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Theology and Revolution?: Negotiating Heritage in Gerhard Brendler's Biography of Martin Luther

A thesis presented in Candidacy for Departmental Honors in  
History  
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## Introduction

Martin Luther's impact on Germany and the wider world has echoed through the ages. His divisive opinions and defiant attitude birthed the Reformation which rocked Western Christianity to its core. Luther's intelligence and linguistic skills distilled and standardized the German language through his translation of the Bible. Such a remarkable and infamous figure has remained in the German national consciousness throughout the ages and remains today a symbol both of national unity and division. However, in the German Democratic Republic, Luther's image experienced a drastic evolution across the state's short lifespan. Luther began as a villain and advocate for the bourgeoisie in the public heritage of the GDR. The 1980s saw a shift as Luther became a figure of German socialist heritage. Changing political relationships, especially the warming of the relations between the Protestant church and the socialist state, allowed for the adoption of Martin Luther as an idealized historical figure. The Academy of Sciences of the GDR, as the official arbiter of historiography, led the charge on the forceful rehabilitation of Martin Luther as a German hero. In late 1978, it appointed Gerhard Brendler to write a biography of Martin Luther which publicly and radically altered the image of Martin Luther in the GDR.<sup>1</sup>

Published in 1983, Gerhard Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* proved to be a forceful academic revision of Luther's image. This rehabilitation was conducted in tandem with the state authorities of the GDR. While Erich Honecker met with church leaders and gave speeches in honor of Luther, Brendler penned his biography of Luther as a positive one. For Brendler, Luther was not simply a medieval theologian with a deference to authority as many socialist historians in Germany portrayed him. Rather, Brendler's Luther was a great intellectual liberator. Brendler's Luther defied the authority of the Catholic Church and progressed the

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<sup>1</sup>Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Zentralinstitut für Geschichte 709, Band 2.

ideology of the German people towards the inevitability of socialism as Marx expressed.<sup>2</sup> This view of Luther lacks precedence within the GDR and German history overall, and this idiosyncratic construction of Luther in the late GDR provides a question for historians to answer.

This thesis analyzes *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* in the historical context of changing state relations with the church and academia. Its author, Gerhard Brendler, was an essential figure in the Academy of Sciences of the GDR and more specifically the Central Institute for History.<sup>3</sup> Originally a Sudeten German who came forcibly to the GDR, Gerhard Brendler was a loyal party member who rose to the top of his field. His scholarship concerned the “Fruehbuergliche Revolution” or the “early middle-class revolution” a socialist byword for the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> Brendler’s work at the Academy of Sciences of the GDR defined his career as a historian. His name appears many times throughout its memoranda. In order to better understand the inner workings of the Academy of Sciences, this thesis utilizes files from the archive of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences which is the successor to the GDR-era institution. The files it contains primarily consist of memoranda for planning coordinated commemorations of public heritage, such as the Lutherjahr (Luther-Year) and the Bauernkrieg (Peasants War) commemoration. There are also letters demonstrating the connections of the Academy with the GDR’s state apparatus and Western academics, and even newspapers from the GDR, the FRG, and the USA.<sup>5</sup> One can see the top-down nature of the Academy in these files. For example, the planning memoranda of the Academy describe Brendler as responsible for writing a biography instead of letting him produce his own work.<sup>6</sup> These documents provide

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<sup>2</sup>Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag, 1983), 36.

<sup>3</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>4</sup>ABBAW ZiG 334 “Bauernkriegs Band Konzeption Schriftwechsel.”

<sup>5</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>6</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

excellent context especially for the motivations and structure of the Academy of Sciences as they show its highly organized nature that often reflects the state's authoritarian tendencies.

The importance of studying Luther's legacy in the GDR is evident due to its connections with two impactful dynamics in the GDR: the top-down relationship by which the state influenced historiography, and the struggle between church and state. Luther's legacy has echoed throughout German history as an integral part of national culture. Until the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, he only held an almost saintly status among the Protestant churches. Luther's defiant character and his standardization of the German language appealed greatly to nationalists. With the unification of Germany in 1871, Luther's memory became a political tool to legitimize the power of the predominantly Protestant ruling class over the nation. The Nazi regime only furthered this relationship between historical legacy and state power. The founding of the GDR drastically changed this narrative due to Luther's problematic associations with organized religion and extreme nationalism. Studies of Luther declined, and the few mentions of him are negative. For example, in 1952 researchers discussed Luther's counter-revolutionary tendencies.<sup>7</sup> This negative view of Luther only changed in 1978, when the Academy began planning a coordinated celebration of the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth.<sup>8</sup> Until the rise of the GDR, nationalism had dominated Luther's legacy within Germany, and the change in Luther's legacy correlates with important shifts in values in the GDR.

Luther's legacy was initially widely dismissed by the academics of the GDR due to the dominance of state ideology on its academic institutions of the GDR. Dating back to Frederick Engels, socialists had viewed Luther as a religious sycophant for the nobility. This view became the near official opinion of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR, and studies of Luther in the

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<sup>7</sup>ABBAW ZiG 902.

<sup>8</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

GDR became few and far between with the rare mentions of Luther consisting of repetitions of Engels' characterization. The Academy of Sciences of the GDR and, more specifically, the Central Institute for History held immense sway within the academic life of the GDR. The Academy's relationships with the universities of the GDR and its preoccupation with public history resulted in this institution having a large influence over the public memory of the emerging socialist society of the GDR.<sup>9</sup>

However, the Academy was not a powerful institution within its own right. It was heavily indebted to the state. It received all of its funding from the state and functioned as a part of the state apparatus of the GDR. The internal files tell of an institution that was dependent upon the state for its ideological basis. Socialist historiography was the official methodology of the Central Institute for History as Gerhard Brendler himself expressed in his work "Foundations, Subjects, and Lessons of Marxist Historical Science."<sup>10</sup> In this work, Brendler details the importance of class struggle and the methods of production for historiographic study.<sup>11</sup> The state determined how the Academy engaged with history as evidenced in the numerous letters between Academy officials and state officials within the Academy files.<sup>12</sup> The state's relationship with the Academy was authoritative as the Academy followed both the ideology of the state and even the directions of state officials.

The change in Martin Luther's legacy within the Academy corresponded directly to the state's decision to compromise with the Protestant church which culminated in a March 6, 1978 summit. When the state had better relations with the Protestant church, the image of Luther

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<sup>9</sup>Martin Roy, *Luther in der DDR: Zum Wandel des Lutherbildes in der DDR-Geschichtsschreibung* (Bochum: Winkler, 2000), 49.

<sup>10</sup>Gerhard Brendler and Peter Bollhagen, "Grundlagen, Gegenstand und Aufgaben der marxistischen Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Einführung in das Studium der Geschichte* (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1966), 81.

<sup>11</sup>Brendler and Bollhagen, "Grundlagen, Gegenstand und Aufgaben der marxistischen Geschichtswissenschaft," 81.

<sup>12</sup>ADDAW, ZiG 709 Band 2

improved within the Academy. The agreements between the Protestant church and the state were responsible for the almost overnight turn from Luther as a marginalized or sometimes demonized figure to a positive influence on German history. On March 6, 1978, the state reached a compromise with the church, and later that same year the Academy of Sciences began its forceful program to rehabilitate the image of Martin Luther.<sup>13</sup> Internal documents show that the Academy of Sciences began to portray Martin Luther as a positive influence on the history of Germany and highlighted his anti-authoritarian tendencies in regards to the Catholic church.<sup>14</sup> Luther's drastic shift in historical memory highlights the top-down relationship of the state towards academics within the GDR.

Luther's legacy within the GDR thus corresponds to the evolving church and state relationships. Like it did to the memory of Martin Luther, the state initially demonized the Protestant church and intended to remove its influence from society as a whole. The state publicly portrayed the church as old-fashioned along with emphasizing its authoritarian tendencies. The state also created social programs to supplant the cultural impact of the church. In terms of academic life, initially the GDR's academics dismissed Luther and religious history writ large. This changed in the late 1970s as the Academy chose to rehabilitate Martin Luther. What caused this change was the state's change in attitude towards the church. The state began a program in the 1960s of approaching the Protestant church with a conciliatory attitude in some respects but often expecting political loyalty in return.<sup>15</sup> Among these compromises, the most impactful was the March 6 agreement of 1978 which allowed the church to act more freely in society.<sup>16</sup> In November of that same year, the Academy of Sciences began its program to

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<sup>13</sup>Robert F. Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State: Political Conflict and Change under Ulbricht and Honecker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 241-242.

<sup>14</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>15</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 84.

<sup>16</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 242.

rehabilitate Luther and assigned Gerhard Brendler to draft a biography for Luther's birth anniversary.<sup>17</sup> The positive change in Luther's memory in the 1970s and 1980s follows closely the earlier decisions of the state to compromise with the church.

Gerhard Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* was the spearhead of a wider campaign to rehabilitate Luther. However, Brendler throughout created a distinctive method of rehabilitation. The medium of biography was relatively unused in the GDR, and this book was Brendler's first proper biography. The methodology of a biography is in conflict with traditional socialist historiography.<sup>18</sup> It tends to place importance on the individual instead of the wider society and the means of production, the traditional focus of the Academy of Sciences. However, biography lends itself well to intellectual history, which Brendler utilizes. Brendler ties Luther's thought directly to that of Marx. He presents theological concepts such as nominalism and Luther's estrangement between God and mankind as prophetic of later socialist concepts such as materialism and Marx's theory of alienation.<sup>19</sup> While the end goal of upholding socialist thought is still present, Brendler exerts autonomy through his creative justification. Through his methodology of a biography and his use of intellectual history, Brendler subverted the historiographic norms of the Academy of Sciences.

While Brendler diverges from socialist historiographic norms, he also maintains them throughout his work. His treatment of Luther involves social history which promotes the study of wider societal trends and economic status. Brendler spends little time discussing Luther's relationships in his early biography of him. Instead he focuses on the economic status of the Luther family in the context of the emerging bourgeois class.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Brendler

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<sup>17</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>18</sup>Ronald D. Asmus "The GDR and the German Past" *German Studies Newsletter* no. 7, Special Issue on Confrontation with the Past (1986): 21.

<sup>19</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 34, 71.

<sup>20</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 9.



completely followed the historiographical methods of the Academy of Sciences by analyzing the past through the evolution of production. Brendler also spends a short amount of time discussing Luther's infamous anti-semitism. He insists in this work that Luther's anti-judaism, as he terms it, evolved from religious sentiments shared at the time, thus diminishing its severity.<sup>21</sup> This case demonstrates the sycophantic nature of the Academy of Sciences as Brendler later defended his treatment of the matter in a 2000 interview showing his ideological dedication to the official historiography of the GDR.<sup>22</sup> Although Gerhard Brendler challenged historiographic norms in *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution*, the realities of the Academy of Sciences meant that he had to conform to the guidelines and orders of the institution.

Existing scholarship on the evolving Luther image in the GDR divides into two camps: American analysis of church-state relationships and post-unification German evaluations of the GDR's efficacy. The American analysis of the GDR's evolving Luther image has focused on its ties to the complex political machinations of the GDR with scholars drawing connections between Luther's historiography and the state's treatment of the Protestant Church. The pioneers of this field were Gordon Mork and Robert F. Goeckel. Robert F. Goeckel wrote multiple works on the state's relaxation of its policies concerning religion.<sup>23</sup> Throughout these works Goeckel often ties the cultural and academic constructions of the GDR to the trajectory of church-state relations.<sup>24</sup> He cites the Academy's promotion of the 1983 Lutherjahr celebration and Brendler's biography as evidence of how the state's attitude towards the Protestant church changed overtime. Goeckel's opinion is that the state eventually warmed up to the prospect of

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<sup>21</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 436,

<sup>22</sup>Gerhard Brendler, "Interview" in *Luther in der DDR: Zum Wandel des Lutherbildes in der DDR* *Geschichtsschreibung* by Martin Roy (Bochum: Verlag Dr Dieter Winkler, 2000), 267.

<sup>23</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 1.

"Church and Society in the GDR: Historical Legacies and "Mature Socialism" *International Journal of Sociology* vol. 18, no. 4 (1988): 210-227.

<sup>24</sup>Goeckel "Church and Society in the GDR: Historical Legacies and "Mature Socialism," 219.

cooperation with the church due to the political benefits of an alliance.<sup>25</sup> In exchange for these concessions, the state had expectations of ideological loyalty.<sup>26</sup> For Goeckel, there was a tension between the church's desire for autonomy and the state's plan to construct a harmonious socialist society that required cooperation with the church while not allowing it to have meaningful power. While Goeckel outlines a progression of GDR church relations that is well-researched, his over focus on politics reflects his Cold War and American mindset. The American reactions to the GDR's church-state relations provide biased but detached insight into how these struggles progressed.

Following the reunification of Germany, there was a growing interest in evaluating the academic institutions of the GDR, especially the Academy of Sciences. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the western dominated united regime of Germany systematically removed former GDR professors from their posts.<sup>27</sup> Historians began questioning the widespread discrediting of the GDR in the late 2000s and early 2010s as they re-evaluated the academic contributions of the GDR. Peter Maser and Martin Roy are two foundational scholars who addressed the issue of Martin Luther's rehabilitation within the GDR. They focused on different aspects of GDR historiography. Martin Roy focuses on the ideological nature of Martin Luther's change; he surveys the thought behind Luther's rehabilitation within the GDR.<sup>28</sup> Peter Maser details the cultural aspect of the Luther celebration and the state's organizing power in this context. Together they tackle the internal struggles of the GDR's identity and emphasize the changing nature of the regime in its last decade. Their work sought to reevaluate the memory of the GDR that was prevalent in their post reunification context.

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<sup>25</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 202.

<sup>26</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 244.

<sup>27</sup>Roy, *Luther in der DDR*, 249.

<sup>28</sup>Roy, *Luther in der DDR*, 127.

Martin Roy's work *Luther in der DDR: Zum Wandel des Lutherbildes in der DDR-Geschichtsschreibung* (2000) focuses on the ideological shifts that the Academy of Sciences in the GDR underwent while changing its image of Martin Luther from a negative view to a positive one. Roy dedicates the work mainly to the evaluation of intellectual trends within the Academy and how they shifted. *Luther in der DDR* devotes an entire chapter to the evaluation of the term "Fruehbuergerliche Revolution" as a historiographic phenomenon in the GDR.<sup>29</sup> While Roy evaluates this reframing of historiographic terms from a mostly ideological perspective, he ignores the state's overt influence over the Academy of Sciences.<sup>30</sup> Roy's attempts to uncritically evaluate the ideology of Luther's rehabilitation result in him taking much of the socialist historiography at face value. He does not highlight the political and religious context and focuses solely on the inner workings of the Central Institute for History. While Roy's *Luther in der DDR* provides an excellent intellectual history of Martin Luther's change in memory during the GDR, its lack of engagement with the political and religious context of the GDR limits its efficacy.

Peter Maser's book "*Mit Luther alles in Butter?*" *Das Lutherjahr 1983 im Spiegel ausgewählter Akten* (2013) provides an excellent culture-focused foil to Roy's *Luther in der DDR*. While Roy focuses narrowly on the intellectual developments of the Academy's opinion on Martin Luther, Maser seeks to study the cultural productions of the GDR in the pivotal 1983 Lutherjahr. Maser's willingness to evaluate culture and its interaction with the state is both his greatest strength and weakness in terms of his work's focus on the totality of Luther's memory within the GDR. Cultural analysis is excellent at evaluating how the population of the GDR received the projects that the state constructed and how effective the state was at instilling the

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<sup>29</sup>Martin Roy *Luther in der DDR*, 127.

<sup>30</sup>Martin Roy *Luther in der DDR*, 204-205.

desired image within the people of the GDR. In this pursuit, Maser draws from all aspects of cultural life such as television, public events, and memorabilia.<sup>31</sup> He argues that the state designed the cultural productions such as television shows, public events, and collectible memorabilia in order to coordinate a campaign to rehabilitate Luther's image. For Maser, the state rehabilitated Luther for purely political reasons that came from the changing relations between the Protestant Church and the GDR. Maser's focus on cultural life provides an excellent grounding to the discussion of Luther's memory within the GDR.

All cultural productions, according to Maser, the state conducted in order to rehabilitate the image of Martin Luther within the GDR. However, this close analysis is also where some of the work's shortcomings come into play. Maser does not place much importance upon the influence of the Academy of Sciences as the directing institution despite its heavy involvement in the creation of some of these cultural productions. For example, the television series on Martin Luther, to which Maser devotes an entire chapter, utilized Academy professors, most notably Gerhard Brendler, as historical advisors.<sup>32</sup> This suggests not only a top-down relationship between the state and culture as Maser posits, but rather that the state mediated its influence through institutions such as the Academy of Sciences. Maser cuts out the importance of these institutions and even individuals such as Brendler in his book. He also devotes chapters to the memorabilia produced during the Lutherjahr, and while it provides some contribution to the historical field, this focus often distracts from the dynamic and political nature of the historical memory of Luther in the GDR.<sup>33</sup> Overall Maser's "*Mit Luther alles in Butter?*"

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<sup>31</sup>Peter Maser "*Mit Luther alles in Butter?:*" *Das Lutherjahr 1983 im Spiegel ausgewählter Akten* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2013), 181, 208.

<sup>32</sup>Maser "*Mit Luther alles in Butter?*," 187.  
ADDAW ZIG 709 Band 3.

<sup>33</sup>Maser "*Mit Luther alles in Butter?*," 208.

provides excellent cultural commentary on the state's interest in public memory and the image of Martin Luther but often loses itself in the details.

While lacking perspective individually, the secondary literature taken together provides excellent context for Luther's historiographic shift within the GDR. This thesis seeks to synthesize these differing perspectives in order to analyze Brendler's work within a complete framework. Goeckel's almost pure focus on the church-state relations allows him to untangle the complex back-and-forth nature of the clerical struggle that impacted the Academy of Sciences' view of Luther. However, Goeckel is an American historian who brings a Cold-War-era bias to his works. Martin Roy provides excellent ideological analysis of Luther's depiction and how the academics negotiated their historiography and the ideals of socialism but is uncritical of certain ideological trends with the Academy of Sciences. Maser dives into the cultural context that surrounded Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution*. He also explores how the state attempted to guide society through cultural production. Maser fails to fully account for the importance of academics within the GDR, and his work loses impact with its focus on the productions themselves instead of the ideological justifications behind them. My thesis contributes to this conversation in that it seeks to synthesize the positive aspects of these works that come from different contexts: German and American. While these works do not devote much to Brendler's biography itself, analyzed in unison the insights of these works form a clearer picture of the political and intellectual landscape in which Brendler drafted his biography. While previous scholars have limited their views to either politics, culture, or intellectual history, my thesis seeks to synthesize these perspectives in its study of the changing Luther image in the GDR.

Gerhard Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* (1983) highlights the intersection between ideology, religion, politics, and cultural memory. It is a production of its time, steeped in both the ideology of the Academy of Sciences and the political realities of church-state ties. The Academy of Sciences decided to rehabilitate Luther and ordered Brendler to write a biography in response to the March 6 Agreement that allowed for more church-state cooperation. While Brendler subverted the trends of the Academy in some ways, namely his intellectual history, he was forced to go along with others. According to Brendler, he was even forced to suppress parts of his desired work. The absurdity of any premodern figure, much less Martin Luther, as a socialist hero draws attention to the issues that plague modern memory culture as a whole. Through evaluating Brendler's work, we can not only gain insight into the complex world of the GDR but how, as historians, we approach the field of public memory in the modern world.

## **Chapter 1: Luther as an Icon for Nationalism**

In 1983, the German Democratic Republic coordinated a massive commemorative campaign across all forms of media and in towns such as Erfurt, Eisennach, and Wittenberg to celebrate the birth of a distinctive and divisive German figure, Martin Luther. The GDR's historians had treated Luther with mistrust and often hostility up until this point. This demeanor did not emerge from the ether; its origin is in the centuries of Luther historiography that preceded it. Frederick Engels' revolt against the post-Napoleonic-era historiography of Martin Luther as national icon provided the ideological basis for the historians of the German Academy of Sciences at Berlin. However, this negative view of Luther drastically shifted later due to both political influence from the Socialist Unity Party and internal historiographic changes. Martin Luther's transformation into a socialist hero during the 1983 Lutherjahr presents a baffling situation for historians as the GDR's Academy transformed a premodern figure who had been a nationalist icon and scapegoat for Marxists since the nineteenth century into a folk hero for their socialist society.

Luther's image and its subsequent changes within the GDR provides an example of national heritage weaponized for political means. The GDR initially cast Luther as a villain for two reasons, his association with the conservative and Nazi heritage of Germany and Luther's important role in the identity of the Protestant church. Luther provided an important unifying figure for the nationalists who attempted to construct a German nation. He served as a figure of Protestant stability for the conservative forces of the German Empire. For the Nazis, Luther provided a prefigurer of their anti-semitism who gave credence to their claims. Important for understanding the GDR's contextualisation of Martin Luther is the historiography of Luther that preceded the Cold War division of Germany.

Luther's popular image echoed throughout Germany even before his death in 1546 with many contemporary figures constructing radical assessments of his character. Evangelical and humanist historians lauded his desire to reform the Church and reinvigorate spiritual life. Catholics and radical reformers resented Luther for their own reasons, with the many extreme Evangelicals such as Anabaptists viewing Luther as a conservative force and a lackey of the princes due to his deference to their authority. As these views crystalized in the centuries following, the image of Luther as national icon began to propagate throughout the German-speaking lands, especially the Protestant lands that would make up the future GDR. While his status as essential to the faith of the various state-backed Protestant German churches is indisputable, and his laudation within those circles remained steadfast throughout the centuries, the nationalist historians and politicians of the nineteenth century shifted perceptions of Martin Luther. Ever since the Napoleonic war, nationalists had positioned the Germanic world against a constructed Romance world culturally and politically. These tensions only heightened and culminated in the Franco-Prussian War in the later half of the century. His opposition to the Roman Papacy and Spanish Emperors endeared him to the anti-Latin attitudes of nineteenth-century German nationalists. Luther as the liberator of the Gospel changed to Luther as the liberator of the German people. In terms of intellectual nationalism, poets and thinkers applauded Luther's translation of the New Testament at Wartburg as a watershed moment for the German language. Luther's image among the establishment conservative ideologues became one of a premodern national unifier comparable to Arminius and Charlemagne.

The nineteenth century was a time of great social and political upheaval within the fragmented states of the former Holy Roman Empire. The Napoleonic Wars had wreaked havoc



among the German peoples, but they served as a rare moment of unity because they coalesced resistance against the French Empire. Immediately following the end of the Napoleonic Wars was a spark of radical liberal nationalism that sought to unify the German lands through language and culture. Luther's popular identity was an important piece of heritage for this emergent nationalism. A most evident example of this was the 1817 Wartburg Rally which galvanized popular support for German nationalism. It consisted of various Burschenschaften (fraternities) coming together at Wartburg Castle where Luther hid from Imperial authorities and translated the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> Luther's translation of the New Testament standardized the German language which became in the nineteenth century one of the few unifying factors for the emerging German nation. To classify the acts that the nationalists committed during the anniversary as radical would be a massive understatement. The Burschenschaften members burned books with which they disagreed, publicly called for violence, and marched on the castle with torches.<sup>35</sup> Important to the development of Luther's image is the irreligious nature of this gathering.<sup>36</sup> Previous commemorations had religious overtones and extolled his virtues as a Christian first and then a German. However, the 1817 gathering extolled his virtues as a German only.

Nevertheless, there were political rebels in the nineteenth century who dissented from this national identity, especially on the question of Martin Luther's image. Frederick Engels in his book *The Peasants War in Germany* (1850) pushed against the establishment view of Luther as a heroic figure and instead presented him as an arch-reactionary. For Engels, Luther's liberation of the German church from the Papacy meant little socially compared to his

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<sup>34</sup>Stephen Michael Press, "False Fire: The Wartburg Book-Burning of 1817," *Central European History* vol. 42, no. 4 (2009): 621.

<sup>35</sup>Press, "False Fire: The Wartburg Book-Burning of 1817," 621.

<sup>36</sup>Press, "False Fire: The Wartburg Book-Burning of 1817," 625.

enslavement of the German people to the princes.<sup>37</sup> While other historians focused their studies of the period on the Reformation and Luther's disputes with the Pope, Engels focused on the Peasants War as a premonition of Marxist class struggle. In his view, while Luther contributed ideologically to the Peasants War, his bourgeois status prevented him from fully accepting the peasants and rejecting the authority of the princes.<sup>38</sup> Engels saw figures such as Thomas Muntzer and the other leaders of the Peasant Revolt as heroes instead of the lackey for the Princes, Martin Luther.<sup>39</sup> While Engels' view dominated Marxist interpretations of the Reformation, it was still countercultural with Luther remaining as a nationalist image throughout nineteenth-century German history.

Engels' book on the Peasants War is an excellent case study for Marxist historiography in practice. Its didactic overtones of class struggle and societal transitions question whether this work is merely a projection of contemporary political feelings onto early modern Germany. Nevertheless, Engels employs a unique methodology in his analysis of this period that influenced the methodology of virtually all Marxist historians following him. Engels' primary methodology was an extremely detailed economic examination of Germany during the sixteenth century. He paid special attention to the trends of industry within Germany and its effect on both urban and rural populations.<sup>40</sup> Important for Engels is the objectivity of his evidence. He utilizes graphs and diagrams to demonstrate that his history is not rhetorical; it is a scientific approach to the study of the progression of history.<sup>41</sup> This approach was shocking to the historians of the nineteenth century who either utilized "Great Man" or diplomatic history, both of which focused

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<sup>37</sup>Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 56.

<sup>38</sup>Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 42.

<sup>39</sup>Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 68.

<sup>40</sup>Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 38.

<sup>41</sup>Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 49.

on elite actors rather than common economic factors. The methodology and evaluation of Luther in Frederick Engels' *The German Peasants War* had a great effect on socialist historians in the decades following and remained impactful into the early years of the GDR.

The conflicts of the twentieth century drastically reformed Luther's image and especially its relationship with the state. The Kaiser's rule of Germany embraced very much the nineteenth-century nationalist view of Luther as simultaneous liberator of the Gospel and the German people from Roman tyranny. The Hohenzollern family patronized churches and important sites related to Luther such as the Wittenberg Castle Church in order to both promote Protestant hegemony and ensure a unified cultural legacy throughout the newly united Germany.<sup>42</sup> Into the Weimar Republic, Luther remained a figure of German unity whom those across the political spectrum utilized to promote their own political agendas. Poets and writers emphasized Luther's linguistic importance and the conservative monarchists maintained the importance of Protestant German nationalism for the cultural values of the nation.

The National Socialist adoption of Luther's anti-semitic works to justify the removal of "Jewish influence" from public life rings most notable out of these Weimar-era examples. The initial anti-clerical and anti-Christian tendencies of the NSDAP subsided throughout Hitler's rise to power and agreement with the conservative establishment, thus facilitating a growing adoption of Luther's as a National Socialist prophet. Nazi propagandists interpreted Luther's anti-semitic tracts as prefiguring their anti-semitism.<sup>43</sup> His rejection of non-German religious authority, in their view, made way for their German ethnocentrism that often had spiritual overtones. During the Third Reich, the need for a nationalized and loyal Protestant church also led to a promotion of Luther's image in order to convince Protestants to support the new regime's changes to the

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<sup>42</sup>"Schlosskirche Geschichte" an exhibit at Wittenberg All Saints' Church, 2023.

<sup>43</sup>Doris L. Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," *Central European History* Vo. 27, no. 3 (1994): 333.

social and religious status quo. The Nazis supported the German Christian movement which sought to combine Aryan racial ideology with Protestant Christianity with Luther's anti-semitism serving as a justification for their hatred.<sup>44</sup> Luther's emphasis on the New Testament rather than the Old Testament also provided a justification for them to remove any mention of the Old Testament which is essentially Jewish scripture.<sup>45</sup> Another anecdote demonstrating the extent of the adoption of Luther by the Nazis is the replacing of the cross on the Wartburg, where Luther translated the New Testament, with a swastika.<sup>46</sup> However, Luther's adoption by the National Socialist regime was a recontextualization of his existing renown to legitimize the regime's political decisions.

With the collapse of the Third Reich, there was a massive external and internal reevaluation of German nationalism which also concerned Luther's memory. Thomas Mann identified Luther along with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as affecting the *Zeitgeist* of the National Socialist movement.<sup>47</sup> Luther's anti-Semitism, his ready adoption by the Nazis, his general xenophobia, and his extreme anger made a compelling case for Luther to be a prophet for National Socialism. Thus, in a twist of fate, Mann confirmed Goebbels' propaganda of Luther as a National Socialist hero. The Allies questioned the legitimacy of Germany's existence as a state. They entertained plans to either permanently cripple or balkanize Germany during the Second World War, due to their crimes against humanity. Figures, such as Luther and Goethe, who contributed to this national identity fell out of favor. New German identities began to emerge that sought to distance themselves from the baggage of the past as in the East they embraced the values of the Soviet Union and in the West those of the Western Allies.

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<sup>44</sup>Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," 333.

<sup>45</sup>Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," 344.

<sup>46</sup>"NS-Zeit," An Exhibit at Wartburg Castle by the Wartburg Foundation, 2023.

<sup>47</sup>Thomas Mann, Library of Congress Speech, 1945.

However, Luther's anti-authoritarian streak and his willingness to take a stand in what he believed in galvanized some of the Christian resistance to the Nazi regime such as the Confessing Church which had important contacts with Anglican clergy and thus the Western Allies.<sup>48</sup> This, along with Luther's lasting positive impression dating from centuries before, led to his image remaining fairly unchanged in the Western Occupation Zones with no serious effort to suppress his image. Protestant majority countries such as Great Britain and the United States even held Luther as one of their important religious figures, thus making this hypothetical suppression even more boggling. Some academics in the West attacked Luther as part of the Sonderweg thesis, which posited that German history traveled on a special path because of inflammatory figures such as Martin Luther. Popular culture especially among Lutheran populations viewed Luther much as the Protestant church had for centuries previous albeit with the Nazi propaganda aspects suppressed. The Protestant church in the Federal Republic of Germany maintained its fairly privileged status and continued to thrive culturally in the regions where it was historically dominant. This warmth for Luther was not shared in the GDR as contemporaneously they both marginalized Luther and portrayed his legacy as negative.

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<sup>48</sup>Ruth Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Thoughts and Actions, 1933-1945," *Jewish Social Studies* vol. 37, no. 3 (1975): 244.

## **Chapter 2: The Politics of Heritage within the GDR**

### **From Muntzer to Luther: The Academy of Sciences and Collective Memory of the Reformation**

Founded in 1949, the German Democratic Republic sought to build a socialist state that rebuked the previous Nazi government. During the postwar occupation of Germany the Allies divided the administration of Germany among themselves. The Soviets took the northeast section of Germany, with most of the sites associated with Martin Luther, where they ran a proto-government modeled after their own. When relations broke down between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies, the Western Allies allowed the independence of their occupied territories to which the Soviets allowed the independence of theirs. The new GDR saw itself as a socialist rebirth of Germany while viewing the Federal Republic of Germany as a state that bore the legacy of Nazi Germany. The state sought to erase the legacy of fascism and imperialism within their society with its extensive denazification program and its demolition of the imperial palace. The GDR sought to explicitly build a socialist society, against fascism, with the Socialist Unity Party or SED guiding the actions of the state throughout its existence.

The most virulent attacker of Martin Luther in the post-Nazi era was the East German state and its academic apparatus. As a state based upon the ideological foundations of Marxism, the government and emerging scholars accepted Engels' evaluation of Luther as a lackey for the princes. Luther's long adoption by the conservative figures of Germany cemented this rejection as well. Much of the initial scholarship concerning Luther that came from the German Democratic Republic simply parroted the points that Engels had made a century prior. However, with the development of the East German academic establishment scholars began to assert their

own voice and not simply defer to the work of prior Marxists. New scholarship and independent analysis of Luther began that synthesized Marxist ideology and contemporary political realities.

In the 1950s, the Academy of Arts and Sciences collaborated with the Deutsches Museum to create an exhibit to publicly reevaluate Luther's image.<sup>49</sup> In a series of internal debates, figures from both the museum and the academy appraised and attacked Luther's role in German history with their ultimate conclusion repeating Engels' assessment of Luther as an enabler of the nobility.<sup>50</sup> While they ultimately agreed with Engels' evaluation of Luther as an empowerer of the nobility, they allowed for dissent in their proceedings as scholars defended Luther's legacy of freedom and importance for national heritage.<sup>51</sup> This highlights the tension that existed throughout the history of the Academy of Sciences. Dissent towards socialist historiography existed within it. However, the policy of the state was, in practice, law. This debate prefigures the Luther celebrations three decades later as it points out both the positives and the challenges of appropriating Luther's legacy in a state with socialist heritage. While the post-war period saw mostly a repetition of Engel's rhetoric, scholars in the GDR slowly began to allow dissent or adaptation of the previous interpretation of Luther.

Important to understanding the East German academic establishment are the histories of the institutions that made it up and the connection between academia and state that was unique during the GDR due to the longstanding connection between the authorities and academia. Central to all scholarship from linguistics to physics and history was the Academy of Sciences of the GDR. The members were authoritative on everything from academic conferences to school textbooks. Starting life as the Society of Sciences of the Elector of Brandenburg, with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz as its founder, the Academy grew throughout the centuries into one of the

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<sup>49</sup>Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Zentralinstitut für Geschichte, Akten 330.

<sup>50</sup>Abbaw, ZiG, 330

<sup>51</sup>Abbaw, ZiG, 330.

premier academies of Europe.<sup>52</sup> Initially, it was essentially a dwarfed version of the western European academies, but throughout its long history, the Academy drew more and more influence with patronage from Prussian kings such as Frederick the Great. Physics and the hard sciences played a long role in its history as it would boast Max Planck as one of its essential members. Under the Nazi government, like all academic institutions, it was “Aryanized” with the expulsion of Jewish members and the appointment of Nazi sycophants.<sup>53</sup> After the war, the Soviet sector controlled the location of the Academy of Sciences and through self-imposed exile and the arrest of political opponents, the institution became an arm of the future GDR state.

The relationship between the state and academia in the GDR was a top-down relationship with the state deciding what the Academy of Sciences focused on. The state determined the intellectual productions of the Academy of Sciences and specifically of the Central Institute for History. The Academy of Sciences of the GDR was a public institution that held official ties to the state. Within the correspondence of the Central Institute for History, there are multiple letters to and from government or party officials. These letters range from correspondence with mayors in towns where the Academy planned conferences, high ranking ministers such as the minister for church and state relations, and even letters to and from the office of Erich Honecker himself.<sup>54</sup> The academy invited Erich Honecker, the supreme leader of the GDR, to an academic conference concerning Martin Luther’s legacy.<sup>55</sup> These letters along with the ideological dedication of the Academy to socialist thought suggests a strong top-down relationship. This relationship was more prominent among the higher rankers in the organization. When Werner Kaltweit, vice president of the Academy of Sciences, gave an introduction to the November 1983

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<sup>52</sup>“History of the Academy,” Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, 2024, <https://www.bbaw.de/en/the-academy/history-of-the-academy>.

<sup>53</sup>Peter Noetzoldt, Peter TH. Walther, “The Prussian Academy of Sciences During the Third Reich,” *Minerva* vol. 42 no. 4 (2004):422.

<sup>54</sup>ABBAW, ZiG 709, Band 2.

<sup>55</sup>ABBAW, ZiG 709, Band 2



seminar on Martin Luther he discussed international politics. His speech was an attack on the United States' invasion of Grenada, which the GDR opposed.<sup>56</sup> The dominance of these political developments over the actual matter of the seminar suggests the political orientation of the Academy of Sciences. The state and its ideology dominated the Academy of Sciences of the GDR to an extent that its relationship was deferential to the authorities, especially on matters of public heritage.

The ideology and historiographic approach of the German Academy of Sciences was a distinctly socialist one which took its roots from both the context of the state and its long-standing history. During the era of the GDR, the Academy produced history that was scientific in approach. In fact, the word that the professors used to describe historiography, *Geschichtswissenschaft*, translates to history-science.<sup>57</sup> History, for these academics, was objective; one could measure its patterns and almost predict the future. This attitude stems from influences from German historical philosophy with Marxism specifically playing a serious role. The German historiographic tradition was rich and boasted many historians who defined history for decades to come. One important German historian was Leopold von Ranke who in the early nineteenth century advocated for an objective study of history "as it was" that entailed quantified analysis of important documents. Marx's historiography also heavily influenced the Academy, and it was the standard to which the scholars compared all other historiography. Along with the Academy's culture of scientific pursuit there was a strong desire to conduct objective research within this environment even notwithstanding the enforced Marxist influence.

The official ideology of the East German state was Marxism, and the government sought to implement it practically in every aspect of life to build a socialist utopia. Marxism is not only

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<sup>56</sup>ABBAW, ZiG 110.

<sup>57</sup>Brendler and Bollagen, "Grundlagen, Gegenstand und Aufgaben der marxistischen Geschichtswissenschaft," 79.

a political philosophy, and it has massive implications for the study of history. Marx was first a historian, and he contextualizes his theories of class struggle and progression of production in the context of human history. For Marx, history follows a dialectical and progressive pattern in that as production intensifies so does the difference between classes.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, in Marx's view, the eternal problem of class struggle grows more and more apparent throughout the annals of history. The East German state enforced this view of history on academia at every level from the elementary school to the university. The GDR's state viewed society as incredibly complex and integrated and sought to ensure the continuation of its ideology through this web of connections. The university and academy were institutions to not just ensure the education of the intelligentsia but also, through the education of gymnasium teachers, the intellectual direction of the whole society.

Marxism manifested itself most in the Berlin Academy of Sciences's *Zentralinstitut für Geschichte* through its periodization and historiographic methods. Originally, the historians of Germany used terms such as *Mittelalter* and *Barock* to describe historical periods. These terms imply other less objective methods of studying history, so Gerhard Brendler and Peter Bollhagen from the Academy of Sciences proposed a new system of periodization.<sup>59</sup> This new system of periodization emphasized modes of production so that historians now labeled *Mittelalter* as *Feudalismus*.<sup>60</sup> This created a problem as much of German history was termed *Feudalismus*. In order to bridge the gap between the previous periodizations and the current ones, the historical scientists at the Academy kept the departments the same but renamed the Baroque and Enlightenment era department "Spät Feudalismus" (late Feudalism).<sup>61</sup> This is an excellent

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<sup>58</sup>Karl Marx *The Communist Manifesto*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 14.

<sup>59</sup>Brendler and Bollagen, "Grundlagen, Gegenstand und Aufgaben der marxistischen Geschichtswissenschaft," 81.

<sup>60</sup>Brendler and Bollagen, "Grundlagen, Gegenstand und Aufgaben der marxistischen Geschichtswissenschaft," 84.

<sup>61</sup>ADDAW, ZiG, 200.

example of how the ideology of Marxism was always negotiated with the day to day realities of life in East Germany, a trend we will see develop throughout this paper.

The Academy focusing on labor history and social history in their papers also informs us of its bias towards Marxist historiography. Papers concerning great men and nationalistic themes were initially only meant as refutations of Nazi and imperialist narratives. The German Academy of Sciences practiced mostly social history.<sup>62</sup> The members produced many papers concerning economic production and social movements within German and international history.<sup>63</sup> These methodologies focus on material conditions and class struggle. Materialism is essential for Marxist historiography as the driving factors of the class struggles of history are material conditions. Marxism struggles to accommodate motivations apart from material ones which make periods such as the Reformation that traditionally define themselves by religious justifications essential for recontextualization. Class struggle is a tenet of both Marxist political activism and historiography, and by researching labor movements and resistance movements, the German Academy of Sciences attempted to prove its relevance throughout all of human history.<sup>64</sup> While the German Academy of Sciences pursued historical scholarship with serious depth, its historians based their methodology strongly in Marxist thought, especially in terms of selection of detail and historical evidence.

The German Academy of Sciences was not the only institution in the GDR that produced history. There were many pre-existing and newly created collectives that contributed to the historiographic culture of the GDR. Most prominent of these were the universities, many of which predated the GDR's establishment by centuries. The esteemed universities of Berlin,

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<sup>62</sup>Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag, 1983), 32.

<sup>63</sup>ABBAW, ZiG, 300.

<sup>64</sup>Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 49-50.

Erfurt, Dresden, Leipzig, and even the continuation of Wittenberg University, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, made up the academic core of the East German society, and these universities produced and refined scholars in conjunction with the Academy of Sciences. The Central Institute of History had regular contact with these universities and would organize historical conferences for their academics to attend.<sup>65</sup> These institutions were not stagnant ideologically after the war. The GDR conducted an extensive denazification and ideological campaign throughout society and especially in academia.<sup>66</sup> Besides changing personnel, there was a top-down revamping of curricula, and while many professors resisted these changes, the governmental power structure still enforced them. A summarization of this ideological change is the renaming of Leipzig University to Karl Marx University during the early years of the GDR. Marxist thought and historical materialism were not only presented as an ideology but also were taught as subjects in themselves and the only proper method of historical evaluation.<sup>67</sup>

### **Thomas Muntzer as a Socialist “Luther Figure”**

When the East German Academy in the 1940s and 1950s rejected Luther, there was a massive horror vacui for Reformation-era heroes. The politicians and academics of the GDR chose to have Thomas Muntzer, Luther’s opponent in the Peasants War, to serve as a replacement Luther figure. Muntzer could serve as a pre-modern religious figure that galvanized the German people against the religious authorities. Muntzer filled the space of a national hero from the pivotal sixteenth century which saw the decline of the central authority of the Holy Roman Empire along with the rise of religious confessionalism. Muntzer’s previous image was that of a heretic with an anti-authoritarian streak which began within his own life as Luther labeled him

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<sup>65</sup>ADDAW, ZiG “1975 Bauernkrieg” ZiG 610.

<sup>66</sup>Natalia Tveskova, “Making a New and Pliable Professor: American and Soviet Transformations in German Universities, 1945-1990” *Minerva*, vol 52. No. 2 (2014): 166.

<sup>67</sup>Tveskova, “Making a New and Pliable Professor,” 171.

“That Arch devil from Muehlhausen.”<sup>68</sup> He was also fairly obscure before the GDR's rehabilitation. The GDR revolutionized his scholarship and brought both new attention and new perspective to his life. This lack of existing knowledge presented a dilemma for the historians of the GDR. There was little scholarship on him so that academics could control the narrative. But his status as a folk hero was stunted. There was little organic knowledge about Muntzer in German popular culture. Only early modern historians and the occasional church figure knew anything about Muntzer before the GDR's rehabilitation of his figure. With little popular knowledge of Thomas Muntzer, the heritage crafters of the GDR worked hard to ensure his image as the true liberator of the medieval German people became public knowledge.

Muntzer rehabilitation was widespread throughout the GDR's society and demonstrated the totality of power that the East German state attempted to exert on historical narratives. To raise an obscure figure from the depths of history is a mighty task, and the East German state undertook many measures to bring Muntzer into the spotlight. His incorporation manifested mainly in terms of public memory culture. The GDR sought to create a socialist society through this public memory, and, in the opinion of the state, Muntzer reflected these socialist values. Scholars such as Gerhard Brendler drafted academic works that portrayed Thomas Muntzer as a hero of German and socialist values.<sup>69</sup> Streets and public institutions were renamed or christened in his honor in order to cement his name in the public psyche.<sup>70</sup> Textbooks focused on his exploits during this time period instead of on the traditional view of Luther as the driving force behind the *Zeitgeist* of the Reformation. Party members extolled Muntzer virtues publicly as a prophet of working-class Germans.<sup>71</sup> He was an example for those who choose to stay in

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<sup>68</sup>Martin Luther, *Wider die Mordischen und Reubischen Rotten der Bawren*, 1525, Reformationgeschichte Bibliothek.

<sup>69</sup>Gerhard Brendler, *Mit Morgenstern und Regenbogenfahne* (Berlin: VEB Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1978) 10.

<sup>70</sup>“Gemeinschaftsschule Thomas-Muentzer, Magdeburg,” Accessed 4/14/24, <https://www.gts-thomas-muentzer.de/>.

<sup>71</sup>ABBAW “1975 Bauernkrieg” ZiG 610.

religious life as a class-organizing cleric. His willingness to die for his ideals also presented an example for those in military service in the GDR. Overall Thomas Muntzer, although obscure, was the best fit for a Reformation-era figure to replace Luther as the reformer of the age for the GDR.

The prime example of the collaboration between the Academy of Sciences and other state apparati to publicly raise Muntzer to the status of hero was the 1975 Bauernkrieg commemoration. The 1975 Bauernkrieg commemoration is one of the many public heritage commemorations that the GDR put together to both serve as entertainment and as a way of ideologically uniting people and organizations. The unitary aspect of these events even spanned borders and often featured guests initially from socialist brother countries, but later even countries in NATO made prominent appearances in these events such as when Western academics were invited to the Lutherjahr Conference of 1983.<sup>72</sup> These commemorations highlight the ability of the GDR's state-party apparatus to plan and coordinate events across organizational, class, and geographic lines. For the Bauernkrieg commemoration there was a historic academic conference, music performances, military drills, youth group activities, and local events organized by the mayors of the respective towns.<sup>73</sup> The totality of this celebration speaks to the attempt of the state and Academy to direct society as it evoked popular culture in its initiatives. While this celebration certainly created a stir within East Germany, it did not make great waves outside, especially in the West, where there was little coverage compared to the 1983 Lutherjahr. The 1975 Commemoration of the Peasants War helped to build the heritage of Thomas Muntzer within East Germany. However, it limited itself to an internal heritage.

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<sup>72</sup>ABBAW, ZiG 709, Band 2.

<sup>73</sup>ABBAW "1975 Bauernkrieg" ZiG 610.

Most important for the historiographic memory of Muntzer and the Peasants War was the academic conference at the center of the celebration. Within the conference there was a wide diversity of topics and presenters. The principal organizers and presenters at the conference were academy men such as Adolf Laube and Gerhard Brendler.<sup>74</sup> There were also East German academics from the universities and international academics as well. The East German bureaucrats broke down the international attendees into two categories: those who were from socialist brother lands and those who were not. The vast majority of those presenting and serving on work committees were from socialist brother lands, although there were notable West German and American scholars who were invited or even attended this commemoration.<sup>75</sup> One of these historians was Hans Hillerbrand to whom the Academy of Sciences sent an official invitation.<sup>76</sup> Among topics there were many that featured the head figure of Muntzer; however, most of the topics focused upon previous or contemporary western scholarship of the Peasants War or social history.<sup>77</sup> Overall, the conference highlighted the social and foreign attitudes of the East German academy in 1975 which was vigilance against social dissent and Western influence.

### **Luther's Return as a Public Figure**

While the 1975 Bauernkrieg commemoration created a large commotion within East Germany, it did not draw much international coverage. The Central Institute for History or ZiG needed to still prove itself as a capable heritage body that served the interests of the state. With the thawing of church and state relations landing close to the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, there was a golden opportunity for the Central Institute for History to demonstrate its importance. On November 15, 1978, the ZiG constituted a committee to begin preparations

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<sup>74</sup>ABBAW "1975 Bauernkrieg" ZiG 610.

<sup>75</sup>ABBAW "1975 Bauernkrieg" ZiG 610.

<sup>76</sup>ABBAW "1975 Bauernkrieg" ZiG 610.

<sup>77</sup>ABBAW "1975 Bauernkrieg" ZiG 610.

for a national heritage commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth.<sup>78</sup> This grew to be a massive undertaking with cooperation between church and state, academics and party authorities, and much history for the Academy to rewrite. It was a unique moment in East German history where vastly different ideological forces converged to attempt to construct a united vision of heritage.

The origin of the committee lay within the ZiG in the late 1970s. It was not uncommon for the Academy of Sciences to plan projects years in advance due to their logistical needs. The ZiG had to give invited historians enough notice to set out time to travel to the GDR, and it worked closely with local magistrates to ensure the flow of their conferences.<sup>79</sup> The ZiG initially envisioned the Lutherjahr commemoration as a conference with some publications. The earlier mention of Gerhard Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* dates from these initial documents.<sup>80</sup> However, in the following years this committee expanded to encompass both input from the East German government and the authorities of the Protestant Church in East Germany. The state always involved itself in academic affairs. However, in 1980 the magnitude of its involvement increased drastically.

In 1980, Erich Honecker, as head of the GDR, constituted a Martin Luther Committee with himself as the leader to oversee the secular celebration of the 1983 Lutherjahr.<sup>81</sup> The committee consisted of Academy of Science personnel, such as Gerhard Brendler, Protestant clergy, and state authorities.<sup>82</sup> Here is an example of how the state set the pace for academic institutions. It provided monetary support and publicity. However, Honecker's guiding role in the official committee proceedings goes beyond societal pressure to an official method of

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<sup>78</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>79</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>80</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 1.

<sup>81</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>82</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.



controlling the construction of academic heritage. With the SED in charge, the event transitioned from an academic coordination to a national jubilee, thus bringing more attention but making the navigation of heritage also much more complex.

The objective of the committee was to rehabilitate Martin Luther in the GDR with the hope that this would improve relations between church and state. With Honecker's blessing, the committee coordinated the celebration of Luther's birth on a total societal level. There were regular press releases in order to build excitement for the commemoration.<sup>83</sup> While Honecker conducted the first conference, Laube and Brendler later became the public faces of the committee and gave interviews in both East and West German news.<sup>84</sup> Like the Bauernkrieg Commemoration, there was coordination with local authorities along with interdisciplinary academic attractions such as public lectures and musical performances.<sup>85</sup> The Lutherjahr commemoration had more official backing and much more political clout. While the Bauernkrieg celebration boasted some small-time party functionaries at its head, Honecker's direction and input were essential for the international coverage of the Lutherjahr commemoration. Two key differences of this effect stand out when compared to the 1975 Bauernkrieg celebration. There was considerably more international interest, especially from West Germany and the USA, and there was a lot more coordination with mass media culture within the GDR.

The state-directed consumer culture in 1980s East Germany struck into full gear with this change in public memory. It attempted to compete with the mass media in West Germany concerning the anniversary of Luther's birth. The Luther Celebration in East Germany was no exception to this, and the East Germans tried to out do anything the West Germans could do in

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<sup>83</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>84</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2

<sup>85</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

terms of producing memorabilia and media for the anniversary.<sup>86</sup> The GDR had a natural advantage since while West Germany had only Worms, where Luther faced off with Holy Roman Emperor Karl V, the GDR controlled every other site associated with Luther. Within the GDR were the places where Luther was born, died, went to school, and worked, as well as the famous Wartburg Castle where Luther constructed the German language with his translation of the New Testament. There was already a growing tourist industry for these places, especially Wartburg with its centuries-long history of tourism, multifaceted cultural and religious significance, and a strong charitable foundation.<sup>87</sup> Besides the tourism industry which also included the selling of knick-knacks and other items, there were wide cultural productions that this Martin Luther Committee undertook.<sup>88</sup> The state commissioned a series of stamps that commemorated the Reformer and other household objects such as ceramic plates and the like.<sup>89</sup> The most impactful of these cultural productions was a television mini-series the state released in 1983 titled “Martin Luther.”<sup>90</sup> The committee promoted this series widely throughout East Germany with it remaining within the popular perception of Luther until today. There was even close cooperation between the historians of the ZiG and the production of this movie with Gerhard Brendler especially advising the film.<sup>91</sup> Overall the East German state utilized popular culture to promote this event, even more so than the previous heritage celebrations.

The promotion did not stop in East Germany; instead the Martin Luther committee actively pursued connections with the international community. This even included non-socialist countries, especially the United States and West Germany. In the 1980s East German policy on relationships towards the NATO powers was complex, especially within the Academy of

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<sup>86</sup>Maser “*Mit Luther alles im Butter?*,” 208, 226.

<sup>87</sup>Maser “*Mit Luther alles im Butter?*,” 213.

<sup>88</sup>Maser “*Mit Luther alles im Butter?*,” 208.

<sup>89</sup>Maser “*Mit Luther alles im Butter?*,” 211.

<sup>90</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

<sup>91</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 2.

Sciences. The decades-long tensions were still present even in 1983 as the vice president of the Academy attacked the invasion of Grenada in his introduction to an academic lecture on Martin Luther.<sup>92</sup> However, much was being done to reduce these tensions especially among the scholars themselves. There is strong evidence in the letters of invitation for the 1983 conference that suggests growing connections between East German academics and their American counterparts. The Lutherjahr academic conference invited much more international scholarship than the Bauernkrieg one with a large number of American academics receiving an invitation. These invitations were not simply formalities but were signs of stronger relationships with Western academia. The conference organizers invited Lewis W. Spitz, an American historian with strong ties to the Lutheran church, to whom he returned the letter with a regretful no.<sup>93</sup> Professor Spitz went as far as to express his regret for his inability to see again his East German colleagues including Gerhard Brendler.<sup>94</sup> Besides the United States, there were attempts to bring in West Germany, as well. Brendler and other East German academics accepted interviews from West German news outlets, and the GDR officially promoted western tourism to Luther pilgrimage sites for the celebration.<sup>95</sup> The difference in attitudes towards Westerners in the 1975 Bauernkrieg Celebration the 1983 Lutherjahr Celebration speaks to the political situation to which the actions of the East German historians were beholden. When the state softened its foreign policy in the 1980s, the academics followed suit.

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<sup>92</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 3.

<sup>93</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 3.

<sup>94</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 3.

<sup>95</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709 Band 3.

### **Burying the Hatchet: Church in Socialism**

The clearest example of GDR state influence on the production of history is found in the parallels between the historiography of Martin Luther and church-state relations in the GDR. There is almost a one-to-one correlation between negative and dismissive treatment of the Protestant Church within the GDR by the state and the Academy painting a negative image of Martin Luther in its histories. While the GDR struggled with the church in the 1950s and early 1960s, Luther was a villain in the background, and Muntzer came to the forefront. However, the Academy's decision to celebrate the 1983 anniversary of Martin Luther's birth on November 15, 1978 followed a massive agreement between church and state on March 6 earlier in that year.<sup>96</sup> The language of the November 15 document does not reference any coercion or orders from party officials. It seeks to find middle ground between socialist values and the values of Martin Luther in the spirit of the compromises between church and state.<sup>97</sup> The changing heritage of Martin Luther correlating with shifts in church and state relations speaks to the academics informing their historiographic conclusions with close readings of political developments in the GDR to ensure their loyalty to the state.

The GDR engaged in a drawn-out process of struggle and compromise with the Protestant church for the entirety of its history which ultimately resulted in their reaching a cooperative agreement in the 1970s. As a socialist state founded in 1949, the GDR opposed organized religion and especially the Protestant church on account of its collaboration with both Second and Third Reichs. The initial relationship between the church and state was hostile.<sup>98</sup> The state maintained a program throughout the 1950s in order to secularize society intellectually, culturally, and socially while the church largely rejected the state by maintaining ties with their

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<sup>96</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 241.

<sup>97</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709, Band 2.

<sup>98</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 42.

brethren in the FRG. The initial relationship between the Protestant church and state was hostile due to the Protestant church's associations with conservative movements and the socialist distrust of religion.

With the Berlin Wall's construction in 1961, both the church and state began to shift strategy. The Protestant church separated officially from the Protestant church in West Germany in 1969, which signaled a great concession to the GDR.<sup>99</sup> The GDR began to pay in kind and allowed more freedom for the newly formed Protestant church to operate within its borders. This new relationship solidified on March 6, 1978 as the GDR and the Protestant Church held a summit that greatly eased persecution while giving it more freedom to function in exchange for ideological support.<sup>100</sup> In 1980, Erich Honecker publicly met with leading Protestant clergy within the GDR to plan the 1983 Lutherjahr celebration which provides a concrete example of how this new relationship grew.<sup>101</sup> When the celebration occurred, Honecker visited Wartburg, a holy site for German Protestantism and nationalism, with Protestant bishops publicly declaring his endorsement of the church.<sup>102</sup> This public celebration of Protestant heritage by the state represents the culmination of the previous decades' shift from hostility to cooperation between the church and state.

The rise of the East German government under Walter Ulbricht in 1949 led to a struggle between the Lutheran Church and the state. Socialist opposition to organized religion dates back to Karl Marx. He famously referred to religion as the "Opium of the People."<sup>103</sup> Socialists viewed religion as an oppressive power structure that distracted the maligned proletariat from the reality of class struggle. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conservatives viewed

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<sup>99</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 86.

<sup>100</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 243.

<sup>101</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 249.

<sup>102</sup>"Lutherjahr 1983," An Exhibit at Wartburg Castle by the Wartburg Foundation, 2023.

<sup>103</sup>Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* trans. Joseph O'Malley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 1.

socialism as an existential threat and emphasized its atheistic tendencies to justify the suppression of labor movements. Germany, especially in its cities, was an ideological battleground between socialism and state-enforced Protestantism. The state's suppression of anti-religious socialism partially explains the German royal family's enthusiastic patronage of the Protestant church. The Kaisers financed churches in historically socialist districts; the Zion Church in Berlin was one of the churches that the Hohenzollerns built to exert religious power in a stronghold of socialism within the city.<sup>104</sup> This antagonistic relationship between socialist movements and the state led to widespread socialist perception of religion and especially the state sponsored Protestant church as one of the pillars of the oppressive imperial society.

The Soviet occupation force initially defined the relationship between the Protestant church and state in what would become East Germany. While the Soviets did not shoot ministers and their congregations en masse like the Russian Revolution or other socialist countries, they effectively finished the process of political marginalization that the church underwent with the collapse of imperial power in 1918. The Soviets allowed the church to function in its charity capacity but did not let it gain any political power.<sup>105</sup> Those who overtly collaborated with the Nazis were punished or demoted, and both the Soviet authorities and those pastors left in charge held the resisting Confessing Church as a model to emulate.<sup>106</sup> While the Soviets did not do major damage to the church infrastructure that was in ruins, they did appropriate its remaining land holdings and ensured it would not obtain any more political power.

The church's position within society only decreased with the establishment of the German Democratic Republic. With the construction of the East German state, the government sought to reform society along socialist lines. This included marginalizing the church from not

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<sup>104</sup>“Zionskirche Geschichte,” An exhibit at Zionskirche, 2023.

<sup>105</sup>*Evangelical Church in Berlin and the Soviet Zone of Germany* (West Berlin: Eckart Verlag, 1959), 15.

<sup>106</sup>*Evangelical Church in Berlin and the Soviet Zone of Germany*, 6.

just a political perspective but from a cultural perspective as well. The ideal socialist citizen would have nothing to do with this ancient and outdated institution. Politically, the vast majority of GDR politicians were avowed atheists and those who were religious often hid their religion on threat of expulsion from the SED.<sup>107</sup> In the GDR, there existed a Christian Democratic Union that officially served as a counterpart to the powerful Federal Republic of Germany's CDU. However, the post-war political purges harshly targeted the East German CDU's politicians.<sup>108</sup> With these purges effectively neutering the CDU, the Socialist Unity Party manipulated the CDU along with the other minor parties. The political environment of the GDR marginalized the expression of religion, especially the cultural influence that the Protestant church held over German society in order to clear the way for their new cultural values.

Most famously, the GDR sought to create alternatives to the activities of the church to decrease church attendance and diminish the presence of the church within society. The social aspect of the church was replaced with the promotion of secular organizations and clubs throughout the GDR.<sup>109</sup> For adults, the GDR promoted state-sponsored hobby associations and socialist reading groups in order to replace the social dynamics of church associations. The Hitler Youth had displaced much of the Protestant youth movement, but the East German youth programs, namely the *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth), ensured that these Protestant groups declined into irrelevance. The government's bluntest attempt was the adoption of the *Jugendweihe* ceremony. This ceremony was meant as a secular and socialist alternative to the Confirmation ceremony of the Lutheran church.

The Confirmation ceremony in twentieth-century German Protestant circles was an essential coming-of-age ceremony which marked full membership in the local parish community.

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<sup>107</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 45.

<sup>108</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 42.

<sup>109</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 50.

The youths would become voting members of their churches and therefore possess more responsibility. As a parting gift to guide the new members of the community, the pastor gave them Luther's *Small Catechism* to help them religiously through their adult lives. Typical of these ceremonies, which were done collectively reminiscent of a modern graduation, would be a Divine Service with the pastor ritually laying his hands upon the confirmands followed by a communal celebration. The post-ceremony party was a typical *Volksfest* with Trachten (traditional clothes) (some communities insist on Trachten for the Divine Service as well), traditional dancing, *Volkslieder*, and a copious amount of refreshments. The Jugendweihe ceremony mimicked this religious rite of passage with speeches on socialist values followed by a party.<sup>110</sup> Participants were made official members of the community and even presented with a book on socialism to mimic the catechism they would have received.<sup>111</sup> The East German state even gave financial incentives to the secular ceremony to boost its popularity.

The official policy of the Socialist Unity Party through the 1950s was atheism following Nikita Khrushchev's policy in the Soviet Union. The government was also wary of the transnational affiliations that the Protestant church held. The church had strong connections with their spiritual brethren in the West which was seen as potentially treacherous.<sup>112</sup> As any early attempts to reunify with the West fell through, the position of the Lutheran church within the GDR became more and more unstable. With the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, a hard barrier now existed between West and East, and within the GDR, a fortress mentality began to emerge. The East German state publicly pushed the narrative that those clergy who maintained connections to the FRG were suspect of Western influence.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, these political

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<sup>110</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 50.

<sup>111</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 50.

<sup>112</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 66.

<sup>113</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 66.



developments put copious pressure on the church to conform to the rapidly changing realities of the GDR as they maintained connections with their West German brethren. The 1950s only saw an increase in open hostility between church and state as clergy tended to dissent from the socialist vision of society that the GDR sought to develop.

The tides began to shift in the 1960s as the GDR began to undergo reforms that had the goal of increased cooperation between the people and the state. The East German state sought to assume its role as the servant of the people in a more receptive rather than purely authoritative role.<sup>114</sup> This included the question of the Protestant church, as a non-ignorable section of the GDR's populace remained devout Protestants. These reforms were furthered by the growing climate of unrest in the East and the inability to maintain the current social organization in the GDR. Concessions to allow both more freedom of expression of the church and less official pressure for atheist thinking began to take shape as early as 1966.<sup>115</sup> However, the GDR did not simply surrender to the Protestant church. The church was expected to adopt a less harsh stance towards the government as well. The leaders of the Protestant church began to proclaim that they were not a church against socialism but rather a "Church in Socialism."<sup>116</sup> The process of conceding ground, but expecting more political loyalty, only grew in the decades to come with its culmination arguably being the Lutherjahr commemoration.

A massive confession of loyalty on the part of the Lutheran church to the GDR was the formation of the "Bund der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR" (Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR) in 1969.<sup>117</sup> In the previous decades, the state held the church in suspicion due to its ties to the Protestant church in the FRG. This connection became practically untenable

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<sup>114</sup>Mary Fulbrook, *The Peoples State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 259.

<sup>115</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 65.

<sup>116</sup> Goeckel, "Church and Society in the GDR: Historical Legacies and "Mature Socialism,"" 214.

<sup>117</sup>Goeckel *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 56.

due to the raising of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The GDR's carrot-and-stick policy with the Protestant church encouraged the church to prioritize establishing distance between its members and their western counterparts. However, ironically, this organizational reordering led to the East German Protestant church focusing more on international affairs.<sup>118</sup> As a separate church body, it now had an independent delegation on the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical body dedicated to worldwide Christian unity through activism and charity.<sup>119</sup> The newly founded East German church quickly played an active role and asserted itself with the body as an advocate for non-violence and nuclear disarmament.

The March 6, 1978 agreement brought in a completely new era for church and state relations. The relatively new East German Protestant Church sat down with the GDR government to find a working relationship between the two in a summit between the two bodies. While the state maintained firm control over the social governance of the country, there were large concessions and cooperations offered to the East German Church Bund.<sup>120</sup> Honecker allowed limited access by churches to ministers in prison, which was unprecedented for other communist countries.<sup>121</sup> Visiting imprisoned faithful is a Christian tradition dating to the Apostles, and, while this practice never reached ideal conditions during the GDR, allowing prison visits was a surprising practice due to it contradicting the secretive nature of the state. For the majority of the GDR's history, there was a general trend of churches closing down; however, with the new agreement, Honecker agreed to help open more churches.<sup>122</sup> The state also helped logistically organize church congresses in the later part of 1978.<sup>123</sup> March 6, 1978 signaled the

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<sup>118</sup>Goeckel *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 257.

<sup>119</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 258.

<sup>120</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 241.

<sup>121</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 241.

<sup>122</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 243.

<sup>123</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 243.

conclusion of the shift from a hostile attitude between church and state to a cooperative attitude between church and state despite their different goals and social divergences.

The eventual agreement between the Protestant church and the state allowed it to rejoin society in a sense. The state no longer viewed the church as an organization to suppress but rather as a necessary tool for maintaining loyalty among some of its citizens. Church leaders became more cooperative, and they publicly made statements that supported the status quo. These conditions allowed for the heritage of the church to be co-opted by the state as part of the cultural expressions of its socialist society. The peak example of this co-opted heritage was Martin Luther upon whom the state began to laud praises immediately following the March 6 agreement.

### Chapter 3 Luther's Biographical Rehabilitation

It is in the new spirit of the March 6 agreement that the Academy of Sciences began its shift from viewing Luther as lackey of the princes to a liberator of the German intellectual sphere. Only a few months later, the Luther committee began to plan an official commemoration of Martin Luther by a secular academic body. This academic commemoration evolved into a massive affair with the creation of a Martin Luther Committee in 1980 headed by none other than Erich Honecker.<sup>124</sup> With the state leader of the GDR taking a leading role, the political implications were massive. There was even coordination with the parallel committee that the church headed which suggests that this was a conscious implementation of the new relationship of compromise defined in the March 6 agreement.<sup>125</sup> While the state and party authorities certainly led the charge, academics also played prominent roles in this Lutherjahr celebration. Gerhard Brendler wrote a biography of Martin Luther, advised the Martin Luther television series, and appeared publicly on behalf of the academic interests of the Martin Luther Committee. He portrayed Luther throughout all of these as a German national hero worthy of such an extravagant celebration. While the context of church and state relations certainly set the stage for the academic change of Luther's historiography within the GDR, there was ready adoption on behalf of the historians, namely his biographer Gerhard Brendler.

Gerhard Brendler published his biography in 1983 to coincide with the Lutherjahr celebrations. Overall in its structure and narratives, it is a standard biography of Martin Luther with few deviations from long held perceptions. It places great importance on the indulgence controversy and Luther's prioritization of freedom as a virtue.<sup>126</sup> It deviates from a standard evaluation of Martin Luther's life in its attempt to ideologically tie Martin Luther's theology to

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<sup>124</sup>ADDAW, ZiG 709, 2.

<sup>125</sup>Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 241.

<sup>126</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 63.

the contemporary ideology of the GDR. However, to a careful reader, Brendler's methodology of social history also helps to classify it securely within the genre of GDR historiography. While *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* certainly adheres to the intellectual ideology of the GDR, Brendler uses unorthodox methodology in order to rehabilitate Martin Luther.

Gerhard Brendler takes his most radical shift in his reinterpretation of Martin Luther's intellectual history. Especially in the second and third chapters of *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution*, there is a clear focus on Martin Luther's intellectual imprinting and development. Previously in Marxist historiography, intellectual history occupied a marginal space. It ostensibly has no material basis and therefore is not related to the driving factors of history, class struggle, and production complexity. However, with the rehabilitation of a wider concept of national heritage, more avenues for historical analysis opened. In this work, in particular, Brendler seeks to dive into the intellectual and even religious history of the German people which had been taboo for the Academy until the 1980s when the head authorities began to tolerate it.

The predominance of social history within the GDR's academy weakened in the 1970s and 1980s with the attempts to construct a wider national heritage. In 1980, Ingrid Mittenzwei, GDR professor and zealous party member, published her biographical work on Frederick the Great.<sup>127</sup> Biographies subvert socialist schools of historiography in that they focus on individuals while socialist historiography traditionally focuses on wider societal trends. Mittenzwei sought to rehabilitate the heritage of Prussia in the context of socialist historiography. She opposed the previous view of Frederick the Great as a duplicitously enlightened despot; instead Mittenzwei posited that Frederick the Great reformed the social context of Prussia.<sup>128</sup> In doing so, she

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<sup>127</sup>Ronald D. Asmus "Review: The GDR and the German Past" *German Studies Newsletter* no. 7 (1986): 21.

<sup>128</sup>Ronald D. Asmus "Review: The GDR and the German Past," 21.

projected his reforms onto the wider conception of Prussian society which Mittenzwei viewed as more progressive than previous Marxists could admit due to their conflict with the Prussian state.<sup>129</sup> While these recontextualizations of previously held notions concerning the German past allowed for more revisiting of established historiographic norms, these biographies still followed the ideological desires of the state. The historians of the Academy maintained their respect for Marxist ideology and adapted the figures to this ideology rather than conceding intellectual differences. Frederick the Great and later Martin Luther became forerunners to socialist ideology within GDR historiography instead of unique actors of history that held a worldview contrary to socialism.

The most important change that Mittenzwei emphasized was her adoption of the biographical style. The biographical style existed already throughout the East German mass media with various cultural and intellectual examples. Culturally, the state limited biographic media in the past to those who matched the intellectual heritage of the GDR closely. An excellent example of this is the 1950s film series on Ernst Thälmann, the Weimar-era communist organizer.<sup>130</sup> Despite or perhaps because of its numerous inaccuracies, the state and especially the educational apparatus endorsed this movie wholeheartedly as pedagogical material. It quickly became an intimate part of the East German cultural memory and highlights the use of figures as public heritage within the GDR.<sup>131</sup> However, what binds these two biographies, film and book, together is their overt ties to socialist views of history that are strongly rooted in the wider tradition of the GDR. Mittenzwei innovated with her biography as she used this

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<sup>129</sup>Ronald D. Asmus "Review: The GDR and the German Past," 21.

<sup>130</sup>*Ernst Thälmann: Sohn seiner Klasse*, directed by Kurt Maetzig (1954; Berlin, East Germany: DEFA, 1954).

<sup>131</sup>Gerhard Brendler, *Thomas Muentzer: Geist und Faust* (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1989) 6.

unorthodox method to challenge classical Marxist interpretations of the past and thus allowed for Brendler to dispute these conceptions further with his biography of Martin Luther.

The methodology of a biography naturally leads to a more abstract and narrower focus of historiography. It focuses on the intentions and personality of the person whom the author chooses to highlight. To counteract this in the GDR, writers projected the private attitudes of these figures onto the wider social context of the time. The title, *Ernst Thälmann: Sohn seiner Klasse* (Ernst Thälmann: Son of his Class), suggests that this one figure represents a collective of people, and throughout the film Thälmann acts as a representative experience of the working class throughout the Weimar period.<sup>132</sup> However, one can never escape the effects of this methodology, and Brendler's biography of Luther certainly embraces this inward focus on Luther as an individual with intentions of his own. Even when Brendler tries to present a Marxist interpretation of Luther, the method of the biography undermines the class-based worldview inherent to socialist historiography. Brendler's previous work was a book that commemorated the German Peasants War called *Mit Morgenstern und Regenbogenfahne* (With Morningstar and Rainbow Flag) (1978). The work focuses on the movement of the radical peasants, rather than the individual leaders such as Thomas Muntzer.<sup>133</sup> In fact, after the success of his Luther biography, Brendler published a biography of Muntzer, as well. By choosing to construct his history as a biography, Brendler highlights Luther's individuality and well-known defiance in his time.

Brendler's context certainly informed his decision to focus on the biography rather than a broad history of the Reformation. The political shifts in the state and its relationship with wider German heritage made it possible for historians to positively evaluate not explicitly socialist

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<sup>132</sup>*Ernst Thälmann: Sohn seiner Klasse*, directed by Kurt Maetzig (1954; Berlin, East Germany: DEFA, 1954).

<sup>133</sup>Gerhard Brendler, *Mit Morgenstern und Regenbogenfahne* (Berlin: VEB Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1978) 10.

Germans. More specifically, the state's tacit approval of the church and the church's new-found cooperation with the state allowed for rehabilitation of even religious historical figures, most importantly Martin Luther. Biographies, or rather hagiographies of Martin Luther, were not a new trend in German history. His contemporaries transcribed his dinner conversations, Lutheran church historians embellished his virtues in tracts, and nationalists portrayed him as a decisive figure of "Deutschtum" along with Arminius. The ZiG's conscious decision to return to this older form of writing and subject matter suggests that the political shift to partially accept the Lutheran heritage of the GDR had historiographic consequences.

For particular context there is evidence from the ZiG Lutherjahr files that suggests it was not Brendler's decision at all to write a biography. The first mention of this Luther biography on November 15, 1978 makes little mention of Gerhard Brendler and does not provide any evidence of his own motivations.<sup>134</sup> "On the National Luther-Commemoration 1983 on his 500 birthday - Conceptual Principles and Measures" which was an internal planning memoranda, guides both the framework and publishing plans of the Academy for the Luther celebration that was to take place five years later.<sup>135</sup> Brendler's own motivations to write this work do not appear in this text. The plan of the Academy is detailed in the third person with no identifiable author which suggests a relatively authoritarian vision of historiography in line with the involvement of top SED officials in this commemoration. However, in later interviews Brendler professed an interest in Luther dating to his time in what is now the Czech Republic where he was born in 1932. He states that what intrigued him was his Catholic family's self-proclaimed ownership of Luther as a German despite his drastically conflicting religious beliefs.<sup>136</sup> No matter whether the

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<sup>134</sup>"Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983 anlässlich seines 500. Geburtstages - konzeptionelle Grundlagen und Massnahmen," ABBAW ZiG 709, 2.

<sup>135</sup>"Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983," ABBAW ZIG 709, 2.

<sup>136</sup>Gerhard Brendler "Interview" in *Luther in der DDR* by Martin Roy, 265.



Academy or Brendler came to this decision to write a biography, there was pressure from above for it to succeed, and Brendler had a personal cultural connection to the material as did many Germans.

While Brendler's own motivations fail to appear in "Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983," there is certainly a strong socialist historiographic framing that dominates the memo. Already by this time the ZiG embraced the decision to rehabilitate Martin Luther rather emphatically. It focused on Luther's progressive intellectual tendencies and his stand against the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>137</sup> In the Academy's view, Luther played an important role in class struggle as, "through the Reformation ideas the feudal system was shaken in its justification and rationale based upon scholastic theology."<sup>138</sup> While this phrase initially suggests a strongly orthodox interpretation of class struggle, beneath the socialist wording there is a new interpretation. While orthodox Marxism seeks to justify the state of the world through modes of production, the importance laid upon "reformatorischen Ideen" (reformation ideas) suggests that philosophy and even theology play important roles in this historiographic view.<sup>139</sup> This complete shift in historiographic thought suggests that there is a compromise between orthodox Marxist ideals and the new embracing of existing German heritage, especially the religious heritage of the Protestant church.

The utilization of intellectual history not only occurs in the interior files of the ZiG, but it is ever present in Brendler's biography, *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution*. The title alone suggests a new interpretation of theology as revolutionary. No longer is theology the tool of the state-aligned church to repress the working classes as socialists conceived of it as in the

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<sup>137</sup>"Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983," ABBAW ZIG 709, 2.

<sup>138</sup>"Durch die reformatorischen Ideen wurde das Feudalsystem in seiner auf die scholastische Theologie gestützten Begründung und Rechtfertigung erschüttert" "Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983," ABBAW ZIG 709, 2.

<sup>139</sup>"Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983," ABBAW ZIG 709, 2.

nineteenth century. Brendler adopts theology in his title as a concept that goes hand-in-hand with revolution and thus plays a role in it. Brendler does not shy away from Luther's conception as a theologian or a figure of the church, and throughout his biography he embraces Luther's status in order to justify the ideals of socialism.

One of the more extreme examples of Brendler's adaptation of theology to Marxist theory is his discussion of the theological concept of nominalism. Brendler views nominalism as relevant to his biography due to its connection to Luther's education as many of his professors were nominalists.<sup>140</sup> He also theorizes that there is a parallel between the theological debates of the sixteenth century and the nineteenth century as he states, "the difference between realism and nominalism is based in the basic question of philosophy with the difference between idealism and materialism."<sup>141</sup> The conflict between idealism and materialism was central to the development of Marxism in the nineteenth century, in Brendler's view. This is in spite of the centuries of time that passed between these two intellectual conflicts. By boldly comparing these two debates, Brendler is contextualizing his work within the wider historiographic theory of the GDR with its Marxist heritage.

Luther's connection to the nominalist debate further demonstrates his status as a proto-prophet of Marxism. Luther studied under nominalist thinkers throughout his intellectual upbringing, and this is enough for Brendler to marry his thought to theirs. Through this connection Brendler seeks to identify Luther as a nominalist, which, while historically making little sense, certainly boosts Luther's character in Brendler's eyes. Luther rejected the nominalist teachings of his predecessors with an outspoken dislike for late medieval academic theology as a whole. For Brendler, nominalism was the sixteenth-century counterpart to materialism, the

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<sup>140</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 35.

<sup>141</sup>"die Differenz zwischen Realismus und Nominalismus berührt sich mit der Grundfrage der Philosophie, mit dem Unterschied zwischen Idealismus und Materialismus" Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 36.

metaphysical framework that was integral to the foundations of Marxist thought. Despite a massive time gap and ideological differences between these two concepts, Brendler insists on loosely connecting these ideas to build up his case for Luther as a proto-Marxist figure.

Brendler develops his thesis of Luther as a theological prefiguring of Marx later in the biography, as he surveys Luther's own intellectual growth. Brendler details Luther's struggles with scrupulosity and his "Turmerlebnis" (tower-experience) where he began to work through his ideas of justification through faith alone.<sup>142</sup> Brendler devotes ten pages to this in-depth examination and evolution of Luther's thought and its roots in the scriptural sources that Luther himself studied. To take such careful and thoughtful treatment of Luther's intellectual and especially religious motivations was uncharacteristic of the East German Academy. Brendler positively describes Luther's theology as liberating from Roman Catholic authoritarianism. In fact, Brendler's treatment of Luther thought from pages 61-71 reads more akin to a tract one would find in a nineteenth-century German seminary library rather than a socialist interpretation of the reformer. Instead of rejecting theology, the traditionalist socialist viewpoint, Brendler weaves his viewpoint with Luther's ideas. Brendler even tackles Luther's "Theology of the Cross," which besides being essential to Luther's views on his ever-present concept of Grace and justification is a deeply religious and anti-philosophical approach to these concepts due to their basis in the event of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and the Gospel's accounts of Christ's actions on the cross.<sup>143</sup> Brendler in this section takes an uncharacteristically sympathetic approach to Luther's biblical studies. He carefully outlines Luther's religious justifications for his ideas and hints throughout at a sympathy for these ideas, giving a tacit approval to some interpretations of the Christian religion.

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<sup>142</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 61.

<sup>143</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 69.

Brendler takes this approval to new heights when he attempts to directly compare Luther's ideas to that of Karl Marx. Previously, Brendler drew connections between the loose concepts of nominalism and materialism that drifted in the background for figures such as Luther and Marx; however, Brendler later draws comparisons between specific concepts that Luther and Marx pioneered. He compares the "separation of mankind from God" found in Luther's theology with Marx's "separation of mankind from its species."<sup>144</sup> For Brendler, the common sense of *Entfremdung* (estrangement) throughout these two ideas is enough to develop a connection in spite of numerous difficulties such as the gap in time and Marx's professed atheism and Luther's dislike of external, material conditions. By connecting Luther's and Marx's concepts as similar, Brendler is bridging the socialist and Lutheran heritage of the GDR.

However, Brendler's intellectual treatment of Luther goes beyond just a redemption of the reformer and extends to a recasting of the Christian theology that the reformer held dear. While internal documents dating from the first mention of the biography and press releases make it obvious that Brendler was attempting to rehabilitate in this biography, the rehabilitation of the whole Christian religion as something compatible with socialism was not explicitly made clear in the press releases that predated the 1983 publication.<sup>145</sup> This decision to rehabilitate Christianity to an extreme extent reflects his own choices as a historian. Brendler's approval of Christian thought is best found in this passage "Christian Theology is a systemized poem about being and the path of people; Luther one of its master singers."<sup>146</sup> Brendler presents Christian thought in a vague and laudable manner that is compatible with socialist thinking as an artistic interpretation of the realities of being and the path of people. The importance Brendler gives to the term *Weg*

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<sup>144</sup>"Entfremdung des Menschen von Gott" "Entfremdung des Menschen von seinem Gattungswesen" Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 71.

<sup>145</sup>Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983 anlässlich seines 500. Geburtstages - konzeptionelle Grundlagen und Massnahmen," ABBAW ZiG 709, 2.

<sup>146</sup>"Christlich Theologie ist systematisierte Dichtung über Wesen und Weg des Menschen; Martin Luther einer ihrer Meistersinger." Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 72.

(path) calls to mind that common heavy emphasis on eschatology that Luther and Marx placed while both reached radically different conclusions. Brendler not only redeems Luther but he redeems his theology, as well, and thus allows for its place in the contemporary socialist state. Brendler's provides a historical basis for the compromise between the socialist state and the Protestant church within the GDR.

With his ability to criticize the Lutheran church limited due to the nature of this work and its political context, Brendler utilizes the Catholic Church as a scapegoat for his religious critiques of Reformation-era religious culture in light of socialist ideology. The attack on the Catholic Church is ironic considering his origins. However, the socialist distrust of religious institutions aligns with Luther's criticism of the worldly power that the Catholic Church held in the late Middle Ages. This similarity makes its adoption into the socialist rehabilitation of Martin Luther rather easy. The earliest documents of the ZiG that attest to the effort to rehabilitate Luther also portray the Roman Catholic Church as corrupt and outdated.<sup>147</sup> Brendler shares this perception as he views Luther's attacks against the Catholic Church in the indulgence controversy as justified.<sup>148</sup> Most impactful is Brendler's characterization of Luther's theology as liberating in contrast to the oppressive nature of Catholic theology.<sup>149</sup> Brendler uses attacks against the Catholic Church and its teachings in order to create a scapegoat for the socialist critiques of religion.

The publication in 1983 of Gerhard Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* sent an intellectual shockwave throughout both East and West due to the rapid differences between it and previous Luther scholarship in the GDR. It was the intellectual culmination of

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<sup>147</sup>“Zur nationalen Luther-Ehrung 1983 anlässlich seines 500. Geburtstages - konzeptionelle Grundlagen und Massnahmen,” ABBAW ZiG 709, 2.

<sup>148</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 100.

<sup>149</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 101.

Luther's rehabilitation in the GDR. Brendler sought to identify Luther positively in the national narrative of the socialist German people. He utilized selection of detail and reinterpretation of previous socialist historiography in order to bring this difficult figure into the national heritage of the GDR. While Brendler certainly meanders from some of the historiographic norms of the Academy of Sciences, he maintained a socialist interpretation of Martin Luther throughout. Brendler's most telling adaptation of Luther is the use of social history throughout the piece as it frames his work within socialist paradigms. The use of social history within *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* demonstrates the attempt to bring together socialist thought and Martin Luther's legacy.

The evolution of social history as a historiographic tool is strongly tied to the development of socialist ideology. Social history seeks to take the focus of the historical narrative from "Great Men" to the everyday people. It employs wide economic and social trends within society to build a wider narrative about the time. Marx laid much of the groundwork for social history in his writings with a clear example in the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx periodizes history and defines it by production and its relation not to individual kings or people but to classes.<sup>150</sup> He groups those without the means of production into a distinct group, the proletariat, explicitly to develop a class consciousness.<sup>151</sup> While many before Marx viewed history as a struggle between great personalities or a dialect of spirit as Hegel did, Marx views it as a conflict between groups of economically divided people. His dialectical approach to the study of class struggle, while borrowing heavily from Hegel, provides one of the first examples of "history from below." Marxist historians would later develop social history into the twentieth century where it became popular in both eastern and western Europe.

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<sup>150</sup>Karl Marx *The Communist Manifesto*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 14.

<sup>151</sup>Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 14.

Throughout the Luther biography, there is a clear interpretation of history from a Marxist perspective. The methodology that Brendler uses is very telling of his ideological background. Social history dominated the Academy of Sciences until the late 1970s when there was a “rehistoricization process” as Robert Goeckel described.<sup>152</sup> This process entailed a cognisant heritage-building project within the GDR that sought to reinterpret the events in the German past as consistent with the ideals of the GDR. The Bauernkrieg celebration of 1975 is an example of this rehistoricization as it seeks to draw connections between rebellious theologically-minded peasants of the 1520s with the contemporary atheist East German state. Its incorporation of all aspects of the GDR’s life from the *Freie Deutsche Jugend* to the *National Volksarmee* with live demonstrations and musical accompaniment made it a public spectacle that sought to draw connections between the distant memory of the Bauernkrieg to the contemporary institutions of the GDR. This process continued into the 1983 Lutherjahr as there were public celebrations and the endorsement of Honecker himself. The rehistoricization of the GDR saw a newfound appreciation of the premodern past in spite of the norms of social history.

Brendler opens his biography with an in-depth description of the social status of Luther’s family in order to position himself within the tradition of social history. Previous scholars such as Erich Fromm in his *Escape from Freedom* (1941) utilized Luther’s early life to psychoanalyze him.<sup>153</sup> Brendler shies away from an early attempt to enter the mind of Luther although he would later explore Luther’s intellectual development as critical to his role in the national heritage. Brendler places him immediately within the context of Marxist class interpretation. While later Brendler would use non-traditional methods to coalesce Luther’s heritage with the opinions of the GDR’s state apparatus, he cannot avoid the necessary engagement with class struggle that

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<sup>152</sup>Robert Goeckel, “The GDR Legacy and the German Protestant Church” *German Politics & Society* no. 31 (1994): 87.

<sup>153</sup>Erich Fromm, *Die Furcht vor Freiheit* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), 67.

forms the bedrock of Marxist historiography. Brendler utilizes social and economic values to effectively place Luther within both his context and Marxist historical thought.

On the first page of his biography Brendler begins this analysis of Luther as a member of the bourgeois class. He describes Luther's family background as having a "relatively stable social status"<sup>154</sup> This assessment, while initially innocuous, hints towards a deeper perception of Luther as bourgeois because his life was not as unstable as, for example, that of a peasant. Luther's status could afford him opportunities that others in his time did not have, such as education which would prove incredibly important to his future actions as a professor of Biblical texts. Brendler in this observation sets up his later treatment of Luther as a member of the bourgeoisie for his commentary in his twelfth chapter on the Bauernkrieg termed "The Victory of Class Instincts."<sup>155</sup> Brendler takes Luther's upbringing as determinative for his anti-peasant attitudes during the Peasants War.<sup>156</sup> Through socio-economic analysis of Martin Luther's background, Brendler utilizes a socialist perspective to determine Luther's motivations for supporting the nobility in the Peasants War.

Brendler's attempts to classify Luther's social status as stable are nothing new. In fact this view of Luther as a proto-bourgeois figure dates back to Frederick Engels' *The Peasants War in Germany*. This appraisal of Luther is standard for Marxists, especially those from Germany, and does not buck the historiographical trends of the GDR. Luther's bourgeois status is important to Brendler's later assessment of him as an important progressive figure but one who did not fully realize the importance of material freedom. Brendler blames Luther's failing on his status as a bourgeois intellectual. In Brendler's view, Luther's social standing is partially

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<sup>154</sup>“relativ sichere soziale Stellung” Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 9.

<sup>155</sup>“der Sieg des Klasseninstinkts” Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 6.

<sup>156</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 288.



deterministic of his views and especially deterministic of his views on political matters including the Bauernkrieg.

Brendler also handles Luther's family's status and relations in an objective manner characteristic of social history. Brendler handles their class status in excruciating detail, but he gives us only one phrase to describe Luther's emotional relation to his family members, which is that he loved his brother Jakob especially.<sup>157</sup> Brendler's lack of emotion to describe the familial relations is standard considering the ostensibly objective method of Marxist historiography. How much Luther loved his family members had no bearing on his class position within Reformation-era German society. It is certainly interesting to note, but in terms of the wider Marxist interpretation of Luther, his class status is much more important than what his feelings were towards the individuals who made up his family. Brendler's treatment of Luther's family situation is typical of a Marxist view of history as driven by production and class.

The penultimate example of social and Marxist historiography within *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* is Brendler's liberal use of the concept of "Fruebuergliche Revolution" throughout the text. This term did not originate in this text and is a concept that the Academy used to describe the period from the 1500s-1530s.<sup>158</sup> Technically it refers to the early calls for an upheaval of the social and religious system that predated the later Enlightenment-era revolutions. However, it practically replaces the term "Reformation" in GDR historiography. This concept seeks to obscure the focus on theology that the term Reformation might entail and in effect turns the concept into a socialist one. In doing so also it downplays the actions of individuals such as Martin Luther or John Calvin and instead pushes the focus onto socio-economic conditions. This practice of changing previous terms for periods to more reflect socialist historiography was

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<sup>157</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 14.

<sup>158</sup>Roy, *Luther in der DDR*, 127.

nothing new for Brendler. In “Foundations, Subjects, and Lessons of Marxist Historical Science.” Brendler and Bollagen argue for replacing terms of periodization to reflect the means of production employed at that time. For example from “Mittelalter” to “Feudalismus.”<sup>159</sup> Overall the term “Fruebuergliche Revolution” is a socialist recontextualization of the phenomenon of the Reformation.

While Brendler uses it liberally throughout his work, this concept originated previously in his early analysis of the Peasants War. Before the Academy of Sciences even began to consider rehabilitating Martin Luther, its members primarily focused on the Peasants War as instrumental for this time period. The previous 1975 commemoration of the Peasants War as a vital part of the socialist heritage of the country demonstrates this view.<sup>160</sup> The term features liberally in the correspondence concerning the event and much of the theoretical conceptualizations of the conference associated with the celebration.<sup>161</sup> This concept is even present in the official talks at the conference which gives the term some publicity as well.<sup>162</sup> It is not a surprise that when the Academy of Sciences shifted gears to focus on Luther in 1978 that they appropriated the term from its specific Peasants War context. By reusing this term in his biography, Brendler maintains a connection to established GDR historiography while he is pushing for change. Brendler’s use of the term “Fruebuergliche Revolution” demonstrates his inheritance of previous GDR historiography regarding the Peasants War.

Aside from the importance of social history and class position within Brendler’s narrative, another East German historiographic trait is present in the discussion of Luther’s anti-semitism, most notably its absence in a serious form. East German accounts of the

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<sup>159</sup>Brendler and Bollhagen, “Grundlagen, Gegenstand und Aufgaben der marxistischen Geschichtswissenschaft,”81.

<sup>160</sup>ABBAW, “Bauernkrieg,” ZiG 210.

<sup>161</sup>ABBAW, “Bauernkrieg,” ZiG 210

<sup>162</sup>ABBAW, “Bauernkrieg,” ZiG 210

Holocaust maximized the victimhood of political prisoners, especially socialist revolutionaries such as Ernst Thälmann, while minimizing the racial crimes of the Nazis such as the genocide perpetrated against the Jewish people of Europe. This view is perpetuated throughout the Lutherjahr of 1983 with the party purposely ignoring calls from Jewish communities to discuss Luther's anti-semitism. Brendler's work also exhibited minimization of Luther's anti-semitism. While Brendler later claimed he desired to touch more on Luther's antisemitism in his work *theology and revolution*, his work does not critically engage with it.

Luther's anti-semitism and its legacy is today the most controversial aspect of the German reformer. While Luther initially wrote tracts in support of tolerance towards Jewish people, later in his life there developed a rabid anti-semitism, defined by his work *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543).<sup>163</sup> In this work Luther argues for the burning of synagogues and the Talmud, and he lobbies the princes to expel Jewish people from the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>164</sup> Luther's anti-semitism, while being religious, not racial, in character, still inspired the Nazi propaganda efforts to appeal to the Protestant church. With the historical memory of the Holocaust, modern scholars find Luther's harsh teachings on Jewish people a problem to analyze. The fear among some scholars is that Luther's anti-semitism led to the Holocaust. This presents an issue for those, such as academics in the GDR, who wanted to present Luther in a positive light since after 1945 many scholars associated him with one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century.

The wider treatment of Jewish memory within the GDR was suppressive in nature. The GDR desired a secular society so the state attempted to break down the historical differences between Jewish people and non-Jewish people within the state. The GDR suppressed both

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<sup>163</sup>Martin Luther, "Von den Juden und ihren Lügen" in *Martin Luther's Work Weimar Edition 53* (Weimar: Böhlau Verlag), 417.

<sup>164</sup>Luther, "Von den Juden und ihren Lügen," 523.

political and religious Zionism within the early Jewish community as it contradicted their concept of socialist unity. However, the most egregious and systemic suppression of Jewish identity and memory was the GDR's public treatment of the Holocaust. The GDR was uncomfortable with the prospect of portraying it as a systematic killing of Jewish individuals and instead highlighted the political victims of the Holocaust. An example of this is the Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald memorials that the GDR constructed. Despite these sites' association with Jewish, Roma, and other victims, the memorials there focused solely on the political victims of the camps. The Sachsenhausen memorial only has red triangles, the badge denoting political prisoners, on its wall. The lack of the other badges tells of the GDR's erasure of the other victims of the Holocaust. The statues at Buchenwald and their revolutionary posing suggests also a political dimension to the sufferings of that camp which is a perspective that diminishes the role that the Nazis' racial policies played in the Holocaust. The GDR suppressed discussion of anti-semitism, especially in the case of the Holocaust, to perpetuate its own victim narrative.

In the special case of the 1983 Lutherjahr, the GDR's state apparatuses did not shift their policy of erasure to accommodate Luther's attested anti-semitic statements. The state and the Academy of Sciences desired to portray Luther as a hero of the people and suppressed any negative portrayal of Luther that they had previously presented. With the state and the Academy working in tandem to present Luther as a positive force for a socialist German nation, these organizations would not allow much qualifiable dissent especially if it could not be directly related to socialism. The only criticism allowed was the class-based criticism of Luther as a bourgeois revolutionary and even this attack became subdued in the public discourse as Honecker focused on Luther's virtues. The Academy knew about Luther's anti-semitism and its

societal impact as historians, and within the files there is evidence of this tension. A Jewish-American newspaper even sent a request for the Academy to use the Lutherjahr Celebration as an opportunity to highlight the issue of anti-semitism.<sup>165</sup> The Academy probably never responded to this request as there is no record unlike other responses to letters.<sup>166</sup> The Academy of Sciences purposely suppressed criticism of Martin Luther as anti-semitic in order to present Luther as a positive figure in German history.

The most concrete example of the Academy's bias comes from the mouth of Brendler himself as Brendler later defended his lack of discussion of anti-semitism in *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution*. Martin Roy conducted interviews of Academy of Sciences historians for his work *Luther in der DDR: Zum Wandel des Lutherbildes in der DDR-Geschichtsschreibung* including Gerhard Brendler as Luther's biographer during the GDR. In this interview Brendler presents a personal side of himself that is lacking in the Academy archives and focuses on his personal motivations and thought-processes. In this interview, Brendler defends his lack of meaningful discussion of Luther's anti-semitism.<sup>167</sup> He defines Luther as a man of his times and defends his position even after the fall of the GDR.<sup>168</sup> In context of his devout party membership, it makes sense that he followed the historiographic consensus to minimize the narrative of Germany's anti-semitic past. This cements the view that the Academy of Sciences sought to have narrative control as Brendler himself provides an example of someone who minimizes the importance of anti-semitism within the context of Martin Luther.

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<sup>165</sup>ABBAW ZiG 709, Band 2.

<sup>166</sup>ABBAW ZiG Band 2.

<sup>167</sup>Brendler "Interview" in *Luther in der DDR* by Martin Roy, 267.

<sup>168</sup>Brendler, "Interview," 267.

In *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution*, there is some treatment of Luther's anti-semitism despite the state's unwillingness to publicly discuss Luther's faults and the role that anti-semitism played in German history. Brendler treats Luther's anti-semitic turn in the last chapter of his book. However, unlike the theological and political issues that Brendler covers, it does not appear in the table of contents.<sup>169</sup> To be precise, Brendler devotes less than three pages of his more than four hundred page book to the issue of Martin Luther's anti-semitism.<sup>170</sup> This is not enough space to cover Luther's complex relationship with the Jewish people as Luther had multiple attitudes over his lifetime and wrote innumerable works on Jews. His discussion is cursory and focuses mainly on wider Jewish-Christian relations such as the prohibition of inter-marriage and the ghettoization of the Jewish community.<sup>171</sup> While Brendler attempts to cover part of Luther's anti-semitism in his book, it is a very cursory level which seems to demonstrate that he did not want to deeply dive into the topic.

Brendler argues in *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* that Luther's anti-judaism was an extreme example, but it was still based in his medieval mindset. First, his use of the term "Antijudaismus" (anti-judaism) highlights his argument of Luther's anti-semitism as comparable to his contemporaries.<sup>172</sup> In the context of this book, Luther's anti-semitism is not a development in of itself but rather it is a part of his historical baggage. Brendler makes this point clear when he compares Luther's anti-semitic attitudes to Johannes Pfefferkorn, a Christian convert from Judaism who advocated burning the Talmud.<sup>173</sup> In this work, Luther's treatment of Jewish people is not special to his character as numerous other historians suggest. Rather, it is a part that holds him back from exacting the "Fruehbuergliche Revolution" that Brendler argues Luther

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<sup>169</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 6.

<sup>170</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 435-438.

<sup>171</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 436.

<sup>172</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 436.

<sup>173</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 438.

intended.<sup>174</sup> Brendler's treatment of Luther's anti-semitism is an excellent example of how, although Brendler attempted to exert his own voice through his biography, the state ultimately dictated how the work presented Luther. The sweeping under the rug of Luther's obvious anti-semitism in *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* among other public celebrations of Luther highlights how the state projected its power over public history in light of its changing interests in church relations.

Gerhard Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* represents the shifting state policies of the GDR in relation to church-state dynamics. In previous GDR historiography of the Reformation, scholars portrayed Luther as a servant of the princes who was worth little mention. The GDR's historians focused their attention with the Reformation Period instead on Thomas Muntzer, a radical preacher who sought freedom from Roman theology along with economic equality through the Holy Roman Empire. Muntzer's radical program made his adoption by the GDR easy, and there were schools and streets bearing his name along with his status of honor during the 1975 Bauernkrieg commemoration. However, with shifts in church and state relations, the heritage of Luther within the GDR went from an attitude of discomfort to his adoption becoming advantageous to the new cooperative relationship between church and state. The ZiG started planning its commemoration in 1978, a few months after church and state reached a new compromise that defined their relationship as non-antagonistic. Honecker took over the celebration in 1980 and made it a wide public affair with international coverage. Brendler's biography served as an intellectual centerpiece. Within its pages there was full rehabilitation of Luther as a figure important to the national heritage of the GDR.

After the publication of Gerhard Brendler's *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* and the public celebration of the Lutherjahr, there was a new era in church-state relations within the

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<sup>174</sup>Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 438.

GDR that even westerners began to notice. The March 6 compromise turned a leaf in the relationship between the church and state. However, the Luther celebration provided an overt and public acknowledgement. Honecker co-celebrated the event with the Protestant Church. When Honecker went to the famous Wartburg Castle in 1983, he walked side-by-side with church leaders and important party dignitaries. This action, in particular, along with his multiple speeches in favor of Martin Luther's legacy, allowed all the world to see the state's new approach to the religious heritage of the GDR. More specifically for Brendler's Luther biography, western journalists interviewed Brendler, and the ZiG published a contemporaneous edition in the FRG allowing the book to also reach international readers. Due to the large public footprint of *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* and the wider Lutherjahr celebrations, there was an international shift in how analysts perceived church and state relationships within the GDR.



## Conclusion

*Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* signaled a new historiography within the Academy of Sciences and the GDR as a whole. A concrete example of this was the foundation of the ZiG subsidiary for *Kirchengeschichte* (Church History).<sup>175</sup> While only boasting fewer than ten members, the committee had bold plans to publish numerous books on religious topics such as the Counter Reformation and Ignatius of Loyala.<sup>176</sup> The subsidiary worked directly with Klaus Gysi, the head of the ministry for church and state relations, to ensure that its work was ideologically in line with the goals of the state.<sup>177</sup> By founding an institution dedicated to studying church history, the Academy overtly signaled a new positive relationship with the Protestant church. It recognized the importance of its heritage. Brendler's biography paved the way for the growth of this institution as his recasting of Martin Luther set an important precedent of positive theology and church history in the context of the GDR. The example that the founding of the Academy's subsidiary for church history provides is demonstrative of the wider acceptance of the Protestant church's heritage in the wake of Brendler's biography.

Shifting to the world beyond the Iron Curtain, initial American reactions to Gerhard Brendler's biography of Martin Luther were full of surprise. The work's inconsistencies with traditional Marxist historiography shocked them. The historian Georg Iggers notes that while Brendler evaluated Luther as a political and religious figure, Brendler still utilized a Marxist-Leninist historiographic vision that dominated the Academy of Sciences.<sup>178</sup> Iggers views Brendler's adaptation in light of changing politics within the GDR as they sought to rehabilitate past figures such as Frederick the Great and Otto von Bismarck.<sup>179</sup> In his view, the GDR sought

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<sup>175</sup>ABBAW, ZiG 201.

<sup>176</sup>ABBAW, ZiG 201.

<sup>177</sup>ABBAW, ZiG 201.

<sup>178</sup>Georg G. Iggers, "New Directions in Historical Studies in the German Democratic Republic," *History and Theory* vol. 28 no. 1 (1989): 62.

<sup>179</sup>Iggers, "New Directions in Historical Studies in the German Democratic Republic," 67-68.

to bring a stronger sense of national heritage through the adoption of these figures.<sup>180</sup> However, Iggers was essentially an outsider looking into the obscured world of the GDR. This means that he did not have the full picture and often speculated. Iggers also had a strong Cold War perspective as he concerned himself with the political motivations and outcomes of this new focus on a wider national heritage.

Later academics reflected upon Brendler's work from a post-reunification perspective. One review of *Martin Luther: Theology and Revolution*, the later English translation of the work, by Reformation historian Hans J. Hillerbrand attempts to explain this confusion. Hillerbrand, in his review, refuses to compare Brendler's work to others, deeming it as a scholastic pursuit because he considers Brendler's treatment "routine."<sup>181</sup> However, Hillerbrand penned this review out of interest in Brendler's political context instead of Brendler's historical coverage of Luther. Hillerbrand seems puzzled and impressed that Brendler knows Western historiography.<sup>182</sup> Here Hillerbrand reveals his Western bias that those behind the Iron Curtain lacked knowledge of historians in the West. However, Brendler did in fact keep up with Western trends as Academy documents show that he delivered a lecture on Western interpretations of the Peasants War at the 1975 Bauernkrieg conference.<sup>183</sup> Hillerbrand comes to the conclusion that this was a prefiguration of the eventual demise of the East German state.<sup>184</sup> This is an obvious projection of the current situation into the past as the collapse of the GDR was unexpected. Hillerbrand's review suggests with the dissolution of the GDR, that Brendler's work began to be viewed as a last attempt for the state to maintain control.

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<sup>180</sup>Iggers, "New Directions in Historical Studies in the German Democratic Republic," 68.

<sup>181</sup>Hans J. Hillerbrand "Review: *Martin Luther: Theology and Revolution* by Gerhard Brendler," *Church History* vol. 64, no. 2 (1995): 283.

<sup>182</sup>Hillerbrand "Review," 283.

<sup>183</sup>ABBAW "1975 Bauernkrieg" ZiG 610.

<sup>184</sup>Hillerbrand "Review," 283.

With the processes of reunification, the new Germany widely discredited the academics of the GDR. Those who assumed power fired academics from the former GDR and the Academy of Sciences became the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, a regional institution.<sup>185</sup> Books such as Brendler's fell into disuse, and GDR historiography went from the Eastern counterpart of the study of history into an object of study itself. My work is no exception to this trend of judging Brendler's work not on its historiographic merits but rather on its complex context within the GDR's political machinations. While the Academy of Sciences and academics within the GDR as a whole were beholden to their political context, Brendler still asserts his own voice through his intellectual history of the reformer. Despite his orders from the Academy and imposed Marxist methodology, Brendler still crafted his own history in *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution*. It is present in the arguments he uses, most notably his intellectual history of Luther, and in the evidence on which he chooses to focus. Brendler is the ultimate author of his work in terms of its final message. While there was much context surrounding Brendler that pressured him to conform in his thesis and methodology, Brendler still maintained a balance between his own scholarship and the demands of the state. Academic life in the GDR was highly regulated, but authors such as Gerhard Brendler still maintained their agency through academic expression.

There is an important lesson in this matter for those of us who practice historical scholarship, especially regarding premodern figures such as Martin Luther. It is the dangers of imposing modern concepts and values onto a distant past. Gerhard Brendler took Luther's legacy and aligned it to the political realities of the time, a socialist state that sought to woo the Protestant church. He turns Luther into both a theologian and a revolutionary to fit the narrative

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<sup>185</sup>“History of the Academy,” Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, 2024, <https://www.bbaw.de/en/the-academy/history-of-the-academy>.

of the Academy's project. However, we in the present day are not entirely different from Gerhard Brendler. While we do not have a state-imposed ideology directing our society, we historians bring many of our own biases and impressions when we evaluate historical figures. The conclusion that we learn from analyzing Brendler's work and those like it is to be careful of our own bias and our own context when we draft our works, so that instead of fueling the ideological conditions of our time we instead hear voices from the past faithfully.

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