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A Marxist De-Lutheranization of the German Reformation

DOUGLAS C. STANGE

In 1947, when the rebuilding of a Europe ravaged by world war had only begun, a classical study of Thomas Müntzer appeared in Russia by the eminent historian, Moisei Mendelevich Smirin, entitled *Norodnaja reformazija T. Mjunzera i velikaja krestjanskaja wojna*. Five years later it was translated into German, and in 1956 it was enlarged and revised.¹ Smirin's effort earned him not only the Stalin prize, second class, but also acceptance as the "orthodox voice" in the confirmation of the Müntzer legend. Friedrich Engels in 1850 had baptized Müntzer's role in the German Reformation in the pure mainstream of Marxist history. Disciples of Marx, representing varied degrees of commitment, continued the Müntzerian hagiography: August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, Franz Mehring, and Ernst Bloch.²

However, it remained for Smirin, with all the Russian propensity for massiveness, to paint with broad strokes the portrait of

¹ M. M. Smirin, *Die Volksreformation des Thomas Münzer und der grosse Bauernkrieg*, 2d ed., trans. Hans Nichtweiss (Berlin, 1956). The pagination of this edition will be followed throughout this essay.

² For a useful commentary on these writers vis-à-vis Müntzer, cf. Abraham Friesen's "Thomas Müntzer in Marxist Thought," *Church History*, XXXIV (September 1965), 306—327.

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Müntzer: an image that would be taken as the prototype for most scholarly writing and hack bravado executed on the Allstedt reformer today in East Germany.

Relying on a wide breadth of original sources and the Marxist historiography done before him, Smirin conceived the following picture of Müntzer and the "people's reformation." In the foreground, of course, were the just demands of the peasants spelled out in 12 articles and circulating in printed form throughout Germany. The peasants, bound to feudal landlords, lacking access to "*Wiese, Wald, und Wasser*," and wholly deprived of the minimum in political rights, were nourished and sustained in the hope of social change—revolution.³

Of the Protestant reformers, it was Müntzer who understood that the problems of the peasants could be solved only through revolutionary action. He foresaw a classless society where property was held in common—a kingdom of God on earth.⁴ The whole reformation movement, in his eyes, meant a fight for the interests of the people, and he exhausted himself in this fight. The needs of the peasants required a complete overturning of all social relations, an accomplishment that lay within their power.⁵

Alignment with the peasants set Müntzer over against the princes, somewhat an

³ Smirin, p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

embarrassment in the company of magisterial reformers like Luther and Melancthon. He told the latter not to flatter the princes. Luther's consistent attempts to prevent himself from being politically embarrassed would please no revolutionary, least of all, Müntzer.⁶

Luther left the working out of the peasants' requests under the law of the land—a program that would only keep them enslaved.⁷ It was inevitable then that Müntzer and Luther would clash. Their basic difference lay in their conception regarding salvation. The autocracy of a paper pope, Luther's idea of *sola scriptura*, and the Wittenberg Reformer's emphasis on man's passivity before God frustrated Müntzer.⁸ The "people's reformer" judged Luther negatively, firmly believing that after the Word was given by the Lutherans the people were forgotten.⁹ Luther considered salvation a personal experience, Müntzer saw it as a universal duty, a social problem-solving that God performed through His chosen ones.¹⁰ Personal needs were made subject to the demands of society.¹¹ Müntzer thought of the church as an institution for the job of fighting the ungodly.¹²

Understandably, there was no place in a people's reformation for Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms. The idea that poor government, reactionary and bourgeois political leadership, could serve the church is out of the question.¹³ Renewal of the

church and spiritual perfection are inseparable, Müntzer declared, from the cleansing of the earthly world from egoistical social authorities who act against the people's interests.¹⁴

Not the Lutheran flag, then, but Müntzer's became the banner of the people's reformation.¹⁵ Müntzer's teachings agreed with the temper of the people themselves,¹⁶ he went against humility, passivity, and Christian love—central points of Luther's theology—replacing them with a fear of God, which understood the duty of the individual to go against all earthly oppressors with the sword of Gideon.¹⁷

Smirin's portrait of Müntzer, consequently, sets him as the leader of the people's reformation over against Luther as the reformer of the princely establishment. A number of patient sketches of the Allstedt reformer fill Smirin's volume: the influences of Joachim da Fiore, Johannes Tauler, Balthasar Hubmaier, and the Bohemian Taborites on Müntzer are explicated in great detail—the fruit of nearly a decade of investigation of the original sources by Smirin.¹⁸ His interpretation and scholarship, therefore, have provided him with recognition both in the East and the West.¹⁹

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 640.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

¹⁸ The Russian scholar had been at work on his project since 1938. Cf. Max Steinmetz, "Zur Entstehung der Müntzer-Legende," *Beiträge zum neuen Geschichtsbild. Zum 60. Geburtstag von Alfred Meusel*. Fritz Klein and Joachim Streisand, eds. (Berlin, 1956), p. 37.

¹⁹ "The most important Müntzer monograph from a Marxist point of view," wrote Steinmetz in 1956, *ibid.*, p. 37. H. F. Mackensen concurred in 1964 by saying Smirin's work was "the standard authoritative communist work on

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 99.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 117—118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

Recognizing Smirin's place in the evolution of historical writing in the Soviet Union, one cannot be overly harsh with the limitations of his interpretation of Müntzer. The narrowness of scholarship in Russia on the whole rests on the inability of altering the Marxist/Leninist view of history, but carelessness with and falsification of sources is not a viable criticism of Soviet historiography. And as greater contact develops between Soviet historians and the comrades of their craft in France and Italy, a broader perspective of interpretation is bound to come.

In any event, if the picture of Müntzer's true role in history is distorted by writers sympathetic to Marxist socialism, the work by Lutheran and Anabaptist scholars, who have a general disinclination to admit any relationship to Müntzer, exhibits their own particular limitations.²⁰

the subject." Cf. H. F. Mackensen, "Historical Interpretation and Luther's Role in the Peasant Revolt," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXV (April 1964), 198.

²⁰ The disassociation of Müntzer from the Anabaptist camp is well illustrated in the following articles: Harold S. Bender, "Die Zwickauer Propheten, Thomas Müntzer und die Täufer," *Theologische Zeitschrift*, VIII (July—August 1952), 262—278; and Robert Friedmann, "Thomas Müntzer's Relation to Anabaptism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXXI (April 1957), 75—87. The Lutheran tradition ranges from "Die Historie Thomae Müntzers" (reputed to have been written by Melancthon) to a number of contemporary writers (who exhibit a varying gradation of sympathy towards Müntzer). Cf. Otto Brandt, *Thomas Müntzer: Sein Leben und seine Schriften* (Jena, 1933), pp. 38—50; Heinrich Böhmer, *Studien zu Thomas Müntzer* (Leipzig, 1922); Karl Holl, "Luther und die Schwärmer," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. I (Tübingen, 1923), pp. 420—467; George W. Forell, "Thomas Müntzer, Symbol and Reality," *Dialog* II (1963), 12—23; and Eric W. Gritsch, "Thomas Müntzer and the Origins of Protestant

Thus, Smirin pointed out the obvious when he wrote that the question of Müntzer's importance and an explanation of his teachings are made difficult by the prejudicial character of almost all the sources.²¹ The Russian historian's book, however, has served as a catalytic element in the rise of the Müntzer legend in East Germany.²² Few scholars in the so-called *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* have parted with him. The history textbook for the middle ages in the DDR, authored by the Russian professor E. A. Kosminskij, grants a scant two paragraphs to Luther, but Müntzer, of course, is made the hero of the Reformation.²³ Two works by Carl Hinrichs appeared in 1950 and 1952, the former providing a critical edition of Müntzer's political writings and the latter comparing the Allstedt reformer with Luther.²⁴

Actually the East German printing presses produced a variety of Müntzeriana

Spiritualism," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXXVII (July 1963), 172—191. Gordon Rupp has a number of times put forward hesitantly the idea of redeeming Müntzer, but somehow never really throws his whole heart into it. Cf. E. Gordon Rupp, "Luther and the Puritans: Luther and Thomas Müntzer," *Luther Today* (Decorah, 1957), p. 146; and his review of Carl Hinrichs' "Luther and Müntzer," *English Historical Review*, LXVIII (April 1953), 309 to 310.

²¹ Smirin, pp. 296—297.

²² Interest in Müntzer has also spread to France. Cf. the translation of Ernst Bloch's volume, *Thomas Münzer, Theologien de la Revolution* (Paris, 1964), and the work of Maurice Pianzola, *Thomas Münzer Ou La Guerre Des Paysans* (Paris, 1958), Smirin's influence on Pianzola is self-evident in the latter's praise of the Russian scholar's book as being "la plus marquante."

²³ E. A. Kosminskij, *Geschichte des Mittelalters* (Berlin/Leipzig, 1948), pp. 209—214.

²⁴ Carl Hinrichs, *Thomas Müntzer: Politische Schriften* (Halle, 1950), and *Luther und Müntzer* (Berlin, 1952).

in 1952. A volume by Professor Alfred Meusel entitled *Müntzer and His Time* severely criticized Luther, declaring that few Germans had matched Luther's talent for demagoguery and that no one since has ever surpassed it.²⁵ His tactics to gain the favor of the princes reaped for Luther a whirlwind.²⁶ Lutheranism bound Germany in the chains of petty state absolutism.²⁷ From no one was so much expected and so little received, declared Meusel, suggesting that the statement would serve as a motto for a biography of Luther.²⁸ The Lutheran princely reformation, moreover, was one of the most tragic "half-accomplishments" in German history.²⁹

The year 1952 would also see Müntzer in the literary genre of printed pop art. A small popular biography by Karl Kleinschmidt, preacher at the cathedral church in Schwerin, is dotted with exclamation points and filled with praise for his hero Müntzer.³⁰ He sees in Müntzer "the soldier and prophet of a great united and independent Germany."³¹ (The National Front for a Democratic Germany had published the book.)

By 1956 Max Steinmetz, director of the Institute for German History, could record "The beginning of the Müntzer legend."³²

²⁵ Alfred Meusel, *Thomas Müntzer und seine Zeit* (Berlin, 1952), p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118. Meusel wrote a shorter sketch of Müntzer in 1955. Cf. *Thomas Müntzer* (Leipzig/Jena, 1955).

³⁰ Karl Kleinschmidt, *Thomas Münzer: Die Seele des deutschen Bauernkrieges von 1525* (Berlin, 1952).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

³² Steinmetz, pp. 35—70. In this essay

And rightly so, for in that year the East German film industry decided to celebrate its 10th anniversary by featuring Müntzer in a gaudy cinematic extravaganza more than two hours long. The program for the film featured over two hundred names. The director, Martin Hellberg, passing over such a tempting possible title as "Gone with the Spirit," chose simply to call it "Thomas Müntzer, a Film of German History."³³ Based on the play by Friedrich Wolf, "Thomas Münzer, The Man with the Rainbow Banner,"³⁴ the spectacle, true to form, viewed Luther negatively and Müntzer positively. Film critics in West Germany disliked the film's message, felt the color rather thick, and the sound loud, but could not help applaud the technical handling of the mob scenes.³⁵

To round out the folk hero image of Müntzer, the people's reformer has been the subject of a historical-biographical novel by Rosemarie Schuder entitled *My Scythe Is Sharp* (1955); he has been brought to the attention of young readers in books such as *The Little Rainbow-Banner* by Ann-Charlott Settgast (1951) and *Under the Banner of the "Bundschuh"* by a Russian author, Altajew (1955);³⁶ he

Steinmetz wrote of the Lutheran view of Müntzer; elsewhere he has commented on the Melancthonian view. Cf. Max Steinmetz, "Philipp Melancthon über Thomas Müntzer und Nikolaus Storch," *Philipp Melancthon Humanist, Reformator, Praeceptor Germaniae* Melancthon-Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, ed. (Berlin, 1963).

³³ "Thomas Münzer, ein Film deutscher Geschichte," *Evangelischer Film-Beobachter* VIII (June 1956), 273—274.

³⁴ Steinmetz, "Müntzer-Legende," p. 37.

³⁵ *Evangelischer Film-Beobachter*, p. 274.

³⁶ Steinmetz, "Müntzer-Legende," pp. 37 to 38.

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has been immortalized in the song for young pioneers, "Thomas Müntzer in the Country" as well as in the "Musical Chronicle" in Magdeburg in 1955; he has been feted in a Thomas Müntzer Festival in Allstedt in 1953;³⁷ and last but not least, he has been compared in a biographical poem to Jesus Christ!³⁸ These major achievements should not totally overshadow the fact that there are schools, mines, power plants,³⁹ cooperatives, even a bulb for planting, that bear Müntzer's name.⁴⁰

³⁷ "Thomas-Müntzer-Festspiele in Allstedt," *Demokratischer Aufbau*, VIII (July 1953), 266.

³⁸ Reinhard Schmid, "Thomas Müntzer im Geschichtsbild des dialektischen Materialismus," *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt*, LXV (May 1965), 261.

³⁹ Kleinschmidt, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Schmid, p. 262. The impact of the Müntzer legend on the young people in the DDR was tested by Schmid, using refugee children from the East as subjects. Through a questionnaire he was able to find that most of

Two Lutheran scholars in the DDR who have maintained a high level of discussion regarding Luther vis-à-vis Müntzer are Franz Lau of Leipzig University and Walter Elliger of Humboldt University in Berlin. They have published a number of articles and monographs in this area.⁴¹ It is doubtful however that their writing will deter the progress of the Müntzer mythology in East Germany or alter the attempted de-Lutheranization of the region.

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the young people recognized Luther as a hard-drinking, profane, gluttonous servant of the princes, whereas Müntzer was in their minds a hero in Germany's history. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁴¹ Cf., e. g., Walter Elliger, *Thomas Müntzer* (Berlin-Friedenau, 1960) and "Thomas Müntzer," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, XC (January 1965), 7—8; also Franz Lau, "Der Bauernkrieg und das angebliche Ende der lutherischen Reformation als spontaner Volksbewegung," *Luther-Jahrbuch*, XXVI (1959), 109 to 134, and "Luther—Reaktionär oder Revolutionär?" *Luther, Mitteilungen der Luthergesellschaft*, XXVIII (1957), 109—133.