J a n e  O.  N e w m a n

LUTHER’S BIRTHDAY

Aby Warburg, Albrecht Dürer, and Early Modern Media
in the Age of Modern War

Summary

At the height of World War I, Aby Warburg held a lecture on early modern
popular woodcut illustration and on Dürer’s Melencolia I (1514). He also dis-
cussed several nativity charts drawn for Martin Luther. Timed to coincide with the
400-year jubilee celebrations of the Reformation, the wartime talk suggests
parallels between early modern and modern uses of astrology, and underscores the
potential dangers in both periods of a widespread dissemination in popular print
forms of the ‘superstitious’ belief systems on which they relied. As much as
Warburg saw in his late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century materials the ways in
which print culture could have dangerous consequences during periods of social
and political strife, he also saw a remedial role for the fruits of both the historical
and the contemporary age of mechanical reproduction.

I. The Wanderstrassen of Early Modern Media Culture

Among the holdings of the Warburg Institute Archive in London
may be found five hand-drawn sketches by the art and cultural
historian, Aby Warburg, which suggest how he planned to illustrate
a lecture he held at the height of World War I. The topic is indicat-
ed by the heading, “Zu ‘Luthers Geburtsdatum’”, scrawled at the top
right of one of the drawings. The talk was to take as its main

1 The sketches may be found in the holdings of the Warburg Institute Archive
(WIA), III.90.2, F. 63-7. The title and date may be found on F. 63. Warburg
held the talk several times in both informal and formal settings, on 6 Septem-
ber, 1917 in his library ‘Kränzchen’ (the sketches appear to be from this date),
on 12 November, 1917 in Hamburg in front of the Gesellschaft für Hamburgi-
sche Geschichte, and on 23 April, 1918, for the Religionswissenschaftliche
Vereinigung in Berlin (still before the armistice). He ultimately published his
remarks two years later in the Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der
Wissenschaften. Philosophische-historische Klasse, Jahrgang 1920, 26. Ab-
handlung, under the title: Heidnisch-Antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu
focus a number of woodcut illustrations of polemical pamphlets (Flugschriften) about astrology and single-sheet imprints (Einblattdrucke) reporting prognostications and prophecies of various sorts produced during the Reformation era, on the one hand, and the analysis of several works by the famous German artist, Albrecht Dürer, most prominently the copper-plate engraving known as the Melencolia I (1514), from this same period, on the other. Also to be discussed were contemporaneous hand-drawn and print nativity charts for Martin Luther — hence, “Luthers Geburtsdatum” — which testified equally as vividly to the ubiquity of astrological thinking at the time.

Warburg had been working on the Dürer-Luther relation for some years. But this lecture was special. Originally planned for early 1917 and postponed for various reasons, including Warburg’s ongoing research into the topic and the wartime lack of coal to heat the venue, it was finally held publicly for the first time in November of that year as part of the 400-year jubilee celebrations of the beginning of the Reformation organized by the Gesellschaft für Hamburgische Geschichte.2 Jubilees of the Reformation had been both designed and perceived as heavily ideological occasions since as early as 1617.3 The commemoration activities of 1917 with which Warburg’s talk coincided were no exception, for they presented an obvious opportunity, in the face of the endgame of the war and hunger and cold both in the trenches and on the homefront, to engage in a rousing (if somewhat desperate) wartime salute to what Tom Brady has called the Rankean “Luther-to-Bismarck” “hegemonic narrative”

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2 On the dating of the various versions of the talk, see Claudia Wedepohl: ‘Agitationsmittel für die Bearbeitung der Ungelehrten’: Warburgs Reformationstudien zwischen Kriegsbeobachtung, historisch-kritischer Forschung und Verfolgungswahn. In: Kasten 117. Aby Warburg und der Aberglaube im Ersten Weltkrieg. Ed. Gottfried Korff. Tübingen 2007, pp. 24-38, here pp. 26-28 and 30. I am grateful to Dr. Wedepohl for sharing the text of her article with me before publication and for helping me negotiate my way through these and other documents at the Warburg Institute Archive.