Constructing Socialist Identities: The Reception of Albrecht Dürer in East Germany

Elizabeth Nijdam

Considering the close proximity of the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the formation of an East German-specific national identity was significantly more important to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) than most nations. With all sites of German memory shared between the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), East German cultural authorities invented East German-specific sites of memory out of Germany’s shared history in order to establish East Germany as a legitimate ‘nation’. This essay investigates how East German cultural authorities positioned Albrecht Dürer as a revolutionary socialist figure in edited volumes and exhibitions of his work in order to reinforce the state’s Marxist teleology. Through the close study of the three commemorative stamps released to celebrate Dürer’s 500th birthday in 1971, this essay examines how East German authorities used the historical figure of Albrecht Dürer to aid in the legitimization of the socialist state while also outlining some of the problems with the assertions they made about the artist’s history.

Like all nations, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) was concerned with the formation of an East German-specific sense of nationhood. However, according to Jan Palmowski, due to the close proximity of the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which left the GDR under constant cultural threat, East German authorities felt a greater urgency to invent a GDR-specific national identity than most nations. It became the cultural prerogative of East German authorities to evoke an emotional connection between the people of GDR and their newly established socialist state. With no sites of memory belonging to the GDR that were not also shared by West Germany, if the party was to establish East Germany as a legitimate ‘nation’ and ensure its viability, it was essential that it define East German-specific sites of memory. It did this by re-historicizing events and rewriting the biographies of figures of all-German importance in exclusive relation to the GDR. This was in no way

1 For a comprehensive overview of the construction of East German identity, see Jan Palmowski’s Inventing a Socialist Nation. New York: Cambridge University Press 2009.
particular to East Germany. On both sides of the Wall, the two Germanys were reinterpreting the lives and historical contexts of quintessentially German figures to propagate the images of their Germany as the “Sieger der Geschichte,” or victors of history. However, the SED recognized to a greater extent the powerful influence of historical events and icons in the formation of a sense of nationhood, so East German cultural authorities amended elements of German history to construct their socialist founding and legitimizing mythology, often at the expense of historical facts, to illustrate how East Germany was the culmination of years of revolution on German soil.

This essay investigates the East German practice of legitimization by way of historical revisionism through the 500th anniversary celebrations of a less examined character in the service of East German appropriation: Albrecht Dürer. Through the close analysis of three commemorative stamps released in 1971, this project examines how Dürer’s character aided East German authorities in legitimizing socialism on German soil while also outlining some of the problems with the assertions made by East German historians and art historians about Dürer’s character.

One of the most interesting problems to emerge from Germany’s division was the difficulty that arose in defining East and West in opposition to each other while still possessing a common past as well as a unique quest for national and political identity. The solution to this problem became the blatant manipulation of German history for the political purposes of the emerging systems. State-sanctioned East German historians sought to “re-educate” East Germans to impart the radical origins of their socialist state. Even those traditions that seemed to have no link to socialism were interpreted through the socialist dialectic, with the result that all of East Germany’s traditions, if understood in the “right” way, pointed to socialism. Historical events became vehicles through which to relate the history of Germany in general to the socialist teleology, and historical personalities, such as the figure of Albrecht Dürer, helped East Germans re-evaluate German history through the East

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2 For example, East and West Germany alike annexed the personages of Goethe, Bach, Beethoven, Heinrich Heine and Bertolt Brecht to lend legitimacy to their nations.
5 Ibid.