The Radical Reformation and Revolutionary Tradition

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F箫t tells his servant, Wagner, "The past, my friend, is a book with seven seals. What you call the spirit of the ages is in reality the spirit of the men in which the times are reflected." What is happening to Reformation historiography today in the light of new ideological commitments illustrates Faust's point.

The historical interpretation of the Protestant Reformation was, up until the nineteenth century, ordinarily based upon what has been called classical Protestant and Catholic scholarship. Roman Catholic scholarship regarded the Reformation as a great misfortune that destroyed Catholic civilization and ruptured European unity. Luther was a rebel who opened the door to the violent revolutions patterned after his own rebellious and irresponsible conduct. Protestant historians, on the other hand, saw the Reformation as the work of God in purging his church. Luther is God's chosen instrument, Rome is the whore of Babylon depicted in the Apocalypse, and the Reformation is the divinely ordained kairos preparing the world for its eschatological denouement. Only through the recent birth of the ecumenical spirit has the Protestant-Catholic polemic been overcome.

Although Catholics and Protestants offered contradictory interpretations of the events of the sixteenth century, they were agreed in their condemnation of Thomas Müntzer, the Anabaptists, and the so-called Randfiguren of the Reformation. Only recently, with the appearance of Marxist and Mennonite scholarship and the publication of radical Reformation source materials, are the radicals beginning to get a fair hearing.

The current political and social posture of Christianity (what Franklin H. Littell and George H. Williams call "the shifting center of gravity in world Christianity"), together with the theology of revolution, have made many conclusions of Marxist scholarship less objectionable to modern Christian historians. Thomas Müntzer, the sixteenth-century revolutionary, has become the object of great interest for both Christian and Marxist historians, although Marxists do not conceal their delight in calling attention to the fact that Marxist scholars are primarily responsible for Müntzer's resurrection from the grave in which classical Reformation history had interred him. Professor Max Steinmetz (Karl Marx University, Leipzig), the most prolific Müntzer scholar in East Germany, that is, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), wrote in his study, Das Müntzerbild von Luther bis Engels, that Müntzer was almost always depicted as the incarnatus diabolus. Eric Gritsch, an American Lutheran professor of church history, published the only biography of Müntzer in the English language in 1967, and it is now going into a second edition. In 1968 Müntzer's works appeared in a critical edition, and, on the occasion of the four hundred fiftieth anniversary of his execution, the League of Lutheran Churches in the GDR has called for serious study of Müntzer's theology.

Thomas Müntzer appeals to twentieth-century Christianity because of his theology of revolution. He appeals to Marxists because he led the German peasants in their attempt to overthrow the feudal powers of Europe. If the prophet Amos and the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer should become the keepers of the contemporary Christian conscience, then Thomas Müntzer might well become the mediator between the two conflicting ideologies that now claim him, Christianity and Marxism. A challenge from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (one of the theologians selected for publication in the GDR) to the Christian Church suggests the foundation on which a possible agreement between Marxism and Christianity concerning social responsibility might be achieved: "The Church exists for service to mankind. Her ministry is not confined to those areas of life where human abilities fail, in the border situations of life. On the contrary, the Church stands in the middle of the village, surrounded by life. There is something 'Old Testament' about the Church, and the New Testament is too frequently read divorced from the Old Testament context."

The new historiography has contributed much to our understanding of the Reformation, especially of the radicals. Mennonite scholars have long been in the forefront with their study of the Anabaptists. The attention devoted to Thomas Müntzer after centuries of neglect and anathema can only be welcomed as a sign that the old polemic is behind us. The potential that the study of Müntzer has for Christian-Marxist dialogue is arresting. Ever since 1850, when Friedrich Engels published his work on the German Peasants' War, Marxist scholarship

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German Peasants, War and the death of Thomas Müntzer has underscored the importance of Müntzer and pleaded for a more sympathetic evaluation of his revolutionary activity. On the four hundred fiftieth anniversary of the German Peasants' War and the death of Thomas Müntzer Marxist Reformation historiography has reached its acme.

For Engels the German Reformation was the anchor point of German history. Building upon Engels's work, Marxists have challenged and exposed the shortcomings of historiography that is based upon religious ideology. Yet the Marxist interpretation of history is also committed to an ideology. A question to ask is whether the new ideology accurately reflects the spirit of modern man. It would be regrettable if modern historians were to be overtaken by the fate of the demoniac (Luke 11:24-26), having been liberated from the evil spirit (the Catholic-Protestant polemic) only to become the slaves of a more exacting master.

If May, 1975, marked the four hundred fiftieth anniversary of the German Peasants' War, it also marked the thirtieth anniversary of the liberation of Central Europe by the Soviet Army. What these two anniversaries have in common is clearly manifested in the Marxist interpretation of the Protestant Reformation. The historical bow is bent from 1525 to 1917: from the first attempted bourgeois-democratic revolution in European society (the Peasants' War), which became the prototype for all subsequent democratic revolutions, to the Bolshevik Revolution, which was the culmination of all previous democratic revolutions and, at the same time, the most significant revolution in history, because it ushered in the era of democratic socialism and initiated the age of mankind's social and political maturity.

According to Marxist historiography, 1917 marked the great transition in human history. The historic chronology of the future will be based on "Before the Revolution" and "After the Revolution." Neues Deutschland, the official organ of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED), the ruling party in the German Democratic Republic, reminded its readers in April, 1975, that the Bolshevik Revolution signaled the transition from capitalism to socialism. May 8, 1945, was an expression of Red October and the continuing power of the Bolshevik Revolution: "It brought liberation to us and opened the way to socialism for us so that we have been enlisted in the revolutionary world movement under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist Party of the working classes. The victory of the Soviet Union led to a socialist world system. It caused a tremendous increase in the power of Communist and working-class movements. It encouraged the struggle for national independence and led to the collapse of the colonial system."

Between the Peasants' War and the Bolshevik Revolution, between Thomas Müntzer and Lenin, European capitalist society was marked by bourgeois revolutions. As Müntzer became the spokesman for the masses in their revolt against the exploitation of a waning feudal society, so Lenin became their spokesman against the exploitation of the capitalistic society. Müntzer, the sixteenth-century Amos, stood in the shadow of the old (feudal Europe) and on the threshold of the new (bourgeois Europe); he stood in the transition of feudalism to capitalism, and, like all great prophets, he could not comprehend the ultimate consequences of his word. According to Marxist historical interpretation, Müntzer was Lenin's precursor, for, despite the differences in time and revolutionary ideology, they both led the masses against an unjust society. The German Peasants' War found its fulfillment in the Bolshevik Revolution.

However, the year 1917 did not immediately bring the benefits of the Bolshevik Revolution to all of Eastern and Central Europe. It was in May, 1945—420 years after the Peasants' War—that Germany, liberated by the Soviet Army, was finally to realize the society for which Thomas Müntzer had yearned. The rainbow banner (the sign of God's covenant with Noah) was defeated on the hills of Frankenhausen in Thuringia on May 15, 1525. In May, 1945, the red banner of revolution, which had come to Germany via St. Petersburg and Moscow, was hoisted triumphantly over the site of Müntzer's abortive revolt. The seed that had apparently died in 1525 produced a glorious harvest 420 years later. One of the most popular plays in the GDR since 1953 is Thomas Müntzer: Der Mann mit der Regenbogenfahne, by the Marxist dramatist Friedrich Wolf. Wolf places prophetic words into the mouth of Müntzer as the sixteenth-century revolutionary viewed defeat and impending execution:

"Everything has its time; and time only brings forth from her womb that which is ripe. Be consoled and tell my comrades that the grain which fell under the sickle will nevertheless find root and one day bring forth fruit (Author's translation)."

Under the aegis of the Soviet Union a new German state was born. This state was to reflect the will of the masses, and describes itself as a state of workers and farmers—the German Democratic Republic, founded in October, 1949.

At a time when Germany was despised for its atrocities during World War II Soviet historians called attention to the redeeming features in German history, to the great revolutionary tradition mentioned in 1850 by Engels:

The German people are by no means lacking in revolutionary tradition. There were times when Germany produced characters who could match the best men in revolutions of other countries; when the German people manifested an endurance and energy which, in a centralized nation, would have brought
the most magnificent results; when the German peasants and plebeians were pregnant with ideas and plans which often made their descendants shudder.

The late Soviet historian M.M. Smirin, who took up Engels’s research of the German Peasants’ War, laid the foundation of contemporary Marxist scholarship. There is a certain irony in the fact that, when Germany reached its nadir, it was a Soviet historian who recalled this great revolutionary tradition, which found its consummation in the Bolshevik Revolution. For Smirin’s work provided a basis for reconciliation and ultimate cooperation between the two former archenemies. Like Engels, Smirin discovered an admirable revolutionary tradition in Germany’s history and revered the people that had brought forth Thomas Müntzer, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, August Bebel, and Karl Liebknecht. That is the meaning of the words attributed to Stalin: “Hitlers come and go, the German people remain.”

The relationship of the Peasants’ War to the Bolshevik Revolution and the necessary union between workers and farmers are now accepted tenets in Marxist historical scholarship. After the abortive revolutions of 1848 Marx regarded the union of peasants and workers as the necessary prerequisite to successful revolution. He wrote to Engels on April 16, 1856: “The whole thing in Germany will depend on the possibility to back the Proletarian Revolution by some second edition of the Peasants’ War.” By 1905 Lenin had replaced the working class as the spearhead of the revolution with the union of workers and farmers. Stalin also cherished the role of the Russian peasant in making the revolution. Smirin, who published his study at the zenith of Stalin’s prestige, was awarded the Stalin Prize (now called the Lenin Prize) for his contribution to historical scholarship.

Smirin argued that, while the third Rome (Moscow) is the ideological center from which the new gospel is disseminated to convert the world to Marxist socialism, Germany provided the first example of a revolutionary peasantry and for that reason, despite the animosity provoked by the war, is to be revered. Germany is thus both donor and recipient; it provided the pattern for European democratic revolution, and for that the Soviet Union is forever in its debt. But Russia achieved the revolution and, after World War II, bestowed it on Germany. Promise and fulfillment, Frankenthal and St. Petersburg, divided by centuries, are now united in the grand synthesis of Marxism-Leninism. This is the key to understanding the Soviet-GDR relationship.

Near the entrance to the Karl Marx University in Leipzig there is a sculpture depicting a very large head of Marx. In relief are sculptured crowds of workers and farmers. The entire anatomy of the workers and farmers is depicted, but in smaller scale than the head of Marx. At a distance one can see the head of Marx, but the figures of workers and farmers suggest only an indistinguishable mass. As one approaches the sculpture, the head of Marx looms even larger, but the faces of the common people also become distinct. The testimony is clear. In the GDR the Marxist ideology, albeit via Moscow, has triumphed. The common people have become historically recognizable in the ideology of Germany’s greatest son.

Vast sums have been spent in the GDR in celebrating the anniversary of the German Peasants’ War and the death of Thomas Müntzer. The Karl Marx University is a major vehicle in preparing and celebrating that event. At the invitation of the university an international congress of historians was convened in Leipzig in February, 1975, to share the latest research on Müntzer and the Peasants’ War. The sculpture of Marx before the Karl Marx University remarkably resembles Lenin. A GDR colleague is of the opinion that the resemblance is deliberate. In the GDR one speaks not so much of Marxism, but of Marxism-Leninism. As the Bolshevik Revolution is the culmination of Germany’s Peasant War, so Lenin is the ultimate disciple and interpreter of Germany’s greatest son. In a society that so ardently desires to imitate its liberator and in which every public expression is marked by gratitude and reverence for the Soviet Union the resemblance serves to remind the observer that Thomas Müntzer, Karl Marx, Lenin, and the Soviet Union are essential parts of the revolutionary tradition. The First Secretary of the SED, Erich Honecker, declared to the Congress: “It was the state of workers and farmers which resurrected the best traditions and humanistic ideals of the German People, adopted them and brought them to fruition in Socialism. These are the traditions and ideals of the German Peasants’ War, which are associated with the name of Thomas Müntzer.

In preparation for the four hundred fiftieth anniversary in October, 1967, of the posting of Luther’s ninety-five theses the seventh Party Congress of the SED issued the following proclamation:

The roots of our movement reach back to the poverty of medieval towns, to the powerful revolution at the beginning of modern European history, to the great Peasants’ War. We are the heirs of the German proletariat, who for more than a century have been fighting the heroic battle for the freedom of the working class against a common enemy. We are the heirs of all the humanistic traditions of the German people, of classical German literature and art, philosophy and science. We are living at the great transition in world history which began five decades ago with the victorious Red October. Coming generations will envy our generation because we in this time,
in our German Democratic Republic, have brought to a living reality for all the people (out of the realm of dreams) that Germany for which Thomas Münzer yearned and which Marx and Engels foresaw.

As the Reformation of the sixteenth century divided Germany along lines of religious allegiance, so today the nation is divided along lines of political and economic ideologies. West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany, according to the Marxists, does not represent the will of the revolutionary masses, but reflects the conservative attitude of Luther in supporting the status quo and restraining the popular will. The GDR claims the "gospel freedom" preached by Luther was translated by Münzer into political, social, and economic terms. Reformation and revolution, middle class and peasants, although historically interdependent, became rival forces in 1525. The present division of Germany is the reincarnation of that sixteenth-century conflict. The twentieth-century phenomenon of two German states is quite simply understood as "Luther versus Münzer."

The fact that the four hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Peasants' War, the thirtieth anniversary of liberation by the Soviet Army, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic all fall in the same year is not thought to be an accident. These events are regarded as essential elements directing European history on its course toward the Communist society. According to Ernst Thälmann, "Anniversaries are, for Communists and those class-conscious elements of the Proletariat, not merely empty memorials, but rather guiding principles, keys for action."

The preface to the volume prepared the four hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Peasants' War concludes:

The testament of the sixteenth-century revolutionaries was and is fulfilled in the German Democratic Republic. The revolutionary class struggles of the Reformation and the Peasants' War assume an important place in socialist historiography, and these class struggles demonstrate now as ever their significance. With the liberation of the German people from Hitler fascism and the founding of the German Democratic Republic the necessary conditions were created in order to realize the ideals and demands of the fighters for a classless society: a society without exploitation and oppression. The democratic land reform (1946) brought liberty to the farmers, a liberty which was completed by the socialist restructuring of agriculture. The socialist state order of the GDR is comprised of the working people under the leadership of the working class and its party. It has taken centuries of sacrificial struggle before the common people were in a position to shape their own fortune.

In the auditorium in Leipzig the audience faces the emblazoned words of Münzer: Die gewalt wird dem gemeinen Volk gegeben werden" (Power will be given to the common people). The same motto is to be read in the entrance to the City Archive in Mühhausen, the city from which Münzer embarked on revolution. Immediately below Münzer's words are these words from the constitution of the German Democratic Republic, Article II: "All political power in the German Democratic Republic is exercised by the working people."

Gerald Götzting, chairman of the Christian Democratic Union, the second largest party in the National Front, which claims to represent the Christian population of the GDR, said recently: "That for which Thomas Münzer and the peasants fought and sacrificed their lives has been achieved in our state on a higher historical level. Once and for all the ruling-exploiting classes in the city and in the country have been deprived of their property and power. The working class in union with the farmers, with the socialist intelligentsia, and other working groups have irrevocably taken their fate into their own hands. Supported by the achievements of the antifascist, democratic, and socialist transformation, the working people shape the developing socialist society. Thomas Münzer's word has been translated into deed, the power is to be given to the common man."

Luther, it is admitted, must be recognized for his role as herald. He did challenge the theological authority of the Roman Church and in so doing contributed to the destruction of feudalism, since Rome was feudalism's chief bastion. Luther, however, did not pursue his revolutionary course. Once certain goals had been achieved, he changed from revolutionary to reactionary. Just as the bourgeoisie deserted the masses in the revolutions of 1848, thereby insuring the victory of reaction, so Luther and the middle class deserted the peasants in 1525 and thus deprived the common man of the democratic victory he might have had. Münzer is therefore the real hero of the sixteenth-century Reformation (which the Marxist scholars prefer to call the early bourgeois-democratic revolution). Luther the herald must give way to Münzer the hero. The salvos at Frankenstein on May 15, 1525, echo louder through the centuries than the hammer blows at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. The declaration of theological independence proclaimed at Worms on April 18, 1521, "Here I stand," is not as electrifying as the call for political revolution, "Power to the common people."

The Revolution takes precedence over the Reformation. Despite the contrast between Luther and Münzer, it must be said that the current Marxist interpretation of the sixteenth century has contributed to overcoming the juxtaposition between the Reformation and the Peasants' War that is still too often seen in the traditional non-Marxist interpretations.

Despite the contradictions, Luther and Münzer, Reformation and Revolution, are bound by an inner historic logic. No Luther, no Münzer, at least not in 1525. The Reformation produced the historical conditions under which the Peasants' War became inevitable. The Peasants' War in turn served as the impetus for all democratic revolutions throughout European history until 1917. There is a clear progression from Luther to Münzer to Lenin; from the herald to the hero to the perfector; from promise to fulfillment. Or so it was proclaimed in the GDR in the Year of Our Lord, Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Five.