

## Diet of Worms

The Diet of Worms was a general assembly of The Holy Roman Empire that took place in 1521 at Worms, a small town on the River Rhine located in what is now Germany. It is most memorable for the Edict of Worms which dealt with Martin Luther and the effects of the Protestant Reformation.



Source A – A 19<sup>th</sup> century picture of the Diet of Worms

not all of one sort." Luther went on to place the writings into three categories: (i) Works which were educational and well considered useful by his enemies. These Luther would not revoke. (ii) Books which attacked the abuses of the papacy: to revoke those would be to encourage the abuses to continue. "If I now recant these, then, I would be doing nothing but strengthening tyranny" (iii) Attacks on individuals: he apologized for the harsh tone of these writings but did not reject what he had taught; if he could be shown from the Bible that he was mistaken, Luther continued, only then would he reject them.

The previous year, Pope Leo X had issued the Papal bull, outlining forty-one errors found in Martin Luther's 95 theses and other writings related to or written by him. Prince Frederick III, Elector of Saxony obtained an agreement that if Luther appeared he would be promised safe passage to and from the meeting. Such a guarantee was essential after the treatment of Jan Hus, who was tried and executed at the Council of Constance in 1415 despite a safe conduct pass.

Emperor Charles V began the Imperial Diet of Worms on 28 January 1521. Luther was summoned to renounce or reaffirm his views; he appeared before the assembly on 16 April. Luther was asked if a collection of books was his and if he was ready to revoke their heresies. He stated "They are all mine, but as for the second question, they are



Source B – 16<sup>th</sup> century image 'Luther is shown as an Augustinian monk debating the pope, a cardinal, a bishop, and another monk at the Diet of Worms'

According to tradition, at the end of his defence Luther said: 'Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen.' Most historians now question whether these words were actually spoken, however, since only the last four appear in contemporary accounts. The full sentence only appears in an account by Philipp Melanchthon, one of Luther's strongest sympathisers, but only the last four words are recorded in a similar first hand account Johannes Cochlaeus who was a defender of the church. The Edict of Worms was issued on 25 May 1521 by Emperor Charles V. It made Luther an outlaw.

### Source C - Edict of Worms

'we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work'



Source D – 2003 feature film with Joseph Fiennes

There is room for creativity in the popular presentation of history since history itself is storytelling that mixes reliable information with interpretation. Since historians themselves are interpreters and shapers of visions of the past...I cautioned against a heroic portrayal of Luther [but] when I read the first draft of the screenplay, I found that little of what I had said seemed to be heard...it appeared that the script had completely escaped the influence of historians.

Source E - Scott Hendrix of Princeton Theological Seminary. Historical advisor on *Luther* 2003 feature film



Source F - van Esschen and Voes, burned at the stake in Brussels 1523

During his return to Wittenberg, he disappeared. Despite the agreement that he could return home safely, it was privately understood that Luther would soon be arrested and punished. To protect him from this fate, Prince Frederick seized him on his way home and hid him in Wartburg Castle. It was during his time in Wartburg that Luther began his German translation of the Bible.

Because of rising public support for Luther among the German people and the protection of certain German princes, the Edict of Worms was never enforced in Germany. However, in the Low Countries (comprising modern-day Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), the Edict was initially enforced among Luther's most active supporters.

In December, 1521, Jacob Probst, prior of the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp, was the first Luther-supporter to be prosecuted under the terms of the Worms Edict. In February 1522, Probst was forced to make public recantation of Luther's teachings. Later that year, additional arrests were made among the Augustinians in Antwerp. Two monks, Johannes van Esschen and Hendrik Voes, refused to recant and so on 1 July 1523; they were burned at the stake in Brussels. They became amongst the earliest Protestant martyrs.

## Activities

### Comprehension

1. Make a timeline of the main events surrounding the Diet of Worms
2. What did Pope Leo X's Papal bull of 1520 proclaim?
3. What reasons did Luther give for refusing to revoke the ideas contained in his books?
4. Why was Luther held at Wartburg Castle?
5. Why did the Edict of Worms have different consequences in the Low Countries compared to Germany?
6. What is a martyr? Explain the view that the first Protestant martyrdom originated in Brussels.

### Source analysis

7. Look at Source C. (a) What is meant by 'either by words or by deeds' and 'notorious heretic'. (b) What is the intention of this extract?
8. Compare and contrast Source A with Source B. Suggest some reasons for the differences in the sources.
9. Consider Source D and E. How useful is Source D in helping us understand what happened at the Diet of Worms?
10. 'The Diet of Worms was a key turning point in the history of Europe'. Using the sources and your own knowledge explain the extent to which you agree with this assertion.