

IN July 1505, the young Martin Luther was on a quiet country road in Saxony. As the afternoon went on, the skies darkened, thunder rumbled. All of a sudden, a bolt of lightning flashed from the heavens and, exploding, knocked the traveller to the ground.

In holy terror, this latter-day Saul cowered before the wrath of God, soon took the monastic vow, and became the devout and tormented Brother Martin. Twelve years later, Brother Martin, with not a little support from the Saxon prince Frederick, stood and challenged the entire authority of the mighty Roman Church, and so began the movement which dragged the Christian religion from the middle ages into the capitalist era, and with it, the emerging bourgeoisie.

# Brother Martin Comrade Luther

## HOW THE EAST GERMAN STALINISTS MARKED LUTHER'S 500th ANNIVERSARY

by **ANDREW DRUMMOND**

1983 has been celebrated as the 500th anniversary of the birth of Luther; it is no exaggeration to say that the Marx centenary has been completely overshadowed in East Germany by the remembrance of Brother Martin, culminating in a series of religious spectacles in

November, when the Archbishop of Canterbury and the leaders of the German Lutheran churches toured the workers' state, giving thanks to God. In all these jollifications, the main official driving force has not been the Church, but the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party.

In 1980 a 'Martin Luther Committee' was set up to organise the celebrations, chaired by none other than the state President Erich Honecker, and including six full members of the East German Politburo, and assorted historians and churchmen. For those who have followed the disintegration of the Communist Parties worldwide, and seen the alliances they have formed with various branches of the bourgeoisie — most recently at the 38th Congress of the CPGB — such hybrids can come as no surprise. But it is worth taking a look at how and why the Stalinists have recruited Luther and, with no regard for historical truth, have converted him to the cause of socialism.

From July until December 1983, an exhibition on Luther toured the universities of Britain. It had been organised jointly by the East German Ministry of Culture, Lambeth Palace and assorted universities, and its centrepiece was a display depicting the main events of the German Reformation. This display was entirely the work of the 'Martin Luther Committee' in East Germany. It included statements by Honecker, by Luther and by Marx and Engels, juxtaposed to images of the people, life and times of the 16th century, beginning with this gem from Honecker:

'November 10 1983 will be the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth,



*The title-page of a pamphlet by Luther against the selling of indulgences*

a man who is one of the greatest sons of the German people. The German Democratic Republic and her people pay homage to his personality. They pay homage to the historical achievement he accomplished by initiating the Reformation — actually a bourgeois revolution — for the benefit of social progress and world culture. The profound changes of our times now call for the support of historical progress of reason and humanism.'

(Although the texts in this exhibition were in English, the grammar was so bad and the meaning sometimes so unclear, that the quotations given here have been altered slightly from the original text.)

Honecker is quoted later as saying: 'Luther's influence on progress is obvious, even today as we approach the 21st century.'

And finally, should his message remain unclear: 'May the worldwide homage on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth — as the worldwide influence of the reformer demands it — benefit the struggle for the preservation of peace and peaceful coexistence of the peoples and the states.'

Leaving aside for the moment the theory of 'peaceful coexistence' and the justification it provides for all kinds of dirty deals between the Stalinists and imperialist and fascist states, the first thing that is obvious here is that Honecker regards Luther as a man of peace, a man of progress and a man of culture. Secondly, he makes it clear that the Stalinists have completely rejected Marxism and are turning instead to 'reason', 'humanism' and of course, religion.

Let us have a look at what Engels had to say about Luther, in his book *'The Peasant War in Germany'*:

'From 1517 to 1525, Luther changed just as much as the present-day German constitutionalists did between 1846 and 1849, and as every bourgeois party which, placed for a time at the head of the movement, is overwhelmed by the plebian-proletarian party standing behind it.

'Luther's lightning struck home. The entire German people was set in motion. On the one hand, peasants

and plebians saw the signal to revolt. . . on the other, he was joined by the moderate burghers and a large section of the lesser nobility. Even princes were drawn into the maelstrom. . . Luther had to choose between them. He did not hesitate for a moment. He dropped the popular elements of the movement and took the side of the burghers, the nobility and the princes.'

And here is a striking sentence: 'His appeals for a war of extermination against Rome resounded no



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more. Luther now preached *peaceful progress* and *passive resistance*.' (p.48). Now, what did Honecker say — 'The struggle for the preservation of peace and peaceful coexistence'?

Remarkable, Engels continues immediately after this last statement with a description of Luther's reaction to a proposed revolt by the lesser nobility, led by Hutten and Sickingen:

'Luther replied: "I do not wish the Gospel *defended by force and bloodshed*. The world was conquered by the Word, the Church is maintained by the Word, the Word will also put the Church back into its own, and Antichrist. . . will fall without violence.' Our Stalinist exhibition, however, lauds Luther's refusal of Sickingen, since he thereby 'saves the Reformation from an adventure doomed to failure'; and without any commentary *at all* hoists up a quotation from the reformer: 'One can only attack with words. One can only overthrow with words. I will not use my fist.'

One of the many propaganda

devices of the 16th century, which contributed to the enormous popularity of the Reformation, was to print a sheet with two pictures — one showing, for example, the Pope counting the gold in his coffers, with his cronies making pious statements about 'Christ's Vicar on Earth', the other showing Jesus throwing the money changers out of the Temple, while his supporters quoted Biblical text. Such a device might not be out of place here, with Honecker spouting Stalinist placebos on 'Peace and Progress', while Engels analyses the nature of the revolution.

The Stalinists do not stop here. They have decided to quote Marx and Engels on the subject of the Reformation. One of the texts used within a single set of quotation marks has in fact been cobbled together out of one quotation from Engels' *'Introduction to the Dialectics of Nature'*, and one from *'The German Peasant War'*. In the first section, beginning: 'It was the greatest progressive transformation which humanity had ever experienced, a time that demanded giants and gave birth to giants. . .', Engels describes the period between about 1450 and 1650, when men such as Machiavelli, Copernicus, da Vinci and Luther attacked the foundations of medieval knowledge and instituted new modes of thought. Engels then also goes on to explain that it was precisely the Protestants, rather than the Catholics, who spearheaded the persecution of the early natural scientists such as Servet (who was on the point of discovering the circulation of Blood). No problem here for the Stalinists. They simply cut off this quotation, and began on another. (This does not prevent them from describing Newton, Lessing, Kant and Hegel as the men who 'carried on what Luther had begun'.)

The second part of this bastardised quotation is the opening sentences of *'The Peasant War'* which hint at 'characters that could match the best men in the revolutions of other countries'. We have already seen how Engels classifies Luther in this connection: the men he is referring to are those such as Thomas Muntzer, who was mercilessly vilified and slandered

by Luther, and the political leaders of the peasantry such as Jorg Schmidt and Christoph Schappeler.

Marx fares no better. One quotation from him stands baldly: 'Luther was the man in whose brain the revolution begins'. Now, we have to look back to 1843 to find the context of this quotation. It appears in Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, and it is the **Reformation**. 'For Germany's **revolutionary** past is theoretical, it is the **Reformation**.

As the revolution then began in the brain of the monk so it now begins in the brain of the philosopher. Luther, we grant, overcame the bondage of piety by replacing it by the bondage of conviction. He shattered faith in authority because he restored the authority of faith . . . But if Protestantism was not the true solution, it was at least the true setting of the problem. . . The Peasant War, the most radical fact of German history, came to grief because of theology'. Marx does not throw himself with abandon into Luther-worship; indeed, precisely because he recognised the limitations of the Reformation, he immediately countered any suggestion of a revolutionary Protestantism with the statement of the fate of the 1525 insurrection.

Luther's revolutionary task was to act as the vanguard of the bourgeoisie. In the Middle Ages, the spiritual and political power of the Church was so great that no social changes could even be contemplated, let alone attempted, without first destroying faith in that Church. And his ideas, while not in themselves original, laid the basis for the end of the medieval thought, precisely because the social conditions in Germany were ripe for them. The capitalist mode of production had already been ushered in, although conditions were not ready for the bourgeois revolution.

The most important moment of the German Reformation was the uprising of 1525. It was this that signalled the end of the truly progressive side of the Reformation. One need not be astonished to learn that the Stalinists prefer to say little about Luther and 1525. (2) In a lecture given by a

member of the Martin Luther Committee in London in November 1983, the Peasant War was not mentioned at all, and only very evasive answers given to direct questioning.

In the exhibition there was a single stirring quotation from the radical Thomas Muntzer (arch-opponent of Luther), and the following pithy summary:

'The revolution "from the bottom" fails. The reformation "from the top" implements what is achievable. The authorities put down the uprising, make use of the achievements brought about by the Reformation to their own advantage, and protect the country against the danger from outside. The Protestant and Catholic Estates of the Empire agree on the status quo in the Augsburg Peace of Religion of 1550, and thus they guarantee peace in Germany for three generations to come . . . The German Peasant War fails. The Reformation goes on. It makes the masses hope and fight again. 50 years later the Dutch revolution wins.'

Luther was fond of citing the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, chapter 13 ('Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God'). So here we have the Estates guaranteeing (!) peace and defending the (no doubt grateful) masses against the enemy without. Luther could not complain. Who should? After all, peace was maintained for three generations — until the horrific 30 Year War; and if the revolution was 'unachievable', why then, why did the masses bother in the first place?

It is a crime and a nonsense to suppose that socialists can discuss the German Reformation and the bourgeois revolution without paying attention to the role of the Lutheran reformers in the insurrection of 1525. So let us suppose, for a moment, that Engels was wrong about Luther, and let us suppose that the Stalinists are ignorant of Luther's position between 1521 and 1525.

The central question to be answered is that of Luther's position on State and Authority. Who was in authority, and why?

In June 1520, three years after he

had first publicly come out against the authority of the Pope, Luther wrote his appeal *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. Here his political position was quite clear: 'Because the worldly authority is ordained by God so that the wicked are punished and the pious protected, then that authority should be allowed to rule unhindered over the entire body of Christianity, excluding no one, be it Pope, bishop, priest, monk, nun or anyone. . . Every soul (I mean even the Pope's) should be subordinate to the authorities, for they do not carry the sword for nothing'. 'So we must say to the Pope and his people: "tu ora", you shall pray; to the Emperor and his people: "tu protege", you shall protect us; and to the common man: "tu labora", you shall work'. Put simply, the feudal state was to remain untouched; indeed, it was to be strengthened with the knowledge of the source of its authority.

This entire call to the nobility was nothing less than a declaration for nationalist absolutism; in it, Luther called for: a prohibition on sending money or goods from Germany to Rome, on pilgrimages and on the sellers of indulgences; the abolition of any legal powers of the Church in lay matters, and of the political powers of the Papacy in Europe; the secularisation of Church property; the abolition of usury; the reform of education and better care for the poor. The princes could no doubt live with the last demand if they also achieved the rest. And indeed, many of the nobility soon came over to Luther's positions and so protected him from the wrath of Pope and Empire.

Luther was absolutely tied to the political sentiments expressed in the Bible in Romans 13 ('For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power . . . for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil'), in Luke 20 ('Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's'), and in 1 Peter 2 ('Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake'). So when the Swabian peasantry rebelled and organised against the burden of feudalism in 1525, and



An allegory of the dream of Frederick the Wise (asleep in his palace bed), in which Martin Luther is shown inscribing his theses with a gigantic pen

wrote to Luther for his approval of their main demands, *'The Twelve Articles'*, his reaction was predictable — although the peasantry must have had a bitter shock.

The 'Twelve Articles' were simple demands for reform, the abolition of the worst feudal burdens, and a 'humble request' to be allowed to appoint preachers in the villages. Luther's reply to these articles addresses the 'princes and Lords' and then the peasantry. For the Princes, there is an admonition that God's wrath would be heaped upon them if they did not improve themselves, and a self-defence: 'This uproar was never my doing, but the murderous prophets (ie Muntzer and Schappeler) who are my enemies as much as yours, have got amongst this rabble. For that God's name, word and title cannot be taken in vain. . . You say that the authorities are very wicked and unsympathetic. I say: the fact that the authorities are wicked and unjust

does not excuse gatherings and uproar. For the punishment of evil is not just anyone's right, but only the task of the worldly authorities which carry the sword'. (Do not be surprised to find Sir Kenneth Newman quoting Luther the next time an inquiry into the activities of the police is demanded!).

'If you were Christians, then you would spurn the use of fist and sward, and stay true to Our Father, and advance your cause with God in prayer and say 'Thy Will be done' and 'Deliver us from evil Amen'.

The peasants' second Article — asking for the right to refuse the payment of the tithe if it was unjust — is condemned as 'pure robbery and public theft. For you wish to keep for yourselves the tithe, which is not yours but belongs to the authorities, and do with it what you like'. The third Article — the request for the abolition of serfdom — is 'impossible', since Jesus liberated only the

spirit and not the body. The remaining articles are passed over and recommended to the lawyers. The main argument is then that God would punish the wicked authorities, and the authorities would also punish the peasantry if they persisted in their uprising.

In April 1525, Luther wrote a commentary on one of the many worthless treaties between the peasant armies and the princes' 'Swabian League' forces. In this he stated that: 'Our peasants have no just cause at all, but have burdened themselves with mighty, heavy sins and aroused God's terrible and unbearable anger by breaking the loyalty, affection, oath and duty which they gave and swore to their lords, and have become disobedient.' The princes had begun to wield the sword which they had from god.

But the true bile of the bourgeois terrified by the prospect of revolution, of which Luther is an early

example, is reserved for the height of the uprising, in the vituperative article 'Against the Robbing and Murderous Hordes of Peasants' (May 1525), which was addressed by Luther to the princes, and concerned the 'violent peasantry' and 'mad dogs'. 'I will not stand in the way of those lords who can and will, without any prior reminder to right or justices, smite and punish these peasants, even if they do not accept my gospel, for they have the right to do so. Since the peasants no longer fight for the gospel, but have become openly disloyal, perjurious, disobedient, insurgent murderers, robbers and blasphemers, then even heathen lords have the right and power to punish them — yes, are in fact obliged to punish these rascals. That is why they carry the sword and are God's ministers over the wicked'. Luther even promised the status of Christian martyrs to those who died in fighting the peasants. 'So, dear lords, release them, save them, help them. Take pity on the poor people. Stab, strike, strangle them, who ever you are; if you die in doing so, bless you, for you can never achieve a more holy death, for you die in obedience to God's word and command'.

(Luther's enthusiasm was in fact wasted, since, by the time this call was published, the Swabian League in South Germany and Philip of Hesse in Thuringia and Franconia had already stabbed and strangled and defeated the main armies of the peasants and plebeians).

It has been argued both by Western theologians and East German historians that Luther did not betray the peasantry, since he never claimed to support or lead them in the first place. But that is scarcely the point. The movement to which Luther effectively unlocked the door in 1517 was the early bourgeois revolution. In this revolution, as in all bourgeois revolutions, the peasantry and the lower urban classes played the major role. They looked to the theoreticians and politicians of the bourgeois for leadership, and were repaid, when they tried to advance their own interests, by a vicious reaction amongst those leaders. There can be no doubt that Luther is an historical figure of major

importance — his work in standardising the German language, in reorganising education and in leading the attack on medieval philosophy, upon which so much of feudalism depended, cannot be ignored or underestimated. But it is pure cynicism to present Luther as a man of the people and not mention the simple fact that his entire philosophy opposed any change at all in the social structure.

The legacy of the Reformation is, ironically, summed up very well by the East German exhibition: 'Luther's faith and the movement of the people call for an order appropriate to them. That means: marrying and raising a family, establishing schools, teaching children and youth, collaborating with temporal authorities, and confess openly that this is right and in accordance with God's will.

This is how Luther saw it, this is the way it became reality, a reality that moulded the lives of townsmen, peasants, craftsmen and scholars for centuries'. Now, this statement is made without any other commentary. It can only be understood as an officially-approved statement. The reactionary nature of the official Reformation after 1525, despite its progress in education and the spiritual liberation of capital, is crudely reflected in the

petty-bourgeois morality that reigns in the Stalinist bureaucracies.

In 1975, the East Germans still saw Luther as a traitor, and Muntzer as the real reformer. The historians of the GDR still maintain high standards of Marxist and socialist analysis, and some of the recent works on Luther provide real insights into the motion of the Reformation. But it is questionable whether they can keep their heads above the rising tides of Stalinist reaction. Since 1975, the world economic crisis and the fear of the working class has propelled the Stalinists even further to the right, and they are locked in a dying embrace with religion — in Poland with the Pope, in East Germany with the Protestant Church, in Britain Monsignor Kent.

The Stalinists seem to be marching down the Biblical road to Damascus, struck with the revelation of God. They have transformed a 16th Century monk into a founding member of socialism. Their intention is to give historical legitimacy to the treacherous policy of peaceful co-existence, while at the same time to use religion to hold back the movement of the working class.

How else can one understand the exhibition statement: 'The church of Jesus Christ and the Workers' and Peasants' State are united in the service of mankind'?