

9.5 Class Conflict in Medieval Europe

Background: The transformation of any society produces social tension and can lead to class conflict as rules, expectations, and mechanisms of social control change. From the 11th through the 14th centuries, Medieval European feudal institutions were weakened and transformed by the Crusades, plague, the growth of towns, and new wealth generated by trade and the Commercial Revolution. The three documents that follow provide historians with insights into the impact of the decline of European feudalism on the relationship between the lower classes and those who dominated the new social order.

Instructions: Read sections A - C and answer the questions that accompany each document using information from the background section and from the document itself. As a follow-up activity, select one of the revolts or rebellions described in the primary source documents. Using the document and additional research, write a scene depicting the struggle either from the point of view of the rulers or of the lower classes. In your script, address the question of whether the oppression of peasants and workers justified their actions and whether the actions by the peasants and workers justified the brutal response by those in power.

A. Revolt of the Jacquery (1358)

Sources (Accessed May 29, 2010): Froissart, John. *The Chronicles of Froissart*. Bouchier, John and Lord Berners, trans. London: Macmillan, 1924, 136-137 at <https://ehistory.osu.edu/books/froissart>; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/froissart2.html>;

Background: After the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) in the middle of the 14th century there were a number of lower class revolts in Western Europe against feudal authority. The Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) fought in France between English and French noble houses that claimed the French throne added to the suffering of the French peasantry. Mercenary armies raided farms, stole food, and destroyed homes. In response to this treatment there was the Revolt of the Jacquery in northern France in 1358. Jacquery was a derisive French term for peasant used because many male peasants were named Jacques. A contemporary report on the Hundred Years' War and peasant rebellion was written Jean Froissart, a French clergyman who openly sided with the French aristocracy.

Questions

1. Why did French peasants revolt against the nobility?
2. What happened during the revolt?
3. In your opinion, can historians rely on accounts of events such as this one written by representatives of the upper class? Explain.

“Certain people of the common villages, without any head or ruler, assembled together in Beauvoisin. In the beginning they said how the noblemen of the realm of France, knights and squires, shamed the realm, and that it should be a great wealth to destroy them all; and each of them said it was true, and said all with one voice: ‘Shame have he that doth not his power to destroy all the gentlemen of the realm!’ Thus they gathered together without any other counsel, and without any armor saving with staves and knives, and so went to the house of a knight dwelling thereby, and broke up his house and slew the knight and the lady and all his children great and small and burned his house. And then they went to another castle, and took the knight thereof and bound him fast to a stake, and then violated his wife and his daughter before his face and slew the lady and his daughter and all his other children, and then slew the knight by great torment and burned and beat down the castle. And so they did to divers other castles and good houses; and they multiplied so that they were a six thousand, and ever as they went forward they increased, for such like as they were fell ever to them, so that every gentleman fled from them and took their wives and children with them, and fled ten or twenty leagues off to be in surety, and left their houses void and their goods therein . . . They made among them a king, one of Clermont in Beauvoisin: they chose him that was the most ungracousest [most ungracious] of all other and they called him king Jacques Goodman, and so thereby they were called companions of the Jacquery. They destroyed and burned more than threescore good houses and strong castles.”

B. Revolt of the Ciompi in Florence, Italy (1378)

Sources: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciompi>; Niccolo Machiavelli (1901). *History of Florence*, NY: Dunne, by Book III, Chapter III, pp. 124-131, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/machiavelli/niccolo/m149h>.

Background: The *ciompi* were wool carders who combed raw wool fibers so they could be used to make thread. While it was a relatively low skill craft, it was essential to the production of woolen textiles, a crucial industry in Florence. In 1378, the *ciompi* took advantage of divisions amongst the rulers, merchants, and skilled craftsmen that dominated the city, the *popolo grasso* or well-to-do fat ones, and demanded better living conditions and the right to participate in the governance of the city. At first they petitioned the governing body, the *Signoria*, for changes, but then they seized control and placed a wool carder in the highest office. For a brief time, Florence was the first European society where all social classes had representation and rights. However, after two months, the upper classes began to regain their authority and the democratic reforms were abolished.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a government official in the Florentine Republic when Florence was economically and politically the most powerful city in Western Europe. He is best remembered for his advice to political leaders in his books *The Prince* and *The Art of War*. In his *History of Florence*, written over one hundred years after the Revolt of the *Ciompi*, Machiavelli described it from the perspective of the upper class and supported efforts by the governors of the city to suppress lower class unrest. While Machiavelli was unsympathetic to the *ciompi*, his account, in which he imagines dialogue, helps us understanding how ordinary people played a crucial role in shaping the history of Florence and Renaissance Italy.

Questions

1. Why did the wool carders revolt against the governors of Florence?
2. What happened during the revolt?
3. In your opinion, can historians rely on accounts of events such as this one written by representatives of the upper class? Explain.

“Meetings took place in different parts during the night, to talk over the past, and to communicate the danger in which they were, when one of the most daring and experienced, in order to animate the rest, spoke thus: ‘If the question now were, whether we should take up arms, rob and burn the houses of the citizens, and plunder churches, I am one of those who would think it worthy of further consideration . . . [A]s we have already armed, and many offenses have been committed, it appears to me that we have to consider how to . . . secure ourselves from the consequences of what is already done. I certainly think, that if nothing else could teach us, necessity might. You see the whole city full of complaint and indignation against us; the citizens are closely united, and the signors [governors] are constantly with the magistrates [judges]. You may be sure they are contriving something against us; they are arranging some new plan to subdue us. We ought therefore to keep two things in view, and have two points to consider; the one is, to escape with impunity for what has been done during the last few days, and the other, to live in greater comfort and security for the time to come. We must, therefore, I think, in order to be pardoned for our faults, commit new ones; redoubling the mischief, and multiplying fires and robberies; and in doing this, endeavor to have as many companions as we can; for when many are in fault, few are punished; small crimes are chastised, but great and serious ones rewarded. When many suffer, few seek vengeance; for general evils are endured more patiently than private ones. To increase the number of misdeeds will, therefore, make forgiveness more easily attainable, and will open the way to secure what we require for our own liberty. And it appears evident that the gain is certain; for our opponents are disunited and rich; their disunion will give us the victory, and their riches, when they have become ours, will support us.”

C. Wat Tyler's Rebellion (1381)

Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Tyler; <http://home.earthlink.net/~dlaw70/wat.htm>.

Background: The Black Death reached England in 1348 and may have killed as much as a third of its population. During the labor shortage that followed the plague, the king issued an edict to freeze wages paid to laborers and feudal nobles pressured the surviving peasantry to surrender a larger share of what they produced. In addition to these demands, the cost of the Hundred Years' War between England and France led to increased taxation and further impoverishment of the peasantry. In 1381, an effort to strictly enforce tax collection led to rebellion.

According to legend, the immediate cause of the rebellion was a tax collector in Kent who stripped and assaulted the fifteen-year-old daughter of Walter "Wat" Tyler. Tyler then smashed in the tax collector's skull with a hammer. Tyler's neighbors chose him as their leader and they joined other protesting peasants and laborers in a march on the capital city of London where they demanded fair treatment. Among the leaders of the larger group, which may have included over one hundred thousand people, was an itinerant priest named John Ball. Ball is credited with preaching a sermon where he demanded to know, "When Adam delved [tilled the soil] and Eve span [worked], who was then the gentleman?"

In London, the peasants and laborers broke open prisons and attacked courts and court officers. They are believed to have captured and killed the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor, and the Lord Treasurer. At one point they are supposed to have confronted King Richard II, who agreed to their demands, but later rescinded his agreement and had the group's leaders arrested and executed. There is historical dispute over the origin of England's well-known Robin Hood legend. It is possible the stories originated in the events of this era.

Questions

1. Why did the English peasantry revolt against feudal nobles?
2. What happened during the revolt?
3. In your opinion, can historians rely on accounts of events such as this one written by representatives of the upper class? Explain.

"There was an usage in England . . . that the noblemen had great franchise over the commons and kept them in servitude, that is to say, their tenants ought by custom to labor the lords' lands, to gather and bring home their corns [grain], and some to thresh . . . and by servitude to make their hay and to hew their wood and bring it home . . . These unhappy people of these said countries began to stir, because they said they were kept in great servitude . . . And of this imagination was a foolish priest in the country of Kent called John Ball, for the which foolish words he had been three times in the bishop of Canterbury's prison . . . Of his words and deeds there were much people in London informed, such as had great envy at them that were rich and such as were noble; and then they began to speak among them and said how the realm of England was right evil governed, and how that gold and silver was taken from them by them that were named noblemen: so thus these unhappy men of London began to rebel and assembled them together, and sent word to the foresaid countries that they should come to London and bring their people with them, promising them how they should find London open to receive them and the commons of the city to be of the same accord, saying how they would do so much to the king that there should not be one bondman in all England. This promise moved so them of Kent, of Essex, of Sussex, of Bedford and of the countries about, that they rose and came towards London to the number of sixty thousand. And they had a captain called Water Tyler, and with him in company was Jack Straw and John Ball: these three were chief sovereign captains, but the head of all was Water Tyler, and he was indeed a tiler of houses [someone who tiles walls and floors], an ungracious patron.