

How Bloodthirsty was Thomas Müntzer ?

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Not infrequently, Thomas Müntzer is characterised as a deranged madman, expressing himself in bloodthirsty terms. This characterisation first saw light around 1521, and persists right up to the present time, largely unchallenged. ‘Bloodthirsty’ – a dictionary definition would say ‘an eager desire to shed blood’, or taking pleasure in bloodshed and violence, and provide a synonym of ‘murderous’, ‘cruel’ or ‘vicious’. More often than not, violent death is implicitly involved.

So how ‘bloodthirsty’ was Müntzer? To determine this, we need to examine two sources: firstly, his preserved letters and writings; secondly, reports by his contemporaries such as Luther, Melancthon and Agricola. These reports and writings cover the period 1519 to 1525. We shall see below that, with a couple of exceptions in the turmoil of early summer 1525, Müntzer’s writings yield very little evidence of anything that might be described as ‘bloodthirstiness’. But we shall also see that several of his contemporaries, largely in the Wittenberg clique, either considered him bloodthirsty or wished him to be seen as such.

Müntzer first came to public notice in April/May 1519, when he made an intervention against the Franciscan monks of Jüterbog. The tone of the report of one of the monks, Bernhard Dappen, was certainly offended, describing how Müntzer and – to a lesser extent – his colleague Franz Günther had condemned the upper echelons of the Roman Church, calling for regular Councils and examination of bishops. Criticism was also levelled at indulgences and at monks. But nothing in Dappen’s extensive report hints at any suggestion of violence or physical assault.¹ It should also be pointed out that Luther himself, when alerted to Müntzer’s activity in Jüterbog, did not consider the matter worth investigating.²

A year later, Müntzer was appointed to a pulpit in Zwickau. Here, reports soon began to emerge of Müntzer’s determined stance against monks and the old belief. In one of his first sermons, he preached that one ‘could cut a pound of flesh from the mouths of monks, and still leave plenty of mouth’. While this was pitching the matter strongly, it was far from a call to physically attack monks. But two months later, in July 1520, Müntzer felt obliged to defend himself in a letter to Luther. He said that Zwickau town-council had advised him to write the letter – not an impossible claim, since the councillors stood by Müntzer for quite some time. Müntzer asserts that his critics had been denouncing him on a daily basis, and that he had been called ‘inconstant and murderous’.³ Müntzer asked Luther to believe none of this, and only to believe that he was carrying out the work of reform, against the monks. There is no evidence that Luther ever replied to this letter, from which one might reasonably assume that, at that time, he saw nothing to complain about in Müntzer’s actions.

In December 1520, an act of violence took place in Zwickau in which Müntzer was at least partially involved. A priest from out of town, Niklas Hofer, had made the mistake of turning up to one of Müntzer’s sermons where he loudly castigated the congregation as ‘heretical scoundrels’. The congregation, quite probably without needing any encouragement from Müntzer, turned on Hofer and chased him round the town; he made his escape, and there were fears that he might have been killed or badly injured if he had not done so. However, such events were not unusual in the early years of the Reformation; Tom Scott points out that ‘such incidents, known collectively as *Pfaffenstürme*, occurred in

¹ Matheson, Müntzer’s Collected Works, pp.447-50

² TMKGA, 3, , p.54

³ Matheson, p.21

both Wittenberg and Erfurt between 1520 and 1523'.⁴ It is clear that Müntzer's preaching was impassioned, and perhaps of a tone which had not been seen in Zwickau before. He directed his criticisms at monks and the Humanist-cum-Lutheran preacher Egranus: Egranus and Müntzer had no love or respect for each other. But the town-council continued to support Müntzer well into 1521. In April of that year, however, matters came to a head; the windows on Müntzer's lodgings were smashed by supporters of Egranus, and a lengthy doggerel poem was distributed by them, in which Müntzer – now for the first time – was described a 'bloodthirsty' ('*O Thoma, du blutt durstiger man... nach blutt vorgiessen stett dein herz...*')⁵ Just what event or events prompted this accusation remains quite obscure. And evidently Müntzer was saying things which did not go down well in Wittenberg for, in January or February 1521, Johann Agricola found time to write to Müntzer – again: he had written to Müntzer in the preceding November, explicitly supporting him against Egranus, but advising him to moderate his tone a little.⁶ In his second letter now, Agricola felt obliged to take Müntzer to task for his anger and his frenzied attacks. In large script in the middle of the letter, quoting Acts 9 and a pre-Damascene Saul, he states: 'they affirmed that you breathe out nothing but slaughter and blood'.⁷ Agricola ends the letter by advising him to calm down a bit and not be so proud. What the 'slaughter and blood' actually referred to is again unknown, as is the identify of 'they' who accused him; but although the accusation clearly upset Agricola, it did not do so to the extent of producing a condemnation – merely a slap on the wrist.

In the end, Müntzer was expelled from Zwickau, while Egranus went off to a cushy job at Joachimsthal. Reports on Müntzer's activities between April 1521 and April 1523 are few and far between. None of them provide any specific evidence of 'bloodthirstiness', although there are hints that he managed to upset the allies of Luther and town authorities in Prague and across Saxony. His *Prague Manifesto*, which was written down in late 1521, is largely devoid of calls for retribution against the Papal church or even the followers of Luther. It does contain a couple of Old Testament quotations concerning God's wrath: the enemies of God "should be struck down" or "will be cast down", and "the time of the harvest is here". Not calm and measured, as Agricola had been recommending, but arguably not violent. The *Manifesto* concerns itself with highlighting the failures of the present church, and does not concern itself with the remedy. His letters of that time indicate no desire for violence, although several promote the idea that an Apocalyptic event, initiated by God, might sweep away the remnants of the old church, citing the Old Testament prophets and the Book of Revelations to support his arguments.⁸ But again, such end-time expectations were not unusual for the period.

When Müntzer took up his post as preacher in Allstedt in March/April 1523, his attention seemed turned almost exclusively on his reforms to the liturgy; from the evidence provided by his letters, and the reports of contemporaries, hot-headed attacks on possible enemies and critics simply did not occur. Indeed, his first printed work in Allstedt, his open letter to Stolberg, specifically discourages his supporters from taking direct action, urging them to feel the movement of the spirit before considering themselves as superior to the godless.⁹ In all of his other printed works up to the middle of 1524 – the *Deutsches Kirchenamt*, *Ordnung und Berechnung*, *Deutsche Evangelische Messe*, *Protestation oder Entbietung*, *Von dem Getichten Glauben* – there is absolutely nothing that could be construed as 'bloodthirsty' or violent.

⁴ Sctoo, Thomas Mungtzer, p.23

⁵ TMKGA, 3, pp.82-4

⁶ Matheson, pp.22-3

⁷ Matheson, p.30

⁸ See for example letter to Melanchthon, March 1522, Matheson, pp.43-6

⁹ Matheson, pp.60-4

Müntzer's focus here was on explaining how God's spirit was to be received by the Elect, and how Christianity could thereby be saved.

The one bump in the road took place when Count Ernst of Mansfeld attempted to stop 'his' people from attending Müntzer's reformed church services and sermons. Müntzer's letter to Ernst in September boasted that he would deal with Ernst 'a thousand times worse than Luther with the Pope'; but no violence is even suggested.¹⁰ In a follow-up letter to Electoral Prince Friedrich, he went so far as to suggest that if the princes took no action to defend the gospel, then 'the sword will be taken away [from the princes] and given to the people'.¹¹ Big words, certainly, and disloyal – but not bloodthirsty. By now, Luther was on Müntzer's case. In a letter of August 1523, he said that he had warned Hans Zeiss against giving Müntzer too much support, because Müntzer was a 'prophet' whom he could not abide, a man with 'mad' ideas expressed crudely. But even here Luther made no suggestion that Müntzer was violent or bloodthirsty.¹²

But in the summer of 1524, events moved fast. In late March came the destruction of the chapel at Mallerbach, for which no suspects could be found, and for which Müntzer was at no point considered even indirectly responsible by any of those interested in the investigation. In the summer came Müntzer's chance to persuade the princes of Saxony to join his crusade, in his *Sermon to the Princes*, of 13 July.¹³ Here, for once, Müntzer begins to be explicit: he suggests (a) that God will shatter the godless; and proposes (b) that the princes should use their swords to help along God's work. He notes once more that if the princes refuse to act, then the sword will be taken away from them, and that 'the enemies' will be strangled without mercy. Many of his Biblical citations are from the Old Testament. But he also quotes extensively from the New Testament (Luke 19, Matthew 18 etc), suggesting (with Jesus) that godless rulers, and priests and monks, should be killed.¹⁴ Immediately following this sermon, a crisis broke out in Sangerhausen, when Müntzer's supporters were obliged to flee to Allstedt to avoid persecution. Müntzer wrote several letters in the days that followed, some to Sangerhausen, others to Zeiss; in these letters, the 'oppressors' (agents of Duke Georg) are described as bloodthirsty tyrants; Müntzer is certain that 'the time has come when a bloodbath will befall this obstinate world because of its unbelief'.¹⁵ His letters also contain phrases about strangling oppressors like mad dogs, and warnings that those who have thirsted for blood (i.e. the oppressors) shall drink blood.

In July 1524, Müntzer wrote a letter, now lost, to Karlstadt. The letter appears to have been a request for Karlstadt to join with Müntzer in setting up some kind of regional "defence league", to defend and promote the more radical reform movement. Karlstadt replied (having had palpitations of horror, as he stated later)¹⁶ and firmly rejected any idea of leagues 'contrary to the divine will'. Karlstadt's congregation in Orlamünde replied separately, probably on the same date, and with much the same argument. Perhaps revealingly, the congregation suggested that, by agreeing to set up such leagues as Müntzer proposed, they would open the way for 'the tyrants' to accuse them of disturbance and rebellion; the tyrants would then be given the excuse to say 'Let them be throttled and slaughtered before they become too powerful for us to handle'.¹⁷ So the bloodthirsty ones here are not Müntzer and his allies, but the authorities, provoked by Müntzer.

¹⁰ Matheson, pp.66-7

¹¹ Matheson, p.69

¹² WA Briefe, Band 3, p.120

¹³ Matheson, pp.230-52

¹⁴ Matheson, p.251

¹⁵ Matheson, p.90

¹⁶ Matheson pp.91-2; also TMKGA, 3, pp.142-3

¹⁷ Matheson, p.94

It is hard to deny that an air of bloodthirstiness hovers around Müntzer's letters of July 1524. But let us take a look sideways. In June 1524, Luther had written an open letter to the princes of Saxony, calling on them to do something about Müntzer and his popularity.¹⁸ Luther, somewhat co-mingling the figures of the Zwickau radical Nikolaus Storch and Müntzer, suggests that 'this same Spirit [Müntzer] does not simply want to stick to words alone, but wants to threaten with his fist and set up a power against secular authority and straight away start a worldly rebellion ... I have indeed heard from this same spirit here in Wittenberg that he considered it necessary to complete the task with the sword.' Referring – probably – to the destruction of the Mallerbach chapel, he writes that 'the fruit of the Allstedt Spirit [is] that he wants to strike out with his fist and break down timber and stone'. Luther calls on the princes to intervene, otherwise

the Allstedt Spirit would accomplish nothing other than bloodshed, and those who did not hear his heavenly word would have to be strangled so that the people of God did not have to put up with such offences.

It is clear here that Luther, even before the events of July, had decided that Müntzer was a dangerous and bloodthirsty villain. But it is actually quite difficult to see where he found the evidence, apart from the episode in Zwickau; in Allstedt, so far, Müntzer was not implicated in any acts of violence against living people. And it is quite a leap from breaking down 'timber and stone' to supposedly 'strangling' those who did not agree.

Not receiving an immediate response from Friedrich or Johann, Luther followed up this admonition to the princes with a much more explicit letter to the town-council of Mühlhausen, once he discovered that Müntzer had relocated there. His open letter to Mühlhausen, of 21 August 1524, contains the following warning:

take care with this false spirit and prophet, who goes around in sheep's clothing but is underneath a ravening wolf. For in many places, especially in Zwickau and recently in Allstedt, he has proven what kind of tree he is, for he brings forth no other fruit than murder and rebellion, and calls for the shedding of blood, all of which he openly preached, wrote and sang in Allstedt... [He] has not achieved one tiny thing up until now, nor borne any fruit, except that he wishes to murder, as you will be able to learn from Zwickau and Allstedt.¹⁹

Luther's suggestion that Müntzer called for the shedding of blood 'in song' (*gesungen*) is curious. A later accusation made by Agricola, in 1525, stated that when Müntzer's supporters 'sang the Mass in Allstedt, they always sang afterwards "We must strike the princes dead and burn down their houses"'.²⁰ However, Hans Zeiss is on record, in August 1524, denying that Müntzer had been preaching against tyrants etc in his Mass – the only Mass he ever conducted was the one that was printed. 'I have no knowledge of him having encouraged people to sing, in one of his Masses, that they should strike their princes dead, and have never heard of such a thing while he was here.'²¹

Remarkably, even in Müntzer's two major pamphlets of autumn 1524 – the *Exposé of False Faith*, and *Vindication and Refutation* – there is little evidence of a desire to kill the godless or shed blood. In the former pamphlet, Müntzer suggests once more that the mighty will be cast down from their thrones by

¹⁸ WA, Band 15, pp.210-21

¹⁹ WA, Band 15, pp.238-40

²⁰ Agricola, *Auslegung des XIX Psalm*, in Ludwig Fischer (ed.), *Lutherische Pamphlete* (1976), p.58

²¹ TMKGA, 3, p.178

God, and that ‘a miraculous victory will be won and the might of the godless tyrants cast down.’²² This is a call for social revolution, aided by God’s wrath; but it is not a call for mass-slaughter. The latter pamphlet was essentially an attack on Luther and his courting of the princes, and only at one point does Müntzer reiterate that ‘as I expounded most clearly to the princes ... [they] are not lords over the sword, but servants of it... anyone spilling innocent blood will be accountable to God’.²³

In the period between December 1524 and April 1525, little is heard of Müntzer beyond a handful of letters and some general reports of activity – alongside Heinrich Pfeiffer – in Mühlhausen. None of those letters suggest bloodthirstiness. But in the four weeks leading up to the battle of Frankenhausen, Müntzer’s letters do become more obviously ‘bloodthirsty’. But not, let it be said, remarkably so: by now, Müntzer and the rebellious peasantry were effectively engaged in a war, in which people (overwhelmingly peasants) were being killed all across the country, in hundreds and thousands. It is little surprise to find Müntzer’s words becoming more heated.

His letter addressed to Allstedt (also known as the ‘letter to the miners’), dated 26 April, is well-known. In it, Müntzer calls for swords to be raised against the ‘godless evil-doers’: ‘As long as they live, it is impossible for you to rid yourselves of the fear of man.’²⁴ Surprisingly, that one phrase ‘as long as they live’, is the most obviously bloodthirsty in the whole letter; the rest of his call to action is simply a conscious effort to stir up enthusiasm for the armed uprising. And even his equally provocative letters to the cousins Ernst and Albrecht of Mansfeld, dated 12 May, do not threaten them with death, only with the force of the peasantry; he leaves both men with an option to surrender and repent. Death or the spilling of blood is not actually mentioned or threatened.²⁵

(We will leave Müntzer’s “Confession” out of this discussion, in which he admits to calling for the violent death of his opponents: the whole concoction is a muddle of actual statements made by Müntzer and suggestions made by inquisitors.)

But we do need to remember here that Müntzer was not the only one agitating for violent retribution against sinners. It is impossible to ignore in this context the shameful pamphlet by Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (*Wider die ränberischen und mörderischen Rotten der Bauern*), of May 1525, in which he writes: ‘So, dear lords, redeem us, save us, help us, take pity on the poor people, stab, smite, strangle, every one of you! And if you die in so doing, then it is good, for there is no holier death to be had.’²⁶ It is very difficult indeed not to accuse Luther of hypocrisy, when he calls out Müntzer as bloodthirsty, yet simultaneously promotes a bloodbath against thousands of ordinary people. This was not some minor blip, or misstep on his part: as late as 1541, Luther was complacently agreeing with Melancthon that Anabaptists should be punished ‘with the sword’.²⁷ To a significant degree, ‘bloodthirsty’ calls for the death of opponents was a feature of those times. But who actually spilled the blood of tens of thousands of peasants in 1525, and who applauded it? Why, then, should Müntzer be singled out?

In conclusion then: Müntzer was demonstrably intemperate, over-enthusiastic, hot-headed, undiplomatic, careless of consequences, hopeful of God’s punishment of sinners; but was he really any ‘bloodthirstier’ than many of his contemporaries, Luther included? From the evidence left in his letters

²² Matheson, p.260

²³ Matheson, pp.334-5

²⁴ Matheson, p.142

²⁵ Matheson, pp.154-7

²⁶ WA, 18, p.358

²⁷ See: Karl Bretschneider (ed.) *Corpus Reformatorum*, Bd.4, (Halle 1837) pp.737-40

and printed works, he was for the most part a thoughtful and considerate man, engrossed in mystical and spiritual reflections, angry at the corruption of church institutions and church teaching, and fully expecting God to deal out appropriate punishment. On the few occasions when – in writing – he expressed a desire to see the ‘godless’ punished by anyone other than God, he was writing at a time of extreme stress.

The bulk of the evidence for bloodthirstiness lies in contemporary reports. But those contemporary reports suffer from having very little detail behind them. This is not to say that they might not be true. But one must also consider the threshold for defining bloodthirstiness among his immediate audience, or with those who wrote the second-hand reports. For peace-loving Karlstadt, for example, the bar was quite low. And for Luther, anything that smacked of anti-authoritarianism was right up there with murder. So was it ‘bloodthirsty’ just to call for monks and priests to be chased through the streets? Or was it in calling for the godless tyrants to be killed, by the hand of God or men? Or was it simply calling for the root-and-branch reform of church and state, for establishing leagues and swearing oaths? Some of the evidence strongly suggests that it was the latter: rebellion in the 16th century was easily capable of turning into a bloodbath, but only when it was suppressed. As indeed it remains so today.

So perhaps we should totally avoid the words ‘bloodthirsty’ or ‘blood-curdling’ in our descriptions of Müntzer; at the very least, we need to remember the dialectic of history. Müntzer – amongst others – was guilty of ‘othering’, of setting the ‘the Elect’ against ‘the godless’, and his tone can be described as ‘hectoring’, and the man himself as demagogic. But is that something that requires us to make a moral judgement on him? Can we really equate Müntzer with (say) Trump or Orbán or Milei or any other more or less dangerous demagogue of the 21st century? Is not one of the traits of demagoguery that it rails against social structures and institutions while simultaneously being in collusion with those very structures? Müntzer was a man firmly of his times, slightly over-written indeed, but not outrageously so. You cannot separate the Müntzer who was a liturgist, mystical thinker, concerned parish priest and educator from the Müntzer who was a would-be leader of a rebellious population and denouncer of social privilege and theological humbug. Nor can you somehow transpose Müntzer into the present day: if he turned up today in Thuringia, he would very quickly be identified as a deluded – and yes: bloodthirsty! – right-wing fanatic. But that is not what he was in – and for – 1525. Social, economic and political conditions then and now are beyond different. Of course it is legitimate, even vital, to use historical examples to warn the present-day of the many ways to go wrong. Perhaps it is legitimate to examine Müntzer’s language, his threats and promises, and his occasional calls for a violent end to the ‘others’, and use that study to highlight the unacceptable and disturbing aspects in the language and attitudes of modern fanatics. But to condemn Müntzer along with these new fanatics is, I would argue, a step too far.