

# The Madness of the Anabaptist Münster

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Johann of Leiden in the guise of David defeats Goliath. An illustration of the Anabaptist work "Neue Zeitung"

As we remember from [previous article](#), the leader of the Dutch Anabaptists Melchior Hoffman, who declared himself the Old Testament prophet Elijah, was arrested in Strasbourg and spent the rest of his life behind bars. But at that time two of his “apostles” (messengers) had already settled in German Münster - Jan Mathis from Haarlem and Jan Bokelzon from Leiden. They declared this city the New Jerusalem and called their supporters to it.



Jan Mathis engraved by van Zychem. In the background is his death during the siege of

Münster.



Johann von Leiden (Beukelszoon), engraving by Heinrich Aldegrever

Upon learning of the teacher's arrest, Mathis, without the slightest remorse, declared him a false prophet, and himself a true prophet, calling himself Enoch. He belonged to that group of Anabaptists who wanted to build the Kingdom of God on sinful earth themselves.

### Anabaptist victory in Münster

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At this time, two parties fought in Münster - Catholics and Lutherans. The Anabaptists supported the latter and gradually found themselves at the head of all the Protestants in the city. Thanks to their agitation, in February 1534, more than 8 thousand people were re-baptized here in 14 days.

In one of the chronicles you can read about it:

“The faces of the Christians blossomed. Everyone in the bazaar prophesied - even children of 7 years old. The women did amazing jumps. The atheists said: they are mad, they have drunk sweet wine.

The activities of the Anabaptists of Münster did not go unnoticed by the local authorities. Prince-Bishop Franz von Waldeck, who was the lord of this city, gathered a three thousandth army, which approached the city on February 9, 1534, but did not dare to engage in battle with the Anabaptist detachments that opposed it. And on February 10, a rare atmospheric phenomenon occurred near Münster - a halo: three suns were seen over the city.



False suns over Münster, depiction from Augsburg Curiosities, circa 1552

The Anabaptists considered this a sign of their impending victory, on the contrary, the halo had a demoralizing effect on their opponents.

As a result, on February 21, in the elections to the city council, the supporters of Mathis received the majority of votes and were able to put their supporters or persons who sympathized with them at the head of Münster. Among them was the merchant Bernhard Knipperdolling, burgomaster of Münster since 1533, who became father-in-law and sword-bearer of Johann of Leiden.



Bernhard Knipperdolling engraved by Heinrich Aldgrever, 1536



I. Baer. Johann of Leiden baptizes a girl. Knipperdolling stands behind him with a sword. 1840



Coin of the Commune of Münster with the slogan "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism"

Already on February 24, pogroms began in Munster: churches and monasteries were destroyed, fanatics smashed statues, burned icons, and threw the relics of saints into the street. In addition to the church statues, the statues surrounding the market square were destroyed, old manuscripts and secular paintings were burned along with icons, and musical instruments were broken.

And on February 27, it came to the expulsion of the "godless", who were declared to be all those who did not accept the teachings of the "prophet". The extremist Mathis demanded their execution. Knipperdolling, who retained the remnants of his mind, opposed, reasonably stating:

"All nations will then unite against us to avenge the blood of the slain."

Finally, the parties came to an agreement: to expel from the city those who did not receive a second baptism, of course, seizing all their property.

The motto of the Anabaptists, breaking into the houses of opponents, was the words: "*Down with the children of Esau! The inheritance belongs to the children of Jacob*».

Eyewitnesses recalled that it was sleet that day, and the expelled were not even allowed to dress warmly.

Then it came to the "fair division of property." The local chronicle says this:

"They unanimously decided that all property should be common, that everyone should give their silver, gold and money. In the end, they all did it."

However, there are big doubts about the "unanimity" of the inhabitants of Münster. Unanimous on this issue, probably, were local and alien lumpens. More or less wealthy townspeople were clearly not enthusiastic. The Anabaptists plundered their opponents very willingly, but parted with their property without enthusiasm, and the process of its socialization dragged on for two months. But the seven deacons appointed to oversee the execution of this command of "the prophet Enoch" were relentless and inflexible. All debts were canceled, internal money circulation was stopped, everyone was equalized in receiving food and other goods.

But even this was not enough for Mathis. Having dealt with the Catholics and Lutherans, he turned his attention to those Anabaptists who were the last to be re-baptized. There were 300 of them. The self-appointed prophet announced that "*The Lord is angry and demands a sacrifice*". The unfortunate people were locked up for several hours in one of the destroyed churches, but then they were nevertheless released. The townspeople began to inform on insufficiently pious neighbors, repressions against dissidents began. Executions became quite commonplace in Münster and at the same time were quite massive. So, already on the eve of the fall of this city, on June 3, 1535, 52 people were executed, on the 6th and 7th of the same month - 18 people each. There were also very wild cases when the body of one of the accused named Northhorn was cut into 12 parts, and one of the Dutch Anabaptists ate his heart and liver.

## **Beginning of the siege of Münster**

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Prince-Bishop von Waldeck turned to the worried rulers of the surrounding lands for help - and received it, mainly in the form weapons (including guns) and equipment. Landsknechts were actively recruited. The infantrymen were promised a monthly payment of 4 Emden guilders per month, the horse soldiers - 8. In addition, the mercenaries were promised that the city they had taken would be given to them for as much as 8 days. Anabaptist leaders and members of the city council were ordered to be taken alive.

At the beginning of March 1534, a 14-month siege of Munster began, which was well fortified and had large food supplies (this was not the merit of the Anabaptist leaders).

The morale of the besieged in the first months of the siege was very high, which cannot be said about the soldiers of the episcopal army. Moreover, the Anabaptists often and successfully made sorties, attacking the enemy camp.

### **The death of Jan Mathis and the appearance of "Tsar Johann of Leipzig"**

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On April 5, 1534, the leader of the Anabaptists of Münster, Jan Mathis, died. The day before, during a meal with fellow believers, he had a vision that he must, like the biblical Samson, challenge the infidels to battle. Without hesitation, he went out the gate with a dozen volunteers - all of them, of course, were killed by enemy soldiers. Now came the finest hour of the Leiden furrier Jan Bokelzon, who declared:

“The Lord willed Mathis to die, so that you would not believe in him more than in God. In return, he will give you another prophet who will be even more powerful.”

After that, Bokelson was silent for three days, and “opening his mouth”, announced that he had received a Divine revelation that it was he who should replace Mathis. And a "prophet" named Dyuzenshnur reported a vision that Jan Bokelzon should become the king of the whole earth until the Lord God himself occupies the throne. So the furrier from Leiden also became the king of Munster, receiving two golden crowns - royal and imperial. The city council was dissolved, Münster was divided into 12 parts, at the head of which were placed "dukes" chosen by lot. By a strange and happy “accident”, all the “dukes” turned out to be either “prophets” close to the new “king”, or Dutch - countrymen of Jan Bokelzon, who from now on became known as Johann of Leiden. Among other things, Johannes of Leiden stated that "*everything high will be destroyed*" - as a result, the tops of the bell towers and towers were demolished.

### **"Apostles" Münster**

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Even from the besieged Munster, preachers and proclamations were sent to the neighboring



regions with calls to join the Anabaptists of this city:

“Let no one think of either a husband, or a wife, or a child, if they are unfaithful. Do not take them with you, they are of no use to God's community.”

They also spoke of heavenly life in Münster:

“The poorest of us, who were formerly despised as beggars, now walk around in rich outfits, like the highest and noblest. The poor have become, by the grace of God, as rich as the burgomasters and the rich.”

In the book "Restitution or Restoration of the True Christian Doctrine, Faith and Life" it was argued that Erasmus of Rotterdam, Luther and Zwingli only slightly revealed the truth, which "shone" in Mathis and Johannes of Leiden.

And the "Book of Revenge" contained open calls for a fight against "unholy power":

“Remember what they (authorities) did to us; all this should be repaid to them by the same measure that they measured. Pay attention and do not consider it a sin that is not a sin.

It is known that the messengers of the Münster "prophets" even reached Bern and Zurich.

The preaching of the "apostles" of Münster was a success. In Cologne, then, 700 people were "baptised", in Essen - 200. At the call of the local "prophet" John Düsenschnur, the Münster Anabaptists openly appeared in the city of Sest and almost captured it. In the city of Wollenhov near Utrecht, 1600 Anabaptists gathered to help the Münsterians, who were dispersed with difficulty by the authorities. Near Groningen, about a thousand armed Anabaptists on their way to Münster were defeated by the troops of the Duke of Guelders. The same duke intercepted and destroyed the Anabaptist squadron, which was heading towards Deventer. It is said that in the Lower Saxon city of Warenburg the Anabaptists behaved so defiantly and insolently that its burgomaster dared to appear on the street only accompanied by numerous guards.

In the harbor of Amsterdam, the authorities seized 21 ships with Anabaptists who intended to sail to Munster. About three thousand people, including women and children, were placed in a camp on the island of Enns, many of them died from starvation and disease.

In Friesland, in 1535, local Anabaptists captured one of the monasteries, which was recaptured with great difficulty by the local authorities: during the assault, the imperial troops lost 900 people only killed. In the same 1535, Jan Van Geel set out from the besieged Münster to Amsterdam, who raised an uprising in the city on May 12-13 and even managed to capture the town hall.

## **polygamy**

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Finally, the “prophets” of the besieged Münster came to the conclusion that it was expedient to establish polygamy, the need for which was justified by references to the Old Testament and the Old Testament patriarchs. In addition, women in Münster, after the murders and expulsion of the opponents of the Anabaptists, turned out to be two (and according to some sources - three) times more than men. A law was passed requiring all women of childbearing age to have a husband. And the division of women began, accompanied by numerous rapes and suicides of unfortunate girls and women. Rebellious women were publicly executed in the town square, one of these victims was a girl who refused to become the 17th wife of Jan Bokelzon, who already called himself Johann of Leiden. The unfortunate woman was declared, among other things, a heretic: after all, a true Christian could not refuse "family happiness" with "God's chosen one." They say that Bokelzon personally cut off her head, and the rest of the wives at that time stood nearby and sang church hymns.



Johann of Leiden executes a woman who did not want to become his 17th wife

In total, Johann, in the end, turned out to have 18 wives, one of them was Divara, the widow of Jan Matis. Things got to the point that the fathers and brothers of some women on July

29-30, 1534 raised an uprising, which was led by a member of the city council, the blacksmith Möllenhecke. However, Johann was sided with his countrymen - those Anabaptists who came from Holland and Frisia. The rebels were executed. Johann of Leiden, Bokelzon, who led the massacre of the bound opponents, shouted:

"Whoever fires the first shot will do a service to God."

After the suppression of this uprising, repressions were launched aimed at suppressing any dissent. The renaming of city streets began, and newborns received strange, often newly invented names. Recall that all this happened during the siege of Münster, which was led by troops gathered by Prince-Bishop Franz von Waldeck.

## Siege of Munster

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The Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire Charles V at that time was preparing for an operation to expel the Ottoman admiral Khair ad-Din Barbarossa from Tunisia and could not provide significant assistance to the opponents of the Anabaptist Munster. Time passed, discipline in the army of the besiegers fell, the sick and deserters appeared.

Finally, the decision was made to storm, which was scheduled for May 26. But already on May 25, the detachments that stood opposite the gates of Judefeld, wanting to be the first to enter the city (and the first to start plundering it), arbitrarily went on the attack. Seeing this, other detachments of the army of the prince-bishop also went on the offensive.



Storming of Münster in an engraving by Erhard Schon, circa 1535

The result turned out to be quite predictable: the besieged easily repulsed this attack and

even went on the counterattack themselves, during which they disabled 26 guns and destroyed a large amount of gunpowder. The ratio of losses was also completely depressing: 14 dead from the besieged against 200 killed landsknechts of the episcopal army. The morale of the besieging army dropped even further. But discontent was also spreading in the besieged Münster, where in July, as we remember, the introduction of polygamy began and the “division of women” took place.

The besieging army decided on a new assault only on August 31, 1534. Along with men, Münster was then also defended by women and children. In some places, the attackers were close to success, especially in the area between the Neubrücken and Kreuz gates, where the fortress wall was destroyed. But this assault was also repulsed.

In December 1534, at the Westphalian Land Diet in Koblenz, the Münster Anabaptists were officially equated with Turks. It was also decided to allocate 15 thousand guilders for the siege of the rebellious city within six months.

Meanwhile, the situation worsened both in Münster, where food shortages were already clearly felt, and in the besieging army, where epidemics began.

Some of the Anabaptist leaders suggested breaking through to the Netherlands. In order to save food, all the elderly, the disabled, children and part of the women were expelled from Münster. About 400 of these exiles were executed on the orders of the Prince-Bishop and his allies, the Elector of Cologne and the Duke of Cleves. About 300 people were pardoned after renouncing heresy. Several hundred died of starvation in the no-man's-land between the walls of Münster and the encampment of the besieging troops. About 5 thousand combat-ready men remained in Münster.

The morale of the Münster defenders was undermined. Desertions began, some of these defectors provided valuable information about the weaknesses in the city's defenses.

## **Fall of Anabaptist Münster**

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The decisive assault on the city was launched on the night of June 25, 1535. The attackers were helped by a heavy downpour, during which "it was impossible to distinguish heaven from earth." Having killed the guards who were hiding from the rain in the guardrooms, the vanguard detachment of the attackers opened the gate. Along Krestovaya Street, the landknechts moved to Cathedral Square, where there was a warehouse of weapons and ammunition. Even under these conditions, the Anabaptists put up fierce resistance, pushing the troops that broke into the city. For some time, the outcome of the battle hung in the balance, especially since the units that broke into Münster could not inform the rest of the troops that they were already in the city, and they did not come to their aid. Not knowing this, Johann of Leiden entered into negotiations, offering the enemy a way out of the city without weapons. This procrastination turned out to be fatal: at dawn the situation cleared

up and the besiegers from six sides broke into the city. The courage of the defenders of Münster, in whose ranks women also fought, surprised even their opponents, but the forces were too unequal. The last detachment of Anabaptists, led by Berndt Krechting, defended the church of St. Lambert.

Bernd Krechting by Heinrich Aldegrever

Finally, believing the promises of saving lives, these soldiers also surrendered - and were killed, as soon as they surrendered their weapons. At 6 am on June 25, Münster fell. Of the five thousand of his defenders, only 700 were taken prisoner. Many of them later turned out to be rowers in the Mediterranean galleys. Jan Bokelson and his "sword-bearer" Bernhard Knipperdolling surrendered, renounced their faith under torture and were executed in the town square. The bodies of Bockelsohn, Knipperdolling and Krechting were displayed in iron cages hung on the church of St. Lambert, which were made by the Dortmund blacksmith Berthold Lüdinghausen.



Münster, cages on the tower of St. Lambert's Church

The Anabaptists were completely compromised throughout Europe and effectively outlawed. But a group of Anabaptists known as Mennonites was still recognized in the Netherlands in the second half of the 18th century. The famous American General and President Dwight Eisenhower was a descendant of German Mennonites whose family emigrated to the United States in 1793. However, there is evidence that his mother became a "Jehovah's Witness". Currently, in addition to the Mennonites, there are two more religious movements of the Anabaptist persuasion: the Amish (Amanites) and the Hutterites.