Peasants' Revolt

1. an insurrection led by Wat Tyler in England in 1381 in protest against an attempt by landlords to revert to old servile tenures.

Summary Article: Peasants' Revolt

The rising of the English peasantry in June 1381, the result of economic, social, and political discontent. It was sparked off by the attempt to levy a new poll tax in the village of Fobbing, Essex, three times the rates of those imposed in 1377 and 1379. The poll tax was a common tax, paid by all, which badly affected those least able to pay. Led by Wat Tyler and John Ball, rebels from southeast England marched on London and demanded reforms. The authorities put down the revolt by pretending to make concessions and then using force.

Following the Black Death, an epidemic of plague in the mid-14th century, a shortage of agricultural workers had led to higher wages. However, the government attempted to return wages to pre-plague levels by passing the Statute of Labourers (1351). Other causes of discontent were the youthfulness of King Richard II, who was only 14 years old; the poor conduct of the Hundred Years’ War, which England was losing to France; and complaints about the church led by John Wycliffe and the Lollards. When a third poll tax was enforced in 1381, three times higher than previous levies, riots broke out all over England, especially in Essex and Kent. Wat Tyler and John Ball emerged as leaders and the rebels marched on London to demand reforms. They plundered the city, including John of Gaunt's palace at the Savoy, and freed the prisoners from the prisons at Newgate and Fleet. The young king, Richard II, attempted to appease the mob, who demanded an end to villeinage (serfdom) and feudalism. The rebels then took the Tower of London and murdered Archbishop Sudbury. The king attempted to make peace at Smithfield, but Tyler was stabbed to death by William Walworth, the lord mayor of London. The young king rode bravely forward and offered to be the rebels' leader. He made concessions to the rebels, and they dispersed, but the concessions were revoked immediately and a fierce repression followed. Nevertheless, many lords realized that the revolt was a warning sign, and began to commute (convert) their feudal dues to money rents.

The events of the revolt are described by the chronicler Thomas Walsingham, an English monk and historian. Typical of most accounts of the time, it is hostile to the peasants, who are seen as trying to overturn an order of society ordained by God.

essays

Black Death

Peasants' Revolt
Conflagration: The Peasants' Revolt

Images

Tyler, Wat

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