the same time, it shows that both Catholic and evangelical actors operated within a shared field of social and political dynamics, often deploying similar rhetorical and interpretative frameworks. The case of Stralsund thus challenges prevailing assumptions about the orderly and conservative character of the northern Reformation and calls for a reassessment of how the Reformation in the Baltic region is conceptualised before 1530.

Keywords: Reformation, Martin Luther, Wittenberg, Pomerania, Stralsund, early modern history

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Monday, 10 April 1525, fell in the week following Palm Sunday. According to the liturgical calendar that structured everyday life in the early modern period, the Lenten season preceding Easter was drawing to a close. On that day, Albrecht of Brandenburg knelt in the market square in Kraków to pay feudal homage to the king of Poland, thereby secularising the Teutonic Order's state in Prussia and transforming it into a Lutheran duchy¹. On the same day, a revolt broke out in some towns of southern Germany, as another episode of the German Peasants' War². That very day in the Baltic port town of Stralsund, an incident in St Nicholas Church – reportedly involving a maidservant – triggered an assault on the town's churches that developed into an episode of urban iconoclasm, followed shortly thereafter by the introduction of the Reformation in the town³.

Taken together, these events – occurring on a single day in different regions of the Empire – illustrate not a unified Reformation experience, but the historiographical effort to impose order on the movement's apparent disorder. Since Bernd Moeller's seminal intervention, further developed by Peter Blickle, Reformation historiography has relied on a typology distinguishing princely (*Fürstenreformation*), communal (*Gemeindereformation*), and council-led (*Ratsreformation*) pathways⁴. The framework aimed to capture how reform ideas interacted with existing political and social structures⁵.

¹ Jacek WIJACZKA, *Traktat krakowski i hołd pruski z 1525 roku* (Rozprawy i Materiały Instytutu Północnego im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego, nr 273), Olsztyn 2025; Igor KĄKOLEWSKI, *Hołd Pruski* (1525). *Historia, pamięć i narracje o scenariuszach alternatywnych*, Warszawa 2025; idem, *Art as an Instrument of Memory: The Representations of the Prussian Homage of 1525 in the Context of the Evolution of Polish Memory Culture until the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, *Zapiski Historyczne*, t. 90: 2025, z. 3, pp. 21–61.

² *Akten zur Geschichte des deutschen Bauernkrieges aus Oberschwaben*, hrsg. v. Franz L. BAUMANN, Freiburg i.Br. 1877, p. 43.

³ Maciej PTASZYŃSKI, *Sacred Bodies: Materiality and Corporeality in Early Reformation Disputes*, *Reformation*, vol. 30: 2025, no. 2, pp. 128–140; idem, *Words Spoken and Unspoken: Preachers and the Baltic Reformation in the Younger Europe*, [in:] *Defining the Identity of the Younger Europe*, ed. Mirosława HANUSIEWICZ-LAVALEE, Robert A. MARYKS (Brill Research Perspectives in Early Modern Cultures of the Younger Europe), Leiden 2023, pp. 90–109.

⁴ Bernd MOELLER, *Reichsstadt und Reformation. Neue Ausgabe*, hrsg. v. Thomas KAUFMANN, Tübingen 2011; see also the English translation: idem, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H.C. Eric MIDELFORT, Mark U. EDWARDS, Durham, NC 1982; Peter BLICKLE, *Die Reformation im Reich*, Stuttgart 2000.

⁵ Luise SCHORN-SCHÜTTE, *Die Reformation. Vorgeschichte, Verlauf, Wirkung*, München 2006, pp. 72–77; Olaf MÖRKE, *Die Reformation. Voraussetzungen und Durchsetzung* (Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte, Bd. 74), München 2005, pp. 109–110; Bernd MOELLER, *Deutschland im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Deutsche Geschichte, Bd. 4), Göttingen 1999, pp. 116–121; P. BLICKLE, *Die Reformation*, pp. 99, 191–197.

Moeller himself framed this problem spatially. When introducing his model in 1962, he emphasised a sharp divide between southern and northern Germany, arguing that 'the North German cities were spiritually and intellectually much less disposed to the Reformation than were those in the South. Thus, the Reformation proceeded there more conservatively'⁶. Subsequent scholarship has both questioned and refined this generalisation, most notably through the development of the concept of communal Reformation, which allowed historians to move beyond an urban–rural dichotomy⁷. This category has been applied extensively to the Peasants' War of 1524/1525, which unfolded primarily in southern Germany. As Thomas Kaufmann has argued, 'the spread of the uprisings toward the north was accompanied by a gradual loss of their specifically peasant character'⁸. From this perspective as well, the North–South divide appeared to be reinforced.

Twentieth-century historiography tended to explain this opposition primarily in terms of social, economic, and legal structures. In the North – especially in the north-eastern regions – strong urban institutions capable of serving as pillars of the Reformation were seen as largely absent. Even the largest towns did not possess the status of Free Imperial Cities, which guaranteed a degree of independence from territorial rulers. This interpretation has been challenged most prominently by Heinz Schilling, who has argued that the Hanseatic towns enjoyed a position functionally comparable to that of the Free Imperial Cities. These analogous institutional frameworks produced similar reform dynamics, though with distinctive features. In the towns and cities of southern Germany, the Reformation unfolded within a bipolar configuration between the urban community at large and the patrician town council. In the Hanseatic towns, by contrast, Schilling identifies a triangular model in which territorial rulers interacted with both the burgher community and the patrician magistracy⁹.

Cultural explanations reinforced this structural reading. Moeller famously argued that northern towns produced no independent theologians of major stature, allowing their Reformation to be organised largely from Wittenberg¹⁰.

⁶ B. MOELLER, *Imperial Cities*, p. 98.

⁷ Peter BLICKLE, *Kommunalismus. Skizzen einer gesellschaftlichen Organisationsform*, Bd. 1–2, München 2000; Guido MARNEF, *Civic Religions*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka RUBLACK, Oxford 2016, pp. 546–564.

⁸ Thomas KAUFMANN, *Der Bauernkrieg. Ein Medienereignis*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 2024, p. 159: 'das Vordringen der Aufstände nach Norden damit einhergehend, dass diese ihren bäuerlichen Charakter einbüßten'.

⁹ Heinz SCHILLING, *The Reformation in the Hanseatic Cities*, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 14: 1983, no. 4, pp. 443–456.

¹⁰ B. MOELLER, *Imperial Cities*, p. 98.

In contrast to the confessional diversity of southern Germany – where Luther, Zwingli, and Bucer competed for influence – the North appeared strikingly uniform. As Graeme Murdock has observed, this image has become deeply entrenched, ‘rendering the Baltic Sea as an almost undisturbed Lutheran lake’¹¹. This perception was further supported by the relatively late arrival of humanist impulses in the Baltic region, alongside a limited number of printing presses and a weak presence of university centres.

More recent scholarship has complicated this picture. Schilling reassessed the role of humanism, emphasising the importance of urban grammar schools and local theological milieus, while Eberhard Völker proposed including preachers as active agents within the triangle of burghers, the council, and the prince¹². Yet for the early Reformation, the content of their preaching often remains difficult to reconstruct, limiting our understanding of how reforming ideas were communicated and received. At the same time, studies by Irene Dingel, Thomas Kaufmann, and Volker Leppin have highlighted the gradual and relatively late emergence of Lutheran confessional cultures as coherent doctrinal systems shaping social life¹³. Moeller’s long-standing question – what, precisely, was preached in the early Reformation? – thus remains unresolved¹⁴. If confessional identities were the product of later processes of definition and stabilisation, what, then, bound together those who would later identify as Lutherans in the early decades of the Reformation?

¹¹ Graeme MURDOCK, *Geographies of the Protestant Reformation*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka RUBLACK, Oxford 2016, p. 106.

¹² Eberhard VÖLKER, *Die Reformation in Stettin* (Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission für Pommern. Reihe 5: Forschungen zur Pommerschen Geschichte, Bd. 38), Köln 2003, p. 64.

¹³ Irene DINGEL, *Reformation. Zentren – Akteure – Ereignisse*, Göttingen 2016, p. 48; eadem, *Wie lutherisch war die Wittenberger Reformation. Von konfessioneller Vielfalt zu theologischer Profilierung*, [in:] *Initia Reformationis. Wittenberg und die frühe Reformation*, hrsg. v. eadem, Armin KOHNLE, Stefan RHEIN, Ernst-Joachim WASCHKE (Leucorea-Studien zur Geschichte der Reformation und der Lutherischen Orthodoxie, Bd. 33), Leipzig 2017, pp. 409–428; Volker LEPPIN, *Wie reformatorisch war die Reformation?*, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, Bd. 99: 2002, pp. 162–176; idem, *Transformationen. Studien zu den Wandlungsprozessen in Theologie und Frömmigkeit zwischen Spätmittelalter und Reformation* (Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation, Bd. 86), Tübingen 2015, pp. 1–16; Thomas KAUFMANN, *What is Lutheran Confessional Culture?*, [in:] *Religion as an Agent of Change: Crusades – Reformation – Pietism*, ed. Per INGESMAN (Brill’s Series in Church History and Religious Culture, vol. 72), Leiden–Boston 2016, pp. 125–148.

¹⁴ Bernd MOELLER, *Was wurde in der Frühzeit der Reformation in den deutschen Städten gepredigt?*, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte / Archive for Reformation History*, vol. 75: 1984, pp. 176–193; Susan C. KARANT-NUNN, *Preaching the Word in Early Modern Germany*, [in:] *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period*, ed. Larissa TAYLOR (A New History of the Sermon, vol. 2), Leiden–Boston 2018, pp. 193–219.

Moreover, northern Germany itself was far from uniform. Schilling's refinements of Moeller's thesis applied primarily to regions west of the Elbe¹⁵. East of the Elbe – from Bremen and Hamburg onwards – he identified a different pattern, characterised by weak communal traditions and the decisive influence of princely reform. Whether this distinction reflects early sixteenth-century realities or was shaped retrospectively by the successful *Fürsten-reformation* of the 1530s remains an open question. It is also likely that the post-1945 division of Germany and restricted archival access contributed to a narrower historiographical focus. Notably, the most recent comprehensive studies of the Reformation in Stralsund still date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Against this background, this article does not merely reconstruct the sequence of events that unfolded in Stralsund on 10 April 1525. It argues that these events reveal the emergence of a distinct form of urban Reformation that cannot be adequately captured by the established typologies of princely, communal, or council-led Reformation. The attacks on churches – preceded by the arrival of itinerant preachers and escalating urban conflicts – were neither accidental eruptions of violence nor merely by-products of external agitation. Rather, they suggest a form of meaningful collective action through which urban actors articulated religious positions and boundaries in the absence of a clearly defined confessional framework. As such, violent acts occupy an uneasy position in the sources: omnipresent and often decisive in their consequences, yet rarely attributed to clearly defined actors or claimed as part of reform. From the perspective of later confessional cultures, it remains structurally unclaimable – neither authorised nor theologically justified – and was therefore retrospectively disowned and attributed to an amorphous 'common man'. By focusing on violence, the article returns to the shared temporal horizon of 10 April 1525 and asks how reform was experienced at the moment when princely decisions, popular unrest, and urban action intersected, but had not yet been stabilised within confessional categories.

Drawing on Catholic accusations preserved in legal records and on testimonies of participants and witnesses, this article reconstructs the contours of a Reformation identity that developed in Stralsund prior to the town's formal adoption of the Reformation in 1525 and its later official establishment in the Duchy of Pomerania in 1534/1535. By identity, I refer here to a shared repertoire of practices, claims, and oppositions through which actors positioned themselves in ongoing religious transformations. This identity did not rest on doctrinal coherence in the later confessional sense. Instead, it took shape through practices and conflicts – most visibly through iconoclastic

¹⁵ H. SCHILLING, op.cit., p. 455.

violence – that allowed urban communities to position themselves within the religious transformations of the early sixteenth century.

The case of Stralsund thus challenges the assumption that northern and north-eastern towns merely adopted a conservative, Wittenberg-directed Reformation or remained passive until the onset of princely reform. It suggests that even in regions commonly associated with *Fürstenreformation*, urban communities generated their own forms of religious meaning and collective identity before confessional norms were fixed. In this sense, Stralsund represents not a delayed or derivative Reformation, but an early and experimental phase of Lutheran identity formation – one that unfolded outside the doctrinal horizon of 1530 and calls for a reassessment of how Reformation identities in the Baltic region are conceptualised.

The main source used in this article is the records of a legal case heard before the Imperial Chamber Court (*Reichskammergericht*) between 1526 and 1531. These files have been held in Szczecin (Ger. Stettin) since the early twentieth century and, after 1945, fell within Poland's borders¹⁶. Given their limited accessibility, only selected excerpts of the six volumes have been published by Johann Gottfried Ludwig Kosegarten, Ernst Zober, and Martin Wehrmann¹⁷. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars working on Pomeranian history have repeatedly described them as the most important source for the history of the Pomeranian Reformation and used them as an account of events. In contrast, this article approaches them as evidence of an ongoing struggle over the interpretation of the Reformation itself. The trial files are read as a site of competing claims, in which actors sought to assign meaning, responsibility, and legitimacy to contested events.

THE MEMORY OF THE REFORMATION IN CONFESSIONAL CULTURES

A long process through which Reformation ideas reached the Baltic coast preceded the events of 10 April 1525 in Stralsund. According to an epitaph

¹⁶ Archiwum Państwowe w Szczecinie (hereinafter cited as APS), Sąd Kamery Rzeszy (hereinafter cited as SKR), sign. 1703–1708 (new sign. 65/6/0/17/1703–1708), vol. 1–6; Maciej SZUKAŁA, *Archiwum Państwowe w Szczecinie w latach 1914–1945. Ludzie i działalność*, Szczecin–Warszawa 2019, p. 69.

¹⁷ Johann G. L. KOSEGARTEN, *Verteidigungsschrift der Stadt Stralsund*, Baltische Studien, Jg. 17: 1858/1859, H. 2, pp. 90–145; idem, *Die Vernehmung*, Baltische Studien, Jg. 17: 1858/1859, H. 2, pp. 146–154; idem, *Die Fragestücke des Hippolytus Steinwer, Oberkirchherr zu Stralsund, abgefaßt für die Vernehmung der von der Stadt Stralsund zu ihrer Vertheidigung gestellten, und im Sommer 1529 zu Greifswald abgehörten Zeugen*, Baltische Studien, Jg. 18: 1860, H. 1, pp. 159–186; Ernst H. ZOBEL, *Spottlieder der evangelischen Stralsunder auf die römisch-katholische Priesterschaft (aus den Jahren 1524–1527)*, Stralsund 1855.

erected in St Nicholas Church in 1546, the first Reformation preacher in the town was Christian Ketelhut (Ketelhot), who began to 'proclaim the Gospel' on 10 May 1523 in the courtyard of St Jürgen Hospital, 'beneath the lime tree'¹⁸. This recollection became part of a Lutheran confessional culture that shaped the collective memory of the early Reformation. A central element of this culture was the set of confessional definitions formulated in the Augsburg Confession of 1530. Article 7 of the Confession defines the Church as the community in which the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. Within this framework, the beginning of the Reformation came to be associated with the discovery of the Gospel.

In the epitaph, Ketelhut himself is depicted – much like Martin Luther – holding a book and a scroll. The evocation of Luther's achievements, his opposition to indulgences and his translation of the Bible would have carried particular weight shortly after the reformer's death. Yet, unlike Luther, Ketelhut published no books, let alone a Bible translation. The function of this representation lay not in biographical accuracy, but in its symbolic role. This aligns with Bruce Gordon's observation that 'memory in the Reformation could serve as a key to the building of a defined church [...] The Reformation was a culture of "ritual repetition"'¹⁹. In this sense, the epitaph did not record the past as much as it actively shaped its meaning within a confessional framework.

Ketelhut belonged to a group of preachers emerging from the monastic milieu, although little is known about his youth and education²⁰. Before arriving in Stralsund, he lived in the Premonstratensian (Norbertine) monastery at Belbuck (Pol. Białoboki). Under Abbot Johann Boldewan, it became one of the earliest centres of Reformation sympathies in the region²¹. Closely associated with Belbuck was Johannes Bugenhagen, rector of a nearby school in Treptow an der Rega (Pol. Trzebiatów). News of Luther's theses on indulgences likely reached this circle at an early stage. In 1518, Ketelhut, together with another Pomeranian, the Franciscan friar Johannes Knipstro, participated in a debate

¹⁸ Christine MAGIN, *DI 102, Inschriften Stadt Stralsund*, Nr. 177(†), [in:] *Deutsche Inschriften Online*, <https://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0238-di102g018k0017706> [accessed online 12 May 2026].

¹⁹ Bruce GORDON, *History and Memory*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformation*, ed. Ulinka RUBLACK, Oxford 2016, p. 774.

²⁰ For more on Ketelhut, see Martin WEHRMANN, *Christian Ketelhut*, *Pommersche Jahrbücher*, Bd. 28: 1934, pp. 27–56.

²¹ Walter PAAB, *Kloster Belbuck um die Wende des 16. Jahrhunderts*, *Baltische Studien. Neue Folge*, Bd. 16: 1912, pp. 44–50; Christoph EHRLICH, *Das Prämonstratenser Kloster Belbuck als eine Keimzelle der Reformation im südlichen Ostseeraum*, *Gdański Rocznik Ewangelicki*, vol. 11: 2017, pp. 149–157; Ulrich G. LEINSLE, *Die Prämonstratenser* (Geschichte der christlichen Orden), Stuttgart 2020, pp. 104–106.

at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder²². Thus, this milieu linked local actors in Pomerania to the earliest debates on the Reformation within the Holy Roman Empire.

From around 1520, Martin Luther's writings began to circulate within this monastic milieu. Bugenhagen – possibly under the influence of *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae*²³ – approached Luther for advice. Luther replied by sending him his treatise, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. In a handwritten dedication, he emphasised that a Christian required no external guidance in matters of conduct since faith itself provided direction²⁴. This suggests that Bugenhagen's concerns were not primarily doctrinal but practical, relating to monastic vows or clerical conduct. The question was less what to believe than how to live.

Interest in reforming religious life in Belbuck extended beyond the monastery walls, and the spread of Reformation sympathies eventually led to its dissolution in 1521²⁵. The dispersal of the monastic community only accelerated this process. As early as 1520, Abbot Boldewan – allegedly with the consent of Duke Bogislaw X and the bishop of Cammin (Pol. Kamień Pomorski) – sent several monks as preachers to neighbouring parishes²⁶. Ketelhut later recalled that he spent less than half a year in the monastery before being dispatched by the abbot to nearby Stolp (Pol. Słupsk)²⁷. After various experiences in Pomeranian towns, some of the former monks eventually arrived in Stralsund.

²² *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri (1517–1521)*, Tl. 1: *Das Gutachten des Prierias und weitere Schriften gegen Luthers Ablassthesen (1517–1518)*, hrsg. v. Peter FABISCH, Erwin ISELOH (*Corpus Catholicorum. Werke katholischer Schriftsteller im Zeitalter der Glaubensspaltung*, Bd. 41), Münster 1988, pp. 311–312.

²³ W. PAAP, *op.cit.*, p. 47, footnote 1.

²⁴ *Dr. Johannes Bugenhagens Briefwechsel*, hrsg. v. Otto VOGT, Stettin 1888, no. 3, p. 8: 'Christianus non indiget praeceptis morum. Fidei enim spiritus ducit eum ad omnia quae deus vult et fraterna exitig caritas'.

²⁵ Stefan MICHEL, *Die Verwendung des Kirchenguts und die Diskussion darüber im Schmalkaldischen Bund*, [in:] *Politik – Religion – Kommunikation. Die schmalkaldischen Bundestage als politische Gesprächsplattform*, hrsg. v. Jan M. LIES, Stefan MICHEL, unter Mitarb. v. Marion BECHTOLD-MAYER (*Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz*, Bd. 137), Göttingen 2022, pp. 131–146; Christoph OCKER, *Church Robbers and Reformers in Germany, 1525–1547* (*Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions*, vol. 114), Leiden–Boston 2006, pp. 74–83; Eike WOLGAST, *Hochstift und Reformation. Studien zur Geschichte der Reichskirche zwischen 1517 und 1648* (*Beiträge zur Geschichte der Reichskirche in der Neuzeit*, Bd. 16), Stuttgart 1995, pp. 69–71.

²⁶ Johann Boldewan to Johann Kurecke, Stettin, 27 January 1521, [in:] Friedrich L. VON MEDDEM, *Geschichte der Einführung der evangelischen Lehre im Herzogthum Pommern. Nebst einer Sammlung erläuternder Beilagen*, Greifswald 1837, appendix 1, pp. 76–77.

²⁷ Stadtarchiv Stralsund (hereinafter cited as StAS), Rep. 28, Nr. 41a; another copy in StAS, Hs 467; edited in *Johann Berckmann's Stralsundische Chronik und die noch vorhandenen Auszüge aus alten verloren gegangenen Stralsundischen Chroniken*, hrsg. v. Gottlieb Ch. F. MOHNIKE, Ernst H. ZOBEL, Stralsund 1833, pp. 253–278, here p. 272.

Hans (Johann) von Schwerin later recalled that Ketelhut spent Easter – 4 April 1523 – on his estate in Mecklenburg²⁸. Shortly after Easter, Schwerin brought Ketelhut to Stralsund without the knowledge of the town council. There, Ketelhut lodged with the merchant and cloth-dyer Johann Holländer.

In light of Ketelhut's own statements and later eyewitness testimony, the sequence of these events appears relatively well established. Yet despite this, during the trial, the town council repeatedly attempted to shift the date of the preachers' arrival to 1524²⁹. As Martin Wehrmann suggested, this may have constituted a deliberate strategy by the council to shorten the interval between the preachers' arrival and the riots of April 1525³⁰. In this way, the responsibility for the escalation of violence could be deflected from preachers. Thus, from an early stage, the history of their activities became an object of contention, shaped by competing interpretations of the Reformation.

From May 1523, Ketelhut and Hans (Johann) Kurecke preached and performed pastoral duties alongside the Catholic clergy. Ketelhut recalled his first sermon, delivered outside the town walls in front of St Jürgen Church, in a written defence composed around 1528³¹. Some witnesses who testified on behalf of the town a year later confirmed these events, while others attributed the sermon before St Jürgen Church to Kurecke³². Ketelhut and Kurecke were soon joined by other former monks from Belbuck and later by clerics³³. In Stralsund, they entered into marriage and gradually altered their appearance, adopting secular clothing and growing beards. Their outward appearance became increasingly secular, perhaps echoing the changing appearance of Luther himself, who had grown a beard in 1521–1522. These changes made reform visible in everyday life, in preaching and in social practice.

What, then, was the content of these sermons? Ketelhut's first three sermons were based on Matthew 11:28 ('Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden [...]'), John 16:23 ('Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name [...]'), and Mark 16:15 ('Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel [...]')³⁴.

²⁸ APS, SKR, sign. 1706, pp. 74–75. See also Jakob RUNGE, *Brevis designatio rerum eccles. Sub initium reformationis Evangelicae in Pomerania gestarum*, hrsg. v. Alfred UCKELEY, Baltische Studien. Neue Folge, Bd. 6: 1902, p. 54.

²⁹ APS, SKR, sign. 1705, pp. 19–20; J. G. L. KOSEGARTEN, *Verteidigungsschrift*, pp. 114, 119.

³⁰ Martin WEHRMANN, *Zur Reformationgeschichte Stralsunds*, Pommersche Jahrbücher, Bd. 6: 1905, p. 71.

³¹ StAS, Rep. 28, Nr. 41a; *Johann Berckmann's Stralsundische Chronik*, p. 267.

³² APS, SKR, sign. 1707, pp. 120, 137–138.

³³ Those were Heinrich Schlichttrull (Schlichtkrull, Slichttrul), Gregor Zeppelin, Gregor Pomerening (Pommerening), Jürgen Kempe, Henrich Sichermann, and Johann Lutkens, as mentioned in APS, SKR, sign. 1707, pp. 159, 251.

³⁴ StAS, Rep. 28, Nr. 41a; *Johann Berckmann's Stralsundische Chronik*, pp. 268–270.

Years later, Ketelhut emphasised that his inspiration was derived solely from Scripture. He presented what he described as the true meaning of Christ's sacrifice while criticising indulgences, the cult of relics, and forms of false piety. These initial sermons prompted the town council to issue a ban on preaching; yet, given the tense atmosphere, it proved difficult to enforce.

All Protestant witnesses who testified in favour of the town in 1529 emphasised that the sermons of the new preachers concerned only the Gospel and the 'pure Word of God', and that they were intended to restore peace in the town³⁵. Only a few witnesses provided more detailed accounts, and even fewer recalled hearing insults in the sermons. Nobleman Balthasar von Jas-mund stated that he had heard from Kurecke that Purgatory had been invented and did not exist, and that whatever God had not instituted should be uprooted – by which he understood human ordinances. Beyond this, however, he recalled no further contentious claims. He explicitly denied having heard that good works are harmful; on the contrary, he remembered that prayer and fasting were to be practised diligently. Regarding images, he recalled that they should not be worshipped, but had not heard that they ought to be forcibly removed or destroyed³⁶. A burgher from Rostock, Klaus (Clawes) Pasewalk, recalled that he had often heard the preachers speak disparagingly of the pope and the clergy, and claim that salvation could not be attained through prayer and fasting. Nevertheless, he noted that they did not reject these practices altogether³⁷. Formulated in 1529 by Protestant witnesses several years after the events, these testimonies suggest an emerging doctrinal coherence, although one still marked by significant ambiguities.

All testimonies emphasised the fact that the first sermon was delivered outside the town walls. In defending both the clergy and the municipal authorities against accusations of disturbing public order, this detail served to demonstrate that the initial sermon did not violate urban jurisdiction or civic peace. Thus, the beginning of preaching was not presented as an act of disobedience. Nor was it portrayed as an autonomous decision of the preachers; rather, it was framed as the result of a particular constellation of circumstances. Five years later, Ketelhut insisted that he had been compelled to speak out by the deplorable state of local pastoral care. Upon his arrival, he claimed to have been shocked by the incompetence of priests and monks and by widespread moral decay, manifested above all in concubinage. The sermons delivered at that time were said to condemn abuses but also to reinforce established authority – both

³⁵ APS, SKR, sign. 1707, pp. 67–69, 75, 80, 124, 135.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

that of the town council and that of the princes. As Ketelhut put it: 'Although we have set ourselves to remove the abominable idolatry and abuse – which were so clearly and manifestly contrary to God's Word – we have nevertheless always insisted at the same time that this should not be done by every man, but rather by an authority ordained by God (just as Ezekiel, Josiah, and Jehu, who destroyed idolatry, yet were all kings), and that such action does not pertain to the common multitude'³⁸. Reform was presented not as a rupture but as a necessary and orderly response to perceived abuses; within this framework, it was explicitly dissociated from the violent plunder of churches on 10 April 1525.

THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE

The arrival of itinerant preachers in Stralsund in 1523 provoked an immediate response from representatives of the Catholic Church. Their interventions, which developed over time, reflect the escalating nature of the conflict. The head of the town's ecclesiastical administration, Hippolytus von Steinwehr, mobilised a range of measures. In the spring and summer of 1523, he addressed the dukes of Mecklenburg and the cathedral chapter in Schwerin; in autumn, he turned to the Pomeranian dukes and, in 1524, to the authorities of Stralsund³⁹. In 1526, he submitted a formal complaint to the emperor⁴⁰. His complaint was supported by the rulers of Pomerania, Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, Brunswick, Saxony, the Palatinate, the archbishop of Mainz, and the bishops of Cammin and Schwerin⁴¹. Steinwehr's petitions initiated proceedings before the Imperial Chamber Court, where the case dragged on for years⁴².

The growing catalogue of accusations documenting the activities of the Reformation preachers and their supporters produced a distinctive account of the development of urban reform. The evolution of these charges also reflected changing perceptions of the Reformation itself. For this reason, both the earliest accusations and their later reformulations merit close attention.

The first recorded complaint, dated 21 June 1523, refers back to earlier protests likely formulated shortly after 10 May, when Ketelhut delivered his

³⁸ StAS, Rep. 28, Nr. 41a; *Johann Berckmann's Stralsundische Chronik*, p. 258: 'Den wiewol wir geraden haben, die greuliche abgötterei und mißbrauch – so hell und offenbar wieder Gottes wortt weren – abzustellen, haben wir doch allweg darneben getrieben, das solches nicht durch her omnes sollte geschehenn, sunder durch eine oberkeit so vom Gott geordnet (gleicherweise alß Ezech., Josias, Jehu, welche abgötteres haben verstöret, aber alle kunige gewesen seint) und stunde solche that keinen gemeinen hauffen an'.

³⁹ StAS, Rep. 28, Nr. 40b; *Johann Berckmann's Stralsundische Chronik*, pp. 363–373.

⁴⁰ APS, SKR, sign. 1706, pp. 245–307, 324–334.

⁴¹ Copies in APS, SKR, sign. 1703, pp. 86–123.

⁴² APS, SKR, sign. 1703, pp. 1–64 (minutes of the proceedings of the judges of the Imperial Chamber Court in Greifswald, 1526–1530); APS, SKR, sign. 1706, pp. 199–201.

first sermon⁴³. Steinwehr described the newcomers as runaway monks ('vorloopenen losen monneke') who, through their preaching, were said to incite the 'common people' ('der Gemeine Mann'), 'stirring up the populace through their sermons' ('prediken vnd dem gemenen manne invilden').

Steinwehr reiterated these accusations in a letter to the Pomeranian dukes dated 21 September 1523, expanding them with further evidence of the alleged harmful influence of the itinerant preachers⁴⁴. The runaway monks were now labelled 'Martinians', 'Lutherans', and 'heretical preachers' ('Martinische, Luterische und ketzerische Prediger'). Although the document was clearly initiated by Steinwehr, it was also signed by other clergy from Stralsund's churches: Johannes Otto, Gottfried Guthe, and Johannes Tetzlaff. It was addressed to Duke Bogislaw and his sons Barnim and Georg, who were soon to assume power in Pomerania following the duke's death on 5 October 1523.

The grievances articulated by the clergy conformed to well-established patterns of late medieval and early modern anti-clerical conflict. Johannes Otto, assistant parish priest of St Nicholas Church, pointed to a long-standing dispute with Christoph Lorbeer. Born around 1484, Lorbeer belonged to the town's elite as the son of the merchant Olaf Lorbeer and the son-in-law of Zabel Oseborn, a long-serving burgomaster of Stralsund⁴⁵. In 1524, Lorbeer joined the Council of Forty-Eight ('48er Ausschuss'), a newly established body representing the burgher opposition. Its members, drawn primarily from wealthy and middling merchants and artisans, sought greater access to political power in Stralsund. Among its most active figures were Roloff Möller, Franz Wessel, Hermann Meyer, and Bartholomäus Buchow, all associated with the elite of the cloth-makers' guild. From 1523 onwards, they increasingly supported the preachers; following the disturbances of 1525, they were co-opted into the town council⁴⁶.

In September 1523, Otto claimed that he had been assaulted by Lorbeer after a Catholic cleric from Rostock, Detlef Denckwardi, had publicly criticised him⁴⁷. Lorbeer threatened that, if the priests mentioned him again, he would

⁴³ Georg Ch. F. LISCH, *Brief-Sammlung*, Jahrbücher des Vereins für Mecklenburgische Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Bd. 3: 1838, p. 181.

⁴⁴ APS, SKR, sign. 1706, pp. 140–152; published in M. WEHRMANN, *Zur Reformationsgeschichte*, pp. 57–65.

⁴⁵ Theodor PYL, *Lorbeer, Christoph*, [in:] *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie*, Bd. 19, Leipzig 1884, p. 169; Johannes SCHILDHAUER, *Soziale, politische und religiöse Auseinandersetzungen in den Hansestädten Stralsund, Rostock und Wismar im ersten Drittel des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Abhandlungen zur Handels- und Sozialgeschichte, Bd. 2), Weimar 1959, pp. 104, 200, 212, 265.

⁴⁶ J. SCHILDHAUER, *op.cit.*, pp. 248–249.

⁴⁷ Karl Ch. F. KRAUSE, *Denckwardi Detlev*, [in:] *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie*, Bd. 4, Leipzig 1876, pp. 725–726.

resort to violence, 'driving them from the pulpits, from before the altars, and out of the churches with halberds, knives and clubs'⁴⁸. Accompanied by an armed group, he appeared in the town's churches and disrupted Mass.

Otto further alleged that a particularly severe outbreak of violence had already occurred on 2 February 1523, before the arrival of Ketelhut and Kurecke. Therefore, the conflict had deep roots and took on various forms. Lorbeer openly disregarded clerical prerogatives. One demonstrative gesture was the burial of his mother, which he arranged in the Franciscan Monastery of St John without the knowledge of the clergy. His father, for his part, removed his endowments from the churches: 'All the kneelers, crosses, images, and other items [...] he took from the church into his own house and locked them away in chests, to my great shame and to the shame, mockery, and detriment of the Church, and to the great dishonour of Almighty God'⁴⁹. Both the burial without clerical consent and the removal of endowed objects constituted significant symbolic acts. They conveyed the message that Lorbeer and his associates treated churches as urban property under the authority of the inhabitants rather than as the possession of the Catholic Church.

A similar account was provided by Johannes Tetzlaff, a cleric from St James Church. He reported that the runaway monks, apostates, Martinians, and Lutheran preachers were received into private homes and soon initiated a wave of attacks against the Catholic clergy. They were said to have hurled insults – calling priests 'antichrists, oil-mongers, hypocrites, and liars' and directing their attacks against 'the entire order of the Christian Church, the pope, the emperor, the clergy, and secular authority'⁵⁰. They allegedly called on their supporters to expel Catholic clergy from the town and even to 'wash their hands in their

⁴⁸ APS, SKR, sign. 1706, p. 142: 'aus der Kirchen mit Hellenparten, Messern und Spiessen stossen und jagen, darzu ich mich freilich verlassen sollte etc.'

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 144: 'Desgleichen nam sein Vatter Oloff Lorber alle Heilthumb, alle Bethe, Kreutz, Bilde und anders, was dartzu horte, mir und der Kirchen zu grossem Hone, Spot und Schaden in grosser Behonschlagung des almechtigen Gots aus der Kirchen in sein eigen Hawsz und schlosz das hinweg in sein Schlosse und Kisten.'

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 145: 'die Priester und Munche van irem Predigen und angehobenem Messen verjagt und den Bapst, alle die Seinen, Bischof und Kirchern, unsz alle und alle Geistlichkeit, alle Tag und Stundt wider Got, Recht, Fuge und alle Pilligkeit öffentlich und gröblich schelten und ausschreiben lassen vor Entcristen, Olii Verkaufier, Heuchler, Lugner, Boszwicht, Vorleiter, Gotlosze und Verfurer der Lewte und sich gegen die gantze Ordnung christlicher Kirchen, Pabst, Keyser, alle Geistlichkeit und Oberkeit erheben und gantz schentlich schelten, verfluchen, klarlich predigen und aussagen lassen, das der Pabst und alle Geistlichkeit, Orden, Weihung, Messen, Vigilien, Seelmesz, Beicht, Busse, Ölung, alle Sakramenta, alle beschriebne Rechte, Menschen Gsatz, alle gute Wercke, Gots Geben und Dienst, Kirchen und Kloster und Fegfewr, auch viel andere unsers cristlichen Glaubens Artickel nur Teufels verdampft, betrieglich Pfaffen erdicht Dingk und nichts ist.'

blood⁵¹. The carnival season of 1523 became a particularly prominent arena for these attacks, when anti-clerical songs were sung and, as witnesses later testified, anti-ecclesiastical performances were staged⁵².

These calls elicited a response among sympathisers. Tetzlaff reported that he was attacked by a group of forty to fifty men and narrowly escaped without serious injury. Catholic clergy were assaulted and abused in the streets, while nuns were insulted with the epithet 'heavenly whores' ('Himmelhuren'). The windows of the clerics' residences were smashed, and acts of violence extended to the churches. There, 'Martinians' were said to attack religious images, demanding their removal and, in some cases, destroying them. They smeared the 'noses and eyes' of sacred figures with filth ('Dreck'), cut off their heads, or threw the statues into mud or fire. Thus, violence changed from verbal and performative forms to direct attacks on persons, properties and sacred objects.

In addition to material damage, Catholic clergy reported a general collapse of reverence for religion. Whereas the faithful had previously knelt and uncovered their heads at the sight of sacraments, they were now said to display contempt or even shout mockery. Even 'upon the altar [...] human excrement and other shameful things were smeared, things of which it is difficult to write appropriately'⁵³. One witness claimed that baptismal fonts were filled with excrement and that 'he himself unwittingly dipped his fingers into it'⁵⁴. Thus, the sacraments were described as 'despised, mocked, and desecrated', with some claiming they were nothing but consecrated bread, and even asserting that 'our Lord God would not descend from heaven into the host merely because a priest speaks the words of consecration over it'⁵⁵.

AN ECHO FROM WITTENBERG

The accusations formulated in September 1523 referred, in part, to a period preceding the arrival of the itinerant preachers whose presence may nonetheless have intensified existing conflicts. From the perspective of the Catholic clergy, the Reformation did not introduce entirely new tensions but rather acted

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 146: 'auch die Hende in irem Blut waschen soll'.

⁵² Songs in APS, SKR, sign. 1703; printed in E. H. ZÖBER, op.cit., passim.

⁵³ APS, SKR, sign. 1706, p. 151: 'Auch das, dem almechtigen Gott sei geklagt und on allen Zweifel will ungestraft nit pleiben, auf die Altar und Altarstein, da man den waren heiligen Leichnam unsern Herrn Jesu Cristi verhandelt, menschen Feulnuss und schentlicher, da es füglich zu schreiben steht, gethan und geschmirt'.

⁵⁴ APS, SKR, sign. 1704, p. 313; APS, SKR, sign. 1708, p. 2: 'weywaßer steine vmkeren, kot da in thuen, vnd selbst, vnbedacht mithem finger da ingestippet hat'.

⁵⁵ APS, SKR, sign. 1706, p. 151: 'das höchst Sacrament unser aller fristen einich Cleinot, den Leichnam unsern Herrn Jesu Cristi und alle andere Sacramenta veracht, bespott und gesagt, das es geweicht Brot ist, ja unser Herre Gott wollte umb des Pfaffens Wort willen herab vam Himel in die Hostien kommen etc'.

as a catalyst, amplifying long-standing conflicts between secular and ecclesiastical spheres. In this sense, reform was perceived not as a coherent doctrinal programme but as a set of practices, attitudes and rhetorical forms associated with Luther. Notably absent from these accusations, however, are references to printed polemics that animated religious debate across the Empire. Stralsund possessed no printing press that the preachers could have used to disseminate their sermons. As a result, religious controversy remained largely confined to the spoken word, and the reported content of sermons in the accusations followed familiar and highly conventional patterns. Indeed, even the most sensational charge – that the preachers called for ‘washing one’s hands in blood’, which appears at first glance to be a verbatim quotation from the sermons of Ketelhut or Kurecke – can be traced back not to local preaching but to Martin Luther himself. This suggests that the language of accusation drew not only on local experience but also on broader discursive repertoires circulating within the Empire.

Accusations of inciting bloody rebellion accompanied Luther from the very outset of his public activity. As early as 1518, Johannes Tetzel and Konrad Wimpina, who debated Luther’s theses at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder, remarked that certain theses could only have been formulated by someone ‘thirsting for the blood of his brothers’⁵⁶. This accusation did not refer to any explicit call for violence but rather to Thesis 75, in which Luther criticised indulgence preachers for claiming that the power of indulgences could absolve even a person who had violated the Mother of God (‘*Dei genitricem violasset*’). Thus, the alleged ‘thirst for blood’ denotes not a literal appeal to violence but rather an incomprehensible and vindictive impulse attributed to the Wittenberg friar.

Luther first used the metaphor of ‘washing one’s hands in blood’ in 1520, responding to anti-Reformation polemic by Silvester Prierias (Mazzolini). Prierias, one of Luther’s earliest opponents and a participant in the Roman proceedings against him, published his critique in 1519 as an *epitome* of a more extensive work⁵⁷. The publication prompted Luther to reprint the tract in Wittenberg,

⁵⁶ *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri*, Tl. 1, pp. 334, 314: ‘fratrum suorum sanguinem sitire’.

⁵⁷ Silvester PRIERIAS, *Epitoma responsionis ad Martinum Luther*, [in:] *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri (1517–1521)*, Tl. 1: *Das Gutachten des Prierias und weitere Schriften gegen Luthers Ablassthesen (1517–1518)*, hrsg. v. Peter FABISCH, Erwin ISELOH (Corpus Catholicorum. Werke katholischer Schriftsteller im Zeitalter der Glaubensspaltung, Bd. 41), Münster 1988, pp. 129–190; Michael TAVUZZI, *Prierias: The Life and Works of Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, 1456–1527* (Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, no. 16), Durham, NC 1997, pp. 104–115, here p. 106.

accompanied by his own polemical commentary⁵⁸. The edition was completed on 25 June 1520⁵⁹.

At the time of writing these comments, Luther was already preparing one of his most influential polemical works, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, published two months later in August 1520⁶⁰. In the preface to his response to Prierias, Luther introduced a central motif that would also shape this forthcoming bestseller: since the Roman Curia had become a 'synagogue of Satan', the reform of religious life had to be undertaken by the laity. Both in his commentary on Prierias and in *Adelsschrift*, Luther made extensive use of martial metaphors likely intended to resonate with a lay audience. In the afterword (*Ad lectorem*), however, this rhetoric assumed an especially radical form: 'It seems to me that if the fury of the Romanists continues to grow in this way, no remedy will remain except that the emperor, kings, and princes [...] If we punish thieves with the gallows, robbers with the sword, and heretics with fire, why should we not all the more attack with every weapon the teachers of perdition – these cardinals, these popes, and the whole rabble of Roman Sodom that ceaselessly corrupts God's Church – and wash our hands in their blood, as if thereby we might free ourselves and our children from the common and most dangerous conflagration?'⁶¹. The metaphor of washing one's hands in blood went far beyond the critique of papal and curial abuses articulated in Luther's other writings from this period. Comparing the preface and commentary with the afterword, Martin Brecht even suggested that 'much speaks for the assumption that the afterword was written by Philipp Melanchthon rather than Luther'⁶².

⁵⁸ VD16, M 1753; published in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 6, Weimar 1888, pp. 323–352.

⁵⁹ *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri*, Tl. 1, p. 130.

⁶⁰ *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung*, hrsg. v. Thomas KAUFMANN (Kommentare zu Schriften Luthers, Bd. 3), Tübingen 2014.

⁶¹ *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Bd. 6, p. 347: 'Mihi vero videtur, si sic pergat furor Romanistarum, nullum reliquum esse remedium quam ut Imperator, reges et principes, vi et armis accincti, aggrediantur has pestes orbis terrarum remque non iam verbis sed ferro decernant. Quid enim lallant perditii homines, etiam comuni sensu privati, quam id quod Antichristus facturus praedicatur, ac si nos insensatores quam trunci sunt habeant? Si fures furca, si latores gladio, si haereticos igne plectimus, cur non magis Magistros perditionis, hos Cardinales, hos Papas et totam istam Romanae Zodomae colluviam, quae Ecclesiam dei sine fine corrumpit, omnibus armis impetimus et manus nostras in sanguine istorum lavamus, tamquam a communi et omnium perdiculosissimo incendio nos nostrosque liberaturi.'

⁶² Martin BRECHT, *Curavimus enim Babylonem, et non est sanata*, [in:] *Reformatio ecclesiae. Beiträge zu kirchlichen Reformbemühungen von der Alten Kirche bis zur Neuzeit. Festgabe für Erwin Iserloh*, hrsg. v. Remigius BÄUMER, Paderborn 1980, p. 594: 'M.E. spricht insgesamt mehr für Melanchthon als Verfasser des Nachworts als für Luther.'

The radicalism of this formulation was immediately capitalised on by opponents of the emerging Reformation. Contemporary polemicists attributed the entire publication, including the afterword, unambiguously to Luther. As early as December 1520, Hieronymus Emser cited the passage in his polemic against *To the Christian Nobility*⁶³. In response, Luther insisted that the phrase about washing hands in blood was merely a rhetorical figure intended to expose the paradoxical consequences of Rome's own position: 'If heretics are burned, why should we not all the more attack the pope and his party with the sword and wash our hands in their blood?'⁶⁴. Luther regarded the burning of heretics and the killing of Christians as contrary to the Gospel. Emser and other Catholic theologians, however, either failed or refused to recognise the irony embedded in this provocation.

Despite Luther's objections, the phrase 'washing one's hands in blood' retained its polemical force. It reappeared in the Edict of Worms of 1521, in which Emperor Charles V, enumerating Luther's offences, noted that the reformer 'not only shows no respect whatsoever for the clerical office and estate, but even dares to exhort laypeople to wash their hands in the blood of priests'⁶⁵.

⁶³ Hieronymus EMSER, *Wider das unchristliche Buch Martin Luthers an den deutschen Adel*, [in:] *Flugschriften gegen die Reformation (1518–1524)*, hrsg. und bearb. v. Adolf LAUBE, unter Mitarb. v. Ulman WEIß, Berlin 1997, pp. 229–269; *Luther und Emser. Ihre Streitschriften aus dem Jahre 1521*, Bd. 1, hrsg. v. Ludwig ENDERS, Halle a.S. 1890, p. 16.

⁶⁴ *Auf das überchristlich, übergeistlich und überkünstlich Buch Bocks Emser zu Leipzig Antwort. Darin auch Murnars seines Gesellen gedacht wird*, [in:] *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 7, Weimar 1931, pp. 614–688, here pp. 645–646: 'Emßer leugt aber mal, das ich wolt der leyen hend ynn er Priester blutt gewaschen werden: eyttel fewr sich sucht seyn heylige priesterschaft und Christlich hebe und wenn ich todt were, durfft er solch lügen für warheit außgeben, wie denn Huß geschehen ist. Ich hab also geschrieben widder den Sylvester per Contentionem, wie der edle Poet und Rhetor wol weyß: Wenn man ketzer vorprennet, warumb nit viel mehr wir Bapst und seyne sectenn mit dem schwerdt angreyffen und unser hend yn yhrem blut waschen, wo er das leret, das Sylvester schreybt, Nemlich das die heylige schrift yhr crafft vom Bapst habe. Als mir nu nit gefellet ketzer brennen, also auch nit eynen Christen todten, weyß wol, das nit Evangelisch ist: ich hab antzeygt, was sie würdig weren, wo ketzer des fewrs würdig sein. Es ist auch mt nott euch mit dem schwerdt angreyffen. Der und weltlich gewalt kan solchen weyblingen und kindischem volck woll mit eynem brieffe und befelh radten, ßo er nur tyrannisch spiegelfechten unnd falschen bann voracht'.

⁶⁵ *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri (1517–1521)*, Tl. 2: *Vom Augsburger Reichstag 1518 bis zum Wormser Edikt 1521*, hrsg. v. Peter FABISCH, Erwin ISELOH (Corpus Catholicorum. Werke katholischer Schriftsteller im Zeitalter der Glaubensspaltung, Bd. 42), Münster 1991, p. 518: 'Er haltet auch nit allain pristerlich ampt und orden auff das allergeringeste, sonder understeet auch, die weltliche layschen personen zu bewegen, ir hende in der prister blut zu waschen', p. 519: 'Porro Sacerdotalem ordinem et per quod sacrosanctum Christi corpus sanguinisque conficitur, divinum illud munus Claviumque Coelestium potestatem non solum vilissimi pendit Lutherus et laicis, perversisque atque adeo foeminis ipsis communia facit, sed et eosem laicos ad lavandas sibi in sacerdotum sanguine manus incitat'.

From the promulgation of the Edict onward, the formulation entered Catholic imaginaries as a shorthand for the dangers allegedly emanating from Wittenberg theology. Following Thomas Kaufmann, it can be understood as part of the media repertoire that shaped perceptions of the Peasants' War, even before its onset. In the case of Stralsund, the evocation of this metaphor in Catholic accusations formed part of the same discursive pattern, alongside references to 'Lutherans' or 'Martinians'. Such identification emerged less through systematic theology than through the circulation and reinterpretation of shared rhetorical forms, above all, in language and metaphor.

DUCAL AND EPISCOPAL RESPONSES

The complaints submitted by Steinwehr in 1523 had immediate political consequences. One of their most significant effects was the first anti-Reformation edict issued in Pomerania, promulgated by Duke Bogislaw X. Raised within the framework of late medieval piety, the Pomeranian ruler had, until then, displayed a certain openness to new religious ideas⁶⁶. He visited Wittenberg on three occasions during Luther's years there, attending his sermons or perhaps even confessing to the reformer. His response to the earliest public appearances of reforming preachers likewise appears ambivalent. According to later Protestant historiography, Bogislaw listened sympathetically to one of the first evangelical sermons delivered in Szczecin in 1523⁶⁷. Reports arriving from Stralsund, however, prompted him to issue the anti-Reformation edict⁶⁸.

Bogislaw's edict, dated 24 September 1523, came ten days before his death and three days after Steinwehr had personally presented his complaint in Szczecin. Addressed to the town council of Stralsund, the duke, acting as territorial lord, called upon the municipal authorities to enforce the law. In practice, this meant expelling itinerant preachers and protecting the Catholic clergy. The edict explicitly named two preachers active in Stralsund – Kurecke and Ketelhut – repeatedly referring to them as 'runaway monks' ('lose verlauffner munich'). They were accused of spreading the teachings of Luther and his associates – doctrines said to threaten unrest ('unbillige und unleidliche Aufrur') and even to transform the ecclesiastical order within the town. Existing law, the duke stressed, did not permit such changes. Rather, secular authorities were

⁶⁶ Martin WEHRMANN, *Herzog Bogislaw X. von Pommern und Martin Luther*, Monatsblätter der Gesellschaft für Pommersche Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Jg. 45: 1931, Nr. 4, pp. 57–62; idem, *Von Luthers Beziehungen zu Pommern*, Pommersche Jahrbücher, Bd. 18: 1917, pp. 109–129; Alfred UCKELEY, *Reformationsgeschichte der Stadt Greifswald*, Pommersche Jahrbücher, Bd. 4: 1903, p. 36.

⁶⁷ Daniel CRAMER, *Das Grosse Pommerische Kirchen Chronicon*, Stettin 1603, p. 54; J. RUNGE, op.cit., p. 54; A. UCKELEY, op.cit., p. 37.

⁶⁸ APS, SKR, sign. 1706, pp. 152–154.

obliged to defend the rightful clergy unless and until the pope, emperor, king, prince, or the wider Christian community reached a decision to the contrary.

In contrast to the dramatic and often apocalyptic language emerging from Stralsund itself, the duke's edict appears strikingly restrained. Bogislaw neither invoked the Edict of Worms nor papal bulls directed against Luther. He did not label the reformer a 'heretic' or 'outlaw', nor did he describe the preachers as apostates. His mandate belongs to a broader group of early anti-Lutheran ordinances issued between 1519 and 1520, when the positions of both Rome and Luther had not yet fully hardened. The value invoked by the duke was not doctrinal orthodoxy but the maintenance of public peace and the existing order, perceived as endangered by the appearance of new preachers.

The first edict was followed by a series of interventions meticulously enumerated in the materials later submitted to the Imperial Chamber Court. On 24 September 1523, Bogislaw instructed Steinwehr to assume control over the town's churches and to ensure the protection of the clergy⁶⁹. Shortly after Bogislaw's death, his sons Georg and Barnim addressed the Franciscan guardian, ordering him to restore discipline within the monastery and forbidding the alienation of monastic silver⁷⁰. On 22 June 1524, the brothers explicitly recalled their father's edict⁷¹. The town council was instructed to prohibit sermons by itinerant preachers, yet such sermons continued. As a result, the dukes argued, disregard for the Mass increased, and attacks on Catholic priests and nuns persisted. Therefore, they once again demanded that the town expel the runaway monks. On 21 July 1524, now invoking imperial mandates – specifically the decision of the Diet of Nuremberg to enforce the Edict of Worms – the dukes summoned the municipal authorities to Szczecin⁷².

At first glance, the continuation of the anti-Reformation policy by Bogislaw's sons can appear surprising. The younger of the two, Barnim, studied under Luther in Wittenberg between 1518 and 1520⁷³. Upon his return to Szczecin on 20 October 1520, he wrote to Luther, thanking him for a letter and a book and assuring him of his support in the conflict with the Roman Curia⁷⁴. Since Luther had just published *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae*, it is generally assumed that this was the work sent to the duke's son.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 154–155.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 204.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 155–157.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 157–159.

⁷³ *Album Academiae Vitebergensis ab a. Ch. MDII usque ad a. MDLX*, vol. 1, ed. Carolus E. FOERSTEMANN, Lipsiae 1841, pp. 72, 80; A. UCKELEY, op.cit., p. 38.

⁷⁴ Barnim to Luther, Stettin, 20 October 1520, [in:] *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel*, Bd. 2, Weimar 1931, pp. 203–204.

A similar constellation in which dynastic interests intersected with religious alignments can be observed in the relationship between Stralsund and Mecklenburg. From the outset of the conflict, Steinwehr directed his complaints to the ducal court of Mecklenburg and to the bishop of Schwerin, to whose diocese Stralsund's churches belonged. Like Barnim, Duke Henry of Mecklenburg sympathised with the emerging Reformation as early as 1523 and maintained direct contact with Luther from 1524 onward. In May 1524, Luther confided to Georg Spalatin that he had already received two requests from the rulers of Mecklenburg to send them evangelical preachers⁷⁵.

Neither Barnim of Pomerania nor Henry of Mecklenburg perceived any contradiction between maintaining close personal ties with Luther and issuing anti-Reformation edicts. Cultivating connections with Wittenberg did not imply acceptance of conflict within parishes or tolerance of anti-clerical violence. From the perspective of the Pomeranian rulers, opposition to preachers supported by the town council could also serve as a means of asserting territorial authority over a recalcitrant town. Since 1523, the dukes had unsuccessfully sought homage and an oath of allegiance from the authorities of Stralsund. In March 1524, they were even denied entry into the town⁷⁶. The dispute was resolved only in April 1525, when the conflict within the town reached its most dramatic phase⁷⁷.

COSTLY *KIRCHENBRECHEN*

Despite the growing number of complaints and the proliferation of anti-Reformation edicts, Stralsund witnessed the events later described as *Kirchenbrechen* on 10 April 1525. On the Monday following Palm Sunday, disturbances erupted in St Nicholas Church and soon spread to the Franciscan Monastery of St John, the Bridgettine Convent of St Bridget, and the Dominican Convent of St Catherine. In an attempt to restore order, the town council appointed a municipal guard during the night and demanded the return of looted property. Two days later, on 12 April, supporters of the Reformation were incorporated into the town council and even admitted to the circle of burgomasters. The perpetrators of the unrest were granted amnesty, while freedom to preach the Gospel was proclaimed – effectively signalling the town's alignment with the Reformation. On the following day, the majority of Catholic clergy left Stralsund. Of those who remained, some joined the Protestant camp, while

⁷⁵ Luther to Georg Spalatin, [Wittenberg], 11 May 1524, [in:] *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel*, Bd. 3, Weimar 1933, pp. 291–292; see also *ibid.*, pp. 118–119, 323–324.

⁷⁶ J. SCHILDHAUER, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

⁷⁷ Martin WEHRMANN, *Geschichte von Pommern*, Bd. 2: *Bis zur Gegenwart*, Gotha 1906, p. 21.

only a few continued their pastoral activities in secret. Several months later, on 5 November 1525, the town council adopted a document drafted by Johannes Äpinus that regulated the status of itinerant preachers, thereby transforming the outcome of the unrest into a new institutional order⁷⁸.

The *Kirchenbrechen* occurred at the height of the German Peasants' War. Its outbreak appeared to confirm, in a dramatic fashion, the accusations long levelled by Catholic polemicists against Luther and his followers. In 1525, the phrase 'washing one's hands in blood' acquired renewed and ominous resonance. By challenging ecclesiastical hierarchy, Luther was now portrayed as having encouraged rebellion not only against the Church but against all authority and the social order itself. Hieronymus Emser returned to Luther's notorious words of 1520, accusing him not only of instigating the peasants' revolt but also of betraying its ideals. Like Pilate, Luther had washed his hands, condemning those who had taken his earlier calls seriously. Thus, Emser put into Luther's mouth a devastating indictment of the rebels: 'All those who take part in this, surrendering life and property, who wash their hands in blood, destroy collegiate churches and monasteries, and stab monks and priests to death – this he wrote publicly and zealously encouraged'⁷⁹.

In another polemical work attributing responsibility for the Peasants' War to Luther, Emser deliberately employed the same 'bloody' imagery to describe the catastrophe: 'It is not the fault of canon law or the Holy Mass that God in these times sends upon us Germans so many errors, so much wrath, punishment, and plague that [...] we ourselves set fire to our own homeland, burn it, devastate it, and wash our hands in our own blood'⁸⁰. In this reading, the blame lay squarely with Luther.

From the perspective of the complaints continually submitted by Steinwehr, the attack of April 1525 appeared not as a rupture but as a continuation

⁷⁸ *Die Stralsunder Kirchen- und Schulordnung von 1525*, mit Beiträgen v. Norbert BUSKE, Heiner LÜCK, Dirk SCHLEINERT (Beiträge zur pommerschen Landes-, Kirchen- und Kunstgeschichte, Bd. 20), Schwerin 2017.

⁷⁹ Hieronymus EMSER, *Der Bock tritt frei auf diesen Plan*, [in:] *Flugschriften gegen die Reformation (1518–1524)*, hrsg. und bearb. v. Adolf LAUBE, unter Mitarb. v. Ulman WEIß, Berlin 1997, p. 136: 'All, die dartzu thon leyb und gut // Und ire hend waschen ym blut, // Stifftkirchen, closter gar zurbrechen // Und monch und pffaffen zu tod stechen, // Das hat er öffentlich gescriben // Und vleyssig darzu angetriben.'

⁸⁰ Hieronymus EMSER, *Wie Luther in seinen Büchern zum Aufruhr getrieben hat*, [in:] *Flugschriften der Bauernkriegszeit*, hrsg. v. Adolf LAUBE, Hans W. SEIFFERT, Berlin 1978, p. 356: 'Das der almechtig ewig Got zu disen unsern getzeyten so vil irthumbs, räch, straff und plagen über uns Tewtschen ausschut und verhenget, das wyr (die sust nyemant überwinden kan) einander selbst überweltigen, unszer eygen Vaterland antzunden, verbrennen, verheren und die hend yn unserm eigen blut waschen, ist nit des canons noch der heiligen mesz schuld.'

of earlier conflicts. In subsequent petitions, the cleric added increasingly detailed accounts of the persecution suffered by Catholic clergy. Neither the arrival of Ketelhut and Kurecke nor their first sermons, nor even the riots of 1525 themselves, occupied a central place in these complaints. Instead, emphasis was placed on the sustained confrontation between the Catholic clergy and the town's elites. Particular attention was devoted to clashes with the local elite, which had recently gained access to power through the newly established assembly of the Forty-Eight. According to these accounts, the agents of these attacks were the 'common man' ('der Gemeine Mann') – a figure that enjoyed a remarkable career in Reformation polemic. It was the 'common man', incited by preachers and encouraged by the town council, who attacked priests, monks and nuns as well as looted churches and monasteries.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that the culmination of Steinwehr's complaints took the form of a detailed calculation of damages and a demand for compensation. As early as 1523, he estimated that the destruction and desecration of churches amounted to 30,000 Pomeranian gulden, or 90,000 Stralsund marks ('mark sundisch')⁸¹. Even for the prosperous Baltic port town, this was an enormous sum, far exceeding the scale of ordinary urban transactions. It corresponded to the value of several dozen houses in Stralsund, dozens of ships, hundreds of horses, tens of thousands of sheep, and vast quantities of staple goods, such as herring and cod⁸². By comparison, a judicial verdict issued by the ducal chancery cost only one to two gulden⁸³.

THE DEFENCE OF THE TOWN

The accusations outlined above compelled the municipal authorities to adopt a formal position. The Stralsund preachers also presented their response. On 25 January 1528, they submitted an apology to the town council outlining their account of the beginnings of the Reformation in the town. The core of their defence was a demonstrative respect for authority and social order. Their preaching, they insisted, bore no relation to the disturbances of 1525. The riots were said to have occurred accidentally as the result of an unfortunate convergence of circumstances and human folly rather than deliberate agitation.

⁸¹ Rudolf BIEDERSTEDT, *Münzen, Gewichte und Masse in Vorpommern im 16. Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur historischen Metrologie der südlichen Ostseeküste*, Baltische Studien. Neue Folge, Bd. 80: 1994, pp. 44–51.

⁸² Estimation based on Rudolf BIEDERSTEDT, *Löhne und Preise in Vorpommern 1500 bis 1627*, Schwerin 2005.

⁸³ Radosław GAZIŃSKI, Paweł GUT, *Organizacja i personel kancelarii ksiąg pomorskich w czasach nowożytnych*, Studia Źródłoznawcze, t. 62: 2024, pp. 63–74.

The town council articulated its own version of events, presenting itself as caught 'inter sacrum et saxum'⁸⁴. Positioned between sacred and secular powers, it claimed to have maintained neutrality in the conflict between the new preachers and the old clergy while striving to preserve peace within the town walls⁸⁵. According to this account, the unrest was caused not by the reformers but by Catholic clergy, who, unable to ground their sermons in Scripture, attacked the evangelical preachers and thus became the 'seminarium et origo totius tumultus'⁸⁶. It was they, the council argued, who incited the populace against the municipal authorities and even threatened bloodshed⁸⁷. The events of April 1525 were accordingly presented as the outcome of Catholic clerical agitation, carried out by the hands of 'the poor', 'the plebs', or even 'peasants'. The violence was thus attributed to socially marginal groups whose actions primarily affected the movable property of churches – property that, crucially, had been endowed by the town's burghers themselves. The council further insisted that Lutheran doctrine had never been preached in Stralsund and that its policies had remained in accordance with imperial law, above all the Edict of Worms⁸⁸.

In the preachers' apology and the town council's defence, a narrative emerged that later entered Protestant historiography. According to this account, corroborated by witness testimony, a misunderstanding that occurred in St Nicholas Church triggered the plundering of churches on 10 April 1525. On that day, a large number of poor people and journeymen gathered there to receive so-called beggar tokens (*Bettelzeichen*) distributed by the town. Alarmed by the crowd, a burgher woman sent her maidservant to secure possessions she had stored in St Nicholas Church. The servant stumbled over church furnishings, triggering cries that the 'Martinians' were looting the church. This cry quickly became a rallying call among the urban poor, triggering the plundering. Others soon rushed to the churches as well, partly to safeguard their own endowments and belongings stored there.

According to this reconstruction, the events of 10–11 April 1525 resulted from the intersection of several processes: the looting carried out by the urban poor, the efforts of burghers to secure their endowments and donations, and attempts by the municipal authorities to protect property and restore order. This version of events was advanced by the Stralsund authorities during the

⁸⁴ APS, SKR, sign. 1705, pp. 166–208, here p. 189; see this document in J. G. L. KOSEGARTEN, *Verteidigungsschrift*, p. 121.

⁸⁵ J. G. L. KOSEGARTEN, *Verteidigungsschrift*, pp. 119–120, 135.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 122–124.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

proceedings of 1528–1529 and subsequently corroborated by witness testimony and by Lutheran pastors active in the town, forming a coherent narrative that later shaped Protestant interpretations of the unrest.

CONCLUSIONS

Accounts of the early Reformation became highly conventionalised as they were shaped by elaborate confessional cultures. In this process of retrospective ordering, chaotic and contingent moments – such as those unfolding simultaneously across Europe on 10 April 1525 – were detached from their immediate contexts and incorporated into explanatory schemes that privileged doctrine, authority, and order over experience, contingency, and violence. Individual actors were assigned generalised, schematic roles. The Reformation appeared primarily as the discovery of the Gospel, proclaimed by a preacher stylised after Luther, who preached the first sermon and drew inspiration from the reformer's widely circulated writings from Wittenberg in 1520. This representation, crafted by mid-sixteenth-century Lutheran confessional culture, profoundly influenced modern historiography, producing a portrait of the northern Reformation as a phenomenon dominated by rulers – orderly in form yet relatively lacking in pluralism.

A closer analysis of the structures and discourses of the early Reformation in Pomerania, however, revealed a more complex reality that unfolded in the peripheries of the emerging media revolution. Whereas reports from Saxony likely reached broader social strata, it was the clergy – particularly monks and friars – who proved most receptive to new ideas. Yet even they primarily perceived these ideas not as a rupture but as a continuation of existing debates about church reform and religious life, as well as responses to pressing moral concerns. In this sense, the early Reformation in Pomerania emerged less as a doctrinal breakthrough than as a reconfiguration of existing religious practices and expectations.

Catholic opponents of the preachers recognised the links with Wittenberg but exploited them as instruments in struggles over authority, influence, and wealth. From their perspective, the nascent Reformation appeared as little more than a new inflection within ongoing confrontations with urban anticlericalism, whose forms and content were already familiar. This fundamental misrecognition of the novelty and force of the Reformation paradoxically aligned Catholic polemicists with the itinerant preachers; both were deeply entangled in the same social and political dynamics, albeit with opposing aims.

The phrase 'washing one's hands in blood', initially attributed to Luther and later placed in the mouths of Stralsund preachers, became a self-fulfilling prophecy amid escalating tensions, culminating in the attacks on churches on 10 April 1525. In response to the eruption of violence, historical actors resorted

to the interpretative strategies available to them. Territorial rulers, regardless of their personal sympathies towards Luther or adherence to traditional doctrine, issued anti-Lutheran edicts. Both the town council and the Lutheran preachers, as well as their Catholic opponents, shifted responsibility for the riots onto the 'common man'. For all parties engaged in overlapping legal disputes, this explanation conveniently deflected direct responsibility. In this way, violence was central to the events yet excluded from the narratives that sought to explain them.

The development of the Reformation in Stralsund before 1530 was shaped primarily by social conflict, radical anti-clericalism and practical questions of Christian life rather than by fully articulated doctrinal systems. Yet this conclusion requires qualification. The emerging Lutheran identity did not precede these processes but took shape within them. It was articulated through traditional forms available to historical actors at a time when the theological language of the Reformation was still taking shape.

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