Luther Rebaptized in Marxist Ideology?

Eleutherius (Unavailable)

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol3/iss5/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
LUTHER REBAPTIZED IN MARXIST IDEOLOGY?

by Eleutherius

The author (Protestant) is an American observer of the Church-State relationship in East Germany. Frequent visits to East Germany and long-standing friendships with ecclesiastical, political, and academic leaders in that country have provided this history professor with unique opportunities to study Church-State relationship in the German Democratic Republic.

"Luther was a genius of a very special kind. His impact has already lasted a long time, and his influence on future centuries cannot be estimated." (Goethe)

As one views the remarkable transformation which is now taking place in the East German assessment of the influence of Martin Luther, one can only conclude that the evaluation of Luther and the Reformation written by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in 1828 was indeed prophetic. How else can it be explained that Martin Luther, who for many years in East German Reformation interpretation was considered a traitor of the German people, has now been transformed, to quote Erich Honecker, the General Secretary of the SED ("Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands" or Socialist Unity Party of Germany) and Chairman of the State Council of East Germany, into "... one of the greater sons of the German people"? On the occasion of the convocation of the Luther Committee, which the Party Secretary convoked in East Berlin on 13 June 1980, Honecker announced that he accepted the invitation of his party to personally chair the Luther Committee, which is charged with preparing appropriate celebrations in 1983 to mark the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther.

The Luther Committee consists of leading historians, theologians, political and ecclesiastical figures from throughout the State. In his address to the committee, Honecker laid the ideological foundation upon which East German Reformation historians are to erect a monument to the new Luther. The General Secretary said that East Germany and its
citizens honor Luther. They honor his historical accomplishments which he, by his Reformation, which was at the same time a bourgeois revolution, achieved for social progress and world culture. Honecker continued that the great transformations of our time demand that we enlist our efforts in behalf of those historical forces which best promote progress, reason and humanity; that in the profound transformation of the 16th century, Luther exercised a great impact on historical development; that he was one of the outstanding humanists who strove for greater justice in the world. Honecker further claimed that the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has appropriated this important Reformation heritage. He added that the GDR, a state controlled by the proletariat, fulfills the ideals of the best sons of the German people by implementing policies which are designed to benefit all. Honecker defined the GDR as the first state of workers and farmers on German soil and therefore as the legitimate heir of the revolutionary struggle of the working class and of the democratic forces against capitalism and war—the legitimate heir of the revolutionary activity of the peasants, of the artisans, of the clergy, of the intellectuals and the artists, of the revolutionary bourgeoisie—in short, of all who brought about revolutionary change.

Honecker added that the 16th century had tremendous significance for the German people. It is for that reason that the GDR celebrated in 1967 the 450th anniversary of the posting of Luther's ninety-five theses. In the same year, the GDR celebrated, as well, the 150th anniversary of the Burschenschaften, who in 1817, appealing to the Reformation, called for national unity and democracy in opposition to the reactionary forces of the Congress of Vienna. Celebrations honoring the great Reformation artists Albrecht Dürer, in 1971, and Lucas Cranach, in 1972, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of their births took place throughout the GDR and were accompanied by a flood of articles in journals and newspapers as well as in handsome anniversary volumes dedicated to the two great men.

Honecker reminded his audience that Friedrich Engels had written, in his work about the German Peasants' War, that the 16th century marked the greatest progressive transformation which the human race had
witnessed to that time, a time which needed giants and a time which bred giants. Engels had identified Martin Luther as one of these giants, because his Reformation had an impact far beyond Germany's borders. Honecker agreed with Engels that Luther prepared the way for great transformations which emerged in European society after the demise of feudalism. Honecker pointed out that Luther's work stamped the key ideas on the 16th century in a determinative manner: viewed from the threshold of the 21st century, his influence on the ideology of European civilization is beyond dispute. In the 16th century, according to Honecker, Europe was seeking to liberate itself from feudalism. The decisive impulse for liberation he ascribed to Martin Luther, when he posted his theses on the church door at Wittenberg. Honecker also classified Luther's call for reformation in the church as a call for social reform. At the Wartburg (May 1521—March 1522), where he sought refuge from the imperial ban, Luther accomplished, with the translation of the Bible, what Honecker called one of the greatest cultural achievements of German history. Furthermore, Honecker called attention to Engels' description of Luther's translation of the Bible as a mighty tool in the subsequent popular uprisings, in which the masses seized on Luther's ideas and carried them far beyond his expectations and desires in a broad anti-feudal movement which peaked in the Peasants' War. According to Honecker's reading of Engels' interpretation of Luther, the German Reformation and the German Peasants' War, taken together, represent the first bourgeois revolution in German history.

Honecker pointed out that just as the Reformation received many impulses from foreign quarters it also released a revolutionary energy which promoted an international thrust in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It is true, Honecker admitted, that the revolution failed in its most pronounced expression, the Peasants' War, led by Thomas Müntzer. But the revolution left traces which had a profound effect on subsequent developments. For the first time in German history, Honecker contended, Müntzer had raised the questions for which Marx and Engels later provided the scientific answers. Thus Luther was an initiator of a great revolutionary movement, but unable to understand the forces for social change which he himself had called forth.
The Secretary General observed that after the Peasants' War Luther concentrated on the consolidation of the Reformation, school and university reform, and care for the poor. Luther's social concepts which revealed his deep union with the masses deserve, even today, a positive evaluation, Honecker suggested. Luther branded the "interest takers" as the greatest misfortune for the society. He contended that the intrigues of financial monopolies which connived at the expense of the citizens should be deprived of their wealth and driven out of the state. To improve the lot of the poor, Luther recommended the establishment of urban poor relief, financed by the expropriation of monastic and ecclesiastical wealth, and by contributions of citizens. Luther considered the care of sick, aged and orphans to be a community responsibility. This requirement to care for one's fellow citizen, derived from the concept of neighborly love, is still effective today and is greatly appreciated in East Germany, Honecker added. The General Secretary stated that Luther's concept of creative work and meaningful activity is highly prized in the East German State, which has abolished the exploitation of one person by another. Honecker found that Luther's concept of creative work provides a basic corollary for the cooperation between Christians and Marxists in the building of the socialistic society.

Honecker claimed that German enlightenment and the German classical era seized upon the progressive ideas of Luther. The rising bourgeoisie understood Luther not in a polemical confessional manner, but as the trailblazer for greater rational and spiritual freedom. The Party Chairman then proceeded to describe the high regard which great German humanists had for Luther. For instance, the former superintendent of the Weimer Lutheran district, Herder, included Luther among those who illustrate the human struggle to achieve intellectual and spiritual maturity. Goethe recognized Luther's importance in the struggle for freedom of thought. Schiller pointed to Luther's revolutionary spirit, from which the Reformation originated. According to Honecker, classical German philosophy understood the Reformation as revolution; consequently, under the influence of the French Revolution, democratic revolutionaries in Germany identified themselves with Luther. For them,
Luther was the central personality of the first revolution in German history, and they consciously sought to imitate his revolutionary example.

Honecker referred especially to Heine, who saw in Luther, despite all the tragic contradictions of his unwavering personality, the champion of progressive rational thought and who gave the Germans not only a new faith but, through the power of his language, a new national identity. Heine conceived of the Reformation as a revolution in which Luther was not only the tongue, but also the sword.

The SED chief pointed out that Marx and Engels held the Reformation in high regard. According to Engels, the Reformation was the first in a series of European revolutions in which the first necessary victory of bourgeois society over feudalism was achieved. All subsequent European revolutions were perceived to be based on Luther's Reformation, and Luther's revolutionary act was viewed as the necessary prerequisite for the development of revolutionary activity in Europe. Lenin, following Engels, referred to the Reformation as one of the great revolutions of all times.

Honecker emphasized that, despite the distortion of Luther and the Reformation by reactionary bourgeois historical writing, German Socialists have never permitted their appreciation for Luther to be negated by the throne-and-altar interpretation of Prussian Protestantism. Honecker stated that the common struggle of Communists, Social Democrats and Christians against Nazism helped to increase respect for Luther and the Reformation. The great champions in the Lutheran tradition who resisted National Socialism--men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Schneider, Martin Niemoller, and many others--manifested in their deportment the best principles of the Protestant Reformation, Honecker said.

The respect and honor which the GDR ascribes to Luther, Honecker continued, reflects the cooperation of all East German citizens who, regardless of ideological convictions, join together in building the socialistic society. They do so because the GDR exists to benefit all--Christians as well as non-Christians. Thus Christian citizens believe that they can support a socialistic state which honors the great
traditions of the Reformation, guarantees religious tolerance and seeks by its policies to promote the welfare of its citizens and world peace.

Honecker reminded his audience that the Luther Committee which had been convoked consisted of members of the National Front Parties, of scholars, artists, ecclesiastical leaders, and theologians, all of whom would work together to prepare appropriate celebrations which will mark the 1983 quincentennial anniversary of Luther's birth.

He assured his audience that the Lutherhalle in Wittenberg and all other Reformation sites on GDR soil will be renovated so that they will be ready for their many visitors in 1983.

The General Secretary added that, from this place (East Berlin), and on this day (13 June 1980), all who feel themselves united with Luther are summoned to help prepare a worthy and honorable celebration for 1983. The General Secretary stated that Luther's heritage is in good hands with the East Germans. He expressed the wish that the honor paid to Luther on the 500th anniversary of his birth, an honor which is appropriate in view of the worldwide impact of his work, will contribute to the struggle for universal peace.

This concludes the account of the address presented by Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED and the Chairman of the State Council of the GDR, to the Luther Committee convoked in Berlin, 13 June 1980.

The question which still remains is: How is the transformation of Luther from enemy of the people to one of Germany's greater sons to be explained?

According to East German historians, the history of the GDR can be divided into four stages:

1. The anti-fascist-democratic revolution, 1945-1949, Soviet-occupied zone;
2. Establishment of the foundation of socialism, 1949-1961, GDR;
4. The further development of an advanced socialistic society, 1971-.

In the period from 1945 to 1949, the Communist leadership established its political base in the Soviet-occupied zone, denied the
bourgeoisie political power, and purged the zone of Nazi elements. Pursuing the policy prescribed by the Potsdam Agreement as that agreement was interpreted by the Soviet Union, the Soviet zone was demilitarized, de-Nazified and democratized. In the view of the Soviet leadership, the frequent disappointments suffered by the masses in seeking to establish German democracy had at last been overcome. According to Soviet interpretation, the yearning for such a society manifested in the Peasants' War of 1525, in the Burschenschaften of 1817, in the revolutions of 1848, and in the Spartacus and Communist movements in the Weimar Republic was now about to be satisfied. In order, however, to achieve the German Communist revolution, it was essential to preserve the national unity of the state. It was for this reason that the capitalistic plan for partitioning Germany and thus thwarting the Communist revolution must be negated. The national unity of Germany became a sacred canon in Marxist historiography. Searching for examples which could serve to reinforce the call for national German unity in the postwar years, Marxist historians scrutinized German history.

Friedrich Engels had seen in the Peasants' War the first great attempt to achieve a national German democratic state. Thomas Müntzer, the leader of the peasants, was elevated by Engels to the role of a great national hero. Had Müntzer been successful, Germany would have experienced in the 16th century a national German social democratic state. The failure of the Peasants' War, the execution of Thomas Müntzer, and the long postponement of German national unity, Engels blamed on Martin Luther, who supported the princes against the peasants. In his counter-revolutionary tract, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, Luther provided the theological justification for the suppression of the revolution. He, who by his own example of revolt against Rome (1517-1524) had inspired revolt in the masses, now became reactionary, the enemy of democracy and the boot-licker of the German ruling class (Engels).

For some time after World War II, Soviet historians based their view of the German Reformation on the early works of Marx and Engels. Following Marx, they concluded that the Peasants' War, the first attempt
at German national democracy, failed because of theology. Following Engels, they concluded that the masses had been betrayed by Luther, who deserted them at the moment of crisis. In both cases, Martin Luther was the culprit.

One important example of this is the work of the Soviet historian M. M. Smirin, who published *The Popular Reformation and the Great Peasants' War*. The book was translated into German in East Berlin in 1952. Smirin indicates that the real hero of the Reformation is Thomas Müntzer, for he had sought to invest the people with political power. Engels, Smirin continues, regarded Müntzer as a true democrat insofar as one might speak of democracy in the 16th century. In Müntzer's teachings, according to Engels and Smirin, were a brilliant anticipation of future history, the ideological seedbed for a future class. Smirin points out that Comrade Stalin had demonstrated in *Questions of Leninism* the significance of the Peasants' War for the evolving revolutionary process.

This particular Marxist view of the Reformation, depicting the revolutionary Thomas Müntzer as the leader of the German national popular movement, corresponded much better to the post-war Soviet policy for Germany (that is, a united German state under Communist leadership in close alliance with the Soviet Union) than did the traditional interpretations of the Reformation which had contributed to the religious and political fragmentation of Germany. The latter were still too theologically oriented and had failed to comprehend that the Reformation and the Peasants' War, taken together, constituted an early middle-class revolution ("frühbürgerliche Revolution"). According to Marxist historiography, the Reformation was the first great revolutionary act in European history and therefore the event which provided the stimulus for all subsequent European revolutions. The Peasants' War of 1525 and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 are thus inseparably united in the world revolutionary process which, according to Marx and Engels, is evolving toward its ultimate rational expression--world socialism.

According to this view, Müntzer rather than Luther was the German national democratic hero of the 16th century. Müntzer's popular movement would have united Germany. Luther's reactionary course served the
interest of the princes and the bourgeoisie and contributed to the political fragmentation of Germany. Each edition of the Soviet Encyclopedia depicted Luther as the traitor of the masses in his accommodation to the princes. He was accused of permitting himself and his Reformation to become the tools of royal absolutism. Just as Luther, by failing to place himself at the head of the German masses in 1525, had destroyed the hope of German national unity in the 16th century, so the bourgeoisie, by deserting the proletariat in the revolution of 1848, had promoted the continued political fragmentation of Germany. The national German state, the Second Reich, which was finally born of iron and blood in 1871, was a bourgeois, imperialistic state. Hitler's Third Reich was merely a continuation of the Second Reich. In 1945 for the first time in German history the establishment of a truly popular social democracy appeared imminent. With the aid of the Soviet Union, the first state in world history to translate Marxist ideology into political power, Germany would make a complete break with her reactionary and bourgeois past and establish a workers' and farmers' state which would serve as a model for the European proletariat in its struggle for the socialization of European society. German national unity was absolutely essential to achieve this goal. Therefore, any attempt at dividing Germany was to be vigorously resisted.

In the Soviet Zone, April 21-22, 1946, the KPD ("Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands" or Communist Party of Germany), under Wilhelm Pieck, and the SPD ("Sozialistische Partei Deutschlands" or Socialist Party of Germany), under Otto Grotewohl, united to form the SED. In the Marxist view, this union was an important step toward the ultimate democratization of all of Germany. However, according to GDR historians, the democratization of Germany was possible only in the Soviet Zone. Soon after the war, the capitalist nations--the United States, Great Britain and France--recognized that it was not in the interest of their bourgeois-dominated societies to permit the democratization of their respective zones. In order to give the capitalist forces time to regroup, the western allies postponed the establishment of democratic parties in their respective zones. The Soviet zone, on the other hand, had allowed the formation of democratic parties already on 10 June 1945.
The object of capitalist policy, based on an anti-Soviet and anti-Communist foundation, was to halt the world revolutionary process, to consolidate the rule of the bourgeoisie, and to restore capitalism in the people's democracies of central and eastern Europe. Once again, like their counterparts of the 16th century and of the 19th century, the bourgeoisie was prepared to betray the masses and to frustrate the call for democracy. The battle lines between socialism and capitalism, between democracy and bourgeois class-domination, were drawn in Germany. The "contagion" of democracy was to be confined to the Soviet zone. In erecting a bourgeois reactionary cordon sanitaire around the Soviet zone, the western capitalistic states set course on the division of Germany. The SED, however, continued to pursue a course for German national unity under a socialist government. As early as 1946, Walter Ulbricht called for a united German state. He asserted: "Without the unity of Germany, our people cannot exist. Saxony cannot exist without the Ruhr and Bavaria cannot exist without Saxony." (Der Spiegel, 10 May 1971, p. 38). Thus in 1948 a delegation of SED officials visited Moscow, where the international struggle between socialism and imperialism and the struggle for a united and democratic Germany were discussed. Other socialist states--Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary--called for a united, democratic Germany. Posters throughout the Soviet zone advertised public rallies convoked from 23 May to 13 June 1948 to demonstrate for the unity of Germany and a just peace. Slogans throughout the Soviet zone announced, "Friendship with the Soviet Union secures peace and promotes the unity of our country."

In the view of Marxist historians, western, capitalist, imperialist states, led by the United States, were fearful of the rising tide of social revolutions. The Truman Doctrine of 1947 was seen as an indication of the lengths to which the imperialist powers were prepared to go in order to thwart popular uprisings in Greece and Turkey. The Marshall Plan also was interpreted as a design to bolster the bourgeois class in western Europe and to restrain popular democracy by massive financial aid to the capitalists, the chief opponents of German Social Democracy.
German Re-unification and the Marxist Interpretation of the Reformation

From 1945 to 1961, the East German and Soviet governments continued to call for the re-unification of Germany. Even after the establishment of the two German states in 1949, the call for the re-unification of Germany was clearly heard from the capitals of the East-bloc states. By frequently reviving the hope for the re-unification of Germany, the Soviet bloc hoped to appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of the German people (especially those residing in West Germany) and thereby promote resistance to the integration of West Germany into a western alliance, it being clearly understood that such an integration would preclude any hope for the re-unification of Germany. As long as the Soviet Union pursued an announced policy of German national unity, Soviet and East German Marxist historiography glorified Thomas Münster and the Peasants' War at the expense of Luther and the Reformation. Thomas Münster and the Peasants' War became symbols of national unification in a democratic, socialist state. Luther and the Reformation became symbols of reactionary, capitalist powers which fragmented Germany and prevented social democracy. What Josef Foschepoth calls the national-materialistic view of the Reformation prevailed in East German Marxist historiography until 1961. This view, in harmony with the SED political goals from 1949 to 1961, emphasized Engels' thesis of 1850, namely, that the bourgeoisie had betrayed the German people, both in 1525 and in 1848. Just as the bourgeoisie had prevented German unity in the 16th century by forming an alliance with the princes against the nationalistic aspirations of Thomas Münster and the peasants, and just as the German bourgeoisie had betrayed the revolution of 1848, preventing Einheit (unity) and Freiheit (freedom), so the bourgeois state of West Germany has betrayed the German people by entering into economic, political and military alliance with reactionary, capitalist and imperialist nations. According to the national-materialist view the goal of German unity thus once again has been frustrated by the bourgeoisie.

As long as the political goals of the SED remained a nationally
united Germany in opposition to the establishment of the "American vassal state" of the Federal Republic, East German Marxist historical interpretation reflected these goals. As long as East Germany continued to call for German unification, free from the interference of the Anglo-American domination, the national-materialistic interpretation of the Reformation prevailed. During the period 1945 to 1961, the Reformation or Early Middle Class Revolution, as the Marxists prefer to call the Reformation, was interpreted as a great revolution which had the potential of realizing, in the 16th century, political and social objectives which would have immediately spelled the end of feudalism. Unfortunately, the bourgeoisie, the vehicle for revolution in the 16th century, failed to recognize its historical mission and even allied itself with the enemies of the revolution. In the national-materialistic view (1945-1961), the Peasants' War is regarded as the most radical and democratic expression of the Reformation. Münter, the masses and the revolution were defeated by Luther, the bourgeoisie and the Reformation. The revolution failed because of theology. After the Diet at Worms, Luther, the revolutionary from 1517 to 1521, became a reactionary and placed himself at the disposal of the princes. The German national Reformation became a Fürstenreformation (Princes' Reformation), a reformation directed by the German princes for their own political benefit. Münter, the proto-communist leader of the masses, who called for a national-democratic Germany, was defeated, but his ideas were to find fruition four centuries later in the German Democratic Republic. It was during the period of the national-materialistic interpretation that the GDR playwright, Friedrich Wolf, presented his play on the life of Thomas Münter.

Everything has its season
Only that which is properly ripened
Is healthfully born out of the womb of time.
Be comforted, the grain which fell under the sickle's blows
Will yet find root and miraculously multiply. [Author's trans.]

Since the GDR regarded itself as the historic fulfillment of democratic and nationalistic hopes born in the Peasants' War, it is not surprising that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the GDR were regarded respectively as the 20th-century political expressions of the
contrary forces of reaction and revolution, of Luther versus Münster.

The failure to achieve the re-unification of Germany; the development of two German states, one integrated into the capitalist western community and the other into the socialist East-bloc; the constant threat to the stability of the GDR posed by the Hallstein Doctrine and mass emigration; and the completion of the transition from capitalism to socialism in the GDR—all these factors led the SED to adopt a policy which would secure the goals thus far achieved and introduce a new phase into the life of the new nation.

The first two stages of East German history, the anti-fascist-democratic revolution, 1945-1949, and the establishment of the foundation of socialism, 1949-1961, had been completed. The new goal for the nation corresponded to the new stage in its historical development: progress towards an advanced socialist society, 1961-1970.

The word 'Weidervereinigung' (Re-unification), which at one time had appeared on almost every page of every German newspaper, gradually disappeared and is seen only rarely today in the German press. On 13 August 1961, the GDR sealed its borders with the FRG and erected the Berlin Wall. The political realities of Europe and the world dictated a new political posture for the GDR. The growing international competition between capitalism and communism, West Germany's firm commitment to the western alliance, the death of Stalin and the subsequent de-Stalinization together with Moscow's growing concern with nationalistic and patriotic fervor in the East-bloc states, particularly as it was manifested in major GDR cities in 1953, in Poland in 1956, and in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, persuaded Moscow and East Berlin that the policy concerning the mission of the GDR had to be revised. Beginning in 1961, and corresponding to the new phase, the emphasis was placed upon the integration of the GDR into the international socialist community and the promotion of the scientific-technical revolution. Socialist patriotism and proletarian internationalism replaced the call for national German unity. After the sealing of the borders between the FRG and the GDR, Ulbricht remarked that the GDR could now concentrate on the domestic tasks, on the development of a socialist democracy. The German question was no longer a national one, but a social one. From the point
of view of the SED, two distinct German states now existed. The class struggle would continue and intensify in the FRG until that German state—at the command of the masses and as a result of their victory over their exploiters—erected a socialist democracy patterned after the social and political structure already achieved in the GDR. Then only would re-unification become a possibility.

Meanwhile, in keeping with its new security and international posture, the GDR had revised its interpretation of the Reformation. International proletarianism, what Josef Foschepoth calls the world-historic-dialectical view, replaced the national-materialistic one. According to this new interpretation, the primary task of the "frühbürgerliche" Revolution (Reformation and Peasants' War) was to accomplish an ideological revolution in the 16th century, not national union, material gain or political, social and economic revolution. The world-historic-dialectical interpretation recognized that the transition from feudalism to capitalism had to take place in gradual steps over a three-hundred-year period. The political revolution in 17th-century England (Bourgeois Revolution II) and the social revolution in 18th-century France (Bourgeois Revolution III) were only possible because the Reformation had provided a new bourgeois ideology which marked the first stage in the victory over feudalism. Thus GDR Reformation historiography, in correspondence with the revised SED policy concerning the mission of the state, began to interpret the "frühbürgerliche" Revolution in the broader category, already suggested by Engels, i.e., as Bourgeois Revolution Number I.

It was no longer a question of Luther, the bourgeoisie and the Reformation versus Münster, the masses and the Revolution. Luther was no longer portrayed as the betrayer of the peasants, nor Münster as the proto-communist leader of the masses. Or as one GDR Lutheran theologian humorously remarked to this writer, "The GDR Marxist Reformation historiography no longer insists that Luther lived in the age of Thomas Münster." According to the world-historic-dialectical view, the Reformation and the Peasants' War had the same objective, i.e., the liberation of bourgeois ideology from feudal strictures, thereby establishing the ideological pre-conditions upon which the subsequent economic, political
and social revolutions would be founded. Professor Max Steinmetz of the Karl Marx University spoke of a new theology as the necessary pre-condition for the birth of a new ideology in the 16th century. Thus the revolution did not fail because of theology, but, on the contrary, theology provided the channel for bourgeois revolutionary ideology. The world-historic-dialectical interpretation of the Reformation corresponded with the political posture of the GDR. This interpretation satisfied Engels' hypothesis concerning the Reformation as Bourgeois Revolution I and it can be harmonized with Marx's statement concerning Germany's revolutionary past: "Germany's revolutionary past is theoretical; it is the Reformation. As at that time it was the monk, so it is now the philosopher in whose brain the revolution is born." Thus the other statement by Marx that the 16th-century revolution failed because of theology must now be read in a broader dialectical context. The Peasants' War, the revolutionary expression of the new ideology, failed without failing and it succeeded without succeeding.

After it became apparent that German unification could not be achieved in the face of the cold war and the international competition between capitalism and communism, the need for the GDR to discover models for German unity in German history, in order to appeal to nationalist sentiments, disappeared. The consolidation of the socialist society within a separate German state and the integration of that state into the world socialist community transformed the appeal to the nationalist-patriotic sentiments into one for patriotic socialism, and the call for "all Germans at one table" to solve the problem of Germany's division was transformed into a call for the GDR to render primary loyalty to the international proletariat. Thus the transition from a national-materialistic to a world-historic-dialectical view of the Reformation was completed.

In the GDR Marxist view, abandoning one interpretation for another did not entail contradiction. On the contrary, each interpretation is valid for the specific period in which it pertains. Whatever contributes to the ultimate victory of the proletariat, the final subject of history, even though it enjoys only a temporary validity and must be abandoned in respect for historic development, has validity for the
period to which it is applicable. From the Marxist point of view, the concept of Parteilichkeit (Proletarian Partisanship), which Marxist scholars claim as their sovereign key to the seven-sealed book of history, does not preclude objectivity, but rather elevates objectivity to a higher plane. Since the ontological structure of the historical process is rational, the course of history must be comprehensible and, since it is the working class which finally creates the society for which history is striving, the only "true" interpretation of history must be one which is ideologically wed to that class—to the proletariat, which is the subject of history and the instrument by which the goal of history is achieved. History, therefore, proceeds by certain demonstrable laws which are in alliance with the working class, and Parteilichkeit becomes the essential posture for the historical observer. From this perspective, the transition from the national-materialistic to the world-historic-dialectical interpretation of the Reformation is simply an accommodation to the new historical thesis which history reveals in the rational progression towards communism.

GDR Marxist historiography also admits that a certain period was necessary for it to achieve maturity. After 1945, all German history had to be re-interpreted from a Marxist point of view. It is too much to expect that a complete revision of German history within such a short time could produce a mature, balanced historiography. GDR historiography in 1945 was called upon immediately to provide historical justification and illustration for German national unity. German national unity in turn was to facilitate Stalin's efforts to communize all of Germany. The national-materialistic interpretation of the Reformation was formulated in accordance with the practical political goals of the Soviet-occupied zone (1945-1949) and the fledgling German socialist state (1949-1961). The changed political conditions after 1961 and the better balanced, less polemical and more scholarly GDR Reformation historiography prepared the way for the current world-historic-dialectical interpretation, which allows the GDR to revise drastically its evaluation of Luther and the Reformation.

Consequently, the new interpretation enables the GDR to reconcile the majority of its Lutheran citizens to the state's demand for
responsible citizenship. It enables the first Marxist-socialist state in German history to lay claim to the entire humanistic and progressive tradition in Germany's past, a tradition which under the national-materialistic interpretation was often regarded as bourgeois and reactionary and was, therefore, rejected. Recognizing that the separate, smaller and economically weaker German-Marxist-socialist state must have historical roots in order to lend it stability, all of Germany's history is examined in order to discover those heroes and movements which can be integrated into the new GDR historiography and which contribute to the historical foundation on which the young state can be anchored. Thus Erich Honecker, who once viewed Luther as a "lackey" and "traitor to the peasantry" can now serve as the honorary chairman of the GDR Luther Committee, charged with preparing for the 500th anniversary of the Reformer's birth.

Not only does the new view of Luther and the Reformation enable the GDR to seek rapprochement with its own citizens; it also enables the state to enlist the services of the Christian Church in the building of the socialist society. The new interpretation improves the standing of the GDR in the eyes of the ecumenical movement. In response, the Lutheran World Council has convoked meetings in the GDR in recent years. In August 1981, a session of the World Council of Churches was convened in Dresden. On August 19th, during the Dresden convocation, Dr. Philip A. Potter, Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, received an honorary doctorate from the theological faculty of the Humboldt University on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. The 6th International Congress for Luther Research will convene in Erfurt in August 1983.

The benefits associated with the new view of Luther are obvious. The tremendous attraction that the GDR will have for Protestants in general and Lutherans in particular in the year 1983, the quincentennial of Luther's birth, is not difficult to perceive. Almost all the sites associated with Luther's life and the German Reformation are situated on the territory of the GDR. It would have been difficult to exploit this most advantageous situation under the old national-materialistic interpretation, which saw Luther as the enemy of the people and a tool
last decade more than forty thousand students from the Third World nations have received professional training in factories, institutes, schools and universities in the GDR.

Seeking recognition of her international role, the GDR cultivates relations with Marxist as well as with capitalist states. Since 1980, Erich Honecker has paid official state visits to Austria, Japan, Mexico, Cuba and certain Arab states. Other GDR officials are constantly on the international circuit. Hardly a week passes that some foreign dignitary does not visit East Berlin. The 1972 treaty between the FRG and the GDR in which West Germany extended recognition to the GDR, the acceptance of GDR ambassadors in most of the capitals of the world and her admission to the United Nations places her firmly in the international arena and gives credence to her argument that two separate and distinct German states now exist. The GDR political leadership readily perceived that the world-historic-dialectical interpretation of German history is more consonant with the GDR's international responsibility and the development of a separate, sovereign, socialist German state.

Recognizing that an improved relationship between Church and State would be a great asset, Erich Honecker, in March 1978, met with Lutheran leaders in order to establish guidelines for increased cooperation between the two bodies. Membership in the World Council of Churches and participation in ecumenical programs by the Lutheran Church in the GDR is encouraged by the political leadership. International theological and religious conferences are scheduled with increasing frequency in the GDR. Even Billy Graham, who not long ago would have been persona non grata in the GDR, conducted a preaching tour in major East German cities in October 1982. Cognizant of the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Solidarity Movement in Poland, the SED has been careful to keep the Lutheran Church in the GDR on a flexible but short leash. The Church's opposition, for example, to instruction in the use of weapons, now part of the East German school curriculum, was ignored by the state. The peace movement, "From Swords to Plowshares," supported by many Christians in the GDR, is held suspect by the political authorities because it calls for bilateral disarmament and is not the state-sponsored peace movement. It is not unusual for young people wearing the
"From Swords to Plowshares" emblem to be detained and interrogated by the police.

Martin Luther, according to GDR propaganda, would be opposed to the arms race and certainly to the installation of Pershing and cruise missiles on German soil. The GDR seeks to link the quincentennial of Luther's birth with a call for disarmament and a plea for détente and coexistence. The spirit of the great Reformer is invoked and he is identified with GDR policy. The FRG, on the other hand, is identified with an aggressive arms policy which Luther would have spurned. The sharp contrast between Hitler and Luther is noted in GDR propaganda. Nineteen hundred and eighty three is not only the 500th anniversary of the birth of Luther; it is also the 50th anniversary of Hitler's assumption of power. In the home of the Reformation, peaceful coexistence, détente and disarmament are pursued by one German state, the GDR, while the FRG, with its policies of imperialism and militarism, is allegedly pursuing the policy adopted by Adolf Hitler.

The GDR is investing millions of marks to renovate the Reformation sites. The inscription, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," on the steeple of the Castle Church in Wittenberg is being restored and will be legible once again. In Erfurt, the incised letters of the Luther statue are re-gilded. The statue of Luther, with an open Bible, which commands the city square, proclaims in bold, gold-leafed letters: "I will not die, but live and proclaim the work of the Lord." An avalanche of publications on Luther and the Reformation flood the nation. Two biographies of Luther by GDR authors have already appeared and more are in preparation. A new Luther film is being prepared; recordings of the better-known Reformation hymns are beginning to appear; calendars with the famous Reformation scenes, with key dates in the life of Luther and events in the course of the Reformation especially noted, are being distributed by the thousands. The GDR travel agency has organized various package tours to the Reformation sites. In East Berlin, the Museum for German History offers a special Reformation exhibit. In all the major cities of the GDR, concerts, stage productions and special lecture series in honor of Luther and the Reformation are now taking place. Despite the earlier Marxist denigration of Luther, five hundred
years after the great Reformer's birth his name is invoked and his benediction is sought to lend legitimacy to the first Marxist-Socialist state in German history. In the euphoria and enthusiasm of the new appreciation for Luther, it should not be forgotten that another German state also claimed the great Reformer as its forebear and saw itself as the heir of the Reformation. On the 450th anniversary of Luther's birth, in 1933, it was said: "It is our duty to consummate the German Reformation in the Third Reich. Adolf Hitler is the heir of Martin Luther and it is the Führer's mission to bring the German Reformation to its ultimate fruition in the German National Socialist Revolution."

The past often has been the servant of the present, as the historical writings in many nations testify. Or, as Goethe puts it, the past is a mirror in which each age finds its own reflection. The rivalry between the two German states, each considering itself the legitimate heir to German culture, the necessity for each German state (born only in 1949) to develop a sense of national identity, and the remarkable re-baptism which Luther recently has undergone in East German historiography has verified once again Engels' observation: "The German Reformation is the pivot point of German history."

While most non-Marxist historians will not be able to subscribe to all the conclusions concerning Luther and the Reformation now being reached in Marxist Reformation scholarship, the new Marxist appreciation for Luther and the Reformation has tremendous significance for the Christian-Marxist dialogue and for the role which Marxists now appear willing to assign to religion in the transformation of society. The new Marxist appreciation of theology as an ideological instrument for social revolution restores Luther to his historical pedestal and enables the GDR to free herself from the narrow nationalistic-interpretation of her mission to reconcile herself with Germany's past, to promote a partnership with the Lutheran Church in the building of the socialist society within the GDR, and to enlist radical religious forces for the cause of the international proletariat.

In 1983, the quincentennial of Martin Luther's birth and the centennial of Karl Marx's death, these two great sons of Germany, long alienated, finally are reconciled in the GDR's grand synthesis of
NOTES

1 In the amazingly short period of ten weeks, Luther translated the New Testament at the Wartburg, but the complete Lutheran Bible, Old and New Testaments, did not appear until 1534, when it was printed in Wittenberg.