

“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

der 10. NOVEMBER 1483—MARTIN LUTHERS GEBURTSTAG (der 2. Februar 1546, Sterbetag)

Martin Luther (1483–1546) standardized modern High German with his translation of the Bible (1522–1534). He also published religious treatises, a proposal for a general system of education, and a violent denunciation of the peasants who had revolted in 1524–1525. He composed many hymns, of which the best known is “Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott” (“A Mighty Fortress is our God”).

THE HERITAGE OF MARTIN LUTHER 3/23

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben and died there on February 18, 1546. As one of those who paved the way for the intellectual and political conflicts that surged through Germany and Europe in the age of the decay of feudalism, he is one of the most influential men in German history.

Martin Luther lived in an age of deep-seated social contradictions: The church, which had developed into one of the most important international centers of feudal power during the Middle Ages, but had increasingly become discredited as a result of its internal corruption, was caught up in a power struggle and secular affairs. The black death swept through the towns and villages around the turn of the century; “Ketzer” (heretics) and “Hexen” (witches) were still being burned at the stake and old-style prophets of doom proclaimed the end of the world. It was a time of general social unrest and violence, i.e. the *Bundschuh* revolts (peasant riots) between the years 1492 and 1517, the crusades, and the invasion of the Turks in the Southeast.

It was also a time when scholars searched for a new vision of man and the world (Renaissance, humanism, and the influences of scholasticism and mysticism) which set the stage for a new age of discoveries and inventions in science and technology. The invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg was a necessary prerequisite for the wide dissemination of Luther’s writings.

At the Diet of Worms in April 1521 Luther refused to recant his doctrines. This was a moral victory for the Reformation. The Edict of Worms imposed a ban which outlawed Luther from society and forbade any dissemination of his doctrines, but because of the extent of the popular movement and of the anti-Papal attitudes of a number of the princes in Germany at that time, the ban failed to achieve its purpose.

Indeed, the opposition to Rome continued to grow. Luther was secretly taken to the safety of Wartburg Castle where he completed his translation of the New Testament, his greatest literary achievement. For centuries to come his Bible was the most frequently read book in the German language. Its dialect stems mainly from that of Upper Saxony and Thuringia, but Luther also built on the unifying linguistic tendencies which had been increasingly developing in the economic, political and cultural dealings between the various German states and principalities. Keeping close to the language of the simple people, he employed with great skill the words, phrases and images appropriate to his task, and his New Testament has remained a model for the art of translation ever since.

Luther was by far the most influential German writer of his age, and his works represent an important contribution to the development of the German language. Not only are they masterpieces of style and expression but they also raised the German language to equal status with Latin in the realm of scholarship, particularly in theology, and gave a great impetus to the development of a unified written language for use in all German-speaking lands.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a monk, a religious man who dedicated his life to worship and study. He used simple and clear language to teach Christians what they should believe and how they should live their lives. He also translated the Bible from the ancient Latin language into German so that everyone could understand it.

Luther spoke out against what he saw as the power and dishonesty of the Roman Catholic Church, especially the selling of “indulgences.” People bought indulgences to have their sins, or misdeeds, forgiven. They received a piece of paper, or receipt, that said they had confessed their sins, they were sorry, and they had been forgiven. The practice of selling indulgences went against Luther’s belief that people’s actions were not what made them good in the eyes of God; goodness was God’s blessing. Luther was also angry that the Church used the money it made from indulgences to pay for the luxurious lifestyles of the Church leaders, while most common people lived in poverty. Luther and his followers became known as Protestants, which means “those who protest.”