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Martin Luther – Rebel, Genius, Liberator: Politics and Marketing 1517–2017

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The American artist Brad Downey argues that Martin Luther was the first street artist. One of Downey’s paintings shows Luther at the door of the church in Wittenberg. But instead of the 95 theses, Luther writes ‘Beauty is the process itself’, while he is monitored by video cameras and God asks for his autograph. Aside from providing a critique of the current status quo of street art, this artwork focuses on what is considered as the defining moment of the Reformation: bold public resistance against the all-embracing powers of the Catholic Church. Equally, it captures the decisive turning point in Luther’s life which shapes any Reformation narrative – in writing, in exhibitions, or in films: as Downey’s work highlights, in 1517 a personal quest turned public. From this point on, Martin Luther was depicted in a wide variety of ways: his followers propagated an image of him as an increasingly saintly figure, his opponents portrayed a seven-headed Luther who collaborated with the devil in plotting the end of Christianity. While the twentieth century refrained from such extreme polemics, there was – and is – still scope for diverse interpretations.

The 1520s were the formative years of the Reformation, with the movement taking shape, new factions coming to the fore, the so-called ‘common man’ or lay person striving for involvement, and issues of principle such as the marriage of priests being debated. While Luther remained the focal personality for the Reformation throughout this time, the decade was also shaped by new conflicts – such as the Peasants’ War – and by other influential reformers, theologians, and leaders: Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and Thomas Müntzer. By the time Luther died in 1546, a second generation of reformers had established itself and had begun to promote an image of Luther that fitted its cause and its opposition to the Catholic Counter-Reformation. These reformers saw Luther as a triumphant liberator, a prophet and apostle; their perception marks the beginning of a commemoration process in which depictions of Luther are determined by changing contemporary religious, national, and political needs and, therefore, by competing narratives.

Wittenberg, the place where Luther lived and worked the longest, where he set up home and which draws visitors in search of the reformer (and the Reformation), is just one part of the ‘Luther trail’ that reflects his life and career.
Accordingly, today the brochure *Wege zu Luther (Paths to Luther)*, distributed by the local tourist offices and museums, offers information on Eisenach (with its Luther House and the Wartburg), Erfurt (where he lived and worked in the local monastery), Schmalkalden (the Luther House), Eisleben (where Luther was born and died), Wittenberg, and Torgau (with its memorial for Luther’s wife Katharina). Between 1945 and 1989 all these cities and towns were in the former East Germany. If one extended this trail into the former West Germany, then Worms (where Luther refused to recant) and Augsburg (Diet of Augsburg in 1530) would be among the suitable additions to the trail. But Luther, one might argue, is in fact omnipresent: nearly every city or town has a Martin Luther Street. Dresden, Hamburg, Lübeck, Eisleben, Coburg, and Berlin are among the numerous German cities that boast Luther memorials, the majority originating in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The annual Reformation Day (31 October) remains a public holiday in a number of federal states; and the Reformation is integral to the curriculum in German schools.

Luther also appeals to popular tastes: the latest attempt to capture his life on screen dates from 2003 (*Luther*, directed by Eric Till). Luther, so the trailer promised, ‘dared to speak his mind’ and provided a catalyst for change, feeding the contemporary desire for strong individuals. Earlier Luther films showed him as the passionate and fierce preacher, the troubled or sensible reformer, the German hero, or the peace maker. It appears that the image of Luther is malleable. It is, then, hardly surprising that the commemorative presentations of Luther down the centuries mirror the history and representational needs of the country, with museums and exhibitions providing the public face for academic and public debates. It is particularly interesting to compare these conflicting interpretations of Martin Luther in East and West Germany after 1945, since each state established its own discourse. On the occasion of Martin Luther’s five-hundredth anniversary, in 1983, academics in both East and West sought to foster a broader understanding of the reformer’s life but, as a comparative reading of exhibition catalogues and related publications from East and West Germany will show, the celebrations also testified to the realities of Cold War politics. While in the West the exhibition *Martin Luther and the Reformation in Germany* was mounted at Nuremberg’s Germanic National Museum, the Museum for German History (MGH) in East Berlin held an exhibition entitled *Martin Luther and his Times*. A series of East German texts written for, or in the wider context of, this latter exhibition form the initial focus of this chapter. In the second part of the argument I take a closer look at the challenges faced by the curators of Wittenberg’s Luther House (Lutherhalle), the foremost museum of Luther’s life and times, in redesigning the museum’s permanent exhibition in time for the anniversary year of 1983. The chapter concludes with an overview of developments in the wake of the fall of the Wall.

**The Great Divide**

In 1983, East and West Germany both – but not collaboratively – celebrated the anniversary of the reformer’s birth. (Remarkably, that same year also saw