

## 2. A NOTE ON REFORMATION-ERA *FLUGSCHRIFTEN*

*Flugschriften* or pamphlets were a popular form of publication in western Europe during the first half of the sixteenth century—the time frame within which the pamphlets listed in the James White Library catalog appeared. It seems likely, in fact, that during that fairly short period (which, moreover, was still relatively early in the history of movable-type printing) possibly upward of 10,000 titles of this sort were printed.<sup>1</sup>

The question of how to distinguish the Reformation-era *Flugschriften* from other literature of that time period has evoked considerable discussion. Probably no definition will be adequate, but the following qualifications seem pertinent:<sup>2</sup>

1. *Physical Description.* The Reformation-era pamphlet is commonly understood to be more than simply a broadside, on the one hand, and for the most part would not exceed 64 small leaves (128 pages), on the other hand. The term “small leaves” has been used, because the printing format was normally octavo, or possibly small quarto. In any case, the obvious purpose of *Flugschriften* was to have small and handy items for ready and reasonably priced distribution. In their original distribution state, pamphlets were generally unbound.

2. *Purpose.* Reformation-era pamphlet literature, as defined by present-day Reformation specialists, manifests obvious apologetic and/or polemical concerns. In other words, in order to be considered *Flugschriften*, the materials must give evidence of a propagandistic

<sup>1</sup>Movable-type printing was a fifteenth-century discovery in Europe, though it had been first used in China much earlier. The European “invention” of this much more versatile means of printing than the older xylography is usually attributed to Johann Gutenberg ca. 1455.

<sup>2</sup>An excellent discussion by Steven Ozment, “The Pamphlet Literature of the German Reformation,” in Ozment, ed., *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research* (St. Louis, Mo., 1982), pp. 85-105, presents the definition of pamphlet literature given by Hans-Joachim Köhler, the leader of a significant pamphlet-research project at the University of Tübingen, and then affords his own refinements of this definition (pp. 86-90). My analysis takes a somewhat different approach, but it does fall within the same general parameters as the definitions provided by those specialists; and in any case, it provides, I believe, some useful and appropriate guidelines for dealing with the complex literature involved.

function; their obvious intent must be to influence thought and/or to incite the readers to action for certain causes or on certain issues, theological or practical.

3. *Subject Matter.* The subject matter of the Reformation pamphlets could, and did, vary considerably from one publication to another. The topics treated might well be anything that would serve the intended apologetical and/or polemical purposes and concerns of the authors. Theological and ecclesiological issues were at the forefront of discussion in these Reformation pamphlets, but such pamphlets might range into treatment of political, economic, commercial, and social matters. Documents that were of purely commercial or political nature (as, for example, simple barter contracts or "bills of trade or sale") are not to be classified as "Reformation *Flugschriften*."

4. *Presentation Style.* Presentation of materials in the Reformation pamphlet literature could take a variety of forms—from theological argumentation, to historical narrative, to imaginary accounts, to polemical diatribe and lampoons, and even to so-called "letters from heaven" or "letters from hell" (see the immediately preceding "Brief Note"). The vehicle of transmission might be elegant prose or poetry, or it could be rather raucous ridicule and invective. Dialogue and drama were sometimes used, and at times the subject matter was set forth largely by pictorial representation. Various treatises, though not primarily pictorial, were illuminated by woodcuts depicting concerns and viewpoints of the times—much as cartoons do in modern newspapers. "Open letters" were also a common type of Reformation-era pamphlet.

In recent years there have been efforts to compile lists of sixteenth-century pamphlets and even to provide corpuses that include selections of such pamphlets. Certain specific areas of interest, such as the Peasants' War, have had more substantial treatment of their pertinent *Flugschriften* than has been the case with regard to general pamphlet literature of the Reformation or even with respect to the pamphlet material pertaining to the German Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Concerning the "Peasants War," there are, e.g., Günther Franz, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges* (Darmstadt, 1963), and Klaus Kaczerowsky, ed., *Flugschriften des Bauernkrieges* (Hamburg, 1970), as well as a publication sponsored by the Akademie der Wissenschaft der DDR and appearing on the 450th anniversary of

This situation is, however, being remedied by an ambitious project of publication by the Swiss Inter-Documentation Company of Zug, which in 1978 began producing in microfiche an extensive series under the capable editorship of Hans-Joachim Köhler. The series is entitled *Flugschriften des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, and is an effort to provide bibliographical data and summaries of contents for all available German and Latin pamphlets that were published from 1501 to 1530 in the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

In closing, we should just mention that the German-Reformation pamphlet literature provides, by its sheer quantity, a significant body of source material to help enhance our knowledge of the events, developments, and thinking of the time. As repetitious of commonplaces as it frequently is, it nevertheless adds its own "twist" to those commonplaces as it shares the perspectives of its wide array of authors and the groups they represent. But beyond this, the great richness in variety of these pamphlets and their forthrightness in expression carry their readers into some of the recesses—the "nooks and crannies," as it were—of Reformation history in a manner that cannot readily be reached in any other way.<sup>5</sup>

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the historic "Peasants War" in Thuringia—Adolf Laube et al., eds., *Flugschriften des Bauernkriegszeit* (Berlin, 1975).

<sup>4</sup>In addition to this project, the Swiss Inter-Documentation Company has undertaken microfiche series on Reformed Protestantism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (under the editorship of Willem Balke et al.) and on Mennonite and related sources of the sixteenth century (under the editorship of Irvin B. Horst).

<sup>5</sup>Ozment, pp. 90-97, devotes an interesting section of his study to the question, "What Kind of Information Do Pamphlets Convey?" He discusses briefly each of seven varieties of the *Flugschriften*: "Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices," "Anticlerical Literature," "Social Profiles and Commentary," "Marriage and Family," "The Proper Relationship Between 'Church' and 'State,'" "Peasant Protest and Revolt," and "Christian Mirrors." The last-mentioned category may need explanation: It is what Ozment defines as "polemical catechisms for the laity that contain not only detailed theological and moral instruction, but also practical household advice"—works that "grew in number and size after 1530 when successful Protestants began to consolidate their gains, and when confessional differences with Catholics as well as those between competing Protestant groups themselves hardened and became irreconcilable" (p. 97).