

Müntzer and his brothers: Johann Zeiss and Christoph Meinhard

1. Introduction

Much of Thomas Müntzer's life remains shrouded in mystery, subject to speculation both wild and rational; and so, too, the collection of letters written to and by Müntzer contains much that is frustratingly obscure. (The 'collection' referred to here and below is Volume 2 of the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* of Müntzer's works; that volume was edited by Siegfried Bräuer and Manfred Kobuch, and published in 2010. It supersedes and improves on a small number of earlier editions of Müntzer's letters.) Among the several curiosities highlighted within the correspondence is Müntzer's relationship with two men: Johann Zeiss, the tax-collector and ducal administrator of Allstedt; and Zeiss' cousin, Christoph Meinhard, entrepreneur and owner of an ironworks in the town of Eisleben. In the 103 letters which constitute the complete collection of Müntzer's preserved correspondence (58 were written by, or under the direction of, Müntzer, the remainder were addressed to him), there are 81 different correspondents (this includes both individuals and corporate bodies – for example, the town-council of Allstedt). But the two correspondents having the largest number of letters were Zeiss and Meinhard. The next most frequent personal correspondents were Johann Agricola and Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. (Omitted from this frequency analysis are letters that were written to/from groups or corporate bodies.)

Two things must be said here about the collection of correspondence. Firstly, the editors of the collection have used internal evidence from the preserved letters and from other remarks by Müntzer to identify a further 49 letters which must have existed, but which are now missing. Among those identifiably missing are two from Zeiss to Müntzer, and three from Meinhard to Müntzer:

Correspondent [cc]	Extant from [cc] to TM	Missing from [cc] to TM	Extant from TM to [cc]	Missing from TM to [cc]	Total
Zeiss	-	2	4	1	7
Meinhard	-	3	3	1	7
Agricola	2	1	-	2	5
Karlstadt	2	-	1	2	5

It is an absolute certainty that many other items of correspondence have been lost. Just how many, is an impossible question to answer. That situation means that the relatively high number of letters exchanged with Zeiss and Meinhard could pale into insignificance against other correspondents. However, we can only analyse the situation that exists. One of the more interesting features of the letters known to be missing is that all of those written to Müntzer by Zeiss and Meinhard have gone astray: we only have Müntzer's side of the exchange. Quite why this should be is debated below.

The second question to raise about the collection is a lack of clarity about the provenance of the letters written by Müntzer to the various addressees. As 500 years have passed since the letters were written and first gathered together by various authorities, there is only one reliable way of distinguishing between originals of letters retained by the addressees and copies which Müntzer kept for himself (Müntzer himself suggests on a couple of occasions that he kept, or intended to keep, copies). The best test is the presence, or otherwise, of remains of a seal, or sealing wax, in addition to an address being

written on the obverse side of the paper. While the question is not entirely relevant to the subject under debate; but the answer could give us an insight into what correspondence Müntzer himself considered sufficiently important that he kept copies of them.

2. Johann Zeiss

Johann Zeiss (also referred to as ‘Hans’) was appointed to the post of ‘Schosser’ – that is, local tax-collector for the Saxon government and official representative of Duke Johann – in Allstedt at the beginning of May 1513. He succeeded Wolf von Selmenitz in this role. It is not known when he was born, nor is anything known of his education and career up to 1513. One might speculate that he was born somewhere in the 1480s. During the period of the early Reformation – that is, from 1517 through to 1525 – Zeiss was an enthusiastic supporter of church reforms; indeed, from the time of Müntzer’s arrival in Allstedt, he seems to have been a supporter of the more radical reform movement. In 1524, Zeiss became embroiled in a number of *causes célèbres* of the radical Reformation in Thuringia, and found himself torn between his duties and his inclinations. He left his position as ‘Schosser’ in Allstedt in May or June 1525, although the nature and timing of his departure is not documented: but the occasional evidence of a falling out between Zeiss and his employer during the early part of 1515 suggests strongly that he would not have survived in post for long after the defeat of the Thuringian peasantry in May of 1525. Surprisingly, perhaps, Luther took an interest in Zeiss’ fate: on 30 May 1525, in a letter to Rühel, Luther writes that he has heard that Zeiss had been executed – he hoped not (it turned out to be a false report).¹ Then, on 5 June, he wrote again to Rühel, enclosing a letter which he hoped would persuade Duke Johann’s son (Johann Friedrich) to be lenient on Zeiss: one must suppose that Zeiss was, at the very least, under some suspicion, if not actually arrested. ² Zeiss reappears once more in the historical record, reported as present on 8 December 1525 at the interrogation of a man of Allstedt who had been accused of vilifying Friedrich the Wise. ³ Thereafter, nothing more is recorded of his life until he was apparently set upon, arrested and executed by one of the counts of Stolberg during the Schmalkaldic War, ca. 1546/47.⁴

We shall explore Müntzer’s letters to Zeiss in more detail shortly. First we need to look at Zeiss’ reaction to a number of crises which erupted in Allstedt during the Müntzer years.

The first of these was the affair of the Mallerbach chapel, owned and operated by the local Cistercian nuns based at the nearby Naundorf nunnery; in 1523, probably influenced by Müntzer’s sermons, the citizens of Allstedt had refused to pay the customary tithe owed to the convent. This obviously did not go down well with the abbess. She made strong and repeated representations to Duke Johann and Prince Friedrich, and in the end Friedrich ordered the tithe to be paid. And this did not go down well in the town. Such was the spirit of anti-monasticism at the time, that swift revenge was taken on the abbess and her nunnery. During the night of 24 March 1524, the Mallerbach chapel, just outside Allstedt, was ransacked and set alight. There is naturally some confusion about the events – those who took part could not be expected to give a faithful account. But contemporary reports tell of a band of men arriving after dark and advising the elderly watchman to take to his heels. The men then burned the chapel to the ground.

The abbess immediately complained, and Hans Zeiss as the duke’s local representative was obliged to investigate. This he did, in a not entirely satisfactory manner. Over the next couple of months, he,

along with the town-council and the mayor, corresponded on the affair with Duke Johann in Weimar and Prince Friedrich in Lochau.

On 11 April 1524, a letter co-signed by Zeiss and the leading citizens of Allstedt was sent to Friedrich the Wise. This was the first official report put together by Zeiss on the events at Mallerbach. It was rather bullish in tone: the signatories complained that the abbess had falsely accused them because she was still resentful about the previous non-payment of the tithe; that the chapel and a nearby tower were already in a state of disrepair; that the contents of the chapel had already been removed by the authority of the abbess, and the watchman told to leave; and that it was probable that agents of the abbess herself had set fire to the place.⁵ They appealed for Friedrich's support against the machinations of the abbess and her provost. As a first attempt at shifting blame, it was a bold stroke; but it failed to persuade the Saxon authorities. On 9 May, therefore, Zeiss and the Allstedt officials were instructed to appear before Duke Johann at Weimar, where they were once more very strongly encouraged to find the perpetrators (the abbess of Naundorf was also in attendance.). Two weeks later, however, the group wrote to Johann, assuring him that they had been doing their best to find the culprits, who – they stated unequivocally – were not citizens of Allstedt. They asked Johann for a delay of two to three more weeks, since they were anxious not to move too quickly and risk causing upheaval in the town. Barely a week had gone by (29 May) before Zeiss personally wrote again to Johann, denying an accusation that he was dragging his heels and obstructing the investigation, and promising to find the culprits; somewhat unconvincingly, he reminded Johann of the premature deaths of the two previous incumbents of his post, as one of the potential risks of moving too fast. But it was clear that he was now coming under considerable pressure to resolve the matter; so much, indeed, that he and the town council rapidly found themselves in opposing camps.

It is highly likely that Müntzer himself was at least advising the council at this time. On 14 June, completely by-passing Zeiss, a letter was sent by 'the council and whole parish of Allstedt' to Duke Johann giving their final judgement on the Mallerbach affair. While not in Müntzer's handwriting (in fact, it was in the handwriting of his secretary, Ambrosius Emmen), the letter was probably largely his work. The Cistercian nuns were condemned for laying false accusations at Allstedt's door, even after the citizens had faithfully paid them tithes and taxes; and the reason for the nuns' infamy was 'so that they could advance their godless and unchristian cause hatefully and jealously and present it to Your Grace as something good'.⁶ The councillors now urged the duke to punish the 'criminals and the godless, for the honour and protection of the pious' – i.e. not the arsonists, but the abbess and her allies.

In the meantime, however, Zeiss had made a bold move: on 11 June he had arrested one of the town councillors, a master-mason named Ciliax Knauth, on suspicion of being involved in the destruction of Mallerbach; it seems that the town magistrate, Nikolaus Rückert, was complicit in Zeiss' plan. On 13 June, a letter from the council to Zeiss took note that he had called in reinforcements from the surrounding villages; they advised Zeiss that they considered this to be a threat against them; they even demanded a written note of safe passage, to attend a meeting with him. These reinforcements comprised peasants and villagers from the surrounding district; Zeiss obviously suspected some adverse reaction to Knauth's arrest. Despite his best plans, things immediately went horribly wrong for Zeiss. On the 14th, the townspeople of Allstedt took issue with developments, the alarm bells were rung, and supporters of both town-council and Müntzer appeared on the streets, armed with whatever they could find. After several hours of demonstration, stand-off and negotiation between castle and town, the excitement died down. On the 15th, Zeiss took himself off to Weimar, to report in person to Duke Johann, from whom he eventually received permission to release the unfortunate Knauth, and fine him instead. Eleven days

later, he wrote to Friedrich, explaining the whole situation, and suggesting that there was still a very real danger of the whole thing turning into a major uprising against authority.

Thereafter, things slowly settled down. Friedrich and Johann wrote to each other several times in June, the latter urging decisive action, the former agreeing to do something – but being entirely vague on the details. The best Friedrich could offer was a stiff letter to the mayor and town-council, written on 27 June, urging them to stop being obstructive and just find the culprits. Johann for his part, put it strongly to Friedrich that Zeiss was shirking his responsibilities.

Zeiss had done his best to maintain an equilibrium: he had tried to head off the investigation; he had tried to delay it; but ultimately, as ducal representative, he had to be seen to be doing something; his attempt to control the situation using villagers went badly wrong. But it is worthy of note that, in the same letter to Friedrich in which he warned of grave civil consequences, he also proposed that Müntzer be permitted to state his religious views, in public, against the Lutherans. This was something that Müntzer himself had several times demanded. In short, Zeiss considered that the turmoil was not merely a matter of criminal misconduct; the cause of the unrest ran far deeper, and its roots lay in the radical reform movement – a movement which he strongly supported.

Barely had the repercussions from Mallerbach died down than Zeiss found himself facing yet another crisis. This was triggered by events in the small town of Sangerhausen, some 12 kms to the north of Allstedt. Since February, the Catholic Duke Georg had been fulminating at the reforming spirit in ‘his’ town of Sangerhausen, and of particular concern was the fact that the residents were in the habit of attending Müntzer’s reformed church services down the road; additionally, a small group of ‘Müntzerites’ had been formed in Sangerhausen, under the leadership of the preacher Tilo Banse. Georg decided the time had come to break up this movement; he ordered the civil authorities in Sangerhausen to arrest Banse. On 15 July, Banse’s supporters began to flee the town. Many of them headed straight for Allstedt, where they felt certain of asylum. Sadly, like so many modern refugees, they found asylum to be not what they had hoped. They were initially given a warm welcome in Allstedt. But this influx only piled more pressure on Hans Zeiss, probably still nervous after the Mallerbach affair. The pressure came not just from how he thought Duke Johann might react, but also from the authorities in Sangerhausen itself, the representatives of Duke Georg now insisting that the refugees be sent back. Within a week, Zeiss was preparing to accede to these demands. Müntzer, who wrote a number of letters to Zeiss during these critical days, was fully aware of Zeiss’ predicament and of the fact that he was preparing to send the refugees back home; but, very curiously, Müntzer did not condemn Zeiss outright; instead, the letters are remarkably calm in tone.

One immediate result of this crisis, however, was the establishment by Müntzer of a ‘defence league’, designed to defend the pious (and this included ‘pious administrators’ such as Zeiss) against the attacks of the tyrants. This is not the place to discuss or describe this league; it is sufficient to state that Müntzer openly proposed its formation to Zeiss. The league was founded on 24 July, and immediately had 500 members, inclusive of townspeople, refugees and miners from outlying districts. And – possibly, although not certainly – Zeiss himself (in his confession of May 1525, Müntzer stated that Zeiss had joined the league, although Zeiss had ‘at first complained about it’; this statement should be treated with some circumspection, however).⁷ In a letter dated 25 July, Müntzer advised Zeiss to tell the princes that they too must defend the reforms, ‘for otherwise there will be much trouble and labour, and Germany will be made worse than a slaughterhouse’. This letter was later passed on by Zeiss to his superiors as ‘a lesson on how to avoid future riot in a godly manner.’⁸

From the perspective of the civil authorities in Weimar, things in Allstedt were going from bad to worse. It probably did not help matters that Müntzer had preached a sermon before Duke Johann and his son, in Allstedt in mid-July, in which he called on the princes to defend the gospel – by joining his league. This, on top of the Mallerbach and Sangerhausen affairs, led inexorably to Duke Johann of Saxony summoning all the parties involved to individual interviews in Weimar. The interviewees comprised Müntzer, Zeiss, Rückert and leading members of the town-council; all appearing for questioning on the final day of July and the first of August; Müntzer was interviewed separately from everyone else. The questions posed to everyone concerned Müntzer, his radical reformed preaching and its effects on civil order. After a couple of days of fact-gathering, decisions were made. It was made clear that Müntzer's activities were no longer to be tolerated. The print-shop which had been set up in Allstedt by Müntzer was ordered to be shut down; to this, however, the councillors objected, since they had invested 300 guilders in the publication of Müntzer's liturgies, at that time being printed; so the printing was permitted to complete. The party then returned home to Allstedt, where, on 3 August, Zeiss and the council wrote to Friedrich, asking politely once more that Müntzer be given the opportunity to state his views, in public, in debate with the leaders of the Wittenberg movement. Given that Johann had very clearly hinted that Müntzer was *person non grata* in Allstedt, this last-ditch attempt by Zeiss and the councillors seems brave. It did little good: Friedrich wrote to Zeiss on 9 August, pointing out that his continuing defence of Müntzer had not gone unnoticed, 'even though you have been warned about it,'⁹ and ordering him to obey Johann's instructions.

As it turned out, Müntzer freed Zeiss from his dilemma; to the surprise of town-council and Zeiss, Müntzer left the town of Allstedt in the night of 7/8 August, judging that he could make no further progress there. With this, Zeiss' immediate interest in Müntzer came to an end; notwithstanding which, he continued to keep an eye on Müntzer's activities. In late August, he wrote to Friedrich, giving him the full story of Müntzer's sudden departure, but also pointing out that two neighbouring Catholic lords, encouraged by the decisions against Müntzer, were now making things difficult for the reform movement in and around Allstedt; he also took the time to advise the prince that Simon Haferitz, Müntzer's fellow preacher in Allstedt (to whom Johann and Friedrich had also objected) had now firmly distanced himself from Müntzer.¹⁰ Whether this last statement had any truth in it at all, is debatable; but at least it served to ease the pressure on Zeiss. A couple of days later, he wrote to Johann, giving him all the details and sending him a copy of Müntzer's now printed *German Evangelical Mass*. Zeiss signs off with the unequivocal statement that 'the people have been utterly poisoned by his teaching'.¹¹ This seems to be a pivotal moment in Zeiss' relationship with Müntzer – when he finds himself suddenly abandoned by the man whom he had clearly admired, left to face the music by himself, now able only to condemn Müntzer for his failure.

We turn now to the letters which Müntzer wrote to Zeiss. As noted above, four of these have survived, one from December 1523, the rest from July 1524. Also as noted above, we have no preserved letters from Zeiss to Müntzer, although these must have existed. We can only speculate why this should be so. As far as is known, all the letters which Müntzer had kept, either in his house in Mühlhausen, or in the satchel which he carried to Frankenhausen, were gathered up by the agents of Duke Georg; presumably all of these were then taken off to Georg's archives. If Zeiss' letters had been amongst this trove, then surely Georg would have had no interest in suppressing information about a supporter of radical reforms in a position of Ernestine governmental trust. And if Zeiss' letters were not in fact amongst all the others – then why not? Had Müntzer himself destroyed or hidden them, perhaps having belatedly discovered that Zeiss was not the supporter he had imagined? We have simply no idea.

The first letter written by Müntzer to Zeiss is dated 2 December 1523. It is self-evidently the continuation of a discussion between the two on the matter of suffering and faith. Two things immediately strike the reader about this letter: there is in Müntzer's words a distinct tone of confidence that Zeiss would fully understand the theological points in question; and there is a confidentiality in it as well – he signs off with the suggestion that 'Let us leave the matter there, and let us take care to always keep copies of our correspondence'.¹² (That final suggestion has turned out to be somewhat ironic. However, it may also explain just why so many of letters written by Müntzer have been preserved.) In a way, Zeiss was being elevated into the position of both a fellow-thinker and also a man of theological understanding. But what is most noteworthy about the letter is the fact that the bulk of it was published openly at the back of Müntzer's pamphlet 'On Counterfeit Faith' (*Von dem getichtten glawben*) in early 1524. It is unlikely that Zeiss would have wholeheartedly agreed with this move at the time; certainly not in retrospect.

The remaining letters from Müntzer to Zeiss all date from the third week of July 1524, when the crisis at Sangerhausen had erupted. No further letters are preserved from the intervening seven months, but we can be certain that there were some. This new tranche of letters primarily advises Zeiss on how to deal with the refugees from Sangerhausen. Müntzer grounds his advice in theological understanding, with the view that true Christians should not bow down to tyrants. There are some immediate practical suggestions here, but also some discussion on how the elect – and administrators – should behave in the face of oppression. 'He who does not risk his neck in God's cause will also not be confirmed in his faith.'¹³ And in the middle of all this upheaval, Müntzer answers Zeiss' 'four questions' (now lost), which once again revolved around despair, suffering and the testing of faith. That Zeiss found the time, amidst all these events, to pose these questions, is astonishing; Müntzer's preparedness to answer them, less so.

The letters between Müntzer and Zeiss which have survived, therefore, display nothing less than an almost undiminished belief on Müntzer's part that Zeiss understood the necessity of defending 'true faith' and that he would act accordingly. Even when chastising Zeiss for his probable betrayal of the Sangerhausen refugees, Müntzer stopped well short of condemning him. All of these letters are signed 'your brother' – *frater tuus*. However, having left Allstedt in a hurry, Müntzer seems no longer to kept in touch with Zeiss; and vice versa.

Having barely survived several crises during 1524, Zeiss was understandably less enthusiastic in his attitude to the tumultuous events of 1525. But his comments on these are not without some interest. In early March 1525, for example, Zeiss wrote to Spalatin – secretary to Friedrich the Wise – informing him of Müntzer's return from south-west Germany to Mühlhausen, and the further activities of Müntzer and Pfeiffer in that town. He suggested to Spalatin that the best thing to be done now was to block the roads leading to Mühlhausen, to prevent the formation of a dangerous army of radicals (amongst whom Zeiss even imagined Karlstadt!); and he ends up describing Müntzer as an agent of the devil.¹⁴ But the new, cautious Zeiss found himself in deep water when, on 5 May 1525, he had to report to Friedrich the Wise that all the men of Allstedt, excepting perhaps 'ten or twelve', had gone off to Mühlhausen to join Müntzer's forces.¹⁵ Two days later, he wrote once more to the prince, advising him that, of all the bands of rebels in the region, that of Mühlhausen was by far the most dangerous. By now, therefore, Zeiss had become quite the expert on Müntzer, and was desperate to use his knowledge to distance himself from the rebel leader.

And then we come to another letter, also dated 5 May, and allegedly written by Zeiss. It is addressed to Zeiss' cousin Christoph Meinhard in Eisleben – of whom more shortly. It is a curious document, not least since it turned up in an archive of 'painful confessions' (*Peinliche Urgichten*) in Dresden.¹⁶ Whose

painful confession? Why was it classified as a confession at all, or was it wrongly catalogued? The physical archival evidence indicates that this was a letter delivered to Schlotheim – where the princes' army was encamped prior to vanquishing Mühlhausen in May 1525 – and that it formed part of a bundle of letters, including three written by Müntzer which had been found in his satchel. But it need not necessarily be a letter that was ever in Müntzer's possession – indeed, the likelihood is that it was added in to the bundle later.¹⁷

One could speculate that the document is some kind of forgery, designed to implicate either Zeiss, or Meinhard, or both, in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the peasant uprising. The document is very clearly in the form of a letter: what we do not know is whether it was actually written by Zeiss. In it, the writer states that 'God will thrust the mighty from their seats and raise up the humble', that the rebels intend to have no lords, that all the mighty must fall. He then describes with some breathlessness the build-up of the rebel forces at Frankenhausen – which lies only 20 kms as the crow flies from Allstedt. He talks of 5,000 men already gathered there, with the expectation of a further 100,000 arriving; he talks of their determination to storm and destroy castles and monasteries. But, he states in a relatively sober aside, Müntzer was not the leader of this army – he was merely a preacher, one amongst many in the army, and the rebels did not consider him as anyone special. He signs off by advising Meinhard to keep up his courage.

There are several possible interpretations of this letter. Firstly, that its very existence served to prove to the authorities that Zeiss himself was supportive of the rebel armies. Another interpretation could be that Zeiss was simply overawed by these truly momentous events, and agitated by the threats and aspirations voiced by the rebels, all of which he takes at face-value. I would incline to the second view: apart from anything else, Zeiss intersperses his rather excited account with such observations as 'the unbridled army storms monasteries, seeking only their own profit'. These are not the words of a sympathiser. He also uses the phrase 'it has been reported to me', which suggests that much of what he writes is reported speech, and not necessarily his own views; similarly, his occasional use of the word 'etc', indicates that he and Meinhard were fully familiar with, but may not have supported, the incomplete phrases and arguments. This is not to say that Zeiss did not believe what he was being told: in those early days of May, it seemed entirely possible to all concerned – including Friedrich the Wise himself – that the last days had come and the social order was about to be overthrown.

If this letter was written on 5 May, then a report from the following day might shed more light on Zeiss' intentions.¹⁸ This is a statement made by someone claiming to be Zeiss' brother, who turned up in Frankenhausen on 6 May, bearing a message from Zeiss. According to this statement, the leaders of the Frankenhausen army were petitioned by Zeiss to be lenient towards those communities and lords who had espoused the religious reforms (i.e. followers of Luther). The messenger's plea was heard and discussed by the captains of the army, and a decision made to respect this request. Satisfied with that response, Zeiss' brother departed. We have not heard of Zeiss' brother before this intervention, nor do we hear of him again. Was he really a brother, or was he simply a 'brother-in-arms'? Was he, conceivably, Zeiss himself? – on balance probably not: he would run the danger of being recognised. Regardless of his relationship, had the messenger really been sent by Zeiss? Or was it a desperate stroke by one of the Lutheran princes or lords? It is hard to reconcile this request with Zeiss' panicky letter of just 24 hours earlier; hard, but not impossible. If Zeiss, having written to Meinhard, had then poured a stiff drink and told himself to get a grip, he might very well have sent someone off to Frankenhausen to avert what he would perceive as a catastrophe for reformed religion. Alternatively, he may have been leaned on by a higher authority to undertake such a move. That the peasant leaders readily agreed to the request does

indicate that it was not outlandish; whether Müntzer would have agreed, had he then been at Frankenhausen, is another question.

Regardless, almost, of the interpretations put on these two reports from early May, it is clear that Zeiss no longer considered Müntzer to be a man worth supporting; quite the opposite. But putting some distance between himself and Müntzer came too late in the day; with the defeat of the Thuringian uprising by the end of May, Zeiss found himself seeking alternative employment. His successor, Bernhardin Walde, previously a secretary in Weimar, was already in post by 9 June 1525, assiduously interrogating and torturing members of Müntzer's league.¹⁹

3. Christoph Meinhard

Christoph Meinhard was reputedly a cousin of Johann Zeiss. He was also the wealthy owner of an ironworks in the town of Eisleben, which lies about 20 kms north-east of Allstedt; although the size of his enterprises had shrunk during the second decade of the century, he was still a man of significant means.²⁰ He is known to have matriculated at Leipzig University in 1495, so we can guess that he was born in the mid-1470s; he was also acquainted with the Luther family, through Luther's brother Jacob – a common interest in mining and smelting bringing them together. Business also brought him occasionally to Allstedt, where he may well have taken the opportunity to attend Müntzer's sermons. Meinhard died in early 1527. In 1523/24, Meinhard was in correspondence with Müntzer; the two had probably been introduced by Zeiss, although it is not impossible that their acquaintance stretched back to 1521. Three letters from Müntzer to Meinhard are preserved; evidence indicates that there were at least three other letters, now vanished, from Meinhard to Müntzer. As with Zeiss, there is no explanation for their disappearance; but there is nothing to suggest that the two men had fallen out, as was most likely the case with Zeiss.

The first letter to Meinhard which we have was dated 14 December 1523 – not long, indeed, after Müntzer's first preserved letter to Zeiss.²¹ It was addressed to his 'dear brother', and is clearly an answer to questions that Meinhard had raised concerning Purgatory and the fate of the soul after death. This debate was probably triggered by widespread concern about how to remember the Dead, after Luther had come out strongly against the festival of All Souls; and the timing of Meinhard's questions could therefore have arisen from personal doubts about the most recent (2 November) All Souls' Day.²² Müntzer provides the iron-master with a short summary of the requirements for true faith and encourages him to embrace suffering and spiritual crisis. He signs off by invoking the protection of God on Meinhard, his wife and children.

The next letter is dated 30 May 1524, and is this time addressed to his 'courageous brother', and refers once more to a letter or letters from Meinhard, now missing.²³ This letter is also known as 'An Interpretation of the 19th Psalm'; this is the title under which it was published, by Johann Agricola, after Müntzer's death; more on that publication shortly. Once more, the letter is theological in content; it describes Müntzer's view of true belief, citing the Bible – and in particular Psalm 19 – and leaning heavily on the mystical traditions of Tauler and Suso. This letter is less personal than the previous one, more focussed on theological argument. The letter ends with the intriguing words: 'So now you have a short explanation of the 18th [i.e. 19th] Psalm. Send me a duplicate or copy of it.' Müntzer may have intended to publish it; but we have no idea whether Meinhard sent him a copy, as requested. Ultimately however, as we shall see, a copy was indeed printed.

The third and final letter to Meinhard was written in the winter of 1524/25; it is undated; some editors suggest November or December, others January.²⁴ It was addressed to his ‘dearest brother Christoph N.’ – the ‘N.’ stands for ‘Name’ (*Nomen*) and was commonly used to conceal identities from prying eyes; not without cause, Müntzer suspected that Meinhard might be placed in awkward circumstances should this letter from a known troublemaker be discovered. (Further on, Müntzer asks Meinhard to ‘greet Hans N.’ for him – evidently Zeiss; Müntzer says he does not know whether Zeiss is hostile or loyal to the cause, but considers that he would still have to deal with it.) The letter is very different in tone from previous ones. It rails against the Lutherans, whom he describes as godless rascals; he stresses the fact that Luther has never once offered to debate with him in public. In amongst all this, clearly written in some haste, Müntzer asks Meinhard if he could provide him with funds for board and lodging – but tells him to give nothing if the request should go against Meinhard’s beliefs. It is not clear to the reader, but presumably was to Meinhard, where these funds were to be sent to. In a postscript, he describes events in Nürnberg (also referred to as ‘N.’), where his latest pamphlets had been printed (probably unknown to Müntzer at this time was the fact that both of his final pamphlets had already been confiscated by the Nürnberg authorities). This was a letter, then, in which Müntzer believed that Meinhard was still a fellow-thinker, a man who would be sympathetic to his major problems with the Lutherans and one who might also be tapped for modest financial support.

Müntzer’s attempt to protect Meinhard from the attentions of Wittenberg may have worked temporarily; but this did not prevent the iron-master receiving a visit from Johann Agricola around 23 April 1525; Agricola, at that time a trusted lieutenant of Luther, was himself a native of Eisleben, and may even have been a distant relative of Meinhard. Luther, Melanchthon and Agricola had arrived in Eisleben around 18 April, partly to organise the opening of a new ‘Christian School’ (of which Agricola was appointed head-teacher), partly to shore up the reform movement in the face of the imminent breakdown of society triggered by the Peasants’ War. While Luther moved on, Agricola stayed behind and interviewed some followers of Müntzer. Among these followers may have been Meinhard – although this is not absolutely certain; a meeting between Agricola and Meinhard, which was highly likely, need not have been in the style of an interview or interrogation. According to Lutheran sources – but not Agricola himself – Agricola allegedly succeeded in persuading Meinhard of the error of his ways (i.e. in corresponding with, and possibly being a follower of, Müntzer) and ‘converted’ him back to the authorised Wittenberg reform movement. Shortly thereafter, in a letter dated 23 May 1525, Luther clearly showed some sympathy for Meinhard and wrote that he should be comforted – conceivably at the loss of his erstwhile mentor, Müntzer.²⁵ And almost exactly a year later, Meinhard made a present to Luther of a silver goblet, presumably as a token of thanks or respect.

While Agricola was in Eisleben, he obtained a copy of Müntzer’s letter to Meinhard of December 1523 – the one concerning the 19th Psalm. Agricola then published that letter, interspersed with his own hostile commentary, and making some mention of the interviews of ‘Thomists’ in Eisleben; he did not omit from the publication Müntzer’s original address to ‘*Suo delicti Cris. Meni.*’; so now everyone would know that Meinhard had been in correspondence with Müntzer. We do not know exactly when this publication appeared: it was probably in late May 1525, and almost certainly after Müntzer’s capture and execution. There is a possibility that the publication was intended to put as much pressure on Meinhard as possible; or that the intention was to blacken Meinhard’s name, regardless of the fact that he had swung in behind the Wittenberg movement. A third option is that Agricola did not care either way – his main target was Müntzer. However, if Agricola had been taking aim at Meinhard as well, then we have to consider carefully why the publication also included an extract of a letter from Müntzer to

Melanchthon, dating from March 1522 and also clearly labelled with sender and addressee. If we accept there was a conspiracy against Meinhard was it also directed against Melanchthon?

One final remark on Meinhard. We refer back to Zeiss' excited letter of 5 May 1525, in which he described the peasant uprising to Meinhard. If the preservation of that letter really was intended to implicate Zeiss, then arguably it also implicated Meinhard. However, since it was never published, but disappeared into the archives, less damage would have been done.

4. Conclusions

Christoph Meinhard was one of several rather anomalous contacts of Thomas Müntzer. Given Müntzer's career, which ran largely on the periphery of established reformed circles, and his sympathy for the lower classes, his occasional friendly contacts with rich men, or men in powerful positions, seem rather dissonant. There was Meinhard; there was Zeiss; there was Michael Clausbeck, a well-to-do magistrate; there was Christoph Furer, one of the richest mining magnates resident in Nürnberg, who discussed theological matters with Müntzer in Nürnberg in late 1524. It is likely that, until the crisis of 1525 burst, Müntzer was following a form of Realpolitik – attempting to persuade men of influence and intelligence to support his cause.

In Müntzer's correspondence with Zeiss, Meinhard and Furer there is clear evidence of the importance to them all of theological discussion. These men were both intelligent and inquiring, and – probably like so many others of the urban elite of their time – had a very deep interest in where the religious reforms were leading, on both a personal and a social level. That some of them corresponded with Müntzer for a time should not surprise us. That some of those should then shy away from the logical political and social consequences of Müntzer's teaching – is also not surprising: an Apocalyptic end to the social order never has been, after all, good for business or a career in bureaucracy.

For Zeiss, more than for his cousin or Furer, a relationship with Müntzer was problematic. While the men of business could have their own thoughts and not have them interfering in any way with day-to-day affairs, Zeiss had to maintain a perilous balancing act between private support of radical reforms and his very public responsibilities as ducal representative. At times, he succeeded; at other times he had to abandon his campaigning principles in order to protect his job. While Müntzer was still in Allstedt, Zeiss took great risks in continuing to support him. It cannot have been easy; and it was probably a great relief to him when Müntzer departed for Mühlhausen.

Were Zeiss and Meinhard being 'stitched up' by the publication of items of correspondence in 1525? Perhaps there was no need to do so. In Zeiss' case, he had effectively sealed his own fate back in the summer of 1524, by his failure to deal adequately with Müntzer, Mallerbach and Sangerhausen; he had already been warned at least once by his employers that he was on shaky ground; the events of May 1525, and the participation of Allstedt citizens in the Thuringian uprising, constituted the final straw. In Meinhard's case, the publication of Müntzer's *Interpretation of the 19th Psalm* came at least three weeks after Meinhard had already agreed to support Luther; there was no point in blackening his name further, unless it was to ensure he continued to toe the line.

A good relationship between people with social revolutionary ideas and people who are firmly rooted in the status quo, is not entirely unusual. Practically every revolution will rely to some degree on idealistic members of what constitutes the enemy class. These supporters agree in principle with the subversive ideas, and can afford to provide material support to the cause. Both parties have something to gain from

the relationship: on the one side, funds, contacts and other material support, possibly even bolt-holes; on the other side, a warm sense of doing the right thing, of being a radical without getting hands too dirty. (In short, a modern-day liberal.) Not infrequently, such relationships collapse at the first sign of real trouble; and not infrequently, the idealists use their influence or status to save themselves from punishment. Meinhard came through unscathed; Zeiss less so. But at least Zeiss lived on; hundreds, possibly thousands, of poorer supporters of Müntzer did not.

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- 1 WA, Briefe, III, p.516
 - 2 WA, Briefe, III, pp.524f
 - 3 AGBM, II, p.738
 - 4 Reference made by Cyriacus Spangenberg of Eisleben in the 1570s. See: Müntzer KGA, 2, p.208
 - 5 Unless otherwise stated, for this and subsequent letters on the Mallerbach affair, see: Müntzer KGA, 2, pp.512-32
 - 6 Müntzer KGA 2, pp.253ff; Matheson, CWTM, p.80
 - 7 Müntzer KGA, 3, p.267
 - 8 Müntzer KGA 2, pp.317ff; Matheson, CWTM, pp.100ff
 - 9 Müntzer KGA, 3, p.164
 - 10 Müntzer KGA, 3, pp.175-7
 - 11 Müntzer KGA, 3, pp.179-80
 - 12 Müntzer KGA, 2, pp.212-17
 - 13 Müntzer KGA, 2, p.304
 - 14 Müntzer KGA, 3, pp.200-1
 - 15 Müntzer KGA, 3, p.229
 - 16 AGBM, II, pp.202-4
 - 17 See: footnotes to Müntzer KGA, 3, items 114, 129 and 135.
 - 18 AGBM II, pp.214-15
 - 19 Cited in: Carl Hinrichs, *Luther und Müntzer*, Berlin 1962, p.19
 - 20 For more on Meinhard, see: Siegfried Bräuer, *Der Hüttenmeister Christoph Meinhard in Eisleben und seine Beziehung zu Thomas Müntzer*, in: E. Donnert (ed) *Europa in der Frühen Neuzeit. Festschrift für Günter Mühlhfordt. Band 1*, Weimar 1997
 - 21 Müntzer KGA, 2, pp.218-22
 - 22 See Bräuer, op.cit. pp.225-6
 - 23 Müntzer KGA, 2, pp.240-52
 - 24 Müntzer KGA, 2, pp.383-6
 - 25 WA Briefe, III, pp.508-9