

How and why do historians disagree about the Peasants' Revolt?

Overview for teachers:

This resource provides students with the opportunity to sample real historical debate about the Peasants' Revolt. The central viewpoint (worksheet on slide 4) is from Rodney Hilton's 1973 *Bond Men Made Free*, to enable students to study a Marxist interpretation in detail.

There is then a more contemporary extract (worksheet on slide 5) to see how the Marxist view is challenged and how historians use evidence to substantiate their claims.

The texts are unabridged and there is a mixture of closed and open questions to encourage students to engage first with the content and then with the concepts in the arguments.

The questions are carefully pitched to develop comprehension, before moving on to deeper thinking. To make the texts even more accessible, they could be read by the teacher, either live or in recorded form.

Suggested uses in the classroom:

- Possible stand-alone homework tasks – a follow-up from a study of the Peasants' Revolt
- Extension tasks for the curious
- A stand-alone resource for cover lessons
- A boost to literacy and reading real historical debate
- The basis for a classroom debate – taking a Marxist viewpoint and then challenging it with counter-arguments
- More useful at Key Stage 3 as an introduction to the concept of interpretations, rather than an in-depth analysis of the historiography of this specific event

Can you find a word or phrase (in bold) in the text that means:

- 1) The way the modern world works on a system of competition, big business and dominated by the wealthy
- 2) The surnames of three of the leaders of the Revolt
- 3) European
- 4) To fight with someone or something to achieve
- 5) Opposing/being put against another
- 6) A group of people or an organisation with a particular set of ideas or opinions
- 7) Spoken/expressed
- 8) Going against held beliefs
- 9) Underground/hidden/trying to destroy something

Which of the statements below better represent Hilton's view of the Peasants' Revolt?

1. Hilton argues that the Peasants' Revolt was part of a long narrative of uprisings of working people against powerful people before and after 1381.
2. Hilton sees the Peasants' Revolt as a one-off event and says that it was the first time that peasants had risen up against the nobles.

Historical interpretations of the Peasants' Revolt:

The peasants... in 1381 need to be understood in terms of a century of past **struggle** at village level in England, those earlier struggles need to be seen as part of a **continental** movement...

... the ideas **enunciated** by the leaders of the rising, especially those critical of the church's role could not simply have sprung from the heads of **Tyler, Ball and Straw**... we must look wider to critical or **heretical** thinking in France, Italy, Germany and elsewhere, and to its **subversive** social and political implications... part of a European **movement** in which peasants communities were to be **pitted** against State, church and nobility for two or three centuries to come as they had been for the two or three previous centuries...

What could the fate of peasant societies in the present world [1973] of almost world-wide **commercial and industrial monopoly capitalism** have in common with that of the peasant societies of the late medieval world?

Clearly, the tasks of leadership in contemporary peasant society have nothing in common with the tasks of the past, except in the recognition that conflict is part of existence and that nothing is gained without struggle.

(Rodney Hilton, Bond Men Made Free, 1973)

Extension task: Can you construct an argument that disagrees with Hilton?

Marxism is a social, political and economic philosophy named after the philosopher Karl Marx. It examines the effect of capitalism on labour, productivity and economic development and argues for a workers' revolution to overturn capitalism in favour of communism.

Do you think that Hilton is a Marxist historian? Explain your reasons.

What is Hilton's view of how society is structured in his time (mid-twentieth century)?

Can you find a word or phrase (in bold) in the text that means:

- 1) Something caused by or influenced by events/people in one specific place nearby
- 2) An aim or reason for doing something
- 3) A man who is in charge of a prior or second in charge in an abbey
- 4) Grumbings – things that you are unhappy about
- 5) Disagreement/argument
- 6) A building where monks and nuns live; this is also where local rules and taxes were decided
- 7) A person who writes about historical events as they happen
- 8) A man who is in charge of a monastery
- 9) Control over one's own affairs

Which of the two statements better represents Chicks' view of the Peasants' Revolt:

- 1) The rebels in 1381 were not all working together. In local areas, people challenged what they saw as abuse of power and argued for freedoms.
- 2) The rebels in 1381 were not all working together. In local areas, they rebelled against religion and religious people.

Historical interpretations of the Peasants' Revolt:

Hilton suggests that the rebels had a shared **agenda**. Firstly, I will look at how the actions in Suffolk were, in fact very localised in character. Secondly, I will look at how the Bury rebels pursued an agenda specific to their town. The radically different attitudes to 'looting' of rebel groups is a key example of the **localised character** of the rebellion. Six separate **chroniclers** describe how the London rebels destroyed the Savoy rather than stealing.... In Bury St Edmunds it is particularly clear that the rebels were pursuing local agendas. The Bury townsmen had fought against the **abbey for self government** for over a century, leading rebellions in 1264 and 1327. A settlement of 1332 reinforced the abbey's power, so these tensions were never fully settled. In 1379 there was a **dispute** between the town and the abbey over the election of a new **abbot**: a dispute which had not ended at the time of 1381 revolt. As discussed, leading figures from the 1379 dispute were involved in the murder of the **prior** in 1381. The townsmen of Bury did not rebel as part of a common rebel agenda, but took advantage of the crisis to pursue a long-standing and localised **grievance** against the abbey.

(Joe Chicks, Kings College London, 2018)

Extension tasks: Can you cite other reasons why people might have rebelled in 1381? Do these fall under local or national grievances?

What does it mean, in the context of the Peasants' Revolt, that the 'rebels had a shared agenda'?

What evidence does Chicks use to challenge this view held by Hilton?

Why might historians – like Chicks and Hilton – disagree with one another? (*Clue: think about what they focus on and the evidence that they use*)