

AP Euro

Chapter 13: Luther + Social Media

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LINDA WERTHEIMER: Protestants around the world, this year, are commemorating the 500th anniversary of the day a German monk named Martin Luther posted 95 objections to the practices of the Catholic Church.

With that act, Luther single-handedly took on the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor and sparked the Protestant Reformation. An anniversary exhibit in Minneapolis documents Martin Luther's achievement. NPR's Tom Gjelten says it shows that social media was as powerful back then as it is today.

TOM GJELTEN: One item in the exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, brought from Germany, stands for what Martin Luther found most odious.

TOM RASSIEUR: This is a trunk. It's an iron-bound chest that has heavy locks on the front of it and big, heavy hinges. It's meant to be shut tight.

GJELTEN: Tom Rasseur curated the exhibit.

RASSIEUR: But at the top, there's a little bowl with a piggy bank slot in it. And the idea was that you would put your money in the slot and the priest would give you an indulgence, a certificate that reduced your time in purgatory.

GJELTEN: Purgatory being just sort of hell, where you went to be purified by fire for thousands of years - but an indulgence certificate would shorten your time there. For Martin Luther, the cash sale of indulgences symbolized church corruption. One day in 1517 at his local church in Germany, he posted his 95 theses condemning the sale of indulgences. His words were incendiary - no one questioned the church. Even so, the broadside might have gone unnoticed but for the introduction a few decades earlier of a new technology, the printing press. Rasseur, the institute curator, says German printers saw a hot property.

RASSIEUR: As an entrepreneurial venture, they set the 95 theses up into type, printed them and reproduced them. And when people saw how rapidly they were selling, they made copies and copies and copies. And it was - it went viral.

GJELTEN: Rasseur shows me one example, a pocket-sized version of the 95 theses, just four pages long.

RASSIEUR: The one we see here was printed in the faraway city of Basel, already in 1517. That means within two months, the words of Luther had reached out hundreds of miles. So when Luther's ideas started to spread, there was no way they could be stopped.

GJELTEN: Do we know how many copies were printed?

RASSIEUR: No, we don't. But we know that there were probably thousands and thousands of them because there were so many editions immediately.

GJELTEN: As with the internet centuries later, Luther showed how a new information technology could change the world. From Rome, orders were put out for him to be put on trial, presumably to be burned at the stake for heresy. And he went into hiding. He was never apprehended. And ultimately, he became the most famous preacher of his day.

The Minneapolis exhibit includes hundreds of objects borrowed from German museums, never assembled before in a single exhibition. The most impressive is the actual pulpit in which Luther gave his last sermon. Rasseur says Luther's pulpit tells a story of how he changed the worship experience.

RASSIEUR: Previously, you'd go to church and the emphasis was on the Eucharist and the mass, the blessing of the bread and the wine and its consumption.

GJELTEN: With the priest at the altar mumbling in Latin.

RASSIEUR: Luther changed things. He had the priests get up in a box and stand in a very visible place, addressing the congregation and speaking to them in plain language in their native tongue.

GJELTEN: Martin Luther courageously questioned authority and gave the world a new people's Christianity. But he was hardly without fault. In his later years, he became mean and hateful, his theology forever tainted by anti-Semitic writings. Tomoko Emmetling of the State Museum of Prehistory in Germany coordinated the German side of the exhibition.

TOMOKO EMMETLING: Now we know that Martin Luther was also an ambivalent figure. There are his anti-Semitic publications. There's no intention to heroize him. Yeah, we tried to get an objective picture and to see him as the person he was.

GJELTEN: A flawed man but also a revolutionary.

Tom Gjelten, NPR News, Minneapolis.

story media

What did Luther do to oppose the Pope & Church?

How did technology help spread Luther's ideas?

Why do you think Luther's message was copied so often?

As Luther a hero or villain for creating this disruption?

How have new technologies changed the modern world of today?