

REVIEW ESSAY

Armed and Ruined Prophets of the Reformation

Jarrett Adrian Carty

Liberal Arts College, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

Email: jarrett.carty@concordia.ca

Lyndal Roper: *Summer of Fire and Blood*. (New York: Basic Books, 2025. Pp. viii, 527.)

Andrew Drummond: *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer: The Life and Times of an Early German Revolutionary*. (London and New York: Verso, 2024. Pp. xii, 372.)

Bruce Gordon: *Zwingli: God's Armed Prophet*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. Pp. xviii, 349.)

Stephen Brett Eccher: *Zwingli the Pastor: A Life in Conflict*. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press. 2024. Pp. xvi, 268.)

Peter Opitz: *Ulrich Zwingli: Prophet, Heretic, Pioneer of Protestantism*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024. Pp. ix, 92.)

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“From this it arises that all the armed prophets conquered,” wrote Niccolò Machiavelli, “and the unarmed ones were ruined.”¹ Moses was his preeminent example of a prophet-prince, since Moses relied not only on the revelation of Yahweh, but also on the arms used to maintain the way of life that revelation prescribed. For Machiavelli, the firebrand Dominican Girolamo Savonarola served as a timely Florentine example of a ruined prophet without arms, for mere popular support was not enough to sustain the serious changes the friar sought for Florence’s church and society.² To be sure, in Machiavelli’s day, there was a

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 24.

² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 24.

widespread belief that the Western church had fallen very far from its apostolic origins; recent popes such as Alexander VI, who had excommunicated Savonarola and fathered Cesare Borgia, could well serve as an archetype of ecclesiastical corruption. But while many agreed with Savonarola's denunciations of wayward popes and clerics, his attempt at reform turned only into a prelude to the return of the Medici to Florence, and their influence over the papacy.

Even if one grants Machiavelli's claim that prophets without arms come to ruin, and that Moses and David were great biblical examples of princely *virtù*, his version of "prophet" is dubious from a biblical perspective. Biblical prophets recalled God's people to covenant, which meant that they were often at odds with whoever wielded power and arms in their context. David may have been successful in war and politics, but the unarmed Nathan was a prophet who successfully called his power to account for breaking the covenant. For every Moses, David, or Gideon, who used arms well, there were plenty more biblical prophets like Amos, Isaiah, or Jeremiah, who denounced the powerful and successful, suffered for it, and never even attempted to conquer their people by force. Prophetic success in the Bible was not in maintaining the state, but in recalling God's chosen people, often resulting in public hostility. Hence Jesus claimed to his followers that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (Luke 4:24).

Was Machiavelli's "armed prophet" reconcilable with the biblical prophets? Many interpreters have denied it. But fascinatingly, many early Reformation leaders styled themselves prophets after the biblical examples and emphasized covenant and divine judgment, and they were armed. These armed prophets also came to ruin and their visions of a reformed church and society shattered. But their influence reached well beyond the narrow confines of their defeats on the battlefield. Due to these defeats, these failed armed prophets of the early Reformation have not enjoyed prolonged historical consideration. Each of the five books reviewed helps overcome this neglect and shows the pivotal role these failed armed prophets played in shaping the political thought of the Reformation.

The Peasants' War of 1525 claimed an estimated 100,000 peasant lives in Central Europe. In fact, the true cost in lives of the *Aufbruch*, or "Turbulence" as it was called, cannot be fully known: our period sources are notoriously unreliable regarding numbers or participants or casualties. But it was a staggeringly large uprising of tens of thousands of peasants across largely German-speaking lands, at first enjoying easy and notable victories, only to be crushed by authorities wherever they were found. There were ample precedents to the Peasants' War in the centuries that preceded it; many significant and destructive peasant uprisings marked medieval European history. What had made this one so widespread and so lethal was that it joined with the very Reformation principles that Luther and others had already made so popular. The Peasants' War would thereby become something of a watershed for how and for whom the Reformation would proceed, and what political ideas for keeping order would prevail in its aftermath.

Lyndal Roper's *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War* tells the story of this Reformation trauma from the perspectives of those who revolted: primarily the peasants and their leaders, but their opponents are also given careful

consideration. In focusing on the peasants themselves, Roper's book is a relatively rare but refreshing history of this great upheaval. Reformation history has tended to treat the Peasants' War as an early story about Martin Luther and German reform, or an early traumatic event on the road to confessionalization: in other words, as a cataclysm that helped form the Protestant and Catholic division of Europe. Through this perspective, the Peasants' War became a great warning when reform was not strictly controlled from above. It has also been seen through various ideological filters; hence Marxist historians treated the war as proto-socialist uprising against the proto-bourgeoisie. By contrast, Roper's vivid study focuses less on what it caused or represented and more on the fact that it was the biggest popular uprising in Europe until the French Revolution.

In focusing on the Peasants' War as a popular uprising, Roper introduces the many people who joined it and why. Certainly, she writes of leaders like Thomas Müntzer, but also introduces peasants like Hans Müller, a subject of the Abbey of St Blasien, in the southern Black Forest, who became a spokesperson for the revolting Stühlingen peasants, or Jakob Wehe, a preacher of Leipheim, who joined the 4,000-strong peasant army of the Günzburg region. Their contributions, along with thousands of other people like them, made the war a movement.

But why did it happen in the early sixteenth century and in Central Europe? Roper's account outlines the coming together of a complex set of peasant grievances with the clear and compelling agenda of the early Reformation, which clashed with the complex but largely weak feudal structure of the Holy Roman Empire that was unaware of the imminent dangers and unable to quickly respond when armed conflict began. Roper sketches how revolts were enflamed in various localities. Peasant rebellions were far from a new phenomenon in European history, and neither were the grievances that fuelled them. Peasants were saddled with such a staggering number of feudal impositions and obligations that one is left wondering how a population so poor and so vulnerable to fluctuations in nature's bounty, market demand, and rates of exchange, could ever pay them. Peasants faced tithes, rents, feudal legal rights, fines of many kinds (such as for taking over farmland), dues for sundry things (such as a death tax or frequenting a tavern), and heavy restrictions on water, wood, fishing, and even moving livestock within the feudal lands. The value and kind of dues and obligations also varied greatly from place to place, often resulting in differing dues between neighboring villages. Roper's book builds a good deal of sympathy for the peasant grievances, and the injustice of their feudal predicaments. She enlivens a world whose societal structure was unmistakably exploitative for its lowest class until the eve of the Reformation.

After its seemingly obscure beginning in the meaning and efficacy of indulgences, the seminal clash of Luther and papal agents grew very quickly into a widespread movement for major church and societal reform. By the early 1520s, pamphlets, posters, and preachers were spreading ideas like the "priesthood of all believers" and "Christian freedom"; soon, all church and civil authority was reconsidered beside a theology that claimed that a Christian was subject to none save God himself. Thus, the peasant grievances were welded to a radical call for the reformulation of church and civil authority. The calls for peasant freedom,

rooted in the experience of feudal exploitation, now came to be understood as a call for wholesale societal reform, with the Bible as its guiding star. Prophet-like leaders came to the fore to lead the peasant movement, and statements like the “Twelve Articles” of the Swabian League became their stated goals. Their armies would be the vanguard of a new social order based on the word of God.

To the peasants and their leaders, early successes in 1525 appeared to confirm a divine mandate, but in Roper’s account it showed the frailty and debility of the feudal powers to enforce dues and rights and maintain peace and order. The paths to peasant revolt were often first ceded by local authorities. Routinely in Roper’s book we see, for instance, firebrand preachers retained by sympathetic town councils, even when the duke had forbidden them to continue. But this was also a world mostly without standing, professional armies, so there was only so much a duke could do when his authority was ignored or violated. The Holy Roman Empire’s professional and mercenary armies were fighting in Italy against France, and not remotely able to stop the revolts from beginning and protect feudal property. The armories of local castles or the treasuries of nearby monasteries, for example, were essentially unguarded as they faced an army of a thousand armed peasants. With such booty at their disposal, peasant armies quickly acquired great wealth and arms in the spring of 1525. For Roper, this one of the great differences from previous medieval revolts: the rapid acquisition of wealth and arms, which guaranteed terrible bloodshed to come.

Almost as quickly as it arose, the revolt was crushed in the summer of 1525, once feudal lords in the empire had the opportunity to organize and respond. Though there were plenty of peasants with battle experience, their armies were no match for the armies and arms of the lords once they had the time to recall or recruit their men. Virtually every armed engagement of the summer was a peasant rout, and the peasant death toll was always too large to be accurately estimated by witnesses. Places such as Frankenhausen saw so much bloodshed that the street gutters became forever known as blood gutters. Roper writes that as many as 15 percent of men were killed, rivaling the death toll in some parts of Germany from the world wars of the last century. It was certainly one of the greatest German upheavals. For Roper, this was particularly true for the war’s effect on monasteries: well over half of the Cistercian and two-thirds of the Benedictine monasteries—by far the wealthiest of the orders and numbering nearly two hundred communities—were destroyed, looted, or damaged, making it also one of the greatest land and wealth transfers in German history.

But the war did not end in the summer 1525, for authorities continued to battle any sympathy for the peasant cause and portray its leaders as devil-possessed, evil usurpers and unhinged, bloodthirsty despots. Quite infamously, and to the dismay of many of his fellow reformers, Luther was publishing such things as the war was raging in his backyard. To be sure, for Roper, Luther’s role in the unfolding catastrophe was secondary. But there was no denying the vitriol he and many others had used to denounce the peasants. The very title of his polemic, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, says enough. Luther insisted, despite peasant and Catholic claims to the contrary, there was an enormous chasm between him and the abominable words and deeds of peasant leaders like Thomas Müntzer. With such denunciations, the war’s legacy became

a warning that any chaos in the name of reform would bring God's wrath. Müntzer's grisly fate proved divine disfavor.

But how essential was Müntzer's leadership in the Peasants' War? For critical scholarship, even confirming the most basic of details of his life is difficult; for much of the war, and for most of his life prior to 1523, we have no documentary evidence. Even Müntzer's appearance should be subject to great doubt: his most popular portrait comes from an etching made in 1608, over 80 years after his death, without any record or indication that it was based on a reliable earlier depiction. Andrew Drummond's biography, *The Dreadful History and Judgement of God on Thomas Müntzer*, reexamines the evidence.

Müntzer's visage, based on the 1608 etching, adorned the 1975 issued *Fünf Mark* of the communist Deutsche Demokratische Republik. Müntzer had become a proto-revolutionary hero, a status that to some extent persists in Germany to this day, and one that strikingly overturned the prevailing condemnations of period sources. Drummond's account about this armed prophet essentially coheres, at least in part, with the sixteenth century's demonization and the twentieth century's lionization. For Drummond, if his doctrinal and religious views are removed, what is left of Müntzer is an absolute authority for revolution. Thus, Luther's vicious slander and communist hagiography amount to the same sum: a revolutionary leader who sought to overturn the entire social and political order. For men like Luther, being a revolutionary was tantamount to devil worship from a raving false prophet; for the East Germans, it was proto-Bolshevism.

Drummond gets to his subject not just by analyzing the sources Müntzer and his circles left but also placing him in the wider but very turbulent first few years of the Reformation. What fascinates about this context is that Müntzer was far from alone. While the victors of the Peasants' War heaped blame on him, as Drummond's book shows, there were many more clerics and civic leaders like him. Amongst the people of Zwickau, Allstedt, and Frankenhäusen—where for a time Müntzer had served as a pastor and preacher—he also had many followers. What is remarkable about those basic facts is how quickly radical and wholesale church reform and societal change took place. In fact, as Drummond outlines, it was the speed and scope of reform that began the rift between Müntzer and Wittenberg. Yet in 1520, still in the early years of Reformation controversies, he wrote to Luther for advice regarding a brewing conflict with Zwickau's Franciscans, plainly seeing himself within the Wittenberg orbit. By early 1522, after the Diet of Worms and his confinement to the Wartburg by his prince (only to secretly visit Wittenberg in disguise), Luther began to argue that only slow, gentle reform was appropriate. Thus, Müntzer began to be seen as too radical for the church, and too threatening to civil order. By odd coincidence, in 1522 while Luther was sequestered at the Wartburg, Müntzer was itinerant. Having been forced to leave Zwickau and then Prague, he wandered, leaving no trace of his route. Yet for Drummond, this was a crucial period in Müntzer's development of his identity, for this wandering convinced him of his status as a great reforming prophet, and to see himself as one of the elect called by God to reorder church and society. His writings after this period took a radical turn.

One of the book's most significant contributions is that it gives an outline of Müntzer's ideas gleaned from letters, pamphlets, and sermons, while critically treating the polemics against them. That Müntzer's texts survive at all is quite remarkable: they were confiscated, prohibited, and largely destroyed. They were only preserved by his sworn enemies, sometimes by accident, sometimes because they served as proof of Müntzer's eternal infamy. They certainly show Müntzer's talents in propelling controversy in an already controversial period. In responding to Luther's 1524 attack in his *Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit*, Müntzer wrote his *Highly Provoked Vindication and a Reply to the Spiritless Easy-Living Flesh in Wittenberg who has Sullied Wretched Christianity with his Falsification and Theft of the Holy Scriptures*, a title which gives a foretaste of the acerbic invective it contained. Müntzer joined the Reformation's wars of printed vitriol with zeal. But behind his polemics was an unshakeable belief in an imminent apocalypse, accompanied by trust in his call as one of the few genuine prophets, and the imperative to take up arms against the enemies of God. These core beliefs were not particularly unique: some version could be found in every corner of the Reformation divides. What made Müntzer's version distinct was the pneumatology behind his ideas: he claimed that the Holy Spirit directly spoke to him and his followers. Scripture was vitally important, but he was no humanist scholar. In fact, unlike Luther, Calvin, or Erasmus, he showed disdain for biblical scholarship. Rather, the experience of the Holy Spirit pointed him forward and would vindicate his prophecies regarding political and social reform. This belief led him to diametrically opposite views from Luther regarding political power; whereas Luther saw in government a divinely ordained institution, Müntzer saw the entrenched enemies of faith that must be countered by an armed uprising.

On May 15, 1525, shortly after noon and mere minutes of confrontation, the battle of Frankenhausen was over with somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000 peasant casualties. Though Müntzer had escaped the slaughter, he was later that day captured and, for his role in the uprising, under the jurisdiction of Duke George of Saxony, beheaded on May 27, in Mühlhausen. Like Roper, Drummond shows a more complex picture than the Müntzer of Lutheran and Catholic diatribes. He was a revolutionary who sought to overturn German society through force, but the Peasants' War was far more popular and widespread than Müntzer's relatively limited leadership over it. Müntzer could not even be said to be remotely in command of the battle of Frankenhausen.

Müntzer had certainly failed to remake the church and social order. Elsewhere there was an example of fast-paced, thorough, and sustained reform in the early Reformation: Zurich, under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli. Once again, there has been a relative dearth of scholarly attention given to him and his context, in part because he too had engaged in armed conflict and lost his life by 1531. Luther would live until 1546, and Reformed Christianity, which Zwingli had helped begin, would soon be led by such heavyweights as John Calvin, John Knox, or Theodore Beza; thus Zwingli's early prominence faded into relative obscurity. Bruce Gordon's *Zwingli: God's Armed Prophet* provides a brilliant and extensive biography of this crucial reformer who would die while the Reformation was still young. It is joined by two other recent and compelling biographies: Peter Opitz, *Ulrich Zwingli: Prophet, Heretic, Pioneer of Protestantism*, and Stephen Brett Eccher,

Zwingli the Pastor: A Life in Conflict. With these recent books, the significance of Zwingli, particularly his contribution to Reformation political thought, is made lucid and distinct.

Zwingli's worldview was fractured by deep tensions and contradictions. He was a committed pastor and preacher of church reform yet died defending his city on the battlefield, clad in armor and sword in hand. He decried the injustices of imperial and papal wars but led Zurich into an unnecessary and doomed armed conflict against its Swiss neighbors. He was a committed humanist scholar of the Bible yet would not concede an inch to other reformers regarding his memorialist theology of the eucharist. He denounced the suppression of reform in the Roman church yet was resolute in his persecution of the Anabaptists. How could such positions be held together in one man? For these biographies, a good part of the answer was that Zwingli's rise was in part due to peculiarities of his Swiss context.

Zwingli spent all his life in the Swiss confederacy and was steeped in its politics. He rose to prominence as the *Leutpriester*, or "people's priest" in the Grossmünster, Zurich, where he would spend the rest of his life. Born in the Toggenburg Valley in the eastern canton of St Gall, from an early age, even before he was known as a reformer, he railed against Swiss mercenaries and distrusted foreign powers that used them. Zwingli was also a cultivated career preacher: after he completed his baccalaureate studies at the University of Basel, he was ordained in 1506, and served in the small canton of Glarus, followed by a preaching post at the Benedictine abbey in Einsiedeln, in the central canton of Schwyz.

As outlined by Gordon, the young Zwingli in his early church career became a Christian humanist and a reformer and had then committed to the principle that Christian belief and practice must be clearly based on scripture. This reputation as a teacher of the Word preceded him in Zurich, even to the point of overshadowing a potentially scandalous affair with a local woman in Einsiedeln, for his appointment to the Grossmünster was met with little opposition. In Zurich, Zwingli's career as a humanist preacher flourished, beginning in January 1519 with his unconventional dismissal of the lectionary in favour of prolonged examination of the whole of the gospel of Matthew. By the early 1520s, like many reformers across Europe, Zwingli was preaching against indulgences and penitential abuses, monasticism, the cult of the saints, and clerical celibacy. In fact, Zwingli was the first Reformation cleric to marry in 1522, though he did not openly acknowledge it until 1524.

As *God's Armed Prophet* shows, Zwingli's rise came with the strong support of his city. Even at the outset of controversies in 1522, and the explicit condemnation from a Swiss Diet, Zurich was largely behind him. Though it had no ecclesial authority to do so, the city council decided to hold a public disputation in January 1523 over Zwingli's teaching to discern its orthodoxy. This First Disputation, as it came to be called, evoked Zwingli's submission and defense of his 67 *Articles*, an extensive scriptural justification of the reform cause, and in posterity a classic text of the Reformation. The disputation absolved Zwingli of error and signaled that serious reform was taking hold within the city. The Second Disputation followed ten months later in October 1523, this time focused upon the use of images in

worship (after incidents and controversies over iconoclasm) and the practice and nature of the eucharist. While less conclusive than the first, these public disputations thrust Zwingli into one of the leading roles of Swiss reform with Zurich as its epicenter. Soon Zurich was reforming church and society with an astonishing pace.

Zwingli's success owed much to the fact that he was a remarkably effective preacher and pastor. Eccher's biography in particular gives primary place to pastoral leadership and preaching skills. One notable example of them was the novelty of Zwingli's study gatherings called the *Lectorium*, or later the *Prophezei*, which Opitz argues were at the very heart of Zwingli's reformation. Five times a week, clergy, students, members-at-large, and visitors would gather at the Grossmünster to communally interpret scripture, which included Hebrew from the Septuagint and Koine Greek, and concluded with a German summary for all. Here was the understanding of the Word as a community effort, meant for dissemination and the benefit of the whole city.

The *Lectorium* gives some insight into his political thought, for it emphasized the unity of the city in living the word of God. In contrast to Müntzer, Zwingli defended temporal government against radical reformers who sought to revolt or reject worldly power, at least as currently constituted, as inherently evil. But neither were there "two kingdoms" or the "law and gospel" in his thinking as there were in Luther's. Zwingli made no great distinction between Christian faith in the spiritual realm and political service in the secular one. His view, rather, was that moral law and the gospel were under one covenant that governed the whole community, be they magistrates, pastors, or the people. Zwingli's city therefore resembled a Christian version of the people of Israel in the Hebrew Bible: living under one law that regulated civil, spiritual, and cultic matters and was administered and presided over by both civil and priestly offices. Zwingli's reformed city would be an integrated Christian commonwealth.

As Gordon's masterful *God's Armed Prophet* makes very clear, Zwingli's plan for reform with city oversight was rooted in the historic Swiss context: in approving of magisterial authority over the church, he sought to uphold and expand the *de facto* ecclesial autonomy the Swiss cantons had been wielding long before the Reformation. Moreover, Zwingli's view of a covenantal community fit closely into the prevailing Swiss context of small city republics governed by aristocracies of merit, and hence his efforts to reform Zurich were always closely in tandem with the efforts of the city's magistrates.

Zwingli's efforts to create a covenantal community, coupled with the long history of republicanism in the Swiss Confederacy, cohered with his consistent and persistent stance against mercenary service. As Opitz, Eccher, and Gordon all note, Zwingli's first publications, the poems "The Fable of the Ox" and the "Labyrinth," renounced mercenary service and called for the protection of Swiss independence against the incursions of European powers. Zwingli's pre-Reformation service as chaplain to Swiss mercenary armies, and especially his witnessing of the battle of Marignano in September of 1515 in which they suffered heavy losses to France, prove formative in Eccher and Gordon's accounts. But unlike many other humanists and reformers of the early sixteenth century, most notably Erasmus, Zwingli's disillusionment with these wars did not turn him into a pacifist. In fact, Zwingli's Reformation career is bookended by battles: first as a military chaplain, and finally

as a soldier. He held no reservations about using deadly force against external enemies or internal dissenters, like the Anabaptists. Yet Gordon notes the irony of his own battlefield death in a war that many at the time, and in its aftermath, deemed unnecessary, and the loss of which was injurious to his city. Gordon's *God's Armed Prophet* ends with a sketch of how troubled the memory of Zwingli was in Zurich, then and since, how there was a simultaneous desire to remember and forget him.

How did these failed armed prophets influence the political thought of the Reformation? One typical answer in the dominant historiography has been that they helped Lutherans and Catholics articulate the boundaries of reform and to say what they were not. But these much-needed studies show us more than just mirrors for the victors of the Peasants' War. It is not that Müntzer was wrong, and that it prompted Luther to say what was right. Rather, these studies show that there were living political ideas in their failures, and that these ideas held some longevity and legitimacy in their time, and in the centuries to come. For example, nearly a century and a half later in the English Civil War, the radical rejection of the divine right of kings and assertion of the right of revolution demonstrated that several key elements of radical Reformation political thought had endured despite the long past ruination of the armed prophets who held them. Perhaps Machiavelli could have used another category: armed prophets who came to ruin, but whose ideas would help found and maintain the states to come.