Summary: A Martin Luther Committee was recently established in the GDR to oversee preparations for the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Church reformer's birthday in 1983. The establishment of this committee not only marks a new stage in the rehabilitation of this historic figure, but the coexistence of senior party and Church officials on the same committee also raises the question of Church-state relations in the GDR. This paper summarizes the political implications of this event.

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On 13 June 1980 a Martin Luther Committee was established in the German Democratic Republic in preparation for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birthday in 1983. Headed by Party Chief Erich Honecker, the state committee is composed of a number of prominent East German personalities and will oversee preparations for a quite elaborate jubilee to be held in the central East German town of Wittenberg.

The treatment of historical figures in East Germany has traditionally oscillated as a function of the changing attitude of the political leadership toward the historical past. The case of Martin Luther is an excellent example of how the historical fate of a person in the GDR is subject to the winds of political fortune. Previously criticized as a traitor to his own reforms and a vassal of medieval German princes for attempting to blunt the revolutionary turmoil which his Reformation unleashed, (1) Luther has now been characterized as a progressive revolutionary who changed the world.

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(1) East German historians draw a direct causal link between Luther's Reformation and the subsequent Peasants' War of 1525, an interpretation that not all Western historians agree with.
Martin Luther

Luther has gradually been rehabilitated over the years. The stage for this revivification was set back in the late 1960s and early 1970s when East German historians revised their interpretation of the Reformation period and subsequent Peasants' War and cast Luther in a somewhat more favorable light. Previously critical interpretations of the Reformation were slowly dropped, and by 1975, on the 450th anniversary of the Peasants' War, East German historians had shifted their line of thought and were praising the progressive achievements of this period of German history. Although previous events, such as the 450th anniversary of Luther's nailing of his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, have also been singled out for attention, such past celebrations pale in comparison to the announced upcoming jubilee.

Addressing the inaugural meeting of the Martin Luther Committee in East Berlin on 13 June 1980, Honecker stated that the GDR would be "honoring the historic achievements which Luther brought about for social progress and world culture by launching the Reformation, which in itself was a bourgeois revolution." In addition, Honecker praised Luther's contributions to classical German literature and philosophy and echoed the current interpretation of Luther as a forerunner of later German radical philosophers. In reference to Luther's subsequent apparent volte-face and conservative positions, the SED party chief declared that Luther was a tragic figure caught in a conflict between his role as an initiator of a great revolutionary event and his inability to comprehend the laws of social development, but that this fact does not diminish the value of his other achievements.

The other achievements which Honecker was referring to are Luther's contributions to the German language and musical traditions. Luther's impact on the development of Church music was singled out in particular as particularly noteworthy and his translation of the Bible was characterized as "one of the greatest cultural achievements of our history." (Emphasis added.)

The State Committee

The 104-member state committee, formed to manage the preparations for this upcoming anniversary, includes leading party, state, and religious figures. In addition to Honecker, the state committee contains five other SED Politburo members, as well as representatives of a vast array of cultural, educational, and mass organizations. Four senior clergymen of the Evangelical Church are also included in the state delegation. They are Bishop Werner Leich of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of

(2) Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 3 August 1977.
(3) Neues Deutschland, 14-15 June 1980.
(4) Ibid.
(5) The five other Politburo members are Werner Felle, Kurt Hager, Joachim Herrmann, Horst Sindermann, and Harry Tisch. For a full list of the committee see Neues Deutschland, 14-15 June 1980, p. 2.
Thuringia; Bishop Werner Krusche of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Saxony; Dr. Joachim Rogge, President of the Council of the Evangelical Church of the Union in the GDR; and Dr. Helmut Zeddies, President of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the GDR. These religious figures are simultaneously members of the separate Church Luther Committee.

The weightiness of this state committee is an indication of the importance which both the party and the Lutheran Church have attributed to this upcoming event. A series of commemorations are planned throughout 1983, culminating in an elaborate celebration in Luther's home town of Wittenberg on November 10. According to Neues Deutschland, the founding of the Martin Luther Committee is in full accord with the GDR's constitutional mission to foster its national culture and is another clear example of the fact that the East Germans represent the best traditions of the German people. In addition, it demonstrates the cooperation of all people in the GDR, regardless of their religion or Weltanschauung.

The Church Committee

A separate Church Luther Committee had previously been established in December 1978. Headed by Bishop Werner Leich, this Church committee is responsible for examining the theological implications of the forthcoming anniversary. In addition, it has expressed the wish to foster a better appreciation in the GDR of the current relevance of Luther's ideas. The existence of separate Church and state committees is officially intended to facilitate a better appreciation of Luther's importance in German history by presenting both the religious and nonreligious points of view, which, according to Leich, will only serve to complement each other. Yet Leich's somewhat provocative quoting of Luther's famous words before the Reichstag -- "Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Gott helfe mir. Amen." -- suggests a somewhat more pessimistic attitude toward such Church-state cooperation in the GDR. (6)

Unanimity of Interests?

The coexistence of senior party and Church leaders on the state Luther Committee clearly raises the question of the official role of the Evangelical Church in the GDR. Although this joint representation officially reflects, in the words of Honecker, "the general cooperation between citizens of our country, regardless of their attitudes and religion," there is reason for skepticism about this proclaimed unanimity of interests between the party and the Church in the GDR. Despite an historic summit meeting between Honecker and leading Church officials in March 1978, conflicts have persisted over such issues as compulsory military service, educational opportunities, and job discrimination. Honecker's call for cooperation in preparation for Luther's anniversary is apparently an attempt to patch over these squabbles and to demonstrate publicly the satisfactory nature of Church-state relations in the GDR.

(6) Ibid., p. 4.
Yet many East German Lutherans may question the utility of such fraternization with high level SED officials. They will argue that the position of the Evangelical Church has not visibly improved since the meeting with Honecker two years ago, and that now an atheistic party leadership is even trying to manipulate the Evangelical Church hierarchy to serve its political goals.

On the other hand, however, the state Martin Luther Committee also appears to offer the unique opportunity for the traditionally passive Evangelical Church to stake out a margin of independence, for it establishes a powerful public forum from which it could express its own interests. In this context, it should be noted that Bishop Leich's speech, reprinted in full in the party newspaper Neues Deutschland, included an appeal for equal treatment of the country's Christians. Whether Evangelical Church leaders will attempt to use the Luther Committee as such a public forum from which to voice their Church's interests or to raise issues of particular concern is a possibility which must be carefully watched in the future. The renewal of religious interest, which can be witnessed in certain other East European states, does not yet seem to have had such significant resonance on the East German political scene. Yet it is a potentiality which should not be excluded, particularly among the youth.

Conclusion

The advance preparations and scale of the Luther Anniversary celebrations, as well as the unprecedented involvement of numerous high party and state officials, are but another gentle reminder of a carefully cultivated historical renaissance at present underway in the GDR. The East Germans have long followed a policy of arbitrarily interpreting German historical and cultural figures as part of the GDR's legacy in a continuing attempt to foster a separate and distinct identity and a sense of delimitation vis-à-vis their Western neighbor. What is new, however, is the scale of the effort involved. This can be seen in the increased attention paid to such figures as Beethoven, Luther, Thomas Mann, and even Richard Wagner, as well as the heightened interest in reviving and reinterpreting the Prussian legacy. Indeed, one easily gets the impression that East German officials are openly raising the long-standing and somewhat arrogant claim that they are the true heirs of German cultural and historical traditions, as opposed to an "Americanized" West Germany devoid of historical roots. This constitutes quite a considerable turnabout, not only from the early days of the GDR, when the party leadership consistently rejected any link with the (non-socialist) historical past, but also from the 1970s, when public use of the word "German" was taboo, except

(7) FAZ, 19 August 1980.
(9) Ibid.
for scholarly historical work. (11) Although the distinct features of such a new Kulturpolitik have not yet come into clear focus, it is safe to say that further serious attempts to cultivate a historical revival in the GDR are certain to attract considerable attention in both the West and the East.

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(11) In 1971 East German officials publicly abandoned any policy of reunification with West Germany and attempted to force the GDR's 17,000,000 inhabitants to perceive themselves as a distinct nation. The words "Germany" and "German" were eliminated from the public vocabulary with the exception of a few prominent newspapers and periodicals, and relegated to the history books. Stores, hotels, and various cultural organizations were forced to remove the offensive words from their names and replace them with the initials "DDR." Even the East German national anthem was censored because of a verse containing a reference to "Germany, our united fatherland." This campaign apparently ended in September 1978 when the East German Sigmund Jaehn took part in a Soviet space flight and the East German press proudly proclaimed that the first German in space was a citizen of the GDR. Since then the words "Germany" and "German" have slowly come back into vogue. The national anthem, however, is still performed without lyrics.