

Popular Revolts in the Late Middle Ages

Famine, plague, and war led to population decline and economic problems in the fourteenth century, which fueled both resentment and fear. How did such crises, and the response of those in power to these, spur calls for reform and revolts among peasants and workers?

1 The Statute of Laborers, 1351. After the English population declined by one-third because of the Black Death, rural and urban workers demanded higher wages and better working conditions, which led the English Parliament and King Edward III to pass the following law.

Because a great part of the people and especially of the workmen and servants has now died in that pestilence, some, seeing the straits of the masters and the scarcity of servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages, and others, rather than through labour to gain their living, prefer to beg in idleness: We, considering the grave inconveniences which might come from the lack especially of ploughmen and such labourers . . . have seen fit to ordain: that every man and woman of our kingdom of England, of whatever condition, whether bond or free, who is able bodied and below the age of sixty years, . . . shall be bound to serve him who has seen fit so to seek after him; and he shall take only the wages . . . or salary which, in the places where he sought to serve, were accustomed to be paid in the twentieth year of our reign of England [1346], . . . and if any man or woman, being thus sought after in service, will not do this, the fact being proven by two faithful men before the sheriffs or the bailiffs of our lord the king, or the constables of the town where this happens . . . shall be taken and sent to the next jail, and there he shall remain in strict custody until he shall find surety for serving in the aforesaid form. . . .

Likewise saddlers, skinnners, white-tawers, cordwainers, tailors, smiths, carpenters, masons, tilers, shipwrights, carters and all other artisans and labourers shall not take for their labour and handiwork more than what, in the places where they happen to labour, was customarily paid to such persons in [1346]; and if any man take more, he shall be committed to the nearest jail in the manner aforesaid.

2 John Ball preaches to the peasants. Beginning in the 1360s, the priest John Ball traveled around England delivering radical sermons, such as this one, reported in a chronicle by Jean Froissart. In the aftermath of the 1381 English Peasants' Revolt, Ball was arrested, imprisoned, and executed; his body was drawn and quartered; and his head was stuck on a pike on London Bridge.

John Ball was accustomed to assemble a crowd around him in the marketplace and preach to them. On such occasions he would say: "My good friends, matters cannot go on well in England until all things shall be in common; where there shall be neither vassals nor lords; when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. How ill they behave to us! For what reasons do they thus hold us in bondage? Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman? What reason can they give, why they should be more masters than ourselves? They are clothed in velvet and rich stuffs, ornamented with ermine and other furs, while we are forced to wear poor clothing. They have wines, spices, and fine bread, while we have only rye and the refuse of straw, and when we drink it must be water. They have handsome seats and manors, while we must brave the wind and rain in our labors in the field; and it is by our labor they have wherewith to support their pomp. We are called slaves, and if we do not perform our service we are beaten, and we have no sovereign to whom we can complain or who would be willing to hear us. Let us go to the King and remonstrate with him; he is young, and from him we may obtain a favorable answer, and if not we must ourselves seek to amend our condition."

ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

1. In Source 1, what does the law require laborers to do, and what penalties does it provide if they do not do so? How did laws such as this contribute to growing social tensions?
2. What do John Ball in Source 2 and the peasants mentioned in Source 3 view as wrong in English society, and what do they want done about it?
3. In Sources 4 and 5, what do the wool workers in Florence want? How do the authors of these sources differ in their opinions about these demands?
4. What was the response of those in power to the demands of peasants and workers?