



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years War, 1500-1648

A Nobleman Lives for War, Plunder, and Adventure – Götz von Berlichingen (1480-1562)

Götz (= Gottfried) von Berlichingen zu Hornberg (ca. 1480-1562), called “the Knight with the Iron Hand” after a prosthesis he wore, is perhaps the most famous Imperial knight of the 16th century. His fame is largely attributable to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose drama *Götz von Berlichingen* is based on Berlichingen’s autobiography, which is excerpted below.

Berlichingen’s rearing, like his values – honor, loyalty, and pride in family and in deeds – was entirely traditional. It involved family and kinsmen, service at a princely court, and participation in the Imperial Diet, wars, and feuds. The central event in his life was the German Peasants’ War of 1525, in which he was forced to serve the rebels against his will. Berlichingen commonly stands as a model of his class, a declining lesser nobility given to a traditional way of life based on feuds and wars. Berlichingen stemmed from the same milieu as Ulrich von Hutten, the author of the next text included in this section. Although the two men belonged to the same class, they adapted to 16th century developments in distinctly different ways.

[Preface]

To Sir Hans Hoffmann, mayor of Heilbronn, and Steffan Feyerabend, licentiate in law and city attorney of Heilbronn.

My very dear sirs, patrons, and friends! You and many other good gentlemen and friends told me some years ago that, in order to honor and instruct my heirs, children, and descendants, I should relate and record the feuds and actions I took part in as a young, noble knight and as a poor cavalryman in wars against estates high and low. And how I and other good fellows and friends served under the Roman Imperial Majesty, also electors, princes, and others in both their interest and in my own.

Thereupon I concluded that, insofar as Almighty God grants me His grace, I would honor and please you, me, and my heirs and descendants – also other good gentlemen and friends – by responding to your request and writing a brief account of the affairs and actions I took part in, to the degree that I still remember them. I have done this as follows, to the best of my memory, not to seek or lay claim to any fame or to a great name, but solely because it has gotten back to me that some of my detractors, acting out of envy or hatred – or perhaps out of ignorance – have wished to put the things I have done during my lifetime in the harshest and worst light. My object is to refute them and bring the truth to light instead. In this work I wish to write or tell of nothing except all my actions and affairs since childhood, trusting entirely that no one will be offended

thereby, but that everyone will understand and accept my intentions, disposition, and opinion in the best sense. I wish, for my part, to earn everyone's friendly attention.

[Early Life]

I have often heard from my late father and mother, also from my elder brothers and sisters and from old servants and maids who served them, that I was a wondrous young lad, and that in my childhood I acted in such a way that many concluded that I would become a soldier or a cavalryman. It would take too long and is unnecessary to relate all this, and I myself wouldn't have known about it, had it not been told and described to me as I have said. Yet I know that my late mother often prayed that someone should take me away into foreign parts, so that I could learn something. Which did happen to me, and, as the following recounts, in my youth I was taken on here and there.

At first I went to school for one year at Niedernhall on the Kocher and lived with a kinsman, Cuntz von Neuenstein, who had built a house and had his residence there. Since I had little taste for school but much for horses and riding and showed some corresponding skill, I went to my late kinsman, Sir Conrad von Berlichingen, with whom I lived for three years as a stable boy.

The first journey I made with my kinsman occurred when Margrave Frederick of Brandenburg-Ansbach sent him as his councilor to the great Diet called to Worms in 1495. I was to go with him and was accordingly outfitted and armed. We arrived at Worms in the first week of Lent, having ridden first from Ansbach to his residence in Schrozberg, then one day from Schrozberg to Mosbach and from Mosbach to Heidelberg. There we had breakfast at the inn "Zum Hirsch," and afterward we rode on the same day to Worms. I calculate that we rode eight or nine [German] miles per day, which I thought then, when I was just a lad, to be very far and too much to ride. In later days I became accustomed to riding great distances in a few days and nights without food or drink, and did so out of necessity, because it had to be done.

Coming to Worms [we found that] my lord was the first to arrive, and he waited until all the electors, princes, and other estates, high and low, appeared personally or were represented by their envoys to the Imperial assembly. And in the three years that I lived with my kinsman, Sir Conrad von Berlichingen, as I've said, in addition to the great Diet of Worms, many assemblies were held here and there – at Worms, Ulm, Augsburg, and other places – to which electors and princes came, also His Imperial Majesty. They often employed my late kinsman, so that he resided for barely two months a year in one of his houses, of which he had three. And even when he came home, his affairs and those of his good friends and the Franconian knights as a whole were so many and various that even as an old knight he never had much peace. And I had always to ride with and serve him as a lad and squire.

[. . .]

After Conrad von Berlichingen's death, Margrave Frederick of happy memory reared me as a lad at court, and I and many other boys had to wait at table on their princely graces. One time I sat down to eat next to a Pole who dressed his hair with eggs. As chance would have it, I was wearing a French great coat, which Sir Veit von Lentersheim had ordered made at Namur in Brabant. And as I rose up next to the aforementioned Pole, I brushed up against his lovely hair and disturbed it. And as I got up, I saw that he tried to stab me with a bread knife, but he missed, and, understandably, I got angry. As I was carrying a long and a short knife, I took the short one and hit him on the head. Then I went off to my duties, as was customary, and stayed that night in the castle.

Early the next morning the margrave entered the parish church and heard Mass, for he was a God-fearing prince, and as we were coming from the church up to the castle, someone closed the door behind me. The deputy marshal came and said that I must consider myself under arrest. I said, "leave me in peace, for I don't believe that I have to go up to see the young princes" and uttered other unpleasant words to him. But the good man was wiser than I, and he let me go, for had he grabbed me, I would certainly have defended myself and gotten into very great trouble. Then I went up to the young princes and told them about the affair and what I had experienced with the marshal and with the Pole. The princes, who were about to sit down for their morning meal, said to me that I should remain, and that if anyone came along, I should go into the chamber and remain quietly hidden and bolt the door. I did so and waited until the brave princes came back from eating. It was thought that they had spoken on my behalf to the old prince, their father, and also to the queen, their mother, in order to protect me from punishment on the Pole's account.¹ But that was not to be, for the old margrave wanted to please his wife, and the young princes their mother, so the margrave had to agree to put me in the tower. The young princes said to me that I should not resist, for they wouldn't let me lie there more than a quarter of an hour. I said, "Why should I be put in the tower? The Pole drew on me first!" They repeated to me that they wouldn't let me be imprisoned for more than a quarter of an hour, so I allowed them to convince me and let myself be put in the tower. Margrave George of happy memory gave me a satin mantle lined with sable to cover myself while sleeping. But I said, "What shall I do? I might as well lie down in the dirt, and since my time will be so short, I don't need it [= the mantle], and I will go to the tower of my own free will." And the brave princes kept their word to me, and I was imprisoned no longer than a quarter of an hour. Then Paul von Absberg, my brave captain, came and let me out of the tower, and I had to tell him what happened, that is, why I was there. I did that, and he took me before the councilors. The brave knight spoke up for me and excused me, and all the lads and squires then at the margrave's court stood by me – about 50 or 60, I believe. Sir Paul von Absberg wanted to get the Pole put in the tower, too, but he could not do it.

[. . .]

¹ The persons involved are Margrave Frederick IV of Brandenburg-Ansbach (r. 1486-1515, d. 1536); Margravine Sophie (1464-1512), a Polish royal princess (hence, "queen"); and their two sons, Casimir (1481-1527) and George (1484-1543) – trans.

[War against the Swiss, 1499]

At the time when, as already mentioned, I was spending the winter until Fasnacht² with my late mother and my brother and sister, the Swiss War broke out, just around Fasnacht, and the margrave sent two forces, one after the other.³ When I heard this, I thought, “shall I sit here,” for I’d had enough of Jagsthausen. And so I rode to Ansbach to learn the news. As soon as I arrived at court, My Gracious Lord, Margrave Frederick, saw me. He sent one of his servants to me with the news that he would send his tailor, and so it happened. When the tailor came, the margrave said to him: “Take Berlichingen and dress him, for he is going to serve me.” The margrave wanted to depart immediately. But the next day [Elector and] Count Palatine Philip of happy memory⁴ arrived, so the margrave had to delay for two days. Count Palatine Philip wanted to seize the New Mark and Upper Palatinate, for Duke Otto of Bavaria had recently died. Then I was sent to serve in the Count Palatine’s quarters, which I did.

When the Count Palatine had left, the margrave himself led away the third contingent, having, as related, already sent two. And by the time we arrived at Überlingen, the Swiss had already defeated one force. We stayed there for some time, while the forces of the emperor and the Imperial estates were gathering, and then went with the united force to Constance. That night the emperor joined us. He wore a smallish, old, gray coat, and a gray cap under a gray hat, so that no one would take him for an emperor or try to take him captive. But even as a young fellow I recognized his nose, for I had seen him earlier, as mentioned, at the Imperial Diets I had attended with my late kinsman.

Emperor Maximilian had planned a good attack, for, as I’ve said, we came in the dead of night to Constance with all our cavalry and infantry units. On the morrow they were brought together and put into a proper order of battle, both infantry and cavalry. There Emperor Maximilian met with Margrave Frederick of happy memory, together with some of the war councilors and officers. I accompanied my lord, the margrave, carrying a long lance with a large banner on it, both painted black and white. On my helmet was a large black-and-white feather, which stood straight up.

As the emperor spotted me, he rode from the margrave to me and asked whom I served. I replied, “My gracious prince and lord, Margrave Frederick.” He rose up and said, “You have a long lance with a large flag on it. Come, ride with this troop until the flag with the Imperial eagle arrives from Constance. I did this, because I recognized the emperor and knew it was he, so I

² Carnival – trans.

³ The Swiss War (the Swiss call it the “Swabian War”) erupted in 1499 between the Austrian regime at Innsbruck and the Swabian League, on the one side, and the Confederation, on the other. It ended in 1501 with the Peace of Basel, the Swiss having been victorious in every theater – trans.

⁴ Count Palatine Philip (1448-1508), Imperial elector from 1476 to his death, was a powerful figure in the southwestern parts of the Empire until his defeat in 1504 at the hands of Emperor Maximilian I – trans.

didn't ask anyone [for permission]. So I rode for half an hour or so at the side of Schenk Christoph von Limpurg, who at the time held Nellenburg in Hegau in fief. Then Schenk Christoph was given the Imperial eagle,⁵ which I then saw in the field for the first and last time. So I then rode back to my own lord and waited to see what I should do.

As I, then a lad of seventeen or eighteen, understood from my gracious prince and lord, the margrave, and others, if we went forward that day, we wanted to catch and defeat the Swiss in Schwaderloch. The next day all units were commanded to be mustered and consulted. But then came the news that the Swiss had received reinforcements, and seeing that they now had gained the advantage, the march forward was abandoned. If we had attacked on the first day, however, as the emperor wanted to do, I believe, based on what I heard, that our side would have prevailed. But when many heads give much advice, it usually goes this way, as has also happened to me in my own affairs.

Shortly thereafter the commanders of the Württemberg troops and the margrave's troops attacked Schaffhausen with cavalry and infantry. That night we came to a village called Thayngen not far from Schaffhausen. In the church there were some Swiss who had come out from Schaffhausen, and they defended themselves and would not surrender but said they would rather die, like all brave [Swiss] Confederates. To keep it short, the late Sir Melchior Sutzel lay between Schaffhausen and Thayngen, and the Swiss drove him away. One Swiss hit him in the face with a stone, and they all defended themselves in the church so well that many nobles and commoners, both on horse and foot, were hit and shot. After my horse, on which I accompanied the margrave, was killed, I ran afoot like an ordinary lad to the church with the squires. I found a short spear and tied my dagger to an ax, and I cut away my riding trousers. Master Jacob, a gunner and a small, tough little fellow, was shooting right at my side, and a shot went through him and hit a squire from the Württemberg troop who was dressed in blue. He died, but the gunner lived. Then Sir Dietrich Spät and others brought some powder, placed it in the church below the tower, and touched it off. A Swiss fell down from above with a young boy in his arms, and when he landed the boy fell away but would not leave him. But the Swiss was dead, and a Brandenburg trooper, I don't know who, took the boy somewhere I did not see.

Now some of our fellows had not gotten out of the church before the powder was lighted, perhaps to grab some booty, but the powder burned too fast, and they died fearfully in the fire. I don't know whether they were alive or dead, for they did not come out. And when we left the church, our little troop, on horse and foot, formed up in battle order, thinking the Swiss might ambush them. No one came, however, and we marched away. As I said, I was present at these events but took part in no other serious attack mounted during this war.

I have no other personal knowledge of the Swiss war, except that the Swiss destroyed many troops, whenever the army was not together. My lord margrave, however, was not present with any of these troops. Count Henry of Fürstenberg was surprised in his camp in the Sundgau

⁵ He means the Imperial banner, which bore a black, double-headed eagle – trans.

during the night.⁶ His army was crushed, and he and his folk were killed, that is, all but two men who came to the margrave in his camp, so I heard how this event had occurred. I understand that it came about through negligence, contempt, and slipshod behavior, for I stood by as the gentlemen told the margrave. I was also present toward evening on the night when they came to him and, as mentioned, gave His Princely grace the bad news.

[Götz's First Feud]

More than a year later I donned armor for the first time. It happened thusly. My late brother, Philip, and I rode to Heilbronn around the middle of Lent to visit the church of Our Lady. As we were on the road home and passed through Neuenstadt am Kocher, the mayor ran up – his name was Black Hans – and shouted at us. I was the first to notice and said to my brother: “He is running after us and shouting, and we should hear what he wants.” So we halted until he caught up with us. His charge was to tell us that a good companion wanted us to enter his service for a campaign. I, the youngest, said for myself: “If he is a good companion, he should come to us and speak to us himself, and we would give him a good answer.” And so we resumed our course.

Next time the same companion came to Jagsthausen. It was old Hans Thalacker von Massenbach [a famous robber-knight], who at the time lay in feud with the duke of Württemberg. I had never seen him before. He said that we should serve him with three horses each. My brother gave me an old nag, and I found two squires and entered his service. To be sure, he himself had no more than three riders, among them Henßlin Henßlinschwert [Thalacker's bastard son], and then another companion, so that we were altogether six. We captured eleven rich peasants – Württemberg subjects – on the Kapfenhart. The weekly market at Heilbronn took place the same day, and Thalacker warned the peasants to appear at Castle Drachenfels [in the Palatinate] on St. George's Day [April 23]. Then we rode on to Heilbronn, and we grabbed whatever belonged to Württemberg. We went into the city as far as the barrier, where we were met by armed gate-keepers. This was the first time I wore armor, for previously I had taken to war only as a boy. In this first attack with Thalacker I learned enough from his squires and riders that I rode with him for two years as an apprentice and belonged to his band. Later, however, this Thalacker became an enemy of the entire Swabian League.⁷

[. . .]

During the spring the affair between the margrave and the Nurembergers began. [. . .]

Captain Paul von Absberg took me aside and said I should stick with him and ride at his side. Shortly thereafter it came to a tussle. We margrave's men were told to start off in the night,

⁶ He refers to the battle at Dornach, which lies in the canton of Solothurn, high on the face of the Jura south of Basel. This was the decisive battle that ended the Swiss (Swabian) War – trans.

⁷ The Swabian League, founded in 1488 under the sponsorship of the emperor and King Maximilian, embraced at this time Imperial free cities and Imperial knights mainly in Swabia and Franconia – trans.

which we did, and the margrave's infantry had to do some hard marching, as we came the same night around one o'clock to Schwabach, where Sir Sigmund von Lentersheim and I were the first through the gate. Since the whole force was on the march, we went on for about half a mile [=3-4 English miles], until Christoph von Giech and some riders met us. They had been up and watching for us through the night. Now I knew he would take the hog by the ears, for he was a foe of Nuremberg, with which he had recently conducted feud. Since all the units were now in order, infantry and cavalry, I decided to ride on with Christoph von Giech. When my lord Paul von Absberg saw that I would go on – he recognized me by my arms – he cried two or three times, "Christoph! Christoph!" When Christoph von Giech asked what he wanted, Absberg replied, "Leave my Berlichinger with me and take my cousin, Hans Jörg von Absberg, with you!"

That is what happened. I rejoined my captain, and we rode to the lazar house [before Nuremberg] to see how things lay and what the Nurembergers intended to do, for Sir Paul von Absberg knew well what he was doing. But, you see, the Nurembergers were already mobilized in a large force with a cannon, and they fired at us once or twice. Then Sir Paul, and we with him, moved back as if we were retreating, for we wanted to hurry away, for we would not fare well in the forest. But the Nurembergers were already upon us with their cannon and wagon fort, and it happened that some of us did not linger, for not everyone can bear the rumble of approaching battle. And so we came to the place where the margrave had placed his force and formed into battle order, infantry and cavalry, to wait and see whether the enemy would pursue us, for we were quite near the city and not far inside Nuremberg Forest, which stood between them and us. And we had around 700 cavalry, 300 of the margrave's militia, and 300 Swiss.

When the time was right, the Nurembergers moved against us with cannon, wagon fort, and cavalry, as many as they possessed, and not without skill ordered their wagon fort, cannon, and cavalry [for battle]. Just before the battle we and our captains sent to Margrave Casimir to ask that His Princely Grace should move forward to us, for if we gave way, they would come upon him, so he should move without delay. His Princely Grace replied that, in God's name, we should go forward, and he would come to us and be there soon – as a proper prince should. So we went forward in God's name, but the margrave's rural levy immediately took flight, except for the Kitzingen company. We had about 300 lansquenets and 300 Swiss left, plus all the cavalry, with whom we moved against the enemy. Their cannonade was so heavy that we couldn't see the troops for the smoke.

When we got as far as the wagon fort, they were trying to close it up. They almost pulled it off, for the teamsters were truly skillful and brave. My pounding heart told me, God put it into my mind, and my own reason saw the need, so I speared the leading teamster from his horse. I did so to prevent the wagon from advancing and to make the others halt. And with God's help I stood my ground, without command or orders from my captain, so they could not close up the wagon fort, though they came very close to accomplishing the deed. And so my action brought our greatest advantage and was doubtless not unimportant to our victory and good fortune. Otherwise, I don't know what might have happened, for they were too strong for us, and they

would have faced us with the cannon and the wagon fort. But they were stopped, and we were exhausted.

[. . .]

The Peasants' War

Many people know well that in this region a great peasants' uprising took place, such as was never before known. My late brother, Hans von Berlichingen, wrote to me at the Hornberg that I should join him. Many peasants had assembled at Schöntal, and I should help him make sure they didn't overcome him. Acting as a loyal brother, I joined him and convinced their captains to leave him in peace. Then the Deutschmeister⁸ needed my service in the Weinsberg valley, so as a loyal neighbor I went to honor His Princely Grace and do his will, for I was very worried. I told His Princely Grace and his castellan in the Hornberg what I had learned, that the rebels had no cannon, not a single gun, with which to fire on our walls. Then I saw to it that Horneck was put in better order by some folk who held the house for me. Many people in this land know what the peasants did at Weinsberg.⁹ Next, the rebels moved down toward Horneck and took it without resistance. Although I was no longer in Palatine service, I wanted to serve His Electoral Grace¹⁰ in this matter, so I wrote to [Palatine marshal] Wilhelm von Habern that he should give instructions as to what I should do, for I feared that the peasants, being so near, would attack me. I was also concerned for my wife, who was pregnant, and my children.

My brother and other good friends of mine, also some other fellows, decided to meet in Heßbach woods near Bocksberg. I had great trouble reaching them, for the very Devil was loose. We deliberated about which nearby prince we should ride to. I said that I didn't know of any prince who was mobilized, except My Most Gracious Lord, the [Elector and] Count Palatine, and the majority of us decided we should ride to him. I also said that I was waiting for an instruction [from Heidelberg] as to what I should do, and I wanted to find out, if possible, so I started out forthwith and reached my home, though with great difficulty. Before I even took off my armor, I asked my wife if a letter had come from Heidelberg, to which she said, "no." I was truly shocked, for I didn't know what I should do. Rumor had it that my lord, the Count Palatine, would treat with the peasants, so I didn't know what to do. I never saw the letter, though I learned that my mother-in-law and my wife did receive it. When my wife read it to her mother, she told her mother to say absolutely nothing about it to me, for otherwise they would all be ruined and killed. That is why I never saw the letter, which caused all of my subsequent

⁸ Commander of the Teutonic Knights in the Empire – trans.

⁹ On Easter Sunday (April 16) 1525, Weinsberg Castle in northern Württemberg surrendered to the peasant army of Jäcklin Rohrbach. Count Ludwig von Helfenstein, son-in-law to the late Emperor Maximilian I, and a number of other nobles in the garrison were made to run the gauntlet in lansquenet style. The "Weinsberg massacre," as it was called, became the most notorious act of bloodletting committed by the rebels of 1525 – trans.

¹⁰ Elector Palatine Ludwig V – trans.

misfortune and trouble. When I later learned the truth, I did not want the mother-in-law to stay in my house, and she never came to us again.¹¹

When the peasants assembled at Gundelsheim, several of my kinsmen and other nobles were there, including Beringer von Berlichingen, a very old man, and my brother Wolff von Berlichingen. They didn't know what to do, whether to join the peasants or not, for they all wanted peace. I was also there, and I made peace with the peasants, as did several other princes, counts, and nobles. But I bound myself to them by neither word nor deed. I stayed with them a while and then went back home. There I hoped for a letter from Heidelberg, such as I had discussed with Wilhelm von Habern, which he should send me. And to this day I have learned not a word of its contents. I pledge my life on that, so truly as God is in heaven, and on my health and salvation.

And when I was back home, the peasants at Gundelsheim mobilized, and their captains sent their marshal [*Schultheiß*] to me to say that I should join them, for they had something to discuss with me. I didn't know what, how, or when, and I feared that they would also seize me and thereby endanger my wife and children and my people, for I really had no armed men in my house. The peasants were full of the Devil, and the servants, male and female, no longer obeyed. So I rode up with the marshal, dismounted at the inn, and made to enter. As I did, Marx Stumpff came down the steps from meeting with the peasants and asked, "Götz, is it you?" I said, "Yes, where do things stand? What should I do, and what do the captains want from me?" He replied, "You must become their commander!" "Oh, God, not me," I said, "that is the Devil's doing. Why don't you do it? Do it instead of me!" And he replied, "They did choose me, but I said to them that if I could do it in [honorable] service, I would do it." So I said again, "I won't do that. I'd sooner go myself to the captains and see whether they could force or compel me to." He replied, "Accept it for the sake of My Gracious Lord and other princes, also all of us nobles." But I said, "I won't do it!"

I went in to the captains and obtained from them a favorable decision, though with the proviso that I should go to the other captains, who were camped in the field in front of the gate, and report and put the same request to them. This I did and rode out and spoke to them, one troop after another, for all the troops were gathered together. I received favorable replies from those who were tenants and subjects of all princes, counts, and nobles in the army, except for those of [the counts of] Hohenlohe. These took my horse by the reins, circled me, and said that I should acknowledge myself captive, and that I must swear to join them the next day in their camp at Buchen. I would find them there, and I must not depart without permission.

The oath compelled me to go them at Buchen, or else my wife and children, also other nobles, would be harmed. I swore the oath with a sad, troubled, and oppressed heart, as I had no taste

¹¹ In keeping with the purpose of the entire memoir, this passage is an apology for Götz's role as a commander of rebels in the Peasants' War in Franconia, for which the victorious Swabian League later punished him – trans.

for being killed [by them], which is what had happened recently to many fine nobles at Weinsberg. I still hoped that some good would come of it, and so the next day I rode to their camp, wishing all the while that I were instead in the worst prison of the Turks, or in the world. But it went as it must, as God willed, just as He would help me out of this.

When I came to the rebel army, feeling God alone knows how, they took my horse by the reins and said I must dismount and enter their circular formation. Then they spoke to me about the command, which I utterly refused to accept, for I knew it would be incompatible with my honor and my duties. I added that I did not understand what they were doing, and that their nature and mine were as different from one another as heaven from earth. Also, I cannot honor an obligation whose fulfillment would be against God, His Imperial Majesty, the electors, princes, counts, barons, and ordinary nobles, also against the Swabian League and all the Imperial estates. I asked them to release me from this obligation. All in vain, for, in short, I had to serve as their commander. Then I said that before I would be their commander and act as tyrannically as they had at Weinsberg, or even counsel or aid in such an act, they would have to kill me like a mad dog. They replied that it could happen, but if not now, then perhaps never.

Then came envoys from Mainz as negotiators to the camp at Buchen.¹² There were no fewer than five or six, Marx Stumpff was among them, also a fellow I did not recognize at first, named Rucker.¹³ The Mainz envoys asked me, as they did Marx Stumpff, to accept this command of the peasants for the sake of their gracious lord, plus all the princes and all the nobles, high and low, in the Empire, for in this way I would prevent a great deal of evil. I replied, if the peasants will abandon their project and obey their rulers and lords by way of service, labor dues, justice, and military service, according to tradition, and if they will behave toward their rulers as honest, obedient subjects as properly befits dutiful subjects and underlings, I will accept the charge for eight days.

They proposed that I serve for a longer time, and in the end we agreed on one month. During this month, however, they must all agree in writing that in all lordships and districts, towns, hamlets, and villages, whether at home or anywhere else, far or near, they will obey the aforementioned terms and will not burn or damage any prince's or noble's home. These terms were accepted by their councilors and captains, those whom I thought suitable, especially one named Wendel Hipler, as able a man and secretary as one could find in the Empire. He had formerly been chancellor of Hohenlohe, but, as far as I knew, the counts of Hohenlohe were not giving him much to do now, so I took him into service. Then the captains and I made a treaty, as I've said, that they would obey, etc., and would send the treaty back to all the districts and lordships from which they came. The oath and treaty were announced to and accepted by the Odenwald army and its captains, so my understanding was that the matter stood as described, and that it was accepted.

¹² That is, from Cardinal Albrecht (1490-1545), the prince-archbishop of Mainz and an Imperial elector, a son of the house of Hohenzollern, a mighty accumulator of ecclesiastical benefices, and a dedicated sybarite – trans.

¹³ Cardinal Albrecht's secretary, Andres Rucker – trans.

But what actually happened? The rebels wanted to move from Amorbach to Miltenberg to meet Count Jörg von Wertheim, who wanted to negotiate peace with those damned people. And after I left them, they assembled, unbeknownst to me, the whole army, with the following result. The peasants who had been called up arrived, accompanied by their councilors. They said that if they were to fight for their freedom, as they were called and commanded to do, they would behave just as they had been doing, and such things. They caused a tumult in the army by swearing an oath with raised fingers to kill me and those who had made the treaty with me and had sent it to these peasants, because it obliged them to follow and obey the agreement we had made.

God, I knew nothing about this, and rode back to the army to see what the damned fellows had done. A fighter came down, a man from Heilbronn who had joined the peasants [. . .] and had heard all the speeches unknown to me. He briefly said to me, "Sir, don't go to the army!" This made me angry, and I cursed them, "May the Devil strike you all down! What have I done?" for I could not have known what had happened or why I should take care. I had thought no more of the treaty, for I held it to be fixed and firm. And as I neared the army, I saw that Wildenberg Castle, which belongs to the bishop of Mainz, was in flames. That was completely against the treaty we had negotiated and established. When they had sworn to me near Buchen and wanted me to remain with them longer than I wanted to do, I had spoken openly to the whole army that they should give me the eight days, as agreed, and I would behave in such a way that they would sooner tire of me than I of them. And they agreed, so my charge was limited to eight days, as I've said.

The peasants now moved on Würzburg and established camp at Höchberg. Here they again held an assembly, at which they wanted present neither prince, baron, or noble, so beforehand they gave me leave for eight days. And I have never been happier in my whole life, for during the eight days agreed upon I never lost courage. I've never been a hypocrite and wasn't this time, as I told them nothing they found pleasant and did not approve when they acted unjustly.

When they came to Würzburg, it happened that they were let into the city, and they made camp at and around St. Burckhardt's church and near the bridges, also some in the city, for it was a large force. And after we had spent some days at Würzburg, there came to me a good, honest, and loyal fellow (who perhaps saw that I meant well and did not speak soft words), who said that I was a good, free nobleman who spoke frankly and not to please his hearers. He advised me in confidence to leave off such speech and told me on pain of my life not to give any sign that he had alerted me. He warned that if I did not cease, it had been decided to take my head. This fellow was then a member of the Seven and the inner council of the peasants. Their decisions had to be accepted and their orders obeyed by the peasants. I took his words for true (noticing that he meant them well and in all loyalty) with great thanks, and I considered what I should do and how I should behave. My oath, that I would remain with them for a month, stood in my way. I decided that although I had leave for eight days, I would remain for the four weeks

as I had sworn to do, so as not to give reason to say that I had not honored my oath and done my duty.

Be that as it may, I could not get free of them while encamped at Würzburg, for if God Himself had come from heaven to me, they would not have allowed Him to speak to me, for there were always ten or twelve of them standing near enough to overhear. I was concerned that if I left them, all the princes, counts, barons, knights, and squires would have to pay, because I had not honored my oath to stay with them for a month. This could be made into a reason to harm many innocent people, nobles and others.

At this time God granted the Swabian League victory and the good fortune to crush a rebel army in Swabia. I well noticed how it struck fear into the rebels, who soon left Würzburg and went to Lauda. At first they camped on the Tauber river, then at Krautheim and at Neuenstadt am Kocher, and then through Hohenlohe, and I stayed with them until Adolzfurt in Hohenlohe. They were camped there at the exact moment of the expiration of the four weeks to which I was obliged. I thought, "Now is the time for you to see what you can do." I don't think they knew what was up or that my time had expired. But I knew it very well, for each day I counted the days remaining. Thus Almighty God gave me good fortune, so I got free of those folk, wicked or honest, I should say.

Every honorable, rational person, whoever he may be, can easily learn from this, my written account, whether I behaved well or ill toward the peasants.¹⁴ And I commend this to every honest man, whoever he may be, even if he is partisan, who may hear it said that I behaved differently among such a tyrannical folk, to whom I was sworn, than I actually did. If I had been better informed, I would have acquitted myself better, and I am not conscious of having done other than to prevent, to the extent I was able, great and noteworthy harm to many electors and princes, spiritual and temporal, also counts, barons, knights, and squires of estates higher and lower. I also put my body and life in such peril that I never knew whether I was safe, or whether they would kill or behead me. No one whatsoever can accuse me of having taken or asked for even a pittance [. . .].

God alone knows how it happened that, despite such trust and good faith, I fell, despite my innocence, into the League's hands, as I have already reported sufficiently and well. And if I had followed my own desires, I would have revenged myself on all my enemies, even if in doing so I were ruined [. . .].

I knew that I was innocent in this affair, and since I should and would surrender myself, I came right away in a few days to My Gracious Lord, Count Jörg von Wertheim, who was my very good friend and gracious lord, and who valued me above his life, property, and land and people, just as I trusted him. I was also his vassal. [. . .]

¹⁴ The memoir's conclusion is a vigorous, completely unabashed apology for the author's life in general, but above all his actions in 1525 – trans.

My Gracious Lord, Count Jörg, sent someone to my quarters late, after we had dined together in the evening. He said that I should come to His Grace in the castle as early as possible the next morning. I did this and found His Grace waiting for me, as he had said, for he was punctilious in his affairs. He offered me his hand, welcomed me, and asked with good and loyal intention, how I would act, and whether I would present myself [to the Swabian League] at Augsburg. I replied, "Yes!" Then he advised me frankly, so I believed, and asked whether I would surrender myself. I replied, "I will surrender, even if I knew that they would throw me into the dungeon, for, as Your Princely Grace himself knows, I hold myself to have been innocent in the matter of the peasants' rebellion, and I can honorably account for my actions. He added that, in good faith, he had to tell me that the estates of the Swabian League had been ordered to take me and throw me into the tower's dungeon as soon as I dismounted at the inn. [. . .]

And it happened to me just as the good, honest count predicted, except that I was imprisoned for two years, but in the room above and not in the dungeon, and what I had to pay for my food made me sour indeed. Thereafter I was prisoner at Heilbronn for three-and-a-half years on account of Duke Ulrich of Württemberg, and I had to pay for my food and more besides. That made five-and-a half years of imprisonment. Thereafter His Imperial Majesty took me into his protection and sent a letter announcing that he wanted me to serve him in Hungary. In the meantime I spent a total of sixteen years under house arrest and never came once beyond my own boundaries, and I never behaved other than as I was obliged to do, as God is my witness. [. . .]

And now that I have lived so long, for years many good-hearted, honest, trustworthy people (who have honored and wished me well, and still do; and who knew in part and perhaps remember how I have spent my life and survived many adventures and dangers from my foes) have asked and pleaded with me to describe my actions in writing. I did not want to refuse, for they hoped that this would bring more benefit than disadvantage to me and my heirs and descendants. Further, many people, high and low, would thereby be pleased, especially those who are unbiased. I don't even ask after the others, my detractors, who out of hate and envy have unjustly and undeservedly schemed against me openly or covertly, attempting now and then to tarnish my name among honorable persons, none of which I have deserved.

I want to affirm of all these accounts, which I have told or will tell, that this is my final will and my account of the clear, correct reasons and truth, and that no paragraph or word is included which I know or remember to be other than absolutely true. And herewith I place my cause before God, Who shall be my witness both in this vale of tears and at the Last Judgment. My whole life through, whether as a boy or man, there is no honest man, whoever he might be, friend or foe, to whom I have said anything untruthful, whether much or little, great or small. I have never failed to keep my word and faith to such men; I have never in my life, whether during my imprisonment or otherwise, falsified a letter or a seal; I have never behaved except as an honest man of noble birth toward friend or foe. I can say this of myself before God and in truth. Although I was later warned by men of high or low estate not to surrender myself, despite my

declaration that I would, I have always kept my sworn oath and obligation, just as I said. I include my enemies, of whom there were many in the Swabian League, princes and others, with whom I have conducted feud, and against whom I was forced to act. But, praise God, all has been settled, composed, and determined, and I placed myself, also my honor and obligations, in their hands, though I had no trust except in my own just cause. In such circumstances the Devil himself would have surrendered. Even some of the greatest members of the League told me that it was foolish of me to surrender to those people, to whom I done much harm, and who therefore hated me as an enemy.

Just as My Gracious Lord, Count Jörg von Wertheim, had warned me, that is what happened to me. Everything I write is the correct and absolute truth, and by the true Word of God, I know of no word to be changed, and when I die, if Almighty God grants His grace, in my final moment before leaving this world, I will take the Holy Sacrament on this truth. [. . .]

And finally

I cannot and will not deny that since my youth Almighty God has by His divine grace often granted me victory and good fortune over all my enemies. My misfortune, which I long suffered, came solely from dealing in good faith with my enemies and opponents, and in believing that yea should be yea, and nay should be nay, and that it is only right that one should keep whatever promises he makes to another. I have relied on and trusted in this principle, and I have believed that others should do likewise, just as I have done throughout my whole life and, God willing, continue to do. As I've said, all my misfortune came from such causes and from too much trust. But when I, as an enemy, did not trust my enemies, which sometimes happened, I have prospered with God's grace and help. I cannot, praise God, say otherwise, for I have known how to behave toward my enemies. May Almighty God still come to my aid!

All this I, an old man of much experience, have wanted to offer as a heartfelt warning and example to all loyal, dear, pious, and honest men, whether fighters or others of estates high and low, to emperors, kings, electors and princes, to counts, barons, knights, and squires, to cities and to others, of whatever estate, spiritual or temporal, who participated in feuds and wars.

May God, the eternal Word, help us,
The poor body here and the soul there,
And may Almighty God protect us
From eternal death. Amen.

Gottfried von Berlichingen zu Hornberg

Source of original German text: Götz von Berlichingen, *Mein Fehd und Handlungen*, ed. Helgard Ulmschneider, *Forschungen aus Württembergisch Franken*, Volume 17. Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1981, pp. 52-54, 57-67, 122-28, 130-31, 139-41.

Translation: Thomas A. Brady Jr.