

Reformation Violence: Religious Riots in the Baltic Region, 1520–1525

The aim of this project is to explore how acts of violence influenced the development of the Reformation in Baltic cities. Typically, the Reformation's progress is portrayed as the result of preaching the Gospel and opposing the Catholic Church's errors. This project offers a fresh perspective, framing violence not as a destructive force but as a catalyst for profound social change and a factor ensuring social stability.

A particularly interesting focus is Lutheranism, often seen as a peaceful, conformist, and conservative denomination that supported secular authorities. As noted by historian Otto Hintze over a century ago, following thinkers like Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch: "The nature of Lutheranism was peaceful and apolitical; it produced neither bold warriors nor cunning diplomats." Contrary to this view, however, the early Reformation along the Baltic coast was marked by a remarkable wave of violence that swept through many cities.

The central argument of the project is that physical, verbal, and symbolic acts of violence were essential to the Reformation's development. They played a decisive role not only in determining the movement's success or failure but also in shaping the emerging cultures of the mid-16th century. Yet, this foundational role of Reformation violence has been forgotten or downplayed. Confessional cultures often described these events as chaotic incidents or acts of vandalism perpetrated by the urban poor or women. Historians, in turn, have struggled to reconcile Lutheran iconoclasm with Lutheranism's supposed peacefulness, tolerance for church art, and preservation of many Catholic traditions.

To investigate this, the project focuses on the Baltic region, which soon became dominated by Lutheranism. The Baltic offers a unique case of a multi-ethnic and multilingual area with a dense network of political, economic, and communication ties. At the dawn of the Reformation, this region experienced an unprecedented escalation of violence. Studying these conflicts will shed light on how religious violence served not only to resolve existing disputes and stabilize social structures but also to express emerging confessional identities.

Additionally, the research examines the origins, course, and consequences of the Reformation in coastal cities from the perspectives of various historical actors, including Catholic clergy, itinerant preachers, urban elites, the poor, and women, as well as animals (baptized, beaten, or used in rituals) and objects (destroyed, defaced, or looted). This comprehensive approach aims to provide a deeper understanding of the transformative power of violence during the Reformation.