"The Clamor of the People": Popular Support for the Persecution of Jews in Switzerland and Germany at the Approach of the Black Death, 1348-1350

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"The Clamor of the People"

Popular Support for the Persecution of Jews in Switzerland and Germany at the Approach of the Black Death, 1348-50

by Albert Winkler

The persecution of Jews in the German Empire and Switzerland from 1348 to 1350 at the approach of the Black Death was one of the most shameful examples of brutality against those people in European history before the twentieth century. Das Martyrologium des Nürnberger Memorbuches presents the names of at least 339
Mobs attacking Jews in the Middle Ages.

cities, towns, and villages in Germany and Switzerland where Jews were oppressed at that time, and the Jewish communities in many scores of cities and towns were eradicated. Many of the victims were tortured and burned alive.\(^1\) While the percentages of the total number of Jews killed at that time were doubtlessly very high, the actual numbers who died in these attacks are difficult to fix with certainty.

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\(^1\) Siegmund Salfelt, ed. Das Martyrologium des Nürnberger Memorbuches (Berlin: Simion, 1898). Much of this material was recorded in 1349. See, the Einleitung, xviii. The compiled list of towns is also presented in The Jewish Encyclopedia s. v. "Black Death."
because of the inexact nature of many of the sources. However, the human death toll was easily in the thousands and likely in the tens of thousands.

Among the poorly understood issues relating to the pogroms is the social status of the persecutors, a question which has caused disagreements between recent historians. Specifically, the argument that the segments of society in inferior positions of rank, wealth, or status supported, assisted, or instigated the Jewish pogroms has been challenged. The validity of this interpretation necessitates that at least several factors were at play. These include the theories that lower-class persons had insufficient motives to attack Jews, that the commoners lacked the will or means to hurt their Jewish neighbors, and that the masses were too weak to influence anyone else to do their bidding. This paper will examine these determinants to understand the role of lower-class members of society in the persecution of Jews in Germany and Switzerland and to demonstrate that the power of the common people was a major factor in these pogroms.

A number of scholars have argued that the lower classes were not significantly involved in the persecution of the Jews at the advance of the Black Death. Early in the last century, Margolis and Marx stated,

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"Unlike earlier persecutions, those of 1348-1349 were generally carried out systematically by the order of the city councils." Recent prestigious studies make similar observations, and Alfred Haverkamp denies that there was any class component in the persecution of the Jews. "The thesis that the social ranks or even class specific behavior against the Jews [is] not supported by the preserved source material." František Graus expresses a similar opinion in which he minimizes lower-class participation. The persecutions of Jews "were no spontaneous reaction by city lower classes." He further adds, "Hardly a single one of the pogroms in the middle of the fourteenth century can really be designated as a people’s movement or even as a [popular] uprising."

These arguments have been continued by Iris Ritzman who also affirms that the persecution of the Jews was not related to the advance of the Plague, and the pogroms can best be understood as a continuation of abuse starting decades earlier. Ritzmann adds that the destruction of the Jews in Germany were planned actions by city councils and had little to do with the hysteria of the people or the fear of the approach of the Black Death. She further declares that, "Normally, the murder of the Jews proceeded hardly ever as a 'pogrom' in the proper sense of the word, but rather as mass executions organized by the [city] authorities." Karl-Heinz Leven disagrees with Ritzmann’s assumptions that the Plague had nothing to do with the outbreak of violence against the Jews, but he maintains "that the murder of Jews in 1348 was no spontaneous uprising of the masses (Pöbels)" which victimized the Jews as scapegoats.

Samuel Kline Cohn has further expanded these arguments in which he also attacks the thesis that the lower classes were involved.

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5 Haverkamp, “Judenverfolgungen,” 91. "Die These von der schichten- oder gar klassespezifischen Verhaltensweise gegenüber den Juden findet in dem überlieferten Quellenmaterial keine Stütze." All translations are by the author.
6 Graus, Judenmorde, 222.
in the persecution of Jews. Professor Cohn argues that some of the aspects of the pogroms have been inadequately explained. "The social character of that persecution (who ordered and led the massacres,
who were its initial targets, and what were the motives?), however, remains hypothetical, often based on unexamined assumptions about the character and reasons for the killing of Jews.”¹⁰ Dr. Cohn states that the lower classes were not involved in the persecution of Jews, “For the Black Death and its immediate aftermath, 1348-52, social movements with concrete aims to redress economic grievances, challenge political authority or question prevailing social hierarchies are difficult to find either north or south of the Alps.”¹¹

Furthermore according to Cohn, there are almost no primary sources which indicate lower-class involvement, “Few, if any, chroniclers pointed to peasants, artisans, or even the faceless mob as the perpetrators of the violence against the Jews in 1348 to 1351.”¹² Cohn also presents an almost blanket condemnation of all modern scholarship which has stated that the lower classes were involved in the persecutions, “The idea that the attacks against the Jews in 1348-51 came from the blind fury of ‘mobs’ comprising workers, artisans and peasants derives almost exclusively from the musings of modern historians, not from medieval sources.”¹³

However, the thesis that the lower classes were involved in the destruction of the Jews has been expressed in numerous thorough and highly-respected studies, many of whom carefully cite their sources. In his extensive history of the Jews, Heinrich Graetz states that the “mob” or “rabble” (Pöbel) persecuted Jews in Strasbourg, Regensburg, Krems, the small city of Stein, and in the villages near Stein. The “people” or “populace” (Volk) molested Jews in Basel, Speyer, Strasbourg, Mainz, and Cologne. The “peasantry” (Landvolk) of Alsace oppressed the Jews. The flagellants also inflamed the “crowd” (Volksmenge) to take action against the Jews in Germany.¹⁴

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¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid., 7.
¹³ Ibid., 18-19.
Dr. Graetz also cites sources for many of his statements that the lower classes were involved in the pogroms. Among these was Albrecht von Strassburg, a contemporary chronicler to the persecutions, also known as Mathias von Neuenburg. Georg Caro also states, “It is no accident that the great Jewish persecutions of 1349 came directly from the guilds and that [in] so many areas the burning of the Jews followed the overthrow of the patriotic [city] council.”

Norman F. Cantor makes a number of statements relating to lower-class persecution of Jews. “In Basel the citizens marched to the city-hall and compelled the council to take an oath that they would burn the Jews.” Also, in Basel there was an “increased anger of the populace” against the Jews. “To satisfy the popular mood,” Jews were burned. Additionally, “The town council of Strasbourg that wanted to save the Jews was deposed on February 9-10, and the new council gave in to the mob, who then arrested the Jews.” In Regensburg, “the urban patriciate enjoyed some breadth of support among the artisans, and it was still possible to quell mob violence.” After the Jews were burned in Strasbourg, “The populace then looted the synagogue.” “The populace” attacked Jews in various towns including Bonn where the city council was “forced to give way to popular pressure.” Additionally, “Some of the Jews killed themselves, while others fell at the hands of the mob.” At Mainz, “The mob turned on the Jews.” Cantor also states how the Jews were regarded by various social strata, “The Jews were detested by a wide spectrum of local society, from minor princes to artisans and peasants.”

Anna Foa also comments on lower-class hostility towards Jews, “In many areas, [the Jewish] neighborhoods were attacked by the mobs (folla), and they were massacred or sent into exile.” She adds that the incentive to massacre the Jews at the time of the Black Death came in the most part from “marginal people” who were involved in mob

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violence.\textsuperscript{17} Joshua Trachtenberg, states that the attack against the Jews in Germany was a “spontaneous mass movement.”\textsuperscript{18} Avner Falk refers to the persecution of Jews in Mainz in 1349, “When the enraged Christian mob fell upon them with great fury, many Jews burned themselves to death.”\textsuperscript{19}

Other studies in German have presented similar analyses. Wanda Kampmann states that the “The Cologne Jewish quarter was stormed . . . by the mob (Pöbel), as the ‘battle of the Jews’ is known to the chroniclers of the city.”\textsuperscript{20} Arno Herzig writes about the persecution of Jews in Germany. “Specific social groups responsible for this pestilence pogrom are simply difficult to account for. Among the Jew beaters (Judenschlägern) [were] found representatives of the nobility, patricians, guilds, and the city’s poor (Stadtarmut). The urban lower classes (Unterschichten) . . . indeed also participated.”\textsuperscript{21}

Robert Hoeniger, argues that the persecutors of Jews in Cologne included the city’s “working class” (Proletarier).\textsuperscript{22} Rudolf Wackernagel also states that the lower classes in Basel pressed for the Jews to be killed. “The guilds (Zünfte) . . . demanded boisterously the death of the Jews.” There was “a public demand of the people (des Volkes)” that revenge be taken on the Jews. “The city council

\textsuperscript{17} Anna Foa, Ebrei in Europa: dalla Peste Nera all’emancipazione XIV-XVII Secolo (Roma: Laterza, 1992), 13, 15.
\textsuperscript{19} Avner Falk, A Psychoanalytic History of the Jews (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996), 495.
\textsuperscript{22} Robert Hoeniger, Der Schwarze Tod in Deutschland: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts (Berlin: Grosser, 1882), 107. “Nur viel geht aus dem Wortlaut hervor, dass die ‘Judenschläger’ zu Köln zu einem Theil fremde Leute, zum anderen Cöln Proletarier waren.”
had to give in to the people (Volke) . . . [and] the Jews . . . were burned.”

The *Germania Judaica* is perhaps the most important and extensive reference work on the history of the Jews in Germany and Switzerland during the Middle Ages, and it includes articles by numerous prestigious scholars. This work is an excellent starting point for any discussion of the Jews in the German Empire. These scholars carefully document their contributions with extensive footnotes from primary sources, making the work a valuable aid in locating original materials for further research. The study also recounts many aspects of Jewish life and history, including accounts of the persecution of Jews at the approach of the Black Death. Surprisingly, Dr. Cohn refers to this important study to support his thesis that the lower classes were not involved in the persecution of the Jews by stating, “Of 1,029 towns, villages and regions surveyed in the volumes of *Germania Judaica* for the Black Death period, citizens and peasants (but even here not the rabble) appear to have carried out Jewish persecutions against the will of ruling elites in only one case—the town of Halle.”

A careful examination of the *Germania Judaica* presents a very different picture.

“The mob” (der Mob) fell upon the Jews of Augsburg. The “guilds” (Zünfte) were involved in persecution Jews in Basel and Nuremberg. The “workmen” or “craftsmen” (Handwerker) participated in the pogroms in Basel, Nördlingen, Strasbourg, and Nuremberg. The “crowd” (Auflauf) was also active in Nuremberg. The “crowd” (Menge) was involved in Breisach, Erfurt, Frankfurt am Main, and Winterthur. The “people” or “populace” (Volk) took part in Breslau, Diessenhofen, Eger in Bohemia, Speyer, Worms, and Zurich. The “people” (Volk) were also engaged in the persecutions

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in Solothurn, Bern, and "most of the other cities" of Switzerland. The "common people" (das gemeine Volk) from Krems, Stein, Mautern and the nearby villages murdered the Jews in Krems. The "crowd" (Volksmenge) also participated in Cologne and Mainz. The "population" (Bevölkerung) was involved in Halle and Fulda. The "peasants" (Bauern) were also engaged in Halle. The "mob" or "rabble" (Pöbel) took part in Halle and Cologne. The "butchers" (Metzger) also participated in Strasbourg.

Some specific quotes from the Germania Judaica help clarify these observations. In Augsburg the "mob (Mob), among whom foreigners were also found, fell upon the Jews . . . and killed all of them who could not flee at the right time."25 In Basel, the city council "was convinced of the innocence of the Jews" and banished some knights because they had done violence to the Jews. "As a result, the guilds (Zünfte) of workmen (Handwerker) marched with their banners before the city hall and demanded . . . the elimination of the Jews."26

In Breisach the ruling classes were forced to persecute the Jews because of pressure from below. The patricians had to give in to "the pressure of the crowd (Menge) and [they] sacrificed the Jews."27 The situation in Breslau was unusual because the members of the people who murdered the Jews were prosecuted for their crimes presumably by the city council. In Breslau "On May 28 the people (Volk) fell upon the Jews and beat them to death." The murderers of the Jews were tried


in 1350, and “Some citizens and other inhabitants, who were found guilty of the murder of Jews, were banished in 1351.”28 Since the people of Breslau were tried for their crimes, their actions certainly were taken against the will of the ruling elites, who later condemned them. In various cities of southern Germany, the people forced the Jews to flee. “As the people (Volk) became more threatening, 330 Jews fled from Diessenhofen, Winterthur and other Austrian cities to the Kyburg fortress.”29

A warrior (soldier) instigated a riot in Eger in Bohemia, then part of the Holy Roman Empire. This man was so moved by the word he heard preached against the Jews that he became upset and demanded that the others present avenge the blood of the Jesus on the Jews. “The people (Volk) fell upon the Jews, beat them to death, and plundered their houses.”30 After the persecutions in Eichstätt, Bishop Albrecht forgave “the crowd (Auflauf) and all the deeds . . . by the mob (Pöbel) against the Jews at Eichstätt, [by] which some [Jews] were killed . . . against the will of the most respectable citizens.”31 The Jews were burned almost everywhere in Alsace “after an uprising of the workmen (Handwerker) also in Strasbourg.”32 In Erfurt the leaders of the conspirators, “assured the crowd (Menge) that no one would hinder [those] who would fall upon the Jews.”33


33 Germania Judaica vol. 2, pt. 1: 220 “Die Häupter der Verschworenen versicherten der Menge [crowd], daß niemand sie darin hindern würde, über die Juden herzufallen.”
In Frankfurt am Main, "If the city council hoped to be able to calm the crowd (Menge), . . . this hope proved to be deceptive." 34 Also, in Fulda, "The Jews gathered together in three houses for fear of the populace (Bevölkerung)." There was a suspicion of a Jewish plot to kill the abbot. "Afterwards the citizens (Bürger) and the officials (Amtleute) of the abbot fell upon the Jews and killed them." 35 The situation was similar in Halle, "The persecution originated from the peasants (Bauern) and the citizenry (Bürgerschaft) against the will of the archbishop and multiple landed nobles nearby. Archbishop Otto tried, together with the city authorities, to protect the Jews, but they were not successful against the mob (Pöbel) from the city and the countryside, who plundered the Jews and burned [them]." 36

The crowd in Cologne also attacked the Jews. "The crowd (Volksmenge) stormed the Jewish quarter, killed its inhabitants and plundered their dwellings." 37 Many groups persecuted the Jews in Magdeburg "archbishop Otto and the [city] council tried to protect the Jews but the people (Volk), strengthened by peasants (Bauern) from the area, attacked the Jews." 38

In Mainz, groups of flagellants caused a disturbance in the city that helped incite the "crowds" (Volksmenge) to attack the Jews. 39 In Nuremberg the guilds drove the patricians out of the

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34 Germania Judaica vol. 2, pt. 1: 245. "Hatte der Rat gehofft, die Menge beruhigen zu können, so sollte sich diese Hoffnung als trügerisch erweisen."


city and ruled for a time. The new city council taxed the Jews and permitted the craftsmen to enter the houses of the Jews to take the documents relating to loans, and these “workmen” or “craftsmen” (Handwerkern) took the opportunity to plunder the possessions of the Jews.40

The leaders of many cities and towns in Switzerland were unable to save their Jews. “In Solothurn, Bern, and most of the other cities, the public authorities gave in to the pressure of the people (des Volkes) and allowed the Jews to be executed.”41 In Speyer, “The people (Volk) in the streets fell on them [the Jews] and beat them to death.”42 Much of the action taken against the Jews in Strasbourg was perpetrated by the butchers. A few “butchers” (Metzger) came to the leaders of the city, and demanded that the “workmen” (Handwerkern) be given a part of the money from the Jews. When leaders of the city hesitated, the workmen came to the church with their weapons and banners. They established a new city council which decided to burn all the Jews.43 In Winterthur, the city council reacted to the “crowd” (Menge) and the Jews of Winterthur were burned.44 Additionally, “At the time of the Black Death the people (Volk) fell upon the Jews at Worms and beat all of them to

40 Germania Judaica vol. 2 pt. 2: 599. “1348 vertrieben die Zünfte die Patrizier aus der Stadt und herrschten eine Zeitlang in ihr. Der neue Rat besteuerte die Juden . . . und gestattete den Handwerkern, in die Häuser der Juden einzudringen, um sich der ihnen gehörigen Pfänder zu bemächtigen, und die Handwerker benutzten die Gelegenheit, die Habe der Juden zu plündern.”


death.”\textsuperscript{45} In Zurich, the city council finally gave in to the pressure of the “people” (\textit{des Volkes}) and had the Jews burned.\textsuperscript{46}

The argument that the lower classes were not involved in persecuting the Jews is too simplistic and fails to take into account the complexity of society in the German and Swiss cities at the time of the Black Death, which included the issues of social mobility and blurred social distinctions. Even when the sources indicated that city councils ordered the destruction of the Jews at the approach of the Plague, the opinions expressed by these decisions might have been influenced by more than one social strata and may not be considered as solely representing the will of the upper classes. Clearly, the members of the rulers of the cities, especially those who rose from the guilds, may have continued to hold lower-class mores.

Modern scholars usually define the segments of society in terms of positions of rank, wealth, or status, but social strata may also include a mental outlook or disposition. Social classes in the cities of the German Empire and Switzerland in the late Middle Ages are often hard to define because of their complexity and variability. Society was far from rigid at that time, and many persons were born into a segment of society but went to other levels in the course of a lifetime. Many people who came into modest families of workers, but they moved up the social scale by becoming a guild master and by being active in city politics. Some of these people eventually sat on the highest councils and even served as mayor of the community. Decisions made by such people who advanced or changed their social positions within their lifetimes may reflect lower-class opinions despite their newly-attained status when they made those determinations.

By the fourteenth century, various social classes were competing for political power in the city councils of Germany and Switzerland. These groups often included the nobility, the patricians, the guild

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Germania Judaica} vol. 2, pt 2: 923. “\textit{Am 1. März 1349 (10. Adar II 5109), zur Zeit des Schwarzen Todes, fiel das Volk über die Juden zu Worms her und erschlug alle, die sich nicht selbst in ihren Häusern verbrannten.”}

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Germania Judaica} vol. 2, pt 2: 947. “\textit{Suchte der Rat zu Zürich anfangs, sie zu schützen, gab aber schließlich dem Drängen des Volkes nach und ließ sie am 22. Februar 1349 verbrennen.”}
members (artisans), and the urban poor. The patricians were an urban aristocracy, who owed their influence to wealth and status. In the south German cities of the thirteenth century, the members of the

Medieval Guild Symbols.

most important city councils tended to hold their positions for a very long time, and most of them were in power their entire adult lives. The guilds were worker organizations of lesser status than the nobles and patricians, and they often comprised much of the lower levels of society. The members of the guilds often elected their leaders or guild masters to represent their interests in civic affairs especially when they sat on city councils. This meant that the guild masters had a vested interest in supporting the opinions of those who elected them. The urban poor included such persons as the unemployed and workers belonging to no recognized guild or organization of laborers. Many of these groups had influence on civic affairs even when they were not directly represented on city councils through various forms of pressure including mob action.  

The lower social groups in the cities of Germany and Switzerland became increasingly restive in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century largely due to harsh economic realities brought by declining markets and colder weather conditions. The spread of poverty and hunger made the masses increasingly dissatisfied with their governments which were often seen as being unresponsive to their needs. Some guilds became strong enough to press for additional political power because they played significant roles in the defense of the cities. Their military predominance, and the fact these groups were organized along military lines, gave them the confidence and power to intimidate their rivals and increase their influence in civic affairs.

Often called “guild struggles” or “guild revolutions,” there were various movements in German and Swiss cities to enhance to the power of the artisans or worker’s organizations. The revolts took place between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, but most of them occurred in the fourteenth century. Evamaria Engel has compiled a list of the larger German cities in which uprisings took place in the

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fourteenth century, and she admits that the list is incomplete. She presents 167 in all. Eighty-two occurred by the end of 1348 when the persecutions of Jews began at the approach of the Plague, and eighty-five happened later. There were years in which two, three, four, or even five revolts (1345) took place. Some cities experienced more than one uprising, and Strasbourg underwent three such movements before the middle of the fourteenth century.  

The power of the lower classes in civic government tended to increase throughout the fourteenth century, and the process was well underway when the cities persecuted their Jews from 1348 to 1350. In some cities members of the guilds were in the minority on the council, but they were still in a position to influence civic decisions. Reutlingen in 1299 had a small council that included twelve consuls, one mayor, and eight guilds. In 1308 Kolmar had ten guild-masters and twelve patricians on the city council, while Mühlhausen had fourteen patricians and ten guilds members on the city council in 1310. Rotweil had twelve guild masters against one mayor, four councilors (Ratsherren) and twelve judges in 1315, while Esslingen had thirteen guild masters compared to twelve judges and six consuls in 1316.  

Many guilds gained representation on the city councils and were nearly equal in numbers to the other levels of society. Starting in 1248 Freiburg im Breisgau’s council had twenty-four members from the aristocracy and twenty-four representatives who were elected yearly by the community. In Hagenau the number of aristocratic judges and members from guilds was also twenty-four to twenty-four. After the revolt of 1332, Strasbourg’s city council was twenty-five aristocrats and twenty-five guild members as set in the constitution of 1334. Zurich’s numbers were placed at twenty-six to twenty-six in 1336 for the same social groups. Additionally, in Stralsund in 1313 there were thirty-two aristocrats and thirty-four representatives from the guilds. In Naumburg there were six aristocrats and six representatives from the poor people.  

52 Ibid.
In many cases the patricians were eliminated entirely from civic governments, and the guilds alone ruled the city. An important example of this development was Magdeburg. By the end of the thirteenth century, members of five of the larger guilds: tailors, shopkeepers, fur dealers, shoe makers, and tanners had increased greatly in influence. A rebellion took place in 1330. At that point, of twelve members of the city council, ten were elected from the guilds and two from the common citizens. This meant that the patricians were almost entirely eliminated from city government, and the guilds were virtually in complete control. There was a similar development in Stendal in 1345 in which guilds removed the patricians from city government as was the case in the cities of Flanders and the Netherlands.

Speyer dismissed its city council in 1349 which had an equal numbers of patricians and guilds in it to be replaced by a government of the guilds alone. This also took place in many cities late in the fourteenth century and in the fifteenth as well. The power of the guilds was so strong that everyone in Freiburg im Breisgau had to join a guild. This was also happened in Ravensburg, reportedly starting in 1346, just as was the case in Biberach and Isny.

In 1337 Bishop Johann Senn granted Basel a new privilege that incorporated the guilds into city government, and the new city council had to include representatives from the knights, patricians, and guilds. At that point, the council was comprised of four nobles (knights), eight citizens (patricians), and representatives from fifteen guilds. This action weakened the nobles and had strengthened the factions of the patricians, but the guilds gained the most because they then outnumbered the combined vote of the other factions on the council.

54 Planitz, Die deutsche Stadt, 329-30.
There are many sources which indicated that the lower classes attacked the Jews. For example, the contemporaneous *Kölner Weltchronik* gave a sweeping statement on the participation of the lower classes against the Jews. "Throughout the German Empire [there was] an uprising of the people (*populāri*) raging in riot ... in all the cities, towns and municipalities against the Jews." A chronicle of Eger stated that an "inexperienced and unintelligent warrior" (*unerfarner und unverstendliger kriegssman*), probably meaning that this man was lower class and not a knight or noble, heard the Franciscans preach the story of the death or "passion" of Jesus on March 25, 1350. Easter was on April 5 that year. This warrior was so moved and angered when he heard that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus that he called to everyone present to kill the Jews. The "mob" (*gepovel*) then killed all the Jews in the city and divided the possessions of the victims among themselves. In Madgeburg the archbishop, Otto of Hesse, and the city magistrates tried to protect the Jews of the city, but the community's citizens (*civitatis*) united "with the peasants of the villages" (*cum rusticus villarum*) and attacked the homes of the Jews. In Speyer, "the Jews ... were murdered by the people, and they [the Jews] laid dead in the street." St. Peter of Erfurt stated that people of Erfurt killed the Jews against the will of the city council. "The Jews were killed in Erfurt by the citizens of the community (*per communitatem civium*) against the will of the city magistrates (*invitis consulibus*). The number [of Jews] being more than one hundred."

The example of Basel is helpful. As was the case in many areas of the German Empire, the fear of the approach of the Black Death

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set in motion the pogrom in Basel. In many places, rumors spread that the Jews were poisoning wells, fountains, and other water sources in some kind of absurd master plot to kill all Christians. No doubt, many other issues and resentments were also causes for the persecution of Jews, but the attempt to prevent the spread of the disease was clearly involved in instigating many of them.

Jews were tortured for confessions in Bern and the county of Froburg, and, reportedly, some of the poison was found in Zofingen. However, the city councils in Basel, Freiburg im Breisgau, and Strasbourg remained skeptical of the accusations and attempted to protect their Jews. In this effort, an apparently hostile noble faction had been banished from Basel. As the contemporary chronicler Mathias von Neuenburg (ca. 1300-ca. 1370) explained, “And by this means were some nobles of Basel banished for a long time by the word of the Jew which caused injustice. . . . [in reaction] the people (populus) rushed with [their] banners to the city hall” to force the city council to take action against the Jews.  

In fear, the city council asked what the people wanted, and they answered that they would not leave until the banished nobles returned. The people (populus) also demanded that the Jews would no longer be allowed in the city. Therefore, the city council and the people swore that the Jews would not be allowed in the community for two hundred years. The leaders of Basel, Freiburg, and Strasbourg persecuted their Jews because “they feared the clamor of the people” (populi timuerunt clamorem).

Before the Jews were killed in Basel, a council was held in Benfeld in Alsace which was attended by the Berthold II von Buchegg, the Bishop of Strasbourg, and many nobles, barons, and messengers from the cities. The messengers from Strasbourg stated that they did not know anything bad about their Jews. They were asked if they thought they had nothing to fear from the Jews, then why had they removed their pails from their water wells? At this time, all the

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“people clamored against them [the Jews]” (populus clamabat contra eos), clearly putting pressure on the council to persecute the Jews. The bishop, nobles, and imperial cities decided to tolerate the Jews no longer, and they were burned in many areas. In some locations the Jews were expelled, but they were overtaken by the “common people” or “rabble” (vulgus) and burned, beaten to death, or drowned in marshes. Mathias von Neuenburg also stated that because of the “clamor of the people” ( clamorem populi) the Jews of Basel were burned on January 16, 1349. He confirmed that the acts were done by the “clamor of the people” ( clamorem populi) by repeating the same sentence in another document.63 Another contemporary chronicler, Jakob Twinger von Königshoven (1345-1420), wrote about the pogrom in Basel. He reported that the “most powerful” (mehtigesten) who wielded political power did not want to harm the Jews. However, the people of Basel “the non-noble citizenry (gedigene) went to the city hall and forced the city council that [it] ... must swear to burn the Jews.”64

Strasbourg is another important example. Not only were the pogroms in the city well documented, but the occurrences there demonstrate more clearly how social and political unrest were factors in the persecution of Jews who became scapegoats for many of the problems in the municipality.65 Already in the middle of the thirteenth century the ruling city aristocracy became something completely different than it had been before. The third body of town ordinances (municipal law) and the letter of the Bishop to the guilds from 126166 indicated clearly how the misuse of power led to the 1332 guild

63 Mathias von Neuenburg, 265-6, 535. The pages 502-548 are Neuenburg’s Gesta Bertholde Episcopi Argentinensis.
revolution and also to the guild revolution of 1419. These uprisings resulted in the removal of the greater part of the Strasbourg nobility from civic government.  

The chronicler, Friedrich Closener, described how the workers organizations with lesser status and influence were recognized as “new guilds,” “worker’s organizations,” or “craftsmen organizations” (zû nüwen antwerken) and given representation on the city council after the revolution of 1332. Closener did not mention the specific guilds where these persons were placed, but he stated their occupations. Many of them were clearly lower-class people, including “shovel makers, grain dealers, rope makers, wagon makers, box makers, junk dealers, estate agents (middlesmen), . . . and wine dealers.”  

Since Closener designated these new guilds as antwerken (antwerge, antwerg, antwerke, antwerglute), he clearly included these workers of lesser status in his definition of guilds. Therefore, whenever this contemporaneous chronicler mentioned these groups (antwerken) in his account, he clearly included people from the lower levels of workers in his definition, meaning that the lower classes were certainly influential in the activities of these organizations.

Closener stated that the men at the head of the city council, Peter Swarber (Ammeister) and his two assistants, Goße Sturm and Cuntze von Wintertur (Stettmeister), tried to protect the Jews and honor agreements that the Jews would not be harmed, and “because of this they [the Jews] were hated by many (meneglichen).” The rumors that the Jews had poisoned the water wells excited the citizens, “the people (volk) mumbled among each other and said that they [the Jews] should be burned. [But] the city council did not want to do that.” Additionally, “The common people (daz gemeine volke) . . . had become so furious with them [the Jews] that they would happily have seen them killed.”

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The chronicler, Mathias von Neuenburg, stated that the Jews were tortured in Strasbourg “in order to calm the clamor” (ut sedaretur clamor) of the people. This chronicler further stated that the Jews were tortured on the wheel and killed so quickly that they were unable to respond to the accusations made against them.\textsuperscript{70} Closener stated that some Jews were tortured by the use of thumb screws (mit dümende) to confirm their participation in the crime. While some Jews admitted to unspecified crimes and were severely punished by being “broken on the wheel” (radebrehte), “yet they never confessed that they were guilty of the [water] poisoning.”\textsuperscript{71}

Apparently convinced that the Jews were innocent, the city authorities placed guards in front of the narrow Jewish street to protect them from mob violence. The Jews were protected for a long time even though the “common peoples (gemeine volke) were angry with them and would have gladly seen them killed.” The three leaders of the city council and the city council itself tried to protect the Jews, but the “common people (gemein volk) did not want to recognize that.” They believed that the leaders must have received payment to protect the Jews and to act “against the universal will” (wider allemenegliches wille) in protecting the Jews.\textsuperscript{72}

Mathias von Neuenburg confirmed that the lower classes were involved in persecuting the Jews. On Sunday, February 8, 1349, some “butchers” (carnificibus) came to the home of Peter Swarber and wanted him to give the guilds some of the money he supposedly received from the Jews. When Swarber refused, the butchers called to the street, “to arms,” and many of the “common people” (plebeis) came to help them.\textsuperscript{73}

The next day, Monday February 9, many guilds or workers (antwerke), armed with weapons and carrying their banners, assembled before the city cathedral and demanded the removal of the three leaders (meister) of the city. The workers stayed before the

\textsuperscript{70} Mathias von Neuenburg, Chronik, 267.
\textsuperscript{71} Closener, “Chronik,” 127. “doch verjohent sü nie, daz sü an der vergift schuldig werent.”
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 127-8.
\textsuperscript{73} Mathias von Neuenburg, Chronik, 267.
cathedral all night, and by the morning of February 10, the leaders of the city had been replaced by a new city council, including a group of four men who would each judge one quarter of the year. These men were Clawes Zorn, Gosze Engelbreht, Johans zům Trūbel, and Kleinfritsche von Heiligenstein. Zorn and Heiligenstein were associated with the noble and patrician classes of the city, but the social status of the others remains unclear. Significantly, the new mayor, who would serve for an entire year, was Johans Betschol, by profession a “butcher” (metziger).74

The Christian butchers hated their Jewish counterparts feeling they were undersold because the Jews often sold the part of the animal carcasses, which they were forbidden by their religion to eat, at lower prices. As a result of this animosity, numerous cities passed ordinances that created a special legal relationship between the butchers of both religions.75

The citizens of Strasbourg were required to swear loyalty to the new government on February 11. On February 18, the members of the new civic government were in place. The number of the members of the city council earlier had been shared between twenty-five knights and twenty-five guild leaders. This number of members was increased to fifty-six. According to the new constitution, eleven knights, seventeen prominent citizens, and twenty-eight representatives from the guilds would comprise the new city council.76 In a matter-of-fact


75 Graus, Judenmorde, 182. Some of the cities, as listed in the Germania Judaica, that had special laws regulating Jews selling meat, slaughtering animals, or interacting with Christian butchers include Berlin, Bonn, Brandenburg an der Havel, Braunschweig, Breslau, Burghausen, Cologne, Esslingen, Frankfurt an der Oder, Friedland, Goslar, Havelberg, Munich, Neumarkt, Neuruppin, St. Veit an der Glan, Spandau, Stendal, Strausberg, Tangermünde, Troppau, and Wittenberg an der Elbe. Examples of animal parts not to be eaten by Jews are found in Genesis 32: 32 and Leviticus 7: 23.

76 “Schwörbrief von 1334 October 17,” and “Schwörbrief 1349 February 18,” in Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg 7 vols. vol. 5 Politische Urkunden von 1332 bis 1380 Hans Witte and Georg Wolfram eds. (Strassburg: Trübner, 1896) 5: 40-3, 186-8. For a list of members of the city council, see Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg vol. 7 Privatrechtliche Urkunden und Rathslisten von 1332 bis 1400, 902-3.
manner Closener wrote about the events which transpired rapidly in Strasbourg from Wednesday February 11 to Saturday February 14. “On Wednesday they swore [allegiance] to the [new] council, on Thursday they swore [allegiance to the new constitution] in the garden. On the Friday they arrested the Jews. On the Saturday, they burned the Jews.”

The Jews were apprehended and killed so rapidly after the deposition of the old government that their destruction appeared to be the initial purpose of the overthrow. Since the new city council of fifty-six members was not established until February 18, the mayor, Betscholt the butcher, had the most authority to order the Jews killed. The Jews were burned in a special house constructed for that purpose. When they were marched to their deaths in Strasbourg, the Jews were robbed “by the common people” (per vulgum) who believed money was hidden in their clothing. After the Jews were killed, all documents relating to the debts owed to them were destroyed. The Jews’ money was divided between the guilds (die antwerg) and the city council, but most of it went to the guilds. Closener believed that it was Jewish wealth, and the indebtedness to them, were the real poisons which got them killed.

The contemporaneous chronicler Jacob Königshofen agreed, “Money was also why the Jews were killed. If they had been poor and the nobles were not indebted to them, they would not have been burned.” Königshofen added details on what happened to the valuables owned by the Jews. “The wealth [of the Jews] was divided among the guilds (antwerg).” Unlike Closener, Königshofen made no mention that the city council got a share of the goods.

The examples of Basel and Strasbourg have clearly demonstrated that the persecution of the Jews were expressions of political and social
discontent in which a much-hated minority paid the price for larger problems in these cities. In both cases, the lower classes instigated the persecution of the Jews and were instrumental in making sure that the destruction of the Jews was carried out. When the lower classes attacked the Jews, they were probably attempting to get more political power, but they were also influenced by fear and hatred of the Jews and a desire to seize their wealth. The noble factions in Basel benefitted from the demands of the lower classes because they were able to return to the city, but the nobles neither instigated nor did they lead the rebellion in either Basel or Strasbourg.

A whole variety of source materials support the assertion that the lower classes participated in the persecution of Jews including official civic sources. Cologne, Eichstätt, and Erfurt are examples of where relevant source materials may be found in official city records. When the accusations of Jews poisoning water sources began to be circulated, the city council of Cologne wrote to Strasbourg on January 12, 1349 in great concern over what was happening to the Jews. The members of the city council of Cologne stated they feared that the common people would take action against the Jews, and the councilors affirmed that they would not give in to popular pressure and allow any massacre of Jews in their city. The councilors also feared that any such outbreaks that would take place in Strasbourg could lead to the spread of the violence to other cities. The city council in Cologne was forced to change its position in the coming months, and the attempt to spare their Jews was unsuccessful. The Jews of that city were killed in August 1349.

The city source book for Eichstätt demonstrates that the lower classes were involved in persecuting Jews. “Because of the crowd (aufflauff) and all of the activities that happened here to the Jews by


82 According to Zvi Asaria, “In the night from Aug. 23 to 24, . . . of 1349 a mob (Pobel) stormed the Jewish quarter because the city council of Cologne dared no longer to resist [to the mob]. Zvi Asaria, Die Juden in Köln von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart (Köln: Bachem, 1959), 55.
the mob (povell) at Eichstätt several of whom were beaten to death and several Christians also received harm. That happened without the knowledge and desire of all our respectable citizens in Eichstätt’s city council."

The example of Erfurt is most helpful in understanding the social status of people who persecuted Jews, because the names and occupations of many of them were listed in a contemporary document. People from various social classes attacked the Jews on March 21, 1349, and a court case was brought against the perpetrators of the crime. The court took statements before July 11, 1349, so all affidavits were taken within four months of when the crimes were committed. The document has been entitled: “Interrogation, testimony and sentence of the citizens of Erfurt who participated in the murder of the Jews.”

The court called witnesses to testify and identify the participants in the crime. These observers recognized many of the persons they saw who were involved in the persecution of the Jews. In many cases the depositions also gave the social class, occupation, and names of those accused of the misconduct.

The names of eight nobles (iunckern) were given who were the “Jew beaters” (iudenschlegern). There were “many other nobles” (viel andern iunckern) who could not be named. Schalla, a noble, and Spitze were leaders of the “common” (gemeyne) people. Gunzel von Rockstedt and Apel von Halle led the rich people. Several men including Roder spoke to the mob stating that they should attack the Jews. He wanted to advance with twenty powerful men, but none of these men could be named in court. Fifty-four people who were


“wool stuff fabricators” (*lober*) assembled in a house apparently to hear the appeal of the nobles. Other members of the wealthy classes “rich people” (*reichen leute*) were also present. Lord Sigeharth’s son called to the Jew beaters. “Attack, I will stay with you through life and death.” Some of these nobles were “leaders” (*heuptleute*) over the “common” (*gemeyne*) people, but many of the other leaders were from the lower classes. This included Johann von Linda who was the leader of the “butchers” (*fleischawer*). One of the leaders was a “tanner” (*wyssgerber*) who led others from his occupation, but his name was not given.

There were many meetings which included members of various lower-class occupations and the names of many of “the common people” (*das gemeyne volck*) were given who were agitating against the Jews. The list included “butchers” (*fleischawer*), “fullers” (*kursener*) “shoe makers” (*fueschützen*), “tanners” or “one who prepares white leather” (*wyssgerber*), “cloth cutters” (*schatrarter*), “wool stuff fabricator” (*lober*), “workmen” or “craftsmen” (*handwerkg, handwercken, handtwercken, handtwerckern*), a “blacksmith” (*schmidt*), “locksmiths” or “metal workers” (*schlosser*), “weavers” (*weber, zichener*), and “wool weavers” (*wollenweber*). These occupations may be simplified as belonging to the guilds of tanners, weavers, blacksmiths, butchers, furriers, and shoe makers.

The people stood with their banners in front of the church when Hug der Lange rode up to them. He told the people they should not stand there, but they should slay the Jews. The same day the ruling councils of the city (*rathe und den rethen*) had told Hug to speak to the “Jew beaters” and tell them to stop the attack on the Jews until the councils could use better advice to handle the situation. In a betrayal of the orders given by the city councils, Hug called to the Jew beaters and said, “Arm yourselves ... no one will hinder you” in attacking Jews. Apparently, a debate ensued when word from the city council

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86 Haverkamp, “Judenverfolgungen,” 55.
came that the city rulers wanted the attack on the Jews stopped. Gunther Bocke admonished the Jew beaters to answer, "No" to the request of the city councils. Helwigk Goltschmidt spoke, saying that even though Iohan von Tromsdorff had declared against his position, he knew that no one would hinder them, and they should the attack the Jews. The Jews were attacked and slaughtered.

The historian Alfred Haverkamp states that the court found at least forty-three citizens of Erfurt guilty who were involved in the unwarranted attack on the Jews, and he has identified nine of these as having connections to noble and patrician families. This meant that over three quarters, or thirty-four, of the condemned were from the lower classes. Three of these condemned persons had been identified earlier in the document as being nobles: Hermann Hasse, Apel von Halle, and Conradt Vierdelingk. Iohan von Bechstetten was listed as a noble early in the document, but he was not among those condemned by the court. However, two men that might have been related to him, the son of Iohan Conradt von Bechstedt and the son of Henicke (Heinerichs) von Bechstedt, were found guilty. They might have had noble standing as well.

The status of having noble connections was insufficient to spare these men, and other family connections also failed to get at least one man released without punishment. Titzel Hotterman was condemned even though he was the son of Seghenhart Hotterman who had served as one of the heads of the city council in 1347. Haverkamp further states that another noble, Guntzel von Rockstede, and two other noblemen were executed for their crimes against the Jews. Jaraezewsky identifies these men as "Günzel von Rostock, Helwig, Goldschmidt."

Thirty-four persons found guilty clearly came from the lower classes based on their occupations. Their names and professions were given in a number of cases. Apel von Goslar and a man named Meldingk were wool stuff fabricators (*lober*), Reynhart von Margkburk

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87 Ibid., 54-5. I count 42 names.
88 Haverkamp, "Judenverfolgungen," 54-5 and Jaraezewsky, 23. These scholars have not cited their sources for these executions, and I have been unable to find the material which verifies their assertions.
was a weaver as were the two brothers, Conradt und Iohan von Madela (zichener), Iohan von Geysmar was a cloth cutter (schröter), Heynerich von Tasdorf was a wool weaver (wollenweber), while Dithmar Titzels von Elxleuben was a wool weaver’s son. Iohan Styme was a butcher (vleischawer), Herman Nunneste was a metal worker (schlosser), and Conradt Windtheim was a blacksmith (schmïdt). One woman, “Titzel, the wife of Gotschalck’s son” (Titzel der frauen der Gotschalcken sohn), was also found guilty. She was the only person charged with the crime who was designated as a woman, but three other perpetrators were also named Titzel, each apparently a man. Titzel was probably a name that was used for either gender. Since women were inferior in status economically and socially and were shut out of politics, they were clearly lower class.

These people were found guilty of “striking the Jews against the will of the city council, [other city] councils, and the guilds (handwercke),” presumably the guild masters. Those found guilty of this crime against the Jews and councils became “expelled [banished] people” and were “eternally” forbidden to come within three “miles” (meilen) [five kilometers] of the city. If they were apprehended in such proximity, the punishment was death. The scholar, Matthias Schmandt asserts that the leaders of the pogrom in Erfurt were not punished “with great severity.” Many of those banished for life had slipped back into the city soon after 1350.

The judicial proceedings from Erfurt gave little indication on who started the persecutions of Jews. Many nobles were present, and a number of them served as leaders of the people, but some of the leaders came from the lower classes as well. There was no indication that the members of the lower classes were coerced into participating, and they likely assembled before the Jewish street by their own volition with the intention of killing the Jews. Apparently, all they needed was the spark from a few rabble rousers to get them to follow through with their aims.


The assertion that the lower classes were not involved in the persecution of Jews is misleading. Clearly, the evidence must lead to different conclusions in the cities of Germany and Switzerland where the attacks on Jews were supported by every secular level of society, and the lower classes were clearly involved in many instances as is evident from the examples cited in this paper. Complex motives were at work in the various cities of the Empire, and the various social groups took out their insecurities on the Jews by killing them. Even though they were often supported and influenced by other social levels, the workers and artisans frequently acted independently, and the lower classes were far from mindless dupes doing other people’s bidding. The lower classes often had discernable goals in attacking the Jews. These included a desire to eliminate a hated religion, to stop the spread of the Plague, to plunder the wealth of the Jews, to remove economic rivals, and to advance their own political power. In view of the evidence, the persecution of Jews in Germany and Switzerland may be considered, at least in a major part, as a social movement by the lower classes.

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