

# MARTIN LUTHER IN PRIMETIME

## TELEVISION FICTION AND CULTURAL MEMORY CONSTRUCTION IN COLD WAR GERMANY

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**Abstract:** In 1983, both East and West Germany celebrated Martin Luther's 500<sup>th</sup> birthday with great fanfare. Nowhere was this competition more provocative and visually arresting, however, than in two multi-part television plays which depicted Luther's life: the West German *Martin Luther*, broadcast by the public station ZDF in April, and the East German title of the same name, aired in October. In this essay, I argue that the East German version constituted an *appropriative* strategy of memory formation – one that depicted Luther's positive qualities and grafted them into the Marxist canon of heroes. In contrast, the ZDF *Martin Luther*, which featured a highly rational Luther, projected what Jan Assmann has termed a *normative* strategy of harnessing Luther's memory, focusing on Luther's intellectual arguments and anti-radicalism.

**Keywords:** Martin Luther, ZDF, DFF, Cold War, Collective Memory

In April 1983, the West German station Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) broadcast a two-part television play entitled *Martin Luther*, in honour of the Reformer's 500<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>1</sup> Directed by Rainer Wolffhardt and starring Lambert Hamel, the programme took a sweeping look at Luther's life, beginning with his decision to become a monk and culminating in his translation of the Bible. In October of the same year, the East German broadcaster Deutscher Fernsehfunk (DFF) aired a five-part dramatic piece, also called *Martin Luther*.<sup>2</sup> Written and directed by Kurt Veth and featuring Ulrich Thein as Luther, this expansive piece had similar ambitions: a comprehensive reenactment of Luther's life.

The East German authorities' decision to broadcast an expensive, heavily promoted rendition of Luther's life has attracted widespread scholarly (and popular) attention.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, over the past few years the 1983 GDR celebrations

1 ZDF, *Martin Luther*, April 1 1983, 20:00; April 3 1983, 20:00.

2 DFF, *Martin Luther*, October 9 1983, 20:00; October 13 1983, 20:00; October 16 1983, 20:00; October 20 1983, 20:00; October 23 1983, 20:00. Both the East and the West German versions are available on DVD, as part of the *Große Geschichten* series on history. Archival documents for the ZDF *Luther* can be found at the ZDF Historisches Archiv in Mainz. The Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv in Babelsberg, as well as the Bundesarchiv (on a more limited scale) houses similar materials for DFF production.

3 Horst Dähn and Joachim Heisse, eds, *Luther und die DDR: der Reformator und das DDR-Fernsehen 1983*, Edition Ost, 1996. See also the newspaper editorial from the 31 October 1983 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

of Luther's birthday in general have become a hotbed for monographs and articles.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, this is not surprising. Luther's position as a national German icon had been established long before the SED took control of East Germany. At first, many communist intellectuals, including the well-known journalist (and later Minister of Culture) Alexander Abusch, ignored or even denigrated Luther,<sup>5</sup> but by the 1970s, in a bid to revive their legitimacy, party figures (including the General Secretary of the SED, Erich Honecker) made peace with the Lutheran Church and began seeking ways to appropriate Luther's legacy. The tensions and contradictions inherent in such a move yield rich insights into the calculus of power in the GDR, which included, among other curious decisions, coaxing Western tourists to spend their money at the numerous East German Luther sites in an effort to prop up the bloated SED system.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, by the 1970s and 1980s, East German television had reached what might be termed a "full instrumentalization". As Rüdiger Steinmetz and Reinhold Viehoff have argued, the decision to produce an expansive, national piece on Martin Luther was a natural result of this environment, simultaneously a way to link Marxist-Leninism with one of the major symbols of German nationalism and attract, it was hoped, a contract to air the piece in West Germany.<sup>7</sup> *Martin Luther* thus received major funding and attention from the regime and, by extension, the television community.

The West German version of *Martin Luther* on the other hand – to say nothing of the numerous FRG museum exhibits, newspaper articles, and academic symposia that were held in 1983 – has been largely ignored.<sup>8</sup> This is unfortunate, because Luther's birthday offers a neatly situated opportunity to compare the memory politics of the two regimes. Both sides actively promoted celebrations, but with very different tools and assumptions.

In this short essay, I want to focus on how the two *Martin Luther* broadcasts represent contrasting memory strategies. I argue that the East German version, featuring emotionally charged performances and panoramic vistas of the Saxon countryside (within the GDR's borders), constitutes an *appropriative* strategy of memory formation. Faced with a lack of popular legitimacy and a vibrant, though diminished, Lutheran Church, authorities moved to appropriate Luther's memory by inducting him into the Marxist canon of heroes. In contrast, the ZDF *Luther*, which features a highly rational Luther who uses his intellect to combat both the Pope and the radical millenarian Thomas Müntzer, projects what Jan Assmann has termed a *normative* strategy of harnessing Luther's memory.<sup>9</sup> This version of the Reformer eschews radicalization and takes what is presented as a principled, almost self-evidently righteous stand against the evil and corruption he sees. Luther thus becomes a role model for West German viewers, who were likewise expected to reject communism, polarization, and (excessive) materialism.<sup>10</sup>

Theories and case studies of collective memory have multiplied exponentially over the last few decades, particularly among historians. Modern Germany is no exception. Even the 1983 Martin Luther celebrations have been investigated

4 See Kathy Hannemann, *Die Martin-Luther-Ehrung im Jahre 1983 in Wittenberg: Das Verhältnis von Evangelischer Kirche und SED in der DDR*, VDM Dr. Müller, 2010; Claudia Lepp, "Erinnerungsgemeinschaft? Die innerdeutschen Kirchenbeziehungen am Beispiel der Reformationsfeierlichkeiten 1967 und des Lutherjubiläums 1983," and Peter Maser, "Mit Herrn Luther alles in Butter? Das Lutherjahr 1983 im geteilten Deutschland," in *Reformation und Bauernkrieg: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik im geteilten Deutschland*, eds. Jan Scheunemann, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010. See also Martin Roy, *Luther in der DDR: zum Wandel des Lutherbildes in der DDR-Geschichtsschreibung*, Verlag Winkler, 2000; and Gordon E. Mork, "Martin Luther's Left Turn: The Changing Picture of Luther in East German Historiography," *The History Teacher* 16, (August 1983), p. 588.

5 See Alexander Abusch, *Der Irrweg einer Nation: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis Deutscher Geschichte*, Aufbau Verlag, 1946. Nonetheless, as Rainer Wohlfeil has pointed out, not all East German historians held this position. See Wohlfeil, *Das wissenschaftliche Lutherbild der Gegenwart in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Ein Vergleich*, Niedersächsischen Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1982, p. 7-8.

6 This was readily pointed out by Western observers at the time. For an example, see Robert F. Goeckel, "The Luther Anniversary in East Germany," *World Politics* 37, no. 1 (Oct. 1984), p. 117.

7 See Rüdiger Steinmetz and Reinhold Viehoff, *Deutsches Fernsehen Ost: Eine Programmgeschichte des DDR-Fernsehens*, Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2008, p. 478-479. See also Claudia Dittmar, *Feindliches Fernsehen. Das DDR-Fernsehen und seine Strategien im Umgang mit dem westdeutschen Fernsehen*, Transcript, 2010, p. 371-391.

8 Bernd Moeller has written about his personal recollection of the Luther museum exhibit in Nuremberg, and Peter Maser, in the same edited volume, has explored the Luther year 1983 "in divided Germany." See *Reformation und Bauernkrieg*, p. 103-114 and p. 163-182. Tellingly, though, Maser's contribution focuses almost entirely on events in the GDR.

9 Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 38.

10 It might seem odd that West German authorities, representatives of a capitalist system in direct competition with the Communist East, would discourage materialism. But in the wake of the Economic Miracle in the 1950s, this is exactly what happened. For example, television plays from the 1960s, such as *Seelenwanderung*, created on Klaus von Bismarck's watch at the Westdeutscher Rundfunk, consciously broadcast anti-materialist messages. A more general description of this phenomenon can be found in Konrad Jaruasch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

in terms of memory.<sup>11</sup> The televisual celebrations, however, have not been the focus of these studies. Television is an ideal medium for the representation and dispensing of collective memory. The combination of sight and sound, the expansive format offered by a multi-part series, and the medium's ability to simultaneously reach millions of living rooms can have a much farther-reaching effect on a nation's memory culture than scholarly monographs, [regional museum exhibits](#), or even [city festivals](#), all of which also occurred in 1983. And because these broadcasts aired during the Cold War, viewers from both states (it is unfortunately impossible to know how many) watched the other Germany's production.<sup>12</sup> This somewhat unique political and media situation affords a glimpse into contrasting memory strategies, both directed at claiming and representing the German nation as a whole.

The DFF representation of Luther was made possible because of a conscious decision among party elites to promote Luther memorials and festivities. In spite of the state's official atheism, authorities had several motives for this. First, as Jan Hermann Brinks has demonstrated, the SED began "adopting" popular non-socialist historical figures as a means of shoring up sagging political legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> Second, because many of the most important Luther sites are located in Saxony, East German shops, hotels, restaurants, and even the government itself (through visas) stood to benefit handsomely from increased traffic from West German tourists. Third, in spite of the GDR's generally successful long-term marginalization of the Lutheran Church, the institution remained perhaps the largest, most well-organized of any non-state organization in East Germany. Adopting Luther as a native son was an attempt to include this stubborn section of the population. Given these motives, it is unsurprising that the state-run television station would adopt an essentially *appropriative* strategy – one which attempted to graft the subject into an already well-defined and cultivated canon of acceptable collective memories – in depicting Luther's life and legacy.

In some ways, the show appropriates the Reformation in what might be termed a "conventional" manner, identifying a proto-communist – Thomas Müntzer, Luther's student and a key figure in the [1525 Peasant Revolts](#) – and valorizing him as a Marxist class hero. Veth depicts the young Müntzer as a bohemian intellectual, convincing his friends that Luther's new theology opens the way to revolution. This point is emphasized in the third instalment, where Müntzer accompanies Luther to Leipzig for his famous disputation with Johann Eck. A man on the street asks him, "Are you heretics?" Müntzer's reply, "What is a heretic?" creates the impression that Müntzer has already realized the revolutionary implications of Luther's teachings. This trajectory is reinforced in the final broadcast, as Müntzer leads the German peasants against their lords. He tells his "generals," "[He] cannot fulfill God's will...according to Luther, the authorities are always right. But I will lead the down-trodden to victory!"

But while Veth and Thein paint a tragic Luther, hardly a figure worth emulation in terms of the plot's surface (in contrast to the role model created by Wolffhardt and Hamel), Luther is still paraded as an important, canon-worthy hero. Thein plays Luther with great emotional power and persuasion. Nowhere is this more evident than in Luther's "Here I Stand" speech at the Diet of Worms – words, incidentally, which Luther almost certainly never uttered. He presents himself before the Reichstag and declares, "I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me!"

### [Martin Luther's "Here I Stand" speech at the Diet of Worms](#) (see 17:35-25:20)

Luther then berates the assembled nobles and clergymen when they try to contradict him. Such displays of raw emotion and conviction recur throughout the piece. From the viewers' perspective, Luther generates far more sympathy and identification than pity or revulsion.

The appropriation of Luther is even built into the piece's cinematography. This is no mere chamber play. Veth's shots are often on location, highlighting the city of Wittenberg as Luther posts his famous [95 theses](#) on a church door, for instance. He includes wide-angle panoramas of the Saxon countryside, directly incorporating the landscape into the film's plot and tone. The Wartburg, the famous castle in which Luther lived incognito and translated the Bible, is

<sup>11</sup> Consider the above-mentioned volume: *Reformation und Bauernkrieg: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik im geteilten Deutschland*.

<sup>12</sup> German television authorities would place television towers along the border in an effort to encourage viewership in the other state. For more on inter-state viewing, see Stewart Anderson, "Big Lessons from the Small Screen: Television Fiction, Media Consensus, and the Reinvention of Morality in East and West Germany, 1956-1970," PhD Diss., Binghamton University, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Hermann Brinks, *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft auf dem Weg zur deutschen Einheit: Luther, Friedrich II und Bismarck als Paradigmen politischen Wandels*, Campus Verlag, 1992. Other figures included Frederick the Great and Otto von Bismarck.

also heavily featured. In short, Veth has assigned a quite specific sense of place to many of his scenes. The East German *Luther* thus features East Germany itself, reminding viewers that the Great Reformer belongs to that country's heritage.

In contrast, the West German *Luther* contains few obvious cinematographic references to the German countryside. Whereas the East German producers used simple sets for dialogue and scattered wide-angle landscape shots, the West German dialogue took place in colourful cathedrals, with little or no sense of the space between locations. The piece might as well have been shot in Italy or France. As a result, the ZDF programme's focus rests less on establishing a setting, and more on presenting interpersonal dialogue and Luther's intellectual merits.<sup>14</sup> The film's emphasis on pageantry, worldliness, and decadence in the Catholic Church reinforces this strategy and further distinguishes the ZDF play from the GDR's appropriations.

As the above demonstrates, Wolffhardt's *Luther* aims to capture the intellectual arguments and social interactions internal to the Reformation. I propose that in terms of memory strategies this approach resembles Assmann's description of normative texts as an influence on what he terms cultural memory – memory which maintains its currency in a society's artifacts and media but which has passed beyond the realm of communicative memory.<sup>15</sup> Assmann's normative texts or products include rules of games, laws, and judgments; in essence, everything which answers the question "what shall we do?".<sup>16</sup> Though television might at first glance seem very different from "laws," I argue that the medium contains a heavy normative component in that it presents believable men and women in everyday situations (as opposed to film, which more often tends to emphasize the fantastic or extraordinary).<sup>17</sup> In this light, then, the Wolffhardt *Luther* embodies the well-rounded, secular, modern German role model envisioned by West German television elites since the 1950s. In part, this strategy also involves an appropriative element, as Wolffhardt attempts to make Luther palatable and even "heroic" for Catholic viewers as well.

Consider the final scene, in which Luther holds a lengthy interview with an old friend – now a papal legate. Neither expresses anger or contempt; they both seem to respect one another's opinion and theology. The legate comments, "Christianity could have been one big family. Your Christianity and mine are not so very different." Luther answers: "I had hoped that faith could have driven everything towards peace." The conversation suggests that the writers spoke to a growing sense of unity among German Christians. The West German *Luther* thus valorises Luther as a tolerant man, honest in his desire to right the Catholic Church, and ready to make peace with his enemies. In general, reconciliation between Catholics and Lutherans in the FRG had long since been accomplished,<sup>18</sup> but this scene emphasizes the point once more.

Indeed, Hamel takes an opposite approach to Thein's rendition of Luther. He exudes rationality, rarely even raising his voice. To cite a particularly poignant example: when Andreas Karlstadt and his followers destroy the Wittenberg Cathedral's icons, Hamel's Luther asks Socratic questions: "why are you smashing idols?" and "what purpose does this serve?" The lack of emotion colours Luther as a rational man, generally right in his views and slow to anger. Hamel presents an ecumenical Luther, one who restores order to the Catholic Church. In the East German version, in contrast, Thein stands at the pulpit and denounces Karlstadt forcefully. He shouts at the congregation, telling them

14 Many of the production documents for this program are still locked up at the ZDF Unternehmensarchiv in Mainz; however, hints that the producers envisioned an intellectual, interpersonal dialogue can be seen in their summary to the station at the time of production (located in the internal ZDF Programm-Datenbank): "The viewers are shown problems and questions which the Reformer would himself have faced." Critics at the time also noted this tendency. Consider the critique in the *Funk-Korrespondenz* from 13 April 1983 (no. 15), which, after panning the programme's lack of ambition (and Lamberg Hamel's acting), proclaims: "everything here orders itself around a comprehensive *pragmatism*."

15 This term was first coined by Assmann, and is best explained in Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring-Summer 1995), p. 125-133. Harald Welzer greatly expanded this term in Welzer, *Das Kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, Beck, 2002.

16 Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, p. 38.

17 Early West (and East) German television makers recognized television's potential to influence opinions and behaviour, and they shaped German television accordingly. See Günter Rohrbach, "Bildungstheater oder Zeittheater: Probleme der Fernsehspiel dramaturgie (1966)," in *In guter Gesellschaft: Günter Rohrbach, Texte über Film und Fernsehen*, eds. Hans Helmut Prinzler, Bertz und Fischer Verlag, 2008. The theoretical literature on the normative – as opposed to the fantastic – qualities of television is of course immense. For an introduction, see Sonia M. Livingstone, *Making Sense of Television: The Psychology of Audience Interpretation*, Pergamon Press, 1990. At a more practical, accessible level, see Marita Sturken's essay, "Television Vectors and the Making of a Media Event: The Helicopter, the Freeway Chase, and National Memory," in *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, eds. James Friedman, Rutgers University Press, 2002.

18 See Maria Mitchell, *The Origins of Christian Democracy: Politics and Confession in Modern Germany*, University of Michigan Press, 2012; and Frank Bösch, *Die Adenauer-CDU: Gründung, Aufstieg, und Krise einer Erfolgspartei, 1945-1969*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001.

that he wishes he had been there.

As noted above, the East German Diet of Worms scene contains a fiery, passionate speech from Luther. In contrast, Hamel's Luther does not even raise his voice. When accused of heresy for questioning the pope's authority, he asks "Where is this doctrine in the Holy Scriptures?" Even the legendary statement, "Here I Stand," is without emotion in the ZDF version.

**Trailer for the recent *Grosse Geschichten* DVD series.** The editors of this trailer have, doubtless in an effort to make the piece more saleable, selected some of Lambert Hamel's most fiery scenes. In terms of the subdued tone and tenor of the piece as a whole, the most representative sequences run from 0:33 to 0:40 and from 0:59-1:04. The iconic "Here I Stand" segment is, as I state above, cut from the same cloth as these two scenes.

One of the few exceptions to Luther's unrelenting rationality is his debate with Thomas Müntzer. When Müntzer interrupts one of Luther's sermons to argue that the new reforms also entail land reform and a temporal revolution, Luther begins to anger, eventually shouting his rival down. Even here, though, Luther can be read as a bulwark against extremism. Luther's memory, in as much as it serves the West German present, is used to lambaste communism and ultra-radical solutions. In contrast, the East German Müntzer is portrayed as a hero.

As this short piece has demonstrated, the competing Martin Luther television plays of 1983 deserve greater scholarly attention because they offer such a resounding contrast between the two states' television systems. Moreover, they also afford a chance to see competing memory strategies in action, the one determined to incorporate Luther into a particular Marxist collective memory, the other designed to paint Luther as a figure worthy of modern emulation. There is unfortunately no space here to offer a complete assessment of how well these strategies worked. I would like to make two observations, however. First, the type of strategy employed by each station seems likely to have had many Cold War European parallels. Particularly in divided Germany (but also in other European contexts), the Cold War fostered a competitive environment in which appropriative and normative memory products could thrive. Second, the GDR's bald attempts to appropriate Luther did not necessarily backfire; on the contrary, viewers and critics on both sides of the wall seem to have identified with the East German version, in spite of its communist undertones and references.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, even clumsy attempts to harness cultural memory for specific purposes cannot simply be dismissed as mere propaganda.

## Biography

Stewart Anderson (1979) has received his PhD from Binghamton University in August 2011 and is currently Visiting Assistant Professor at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. His main research interests include postwar Germany, media history, and collective memory. Besides his dissertation, he has published articles in several journals, including an article entitled "Modern Viewers, Feudal Television Archives: How to Study German *Fernsehspiele* of the 1960s from a National Perspective," for the Autumn 2010 volume of *Critical Studies in Television*.

<sup>19</sup> Positive reviews from Peter Jochen Winters in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (31 October 1983), Eckart Kroneberg in *Kirche und Rundfunk* (2 November 1983), and especially Alex Schützack in *Die Welt* (25 October 1983). In contrast, many West German critics criticized the ZDF version, especially Helmut Gumnior in *Der Spiegel* (28 March 1983).