

Reformation History and Political Mythology in the German Democratic Republic,  
1949-1989

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It is perhaps ironic that a Marxist state such as the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), which rejected all notions of divinity and the supernatural, should have paid so much attention to the history of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Many of the key events of the Lutheran Reformation had, of course, occurred in the Saxon-Thuringian territories which were now enclosed within its borders, but this alone does not account for the intense interest displayed by the GDR in sixteenth-century history. Geographical proximity was of less importance than the fact that the nineteenth-century pioneer of Marxism, Frederick Engels, had shown a keen interest in events during the Reformation era. His 1850 study, The Peasant War in Germany, represented the first attempt to write history from a historical materialist perspective.<sup>1</sup> In the GDR's search to construct a viable, Marxist-based historical discipline that was distinct from, and in opposition to its Western 'bourgeois' variant, Engels' work acquired a special status. However, in the GDR, the Reformation era was more than just a topic of historiographical interest; it can be seen to have constituted an important foundation myth for this Communist state. Recently, scholars have begun to focus more closely on the cultural significance of political myths for modern states. While formerly political myths were perceived rather prosaically as fictions, propaganda or simply lies, they have in the last few years been viewed in a more sophisticated light. They are increasingly recognised as essential elements in creating collective identities within states, especially Communist ones.<sup>2</sup> Political myths can be defined as accessible, simplified historical narratives that transmit information about the origins, meaning and political destiny of regimes. People are politically integrated

and provided with common bonds and a sense of collective memory by such myths – myths which help to legitimate and provide essential support and stability for a state.<sup>3</sup>

Myth-making was especially important in new Communist societies in order to instil into the people the requisite socialist consciousness. The GDR regime, in particular, remorselessly utilised mythic versions of the past for the political ends of consciousness-raising. It must be remembered that East Germany's leaders were aiming to impose a Communist system on a defeated people who had witnessed twelve years of Nazi rule. Nazism had been totally hostile to Communism, and the imposition of a Marxist ideology on the populous consequently faced almost insurmountable hurdles. The core of East German's Communist doctrine derived from a dogmatic version of Marxist-Leninism that had been formulated during Stalin's Russian dictatorship. This stressed that history evolved through a series of class struggles; it was put to the working classes that it was now their special task, under the direction of the Party (which represented the proletariat's 'true' interests), to establish eventually a classless, Communist society.<sup>4</sup> Political myths surrounding the foundations of the GDR state were constantly used and manipulated by the Party élite to secure the people's allegiance and direct their attitudes towards a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint. Myths appeared to be particularly suitable for the task of moulding political mentalities. The potential for transforming permanently a people's political thought processes was, obviously, greater if citizens took seriously and embraced the ideology embedded in specific state-supporting myths.<sup>5</sup>

The present paper will focus specifically on those forms of state myth-building associated with the sixteenth-century Reformation era that the GDR regime produced throughout its forty-year existence. Historical myths involving the Reformation were expressed in numerous ways: history books, jubilee anniversaries and celebrations,

films, museum displays, panoramic paintings, and even school text-books. While reference will be made to this variety of cultural forms, the main concern will be on the Marxist Reformation historiography, because historians were some of the principal architects in the construction of myths that aimed at improving GDR citizens' socialist historical awareness.

The search was for a foundation myth that could legitimate the newly-established East German Marxist state and provide it with its own revolutionary heritage. This led inevitably to the dramatic early-sixteenth-century event when the lower orders had struggled against feudal oppression: the German Peasant War of 1525. The peasants' rebellion could easily be portrayed as the German people's first radical attempt to transform society. Although the Peasant War had ended in defeat, the culturally constructed 'foundation myth' of the GDR invoked the idea that the sixteenth-century peasants' aims of building a free, just and peaceful society had eventually been realised with the founding of the new state in 1949.<sup>6</sup> At a Party Congress on 20 July 1950, Wilhelm Pieck, the GDR's first president, emphasised the historical importance of the topic, particularly for the young, and lamented the fact that East German youth knew too little about the Peasants' War.<sup>7</sup> Besides helping to instil into the young an awareness of its revolutionary heritage, the Peasant War mythology was also employed to endorse specific state policies, especially those concerning agrarian matters. Edwin Hoernle, Head of Agriculture and Forestry Administration, justified the regime's policy of 'democratic' land reform and the formation of collective farms by making references to early modern history. He claimed that, as far back as 1525, the Thuringian peasants, led by their radical priest Thomas Müntzer, had fought against large-scale landed property ownership by the ruling classes. According to Hoernle and other high-ranking state bureaucrats, the

freedom from servitude sought by Müntzer and his peasant rebels was being successfully accomplished for the first time in Germany's new Workers and Peasants' State.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Peasant War appeared to be a very useful topic for demonstrating East Germany's progressive tradition and for mobilising its citizenry in the struggle for social and political progress, relatively few historical works were actually published during the first ten years of the GDR's existence. The lack of literature can be explained by the acute shortage throughout this time of university staff who were sufficiently conversant with the principles of historical materialism and Marxist-Leninism. A popular study of Thomas Müntzer did appear in 1952, written by Alfred Meusel, the Director of East Germany's Historical Museum<sup>9</sup>, but the most influential historical work during the 1950s was produced by the Russian historian, Moses M. Smirin: his study of Thomas Müntzer and the 'People's Reformation' was published in German in the same year as Meusel's work.<sup>10</sup> Smirin's monograph remained very close to that of Engels' 1850 Peasant War study, and in both works pride of place was given to Thomas Müntzer as the main revolutionary protagonist throughout the German peasants' struggle. Müntzer was perceived as the true embodiment of the revolutionary impulse of the common people, and Smirin's study provided significant theoretical and historical support for the elaboration of the myth of the historical origins of the GDR state being embodied in the Peasant War.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that Smirin's study appeared in East Germany at the same time as the country was witnessing the harsh imposition of Soviet-style socialism, which stressed the leader's personality cult together with the dominant rôle of the Party in controlling all aspects of political and social life.<sup>12</sup> The image of Müntzer as the great champion of the masses who, with the help of his radical People's

Reformation Party, aimed at the liberation of commoners from feudal oppression would have certainly appealed to Walter Ulbricht, the General Secretary and Head of the East German Government. Ulbricht's political mission - freeing the exploited working classes from capitalist domination with the aid of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) – could be interpreted as a continuation of the liberation strategies initially advanced by Thomas Müntzer, the forefather and precursor of the GDR's socialist regime. The kind of popular sovereignty that Smirin attributed to Müntzer seemed to have found its fruition in East Germany. While in Marxist writings such as Smirin's, Müntzer was honoured as a revolutionary hero, it is not surprising that little attention was focused on Martin Luther, the historical personality who had unleashed the Reformation movement. Luther had, after all, savagely condemned the peasant rebels in his tract, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525), and had ultimately sided with the ruling princely élites. If Müntzer was perceived in mythic terms as the embodiment of revolution, then Luther clearly personified the forces of Counter-Revolution during Germany's Reformation era.<sup>13</sup>

The dominance of Soviet scholarship in the writings of East Germany's sixteenth-century history was eventually broken towards the end of the 1950s. By that date, there was no longer a severe shortage of academics trained in the principles of Marxist-Leninism, and a growing number of historians were now appointed to the GDR's universities. The East Germans' first real engagement with Reformation history occurred in January 1960, at a conference organised by the Medieval Section of Historians and held in Wernigerode, a town in the Harz region. The decision to host the conference in Wernigerode was not arbitrary, but was suffused with significance, because in the months before his death Müntzer had spent time in the surrounding territories.<sup>14</sup> However, the conference was not narrowly preoccupied with

examining Müntzer and the Peasants' War. It was concerned instead with a broader theme within Marxist scholarship: the revolutionary significance of the Reformation era. This issue had first been explored by Engels during the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> When he wrote his 1850 study of peasant rebellion, Engels was convinced that the agrarian workers' struggle constituted a revolutionary attempt rather than a fully-developed revolution. Engels based this assessment on his conviction that progress in the economy was insufficiently advanced and, therefore, that sixteenth-century Germany had not experienced the dramatic transformation in the modes and relations of production necessary for a revolution in the Marxist sense. Towards the end of his life, Engels' subsequent studies convinced him that in early sixteenth-century Germany dramatic economic progress had actually been made, especially in mining, smelting and the textile industry. By the 1880s, Engels argued that the developments which had occurred in sixteenth-century Germany's productive forces were extremely rapid and, therefore, the Reformation era constituted a decisive event in early modern Europe's transition from feudalism to early capitalism. Engels characterised the German Reformation as the first in a series of revolutionary attempts, culminating in the French Revolution of 1789, in which Europe's bourgeoisie aimed to throw off the shackles of feudalism and transform society along capitalist lines. He wrote in 1892:

The long fight of the bourgeoisie against feudalism  
culminated in three decisive battles ... The first was  
what is called the Protestant Reformation in Germany.<sup>16</sup>

Germany's status within Marxist historiography was clearly enhanced by Engels' re-assessment: the country appeared to have been the first within Europe to have experienced a 'modern' revolution. However, during the 1950s when German history had been dominated by Soviet scholars, some historians, such as O.G.

Tschaikowskaja, had questioned the early-bourgeois-revolution thesis.<sup>17</sup> They based their assumptions on Engels' earlier 1850 views about the German economy, when he had stressed under-development. The 1960 Wernigerode Conference provided East German historians with their first opportunity to participate fully in the debate concerning Germany's revolutionary importance.

At the conference, the main issues for discussion were the thirty-four theses proposed by Max Steinmetz, a leading medievalist.<sup>18</sup> He argued persuasively that the events between 1476 and 1535 constituted an early bourgeois revolution and that its two essential components were the Reformation and the Peasant War:

“ The first great action of the rising bourgeoisie ”  
(Engels) in Germany reached its highpoint in the  
Reformation and Peasant War (1517-25), the most  
significant revolutionary mass movement of the German  
people until the November revolution of 1918 ... The  
Reformation and Peasant War as the kernel and  
highpoint of the early bourgeois revolution in Germany,  
from the posting of the Theses in Wittenberg to the  
defeat of most of the peasant armies in 1525/6.<sup>19</sup>

For Steinmetz, Luther's attack on Indulgences signalled the commencement of the revolution, because it created a national movement that unified social classes against the feudal, Catholic Church. The Peasant War became the climax of the struggle: in 1525 the popular masses waged an offensive against the rulers of the feudal princely states. Finally, Steinmetz suggested that Müntzer's attempt to establish popular sovereignty - a People's Reformation – constituted the most mature political expression of the revolutionary movement. While Steinmetz still gave prominence to

Müntzer and the Peasant War and did not deviate from Smirin's paradigm, he included and acknowledged the contribution of Martin Luther's Reformation to the revolutionary process. Steinmetz suggested that the Reformation was an essential component of the early bourgeois revolution and was inextricably linked to the Peasant War. This helped to widen Marxist historical perspectives and compel historians to begin to pay more attention to the Lutheran movement. Although in 1960 Luther himself was still largely perceived in rather negative terms, historians did begin to focus more widely on Reformation history topics. Symbolically, in May 1960, on Thomas Müntzer Memorial Day, a study group was established to undertake research into the history of the Reformation and the Peasant War.<sup>20</sup> It met in the Thuringian city of Mühlhausen: the site of Müntzer's headquarters during the rebellion. Study groups and collaborative approaches to historical research were encouraged in the GDR, since they were thought to promote socialist rather than 'bourgeois' individualist attitudes to history writing. By the autumn of 1960, Steinmetz became Director of the Institute for German History at the Karl Marx University, Leipzig, and this organisation now took the lead in developing Marxist research into the history of the Reformation era. The main participants in the working group were: M. Bensing, G. Brendler, K. Czok, G. Günther, S. Hoyer, D. Lösche, M. Steinmetz, G. Vogler, and G. Zschäbitz.<sup>21</sup>

During the early 1960s much of the research undertaken by the group focused on theoretical aspects, and on trying to demonstrate the validity and refining the early-bourgeois-revolution thesis. A few GDR historians, such as Bernhard Töpfer, questioned Steinmetz's views on similar grounds to those made by certain Soviet scholars during the 1950s: that Germany lacked a significant embryonic capitalist middle class necessary for an early bourgeois revolution.<sup>22</sup> However, the majority of



East Germany's historical profession endorsed Steinmetz's work and provided increasingly inventive arguments in support of their case. Attempts were made to divide the bourgeoisie into two camps: a progressive anti-monopolist faction and a more traditional, conservative, pro-monopoly group. Difficulties still remained in demonstrating that those citizens who undertook early capitalist activities usually held progressive, anti-feudal sentiments and were the driving force behind the Reformation. It was mostly those groups not engaged in early capitalism such as poor artisans and propertyless townfolk who were especially hostile towards feudalism. A clear correlation could not, therefore, be easily established between citizens who engaged in early capitalist activities and antagonism towards the feudal system.<sup>23</sup> The search for a sixteenth-century advanced bourgeoisie that possessed firm anti-feudal attitudes may have been rather elusive. However, this did not lead East German scholars to abandon their conviction that Germany experienced an early bourgeois revolution.

Once formulated, Steinmetz's Theses became almost impossible for GDR historians to dislodge, because they corresponded so closely to the teleological historical assumptions of Marxism with its emphasis on class conflict as the motive force, and revolutions as the locomotives of historical development. The early-bourgeois-revolution notion also gave pride of place to Germany as the first country to have experienced this type of Marxist transformation – something that a German Communist state could only view with great pride and satisfaction. If the Peasant War constituted one of the foundation myths of the GDR, then the early bourgeois revolution can be regarded as one of its most significant sustaining myths. Although the notion was not emphasised so forcefully by historians in the regime's latter years, it was never completely abandoned and was still being used to characterise the

Reformation era in 1989.<sup>24</sup> The early-bourgeois-revolution thesis remained crucial for the GDR regime, since it helped to define systematically a Marxist, materialist approach to history that was distinct from the ‘bourgeois’, idealist interpretations dominant among its Western rivals in the Federal Republic. Religious history was especially useful in sharply defining the differences between the historical interpretations in the two Germanies. Instead of examining the Reformation from a traditional Western theological perspective, the GDR historians focused – often it must be said extremely reductively – on religion’s economic and social dimensions. For the East Germans, the Reformation was transformed from a theological struggle into a socio-economic conflict.

It is necessary to place briefly the elaboration of the Theses specifically in the context of contemporary East/West German relations because, in the GDR, history and politics were never far apart.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the 1950s, it became more and more obvious that the division of Germany into two separate republics would continue for the indefinite future. The Federal Republic denied the legitimacy of the GDR (the Hallstein doctrine), and East Germany retorted by claiming that it alone represented Germany’s lawful, genuine state. West Germany was perceived by the GDR regime as aggressive, capitalist, imperialist and counter-revolutionary; while its own East German territory was portrayed as the first socialist state on German soil. Almost eighteen months after Steinmetz’s Theses had been adopted at Wernigerode, relations between East and West Germany reached their nadir and on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1961 the GDR’s borders were sealed and the Berlin Wall was erected. The GDR could now concentrate its energies on building socialism without direct interference from its Western neighbours, and without the constant defection of its citizens, who were lured by the promise of a better, freer life in the Federal Republic. During the early years

following the Wall's construction, a climate of repression prevailed as the regime ensured that its citizens acquiesced and came to terms with the new political realities of 'house arrest'.<sup>26</sup> The party leadership eventually became more relaxed from the mid-1960s onwards. It attempted to promote a less doctrinaire form of socialism when it became obvious that the majority of its citizens had resigned themselves to their political fate. This new flexibility in domestic policies was also prompted by the East German authorities, acting in conformity with their Russian masters, and launching a similar campaign of destalinisation to that undertaken in 1961 by Soviet Leader Khrushchev.<sup>27</sup> The less tense domestic political atmosphere that now prevailed started to influence writings on Reformation history, especially assessments of Martin Luther; he began to be viewed in a more positive light. Luther's rehabilitation was closely connected to the regime's growing desire to enlist significant individuals from Germany's past and incorporate them into its own distinctive socialist historical heritage: a tradition that supposedly stood in marked contrast to that of its decadent, capitalist neighbours in the West. Luther the reactionary and princes' lackey does appear an unlikely choice of candidate for inclusion in the GDR's 'Hall of Fame'. However, at the Wernigerode Conference, Steinmetz had acknowledged the reformer's rôle as the instigator of the early bourgeois revolution; Luther had accomplished this by undertaking the dramatic act of posting his theses against Indulgences and criticising the Papacy.<sup>28</sup> Luther could, therefore, be accommodated within the GDR's Marxist hagiography and perceived as the harbinger of the new early bourgeois age.

The 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the German Reformation in 1967 provided the state with an ideal opportunity to integrate Luther into its mythological tradition. Gerhard Zschäbitz's biography of Luther, which was produced to coincide with the

Reformation Jubilee, offered a far more positive and rounded assessment of the reformer than that of previous Marxist scholars such as Smirin.<sup>29</sup> Zschäbitz portrayed Luther as a representative of the educated bourgeoisie who acted within the constraints of his age, displaying both conservative and progressive attitudes. The subtitle of the study made this obvious: Grösse (Greatness) und Grenze (Limitations). During the 1950s, it would have been an act of political heresy to describe Luther in terms of 'Greatness'.<sup>30</sup> The Reformer's rehabilitation did not only help to enhance the GDR's historical prestige, it also served a more pragmatic political purpose: the reconciliation of the substantial Christian Lutheran community with the secular, Marxist state.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the early years of the GDR, State/Church relations were largely confrontational, and they were at an especially low ebb during the 1950s when a regime, dedicated to a philosophy of materialist atheism, met resistance head-on from an institution concerned with upholding Christian beliefs and traditions. However, in the course of the 1960s, a Christian-Marxist dialogue gradually developed. The State began to realise that the Church was unlikely to disintegrate in the near future and, so long as Christians did not pose a serious threat to the regime's existence, a degree of accommodation with Lutheranism was achieved. Concessions were granted to the Lutheran Church, on condition that its leaders displayed political loyalty. The notion developed of 'the Church within Socialism' whose main purpose was to serve society and not work against the Marxist regime.<sup>32</sup> In 1978 an Accord was established with Protestantism that provided state recognition of the Church's autonomy as a social institution. The Protestant Church was also granted various concessions such as limited access to the regime's media. The growing amicable relations between State and Church were symbolised by their close co-operation in organising the 1983 celebrations to mark the quincentennial anniversary of Luther's

birth. Two committees were established in 1980 to oversee the jubilee: a State Martin Luther Committee presided over by Erich Honecker, the head of the regime, and a Church Committee led by Werner Leich, the Bishop of Thuringia.<sup>33</sup> This event provided an ideal opportunity for the party leadership to demonstrate publicly a more harmonious relationship with the Lutheran Church. The State's appropriation, as part of its cultural heritage, of the many key historical Reformation sites situated within its borders also helped to articulate further a clear, precise East German national identity. Millions of Ostmarks were spent on renovating the main buildings associated with the Reformation, in order to further East Germany's cultural prestige. Rulers from Western Europe and North America were invited to attend the Luther celebrations. An increasingly self-confident Honecker sought to use the event to gain international recognition for the GDR as a socialist regime dedicated to peace, progress and moderate Church politics.

Honecker described Luther as 'one of the greatest sons of the German people' and 'one of the most significant humanists who strove for a better world'.<sup>34</sup> This was a far cry from the 1950s' Marxist assessment of Luther as class traitor and coward. Luther was not the only famous German historical figure to be co-opted into the service of the GDR's progressive cultural tradition. Goethe was given similar accolades to Luther, and was also recruited into East Germany's humanist heritage. He was described by Honecker in an almost identical manner to Luther as 'the brave champion of a militant humanism, for a just and enlightened social order ...'.<sup>35</sup> During the Anniversary Celebrations, the influential East Berlin historian Gerhard Brendler played a key rôle in the mediation of the Luther myth to the public. He produced a detailed Luther biography that developed further the more nuanced portrait of the reformer which had been initially outlined in Zschäbitz's revisionist

study. Brendler stressed that Luther was motivated by a genuine religious impulse and he produced a 'theological revolution' which was the first radical challenge to the feudal Church's hegemony.<sup>36</sup> Luther's protest 'opened the way for uniting with the new theology the interests of forces opposing the established authority'.<sup>37</sup> The reformer's main contribution to the revolutionary process was to offer a religious ideology that corresponded with the bourgeoisie's requirements. Essentially, Brendler provided a more elaborate, refined version of the idea rather crudely expressed in Steinmetz's Theses that Luther's Reformation was an ideological expression of the early bourgeois revolution.

Besides the biography, Brendler was also one of the main authors of a series of fifteen Theses Concerning Martin Luther, aimed at articulating to a wide audience the GDR's assessment of the reformer. Luther was, of course, situated in the GDR's progressive tradition, and great stress was placed on his positive contributions to issues such as education and welfare:

In the social sphere Luther's activity was directed chiefly towards providing for teachers, clergymen, vergers and the universities, and dealing with the question of the beggars and the poor. The appropriation of ecclesiastical and monastic lands was seen as a way of achieving these aims ...The Reformation also had a significant influence on the development of formal education. Luther himself stimulated the growth of elementary schools ...Luther also stimulated the development of a humane social ethic (sic) by drawing attention to the obligation to serve one's fellow-men,

the urge to engage in productive and purposeful work,  
the necessity to abolish the exploitation of human  
labour for profit, the need to preserve and protect the  
family, and the indispensability of virtues such as  
diligence, industry, thrift and a sense of duty.<sup>38</sup>

The final sentence suggested that, by the early sixteenth century, Luther had already prescribed all the essential qualities required of the conformist, loyal, obedient GDR citizen. Only marginal references were made in Thesis Six to politically sensitive issues such as Luther's condemnation of peasant rebellion.

In order to disseminate further the new Luther image to GDR citizens, Brendler acted as historical adviser to a five-part filmed dramatisation of the reformer's life that was broadcast on East German television in 1983.<sup>39</sup> Here Luther was robustly portrayed by the eminent GDR actor, Ulrich Thein, as a hero of his age. Luther's sudden prominence within East Germany led to the partial eclipse of the traditional champion of the GDR, Thomas Müntzer. In the Luther film, Müntzer made only a brief appearance and was portrayed by the actor, Frank Lienert, as a fanatical, otherworldly, utopian idealist. By contrast, Luther was represented as a combative, shrewd realist – a portrayal reminiscent of Müntzer's in the 1956 East German film about his life.<sup>40</sup>

Müntzer had not, however, been entirely ignored by the regime in the years following the construction of the Wall. He was specifically celebrated in 1975 during the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the German Peasants' War. As a tribute to the revolutionary leader of the sixteenth-century common people, the city of Mühlhausen, where Müntzer had resided during the rebellion and created his radical 'Eternal Council', was renamed Mühlhausen Thomas-Müntzer-Town. A Peasant War

Museum and Memorial was also opened in the town on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1975, and this building became a kind of secular shrine to Müntzer and the sixteenth-century popular struggle.<sup>41</sup> The museum contained weapons, models and documents associated with 1525. Significantly, the museum was housed in a former church, the Kornmarktkirche where loyal GDR citizens could make a secular rather than a religious pilgrimage to learn more about one of their country's greatest heroes. This building seemed a particularly suitable location, for it was rumoured that ammunition for the peasant rebels had been cast from the church's melted-down bronze bells.

While Müntzer was still being eulogised in 1975, East German historians were no longer so concerned with focusing almost exclusively on his involvement in the Peasant War. Attempts were now being made to view the conflict from a more wide-ranging perspective. GDR historians wanted to demonstrate that they were not academic isolationists and, unlike previous gatherings, historians from non-socialist countries were invited to participate at the anniversary conferences.<sup>42</sup> This new-found open-mindedness among East German academics obviously reflected the views of their political masters, for the early 1970s first marked the era when the GDR came out of the political cold into the warmth of the West. In December 1972 the Basic Treaty was signed which improved communications with the Federal Republic, and in September 1973 the GDR became a full member of the United Nations.<sup>43</sup> The 1975 Peasant War celebrations occurred in the more relaxed, open political climate that also marked the subsequent 1983 Luther anniversary. Many historical studies published to coincide with the 1975 celebrations still reiterated standard Marxist orthodoxy. However, some works were produced, based on empirical verification and careful scholarship, often archival-based, and these differed little from those undertaken in the West. It is noteworthy that more subtle and less doctrinaire



assessments were made of the rebels' political aims - a perennially problematical issue for hard-line Marxists - and they were no longer simply categorised into the somewhat rigid categories of either 'revolutionary' or 'moderate'.<sup>44</sup> This was most apparent in Siegfried Hoyer's analysis of a notable peasant pamphlet from Upper Swabia: To the Assembly of Common Peasantry (1525). While Smirin had stressed its radical nature and links with Müntzer's 'People's Reformation', Hoyer also drew attention to its moderate features, particularly its incorporation of Zwinglian ideas discouraging capricious revolt.<sup>45</sup>

Although GDR historians were clearly becoming influenced by Western approaches, the exchange of ideas was not solely in one direction. Some historians from the Federal Republic, such as Peter Blickle, demonstrated that they were receptive to East German notions. Unlike most of his West German colleagues who were reluctant to consider a socio-economic perspective because of its association with Marxism, Blickle was willing to embrace such an approach. While Günter Vogler, the East German historian, had related the Peasant War to the 'feudal offensive in the countryside',<sup>46</sup> Blickle similarly viewed the conflict in the context of feudal oppression and suggested that it was provoked by 'a process of intensification of lordship'.<sup>47</sup> Blickle also emphasised something that East German Marxists had constantly stressed: the close links between the Reformation and the Peasant War. Most Western scholars failed to see any connections between the two events, preferring instead to view the Reformation primarily as a theological occurrence totally divorced from social issues. Although Blickle's work endorsed the East German claim that the Reformation and Peasants War were related, it needs to be emphasised that he did not subscribe to the view that both events were part of a single early bourgeois revolutionary process. For Blickle, the Peasant War was not part of a

general Marxist bourgeois revolution concerned with the transition from feudalism to early capitalism; it represented instead a more specific political revolution of the common man in town and countryside. Discontented and alienated social groups (peasants, soldiers, miners, the urban lower orders) wanted an end to feudal subjugation and demanded definite political rights. In Blickle's 'common man's revolution', the Reformation was closely linked to the popular rebellion because the religious doctrines of the reformers provided the common people with a legitimating ideology for revolt: 'To implement 'godly'[Reformation] law, whatever the peasants may have understood by it in detail, became the aim of the revolution'.<sup>48</sup> The rebels used Reformation religious arguments to criticise feudalism, and they hoped to conquer oppression and create a new, more egalitarian society with the aid of a biblically-inspired notion of Divine Justice.

Blickle's perceptive study did not, then, wholeheartedly confirm East German approaches. However, he did endeavour to bridge the gap between the rival interpretations in both states by considering seriously issues explored primarily by Marxists, such as the question of the possible connections between Reformation religion and popular revolt. Besides Blickle, the Australian scholar and Reformation expert, Bob Scribner, was also receptive to the work of GDR scholars. Scribner drew on Marxist notions of social conflict in his 1975 study of the Urban Reformation in Erfurt, and the social history of the Reformation which he helped to pioneer owed a significant debt to the work of leading GDR historians.<sup>49</sup>

The 1975 Peasant War celebrations can be seen to have provided the first real opportunity for some kind of scholarly dialogue to be established between East and West, and clearly marked the end of the GDR's academic isolation. A more open general political climate continued throughout much of the 1980s, as East/West

German relations were rapidly normalised. This was effectively symbolised in Honecker's visit to West Germany in 1987; on that occasion he was accorded all the dignities normally reserved for foreign visiting heads of state.<sup>50</sup> While East/West Germany appeared to be drawing closer together, it needs to be stressed that the GDR's ruling ideology was still based on Marxist-Leninism and on the notion that the Party ruled and represented the interests of the working classes. During the late 1980s, significant tensions can be discerned between the doctrinaire political orthodox views demanded by the party élite, and the historical interpretations of those scholars influenced by less rigid, Western approaches.

This was most apparent during the 1989 quinquennial Thomas Müntzer celebrations when, in some historians' interpretations, the radical priest's status as revolutionary hero and progressive socialist began to be revised. Significantly, at an East German conference held in August 1989, Professor Adolf Laube emphasised that Müntzer was a 'genuine theologian' and preacher. Laube went on to argue that, at the beginning of his career, the basis of Müntzer's thought and personal programme had been religious rather than political and, like Luther, he was concerned to find the right way to correct faith. It was only much later, at the height of the Peasant War in April 1525, that Müntzer proposed the common people should resort to force against the ungodly authorities.<sup>51</sup> Similar views were expressed by Vogler, who argued in his biographical study of the radical priest, that Müntzer's primary objectives were concerned with theology rather than social liberation.<sup>52</sup> These interpretations were far closer to those conventional Western approaches that had regarded Müntzer as a religious visionary rather than a social revolutionary. Paradoxically, by 1989, many East German Marxists were focusing more on the theological aspects of sixteenth-

century history, while their counterparts in the 'bourgeois' West were increasingly concentrating on the Reformation's sociological and economic dimensions.<sup>53</sup>

Traditional views on Müntzer were, though, also still present as late as 1989, for the GDR regime had no intention of abandoning completely the important myth of the radical priest as a central character in East Germany's revolutionary tradition. The official governmental view of Müntzer was embodied in the fourteen Theses Concerning Thomas Müntzer, published in 1988.<sup>54</sup> A prominent photograph of Honecker at the start of the published theses made it abundantly clear that the work represented party orthodoxy. The Theses focused on Müntzer's revolutionary heritage, and on his anticipation of the working classes' historical destiny. Müntzer was perceived as:

... the outstanding representative of the extreme left wing of the early bourgeois German revolution ... At the beginning of an era of social transformation he strove for radical changes in society in favour of the exploited and oppressed people in conformity with his revolutionary interpretation of Christian teachings. He developed a theology of revolution with the aim of overcoming any kind of class rule. As he saw it, this revolution was to be accomplished by the ordinary people by means of revolutionary action.<sup>55</sup>

The Theses also stated that:

The GDR pays tribute to the theologian and revolutionary Thomas Müntzer as the exponent of those traditions of the early bourgeois revolution which

stressed the struggle of the oppressed masses for a better life in social equality and security. With the renewal of the socialist society these traditions are being jointly continued by the working classes, the class of cooperative farmers, by all working sections of the population in our republic, by their parties and mass organisations ...<sup>56</sup>

Besides the views expressed in the Theses, the fact that Manfred Bensing's 1965 study was reprinted in 1989 was a further indication that the GDR state had not abandoned completely earlier perspectives.<sup>57</sup> Bensing's dated work on Müntzer had portrayed him as a proto-Communist and little attention had been given to his theological ideas.

Although significant changes had occurred by 1989 in the GDR's understanding of Müntzer, older views that harked back to those of Smirin in the 1950s had not been completely renounced. The disparity between the more recent perspectives and the more traditional ones was indicative of the wider chasms opening up within the GDR. There were splits between those who were critical of the regime and who demanded reform, and the obstinate leadership of the ageing Honecker and the moribund committee members of the principal decision-making political institution in the State, the Politburo. Müntzer and the Reformation era as part of a state-supporting mythology seemed now in crisis, and the regime encountered growing problems in manipulating effectively such political myths. The difficulties in myth-building were nowhere more apparent than in the popular reception given to Werner Tübke's gigantic panoramic painting, over forty-five feet high, of the Peasant War. Tübke's monumental painting was housed in a huge purpose-built rotunda,

known as the Panorama Museum, which had been erected on the site of the battle of Frankenhausen. This was the place where, in May 1525, Müntzer and his peasant troops were defeated.<sup>58</sup> Tübke's painting – the world's largest and entitled 'Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany' – was opened to the public on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1989; it represented the high-point of the Thomas Müntzer celebrations. The panorama painting portrayed the battle together with various symbolic, dramatic scenes set in the sixteenth century and was placed within a cycle of the four seasons. However, the picture was not painted in the characteristic direct, unambiguous, socialist-realist style that East German citizens were more familiar with. Tübke's painting combined a number of artistic styles, such as late-medieval German as well as Mannerism, and relied on an imaginative use of historical visual sources, such as the woodcut illustrations found in sixteenth-century broadsheet pamphlets. Within the work, the influence of artists such as Dürer, Cranach, the Beham Brothers, Brueghel and El Greco could be detected. The painting was suffused with a myriad of late-medieval symbols, allusions, allegories and Christian iconography that ordinary orthodox Communist party members had great difficulty comprehending. Unsurprisingly, the enormous cylinder-shaped museum building was soon derided and was nicknamed the 'elephant toilet' by cynical visitors. Many GDR citizens seem to have resented the cost of erecting such an immense structure which had little meaning for them, and which appeared merely to display the grandiose illusions of an aloof, remote ruling élite. Disillusionment with the Panorama Museum was succinctly expressed in a letter written by a worker from Görlitz to the Minister of Culture, Hans-Joachim Hoffmann:

I am only a simple worker, but one perhaps who has  
eyes to see and ears to hear. And a mouth that says what

it thinks... Because we are supposed to be the greatest such a ridiculous thing [the Panorama-Museum] was made ... We are a socialist country and don't need a pilgrim site like in Jerusalem. That is only for believers and they should only build it if they need it, but not with our money ...<sup>59</sup>

This worker cynically deconstructed the GDR's historical mythology and raised the awkward question whether a religious kind of veneration was appropriate in a secular, atheist state. Perched on top of a steep hill, the Schlachtberg, where approximately 5,000 peasants had been slaughtered in 1525, and towering over the surrounding countryside, the gigantic Panorama Museum certainly had the appearance of a sacred sarcophagus. The letter made it obvious that, for one worker at least, Tübke's painting failed to instil the sense of pride in the Peasant War as the starting point of a proletarian-revolutionary tradition that the party hierarchy still wished to promote to its citizenry. Instead of sustaining loyalty to the state, the Panorama Museum seems to have induced anger and consternation at the cost of the colossal project.

The huge museum should be contrasted with the more humble, modest Peasant War Museum located in Mühlhausen. Although this museum was partly reorganised in 1983 to take account of the Luther Celebration, and again in 1989 for the Müntzer Jubilee, the essential elements of the exhibition remained intact since its opening in 1975.<sup>60</sup> The museum presented the Peasant War in a very traditional manner: a series of relevant exhibits (primarily copies rather than originals) were mostly housed in glass cabinets placed close to the walls of the former Church building's high interior. At the start of the exhibition the focus was, in conformity with Marxist orthodoxy, on the 'economic base' and the 'materialist' aspects of the

late Middle Ages, e.g., new productive developments, agrarian feudal relations. It then moved on to a consideration of the Peasant War itself. Finally, Müntzer and the Peasant-War tradition in twentieth-century socialist history was considered. Photographs were displayed of the German Communist Party's jubilee celebrations in 1925 commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the struggle. The last display focused on the socialist transformations in agriculture, particularly the collectivisation of land from 1945 onwards. Proud peasants were shown industrious and content in their agricultural co-operatives. Needless to say, Mühlhausen's co-operative was symbolically named after Thomas Müntzer. For East German visitors to the museum the message was clear and unambiguous: the aspirations of Müntzer and his peasant army had found their realisation in the GDR state. To drive the point home a quotation that Müntzer had made in Mühlhausen on 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1525 was inscribed high up on a wall facing the museum's entrance: 'Power shall be given to the common people' ('Die Gewalt soll gegeben werden dem gemeinen Volk'). A large picture painted in 1956 by W. O. Pitthan hung on the wall below the proto-socialist slogan and helped to reinforce it. This painting, produced in a Socialist Realist style, depicted an intense-looking Müntzer haranguing a crowd of armed, militant peasants. The immediacy and certainty of interpretation to be found in the displays and art work in the Mühlhausen Peasant War Museum was clearly absent from Tübke's complex, elusive panoramic painting. It has been observed that historical myths need to be transmitted 'in an easily comprehended, emotionally moving form'<sup>61</sup> and this, obviously, did not apply to Tübke's work, particularly the painting's capability of being plainly understood.

Ultimately, the GDR state can be seen to have failed in its bid to incorporate successfully Reformation history into its mythic repertoire. It was similarly unable to



sustain its legitimacy beyond November 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. One of the major weaknesses of the Reformation era myths in East Germany was their growing ambivalence and contradictory nature. This became more apparent as the regime progressed. Myth-building requires consistency and uniformity if it is to have any chance of moulding and transforming the beliefs and opinions of its intended audience.<sup>62</sup> The specific myths of the 1950s, which focused on Müntzer and the peasants' struggle as precursors of the new socialist state, were unproblematic and probably gained wide acceptance. School texts, in particular, such as the 1959 history book aimed at the sixth grade, helped to disseminate widely these myths and stressed the significance of Müntzer together with the Peasant War. Luther was portrayed in this educative literature mainly in negative terms.<sup>63</sup> However, from the late 1960s onwards, Müntzer began to be upstaged by Luther who was increasingly incorporated into the GDR's progressive tradition. Many rank-and-file party members were sceptical about Luther's sudden political canonisation and were reluctant to involve themselves in the 1983 Luther Year celebrations.<sup>64</sup> The central event aimed at popularising the 'Luther-as-GDR-Hero' cult – the five-part televised biographical film about Luther – was met with indifference and the viewing figures were extremely low: less than 10% of the viewing population watched the broadcasts, and young people displayed the least interest.<sup>65</sup> Then in 1989, East German citizens were presented with an inconsistent portrayal of Müntzer. On the one hand, some historical studies were drawing more attention to Müntzer's theology rather than to his radical political programme, and the conclusions in these works differed little from those put forward by Western scholars. On the other hand, Müntzer was still presented in the Theses as the people's champion, revolutionary warrior and spiritual forefather of the German Socialist State. The incompatibility between the two views of Müntzer helped

to undermine rather than maintain the GDR's Reformation history mythology. East Germany's collapse in the very year of the Müntzer Anniversary is ample evidence of the inability of Reformation historical myths to retain the people's loyalty to the regime.

However, the lessons of Reformation history were possibly not entirely lost on GDR citizens. The 1989 official state propaganda had stressed 'Müntzer's public commitment to the right of all common people to a radical elimination of oppression and injustice'.<sup>66</sup> In that year, many East German citizens regarded themselves just as oppressed by their socialist state as the GDR teachings had claimed Müntzer felt exploited by the sixteenth-century feudal order. To the chagrin of the elderly and increasingly paranoid Politburo, the East German people eventually turned the Müntzer myth against its very own myth-makers: they followed the path of their regime's revolutionary hero by taking to the streets and demonstrating against the undemocratic system. Clearly, Müntzer's rebellious spirit permeated the entire life-span of the GDR from its inception in 1949 to its eventual demise in 1989. Both sixteenth and twentieth-century history were never far apart in this peculiar, misunderstood country – a country that witnessed within its borders dramatic challenges to ruling orthodoxies in both centuries: the 1517 Lutheran defiance of Catholicism and the 1989 peaceful revolution against Communism. Research into how the GDR State interpreted, celebrated and mythologised the Reformation era offers us not only useful insights into Marxist materialist perspectives on sixteenth-century history, it also provides further understanding of the rise and eventual fall of Communist rule in East Germany.

### Acknowledgements

I am especially grateful to Professor Andrew Pettegree of St. Andrews University for initially encouraging me to undertake research into East German perspectives on Reformation history. I should also like to thank my colleagues at Portsmouth University, Professor Sue Harper and Dr. Brad Beaven, for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The following edition has been consulted: Frederick Engels, The Peasant War in Germany (Moscow 1969).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Alan L. Nothnagle, Building the East German Myth. Historical mythology and youth propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989 (Ann Arbor 1999); Raina Zimmering, Mythen in der Politik der DDR. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung politischer Mythen (Opladen 2000). About a third of Zimmering's impressive monograph is concerned with the GDR's Reformation era mythology, and this paper has benefited greatly from her insights and observations. However, the present study pays more attention than Zimmering's work to specific historiographical issues involving the Reformation period. Zimmering approaches the topic of GDR mythology essentially as a political scientist rather than a historian. It should also be noted that Zimmering neglects to consider one of the GDR's main political mythological sites: Mühlhausen's German Peasant War Museum.

<sup>3</sup> For useful discussion and definitions of the concept of myth in this context, see Nothnagle, op. cit., 5-12; Zimmering, op. cit., 11-35.

<sup>4</sup> For examination of the Marxist-Leninist concept of history in the GDR, see especially Andreas Dorpalen, German History in Marxist Perspective. The East German approach (London 1985), ch. 1; Nothnagle, op. cit., 15-26; Josef Foschepoth, Reformation und Bauernkrieg im Geschichtsbild der DDR. Zur Methodologie eines gewandelten Geschichtsverständnisses (Berlin 1976), 13-32.

<sup>5</sup> Nothnagle in, op. cit., 6, notes that 'a myth is an abbreviated world-outlook, an ideology in miniature'.

<sup>6</sup> For a helpful discussion of the Peasant War myth's significance at the GDR's foundation, see Zimmering, op. cit., 173-5.

<sup>7</sup> Rainer S. Elkar, 'Geschichtsforschung der Frühen Neuzeit zwischen Divergenz und Parallelität', in Rainer Wohlfeil, ed., Bauernkrieg, 1524-1526. Bauernkrieg und Reformation (Munich 1975), 219-45; 222.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Trossbach, 'Der Bauernkrieg in der Geschichtsschreibung der DDR – "die dritte Etappe der frühbürgerlichen Revolution"', Mühlhäuser Beiträge, Sonderheft, 10 (1997), 39-58; 39. For a general discussion of land reform, agricultural collectivisation and the Peasant War, see Zimmering, op. cit., 207-11.

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- <sup>9</sup> Alfred Meusel, Thomas Müntzer und seine Zeit (Berlin 1952).
- <sup>10</sup> Moses M. Smirin, Die Volksreformation des Thomas Müntzer und der grosse Bauernkrieg (Berlin 1952). For an English summary of Smirin's work, see Abraham Friesen, Reformation and Utopia. The Marxist interpretation of the Reformation and its antecedents (Wiesbaden 1974), 182-6.
- <sup>11</sup> Zimmering, op. cit., 190-5.
- <sup>12</sup> For an excellent examination of the Stalinisation of East Germany, see Gareth Pritchard, The Making of the GDR 1945-53. From antifascism to Stalinism (Manchester 2000).
- <sup>13</sup> Zimmering, op. cit., 204.
- <sup>14</sup> Romwald Maczka, 'Thomas Müntzer Scholarship in the German Democratic Republic, 1949-1983' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Karl Marx University, Leipzig, 1987), 45. I am grateful to Dr. Maczka of Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin, for making a copy of his thesis available to me.
- <sup>15</sup> For useful discussions about the development of Engels' views on the Peasant War, see Dietrich Lösche, 'Probleme der frühbürgerlichen Revolution in Deutschland', in Rainer Wohlfeil, ed., Reformation oder frühbürgerlichen Revolution? (Munich 1972), 163-86; Janos Bak et al., "'The Peasant War in Germany'" by Friedrich Engels – 125 Years After', The Journal of Peasant Studies, 3 (1975), 89-135.
- <sup>16</sup> Frederick Engels, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific (Moscow 1974), 19.
- <sup>17</sup> O.G.Tschaikowskaja, 'Über den Charakter der Reformation und des Bauernkrieges in Deutschland', Sowjetwissenschaft, Gesellschafts-Wissenschaftliche Beiträge, 10 (1957), 721-38.
- <sup>18</sup> Steinmetz's Theses have been reprinted in Wohlfeil, ed., op. cit., 1972, 42-55. An English translation can be found in Bob Scribner and Gerhard Benecke, eds, The German Peasant War of 1525 – New Viewpoints (London 1979) 9-18.
- <sup>19</sup> Scribner and Benecke, eds, op. cit., 9-10.
- <sup>20</sup> Foschepoth, op. cit., 35.
- <sup>21</sup> Maczka, op. cit. 46.
- <sup>22</sup> Bernhard Töpfer, 'Zur Frage nach dem Beginn der Neuzeit', in Wohlfeil, ed., op. cit., 1972, 70-9. Cf. Tschaikowskaja, op. cit., 721-38.
- <sup>23</sup> Wohlfeil, ed., op. cit., 1972, 175-6, 215-16; Foschepoth, op. cit., 70-80.
- <sup>24</sup> For example, the monumental Peasant War panorama painting that was put on general public display in autumn 1989 was given the official title: 'The Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany'.

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<sup>25</sup> For a useful, brief survey of political developments in both Germanies, see Mary Fulbrook, Interpretations of the Two Germanies, 1945-1990 (Basingstoke 2000). For a more detailed outline of Communist rule in the GDR, see Mike Dennis, The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990 (Harlow 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Fulbrook, op. cit., 20.

<sup>27</sup> Dennis, op. cit., 103-4.

<sup>28</sup> Thesis 23 stated: 'The first stage of the early bourgeois revolution was a national movement precipitated by the Wittenberg professor, Martin Luther, posting his Theses against indulgences' (Scribner and Benecke, eds, op. cit., 15).

<sup>29</sup> Gerhard Zschäbitz, Martin Luther. Grösse und Grenze (Berlin 1967).

<sup>30</sup> Zimmering, op. cit., 222.

<sup>31</sup> For State/Church relations in the GDR, see Robert F. Goeckel, The Lutheran Church and the East German State. Political conflict and change under Ulbricht and Honecker (Ithaca 1990); John P. Burgess, The East German Church and the End of Communism (New York and Oxford 1997); Dennis, op. cit., 246-50. For an examination that focuses specifically on the Church in Thüringia, see Mark Allinson, Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945-68 (Manchester 2000), ch. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop Albrecht Schönherr, the Chairman of the League of Protestant Churches, observed in 1971: 'We do not want to be a Church against or alongside but we wish to be a Church within socialism' (quoted in Dennis, op. cit., 247).

<sup>33</sup> Zimmering, op. cit., 280-1; David Childs, The GDR: Moscow's German Ally (London 1988), 94.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Zimmering, op. cit., 263.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Nothnagle, op. cit., 65.

<sup>36</sup> The English translation of the 1983 study has been consulted: Gerhard Brendler, Martin Luther. Theology and Revolution (New York and Oxford 1991), 374.

<sup>37</sup> Brendler, op. cit., 375.

<sup>38</sup> Horst Bartel, Gerhard Brendler et al., Theses Concerning Martin Luther, 1483-1983. The Luther Quincentenary in the German Democratic Republic (Dresden 1983), 19, 24.

<sup>39</sup> For discussion of the film, see Zimmering, op. cit., 285-94; Horst Dähn and Joachim Heise, eds, Luther und die DDR. Der Reformator und das DDR-Fernsehen 1983 (Berlin 1996).

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Thomas Müntzer’: directed by Martin Hellberg (DEFA Studios, 1956). Based on Friedrich Wolf’s play.

<sup>41</sup> For a brief examination in English of the museum, see GDR Review, 1 (1990), 27-31. A short discussion of the museum’s fate after the fall of the GDR can be found in Mühlhäuser Beiträge, Sonderheft, 10 (1997), 5-8.

<sup>42</sup> Maczka, op. cit., 16. Historians from the Federal Republic also invited GDR scholars to their 1525 anniversary gatherings. Leading East German historians, such as Adolf Laube, Max Steinmetz and Günter Vogler, attended the main West German conference held at Memmingen in March 1975. For the conference papers, see Historische Zeitschrift, Beiheft, 4 (1975).

<sup>43</sup> Fulbrook, op. cit., 41; Dennis, op. cit., 170-1.

<sup>44</sup> Trossbach, op. cit., 52.

<sup>45</sup> Siegfried Hoyer, ‘The Rights and Duties of Resistance in the Pamphlet To the Assembly of Common Peasantry (1525)’, in Scribner and Benecke, eds, op. cit., 123-36.

<sup>46</sup> Günter Vogler’s contribution to the discussion: ‘“The Peasant War in Germany” by Friedrich Engels – 125 Years After’, 110. Vogler produced for the Peasant War Anniversary a very informative general study: Die Gewalt soll gegeben werden dem gemeinen Volk. Der deutsche Bauernkrieg 1525 (Berlin 1975). He was also one of the three authors of the copiously illustrated, commemorative GDR study of 1525: Adolf Laube, Max Steinmetz, Günter Vogler, Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen frühbürgerlichen Revolution (Berlin 1974).

<sup>47</sup> Peter Blickle, ‘The Economic, Social and Political Background of the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants of 1525’, The Journal of Peasant Studies, 3 (1975), 63-75; 66.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Blickle, ‘Biblicism versus Feudalism’, in Scribner and Benecke, eds, op. cit., 137-43; 142. Blickle’s superb monograph on the Peasant War was published in West Germany to coincide with the 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Die Revolution von 1525 (Munich 1975). An English translation by Thomas A. Brady jr and H. C. Erik Midelfort is also available: The Revolution of 1525. The German Peasants’ War from a new perspective (Baltimore 1981).

<sup>49</sup> R.W.Scribner, ‘Civic Unity and the Reformation in Erfurt’, Past and Present, 66 (1975), 29-60. Scribner was one of the few historians from a non-socialist country who undertook historical research in the East German archives during the early 1970s.

<sup>50</sup> Dennis, op. cit., 180.

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<sup>51</sup> Laube's paper was published in early 1990: Adolf Laube, 'Thomas Müntzer und die frühbürgerliche Revolution', Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft, 38 (1990), 128-41.

<sup>52</sup> Günter Vogler, Thomas Müntzer (Berlin 1989). For reviews in English of Vogler's study together with others produced for the 1989 Müntzer Anniversary, see James M. Stayer, 'Thomas Müntzer in 1989: A Review Article', Sixteenth Century Journal, 21 (1990), 655-70; Henry J. Cohn, 'Thomas Müntzer. Theologian and Revolutionary', German Historical Institute London Bulletin, 13 (November, 1991), 3-15.

<sup>53</sup> Helmar Junghans, 'Der Wandel des Müntzerbildes in der DDR von 1951/52 bis 1989', Luther, 60 (1989), 102-30; 122.

<sup>54</sup> Adolf Laube et al., Thesen über Thomas Müntzer: zum 500. Geburtstag, (Berlin 1988). Ironically, both Laube and Vogler were members of the authors' collective that produced the Theses. This demonstrates the 'intellectual schizophrenia' that GDR academics had to indulge in, particularly during the latter years of the regime. The necessity to produce party propaganda that sustained the mythic version of Müntzer was clearly at odds with these two historians' more cautious, scholarly assessments. All GDR historians were party members and were expected to display Parteilichkeit ('partisanship') and follow ideological guidelines laid down by special commissions under the regulation of the Politburo. Failure to display Parteilichkeit could lead to the end of a career; see Nothnagle, *op. cit.*, 15-22.

<sup>55</sup> Laube et al., *op. cit.*, 5; English translation in GDR Review, 1 (1990), 28.

<sup>56</sup> Laube et al., *op. cit.*, 55; English translation in GDR Review, 1 (1990), 29.

<sup>57</sup> Manfred Bensing, Thomas Müntzer, Fourth edition (Leipzig 1989 [first edition 1965]).

<sup>58</sup> For discussion of the Panorama Museum, Tübke's painting and its reception, see Zimmering, *op. cit.*, 233-56. An interpretative guide and souvenir book was produced in 1989 for GDR visitors: Karl Max Kober, Werner Tübke. Monumentalbild Frankenhausen (Dresden 1989).

<sup>59</sup> 'Ich bin nur ein einfacher Arbeiter, aber vielleicht einer der die Augen zum sehen und die Ohren zum hören hat. Und einen munt der sagt was er denkt ... Weil wir die Grössten sein sollen wird so ein Wahnsinnsobjekt gemacht ... Wir sind ein Sozialistisches Land und brauchen keine Pilgerstätte wie in Jerusalem. Das ist was für Gläubige und die sollen es nur bauen wenn sie es brauchen, aber nicht auf unsere Kosten' (quoted in Zimmering, *op. cit.*, 255).



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<sup>60</sup> The museum was largely unaltered and still remained a ‘time capsule’ from the GDR era when it was visited in July 2001. In 1995, following public debate and discussion, the decision was taken in Mühlhausen to dismantle the GDR display after the Millennium Year and create an entirely new Peasant War exhibition. However, by the summer of 2001, work had not yet commenced on this project. A brochure has been produced for visitors which attempts to place briefly the museum in the GDR’s historical context: Zur Konzeption des Bauernkriegsmuseums (Mühlhausen 1996). I am grateful for the very useful information about the history and development of the museum provided by Herr Martin Sünder who worked there as a research associate during the GDR era.

<sup>61</sup> Nothnagle, op. cit., 6.

<sup>62</sup> For discussion of the ambivalence and inconsistency of the GDR’s political mythology, see Zimmering, op. cit., 359-61.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>65</sup> Dähn and Heise, eds, op. cit., 149-54. Some of the GDR leaders were obviously disappointed with the film’s reception, for it failed to win the prestigious National Culture Prize.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Müntzer (Mühlhausen Thomas-Müntzer-Stadt 1988), n.p. The English language version of this pamphlet could still be obtained at Mühlhausen’s Peasant War Museum in July 2001.

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