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THOMAS MÜNTZER:
THEOLOGIAN, REFORMER, AND EAST GERMAN FOREFATHER
by Romwald Maczka

Dr. Romwald Maczka (Lutheran) studied at Wheaton College (B.A. and M.A.) and received a Ph.D. degree at Leipzig University in Historical Studies in 1987. He lived in East Germany for three and half years. He had served several years as the director of the Institute of Slavic Studies in Wheaton, Il. and published several articles on East German topics for four years he was a religious worker. For the Menonite Central Committee.

Faced with the challenging task of portraying the tradition which gave rise to their country on just five bills of currency, East German officials decided to include one clearly religious figure from the past. Predictably, the two largest denomination bills, 100 marks and 50 marks, received the portraits of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The twenty and ten mark bills depict Johann Goethe, the progressive literary genius of 18th century Weimar and Clara Zetkin of Saxony, charismatic leader of the German women's labor movement in the early 1900's. But surprisingly, the five mark bill of the GDR bears the image of Thomas Müntzer, the 16th century radical preacher and social revolutionary from Thuringia.

The apparent incongruity of claiming a devout churchman and theologian among the early forbears of the modern Marxist East German state has occasioned a good deal of debate over the last forty years. This discussion has progressed through three discernible phases building upon a foundation inherited from Friedrich Engels which left no doubt as to the importance of the radical preacher in the Marxist understanding of German history. The differing phases of the discussion have been the product of shifting internal and external politics, the consensus reached by Marxist scholars concerning the function of the Reformation in European history, and improved biographical knowledge about Müntzer himself. But it has also been influenced by the interaction of Christian theologians and non-Christian Marxists. Indeed, Thomas Müntzer scholarship has become a forum of serious dialogue in East Germany. It has challenged non-Christian Marxists to authentically grasp the Christian message and non-Marxist Christians to authentically grasp the Marxist message. It has also challenged Christian Marxists to compare their own integration of the two convictions with that of Thomas Müntzer.

The following study explores who Thomas Müntzer was, how the discussion has progressed and where the discussion seems to be going.
Thomas Müntzer

Thomas Müntzer was born around 1489 in the picturesque Harz mountain village of Stolberg near the western boundary of present day GDR. He was educated in theology at the Universities of Leipzig (now, Karl-Marx-Universität) at Frankfurt (O), and served variously as teacher and confessor in monasteries until 1529, when he was invited on Martin Luther's recommendation to substitute for a preacher of the budding Lutheran reformation near Berlin who had been temporarily forbidden to speak from the pulpit as a result of friction with the local chapter of the Franciscan order. The following year, Luther recommended him to a second temporary post, this time in Zwickau, a rapidly developing textile manufacturing center near the southern boundary of today's GDR. There he sharply criticized the Roman Catholic church, stirring up enough civil commotion to result in his expulsion from the city.

Müntzer then traveled to Prague, perhaps in search of a Hussite remnant, and there he posted a "Manifest" throughout the city calling for the God-fearing elect to join him in preparing for the immanent apocalypse. His prophetic call went unheeded by the elect, but city officials took notice and expelled him, apparently because it threatened to fan the embers of Hussite unrest and so disturb the fragile peace of Prague. Müntzer wandered one and half years in Saxony until he was called to pastor a village church in Allstedt. This was his most prolific period and in just eighteen months he produced a German language mass, numerous theological tractates, married a former nun and fathered a son. He continued to preach against the Catholic church and began preaching against the Catholic church and began preaching against Luther's reformed church accusing both of smothering the Holy Spirit, through each in its own way. Finally he organized the secret "League of God" and appears to have incited his followers to burn a small Catholic shrine nearby. This brought sharp censure from secular authorities, but Müntzer rebelled against the censure and formulated the prophetic declaration that the elect were about to purge the church of the godless. Secular authorities who resisted the purging could expect God's judgement by the sword wielded by the elect.

Sensing acute danger the preacher-rebel fled Allstedt and had his ideas secretly published elsewhere. The peasant rebellion in Thuringia continued to spread and intensify, and Müntzer proceeded to Mühlhausen (today, Thomas-Müntzer-Stadt-Mühlhausen) where he became involved in replacing the entire city council with a revolutionary group favoring redistribution of the city's wealth among the poor. But the new council was short lived because the armies of the princes were converging on the area. Müntzer led a handful of ill armed peasant farmers into battle against three trained armies resulting in a bloody rout from which he himself fled. Later that day he was
discovered in hiding and taken into custody. After the rebellion was fully crushed, Müntzer was tortured and executed along with other agitators.

**Müntzer and the GDR.**

What does this peculiar and tragic figure have to do with East Germany? The answer to this question can be traced back to an essay published in 1840 by Friedrich Engels entitled *The German Peasant War*. At that time, Engels suggested that the Great Reformation was not really a fundamentally religious movement at all, but rather it was one of two components which made up the Early Bourgeois Revolution, the first step of the extraordinarily important process of capitalism supplanting feudalism in Europe. The other component of the Early Bourgeois Revolution was the peasant rebellion against harsh feudal exploitation, a rebellion which rocked the German territories for fifty years. The two events are interdependent, and they are reflective of the basic transition of the European social order from feudalism to capitalism. Thomas Müntzer was a reformation preacher and theologian who not only favored church reform but was an active and consequential participant in the attempt of the peasants to throw off the yoke of feudalism by force of arms. From this viewpoint Müntzer is the hero of the Early Bourgeois Revolution. He becomes the first truly revolutionary figure of Germany's past, representing the strand of German tradition which East German historians understand as culminating in the founding of their state, the first German state in which Müntzer's radical vision of communal ownership of the means of production has found its fulfillment. And so Thomas Müntzer appears on the five mark bill as one of the most significant forerunners of the modern socialist German Democratic Republic.

But that brings about the curious situation in which the GDR, whose official and most widely accepted ideology is that of atheistic Marxism, claims a confessing Christian, professional clergyman, and active theologian as ideological forbear.

**1948-1960**

Throughout the late 1940's and the 1950's, East German Marxists leaned upon Engels' assertion that Müntzer couched his message in religious terms to convince and motivate the unschooled common people for whom such arguments were forceful, but personally remained a functional atheist. Of course during these years East Germany was far more concerned with reconstruction and with the denazification of the education system than with encouraging original Reformation scholarship and as a result, first priority was given to preprinting existing works consistent with the Marxist tradition. This included Engels' 1850 essay and its principle source,
liberal democrat Wilhelm Zimmermann's *The Great German Pleasant War*; and old textbook by journalist Franz Mehring used in educating party functionaries of the Communist Party of Germany before WWI; and a modern scholarly work by the Soviet historian M. M. Smirin. Of these four authors, only Smirin took Müntzer's theology seriously, tracing its roots back to Italian mystic Joachim of Fiori. But Smirin consistently viewed theology as essentially a distorted reflection of sociological phenomena.

Marxist Müntzer literature written by East Germans in the forties and fifties was limited to two historical novels, a study tracing the rise of Fascism back to Martin Luther, two source studies and preforatory remarks to Müntzer source editions. All of these works have in common a heavy emphasis upon progressive/reactionary dichotomy in which Müntzer is seen as having played a facilitating role in historical dialectic, the irresistible development of human society from primitive tribal organization through slave-holding society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism and on toward communism. He gave all he had, even his life, to defeat feudalism, and if it was communism after which he strove rather than the objectively necessary next step of capitalism, it was only through ignorance of the historical dialectic. Luther, on the other hand, was the arch-reactionary who obstructed and confounded the development of society by delaying the transition from feudalism to capitalism through providing the feudal lords with just the sort of new church which could be used to strengthen their strangle hold on the German peasant. The emphasis of this interpretation model allowed the Marxist writers of the 50's to generally ignore the theological side of Müntzer, since it was not his thought which was decisive in judging him to be progressive but his social reform activities. He was considered a revolutionary hero of highest rank and became the subject of an epic poem, a three act play and a full-length feature film.

While reliance upon the progressive-reactionary dichotomy allowed Müntzer's theology to be overlooked, it did not necessitate it. Three scholars published serious studies searching Müntzer's theology for elements which in his social milieu gave rise to radical revolutionary action. Using this approach, historian Carl Hinrichs (who left the GDR for West Berlin in 1952) highlighted Müntzer's notion that secular authorities are commissioned by God to protect the righteous and punish the wicked and that the legitimacy of their commission rests upon the effectiveness with which they continue to carry out this function. Thus the forcible overthrow of secular rulers might be entirely just under certain circumstances; the circumstances, for example, in which Müntzer felt he found himself. Theologian Franz Lau explored Müntzer's personal sense of calling as a latter-day prophet living in the apocalypse as another explanation of his radical activities. Lau through this also explained Luther's sharp condemnation of both Müntzer and his
cause. Finally, theology professor Gerhard Fuchs who is known for his position that the church's failure to resist fascism constitutes a call upon Christians to cooperate with Marxist leadership in building a new society in East Germany, wrote that Münzer's remarkably strong following is to be explained through the fact that his theological premises addressed precisely those issues which happened to be common to all members of the largest single socio-economic class of his day, the peasant.

1960-1975

In the sixties a new generation of Marxist historians became active, and the theologians in the GDR fell silent. The major thrust of the new scholars was an organized effort to more fully work out Engel's idea of the Early Bourgeois Revolution, including a more concrete periodization, a more precise description of its course, improved documentation of socio-economic factors and a more clear integration of it in the larger context of German and European history. As far as Münzer scholarship is concerned, these goals came to be expressed in increased emphasis on biographical research through many smaller studies as well as through a few larger works.

Historian Manfred Bensing submitted a dissertation in 1962 detailing the Thuringian rebellion of the peasant war and Münzer's involvement in it. The work was later published as a book, and he also wrote a short Münzer biography which emphasized Münzer's independence from Luther and the breadth of revolutionary forces united through the preacher's organizational efforts. At the same time Professor Max Steinmetz wrote a monograph on Germany from 1476-1648 in which he cited not just the revolutionary organization of Münzer's as a great progressive contribution, but also his ideology which unified peasants, artisans, wage earners and miners and which helped mitigate the effectiveness of Luther's reactionary ideology. The same material was later incorporated in a three volume general German history textbook.

Steinmetz also updated and extended his earlier Habilitationsschrift to produce a historiography describing how Münzer was portrayed in historical writings dating from Luther through Engels. This was an attempt to free the Münzer story of alleged distortions generated by the polemics of four centuries of class conflict.

One study of Münzer's theology was published in the sixties, though not by a theologian, but by medievalist Ernst Werner who wanted to show that Münzer's theology emerged neither from Biblical studies nor from a particular understanding of Christian tradition, but from the social conditions of overripe feudalism. He examined five chronologically consecutive forms of Messianism and reinterpreted their Messianic theology in social terms corresponding to the current
state of development of feudalism. Müntzer's was the final and most modified form: he believed the world order would be soon fundamentally transformed not by a personal divine Messiah but by the hand of the oppressed peasantry who were to step into the role of the Messiah. This peculiar treatment of Müntzer has found little resonance elsewhere.

From 1975

East Germany officially commemorated the Peasant Rebellion in 1975, the 500th anniversary of the defeat of the Thuringian peasants under Müntzer's leadership. With the much improved biographical basis and the more firmly established Early Bourgeois Revolution model, the commemoration encouraged an abundance of studies of Müntzer's theology from many different disciplines. Within the context of relaxing church-state relations, the theologians rejoined the discussion in large numbers. Some of the more than twenty studies of Müntzer theology published in the GDR from 1974-1977 probed at the sources of the content and structure of his though. For instance Steinmetz analyzed Müntzer's treatment of Scripture and concluded that it was conditioned by a preoccupation with apocalypsis, while theologian R. Mau tried to show that Müntzer was less interested in what Scripture could reveal than in what it could effect. History professor S. Hoyer searched for tangible evidence of Hussite influence on Müntzer, finding only a single Hussite tract known to have been in the possession of an acquaintance of his. Theology professor and Luther scholar Helmar Junghans examined the cleft between the two reformers, concluding that it was rooted in the philosophic incompatibility of Müntzer's Neoplatonic realism and Luther's Aristotelian nominalism.

Other less scholarly papers examined the significance of Müntzer and his ideology in illuminating the social responsibility of Christians in the socialist society of the GDR. for instance Christian Democratic Union (CDU) chairman and president of the People's Chamber, Gerald Götting declared that the demands for which Müntzer struggled and died, the liberation of the farmer from the exploiter, have been met in the GDR. In the same collection of essays published by the CDU, former theology student Willibald Jakob saw in Müntzer a challenge and an example of how Christians could and should work side by side with Socialist Unity Party of the GDR. Still other studies examined more esoteric aspect of Müntzer's through including how he perceived the Reformation, the flow of history, his own prophetic call and the power of the written word. But taken together, well over half the studies published at that time dealt with the connection between his theology and his revolutionary activity.
Numerous possible links between Müntzer's theology and his revolutionary ideology and activity were proposed. One possibility was suggested by a doctoral candidate at the University of Halle, Michael Müller. He emphasized the doctrine of election as a link since Müntzer had taught it was the elect who must take up the sword to cleanse the church because the rulers would not do it themselves although it was actually their divine commission. Pastor Wolfgang Gericke brought attention to Müntzer's idea that the church should ideally be the divinely ordained channel by which the Holy Spirit woos, teaches and develops the individual, as well as the community of the learning, growing elect. The establishment of this sort of church was the goal of Müntzer's desired reform. W. Trende, a party official of the Christian Democratic Union proposed a hermeneutic link between his theology and revolution. He wrote that Müntzer was an advocate of direct revelation, taught that Biblical interpretation must be subject to it, and that the Holy Spirit revealed that the welfare of the exploited peasant was the measure of divine justice.

Both of these links between theology and revolution seem to imply that it was religious or theological conviction that compelled the preacher to engage in revolutionary activities, a suggestion with which Marxist advocates of social determinism of religion do not readily agree. So three other links were suggested in which it was postulated that social circumstances drove Müntzer to revolutionary activities and that his theologizing was just an intermediate phase between the social impulse and his revolutionary response, a phrase in which he expressed himself. Historian Willibald Gutsche of the GDR Academy of Sciences seemed to doubt the sincerity of Müntzer's Christian conviction. He wrote that Müntzer ceased identifying the elect in his teachings as a spiritual entity and identified them instead as the poor and suffering when he realized that this would be the only way to muster the rebel faction which he needed in his struggle for social justice. History professor Gerhard Brendler tried to show that the growing radicalism of Müntzer's preaching occurred in two distinct steps corresponding to a two step radicalization of the bourgeois faction of the Early Bourgeois Revolution. Finally, philosopher Alexander Kolesnyk described Müntzer's replacement of Christ with the "elect" as the motive force in establishing the Kingdom of God, as an early, tentative step toward the overall secularization of the European world view. He identified this secularization as the link between theology and revolution.

Two studies meditate between the approach of theologically motivated revolution and the approach of socially motivated revolution expressed in theological terms. The mediating studies maintained that Müntzer's theology generated a particular understanding of society which called for revolutionary change. Theology professor Norbert Müller worked out the thesis that in the Bible Müntzer found the model of divinely ordained society in which the three major groups (clergy,
rulers and commoners) each fulfilled a specific function in order to create an environment in which the individual could search out God unobstructed by external influences. Since the society of his day did not comply with this model, he sought to reform it. Similarly, German literature scholar Werner Lenk theorized that Müntzer was striving after the vision of an egalitarian, classless society marked by communal ownership, a vision which he derived from I Corinthians 13 and the Sermon on the Mount.

**Outlook**

Research of Müntzer and his theology all but vanished as attention was drawn to Martin Luther on occasion of the celebration of the 500th anniversary of his birth in 1983. More than two hundred books about the Wittenberg reformer were published, vastly more than has ever been written about Müntzer. But in 1989 Müntzer's birthday, too, will be celebrated. In addition to two new biographies by Marxist historians and a revised source edition, a set of "Müntzer-theses" from a joint committee representing the GDR Academy of Sciences and the faculty of the universities of the GDR under the leadership of Adolph Laube should appear.

In an early draft of three theses, Müntzer's theology emerges as a powerful factor in his biography. The theses suggest that beginning very early Müntzer showed a distinct theological independence from Luther. In Zwickau, he adopted the notion of direct revelation and concluded that the poor are made more receptive than the rich through their suffering. The influence of apocalyptic thought grew steadily upon Müntzer during his time at Allstedt, and he interpreted the Biblical apocalyptic in the revolutionary sense of the elect toppling the godless rulers by use of force. Despite its name, the Eternal League of God, which he organized at Mühlhausen, was nothing other than a military band. From that point on in the biographical sketch, Müntzer's theology submerges.

His chief accomplishment according to the theses was to develop a revolutionary theology, ideology and strategy which fueled the differentiation and radicalization of the reformation movement within the larger context of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. His thought centered on understanding and proclaiming God's will to help others come to faith. His pastoral experience led him increasingly to identify the poor as the elect and his preoccupation with Biblical apocalyptic led to his revolutionary conviction.

The harvest of forty years' discussion in the GDR of the radical preacher-revolutionary from Thurigia has not yet produced a consensus among scholars about how religious fervor and revolutionary fervor, and how religious ideology and revolutionary ideology came to be united in
the 1520's. But there is a consensus that it actually did happen in and around Thomas Müntzer, and this has become an occasion for reflection, both for those Marxists who tend to reject Christianity as fundamentally reactionary and for those Christians who tend to reject the humanitarian vision of Marxism because it does not flow from Christian conviction. More concretely, Müntzer has provide the valuable impulse for non-Christian Marxist scholars to seriously delve into the Christian message and gain a functional understanding of it and for non-Marxist Christian scholars to do the same with respect to the Marxist world view. The result has been a greater awareness of points of harmony of the two world-views, a greater clarity of the points of difference and a greater respect for the abilities and sincerity of the representative of the opposing perspective.

Selected readings from East German scholars on Thomas Müntzer and the Reformation.


Bensing, Manfred. Thomas Müntzer. Leipzig, VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1965. With 92 illustrations on just 103 pages this is the first, and to date only, complete Müntzer biography produced in the GDR.

Demke, Christoph, ed. Thomas Müntzer: Anfragen an Theologie und Kirche. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1977. This small volume is the result of a seminar held by the League of Evangelical Churches in the GDR and contains several essays written by theologians on occasion of the 1975 commemoration of the 450th year of the peasant uprising.


Hinrichs, Carl. Luther und Müntzer: Ihre Auseinandersetzung über Obrigkeit und Widerstandsrecht. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1952. Although emphatically non-Marxist, this study provided Marxist scholars with much impetus and structure in their own explorations of the interrelation of Müntzer's theology, politics and activity.


Prophet einer neuen Welt: Thomas Müntzer und seine Zeit. Berlin: Union Verlag, 1975. A collection of nine Müntzer related essays by persons affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union political party. Though receiving differing degrees of emphasis, a common strand which emerges in all essays is the moral desirability of Christians in the GDR supporting the socialist party in the building of a humanitarian society.

Steinmetz, Max, ed. *Die frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland.* Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1985. One volume containing 21 reprints of studies from 1952-1984 documenting the development of the Early Bourgeois Revolution interpretive model in East German scholarship along with an introduction by the editor and an extensive bibliography.

Vogler, Günter, et al. *Illustrierte Geschichte der frühbürgerlichen Revolution.* Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974. This sizeable, popular level, illustrated history remains the most recent comprehensive treatment of the Early Bourgeois Revolution in the GDR.