

## **Policy in Practice: The Role of Local Officials in Enforcing Religious Conformity in the Holy Roman Empire**

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At Speyer in 1529, the imperial Diet resolved on a policy of persecution of the Anabaptists. The measures of the Lutheran Margrave George of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach against religious dissent, however, grew out of local developments in Franconia, and not from a centralized imperial policy. The Franconian ruler was, like most of his colleagues, convinced of the revolutionary character of Anabaptism and believed it was his duty to God to enforce religious unity. His efforts to punish Anabaptists, largely by trying to force nonconformists to recant, and then by expelling those who refused, were dependent on a small number of local officials. Because of their lack of resources and not because of their lack of effort or faith in the margrave's policy, these officials met with only limited success.

In April of 1531, the cleric Anton Schad wrote to the councilors of the margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach. "I, as a poor chaplain at Uttenreuth," he stated,

promulgated my loving Lord's mandate, which has been sent out and dispersed throughout his grace's principality, and as I came to the article that concerns the holy, highest Sacrament, . . . a certain Hans Schmidt arose and said he wished to give account of his beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Anton Schad's report was an indication to the council that a new group of religious nonconformists were beginning to disrupt the religious unity of the state. Schad went on to explain that after the service he confronted his parishioner, remarking that Schmidt had not been in church for over a year. The man countered by saying he was prepared to answer for his beliefs before the Baiersdorf district official, Hans von Seckendorf, or even before Margrave George himself. Shortly thereafter Seckendorf asked Hans Schmidt, now imprisoned, the standard questions presented to Anabaptists, namely if he believed in baptism and in the real presence in the sacrament of the altar. Seckendorf's report to the margrave's council mentioned that he had "also questioned him in the presence of the minister and the city council, after the need, but we could not entirely reckon his beliefs because he is no sectarian that I can recognize . . . He believes in infant baptism and the sacrament [of the altar]."<sup>2</sup> Five days later Seckendorf sent out a copy of Schmidt's interrogation with his conclusion that the prisoner

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<sup>1</sup> Staatsarchiv Nuremberg, *Ansbach Religions Akten 39* [ARA 39], 459.

<sup>2</sup> ARA 39, 300.

was not entirely sane, because he “does not cite any scripture at all, he also does not know anything other than what he thinks to trust from his dreams, what he dreams is God’s command.”<sup>3</sup>

Schmidt was the leader of a group of religious nonconformists called the “Dreamers,” and their legal battles with the margrave’s council would soon be further complicated by the arrival of George Pfersfelder, an Anabaptist. Pfersfelder was a knight whose family lands lay within the bishopric of Bamberg, but who had entered the city of Nuremberg’s service as a cavalry officer in 1528. He had also fought on behalf of the city and King Ferdinand of Austria in the campaign against the Turks in 1529.<sup>4</sup> Pfersfelder, mistakenly believing that Schmidt and the Dreamers were co-religionists, set out to protect them with a small armed force. Late in April 1531, he arrived in Uttenreuth and took the cleric Anton Schad prisoner. Schad reported his ordeal to the council: “Pfersfelder took me prisoner and said I should consider letting Schmidt go free, and if not he admonished me that he would hurt me so that my heart would shake in my body.”<sup>5</sup> Hans von Seckendorf, the district official, managed to arrange for Schad’s release, but only after Schad had, in turn, promised to free the Dreamer Schmidt. Soon afterward the knight sent the Seckendorf a letter, attacking him for his treatment of Anabaptists in general and criticizing Martin Luther’s teaching. He then sent a servant to Uttenreuth to kidnap Schad and imprison him once again. Seckendorf reported the kidnapping to Chancellor Vogler in Ansbach on May 9, and outlined a plan to call on the city of Nuremberg for help in dealing with Pfersfelder, their errant servant.<sup>6</sup> The Nuremberg council promised to see to Schad’s release and made it clear that Pfersfelder was not acting with their approval.<sup>7</sup>

Before Nuremberg could effect Schad’s release, however, Seckendorf reported to the council:

You wrote me earlier and sent me a copy of the answer Nuremberg gave you, that the council of Nuremberg had accepted George Pfersfelder’s oath that he should not leave the city on threat of punishment to his body and goods. The same meant nothing, as he appeared in recent days in Uttenreuth and spoke threatening words.<sup>8</sup>

The cleric Schad also wrote to the council, telling them that Pfersfelder had threatened him that should he “write to your gracious, honorable, and steadfast

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<sup>3</sup> ARA 39, 299.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Dieter Schmidt, *Täuferium und Obrigkeit in Nürnberg* (Nuremberg: Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, 1972), 82.

<sup>5</sup> ARA 39, 459.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Schornbaum, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer Band 4: Bayern I* [QGT BI] (Leipzig: M. Heinsius, 1934), 240-241.

<sup>7</sup> QGT BI, 241, 247-248.

<sup>8</sup> ARA 39, 386.

lords,” the knight would “cut off my testicles, so that no person would be able to help me anymore.” Schad then pleaded with the councilors “not to let the forenamed Pfersfelder mutilate me, a poor chaplain, but to protect and shield me with a firm hand, or to write the reported Pfersfelder that he should abstain from his unsuitable actions against me.”<sup>9</sup> In conclusion, the cleric wrote, he could not take much more because his family and small children depended on him. Given the difficulty of the circumstances, the district official Seckendorf was worried that he could protect neither himself nor his chaplain against the knight. “Now gracious loving lords,” he wrote the council, “you can imagine that it is very hard on me to await his violent actions, and I worry not alone about myself, but...that he will do evil with his ten or fifteen riders, while I have scarcely three or four mounted fighters.”<sup>10</sup> Luckily for all involved, however, the knight neither returned to carry out his threats nor made any more efforts to free Schmidt or his followers.

The case of the Anabaptist knight Pfersfelder illustrates the great difficulty local officials had in applying the margrave’s general anti-Anabaptist policy to complex real-life situations. Political studies of Anabaptism generally assume that all government decisions and actions were in the hands of one person or entity, such as a prince or a city council.<sup>11</sup> But princes and councils depended on a wide range of officials and advisors to carry out policies within their territories. The case of the government of Margrave George is an excellent example of this dependence on local officials. The margrave gathered the advice of these men on troublesome issues and made extensive use of them as needed in the localities. Thus while the members of Margrave George’s council played the most significant role in devising his policy against nonconformity, he did not depend on them alone to implement it.

Margrave George, when present, was the council’s most important member. However, since the margrave spent so much time during his reign in his Silesian territories or at imperial Diets, the council had the authority to make independent decisions about policies and procedures against Anabaptists and other religious nonconformists. The rare executions of religious dissidents in the margravate are an example of the council’s importance, as the council took part in all decisions about the death penalty. Before Margrave George assumed his position in Ansbach after the death of his brother Kasimir, the council had served as the sole governing body of the margravate and so had been even more influential. For example, during this time the council had been responsible for

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<sup>9</sup> ARA 39, 459.

<sup>10</sup> ARA 39, 386. 386’.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the importance of local officials in early modern European politics, see David Mayes, “Heretics or Nonconformists?: State Policies Toward Anabaptists in Sixteenth-Century Hesse,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 32 (2001): 1003-1026. See also Paul Sonnino, *Louis XIV and the Origins of the Dutch War, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

the hearing and sentencing of the accused Anabaptist Ambrosius Spittelmeier.<sup>12</sup> The councilors had also called upon the legal expertise of one of their own members, Hans von Schwarzenburg, to consult on the case.<sup>13</sup> At the sentencing of another suspected Anabaptist, Hans Hechtlein, the council had ordered this former priest branded and expelled.<sup>14</sup> Even after George became margrave, however, the council continued to play an important role, as in the cases of Jörg of Passau and Marx Mair. Here it convinced George not to execute Jörg of Passau, and then, after complaints from the city of Ansbach, it reviewed Mair's case.<sup>15</sup> In another example, in 1531 the council members presented the margrave with the advice that three members of the new Dreamer sect should be put to the sword.<sup>16</sup> So although the margrave had the ultimate authority to decide whether Anabaptists were to live or to die, his council had significant influence on his decision-making.

The men who had such influence with the margrave were either jurists or members of the many knightly and lesser noble families who possessed land in Franconia.<sup>17</sup> Jurists included Heller, Kifer, and Vogler, and the knightly class contained William von Weisenthau, Hans von Seckendorff-Abendaar, and Sebastian von Eib (see [Table I](#)). Hans von Schwarzenberg, a notable exception, was a member of both groups, coming from a powerful baronial family and having built a reputation as one of the empire's leading Roman lawyers before entering into the service of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach.<sup>18</sup> Because of the large number of jurists on the council and the lack of a prominent law faculty within the margravate, it is not surprising that George never sought advice from an independent legal body, as did, for example, the duke of Württemberg and the city council of Nuremberg.<sup>19</sup> Instead the margrave summoned additional jurists as needed.<sup>20</sup>

The two highest offices in the margravate, chancellor and *statthalter*, were central to suppressing nonconformity. The *landschreiber*, though not as powerful as the other two offices, also played an important role in carrying out the margrave's coercive measures. Hans von Schwarzenberg, who held the office of

<sup>12</sup> Martin Gernot Meier, *Systembruch und Neuordnung: Reformation und Konfessionbildung in den Margraftümen Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach 1520-1594* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 99.

<sup>13</sup> QGT BI, 105-108.

<sup>14</sup> QGT BI, 163.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, Edward. "Coercion and Dissent: The Governments of the Holy Roman Empire and Anabaptism 1527-1566." (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2003), 63-67.

<sup>16</sup> QGT BI, 327.

<sup>17</sup> Max Spindler, *Bayerischer Geschichtsatlas*. (Munich: Bayerischer Schulbuch-Verlag, 1969), 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie* [DBE], eds: Walther Killy and Rudolf Vierhaus, vol. 9 (München, 1998), 231; Rudolf Endres, "Fürsten und Reichsgrafen," in Mark Spindler. *Handbuch der bayerische Geschichte. Dritter band. Erster Teilband: Franken* (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1971), 375.

<sup>19</sup> Gustav Bossert, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der Widertäufer Band 1: Herzogtum Württemberg* [QGT W] (Leipzig: M. Heinsius, 1930), 53; Schmidt, 231-242.

<sup>20</sup> QGT BI, 157.

*landhofmeister*, was also was an influential councilor, but this seems to have been related to his personal accomplishments and status, rather than his office; after his death in 1528 the office is rarely mentioned in connection with the policy against Anabaptism.

The chancellor for most of Margrave George's reign was George Vogler. Vogler represented or advised George in most matters of political importance, including the alliance negotiations with Nuremberg and the margrave's participation in imperial Diets. The chancellor was also often the only member of the Ansbach council who accompanied George when the margrave visited his Silesian holdings.<sup>21</sup> As chancellor, Vogler played a crucial role in the government's efforts against religious dissent. Most of the official documents of the margrave's council passed through or originated with the chancellor. He corrected or drafted many of the various council messages to the localities and to Ansbach's neighbors, as well as from Margrave George to the council and vice versa.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the chancellor drafted a number of the standard questions used in the hearings of various religious dissenters, including those of the Dreamers, Jörg Dorschler, and the Windsheim Anabaptists.<sup>23</sup> Vogler also had a strong personal interest in stamping out religious nonconformity because of his conviction and fear that religious dissent undermined government authority.<sup>24</sup>

While the chancellor was responsible for the drafting of most documents, the *statthalter*, Hans von Seckendorf-Abendaar, was in charge of most communications between the council and the localities, as well as between Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach and neighboring states. Like Vogler, Seckendorf-Abendaar was involved in most political negotiations. He accompanied George to the imperial Diets of Speyer and Augsburg, and represented the margrave in negotiations with Nuremberg.<sup>25</sup> The *statthalter* also acted as head of the council in the absence of Margrave George.

The *landschreiber* was the most important secretarial official in the margrave's council, but his role paled in significance to those of the chancellor and *statthalter*. Nevertheless, the *landschreiber* represented George before the Swabian league in 1529.<sup>26</sup> The position was held first (as late as autumn of 1530) by Caspar Prunner, and then (as early as April 1534) by John Kindlein. The primary job of the *landschreiber* was to record important events. Prunner and Kindlein thus not only attended council meetings, but also the hearings of various Anabaptists.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the *landschreiber*, like the chancellor and *statthalter*,

<sup>21</sup> Karl Schornbaum, *Zur Politik des Margrafen Georg von Brandenburg von Beginne seiner selbständigen regierung bis zum Nürnberger Anstand 1528-1532* (München: Theodor Ackermann, 1906), 64.

<sup>22</sup> QGT BI, 122, 190, 223, 234, 236-7, 243, 258, 267.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125, 236-7, 247, 270.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 331, 340-341.

<sup>25</sup> Schornbaum, *Margrafen Georg*, 53, 69, 112.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 91.

<sup>27</sup> QGT BI, 163, 179, 182.

relayed important reports about religious nonconformists. For example, in 1530 Prunner reported that Jörg of Passau, after hearing the resolution of Speyer, claimed that he had recanted in Strasbourg and begged for mercy, while in 1534 Kindlein forwarded the margrave's order to district official Hans Ochs that he should arm himself in case Anabaptists from Münster led a new rebellion.<sup>28</sup>

In comparison with other officials, the Roman lawyer and *landhofmeister* Hans von Schwarzenberg had influence not so much because of his office, but because of his individual prestige. He was George's closest and most powerful advisor until his death in 1528.<sup>29</sup> This *landhofmeister's* most important act related to religious nonconformity was his negotiation with Nuremberg to overturn the bishops' anti-Anabaptist cavalry act, which was intended to create a cavalry unit of 400 knights for the purpose of hunting down Anabaptists.<sup>30</sup> While opposed to Anabaptism in general, both the margrave and the city council believed the cavalry was executing Anabaptists without fair procedure and terrorizing "true Christians" (Lutherans).<sup>31</sup> In addition, Margrave George had Schwarzenberg's letters relayed to his representatives in the Swabian league for the purpose of organizing the election of his own candidate for the Franconia cavalry.<sup>32</sup> The *landhofmeister's* legal advice also led to the execution of Ambrosius Spittelmeier.<sup>33</sup>

George's council, therefore, was not only an entity that gave advice, but it also had a great deal of authority to proceed independently against Anabaptists. Indeed, one can rarely separate the actions and decisions of the margrave from those of his council. While George had theoretical power to determine all policy for his realm, political decisions were actually the work of a small number of influential men. Implementing those decisions, however, was often left to local government officials. Thus local officials were responsible for identifying, finding, and capturing religious dissenters, after which they would write to the central government, which would inform them whether to move the prisoners (usually to Ansbach) or to start judicial proceedings against them. Anabaptists and other religious nonconformists often proved difficult cases for local administrators, however, as local resources and powers were not sufficient to suppress any sort of popular movement.

Like many other pre-modern governments, the local administrative divisions of the margravate of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach were not entirely made along uniform lines. Most of the land of the two parts of the margravate was divided into chief districts (*Oberämter*). These districts were then divided

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<sup>28</sup> Wilson, 77-78.

<sup>29</sup> Johan Baptist Götz, *Die Glaubenspaltung im Gebiete der Margravschaft Ansbach-Kulmbach in den Jahren 1520-1535* (Frieberg: Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1907) 115; Schornbaum, *Margrafen Georg*, 4, 20, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, 169-170.

<sup>31</sup> QGT BI, 118-119.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, 37-42.

along tax, treasury, and jurisdictional lines. District officials (*Amtmann*, *Amtleute*), usually came from noble lineage and were often members of the Franconian knightly class that headed these territories. Theoretically, a treasury official (*Kastner*), who was in charge of financial matters, and a sheriff, who looked after court procedures, assisted the district official. Apart from the chief districts, there were also a number of smaller irregular districts; judges, sheriffs, or other officials administered these territories.<sup>34</sup>

These local secular administrators were instrumental in implementing the policies of the margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach. Margrave George treated these men, especially the district officials, with great respect, and some of them, such as Veit von Lentersheim and Wolf Christoph von Weisenthau, who were knights and district officials of the cities of Neustadt and Schwabach, represented or accompanied the margrave on so many missions that they almost appear to be counselors themselves.<sup>35</sup> Margrave George, as well as his older brother and predecessor Margrave Kasimir, depended a great deal on the cooperation of these administrators. Controversial measures, such as Margrave George's church visitation of 1529, met with only partial success due to the opposition of the district officials and local nobility.<sup>36</sup> In comparison with these policies, however, the suppression of Anabaptism met with little opposition; administrators with either Catholic or Lutheran sympathies could agree that such religious dissent was harmful to the realm.

The margrave and council of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach made use of this support by assigning district officials to complete many components of their policy against religious dissenters. When starting to proceed against nonconformists, George first sent orders to district officials. These directives usually took the form of a command to an individual district official. Sometimes, however, the margrave and council had more ambitious plans. For example, in 1532 the government ordered the district officials of Uffenheim, Castell, Rechenberg, Creglingen, Hoheneck, and Neustadt to imprison any innkeepers suspected of heterodox activities.<sup>37</sup> District officials were thus responsible both for reporting rumors of Anabaptist activity and also for the capture of religious dissenters. In another example, Albrecht Gailing, the district official of Hoheneck, reported his suspicions that a certain Ulrich Hutscher was once again spreading Sacramentarian ideas. He also reported that he had seized Jörg Dorsch, another suspected Anabaptist.<sup>38</sup> In addition to exposing and capturing Anabaptists, district officials were also often ordered by the margrave and his

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<sup>34</sup> Meier, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Schornbaum, *Margrafen Georg*, 24, 53, 69, 104, 188.

<sup>36</sup> Götz, pp. 127, 149; Theodor Kolde, *Andreas Althammer der Humanist und Reformator in Brandenburg-Ansbach* (Nachdruck der Ausg. Erlangen, 1895), 60; Karl Schornbaum, *Die Stellung des Margraf Kasimir von Brandenburg zur reformatorischen Bewegung in den Jahren 1524-1527* (Nürnberg: G.L. Knoll, 1900), 109.

<sup>37</sup> QGT BL, 332.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 331, 123.

council to interrogate imprisoned Anabaptists using a prearranged set of questions and then to send a written report of the results to Ansbach.<sup>39</sup> District officials were not free to deal with these prisoners as they wished, but had to write to Ansbach for special permission either to torture or release them.<sup>40</sup> These administrators were also responsible for assembling local military and police units, as when Margrave George ordered Hans Ochs, the district official of Wunsiedel, to assemble his troops against a possible Münsterite insurgence.<sup>41</sup> Lastly, the margrave selected some of his district officials to take part in the creation of policy. This was the case when the district officials Veit von Lentersheim, Hans von Seckendorf, Caspar von Seckendorf, Sigmund von Heßburg, and Wolf Christoph von Weisenthau met at Closter Heilsbronn in 1529 (see [Table I](#)).<sup>42</sup>

Treasury officials had duties similar to those of district officials, but less extensive powers. In terms of enforcing the margrave's policy against nonconformists, the treasury official reported any Anabaptist activity he discovered. Peter Jäger, for example, who was the treasury official of Cardolzburg, made some of the earliest reports of dissident preaching in the margravate when in March of 1527 he sent to the council the first reports of rebaptism near Grundlach.<sup>43</sup> While Margrave George gave his district officials the ultimate responsibility to capture, hold, and interrogate prisoners, the treasury official was often the one who actually held the hearings or looked after the captured nonconformists. The treasury official of Kulmbach, Jorg Hoffman, for example, carried out the interrogation of captured Anabaptists before the city council of Bussbach late in 1527.<sup>44</sup> The council gave Peter Jäger both the duty of detaining the accused Anabaptist Ambrosius Spittelmeier, and the special instructions to make sure that Spittelmeier was kept in isolation to prevent communication with other Anabaptists.<sup>45</sup> Treasury officials could also assume the place of a district official when the latter was absent. This duty fell more than once to the treasury official of Baiersdorf, Sigmund Schlahinhaufen. For example, he reported the presence of followers of Hans Hut in Erlangen when the district official Erkingen von Seckendorf was absent.<sup>46</sup> Schlahinhaufen also reported to George's council the proceedings against several Dreamers when Hans von Seckendorf was absent pursuing the fugitive Mair brothers.<sup>47</sup>

Despite having a less important part in the margrave's policy than that of a district official, the role of treasury official was more extensive than that of judges

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<sup>39</sup> Two of many examples, these from the career of Sigmund von Heßburg, at Cardolzburg. QGT BI, 58, 154.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 104, 159, 174.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, 77.

<sup>42</sup> QGT BI, 157.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-56.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

and of sheriffs, since these men had only limited roles in the suppression of Anabaptism. In those irregular districts where sheriffs possessed chief authority, however, they acted like district officials. Otherwise they only tended to be present at legal proceedings against Anabaptists.<sup>48</sup> So long as torture was not used, it was not necessary that judges be present at normal hearings or interrogations. The margrave only sent them in case of unusual legal proceedings or problems. For example, when Hans von Seckendorf, the district official of Baiersdorf, asked to be reimbursed for the imprisonment of the Dreamer community, Margrave George sent the judge of Schwabach to settle the case.<sup>49</sup>

No example better illustrates the difficulties and responsibilities of the margrave's officials in their war against religious dissent than the career of this district official, Hans von Seckendorf. The first mention of his noble family appears in the eleventh century, and by the thirteenth century it had already split into eleven branches.<sup>50</sup> The members of these branches held a plethora of important offices within the margraves' regime, perhaps more than any other family in Franconia. Hans von Seckendorf-Abendaar was *statthalter*, Eucarius von Seckendorf was mayor of Erlangen, Kaspar von Seckendorf was district official of Schönberg, Gilch von Seckendorf was lord of Jocksberg, Christoph von Seckendorf was lord of Bertoldsdorf, Apel von Seckendorf belonged to the imperial ruling council in Eßlingen, and Hans' cousin Erkinger was district official of Erlangen.<sup>51</sup> As district official of Baiersdorf, Hans von Seckendorf was an early champion of Lutheranism. His commitment to religious reformation was so great and so apparent that Margrave George even named him as his ambassador to the early phase of the 1529 Diet of Speyer. The margrave knew that until he arrived in person, Hans von Seckendorf could be counted on to cooperate with Saxony and Hesse.<sup>52</sup> George could not, however, similarly trust all members of the von Seckendorf family. Gilch, Apel, and Christoph, for example, acted to foil his confiscation of church goods.<sup>53</sup>

Hans von Seckendorff is particularly noteworthy because he had to cope with an unusually high amount of sectarian activity. In his district of Baiersdorf there were two major dissenting movements, the Anabaptists in 1528 and the Dreamers in 1531. In addition, he had to deal with a number of individual Anabaptists passing through his territory and, on more than one occasion, had to assist his cousin Erkinger against followers of Hans Hut in Erlangen. During his career, Hans von Seckendorf performed all of the duties that Margrave George expected of a district official, and constantly corresponded with the central government about religious dissidents. As with all district officials, this correspondence consisted of reports of rumors of Anabaptist activity and

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 118-119, 148, 150, 215, 338.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 101. For the activity of judges see also 163, 249, 259, 289.

<sup>50</sup> Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses Vollständiges Universal-Lexicon* vol. 36 (Graz, 1962), 886-7.

<sup>51</sup> Götzt, 32, 149, 154; QGT BI, 370.

<sup>52</sup> Schornbaum, *Margrafen Georg*, 65.

<sup>53</sup> Götzt, 149, 154.

standard acknowledgements of having received orders. However, Seckendorf's relationship with the council of Ansbach was often more complex. For example, he wrote on more than one occasion to request permission to release religious dissenters who he felt had made a sufficient recantation, had been unjustly imprisoned, or had fallen so ill that they were in danger of dying.<sup>54</sup> In one instance he recruited the aid of the mayor and city council of Erlangen to appeal to the margrave's council to free a sickly potter whose three small children would be left without anyone to provide for them if their father died.<sup>55</sup> More than once Seckendorf sent his complaints or his recommendations for the handling of Anabaptists to the central government. Other times he asked the margrave's council for advice on how to proceed, such as when he captured the Dreamer Hans Schmidt and discovered that the man rejected neither infant baptism nor the real presence within the sacrament of the altar.<sup>56</sup> Seckendorf was also ordered by the authorities to conduct interrogations of various other imprisoned Anabaptists, and in 1531 was commanded to lead a manhunt for the Mair brothers after they had been identified as members of the Dreamer sect.<sup>57</sup> This was not his first manhunt, however. In 1529 he had reported the rumor that Anabaptism had recurred within his district, and had been instructed by the council to use his soldiers to hunt down the religious dissenters. Seckendorf had also joined a number of other district officials at the meeting in Heilsbronn in that same year to discuss Anabaptist policy.<sup>58</sup>

The fight against religious dissent was a burden for most district officials in the region, since their resources were simply not sufficient to handle more than small numbers of religious dissenters at any one time. Because of the extensive Anabaptist activity in his district of Baiersdorf, however, Hans von Seckendorf had particular difficulty in carrying out Margrave George's policy, and his situation thus most clearly demonstrates the limits of the government of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach and its policies. First, the district prison in Baiersdorf was too small to hold numerous captives. Trying to hold too many individuals created long-term difficulties and unhealthy conditions. In 1528, when Seckendorf seized the religious dissident community at Uttenreuth, he brought ten men and ten women into the prison at Baiersdorf. This was a serious problem, and it led Seckendorf to inquire from the council on how to proceed, complaining that he was not used to having "so many guests" in his prison.<sup>59</sup> The central government responded to the round-up of dissidents by sending Seckendorf a set of questions for the hearing of the prisoners. He must have sent the results of this interrogation to Ansbach swiftly, because just eight days later, complaining about the lack of the council's response, he released a number of the

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<sup>54</sup> QGT BI, 100, 104, 117, 159.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>56</sup> ARA 39, 300.

<sup>57</sup> QGT BI, 270, 282.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

men, probably to increase space in the prison. "I have also spoken with the women," he wrote to the council,

and they have also given me their answers, as you have heard read out. I have also released some men from prison, on the swearing of an oath that you will find included here. And if I have done wrong, it is your [the council's] fault, because I waited so long for a further command, for you can guess that having so many guests for so long is not amusing.<sup>60</sup>

Not only was the jail too small, but there was also not enough money to feed the prisoners. On January 9, Seckendorf reported that he felt it would be impossible to hold the prisoners much longer, "I make the friendly request of you, that you give a further command in regards to the costs. . . I know that I can no longer deal with them from the district resources."<sup>61</sup> Despite such complaints, Seckendorf and the prisoners had to wait another eight days until the council sent the judge from the city of Schwabach to hear the oaths of the prisoners and to calculate how much the margrave needed to repay his officials. The same problems emerged once again in 1531 when Seckendorf brought a large number of Dreamers into the Baiersdorf prison. Because of lack of resources he was forced to put the Dreamers on a bread and water diet. Many of them fell ill.<sup>62</sup>

Seckendorf also seems to have had only limited military and police personnel at his disposal. This meant that capturing fleeing Anabaptists was almost a futile task. If the Anabaptists had actually tried violently to resist capture, which luckily for Seckendorf they did not, he would have been hard pressed to respond. For example, when he felt his safety was threatened in 1531, he sent the margrave's council a missive claiming that he had only three or four cavalry under his command.<sup>63</sup> Other evidence seems to indicate he also commanded only a handful of infantry. Furthermore, the 1529 offer from the central government to supply Seckendorf with troops and his 1531 cooperation with Bamberg in trying to capture the Mair brothers both suggest that the district official never had more than about a dozen soldiers at his disposal.<sup>64</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, he had only mixed success in capturing Anabaptists. Seckendorf was able to capture a large number of Hut's followers in 1528 and a large number of Dreamers in 1532, but both of these were sedentary communities in Uttenreuth. He had much less success in Iphofen in 1528, when wandering preachers had converted part of the populace. In that case he felt that his efforts had only resulted in the imprisonment of a couple of the victims of sectarian

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<sup>60</sup> Staatsarchiv Nuremberg, *Ansbach Religions Akten 38* [ARA 38], 284. A brief summary of the document appears in QGT BI, 100.

<sup>61</sup> ARA 38, 284.

<sup>62</sup> Wilson, 90.

<sup>63</sup> ARA 39, 386.

<sup>64</sup> QGT BI, 149, 267-8.

activity, rather than the real perpetrators.<sup>65</sup> His manhunt for the two Mair brothers in 1531 also proved a long and difficult matter, despite help from both Bamberg and Nuremberg. In the end he captured them, but only after they had escaped from captivity multiple times and killed a Bamberger who had tried to imprison them.<sup>66</sup>

The secular officials in the localities thus played an important role in enforcing the margrave's policy against the Anabaptists. They were the ones responsible for tracking down, imprisoning, and in many cases proceeding legally against the nonconformists. Without these administrators George's policy would have been a total failure. Nevertheless, only a small number of secular officials were at work in the margravate (see [Table I](#)). Because of their limited resources, as the example of Hans von Seckendorf demonstrates, local administrators had only moderate success in carrying out their directives. This was not the fault of the margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, but rather a limitation of sixteenth-century governments in the Holy Roman Empire, which by modern standards appear weak and fragile.

In the localities, spiritual officials complemented the work of their secular counterparts, and local ministers played a weighty role in the suppression of religious dissent. The margrave called on a large number of his local ministers to advise him on religious issues and, like the ministers at Ansbach, the ministers of the localities were also expected by George's council to provide instruction to Anabaptists reluctant to recant. First, and most important, however, was the task of identifying Anabaptists, and this was a task best left to the local clergy. It was they who knew which members of the community did not attend church or did not bring their newborn children to be baptized. They also had close contact with the local people. The minister at Bruck, for example, learned of Anabaptist preaching in his parish from one of his flock. The local clergy were thus the best positioned to see who went against the articles of the church or who held heterodox religious beliefs. Furthermore, many ministers were able to identify Anabaptists and dissenters when such nonconformists aggressively tried to convert them. Hut and his apostles had proven successful at winning over clerics at Eltersdorf and at Schalkhausen; therefore it is not surprising that they tried this tactic elsewhere. In Uttenreuth in 1528, for example, two of Hut's followers tried to convert Anton Shad, the early mass giver, and even came back to see him a second time in order to give him some literature.<sup>67</sup> Shad reported the incident, but did so too late for the government to catch the Anabaptists. The situation turned out much differently in Reppendorf, where the minister reported to Martin Meglin, the minister of Kitzingen, that Jörg of Passau had attempted to convert him; Meglin, in turn, informed the district official, and the official reported to his superiors in Bamberg. Even though Jörg of Passau himself

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>66</sup> Wilson, 87-89.

<sup>67</sup> QGT BI, 129-130.

escaped, the district official of Kitzingen's report led to the eventual destruction of the entire dissident community.

Once religious dissenters were in custody, the local clerics tried to bring them back into the church. One example of this is the case of Hans Nadler, a follower of Hans Hut. His process was handled at Erlangen, rather than at Ansbach, in 1529. Margrave George and his council ordered both the minister of Erlangen, Andreas Eck, and the minister of Baiersdorf, Thomas Beck, to instruct the man of his error and to convince him to recant. Eck and Beck worked on Nadler for some two weeks before deciding that persuading him to renounce his beliefs was a hopeless task.<sup>68</sup> Beck and Hoeb Gast, the minister of Cadolzburg, converted some of the Dreamers with more success in 1531. This process took a great deal of time, however, and its success might well have depended more on the length of the Dreamer's imprisonment, their dismal prison conditions, and their torture, than on the persuasive powers of the two ministers. Initial efforts had been, after all, fruitless.<sup>69</sup>

Even though the Ansbach theologians attended council meetings on religious dissent, Margrave George also frequently requested that local parish ministers also assist him in devising his policy towards nonconformity. In 1529, for example, he commanded that John Ruhrer, Adam Weiß, Martin Meglin, and Hoeb Gast (see [Table I](#)) give their opinions on how to handle the issue of sectarianism at an upcoming Diet.<sup>70</sup> He then later asked these clerics to come to a consensus about their initial advice.<sup>71</sup> Before the 1630 Diet of Augsburg, Margrave George again asked for local advice on dealing with Anabaptists, this time calling on Kaspar Löner (the minister of Hof), and an entirely different set of ministers from the localities; these included George Amerbacher, Sixtus Reißner, and John Lierhammer.<sup>72</sup> But George had a deep respect for the advice of both Weiß and Meglin in particular, and both men accompanied him to the Diet of Augsburg.<sup>73</sup> Weiß also served along with Ruhrer and Althammer in forming the core of the margrave's visitation committee.<sup>74</sup> In 1531, when George wanted biblical consultation on the validity of the death penalty, he consulted Löner again, as well as the local ministers Ludwig Agricola, Johannes Schanbel, Johannes Behem, Nicholas Hiltner, and Johannes Stuedel.<sup>75</sup> George was not alone in appealing to the locality for advice. The margrave's administrators also sometimes made special requests of local clerical officials. In January 1528, for example, George's council commanded Augustus Obermeier and John Schopper,

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 143, 154.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 241, 272-281.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>72</sup> QGT BI, 172-173.

<sup>73</sup> Schornbaum, *Margrafen Georg*, 112.

<sup>74</sup> Götze, 153.

<sup>75</sup> Karl Schornbaum, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer Band 5: Bayern II* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1951), 284.

then only prior and not yet abbot of Heilsbronn, to look over a short instruction manual against Anabaptism that they intended priests to read on holy days. Before issuing the manual the council members wanted the local clerics to confirm that its teachings were in accordance with the bible.<sup>76</sup>

For Margrave George and his council, therefore, the spiritual officials in the localities were at least as important in devising his policies as were their secular counterparts. George considered these men to be biblical experts, best suited to advise him on how a Christian prince should deal with religious dissent. They, along with their counterparts in Ansbach, provided the margrave with the ideological justification for his policies. But local clerical officials not only played a major role in shaping policy, they were also on the front lines of the ideological battle against Anabaptism, and the margrave called upon them to read his mandate regularly from the pulpit.<sup>77</sup> In addition, they preached to the people and worked to keep them members of the “true religion.” When individuals left the state church it was the local cleric’s duty to identify them. Even opponents of the state church realized the importance of local clerics in the religious conflict that permeated the Empire. For Hans Hut’s followers, for example, ministers became important targets for conversion.

Although the imperial Diet at Speyer in 1529 had prompted the creation of a larger empire-wide policy of persecution of the Anabaptists, moves against religious dissent were carried out by state, not imperial, officials. The principal impetus for this in Franconia was the margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach himself, but he looked to his officials to help him both formulate and execute his policies. When one looks at the small number of men responsible for enforcing the policy of the margrave and the great variety of responsibilities they had, it is understandable that they often met with only limited success in trying to suppress religious dissent. Considering the circumstances they worked under, it is a wonder that the officials were as successful as they were. Yet it is also important to note that the margrave’s policy was not the work of one or two men, but that many nobles and clerics contributed to its content. Furthermore, the enforcement of this policy would never have succeeded without the cooperation of local officials. The overwhelming majority of officials in Franconia supported Margrave George’s policy. Any resistance against the margraves’ policy was the exception rather than the rule. Thus, in comparison with the suppression of the Roman Catholics, in Franconia the policy against the Anabaptists was well supported and well enforced.

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<sup>76</sup> QGT BI, 99-100.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.