

# Labour Review

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## **Thomas Muntzer: an early German revolutionary**

*by Andrew Drummond*

Think of the German Protestant Reformation and you will probably think of Martin Luther, and the fight between the Lutherans and the Catholics: that is the common conception of this historical period put about in schools and colleges. In reality, that period around 1517 to 1535 was far more complicated, since, as Engels said, 'the Reformation — Lutheran and Calvinist — is the No 1 bourgeois revolution.'<sup>1</sup> The turbulent period from 1517 — when Luther made his first public pronouncement of revolt against Roman Church authority — to 1525 — when the great peasant uprising in Germany was brutally crushed by the regional princes — was the first step in the European bourgeois revolution, which then moved on to England in the 1640s, to France in 1789, and back to Germany in 1848. By presenting this period as simply a time of theological debate, bourgeois historians conceal their own revolutionary origins, and more particularly the radical wing of the Reformation, led and exemplified by Thomas Müntzer, who sparkled for a relatively short time as the ideological and political leader of a plebeian revolt in Saxony. In so doing they conceal the rebellion of the entire South German peasantry.

Müntzer, who was executed by the princes of Saxony in May 1525, died because of his implacable hatred of the social tyranny of feudalism, because of his momentary vision of a communistic society, and because he represented a serious practical challenge to the princes' tame Reformer, Luther, for the leadership of the Reformation. And since his death, he has been vilified, buried in lies and confusion, covered by slander and abuse, and utterly denigrated by Lutheran and bourgeois historians. It was only Engels, and his Liberal contemporary of 1848, Wilhelm Zimmermann, who managed to

dig Müntzer out of the mire, and found an alternative historical view of the man and his epoch.

The reason for Müntzer's treatment at the hands of the bourgeoisie is not hard to find. When the peasantry was defeated in 1525, Luther and his cronies fell over themselves in their anxiety to dissociate their movement from that of the peasants, and they immediately — within days of Müntzer's death — heaped all kinds of slander, gossip and political judgements upon the leaders of the peasantry. Müntzer was called a Satan and a bloodthirsty revolutionary, because Luther and his princes feared revolution. In their ensuing oppression of rebellious elements among the lower classes, who were often led by Anabaptist groups, they held up Müntzer as a bogeyman. This view of the man did not change for some 270 years, since Germany remained under the thumb of feudalism and regional absolutism; only when the reverberations of the bourgeois French Revolution of 1789 came through to Germany, did historians begin to take a more critical view of Germany's own revolutionary history, and even came close to excusing Müntzer. In the years leading up to the 1848 revolution, this attitude became dominant, with Zimmermann providing an excellent and sympathetic history of the 1525 revolt and praising Müntzer as a revolutionary. Since then, there has been a tussle between hard-line Lutheran historians and critical bourgeois historians, debating whether Müntzer was justified or whether he was just a devil in disguise: both sides, however, remained averse to condoning revolution. Historians in Nazi Germany, for example, praised Müntzer for being a 'conservative liturgy writer' and denied that he had ever been a revolutionary; this was in line with the Nazi attitude to the peasantry, expressed in one history of the 1525 uprising: 'Today, at the conclusion of the first victorious German revolution, the peasant of the Third Reich has won in the life of the nation that position for which he strove in 1525.'<sup>2</sup> Müntzer was thus reduced to a petty bourgeois. Even in 1975, one Lutheran church historian considered that Müntzer — not the feudal princes — was to blame for the bloodshed of 1525; that is what Luther said. The bourgeois does not change.

General histories in English are no better. Norman Cohn decided that Müntzer had 'a lust for blood which at times expressed itself in sheer raving'.<sup>3</sup> Gordon Rupp considers that Müntzer was 'brilliant yet unbalanced'.<sup>4</sup> G.R. Elton saw in him 'an unrestrained fanatic . . . a dangerous lunatic'.<sup>5</sup> All only express their hatred for revolution and

revolutionaries, and vent their wrath on socialist histories of the period.

History has thus determined the views taken of Müntzer and the Peasant War; the advent of modern capitalism and of the bourgeois period of history contained two opposed classes, and eventually two opposed views of history — the bourgeois view, leaning heavily on Luther's fantasies and falsifications, and the Marxist view, relying on the method of historical materialism.

### MAKING OF A REVOLUTIONARY

What, then, was Müntzer?

He was born in the small town of Stolberg in the Harz region of Germany, in 1489. He was the son of a coin-maker (his father was not, as Engels and Zimmermann believed, hanged by the Count of Stolberg, for he was still alive in 1521), and received a good education at the universities of Leipzig and Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, where he was trained to be a priest in the Catholic Church. Between 1513 and 1519, he occupied a variety of posts in the Church education system — as a tutor in Halle, where he may have been involved in a youthful plot against the Archbishop, and as a teacher of the nuns in a Cistercian nunnery near Halle. Around 1518 he began to question the institution of the Roman Church, partly under the influence of Luther, partly as a result of his own reading of medieval mystics who had advocated a far more individualistic and strenuous course of theology than was common in the Church. He was removed from his post at the nunnery, then engaged in a bitter argument with the Church in Brunswick on the question of Luther's '95 Theses', and was expelled from the town. In the spring of 1519, he turned up at the town of Jüterbog (near Potsdam) and there became involved in a controversy with the local Franciscans, defending Luther's position on the abuses of authority in the Church and calling for a more democratic order within the Church. When Luther had his famous disputation with the Catholic representative, Johann Eck, in Leipzig in July 1519, Müntzer was present; it was probably here that Luther took note of his colleague, and recommended him for a temporary post as preacher in Zwickau, which was to be vacant from April 1520.

Before going to take up this post, however, Müntzer became chaplain in a Cistercian nunnery near Naumburg, where he read eagerly and furiously in the works of the mystics and in the more radical texts

which had demanded social and ecclesiastical reform in the fifteenth century, under the influence of the Hussite Reformation and revolution in Bohemia. Thus, when he came to Zwickau — which lay close to the Bohemian border in a mining district of Saxony — he brought with him both the new Lutheran positions against the Catholics and the older traditions of radicalism and individualistic opposition to orthodox theology.

### THE EMERGENCE OF CAPITAL

But that was not all that was going to influence his career. The Reformation was not merely the result of one Luther's actions at the University of Wittenberg. Since the latter half of the fifteenth century, Germany had been in the grip of a historic social, economic and political crisis, for, in emerging from the night of the Middle Ages into the new capitalist mode of production which was then still only in its infancy, a whole set of social relations had to be overturned. 'Revolutionary merchant capital not only created modern absolutism, but also transformed the medieval classes of society according to its needs.'<sup>6</sup> Capital, which had slowly been stored up in quantity during the Middle Ages, through trade and small-scale production and extraction, now emerged as a qualitative force in history: it undermined the traditional rule by force of the feudal and Imperial nobility, by putting them into debt, and by purchasing mercenary armies; it placed a further burden upon the back of the peasantry, for, in addition to the crushing taxation and tithes paid in kind (ie, with corn, animals etc), the noble lords could now impose limitless taxes of 'the universal equivalent', rather than restrict themselves to what their stomachs could hold. Saxony became the most prosperous area of Europe, with its great gold and silver mines, and it was no accident that here, in the highest developed area, the Reformation began.

As yet, Capital was not the enemy of feudalism: the great feudal lords even welcomed and encouraged it, since they still controlled the laws and the mines and the land. Lesser nobility, however, were often made bankrupt, bought off the family holding and forced to sell their military skills to their richer colleagues. The peasantry felt the full force of Capital, in increased taxation and exploitation, and in impoverishment which drove them to seek work in the towns where the pre-proletariat was emerging. From 1476 until 1525, a whole series of local and regional peasant uprisings burst out all over Ger-

many, each one more powerful than the last, each with a new set of democratic demands for political representation and economic reform, each one defeated by betrayal, parochialism or in battle.

In addition, Capital became a national force: for decades, the Church in Rome had been carting German wealth southwards across the Alps to finance their own degeneration and the glorious Renaissance, by means of Church taxation, the sale of indulgences and benefices and any other trick imaginable. This exploitation naturally caused great resentment both among the peasantry (who formed 75 per cent of the population) and the nobility, who saw their own potential pickings flying southwards. In the peasant rebellions, much anger was directed towards the Church. Thus, in a sense, when Luther spoke out in 1517, he was speaking for all sections of German society. And all sections saw in him their social saviour. The lower classes in particular supported him to the hilt; the impoverished lesser nobility divided their support between Luther and the exponents of élitist Humanism; sections of the richer nobility threw in their lot with the obviously popular movement, seeing their chance to appropriate Church wealth to themselves. But, as Engels said, 'in the early sixteenth century the various Estates of the Empire . . . formed an extremely confusing mass with their varied and highly conflicting requirements. The Estates stood in each other's way, and each was continually in overt, or covert, conflict with all the others.'<sup>7</sup> A change in religion in itself, obviously, could not resolve this crisis — it merely intensified it by giving expression to it.

Zwickau was one of the first towns to seize the chance offered by the new Lutheran doctrines. Thus, when Müntzer arrived there in early May 1520, he did not cause a great stir. He preached first in the church of St Mary, where the congregation was mainly of the rich patrician ruling group, and he seems to have remained true to Lutheranism, if more fiery and uncompromising in his attacks on the Catholic Franciscans than his predecessor, Egranus. It was only in October, when Egranus returned from study-leave, and Müntzer was transferred to St Katharine's church in the poorer part of town, that he began to earn his name as a rebel and independent thinker. The congregation of this church was mainly composed of plebeians from the thriving weaving and brewing industries of the town, and there was a close connection, too, with a group of radicals — including miners from the nearby silver and coal mines — around Niklaus Storch, a weaver deeply influenced by the Bohemian Taborite sects

which had emerged as the radical wing of the Hussite Reformation in 1420. Together, although each kept a critical distance, Müntzer and Storch worked to bring about a complete and popular reform in the Church in Zwickau, both relying on the weavers and other elements of the pre-proletariat. This activity, together with the violent reactions of the Catholics, the town council and the half-hearted Lutheran Egranus, soon led to a series of riots, directed both against those who defended Catholicism and the town council patriciate. Müntzer, although he still considered himself to be a colleague of Luther and still appealed to Luther for help, rapidly developed towards a position of principled opposition to Egranus. But in early 1521, since the national social crisis was not yet near to a climax or conclusion, Müntzer was forced to flee the town after more riots. Ironically, on the day after his departure in mid-April, Luther entered Worms to answer for his cause before the Empire and there gained the protection of Prince Friedrich of Saxony.

#### SPLIT WITH LUTHERANISM

From April until June Müntzer made a trip into Bohemia, where he encountered cells of Hussite and Taborite activity, before returning to Saxony to gather together a group of missionaries who were to lead a 'true reformation' in Bohemia. In the event, he only collected one friend — Mark Stübner — since even Storch did not reply to the invitation, and from June until December, the pair were in Prague, where Müntzer preached against Catholic doctrines in the churches, the university and on the streets. Conditions in Prague, however, were not at all as they were in Saxony, and, although Müntzer seems to have been involved in a series of plebeian demonstrations for reform and raised the hackles of decent Hussite citizens, he was forced to leave the city again in early December without having achieved very much — although he had learned a great deal about his friends and his enemies. His first major piece of writing was done in Prague, a manifesto (copied out in German, Latin and Czech in order to reach all layers of society) which condemned the 'academics' who imposed a false belief upon the masses because they placed the scripture (the past) before revelations and visions (the present), the abstract before the concrete. Müntzer considered that a living perception of reality was a hundred times more important than a mechanically applied

witness from the past: he opposed the 'living word' of the spirit to the 'dead word' of scripture.

When Müntzer returned to Germany, the Reformation was temporarily drifting rudderless. Luther was snugly tucked away in Friedrich's castle at Wartburg, while his lieutenant Melanchthon was having great difficulty in maintaining order in Wittenberg, where the more radical Karlstadt (the Wedgwood-Benn of the times) was throwing out church decorations and preaching while dressed as a peasant, and where Storch and Stübner turned up and impressed everyone with their doctrine, which bore many similarities to Müntzer's. Luther then sent a flock of angry directives from the Wartburg and saved the official Reformation from the breath of radicalism. Müntzer, for his part, began a life of wandering, taking up temporary posts in Erfurt, Nordhausen, Stolberg, Weimar and Halle, and in each of these places was involved in plebeian riots against the Catholic Church and, in Nordhausen, against representatives of the Lutheran movement. Each time, he was also expelled from the town.

In March 1522, he wrote to Melanchthon, finally announcing his split from the official reform movement, attacking the Lutherans' theoretical methods — which, like the Catholic 'academics' denied the present by the past — and their back-tracking in the popular development of the Reformation.

After all these setbacks, despite which he chose the road of independence, it came almost as a surprise that he was given charge of St John's church in the country town of Allstedt in Thuringia. When he took up the post at Easter 1523, he saw before him the possibility of an orderly, but nevertheless radical, reform; political developments also gave him confidence, since, although a revolt of the minor nobility in 1522 had been crushed by the regional princes, the Reformation movement was now officially established in several areas of Germany. He also realised that his own reforms were not to be achieved through propaganda or ultimatums alone, but that he had to educate his supporters. This he did, firstly by translating the Bible according to the needs of his own doctrines, and secondly by incorporating this translated content into the old forms of liturgy and the Mass, by building a bridge between old forms of consciousness and new ones. In addition, he wrote once more to Luther, seeking a principled agreement to differ and yet to work for the same aims. Luther did not reply, for he already knew whose side he was on — it was the princes of Saxony who fed him.

Thus, there is a completely new and fruitful period of organised propaganda, education and construction. In July of 1523, he even wrote to his supporters in Stolberg, advising them not to cause riots, since the time was not ripe, but rather to 'improve your lives' and to educate themselves in spiritual suffering (doctrinal independence).

All this activity brought its results. Other preachers in the town fell in with Müntzer, and peasants, plebeians and miners from the surrounding area flocked to hear Müntzer's reformed services in St John's church. This was naturally not entirely acceptable to the local Catholic nobility, who looked with disfavour upon anyone who usurped the religious monopoly: a new way of looking at God was likely to engender a new way of looking at society, since society and religion were so closely bound up together in that period. Therefore, in September 1523, Count Ernst of Mansfeld (the main mining area of Thuringia) sent out his soldiers to block the roads leading to Allstedt, so that his subjects would not be tainted by reform. Müntzer once more faced the reaction of the authorities: but his response was remarkable; he wrote a strong letter of protest to Ernst, denouncing him as 'a damned and godless man', and advising him to stop 'removing the key to the knowledge of God', or 'I will deal with you a hundred thousand times worse than Luther did with the Pope'. He also wrote in similar terms to Prince Friedrich of Saxony.

And, perhaps more importantly, he decided to form a defence militia composed of men from Allstedt and Mansfeld. This organisation had very humble beginnings, but, by June 1524, it had grown to be 500 strong, consisting of miners and plebeians who were prepared to answer any call to defend the reforms. Until July 1524, no other noble dared to lift a finger against the popular movement, and even when, in March, Müntzer's followers burned down a chapel at Malterbach (near Allstedt), the town council (and even the Duke's tax-collector) backed Müntzer to the full in the official inquiry. In July, Duke Johann and the Electoral Prince Johann Friedrich arrived in Allstedt in an attempt to discover what was going on in the earth under their feet. Müntzer was summoned to preach before them, and he called on them, as Lutherans, to take up arms against 'the godless tyrants' (the Catholic princes), for 'the eels and snakes squirm with each other in one pile. The priests and all evil clerics are snakes . . . and the secular lords and sovereigns are eels.' 'Oh, dear sirs, how splendidly the Lord will shatter the old pots (of the Age) with an iron bar.' He called for their aid in order that the Reformation could be advanced; this was by no means a compromise with the princes:

Müntzer, clad in the robes of the Prophet Daniel, made it quite clear that if the princes did not take up the sword against the tyrants, then the people would.

The princes had no immediate reaction to this; they were themselves still confused — even announcing that 'if God so commands, then the common man shall rule'. They went about their business. In mid-July, however, two things occurred; firstly, Luther wrote an infamous *Letter to the Princes of Saxony on the Rebellious Spirit* [Müntzer], fingering Müntzer and encouraging the princes to take action against the rebels; secondly, Müntzer was implicated in a further riot in the neighbouring town of Sangerhausen. The princes therefore summoned him and the town council — probably at the instigation of the Catholic Duke Georg of Saxony — to their court in Weimar, and there ordered Müntzer to close down the printing-shop he had established in Allstedt. The bourgeois town council decided that loyalty to the princes was more advantageous than loyalty to Müntzer, and denounced him.

#### MUNTZER'S PHILOSOPHY

In early August, therefore, Müntzer left Allstedt, and went to the Thuringian town of Mühlhausen. If in Allstedt, 'Müntzer was as yet more theologian than anything else', then he left Allstedt as a determined revolutionary, with no intention of social compromise, with organisational experience, and with a burning desire to remove the social order which he considered to be a hindrance to 'God's justice'. In the following month, he wrote two pamphlets against the 'godless tyrants' and Luther, whom he regarded as a traitor to the progressive movement, since he had sold the Reformation to 'his' princes. These pamphlets reveal the philosophical basis for Müntzer's coming revolutionary practice.

In his *Express Revelation of the False Belief*, Müntzer called for the downfall of the tyrants, and of the 'academic' Lutherans, since 'all their words and deeds mean that the poor man cannot learn to read because he is troubled for nourishment, and they preach unashamedly that the poor man himself be skinned and scraped by the tyrants. So how can he learn to read the Scriptures?' Here is the essence of Müntzer's activity: the existing social and political order had to be overthrown in order that the 'true belief' might be transmitted to the masses. Müntzer subjectively, as a theologian, regarded social revolu-

tion as a means to a higher end; objectively, he was a political animal. He disguised himself as the Prophet Gideon, and took up the sword that would kill the godless, for 'the time of the harvest is now here'. Müntzer's sense of the historical crisis was transmuted into an idealistic vision that the 'old Age' of the world was ended and that the millenium was about to begin. In his next pamphlet, directed principally against Luther, 'the soft-living flesh of Wittenberg', he denounced Luther's betrayal of the cause to the princes, condemned his theory of knowledge which denied living perception in favour of past, dead testimony, and showed that his flattery of the princes was quite criminal:

'Look, the originators of usury, of theft and of robbery are our lords and princes, who take all creatures to themselves. The fish in the water, the birds of the air, the things that grow on the land, they must take it all. They flay and skin the poor ploughman, craftsman and everything that lives. And then Doctor Liar [Luther] says: Amen. The lords themselves make the poor man their enemy. They cannot remove the cause of rebellion, so how can it gradually get better? and I say this, that if I must be rebellious, then let it be so.'

Mühlhausen, when Müntzer arrived, was in a permanent state of revolt. Ever since the Reformation had arrived there in 1522, it had become inextricable from the democratic revolt which was led in turn by the middle classes, the craftsmen and the plebeians — the latter two under the leadership of Heinrich Pfeiffer, an ex-monk. Riot, demonstration, and the flight of town dignitaries was commonplace; when Müntzer arrived, however, the rebellion had become bogged down in parochialism and petty-bourgeois short-sightedness, which limited itself to the expropriation of church wealth in the immediate vicinity and to a democratisation of the town-council. Müntzer tried, by education and through establishing contact with other communities, to give some national and historical perspective to this movement; he won converts to his own cause, and gave Pfeiffer some grounding in his doctrine of the freedom of the subjective will. However, after another of the common swings of the political pendulum, Müntzer and Pfeiffer were expelled from the town at the end of September 1524.

Müntzer then travelled southwards to Nuremberg, with Pfeiffer, to arrange the printing of his latest pamphlets; in the town, he managed to win two men who were later to lead the radical South German

Anabaptist movement, Hans Hut and Hans Denck. Then, while Pfeiffer returned to Mühlhausen, Müntzer moved on to the Black Forest region, where he had heard that the first peasant army of the great uprising had gathered in late August.

### THE MILITARY CONFRONTATION

The uprising of 1525, which began in the autumn of 1524, was the final qualitative result of the long series of new impositions upon the peasantry and the spontaneous localised revolts; these revolts had now been given a national scope and a religious basis in Luther's Reformation — their most famous set of demands in 1525 was thick with Biblical references. Their demands were largely bourgeois-democratic, consisting in the right to a Lutheran minister, and the abolition of the most harsh feudal burdens of tax, tithe and forced labour. 'Their demands lay entirely in the direction of historical progress . . . They were all completely right and just and above all they conformed to the prerequisites of the bourgeois period of history'.<sup>9</sup> Compared with what Müntzer was calling for, they were mild indeed, but nonetheless revolutionary, since they supposed the end of feudalism.

The uprising, beginning in Stühlingen near Lake Constance, spread rapidly to all other areas of Swabia and the Black Forest and, by early 1525, northwards to Franconia and Saxony. In April 1525, some 50,000 peasants were organised into various armies; but each army had its weaknesses in parochialism, in its willingness to sit down for talks with the noble lords (who would then break all truces without conscience), and in simple lack of military hardware. Although their lordships had severe difficulties in raising a mercenary army, when they finally did so, they defeated the peasantry in every battle.

What Müntzer actually did in South-West Germany is not known for sure: Engels and Zimmerman supposed that he actually organised the peasantry, but there is no evidence. It seems clear that he intervened where he could, and certainly gained supporters, but his activity did not drastically alter the course of events. What he gained was a knowledge of tactics and of military organisation, and confirmation of his view that the revolution was to be national. And that is what he carried back to Mühlhausen in February 1525.

From February until May, Müntzer was engaged in organisation. His writing ability was directed towards rousing surrounding com-

munities to join his movement. His military knowledge went to training and expanding a new defence organisation called the 'Eternal League of God'. His theoretical knowledge went to raising the consciousness of the community to a higher historical level; but this attempt ran up against the large group around Pfeiffer, whose sole concern was immediate gains for the parish in the expropriation of Church and feudal wealth. When, after an expedition against surrounding manors and churches, in early May, Müntzer moved northwards to meet the approaching armies of feudal reaction, Pfeiffer's group refused to follow.

Despite this, Müntzer managed to collect groups of plebeians, peasants and miners from all areas of Thuringia, and they joined up with the plebeian-peasant army at the town of Frankenhausen to await the opposing armies led by Duke Georg of Saxony and the Lutheran Prince Philipp of Hesse. In an attempt to provoke an over-hasty attack by the local lords, who were sitting tight until the armies arrived, Müntzer wrote highly abusive letters to Count Ernst ('Brother Ernst') and Count Albrecht of Mansfeld: 'Tell me, you miserable shabby sack of maggots, who made you a prince over the people? Do you think that the Lord God cannot stir up the people to bring down the tyrants? . . . If you will recognise that God has given power to the common people, then we will gladly accept you as a common brother. If not, we will fight against you as an arch-enemy of Christian belief.' The noble lords, however, preferred to wait.

On May 15, the peasant army, while considering an offer of peace, was set upon by the nobles, and, in minutes, routed. The local stream ran with blood. 3,500 men died on the spot, the rest were captured and executed, or else fled. Müntzer himself was arrested, tortured, forced to confess and to sign a refutation of his religious beliefs, and, together with Pfeiffer, beheaded on May 27, 1525.

In the period of repression, some 100,000 peasants and plebeians also died; to the applause of Luther, the regional princes were victors in the historic crisis; and they were to remain in power for some three hundred years. The radical movement in Germany after 1525 was directed into the Anabaptist movement, which inherited Müntzer's theories and practice, which plotted, prayed and waited for the Apocalypse to sweep the tyrants away, which was discovered, punished and driven underground again and again. This movement adopted and adapted many of Müntzer's ideas for their own needs, since 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being,

but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness':<sup>10</sup> criticism of Luther and the feudal system, together with the new conditions of organisation, negated Müntzer's theory of spiritual independence into the doctrine of adult baptism as a visual sign of radical organisation. It was the Anabaptists and their sympathisers alone who fought for independence from the State and its Church. In 1535, they even managed to take over the town of Münster in Westphalia, and organise it as a communistic community for 17 months. The Anabaptist movement, going through a whole series of organisational and doctrinal permutations, spread to Holland and to England, and Müntzer's doctrines could even be detected in the thoughts of the radical leader Winstanley during the English Revolution.<sup>11</sup>

#### MUNTZER'S ACHIEVEMENT

Müntzer's greatest achievements and his greatest significance lay in his doctrine and in his political practice. It is important to stress that Müntzer did not consider himself to be a politician, but a theologian. Although he demanded that 'everyone be made equal' and that 'all things be held in common', this was only a stage in his vision of the millenium: his ultimate goal, subjectively, was the unhampered spread of the 'true, living word of God'. But when he demanded that living perception be primary to past witness, he merely expressed the desire that the Reformation be left open to the interpretation of the labouring majority, since it was their living perception that demanded attention, not Biblical passages. When he promoted the idea that there was a supra-historical body of 'the Elect', he was giving his own expression to the historical need for a party of leadership that could unite plebeians and peasants in a national movement: his theory, idealistic though it was, was far ahead of the prevailing parochialism and spontaneity of the masses. As Engels said, in 1850, 'more than one present-day communist sect lacked as comprehensive a theoretical arsenal as was Müntzer's in the sixteenth century'.<sup>12</sup>

In his theology, itself the only form of theoretical thinking at that stage of European history, Müntzer reflected the crisis of German society and the hopes and requirements of the lower classes in the town and country. His opposition to Luther and to the princes was, objectively, a statement of the hegemony of the plebeians and the peasantry. Since Müntzer was primarily attracted to plebeian revolt in

the towns — and since, uniquely, the Thuringian peasantry was led by the plebeians — he represented a trend in history that was far ahead of its time: that is why he was so fanatical. 'The class which he represented was still in its birth throes . . . What is more, these [economic] conditions were paving the way for a social system that was diametrically opposite to what he aspired to.'<sup>13</sup> The cause of this class, the proletariat, was taken up, equally fantastically, by the Anabaptists, and continued until the English Levellers and Diggers of the 17th century took it up clearly and forcefully. But in 1525 this was, objectively, Müntzer's class.

### MARXISM AND THE REFORMATION

We have already mentioned that Lutherans and bourgeois historians have generally worked to conceal the truth about Müntzer. The only histories that have concerned themselves with a sympathetic view of him have been those written by socialists: our summary of Müntzer's life indicates why.

The first was by Engels, written in 1850 after the defeat of the workers in the 1848 revolution, and which aimed at providing an historical precedent for the events, in order that the workers' parties might learn. Engels based himself on the work by Wilhelm Zimmermann, which he praised, even if it 'lacks inner connections . . . it does not succeed in showing the politico-religious controversies of the times as a reflection of the contemporary class struggles'.<sup>14</sup> Engels corrected this false method, using other sources to indicate the economic and historical base of the Reformation and the Peasant War, while still relying on Zimmermann for detail: as a result, the work shines in its method, while being false in some of its detail — none of which, incidentally, affects the overall value of the book. If he saw Müntzer's followers as the fomenters of the entire uprising in Germany, if he called these followers 'Anabaptists' (Anabaptism only emerged as a radical movement *after* the defeat of 1525), and if biographical detail is missing, then that is secondary to the method of historical materialism which Engels applied to the subject. Indeed, this work still outshines some of the dustier obscurantist studies of modern Church historians.

Karl Kautsky and Franz Mehring of the German Social-Democratic movement also turned their attention to Müntzer and the German Reformation. Kautsky's work, *Communism in Central Europe*

in *the Time of the Reformation*, appeared in English in 1897, was praised by Engels,<sup>15</sup> and generally provided a good historical and materialist account of the events of 1525; it also critically examined the Lutheran legend around Müntzer, and denounced one of its main propagators, Melancthon, as being 'wholly untrustworthy'.<sup>16</sup> But Kautsky's main fault was to only see the surface of Müntzer's philosophy, to see in it traits similar to medieval heresy and to Taboritism, and to come to the conclusion that 'we have not succeeded in finding a single new idea in him'.<sup>17</sup> But the Reformation was entirely new, it was not medieval, and Müntzer's conception of revolution depended upon a whole set of new material elements. Admittedly, Müntzer's writings at that time were only really available in the dark libraries of State archives, where Kautsky could not find them. Mehring's study, published in 1910, was better, partly since Mehring seems to have had a better grasp of dialectical theory; his work is highly lucid, although he too depended on Kautsky, saw Anabaptists everywhere, and considered that 'one cannot really call him an independent thinker . . . But he was able to recognise revolutionary elements with a penetrating and far-sighted eye and to grasp them with an incomparable force of action'.<sup>18</sup>

The English socialist, Belfort Bax, also published a history of *The Peasant War in Germany* in 1899, relying on everyone except Engels, and relating the religious Reformation to economic and social changes. He attacks the myths of the Lutherans, calling Melancthon a 'malignant toady' and 'Luther's jackal',<sup>19</sup> and correctly assesses Müntzer's historical importance in terms of organisation and theory. Interestingly, while condemning Fabianism, he lauds Karlstadt as 'essentially revolutionary, while Luther was the mere reformer'<sup>20</sup> — Karlstadt was in fact only a more radical reformer, while Luther was an out-and-out traitor to reform.

These works laid the basis for the latest series of sympathetic works which emanate from the USSR and East Germany. Stalinist historians, particularly before the events of 1956, and only less noticeably since then, have been anxious to conceal the fact that Müntzer was a theologian, and have presented him as a fully conscious proletarian revolutionary. The dialectical opposition between object and subject is thus wiped out, and replaced by a form of mechanical determinism. This approach was led by the Soviet historian M.M. Smirin in 1947, who received a Stalin Prize (2nd Class) for his pains. This work was followed by a whole set of biographies which equally

proclaimed that Müntzer was fully conscious of what he was doing, and that 'the people' were 'the Elect' — in fact, the Elect were the vanguard of the people. Despite these many drawbacks and falsifications, Stalinist historians have initiated a full and detailed discussion, which bourgeois historiography alone would never have wished, and the image of Müntzer is now far clearer than it has ever been; and the Stalinists have received the full venom which bourgeois theologians reserve for 'Marxists' and 'Bolsheviks'. Now, in the era of Trotskyism, it is time for a truly Marxist history of the Reformation era in Europe, based on Engels, Marx and Mehring, and using the progress made by East German studies.

In this history, the place of Müntzer will be important. Müntzer was not merely another theologian. His theology was simply the form of thought brought down from the Middle Ages, but its content was a reflection, distorted through the form, of very particular social needs. The dialectical relationship between matter and thought is shown very clearly in Müntzer's case: his theory of knowledge and conceptions of history and society were not plucked from the Bible, but directed by living history and expressed in a traditional form that was natural to the vast majority of people. 'The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And when they are concerned to revolutionise themselves and the world, to create something entirely new, then precisely in these periods do they fearfully call up the ghosts of the past.'<sup>21</sup> Müntzer dressed himself as Daniel, as Gideon, but he was really Müntzer approaching a new era of history. He raised pragmatic political demands to a higher theoretical level, and that was his true greatness: without theory, there can be no revolution. He was a German revolutionary, and, through his inheritors the Anabaptists, his doctrines became European.

Trotsky said of the bourgeois revolution in England: 'in the seventeenth century drama, the British proletariat can find great precedents for revolutionary action' and 'the British social crisis of the seventeenth century combined in itself features of the German Reformation of the sixteenth century with features of the French Revolution of the eighteenth century.'<sup>22</sup> A study and analysis of the German Peasant War of 1525 and of the philosophical reaction of Thomas Müntzer would therefore serve as an introduction to an understanding of British bourgeois and proletarian history.

## Notes

- 1 F. Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, Moscow 1969, p.188.
- 2 G. Franz, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg*, Berlin 1933, p.V.
- 3 N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium*, London 1972, p.236.
- 4 E.G. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, London 1969, p.250.
- 5 G.R. Elton, *Reformation Europe 1517-1559*, London 1967, p.94.
- 6 F. Mehring, *Absolutism and Revolution in Germany*, London 1975, p.3.
- 7 Engels, *op. cit.*, p.40.
- 8 *Ibid*, p.54.
- 9 Mehring, *op. cit.*, p.19.
- 10 K.Marx, Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*.
- 11 See: H.N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, London 1961, p.660.
- 12 Engels, *op. cit.*, p.56.
- 13 *Ibid*, p.116.
- 14 *Ibid*, p.7.
- 15 See: *Ibid*, pp.176-177.
- 16 K. Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, London 1897, p.107.
- 17 *Ibid*, p.109.
- 18 Mehring, *op. cit.*, p.16
- 19 E.B. Bax, *The Peasants War in Germany*, New York 1968, pp.232, 350.
- 20 *Ibid*, p.90.
- 21 K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
- 22 L. Trotsky, *Writings on Britain*, Vol.II, London 1974, pp.87, 92.