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Lutheran Churches and Luther's Anti-Semitism

Repression, Rejection, and Repudiation

Introduction

The commemoration of Martin Luther's quincentenary in 1983 saw the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) tackle, for the first time, the famous theologian's anti-Semitism. In a pioneering move, the LWF organized a meeting with the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), a consultation that resulted in a published document. The document is composed of three statements, one made by the meeting's Lutheran participants, a second one made by its Jewish participants, and a third one made jointly.¹ The Lutheran part states unambiguously: "The sins of Luther's anti-Jewish remarks, the violence of his attacks on the Jews, must be acknowledged with deep distress. And all occasions for similar sin in the present or the future must be removed from our churches."² Never before had a body of Lutheran churches recognized and condemned Luther's judaeophobia and committed itself to combatting anti-Semitism.

Arguably, we witnessed a watershed. One might well ask: what prompted the Lutheran Church to make this extraordinary decision? How did it happen that this impulse was taken up and put into practice? This essay examines the question of how the Lutheran churches in Europe – as represented by the Lutheran

¹ The consultation took place in Stockholm, Sweden, from July 11–13, 1983. Jean Halpérin and Arne Sovik, eds., *Luther, Lutheranism and the Jews: A Record of the Second Consultation between Representatives of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultation and the Lutheran World Federation, held in Stockholm, Sweden, 11–13 July 1983*, *Lutheran World Federation Studies* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1984). An earlier consultation had taken place in Bossey, Switzerland, in 1982 and its results were published: *The Lutheran World Federation*, ed., *The Significance of Judaism for the Life and the Mission of the Church* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1983).

² Statement from the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Consultation, Stockholm 1983. Quoted in *A Shift in Jewish-Relations?*, eds. Wolfgang Greive and Peter N. Prove (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003): 196. Available at: <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/interreligious/759-lwfijcic1983>

Commission on the Church and the Jewish People (LEKKJ) – have begun to confront Luther's anti-Semitism, how this move is reflected in official statements, and what steps have been taken towards a new and respectful relationship between the Lutheran Church and the Jewish people.

The European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People

The European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People (LEKKJ) is a network of Lutheran churches that deals with questions concerning the relationship between the churches and the Jewish people. The only umbrella Protestant institution in Europe that has operated continuously since its establishment in 1976, the LEKKJ was founded in Christiansfeld, Denmark, by eight Lutheran churches and missionary organizations from Scandinavian countries, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Netherlands. Church delegates meet annually for a conference at the invitation of a member church. The conferences engage with a wide range of topics pertinent to Jewish-Christian relations and theological questions, specifically Lutheran-Jewish relations. A sampling of themes includes: the relevance of Judaism for Christian self-understanding; anti-Judaism and the renewal of Lutheran theology in the face of Judaism; hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible; as well as the organization of practical work in church communities and schools and the fight against anti-Semitism. Over the decades, the conference discussions have yielded significant output, including official statements, articles, and books.

Luther's Heirs

The book *Luthers Erben: Das Verhältnis lutherischer Kirchen Europas zu den Juden* (*Luther's Heirs: The Relationship of European Lutheran Churches to the Jews*)³ is one such literary product of the LEKKJ conference circuit. *Luther's Heirs* emerged from the organization's first study project, started in the second year of its existence. In its early stages, the project was referred to by the general title *Christians Meet Jews – Jews Meet Christians*. During the course of the study process, however, LEKKJ members decided to tackle explicitly Luther's ideas on Jews and Ju-

³ Arnulf H. Baumann, Käte Mahn, and Magne Saebø, *Luthers Erben und die Juden: Das Verhältnis lutherischer Kirchen Europas zu den Juden* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1984).

daism and Lutheran issues within the wider context of Jewish-Christian relations.⁴

Published in 1984, *Luther's Heirs* is a collective volume edited by German Lutheran ministers Arnulf H. Baumann and Käte Mahn, along with a Norwegian Lutheran scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Magne Saebø.⁵ The publication, which features Lutheran authors as invited contributors, was funded by the national Lutheran Church office in Hannover, the Norwegian Israel Mission, and the Finnish Lutheran mission.⁶

Luther's Heirs was written for a target readership, namely, “Lutheran Christians across Europe to whom the relationship between Jews and Christians is dear,” and with a specific aim, that is, to contribute to the “dismantling of prejudices for a deeper understanding and better coexistence of Christians and Jews in the future.”⁷ The book represents a groundbreaking attempt to sketch the history of relations between Jews and the Lutheran churches in Europe, to understand the difficulties of present Lutheran-Jewish relations, and to set forth boldly the relevant theological challenges. Furthermore, it raises the profound question of how “Luther's heirs” have thus far approached Jews and Judaism. In this respect, “It shows how extremely different attitudes and behaviors have manifested themselves at various times in different countries.”⁸ The publication, which gathers previously unavailable information and materials from many different churches, is available in a useful handbook form.

The first chapter of *Luther's Heirs* sketches the situation of the Jewish population in Germany at the beginning of the sixteenth century, briefly describes Luther's perception of and relationship with the Jews, and discusses the representation of Judaism in Lutheran confessional writings. The final part of the first chapter is dedicated to the question of how Judaism features in a specific

⁴ “Bei der Tagung in Hoekelum / Niederlande 1978 wurde Übereinstimmung darüber erzielt, dass es notwendig ist, einen historischen Überblick über die Juden in der Reformationszeit und eine Darstellung der theologischen Anschauungen Luthers und der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften über die Juden voranzustellen”; Baumann, Mahn, and Saebø, *Luther's Erben*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9

⁷ Translations from the German are mine. “Die Studie wendet sich an lutherische Christen in ganz Europa, denen das Verhältnis von Juden und Christen am Herzen liegt, insbesondere an solche, die aktiv im kirchlichen Dienst stehen oder sich in der Begegnung mit Juden engagiert haben. Sie kann zur Vertiefung ihrer Kenntnisse über die Entwicklung im eigenen Land helfen, aber auch zur Erkenntnis, wie und warum es in anderen Ländern anders gelaufen ist”; *ibid.*, 11.

⁸ “Es zeigt, wie außerordentlich unterschiedlich sich die Einstellungen und Verhaltensweisen zu verschiedenen Zeiten und in verschiedenen Ländern ausgeprägt haben. Es bietet Material zur Beantwortung der eingangs gestellten Fragen, wie es sonst nirgends zugänglich ist”; *ibid.* 9.

Lutheran confessional text, namely, the *Confessio Augustana*, a foundational Lutheran work that remains a point of reference for Lutherans today. Additionally, the chapter points to the unique relationship between the Lutheran Church and the Jewish people, stemming from their shared foundation in the Bible: “the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and the New Testament.”⁹

In the second chapter of the book, one reads of the historical relationship between the Lutheran churches and Jews in some European countries, with a special focus on Germany. The third chapter – the most extensive of the volume – discusses the relationship between the European Lutheran churches and contemporary Jews. The focal point of the fourth chapter is the issue of foundational theological questions from the Lutheran point of view, such as the relationship between Old and New Testaments, the particular relationship between the Church and Judaism, and the testimony of Christ.

The book’s brief account of Martin Luther’s portrayal of Jews and Judaism follows the established pattern by depicting the early attitude and writings of Luther as friendly towards Jews and Judaism, especially his treatise *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborener Jude sei* (“That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew”), published in 1523. The authors present Luther’s early writings as an expression of appreciation, neglecting the fact that Luther’s political advice was driven by his hope of the Jews’ conversion to Christianity and thus was not an appreciation of Jews and Judaism as such.¹⁰

The late writings of Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* (*On the Jews and Their Lies*) and *Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi* (*Of the Ineffable Name and the Generations of Christ*), written in 1543, are characterized as follows:

These writings, which have a much sharper tone, arose within the framework of a theological discussion which was characterized by historical and exegetical arguments [...]. Thus, from these writings we hear not only venom and indignation, but, above all, fear that his words, which were so clear to him, had no effect on the Jews. This could only be due to their ‘blindness’ and ‘stubbornness.’ At the same time, Luther was afraid of the effect of their

⁹ “[...] zu den prophetischen und apostolischen Schriften Alten und Neuen Testaments als zu dem reinen, lauteren Brunnen Israels, welcher alleine die einige wahrhaftige Richtschnur ist, nach der alle Lehrer und Lehre zu richten und zu urteilen seien”; *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ “Das Ziel der Schrift bestand demnach vor allem darin, Christen oder Konvertiten aus dem Judentum, die missionarisch wirkten, eine Orientierungshilfe zu bieten”; Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014), 66. Towards this end, Luther advocated friendly behavior towards Jews.

arguments. Driven by fear that faith in Christ might be lost, he would be led to the infamous statements, which Protestant enemies of the Jews later invoked time and again.¹¹

Hence, on the one hand, the authors distance themselves from Luther's vitriolic anti-Jewish diatribes. On the other, however, their analysis is marked by apology. Luther's invectives and the demonization of Jews and Judaism, his literal identification of Jews with the devil, are glossed over as 'ugliness' (*Gehässigkeit*) and 'indignation' (*Entrüstung*).¹² His hostility towards Jews and Judaism is explained, in part, via the *Zeitgeist* and his *Weltanschauung*, political circumstances as well as Jewish (re)actions. The text's attempts to analyze, understand, and explain Luther's judaeophobia are, thus, colored by a definite defensive mode.

The authors state the necessity that "[...] theology and the church clearly distance themselves from all Luther's anti-Jewish statements,"¹³ since anti-Semites invoked them over and over again during the course of history.¹⁴ Tellingly, however, nowhere does one find the notion that a repudiation of these statements could be necessary for the sake of the church itself: its faith and theology.

In sum, while the authors raise important questions and formulate lucid and laudable goals, they often fall short of achieving these aims. This decidedly partial accomplishment can be variously accounted for. Most prominently, perhaps, the volume would have profited from the inclusion of non-Lutheran perspectives – Jewish scholars, in particular. It might have taken its cue from the Lutheran World Federation, which jointly organized a consultation with the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations and in which members of LEKKJ participated and were even instrumental in its preparation.¹⁵ Although

¹¹ Ibid, 15.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ The invocation of Luther's anti-Semitism continues until today. During the federal election campaign in 2017 the NPD (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), an extreme right-wing party, put up election posters showing Luther with the caption: "Ich würde NPD wählen – Ich könnte nicht anders" (I would vote NPD – I couldn't do otherwise), alluding to Luther's words, allegedly spoken at the Reichstag in Worms: "Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders" (Here I stand, I cannot help it.) The Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) protested this strategy.

¹⁵ The Report of the Assembly Committee on the Church and the Jewish People explicitly thanks LEKKJ: "We do not want to leave unspoken our recognition of the very extensive and helpful work in Lutheran / Jewish relations that has taken place in our member churches, particularly in the USA and in Europe. The chief coordinating agencies were the European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People in Europe and the Lutheran Council in the USA"; Greive and Prove, *A Shift in Jewish Lutheran Relations?*, 199.

the depiction of Luther's attitude towards Judaism is characterized by defensiveness and an apologetic stance, these shortcomings do not detract from the fact the book represents the first post-1945 Lutheran attempt to deal with these acutely painful topics.¹⁶

The Declaration of Driebergen

After the Shoah, the awareness of the need for a renewal of Christian-Jewish relations developed slowly in the churches. In this vein, an important Protestant statement, the declaration of the Synod of the Rhineland, Germany, was published in 1980.¹⁷ In the past decades, many Protestant – as well as Catholic – churches in Europe, North and South America, and Australia, have published statements that express a fundamental theological shift. Among these are the condemnation of anti-Semitism, the rejection of anti-Judaism, the insight of God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people based on a re-interpretation of Paul's letters to the Romans, the focus on Jesus' and Paul's Jewishness and consequent perception of them as part of the Jewish people and Jewish culture of the first century CE – and finally, a rejection of the teaching of supersessionism. This theological shift can be seen as the attempt to depart from the “theology of contempt” – as the French historian Jules Isaac termed it – and to establish a new relationship between the churches and the Jewish people.

In 1990, the LEKKJ published a comprehensive theological *Statement on the Encounter between Lutheran Christians and Jews*.¹⁸ This succinct declaration, also known as the *Document of Driebergen*, is composed of four parts. The first section sets forth basic theological insights, such as the enduring chosenness of Israel and the unique relationship between Christians and the Jewish people. The second section reflects on the Shoah and the history of Christian anti-Judaism, condemning Christian triumphalism and calling for repentance: “In order to

16 For a detailed discussion, see Andreas Pangritz. *Theologie und Antisemitismus: Das Beispiel Martin Luthers* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2017).

17 Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Hermann Henrix, eds, *Die Kirchen und das Judentum: Dokumente von 1945–1980*. (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1988), 593–6.

18 European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People, *Statement on the Encounter between Lutheran Christians and Jews* (Driebergen, The Netherlands, May 8th, 1990). A German version of the text can be found in Hans Hermann Henrix and Wolfgang Kraus, eds., *Die Kirchen und das Judentum: Dokumente von 1986–2000* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2001), 448–51.

gain a new relationship with the Jews, we must learn to do penance as a church.”¹⁹

The question of missionizing among Jews was a highly controversial topic among the members of LEKKJ. This document eschews the term “mission” and instead uses the word “witness,” speaking of the role of “mutual witnesses” to which Jews and Christians are called.²⁰ “He [God] frees [us] from the pressure of having to accomplish everything by oneself. This insight places Christians under the obligation to give witness and render service with due respect to the conviction and the faith of their Jewish partners.” Members of the LEKKJ have understood these lines as rejecting any proselytizing attempts of Christians among Jews.²¹ However, one finds no consensus among the Lutheran churches in Europe on this topic.

Most significantly, the document calls for an overhaul of Lutheran education and preaching, demanding:

We also urge that the fundamental patterns of Lutheran theology and teaching such as “Law and Gospel,” “faith and works,” “promise and fulfilment,” and the “two kingdoms/realms” be reconsidered in view of their effects on the relationship between Christians and Jews.²²

19 “In this context, the extent to which Christians – even after the Holocaust – still have to change their preaching and teaching – as well as their whole practice – has become clear”; “Dabei wurde immer klarer, wieviel die Christen nach der Shoa noch in ihrer Verkündigung, im Unterricht und in ihrer gesamten Praxis ändern müssen.” In: Hans Hermann Henrix and Wolfgang Kraus, eds., *Die Kirchen und das Judentum: Dokumente von 1986–2000* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2001), 448.

20 “Any encounter between Christians and Jews must be based on the understanding that God Himself is the one who sends out, that is, who is the missionary. This insight into the missio dei helps us to understand one’s own possibilities and tasks. God authorizes us to mutually witness our faith, trusting in the independent working of the Holy Spirit; for it is God who alone decides what effect our witness will have; and it is His decision with regard to the eternal salvation of all mankind. He frees us from the pressure of having to accomplish everything by ourselves. This insight places Christians under the obligation to give witness and render service with due respect to the conviction and the faith of their Jewish partners”; *Ibid.*, 450.

21 The synod of the Austrian Protestant Churches quotes these lines and continues understanding it as a clear “no” to any form of missionary activities: “Da der Bund Gottes mit seinem Volk Israel aus lauter Gnade bis ans Ende der Zeit besteht, ist Mission unter den Juden theologisch nicht gerechtfertigt und als kirchliches Programm abzulehnen”; Erklärung der Generalsynode: “Zeit zur Umkehr – Die Evangelischen Kirchen in Österreich und die Juden.” November 1998. https://evang.at/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/umkehr_011.pdf

22 <http://www.lekkj.eu/dokumente>.

Furthermore, the statement calls for “joint theological work with Jews, especially in the field of Bible.”²³ Thus, it understands Jewish exegesis as enriching Christian exegesis of the Bible.

This text is a significant theological articulation of the position of Lutheran churches in Europe on Jews and Judaism. It contains crucial statements such as the recognition of guilt, combined with the call for repentance; the condemnation of anti-Semitism; the emphasis on the unique relationship of Christianity to Judaism; and a continuing relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people. The explanations on mission and testimony are to be understood as a rejection of any Christian missionizing activities among Jews. The distinctive character of this statement lies in its call for a theological examination and reformulation of Lutheran theology, as well as the call to theological collaboration. In a gesture of striking humility, the authors observe: “Great learning tasks lie before the churches, their organizations, their communities and all employees in preaching and teaching.”²⁴

The impact of the Declaration of Driebergen can be seen in several European Lutheran churches. In Germany²⁵ and in Austria, for instance, the text is quoted in the 1998 declaration of the *Evangelical Austrian Church* and in a 2015 statement of the synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) on Luther’s anti-Semitism.²⁶

Recent developments

After the Declaration of Driebergen, the LEKKJ continued its work with a number of smaller projects, publishing educational material and briefer statements, such as the text entitled *Martin Luther and Judaism – Challenges for Lutheran Churches*

²³ <http://www.lekkj.eu/dokumente>.

²⁴ <http://www.lekkj.eu/dokumente>.

²⁵ Lutheran Churches in Germany were asked to formulate an assessment by the VELKD: this was formulated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria and the Lutheran Church of Hanover. VELKD archive (AZ: 17/8 – 1–4). The Hanoverian church even published a flyer; see Henrix and Kraus, eds., *Die Kirchen und das Judentum: Dokumente von 1986 – 2000*, 448.

²⁶ Erklärung der Generalsynode: “Zeit zur Umkehr – Die Evangelischen Kirchen in Österreich und die Juden.” November 1998. https://evang.at/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/umkehr_011.pdf und “Martin Luther und die Juden – Notwendige Erinnerungen zum Reformationsjubiläum”. <https://www.landeskirchehannovers.de/damfiles/default/evlka/frontnews/2015/11/19/EKD-Beschluss-11-11-2015-6da1af1131c1b4a18be18ced723cd082.pdf>

of Today (2011).²⁷ In this document, the LEKKJ draws attention to the declaration of the Lutheran World Federation of 1984 and points out that the Reformation Jubilee in 2017 ought not to pass without recalling and repudiating Luther's judeophobia. In this document, reference is made to the core message of the declaration of the Lutheran World Federation from 1983.²⁸ Furthermore, the central challenge formulated in the statement of Driebergen to "rethink fundamental Lutheran theology" and to bring scholarly insights into the churches and congregations, is restated as a task still not realized.²⁹ The statement ends by pointing to Luther's appreciation of the entire Bible – not only the New Testament – and recalling the theological challenge: "We believe it is a primary task of the Lutheran Church today to further Christian hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible and consider the Jewish interpretation as enrichment to the understanding of our common biblical basis."³⁰

Conclusion

The quincentenary of Martin Luther's birth proved to be a crystallization point on an international level for the critical self-reflection of Lutheran churches on the famed theologian's anti-Semitism. In the Lutheran World Federation as well as in the European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People (LEKKJ), an awareness arose regarding the urgent need for historical and theological discussion. The ensuing discussion of Luther's anti-Semitism in the LEKKJ took place almost exclusively among Lutheran ministers and scholars, which explains, among other things, the apologetic tone of *Luther's Heirs*. In the study published by LEKKJ members, the anti-Semitism of the late Luther is roundly rejected. Yet, comprehensive scholarly treatment of it and its long-term effects awaits future inquiry.

The Declaration of Driebergen formulates a fundamental theological renewal: this includes ecumenical insights such as the condemnation of anti-Semitism and an affirmation of the unrevoked covenant. Furthermore, the statement makes patent the need for a reconstruction of Lutheran theology and practice. Core elements of Lutheran theology, such as the relationship between Law and Gospel, contain anti-Jewish aspects. Thus far, however, only a handful of

²⁷ [http://sakasti.evl.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/9C5E043DDFA43B10C22579AA00497F54/\\$FILE/LEKKJ%20zu%20Luther-Helsinki%202011%20-English.pdf](http://sakasti.evl.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/9C5E043DDFA43B10C22579AA00497F54/$FILE/LEKKJ%20zu%20Luther-Helsinki%202011%20-English.pdf) and <http://www.lekkj.eu/dokumente>.

²⁸ <http://www.lekkj.eu/dokumente>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

theologians, including, notably, Friedrich Wilhelm Marquardt,³¹ has tackled these constitutive theological concepts in any serious and systematic fashion.

Nonetheless, it can be said that, to an increasing degree, sober historical and theological analyses are replacing apologetics. The celebration of 500 years of the Reformation in Germany gave rise to important research and discourse. The impact of Luther's judaeophobia on the church and society at large in Germany was debated fiercely,³² in the church pews no less than in the hallways of academia.³³ As part of the Lutheran Church's educational project, several exhibitions on this topic were prepared³⁴ and various ecclesial boards released statements, among them the synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany.³⁵ And, on November 9, 2015, in Wittenberg – and a year later in other German cities – a poignant public gesture was made: in a reversal of the iconographic Christian image of the blindfolded *synagoga*, the eyes of the statue of Martin Luther were covered with a blindfold, signaling, with this switch, Luther's blindness and that of his heirs.

³¹ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Von Elend und Heimsuchung der Theologie: Prolegomena zur Dogmatik* (Munich: Kaiser, 1988); *idem*, *Das christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden: Eine Christologie*, 2 vols. (Munich: Kaiser, 1990/91); *idem*, *Was dürfen wir hoffen, wenn wir hoffen dürfen? Eine Eschatologie*, 3 vols. (Munich: Kaiser and Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993–1996); *idem*, *Eia, wärn wir da – eine theologische Utopie* (Munich: Kaiser and Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997).

³² Harry Oelke, Wolfgang Kraus, Gury Schneider-Ludorff, Axel Töllner, and Anselm Schubert, eds., *Martin Luthers Judenschriften: Die Rezeption im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016); Christopher Ocker, "Martin Luther and Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism" <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-312>

³³ For an example of a controversial publication, see Johannes Wallmann, "Zum Umgang mit Martin Luthers Judenschriften: Die Evangelische Kirche verleugnet ihre Geschichte," part 1. <http://www.pfarrerverband.de/pfarrerblatt/index.php?a=show&id=3621>

³⁴ Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg-Schlesische Oberlausitz and Touro College Berlin, eds., *Martin Luther und das Judentum: Rückblick und Aufbruch* (Berlin: Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg- Schlesische Oberlausitz, 2016).

³⁵ Synode der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, "Martin Luther und die Juden – Notwendige Erinnerung zum Reformationsjubiläum" 2015; https://r2017.org/fileadmin/downloads/ekd_kundgebung_luther_und_die_juden.pdf



Luther's blindness

Picture: Stefan Heinze

