

Anabaptists in Baiersdorf: Religious Dissent and the Politics of Coercion in Early Modern Europe

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The phenomenon of Anabaptism and other religious dissent during the period of the Reformation has been studied largely from a theological perspective, either from that of its enemies or its sympathizers. Theological division and strife has even made the term “Anabaptist” a controversial concept.¹ More recently, historians like Werner Packull and Hans-Jürgen Goertz have studied Anabaptism as a social and communal phenomenon. While these perspectives are important, what has largely been ignored outside of Holland and Switzerland is the political response to Anabaptism. *Historians have often characterized the motivations of the governments that suppressed religious dissent in the worst light, as a “campaign of propaganda and suppression”² which tends to assume that the authorities used rhetoric against Anabaptists out of cynical self-interest, as an excuse to suppress the movement. While this attitude can easily be understood when one compares the brutal persecutions, supported almost universally by the governments of the Holy Roman Empire, to the peaceful doctrines of most Anabaptists, it fails to take into account the context from which the perceptions and beliefs of the authorities arose. Many of the fears of the governments, which may seem groundless to the*

modern observer, were based concretely upon the actions and doctrines of the radical reformers. The authorities considered Anabaptism a dangerous and rebellious movement bent on destroying God's order and replacing it with anarchy. Part of this fear was rooted in the limits of early modern governments, which had few resources and limited ability to suppress any sort of dissent. Another basis important for these fears was the firm conviction of many rulers that the leaders, doctrines and goals of the Anabaptist movement were the same as those of the recent Peasants' War. The issue of whether this connection actually existed has been hotly debated by historians. But what proves important is not so much whether such a connection did exist, but the belief of those in power that it did. Only in this context can the terror and paranoia that this belief inspired and the bloody policies that followed be understood.

When one takes this perception of the authorities into account, cases which largely have been ignored by historians take on greater significance. One such case took place in the Franconian prison of Baiersdorf in 1528, when Hans von Seckendorf, the district official of Baiersdorf, wrote to the Margraval government of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach to inform it of his capture of twenty persons in Uttenreuth, most of whom had been rebaptized by the radical preacher Hans Hut. This small Uttenreuth enclave was unremarkable in both its size and its spiritual strength (all twenty later recanted). Its members proved to be neither theologically sophisticated nor particularly revolutionary. It is no wonder, then, that their short stay in the prison of Baiersdorf has been largely passed over by historians.³ However, this case proved significant in the formation of the policy of Margrave George of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach against Anabaptists within his territories. The case of the Uttenreuth Anabaptists also shaped George and his council's perception of Anabaptism and the threat it presented. Despite the lack of theological sophistication or revolutionary motives of the Baiersdorf Anabaptists, the authorities viewed them as part of a larger satanic plot to destroy not only the government of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, but all social and political order. To see how the authorities perceived this case, one must first understand how Anabaptism arose in the Margravate of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach.

Located in middle Franconia, the district of Baiersdorf was under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Bishop of Bamberg and was an administrative province of Kulmbach, which along with Ansbach was under the authority of the Margrave of Brandenburg. Protestant Preachers began to spread their message in the Margravate after 1520, during the reign of Margrave George's older brother Margrave Kasmir. Many of the clergy and officials in the Margravate began to support the new movement. Kasmir embraced the Lutheran concept of "preaching the Gospel" and submitting religious doctrine and practice to the authorities. However, Margrave Kasmir also protected the church ceremonies and traditions criticized by Lutheran reformers. In spite of this, Kasmir justified limiting or completely ignoring the authority of the bishops within his lands and confiscated church goods. Unfortunately for Kasmir few of his subjects embraced this policy, and during his reign many areas moved towards Lutheranism (such as Baiersdorf) or remained

Catholic, depending largely on the religious inclinations of the district officials of that region. Only in 1528, under Margrave George, did Lutheranism become the official religion of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach. Both George and Kasmir saw the rise of mystical Anabaptism after 1527 as a challenge to their authority and church policy.⁴

The building of an Anabaptist community in Franconia, now part of Northern Bavaria, was almost entirely the work of one exceptionally charismatic leader, Hans Hut.⁵ Born in 1490, Hans Hut took an interest in the works of the early Protestants including Luther. After 1521 he worked as a book binder and dealer, and wandered about Franconia. He soon came personally under the influence of Thomas Müntzer and later confessed to taking part in the Peasants' War. Hut fled after the peasant army was destroyed by the German princes at Frankenhausen. In 1526 he was rebaptized by the spiritual Anabaptist Hans Denck, but he understood rebaptism in a sense very different from the Swiss Anabaptists, and as Seebass, Packull, and others have pointed out, his spiritualist teachings were related more closely to the mystical teachings of Thomas Müntzer. Nevertheless, after the Peasants' War, Hut set himself apart from Müntzer in denying that the believer could use the sword. However, this prohibition of the sword was only temporary, for Hut was also an apocalyptic preacher. Hut prophesied that the world would come shortly to an end and the authorities would be slaughtered by the Turks. The invaders from the east would bring God's wrath down upon them for their wicked and unjust treatment of their subjects. After the Turks had destroyed the authorities and slaughtered most of the wicked, Hut's followers, spared by Christ from the wrath of the "infidels," would emerge from the wilderness and put the remaining godless to the sword. After being rebaptized, Hut along with one of his earliest apostles, Georg Volk, imitated the biblical apostles who went forth to preach in pairs; they roamed throughout Franconia, rebaptizing, and establishing communities.

Hut's work first came to the attention of the authorities in Königsberg. Königsberg had the unusual distinction of being a Franconian province that belonged to Electoral Saxony, though it was under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Bishop of Würzburg. Much of the province, however, lay far closer to the neighboring bishopric of Bamberg. After discovering Hut's group, Saxony, Bamberg, and Würzburg cooperated to destroy the Anabaptist communities. The two bishops and the elector put a number of Hut's followers to death and expelled the rest.⁶

The Bishop of Bamberg, upon Kasmir's request, communicated the details of this procedure to the Margrave's council in Ansbach. The Margrave had grown concerned following the capture of one of Hut's apostles, Wolfgang Vogel (the minister of Eltersdorf) in Nuremberg. Kasmir's main concern, he wrote Bamberg, was to "prevent a future uprising."⁷ He also was concerned that his own subjects might somehow be involved in the movement. Indeed, he had been informed by his council early in March of a number of suspected Anabaptist rebels from the city of Erlangen.⁸ It was from the reports of Bamberg, Nuremberg, and Erlangen⁹ that the authorities in the Margravate began to put together their first perception of Hut's movement.

Kasmir's treasury official (*castner*) at Baiersdorf, Siegmund Schlachinhafen sent the report concerning the peasants of Erlangen to Margrave Kasmir's government at Ansbach. He reported that the peasants in Erlangen had fled but were in league with recently captured Anabaptists in Nuremberg, and he asked the government for instructions, which were necessary in order to prevent a new rebellion. The district official (*amtmann*) of Erlangen, Erkingen von Seckendorf, wrote two weeks later, on March 23, 1527, that he worried while he was away from the city that the community of Hut's followers had flourished. Erkingen added that the Erlangen community may have existed as long as a year before being detected. He sent along the confessions of the abandoned wives and the relatives of the citizens who had fled, in which witnesses confirmed that the fugitives were at the very least rebaptized. On the same day, the Margrave wrote Nuremberg, hoping that the city council could shed further light on the activities of the sect. The *Bürgermeister* and council wrote back that not only did Wolfgang Vogel deny infant baptism and the real presence in the sacrament, but that he also was part of an "unchristian alliance against all government, that intends to destroy it" and the sign of "such league is rebaptism."¹⁰ Bamberg sent over its report a week later on the third of April. The Bishop's council informed the Margrave, that in addition to rejecting infant baptism and the real presence in the sacrament of the altar, the followers of Hut denied eternal damnation and believed that the Turks would come soon into the land to slaughter all of the nobles and priests.¹¹ It is also clear that Würzburg had sent further reports to Margrave Kasmir, in which the bishop claimed that he had received a report from Strasbourg which connected the Franconian Anabaptist apostles with a recent revolt in the countryside about the free imperial city.¹² This can be seen in a letter Kasmir wrote to his brother Albrecht of Prussia on April first, in which he explained that he was certain Albrecht had already heard "what a shocking, unchristian thing takes cover under the light of the new baptism," and that the proponents of the new baptism were connected both with the Peasants' War and violent acts in Strasbourg.¹³ He wrote all his officials on April 9, with similar warnings about the dangerous nature of Anabaptism, ordering them to look out for the members of the sect.¹⁴

By late April 1527, the Margrave and his officials were already deeply concerned about Hut's movement, even though they had not captured or proceeded against any of its members. They were already convinced that a number of wandering preachers were secretly spreading heretical and rebellious doctrines throughout their land. They had good reason to be afraid of such secret preachers who had also appeared earlier in the land just prior to the Peasants' War. On December 12, 1524, as peasant unrest was already spreading throughout Franconia, the Kastner of Kardolzburg reported to the Margrave's council that peasant preachers had been spreading rebellion near Erlangen. Also, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, having been denied permission by the Margrave to settle in his territories, secretly went to Rothenburg ob der Tauber, where the largest and most volatile Peasant Army in Franconia was forming.¹⁵ This must have been in the minds of the Margrave and his officials as they apprehended the first Anabaptists in their territories.

The first three major cases in which Anabaptists within the Margravate were taken prisoner occurred late in 1527. Because of the death of his brother Kasmir in late September, Margrave George had the responsibility of dealing with these cases. The first case took place in the town of Bussbach in December. The Head official (*hauptmann*) reported that he had taken into custody three farmers who had accepted rebaptism from a wandering preacher. Little documentation outside of the farmers' hearings and the Head official's report exists. The Head official's main concern was how to stop these wandering preachers who were roaming about the land, so he sent over the report of the hearing.¹⁶

The other two cases were far more significant. The first was the imprisonment of Ambrosius Spittelmeier by the district official Erkinger von Seckendorf in Erlangen in September 1527. After the first round of interrogations, it became clear that Spittelmeier was an Anabaptist leader. He admitted freely that Hans Hut had sent him into the land to deliver a message to the Anabaptists who had fled the city. Spittelmeier confirmed many of the early reports about Hut's followers, admitting that he did not believe in infant baptism or the real presence, and claiming that Christians should hold goods in common. Though he said one should not rebel against the government, he explained that the same governments had become wicked and ungodly, and that they would not survive long because the world was quickly coming to an end and Christ would soon return, not in peace, but with the sword. Such teachings were confirmed by Hut himself, who had been captured in Augsburg, and whose confession was sent over to the Ansbach council by way of Nuremberg in October of the same year.¹⁷ The last case began on New Year's Eve, while the council and Margrave were still pondering what to do with Spittelmeier. The government of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach captured its first entire community of Hut's followers when Hans von Seckendorf (Erkinger's cousin) seized the Anabaptists at Uttenreuth and brought them into the district prison at Baiersdorf.

It quickly became apparent that the capture of such prisoners put an unusually burdensome strain on the local officials. Hans von Seckendorf, the district official of Baiersdorf, wrote to the Margrave's council on the first of January 1528, informing them that he had seized ten men and ten women near Uttenreuth who had been rebaptized, and that all were unshaken (*unerzittert*) in their wish to remain in their community and stand by their new beliefs and baptism. Two of the men, Wolfgang Wüst and Hans Zurl, both eighteen years old, were found with their own copies of the New Testament. Hans von Seckendorf assumed that they were leaders in the sect. The Margrave's council thought it wise that these two should be kept in captivity separate from the others. Seckendorf asked how he was to proceed further; he complained that he was not used to having "so many guests" in his prison. He also copied down and sent the transcript of a song that the prisoners had sung together, presumably during their first night of captivity.¹⁸

Shortly thereafter, the Margrave's council sent the procedure for the interrogation of the twenty prisoners. The council must have sent their orders relatively quickly, because in his January 9 letter, Seckendorf complained about the

lack of response to his dispatch of the results of the hearing. The district head reported:

I have also spoken with the women, and they have also given me their answers, as you have heard read out. I have also released some men from prison, on the swearing of an oath that you will find included here. And if I have done wrong, it is your (the council's) fault, because I waited so long for a further command, for you can guess that having so many guests for so long is not amusing.¹⁹

He also added that many of the prisoners still did not wish to recant. Seckendorf felt that the burden would be too much for the district to hold the prisoners much longer. "I make the friendly request of you, that you give a further command in regard to the costs. . . I know that I can no longer deal with them from the district resources."²⁰

Seckendorf and the prisoners had to wait another eight days until the council sent out the judge from the city of Schwabach to reckon what the Margrave needed to repay his officials and to hear the oaths of the prisoners. All were to be released upon their recantation, except one of the Uttenreuth community, Fritz Stringle, in whose house the assemblies had taken place. The council ordered that he be further questioned under torture. The judge arrived sometime later in the month, tallied the dues, and stayed on to receive their oaths. The last we hear of the Anabaptists is at the end of the month. The district official of Baiersdorf forwarded two requests on behalf of the prisoners. The first was that those who recanted begged to do their penance outside of their parish because they feared further punishment from the Bishop of Bamberg who held spiritual jurisdiction over the area. The second was Fritz Stringle's request for release from the Baiersdorf prison. The council denied the latter because they claimed that it was imperative that they learn of Hut and his followers' plot against the government. After the next interrogation, Seckendorf sent a second request to release Stringle who was released after his subsequent oath.²¹

The case of the Uttenreuth Anabaptists shows clearly that the local authorities were unprepared to deal with religious dissent, or for that matter with any crime which required holding large numbers of people in prison even for short periods of time. Such examples are not limited to Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, but appear nearly everywhere in the initial efforts of the early modern German governments against the Anabaptists, most notably in Austria and Württemberg.²² In the end, to reduce the strains on the local authorities, the Margrave's council began increasingly to command that Anabaptists be brought to Ansbach, where they were to be held.²³ Such a procedure also appears in other states such as Austria and Hesse.²⁴ In any case, it is clear that the campaign of the governments of the Holy Roman Empire against religious dissent could scarcely function within the normal criminal justice structure. It was incumbent upon both the Margravate of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach and the other powers of the Holy Roman Empire to erect a new and costly judicial procedure in order to deal with religious dissenters.

The first phase of such a judicial procedure was underway in Baiersdorf, when the district official received a set of questions drawn up by the Margrave's council,

shortly after the capture of Hut's adherents. The questions posed by the authorities and the procedure of the trial reveal a number of the government's assumptions and beliefs about the followers of Hans Hut. Furthermore, the answers given by the prisoners themselves are revealing both in the way they confirm and discredit these assumptions.

The questions for most of the prisoners were taken from the articles drawn up for Hut's disciple, Ambrosius Spittelmeier. The city of Nuremberg had an extensive role in writing these articles, and many of the articles were written in direct response to the interrogation and confession of Hans Hut under torture at Augsburg.²⁵ The authorities posed to the Uttenreuth "leader", Wolf Wüst, however, not one, but two sets of questions. The council of the Bishop of Bamberg almost certainly sent over the first set. The content of this inquiry, which largely dealt with the prisoner's view of the traditional medieval church, its ceremonies, and its hierarchy, contained a number of questions not posed in the far more extensive questioning of Ambrosius Spittelmeier, and does not appear in later queries posed to Anabaptists in the Margravate. It would have been unlikely, in any case, that the Protestant Margrave George and his officials would have had any concern for such questions. If the content of the questions alone is not suggestive enough, the fact that the Uttenreuth community was in Bamberg's diocese, and that the episcopal council of Bamberg was working together at this point in time with the Margravate in its efforts to suppress the Anabaptists, leaves little doubt as to the source of the second set of questions for Wüst.²⁶ Though this study is mostly concerned with the Margravate's policy, the Bishop's questions prove useful as a comparison.

The questions posed by Bamberg's council show a number of intersecting points of concern, and are similar to those posed in the Margravate. However, the Bamberg questions also display a number of distinct concerns that were of importance to a Catholic prince bishop. Bamberg raised many of the questions that Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach later posed. These similarities indicate some shared points of interest by the two powers. These common concerns include questions about the background of Wolfgang Wüst, the leaders of his sect, and the plot against the worldly authorities. In addition, the Bamberg articles specifically ask whether Wüst believes "the peasant revolt, in which the peasants took and burned some of the possessions of the nobles was also godly."²⁷ The authorities of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach could have just as easily posed such a question. The questions also intersect on some basic theological issues, such as Wüst's reason for accepting rebaptism and his view on the Sacrament of the Altar. The authorities used these two tenets, as we have already seen, to separate Anabaptist "heretics" from "true believers." In addition, however, the bishop's council asked whether the Anabaptists believed in a number of tenets of the old church, from which the Protestants in the Holy Roman Empire had already begun to move away, such as calling upon the intercession of the saints. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the bishop was concerned with how Wüst defined the spiritual and worldly authority of a bishop. For example, "Whether we should also be obedient to commands to the people from the papacy, bishops, and priesthood,

which were established by God?"²⁸ or "Whether the pope and bishop have the power to damn us or lift us up into heaven, to bind and to free, as said in the Holy Scripture?"²⁹ Such questions clearly display the Bishop's worry that his authority, both as a spiritual and secular leader, was being undermined by the Anabaptists, and that this could lead to rebellion. Wüst answers almost none of these questions directly. Without mentioning bishops, for example, he answers the last question by saying that the pope cannot help anyone into heaven. Questioned about the worldly authority of the priesthood, he answers that no human law can be an aid to salvation, and to the question regarding the Peasants' War, he simply answers that where Christ is no one desires that which belongs to others. On the other hand, Wüst shows little caution in condemning Catholic ritual as being unbiblical.³⁰ Wüst's answers also display his doubts about clerical authority. While it is clear that the followers of Hut shared many of these assumptions with other Protestants, they must have done nothing to dispel the Bishop's preconceptions about the movement.

In addition to the questions from Bamberg, the questions from Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach reveal the fear and agenda of the ruling authorities. The margraval council sent the two sets of questions with the following instructions. First, the instructions informed the interrogator that there were two types of prisoners, namely, the two "leaders" Wüst and Zurl, and the remaining poor simple folk, who had allowed themselves to be re-baptized. The document also admonished the district official to be very serious when he presented the questions and not to use any thoughtless words. The council gave eleven questions for the "simple people" and twenty-five for the "leaders." In addition, before beginning, Hans von Seckendorf or the interrogator was to read out a prepared statement from the council to the prisoners. The council first confessed that it understood the plight of the poor simple folk who thoughtlessly allowed themselves to be misled by the seductive sect. This occurred largely because the common folk could not read or understand the gospel and were thus easily persuaded by such heretical teachers. The council also admitted that the sect was teaching much about brotherly love that is perfectly Christian, but "under this baptism and brotherhood is hidden, and what alone arises from and makes up the same, is that in the end this crowd is united against all government, to destroy and eradicate all authority, as is clearly the case with some leaders of this sect, who also appropriately received the death penalty, which they deserved for such rebellion."³¹ In addition the council also listed the errors of such sects: contempt of infant baptism, the denial of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the altar, the holding of all goods in common, and the especially devilish doctrine that Christ, acting through the Anabaptists, would soon return and destroy all governments. Also, one was not to forget the other various errors, "that are not alone cruel and shocking to hear, but obviously against all godly and holy scripture."³² Before the prisoners answered any question, the government had already defined Anabaptism as false belief. It had also already defined two types of Anabaptists: the first group, the leaders, deserving execution, and the other simply misled from ignorance. The council also already stated its view that in the end the entire purpose of the sect was to undermine the government. The

last assertion is certainly understandable in the context of the interrogation discussed above. Later events also confirm that this was no cynical pretext used to punish the religious dissenters, but the firm view of those in power.

The questions bear this out. Of the eleven questions for the non-leaders, the purpose behind most of the questions was to inform the council and Margrave George about the sect, its members, and its leaders (including whether Wüst and Zurl were themselves leaders). The government designed these questions to help them discover and capture other members of the sect who might still be at large. Two questions asked what the members of the group were sworn to do. The latter, question number eight, specifically demanded the interrogated to reveal their plot to destroy all government. The question also informed the reader that this plot was already well known to the authorities. Theological questions were alone left for the "leaders." These asked about the group's apocalyptic predictions about the future, about the sacrament of the altar, whether Christ was God and man, and about the nature of sin. The authorities designed other questions to discover the group's secret signs and organization, and also to clarify exactly what role the "leaders" had in the sect. In addition to the two questions about the purpose of the sect and its plot against the government, a third asked about whether God had established the political authorities.³³

The first important fact to be revealed from the testimony³⁴ was that Hans Hut had indeed established the community, but had remained for fewer than two days and had not returned. His disciple Georg Volk had visited the community, perhaps as many as four times.³⁵ It is also clear that while many of the members had received the same instruction, they did not all have the same level of understanding of the teachings. Furthermore, one might ask whether any of the interrogated feigned ignorance in order to be considered "simple." This cannot be definitively answered. On the one hand, many answered the questions indirectly or ambiguously. On the other hand, nearly all of the questioned admitted holding teachings the government defined as heretical. It also becomes evident what teachings Hut thought were most important for a godly community to know.

A comparison of the specific answers shows the focus of Hut's message. In addition to the set eleven questions, Hans von Seckendorf asked many of the "simple Anabaptists" questions from the leader sheet. He asked almost all of them about the sacrament of the altar, for instance. He also appears only to have interrogated sixteen of the twenty initially captured. When asked if Wüst and Zurl were leaders, five of the fourteen "simple Anabaptists" denied that the two had taught or baptized anyone. The others claimed ignorance about the matter. Many stated that they were unacquainted with the young men, or said that they only knew that the two had worked at threshing wheat in the mill. Katherina Schrenzin, one of the women of the Uttenreuth community, claimed that only one of the two, Wüst, was literate, and that he could read a little (*allein... kann er wenig lesen*). Two of the other women supported this assertion, as did Wüst, who claimed he could not write and could only read a little. The answer to what obligation they had to their society elicited varied responses. Eight of the sixteen reported that they were to obey God,

and two said that they were obliged to do "good." Seven stated that they were to avoid evil and sin. Five said that they should help out the others when they were in need. When asked directly about the plot against the government, all of them denied being part of such a conspiracy, and fourteen of the sixteen said that Hut and Volk had taught that one should be obedient to the government and give the authorities what they were due. The only hint of apocalypticism can be found in Uttenreuth farmer Konz Beck's report, when he stated: "If the government demands one coin, you should give it two, then the day of the Lord will come soon, like a net over a bird."³⁶ But he also insisted that Hut and Volk taught nothing against the authorities. When asked exactly what articles the teachers taught, most of the questioned answered that they taught one should follow God, or abstain from sin, or help one another, or love God. Fritz Stringle added that they taught one should pay one's taxes. Most of them mentioned that their leaders read from the Bible. It becomes clear from these answers that, at least in the villagers' eyes, Hut's main message was to avoid sin and to obey God and the Bible. They did not see this as being incompatible with being good citizens, nor did Hut present it in such a way.

When one examines what the villagers thought of the Eucharist, it becomes evident that theological issues were less meaningful for the prisoners. Seckendorf asked thirteen of the sixteen about the Sacrament, and all remembered that Hut or Volk had said something about the ceremony and had given out a bit of bread. The villager Margeret Veitin proved the sole exception, saying Volk had taught nothing of the Sacrament, but that she thought it was a good idea to receive it often. Six of the other twelve stated that Hut had taught that the real presence was not in the bread and wine, though Uttenreuth resident Else Gruber said that he taught the Sacrament was a sign, but how she understood this cannot be garnered from her confession. Four were also able to remember that the drinking of the wine symbolized the suffering of Christ, which was related to Hut's teaching that the true Christian must suffer in the world. Another of the village women, Kunigend Zeltner, remembered that one should think about God and Christ's words, "this is my body....," and Katherina Gruber said that she was too young to understand. Gerhaus Otto admitted that he had not noted (*gemerkt*) what Hut had said about the Sacrament.

In any case, it appears that outside of basic Christian teachings, and the doctrines of rebaptism and the sacrament of the altar, Hut and Volk had said little to the villagers during their visits. Nor were the theological issues as important to the members of the community as a whole as the idea of leading a moral, Christian life, and following God's commands. Yet, as we shall see, such confessions did nothing to change the preconceptions of the government. In fact, if anything, they strengthened them.

The government officials could easily fit the Anabaptist community of Uttenreuth into their view of Anabaptism. We have already seen that the council had a concept of how the sect seduced and destroyed their subjects. In the instruction on the interrogation of the prisoners at Baiersdorf we already find the preconceived idea that the Anabaptist leaders seduce the common people because

of their ignorance,³⁷ in the guise of the Gospel and Christian love. This was viewed as the first step to corruption. According to this model, having seduced the simple people, the Anabaptist leaders slowly began to train the folk in their insidious doctrines, eventually making themselves leaders. After having questioned Wolfgang Wüst, Hans von Seckendorf felt that the youth was well on his way to becoming such a disciple. He concluded that although Wüst was not a leader “but only a student, he will just the same with time become a good teacher.”³⁸ For Seckendorf and the council Wüst was a Hans Hut or Ambrosius Spittelmeier in the making. The other members of the community fit equally well into this picture. Though most of them appeared “simple” and did not (yet) hold the rebellious doctrines that the government feared, they did hold a number of positions the authorities considered heretical and dangerous. The idea that Anabaptists seduced the innocent under the false appearance of moral and Christian doctrines could also be inferred by the authorities from the Uttenreuth community, where it was apparent that most of the members were attracted by Hut’s idea of a pure Christian community based on the ideals of obedience to God’s commands and treating one’s fellows with Christian love.

Such an assessment of the government’s view is confirmed by two events that occurred as the procedure at Baiersdorf was entering its final stages, namely the release of Margrave George’s first mandate against the Anabaptists on January 5, 1528, and the decision to execute Ambrosius Spittelmeier early in February of the same year. It is perhaps no accident that the former was promulgated just days after the capture of the Uttenreuth Anabaptists; the language of the mandate echoes much of the formal statement read to the prisoners before their interrogation. The Margrave opened by declaring that in many places in the Holy Roman Empire false, seductive teachers have begun rejecting infant baptism, denying (*verlaugen*), contradicting (*widersprechen*), and destroying (*vernichten*) God’s holy scripture in the process. The Margrave further asserted that “through their false teaching about many other erroneous, faithless articles” they seduce the “simple ignorant people” to join their society which they have set up “under good appearances.”³⁹ In addition the Margrave said that the group believed in the community of all goods. In his assault on this doctrine, the fears of Margrave George and his officials are clearly revealed. The Margrave argued that under such an article the “Christian subjects cannot obediently give or support their God-ordained governments with taxes, duties, and other obligations; thereby, then, the authority cannot punish the evil and aid the pious, and no Christian will be able to give Christian charity to another, as is openly taught and commanded in many places in godly scripture.”⁴⁰ Under such logic the followers of Hut had spread such teaching in order to undermine the foundations of government. Clearly this shows that the Margrave and his council thought that their places as heads of the political order were being fundamentally endangered. Such a community of goods, the Margrave firmly concluded, was a devilish article designed to promote discontent and unrest.⁴¹ Margrave George also said that such teachings will inevitably lead to great damage to his subjects’ lives, goods, and souls, a clear proof of which are the events of the

recent Peasants' War, which could only be put down by the authorities with the sword. In conclusion, with threats of the most serious forms of punishment, he forbade anyone from becoming an Anabaptist or sheltering any of the members of the sect, and called for preaching against Anabaptism. In the context of the mandate, the example of the Uttenreuth community clearly confirmed to the authorities their view of the seductive means and the rebellious teachings of the Anabaptists.

Late in January 1528, the Margrave's council had begun seriously considering executing Ambrosius Spittelmeier. They had already received advice to do the same from the Bishop of Bamberg's council and Sigmund von Hessburg, the Marshall and district official of Kardolzburg, where Spittelmeier was imprisoned.⁴² But before proceeding they wished to consult an expert in the matter, and thus they sent the question to Hans von Schwarzenburg whether one could execute a person for spiritual and religious offences. Schwarzenburg was a member of a Franconian baronial family and a widely renowned expert in Roman law. As housemaster for Bamberg he had drafted the bishopric's criminal law code, which was later to be used as the model for imperial criminal code of 1532. He had also briefly served in the *Reichsregiment*, but his Lutheran sympathies had led him to leave Bamberg and the Emperor's service, and from 1527 he had served Margrave George as *Landhofmeister*.⁴³ Schwarzenburg advised that in such matters it was wise to be cautious, and it was natural to worry and have doubts. He assured the council that in canon and imperial law it is clear heretics must receive the death penalty. But he went beyond this, saying that the doctrines that a true Christian should serve no lord other than Christ and that all goods should be held in common are against all scripture and will lead to the "revolt and unrest of the common man against all government."⁴⁴ He also mentioned that such Anabaptists, who were recently held at Baiersdorf (the Uttenreuth community), confessed how they were obligated by their baptism "to help one another and to advise, as far as their life and goods suffice, which is not a small step away from their obligations to the authorities."⁴⁵ Schwarzenburg further confirmed that this was only the first stage down such an erroneous path. One could see the final results of such heresy in Spittelmeier, who without a doubt held more malicious (*boshaftiger*) and rebellious articles.⁴⁶ The judgment against Spittelmeier, finished five days later on February 6, 1528, begins by recalling that the lives, souls, goods, and honour of so many had been damaged in the Peasants' War, which had undoubtedly grown out of such secret preaching. The judgment accused Ambrosius Spittelmeier of again bringing secret preaching into the land in order to seduce the poor common man. He was to be executed as an open rebel and heretic.⁴⁷ The government's view was that any Anabaptist left to his or her own devices would become a Spittelmeier or Hans Hut.

The Uttenreuth Anabaptists imprisoned at Baiersdorf were not themselves rebellious. Hans Hut and his disciples, however, held apocalyptic ideas which prophesied the violent end to the government of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach. While the coming rebellion that the authorities so feared was their own construct, in the context of Hut's beliefs and the recent Peasants' War it is unsurprising that the authorities could believe that this uprising would soon occur. It can also not be

surprising that in Austria, Bavaria, Franconia and southern Saxony, where Hut's movement spread, the authorities connected all Anabaptism with rebellion. This fear of the authorities must have been magnified by the inadequate means at their disposal to deal with widespread religious dissent. As Anabaptism arose, the local authorities did not have the money or manpower at their disposal to deal with the Anabaptists in the manner the central government would have liked. To a modern observer, the suppression of Anabaptism may seem particularly harsh and brutal. What must be remembered is that the authorities who authorized and carried through such persecutions were convinced that they were not only battling a rebellious movement, but also that they were fighting a movement that they were barely capable of dealing with.

Notes

¹ The word "Anabaptist" has in modern times been used as an exclusive term to describe some groups of religious dissidents, such as the Swiss Bretheren, Hutterites and Mennonites. Such an a-historical division naturally accentuates important theological distinctions between these religious groups, and the spiritualist inclined followers of Hans Hut, Caspar Schwenkfeld, and Hans Denk. However none of these groups called themselves Anabaptists. Such was a definition forced upon all of them by the authorities, which only had marginal interest in the theological divisions. While it is important to take note of the theological divisions between radical groups, for our study we use the term Anabaptist in its historical sense, to describe groups which practiced the prohibited activity of a second baptism, which defined them in their societies as religious dissidents. An excellent presentation of Anabaptist historiography can be found in the introduction of Werner Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings* (Baltimore, 1995).

² Frank H. Little, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York & London, 1964), xv

³ Only Günther Bauer, in his *Anfänge täuferischer Gemendebildung in Franken* (Nuremberg, 1966) takes much note of the group. His purpose in doing so is to try to discover the spiritual life and organization of the community. Bauer's discussion of the authorities' actions is marginal to his purpose and narrative.

⁴ On Kasmir's reign, see Johann Baptist Götz, *Die Glaubenspaltung im Gebiete der Margrafschaft Ansbach-Kulmbach in den Jahren 1520-1535* (Freiburg, 1907), 29-94 and Karl Schornbaum *Die Stellung des Margraf Kasmir von Brandenburg zur reformatorischen Bewegung in den Jahren 1524-1527* (Nuremberg, 1900); Martin Gernot Meier, *Systembruch und Neuordnung: Reformation und Konfessionbildung in den Margrafitümern Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1520-1594* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 76-94, and Scott Dixon, *The Reformation and Rural Society: the parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1528-1603* (Cambridge, 1996), 14-25. For the transition to George's reign see especially Reinhard Seyboth, "Margraf Georg von Ansbach-Kulmbach und die Reichspolitik," *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landforschung* 47 (1987), 43-52, as well as Karl Schornbaum *Zur Politik des Margrafen Georg von Brandenburg von Beginne seiner selbständigen regierung bis zum Nürnberger Anstand 1528-1532* (Munich, 1906), 1-25; Dixon 26; Meyer 98-100; Götz 95-112.

⁵ Hut's life, theology, and works have been discussed elsewhere at length, making an extensive repetition here unnecessary. The reader should see Wilhelm Neuser, *Hans Hut, Leben und Wirken bis zum Nikolsberg Religionsgespräch* (Berlin, 1913); Gottfried Seebass, *Müntzers Erbe, Werk, Leben, und Theologie des Hans Hut*. (Unpublished Habilitationsschrift, Erlangen,

1972). Werner Packull, *Mysticism, and the Early South German- Austrian Anabaptist Movement 1525-1531* (Scottsdale, 1977). James Stayer, "Hans Hut's Doctrine of the Sword: An Attempted Solution," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 39 (1965) 181-191. For Hut's missionary activity, see Bauer. The most recent summary of the development of the historiographical interpretation of Hut's role in Anabaptism can be found in Werner Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 55-61.

⁶ See Bauer, 1-41 and Georg Berbig, "Die Wiedertäufer in Amt Königsberg," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Kirchenrecht* 35 (1903) 291-353.

⁷ "Kunftige emporung verhuten" ed. Karl Schornbaum, *Bayern I: Margraffum Brandenburg*. (Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer II) 18-19, 22. In all subsequent notes to be referred to as QGT BI.

⁸ QGT BI, 11.

⁹ The reports on Erlangen here and following come from QGT BI 11-17.

¹⁰ "unchristliche verpundnus wider alle oberkaiten. die si zu vertilgen vorgehabt..." "...zu ainem zaichen und los solicher pundnus wiederum getauft." *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ Wappler, *Täuferbewegung in Thüringen 1526-1584* Jena, 1913. The primary sources printed in Wappler will be henceforth referred to as WTT.

¹² Bauer, 10.

¹³ "Daraus e. I. zu vernemen haben, was erschreckenlich unchristlich ding unter dem schein einer neuen tauf understanden werden." QGT BI, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-4. For an account of the Peasants' War in Franconia, see Godfried Seebass, "Bauernkrieg und Täufertum in Franken," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85 (1974), 284-300.

¹⁶ QGT BI., 57-60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-56. Hut's trial and death is well detailed in Packull 119-121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67, 96. Wappler includes a copy of the song among his documents. See WTT, 248

¹⁹ "Ich hab auch die weyber besprocht, geben sie mir auch antwort, wie ir hiepey vernemen wert, hab auch etzlich man uff urphe wie ir der selben ein copey hiepey findet wert, aus der gefenkus gelassen und wie ich unrecht hab gethan, ist die schuld euer, dieweil ir mich mit weyternn bevelich solang uffhalt, dan ir kunt abeneme das mir die zeit, pei sovill gesten nit kurzweilig ist." Staatarchive Nürnberg, Ansbach Religions Akten, 38, 284. Hereafter cited as ARA. A brief summary of the document appears in QGT BI, 100.

²⁰ ARA 38, 284'. "Bieth euch derhalben uffs freuntlichs, mir auff das cost weyternn bevelich zethun. . . .wais ich mich amtshalben furtere nichts mer zu handeln."

²¹ QGT BI, 101.103-104. Stringle's release is not in the sources, though he was imprisoned again as a member of the cult of dreamers in 1531, and claimed to have stood by his recantation in 1528. *Ibid.*, 228-231.

²² See ed. Greta Mecenseffy, *Osterreich I* (Quellen zum Geschichte der Täufer XI) (Gütersloh, 1964), 137 (henceforce referred to a QGT OI). Ed. Gustav Bossert, *Herzogtum Württemberg* (Quellen zum Geschichte der Täufer I.) (Leipzig, 1930), 212-213.

²³ Already in the summer of 1528, the district official of Hoheneck is ordered to send a suspected Anabaptist to the council. QGT BI, 123.

²⁴ In Austria, for example, an "Anti-Anabaptist Cavalry" had already been suggested to Archduke Ferdinand I early in 1528; this cavalry later "picked up" Anabaptists from the localities. Thereafter Ferdinand and his council appointed a number of officials to be sent out to the localities to reduce strains on the local authorities. QGT OI 81-82, 96, 118, 141. Already in 1528, in the case of Melchior Rink, prisoners in Hesse were sent to Marbourg. This led the Staathalter in 1536 to complain about the costs of keeping so many prisoners. Ed. Günther

Franz. *Urkundliche Quellen zur hessischen Refomationsgeschichte* IV. (Marburg, 1951). 3. 133.

²⁵ QGT BI, 39. 40. 45. See also Hans-Dieter Schmidt. *Täuferium und Obrigkeit in Nürnberg* (Nuremberg, 1972), 159-172.

²⁶ Bernhard Sicken. "Die Fürstbistümer und die Reformation." in Walter Brandmüller. *Handbuch der Bayerischen Kirchengeschichte* Band.II (St.Ottilien, 1993). 152.

²⁷ "Ob auch die peurisch aufrür. darinen die pauern manchem von adel das sein genommen und verprandt haben. auch götlich sey gewesen?" QGT BI 69.

²⁸ "Ob wir auch des pabst. bischof und pfaffen menschen gepot. die mit got aufgesetzt. gehorsam sein sollen?" *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Ob der babst und bischof macht hab uns zu verdammen oder in himmel heben, zu pinden und lösen. wie die geschrift sagt. . . ." *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69-73.

³¹ "Unter dieser tauf und bruderschaft verporgen. auch dieselb allain darum erdacht und aufkomen. das sich dieser hauf endlich wider alle obrigkait verbinden. die vertilgen und auszureuten. wie sich auch desselb bei etlichen leren dieser secten lauter funden. die auch darum ir gebürliche todstraf, wie solchen aufruren zustee. empfangen haben." *Ibid.*, 77.

³² "Das nit allein grausam und erschrockenlich zehorn. sondern öffentlich allen grund göttlicher und heilger schrift ist." *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 74-75, 77-78.

³⁴ *Ibid.* The hearing discussed here and following appears between pages 74 and 94.

³⁵ This is Bauer's count. It is clear that Volk visited more than once, but beyond that one can only speculate from the sources.

³⁶ "Vordern sie 1 patzen, sollen sie 2 patzen geben.dann der tag des herrn werd pald kommen, wie das netz uber den vogeln." QGT BI 79.

³⁷ In the case of Hut's movement, which as Bauer has illustrated was largely grounded in rural communities, one can see why the government might have come to such a conclusion.

³⁸ "....sonder nur ein schuler wie wol er mit der zeit ein guter lerer mocht word sein." ARA 38, 284.

³⁹ "....durch ire falsche lere etwo vil anderer irriger glaublaser in die herezen der einfeltigen unverstendigen menschen zudringen und dadurch eine neue sect oder bruderschaft (wie sie die nennen) im schein des guten aufzurichten." QGT BI 96.

⁴⁰ "Könten die christlichen untertonen irer von got verordneten obrigkeiten nit zoll, zins, und andere schuldige gehorsam geben und leisten, damit alsdann solche obrigkeit die bosen nit strafen und die frumen handhaben, auch sunsten kein christ den andern christliche hilf zutun vermöchte, wie das doch in manchem ort göttlicher schrift öffentlich gelert und gepoten ist." *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102,104.

⁴³ Eds., Walther Killy and Rudolf Vierhaus, *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie (DBE)* 9 (Munich, 1998), 231. Rudolf Endres. "Fürsten und Reichsgrafen." In Mark Spindler. *Handbuch der bayerische Geschichte. Dritter band. Erster Teilband:Franken* ,(Munich, 1971) 375.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁵ "In solcher widertauf zusammen verpflichtet werden, einander zu helfen und zu raten, als weit ir leib und gut reiche, das ja auch nit ein kleins stück wider die verpflichten obrigkeit." *Ibid* 105-106.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 110-111.