

Part 2

Reformation

I am bound by the
Scriptures I have quoted
and my conscience is
captive to the Word of
God. I cannot and I will
not recant anything, since
it is neither safe nor right
to go against conscience.
May God help me.

MARTIN LUTHER





Charles V

Early sixteenth-century Western Europe was dominated by a trio of powerful and ambitious monarchs. Henry VIII (r. 1509–47), the first English king to be addressed as ‘majesty’, was courted by both the French king and the Holy Roman Emperor, and famously broke with the pope. Francis I (r. 1515–47) reinforced the absolutist claims of his immediate predecessors as King of France and unsuccessfully challenged Charles V for the title of Holy Roman Emperor. Meanwhile the Ottoman Turks under Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66) were looking enviously at the Christian north. The Sultan’s armies took Belgrade in 1521 and defeated the Hungarian army at Mohács in 1526. However, Suleiman’s siege of Vienna in 1529 was eventually raised, while his foray into Austria in 1532 was successfully resisted at Güns.

The third in this trio, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–56), attempted to maintain order, repel the Turks, heal the schism in the church caused by the Reformers, and defend and increase his hereditary holdings. As a descendant of Ferdinand of Aragon (r. 1479–1516) and Isabella of Castile (r. 1474–1504), he inherited the Spanish crown in 1516, taking the title Charles I. With the fall of Granada in 1492, the last of the Muslim Moors had been driven from the Iberian peninsula. Through Ferdinand and Isabella, Charles also received Sardinia, Sicily, the Kingdom of Naples, and the Balearic Islands. In addition, the newly colonized Spanish territories in North, Central, and South America poured wealth from the New World into his treasury.

Charles also inherited from his paternal grandmother, Mary of Burgundy (r. 1477–82), much of the Netherlands, Franche-Comté, and Luxembourg; and from his paternal grandfather, Maximilian I (r. 1508–16), the Habsburg lands of Germany. Shortly afterwards the Habsburgs also claimed the eastern flank of the Empire: Hungary,

Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. In 1519 Charles was elected Holy Roman Emperor becoming, at least in name, sovereign of the central lands of Europe too.

However Charles’ extensive holdings and ambitions did not allow him an easy rule. Charles and Francis I both laid claim to the Kingdom of Naples, Milan, Burgundy, Flanders, and Artois. There was also rivalry between the Pope and Charles, and it was papal policy that no power should control both Naples and Milan. The pope often backed Francis rather than Charles: Pope Leo X supported Francis over Charles in the imperial elections, and Pope Clement VII allied himself with the French king at a time when concerted action with Charles might otherwise have crushed the Reformation.

During the 1550s Charles gradually abdicated from parts of his empire. He gave Sicily, Naples, and Milan to his son Philip in 1554; he abdicated from the Netherlands in 1555; and from his Spanish Empire in 1556. Finally his brother Ferdinand succeeded as Holy Roman Emperor in 1558, shortly before Charles’ death.



Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was born in Eisleben, a small mining town in north-east Germany, grew up in Mansfeld, and was educated in Eisenach, Magdeburg, and the University of Erfurt, where he studied law. In 1505 he joined a closed Augustinian friary in Erfurt, after having made a dramatic vow during a thunderstorm. Ordained in 1507, he studied theology and rose through the academic ranks at the university. Transferring to the new University of Wittenberg in 1511, he was linked with that institution for the rest of his life. In 1510–11 Luther visited Rome for his order, and was profoundly shocked by the corruption and extravagance he encountered in the papal city. In 1512 he became a doctor of theology and professor of biblical studies at Wittenberg.

After a long spiritual crisis, Luther rejected theology based on the inherited tradition, emphasizing instead the individual understanding and experience of Scripture, crucially believing justification not to be by works, but by faith alone. Luther's views became more widely known when he sent a letter to the bishops, including Albrecht, Bishop of Mainz, on 31 October 1517 and later (probably mid-November) posted his 95 Theses – intended for academic debate about the sale of indulgences and the church's material preoccupations – on the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church. Their effect was to undermine the basis of contemporary practice.

In December the Archbishop of Mainz complained to Rome about Luther. The latter refused to recant, travelled to Heidelberg in 1518 having prepared a set of theses for disputation before his Augustinian order, and was then examined by Cardinal Thomas Cajetan (1469–1534) in Augsburg. When he heard he might be arrested, Luther fled. In July 1519, during a disputation at Leipzig with his sharpest opponent Johann Eck (1486–1543), Luther denied the supremacy of the pope and the infallibility of church councils. Two years later he was excommunicated.

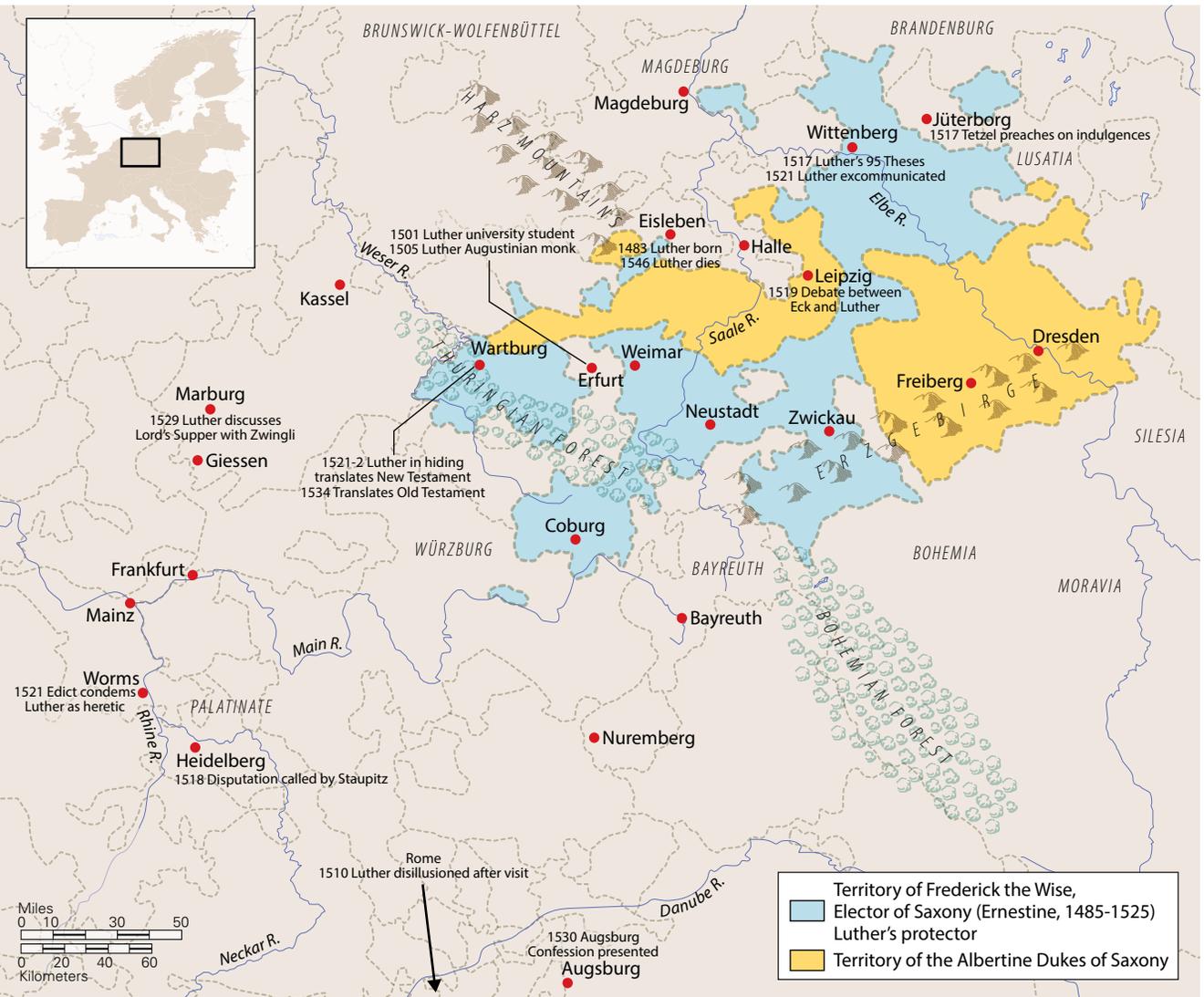
At the famous Diet of Worms in April 1521, standing before the

Holy Roman Emperor in person, and fearing for his life, Luther again refused to recant. He was declared an outlaw, but kidnapped for his own protection by the sympathetic Elector Frederick of Saxony and taken to the Wartburg Castle. There he devoted his energies to translating the New Testament into German.

Since 1483 Saxony had been divided into two parts: Ernestine and Albertine, or Electoral and Ducal respectively. During his career as reformer, Luther was fortunate to live in Electoral Saxony, where the ruler, Elector Frederick the Wise (r. 1483–1525), despite remaining a Catholic, protected

Martin Luther (1483–1546).





him when both Empire and Church turned against him. Ducal Saxony, on the other hand, was ruled by Duke George, a fierce opponent of Luther. The Leipzig debate took place in his territory.

In 1529 Luther travelled to Marburg for a colloquy with Zwingli and other reformers from Switzerland and south Germany; but the majority of his days were spent within

the narrower limits of Saxony. The 'Luther Lands' are bounded by the Erzgebirge (Bohemian Massif) on the south-east, Electoral Saxony to the north-east, the Harz Mountains in the north-west, and the Thuringian Forest around the Wartburg in the south-west. No city in this region is more than 75 miles from Wittenberg.

The German Knights' War

Given the revolutionary nature of Lutheranism and the economic and political tensions of the time, it is not surprising that the Reformation soon became marked by violence and extremism. The German Knights' War of 1522–23, in which members of the lower nobility – some of them strong supporters of Luther – rebelled against the authorities in south-west Germany, was quickly crushed.

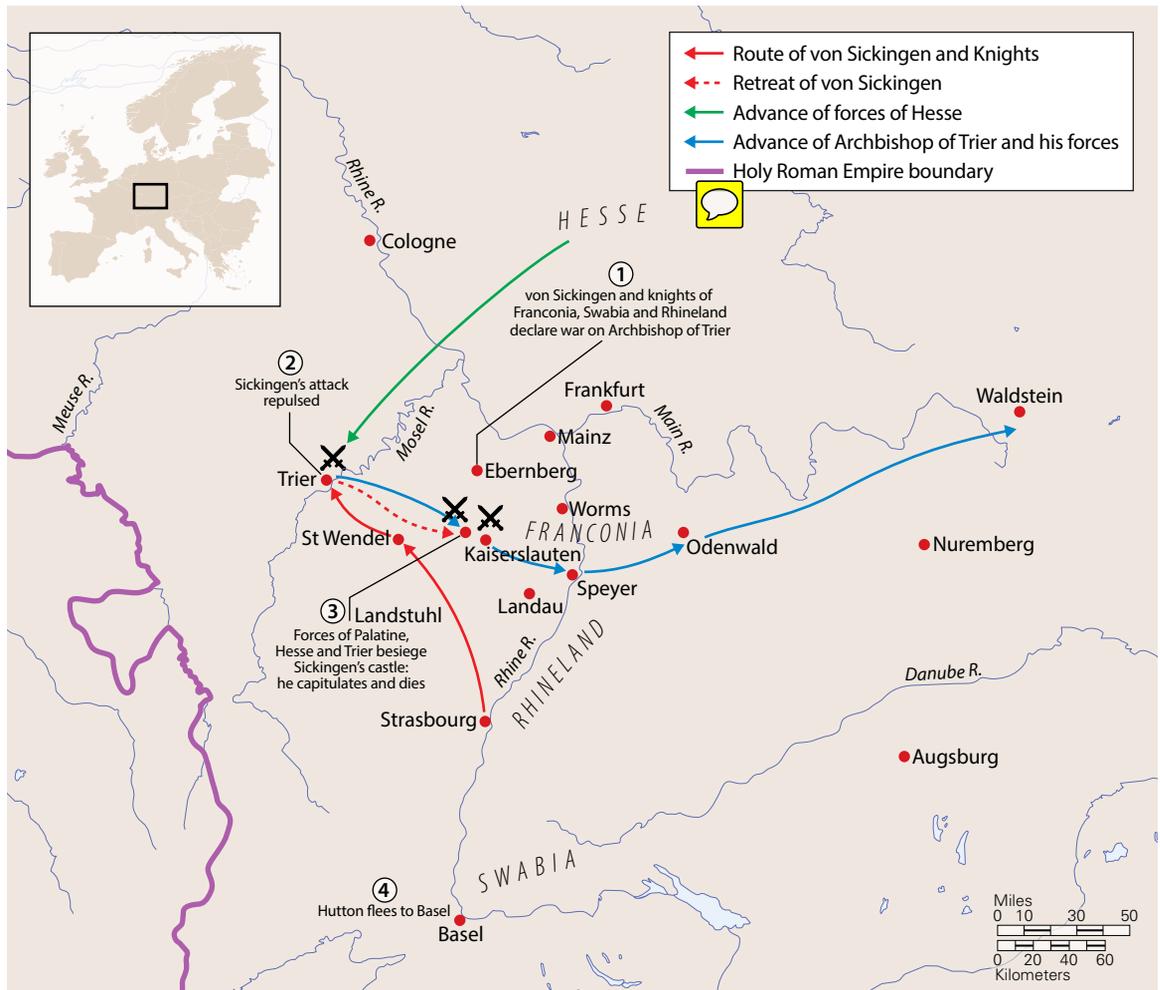
As medieval society began to crumble, the lesser nobility of the German states found themselves squeezed between powerful forces they could neither control nor moderate. Many depended upon dwindling payments in kind from their lands, a shortage of income made more acute by the spiralling inflation that followed the discovery and plundering of the New World. The increased authority of kings, together with the power and wealth of some princes of the church, further jeopardized the status, and excited the envy, of the knightly class. Their self-image had been flattered by the medieval code of chivalry and their role in the Crusades; now both their economic base and political power were declining rapidly.

Revolt

The knights rose in revolt under Franz von Sickingen (1481–1523) and Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523). Both became adherents of the Lutheran cause, seeing in it an opportunity to recover the declining influence of the Christian nobility in the German nation. Sickingen, who had previously fought for the emperors Maximilian and Charles V, was sometimes called 'the last knight'. With Hutten, he proposed the unification of German-speaking lands and secularization of ecclesiastical principalities. Influenced by

The Sickingen Heights, in the Palatinate, Germany, near von Sickingen's town, Landstuhl.





Hutten, Sickingen made his Rhineland estate, the Ebernburg, into a refuge for Lutheran sympathizers and a centre for Lutheran propaganda. He gave shelter to the reformers Martin Bucer and Johannes Oecolampadius, and even offered refuge to Luther following the Diet of Worms.

While Charles V was away in Spain, Sickingen summoned a gathering of knights and declared war on the Archbishop of Trier,

a prominent opponent of Luther. His assault failed and he retreated to his supposedly unassailable stronghold at Landstuhl, where he was defeated and killed by an alliance of three German princes. Following Sickingen's defeat, Hutten fled to Basel, Switzerland.

The common refusal to pay church tithes during the revolt spread to the peasants and inspired them to refuse to pay the tithe – one of the factors that led to the Peasants' Revolt.

The Peasants' War

While Martin Luther was in protective custody at the Wartburg Castle, back in Wittenberg his colleague Andreas Karlstadt started to attack clerical celibacy and the ritual of the Mass. Also outsiders (the 'Zwickau prophets') arrived, claiming direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit and that the eucharistic bread and wine were symbols and in no sense the body and blood of Christ. Baptizing babies was also called into question. Luther soon intervened to bring matters back under his control.

But Luther's ideas and protest – particularly his emphasis on Christian freedom – were helping rapidly to produce socio-religious ferment throughout Germany. Significant numbers of clergy led attacks on the Mass; various towns introduced reforms; many nobles imposed religious change in their estates; and monks and nuns abandoned their vows.

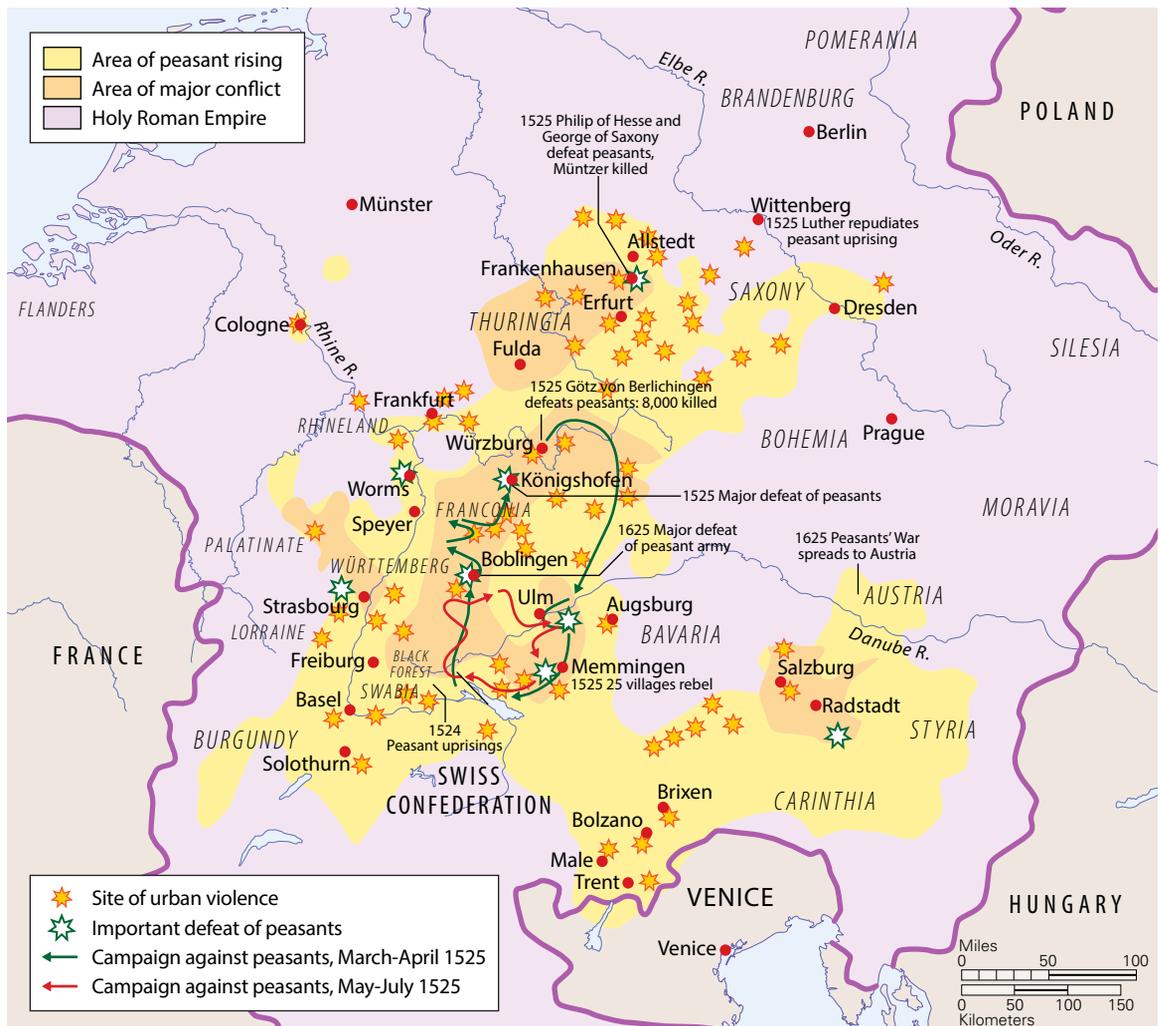
Late in 1524 rural strikes and armed protests flared up across much of the country, escalating into the so-called Peasants' (or better "Tenants") War, the biggest and most widespread popular uprising in Europe until the French Revolution of 1789. Similar protests had occurred previously, but this was far more extensive, representing the coming together of economic and social grievances with ideas derived from the Reformation. In German-speaking areas as widely scattered as Alsace, the fringes of the Alps, the borders of Bohemia, Hungary, and the kingdom of Poland there were strikes, disorder, and rebellions. Hostility was particularly aimed at clerical landlords. The first three of the Twelve Articles drawn up by the tenant farmers (*Bauern*) of Swabia called for the right to elect the parish priest, to use the tithe locally for the priest and poor, and for the end of serfdom.

Initially the Emperor was preoccupied with Italian wars

against the French, but after gaining a decisive victory at the Battle of Pavia in February 1525 his forces, under Georg III, Truchsess von Waldburg-Zeil (also known as *Bauernjorg*, 1488–1531), turned north to Germany, where with the aid of local princes, such as Philip of Hesse and George of Saxony, they set about putting down the rebellion with bloody battles, torture, and mass killings.

Luther's room in the Wartburg Castle.





Luther responded to the Peasants' Revolt with an *Admonition to Peace* (April 1525) that laid the blame for the rebellion on princes, lords, and 'blind bishops, mad priests, and monks', but reminded the peasants that 'the governing authorities are instituted by God'. However after a perilous journey to negotiate with the rebels, Luther became convinced anarchy was

unleashed and wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. This was published just days before the rebellion collapsed and appeared to justify the ensuing reign of terror by the Emperor and princes in which the final death toll may have reached 100,000. Luther, the champion of lay Christians, seemed to have turned himself into an apologist for state butchery.

The Reformation progressed strongly in the Swiss city of Zurich. Following the logic of the prohibition in the Ten Commandments on ‘making graven images’, enthusiastic citizens began to destroy religious statues. Study of the New Testament led some to conclude that the apostles had baptized believing adults – not newborn babies. In accordance with this, in January 1525 a small group of Zurichers first baptized themselves and then others. Since all had been baptized as babies, opponents dubbed them ‘Anabaptists’, or re-baptizers. The Anabaptists did not regard this as re-baptism but as their first, since infant baptism was no baptism at all.

The Anabaptists soon won many converts, particularly in villages south and east of the city. When the Zurich Anabaptists were arrested most recanted, but in 1526 four were executed by drowning and the others expelled. Anabaptist membership was voluntary and groupings appeared, disappeared, and fluctuated. They were normally only a small minority, and three main strands can be detected.

An influential group of ‘Swiss Brethren’ met in 1527 near Lake Constance and agreed upon the ‘Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God Concerning Seven Articles.’ They claimed adult baptism was mandatory, the Eucharist was a memorial ordinance, pastors were to be elected, and believers should separate themselves from society – taking no part in civic affairs and renouncing the use of force. They also refused to swear oaths. However although in Wittenberg Karlstadt had also questioned infant baptism, and Luther had ejected the enthusiastic Zwickau prophets, no links have been established between those radicals and the Swiss Anabaptists.

A second strand of the radical movement was focused on southern Germany, with Augsburg an early centre, led by Hans Denck (1495–1527) and a bookseller named Hans Hut (c. 1490–1527).

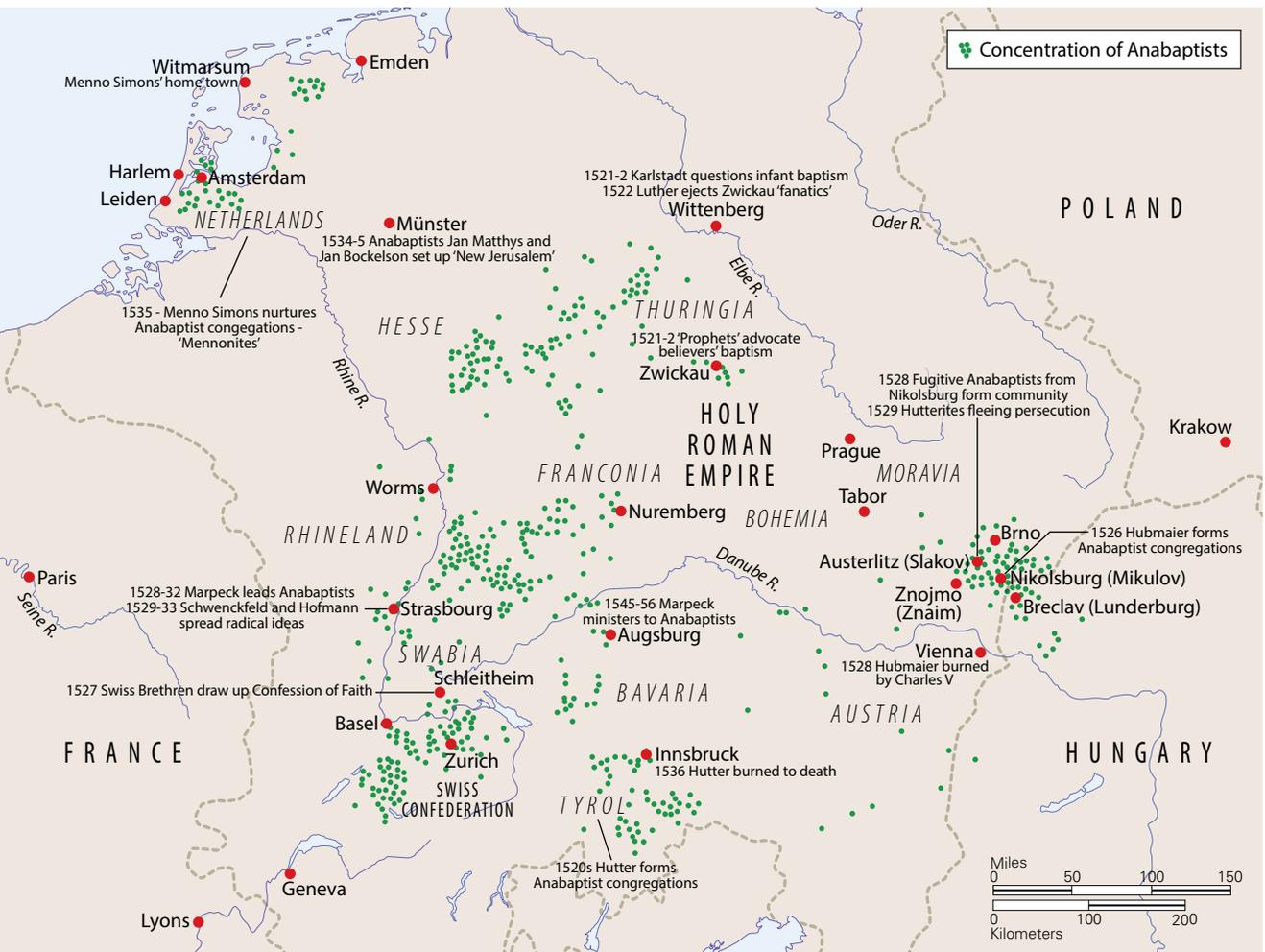
Eventually the Swiss and south German Anabaptists were driven to take refuge in the relative safety of Moravia. Led by Balthasar Hubmaier (c. 1485–1528), a refugee from

Waldshut and Zurich, and Jakob Hutter (c. 1500–36), who brought his followers from Tyrol, the ‘Hutterites’ developed a communal lifestyle and in the third quarter of the sixteenth century possibly numbered 30,000. But soon Moravia ceased to be a safe haven and over the next two centuries survivors of these groups were driven from place to place in Eastern Europe until they found eventual refuge in North America.

The behaviour of a third stream – in north-west Europe – largely accounted for the paranoia concerning Anabaptists that came to dominate the sixteenth century. In the Low Countries the evangelist Melchior Hoffman (c. 1500–c. 1543) won many converts to a form of Anabaptist belief that expected the imminent arrival of God’s final triumph. This region was under the direct rule of the Habsburgs, who initiated a merciless persecution of such ‘heretics’. Their victims fled, finding refuge in the episcopal city of Münster, where reform was already in progress. By this time Hoffman was in prison in Strasbourg, but the ‘Melchiorites’ seized control of Münster and proclaimed the ‘New Jerusalem’. Thousands from Friesland and nearby flocked to the city to be baptized and await the end of the age.

Münster

In April 1534, the Bishop of Münster joined forces with Lutheran nobles and cities to besiege the city, inside which radical steps were being taken to inaugurate the new



society. Property was declared to be common and polygamy made mandatory. The leaders, headed by the tailor Jan Beukels – ‘John of Leiden’ – lost all connection with reality. He lived in luxury, took sixteen wives, and proclaimed himself king of the world. In 1535 the city was betrayed to the bishop and resistance collapsed in a bloodbath.

The fall of Münster marked the end of militant Anabaptism – apart from the radical sect of Zwaardgeesten (‘sword-minded’) led by Jan van Batenburg (1495–1538) – as

a wave of persecution swept across Europe and thousands were slaughtered. Of the survivors, many turned to mysticism and inner enlightenment. The largest group was nurtured by the clandestine ministry of a former country priest, Menno Simons (1496–1561). These Mennonite communities – quietist and pacifist – survived continual Habsburg persecution and when the Dutch Republic was set up later in the century eventually achieved toleration.