

An *Enfant Terrible* of International Communism (and Internationalist Communication)

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Abstract

A reflection on the life and death of Willi Münzenberg, the very epitome of the Communist internationalist and communicator in the period between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. Münzenberg was a product of State-Communism's early, creative and spendthrift period and also its victim as Soviet Russia became more authoritarian, nationalist and obsessive. And although he must be seen as also a product of national/industrial/imperial capitalism, emancipatory movements of capitalism's global and computerised era still need to be aware of the price to be paid for Münzenberg's crimes and misdemeanours.

Keywords: *Willi Münzenberg, Communism, Comintern, Internationalism, Emancipation, Media, Agitators, Agents, Communicators.*

Youth International; Zimmerwald Conference; Founding Congress of the Comintern; Famine Relief for Soviet Russia; Workers International Relief; Famine in Germany; Proviantkolonne des Proletariats; Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung; Communist Party of Germany; League against Imperialism and for National Independence; Against the Horrors in Syria!; L'Etoile Nord-Africaine; Der Rote Aufbau; The Arab National Congress; La Ligue pour la Défense de la Race Nègre; Mezhrabpom-Film; First International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers; Kuhle Wampe; Free Sacco and Vanzetti!; Neuer Deutscher Verlag; Hands Off China!; Eulenspiegel; Liga Antiimperialista de las Américas; Indonesian Revolt; World Committee Against War and Fascism; Berlin am Morgen; Welt am Abend; ¡Viva Sandino!; For the Release of Dimitrov, Thälmann and all Antifascists; Lutetia Committee; Prometheus Film; Association of Worker Photographers; The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror; World Committee for the Relief of the Victims of German Fascism; Propaganda as weapon; The International Coordination and Information Committee of Aid for Republican Spain; The Hollywood Anti-Nazi League for the Defense of American Democracy; Die Zukunft, Organ der Deutsch-Französischen Union; "The traitor, Stalin, are you!"; Komitee Menschen in Not; Freunde der sozialistischen Einheit Deutschlands.

(Some of the keywords for the Münzenberg Conference, Berlin, September 2015)

Introduction¹

What, in this globalised and informatised capitalist world disorder, are we to make of Willi Münzenberg, who lived and died fighting in and against a national and industrial capitalist one? Sean McMeekin (2003), in an otherwise overwhelmingly scholarly work, ends up by presenting Münzenberg as a brilliant but corrupt and vicious propagandist exploiting anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism and anti-fascism to threaten the pluralistic West. He even suggests he was a forerunner of the

Islamic terrorists (who) exploit the very openness of our society to move money, men and munitions across borders, and use our own technology to kill us (307).

Dear oh dear...!

One would have thought McMeekin's title and subtitle sufficient to have Münzenberg hung, drawn and displayed as a frightener to the rest of us (that means those of 'us' enjoying the benefits of an open society that never stops moving money, men and munitions across borders, and whose world-destroying global media lies and manipulation have been increasingly exposed).

Münzenberg was born in Erfurt, Germany, 1889, and died near Grenoble, France, 1940. He was surely one of the most remarkable of the first-generation Communist internationalists. He was a young primary-educated worker when he was urging his brand of radical socialism on the already stolid, late-19th century, German Social Democratic Party. As a starving youth he made his way to Switzerland, where, during the great inter-imperialist carnage of 1914-18, he met Lenin and other early left social democrats and revolutionaries. He was involved in the creation of the German Communist Party but is better known - where known at all - for his international organisational and media activities, which fell under the patronage of the Communist Third International (Comintern).

Münzenberg was, however, an innovator within both the national and international movement, commonly acting first and seeking, winning or imposing approval after. He initiated, shaped and dominated dozens of international solidarity and aid committees - all Communist fronts - addressed to the defence of the Soviet state, to famine victims in Russia or political prisoners elsewhere, to peace, national independence, anti-fascism. He was

¹ This is an edited version of my paper to the 2015 Willi Münzenberg congress in Berlin, which in turn draws on and updates my 2004 review of Sean McMeekin's biography of Münzenberg. The continuing - if not growing - interest in Münzenberg led to the Berlin conference, whose invitation (<https://psacommunism.wordpress.com/2014/11/10/call-for-papers-first-international-willi-munzenberg-congress/>) provides convincing arguments for the importance of this man. Another reason for reworking this piece is that there are still, on the left, those who believe in both the revolutionary lie and in communication as its instrument.

involved in international Communist film production and distribution. He set up 15-20 journals, newspapers and popular illustrated magazines – some international. He created the Worker Photography Movement, which itself became an international one. He travelled Western Europe, visited Moscow on numerous occasions, was exiled in France. He survived both black and red terror, cautiously avoiding invitations to Moscow as the wave of trials and executions rose. With the Kremlin smearing as ‘traitors’ thousands, including Willi himself, he returned the insult, stating that ‘Der Verräter, Stalin, bist Du!’ (The traitor, Stalin, is you!). This is now the title of a compilation on the death of Communist internationalism (Bayerlein 2008).

Münzenberg juggled funds between numerous simultaneous projects, even using Moscow gold to finance the solidarity actions or aid that ostensibly flowed to the Soviet Union either from the ‘workers of the world’ or from ‘democratic and peace-loving forces’. Motivated till his premature death by the international proletarian revolution, he over time developed a nice taste in suits, had a personal barber, stayed at fancy hotels, lived in a fine apartment. The Soviet Union and the Comintern, however, were moving, in the 1930s, away from their early revolutionary, creative and spendthrift beginnings - when there was room for charismatic and creative individuals - into a conjoined bureaucratic apparatus responding only to the latest twitch of its master’s moustache.

Münzenberg was, as McMeekin says, a propagandist, and evidently someone who had no theory of the media, no notion of it as an independent sphere, with its own emancipatory possibilities: it was an instrument of ‘The Party’, like Lenin’s Iskra (which preceded his own party).²

Münzenberg, who lived on financial and political credit from the Soviet Union, eventually ran out of both, was rejected by a Comintern purged by Stalin, thrown out of the German KPD, and died, under suspicious circumstances, as he attempted to flee Nazi-occupied France for Switzerland. In so far as it seems possible that he was strangled by one of the agents who had for some years been spying on him, the expression ‘hoist with his own petard’ seems grimly appropriate. Indeed, the bloodless bureaucrats who survived him and ruled the German Democratic Republic, later killed him off 13 years before his actual death! An official East German handbook on the international labour movement gives him a last mention in 1927 (Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus 1986:254).

Despite this depressing detail, I still prefer to place Münzenberg within a certain history, or model, of internationalism, and of communication in relation to such. This is, in part, because I cannot see the history of the last 100 years or so in terms of the development of an ‘open’ and ‘self-critical’ world society threatened by mad extremisms (read: ‘evil empires’, ‘axes of evil’) called Communism, Anti-Imperialism or even Islamic Fundamentalism. I see it, rather as an unevenly liberal capitalist world – as also an imperialist, militarist, hetero-

² Which is not to say that Willi M had no ideas about the importance of the media and was not responsible for or involved in a whole series of original cultural experiments. See here Heynen 2015: 508-29.

normative, ecologically-destructive and occasionally fascist one – which repeatedly recreates, to recall a phrase, its own gravediggers. Such gravediggers (pace Marx) are not necessarily civilised by the society that creates them. Nor are their methods necessarily more civilised. Rosa Luxemburg posed as alternatives Socialism and Barbarism. She forgot a third alternative, Barbaric Socialism. But if Münzenberg was a monster, sacred to some, evil to others, than he was as much a monster of the capitalism that gave birth to him as of the Communism he himself helped create. Communism, after all, was not a *deus ex machina*. It was itself a child of the national, industrial, capitalist modernity into which it was born.

This brings me to another other reason for interest in Münzenberg, a long-standing concern with internationalism, with communications and culture in relation to such, and with the bearers of these, the left or red internationalists (Waterman 2002). Paraphrasing Eric Hobsbawm (1988) – a later-generation German/British and cosmopolitan Communist – I once proposed a historical typology of red internationalists: the Agitators (often freelancers, ‘changing their countries more often than their shirts’); the Agents (working for a state or party, whether openly or clandestinely, whether as organisers, propagandists or spies); and the Communicators (creating/instrumentalising/empowering mass action by providing relevant publics with information, ideas, dialogue, *son et lumière*). It then occurred to me that this was not simply a diachronic typology, it could also be a synchronic one - that these were also forms or aspects of internationalist activity within each significant historical period. (Be it added that this was meant to be a heuristic typology - one that could be abandoned or surpassed in the face of forceful criticism, and especially stubborn evidence). Let us try it out on the Münzenberg case.

Within such a typology, Münzenberg could be seen as a young Agitator, early transformed into an Agent, and as a Communicator whose activities were determined by his Agent role. Upon these bones we have to place flesh and muscle. This means: the party and ideology, the social, economic and political history, the individual personality. Much of this is provided by McMeekin. What he does not show us, either literally by illustration, or figuratively by description, is the remarkable artefacts Münzenberg produced or was responsible for. Indeed, Münzenberg himself is quoted sparingly, except toward the end of his life and this book.

This shortcoming was fortunately compensated for by the pioneering two-volume work of Mattelart and Siegelau (1979, 1983), *Communication and Class Struggle*. These unique volumes themselves came out of a previous wave of emancipation and internationalism (we are undergoing a new one now), that of 1968. In the second of the two volumes we are not only given a text of Münzenberg on the International Worker-Photographer Movement. We are also shown sample pages, photos and contributions from *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* from the early 1930s. These are usefully preceded by other remarkable statements from the German Communist movement of that time: Bertolt Brecht on radio; and Hanns Eisler on the worker music movement. Brecht, with

brilliant if misplaced foresight, gives radio the democratic communication potential of the computer; Eisler (who invented a whole new musical genre for his party, class and international movement) takes an instrumental and pedagogical attitude to music (but check out the amazing music itself; another article, on 'The Worker's Eye', from *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* itself, warns that the majority of proletarians are stumbling around with 'a definitely petty-bourgeois eye' (1979: 176)! The worker's eye clearly lies here in that of the vanguardist beholder. Münzenberg's own contribution here is suggestive but predictable – though we must discount the achievements claimed.

The point here is that in the *Sturm und Drang* of Weimar Germany (Heynen, 2015) – and around the world at that time – there was an explosion of left cultural activity, mostly linked, for better or worse, with Soviet and international Communism. When Hitler came to power (due in part to Communism treating Social Democracy as the greater threat), and as international Communism was reduced to Soviet Nationalism, this cultural internationalism pretty much disappeared. As did Münzenberg. 'Our' capitalism played its own part: the increasing technical sophistication, corporate concentration and commodification of what had previously been artisanal media, left decreasing space for both avantgarde artists and working-class culture.

Here a parenthesis is necessary, one not unconnected with the latest global solidarity movements. This has to do with Münzenberg's Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH, International Worker Relief). One of its aims was to aid victims of the Soviet famine of the early 1920s – a famine for which Soviet policies were at least co-responsible. IAH was, however, also created as a Communist-controlled counterweight to not only the American Relief Administration (of the US Quaker, humanitarian and justly-forgotten future president, Herbert Hoover), but also the international Social-Democratic relief efforts initiated by the experienced left-socialist international union leader, Edo Fimmen (McMeekin 2003:107-9).

Casting an eye backward, the IAH could be seen as an expression of that wide range of activities by which the inter/national working-class movement confronted the charity activities of a hypocritical and calculating inter/national bourgeoisie. Looking sideways one could see it as an expression of the war - always cold, sometimes hot – that Communism was carrying out against Social Democracy. Looking forward, we can see the outlines of inter/national 'development cooperation' – today once again addressed to the East as well as the South. The contemporary inter/national trade union organisations are active within this aid effort, but are also largely incorporated within both the institutional/financial practices and the ideological discourses of a Eurocentred liberal middle class.

The Communist project of Münzenberg was partially destroyed by its financial and political shenanigans, including Willi's disastrous efforts to convert the IAH into some kind of international industrial and commercial contribution to

Soviet development. In so far as the contemporary international unions are beginning to see themselves as part of 'global civil society' – even echoing 'Another World is Possible!' - then there is clearly a need to reconsider this whole complex and disastrous experience, and then to reinvent international aid and solidarity activities on a more principled and autonomous basis. (For just one of various recent efforts, see *Interface*, issue 6 volume 2³).

Maybe we should see Münzenberg as the left equivalent of a media tycoon or maverick capitalist - a Bill Gates or George Soros - of international Communism. After World War Two the International Communists and Communicators were a dreary lot (I was one of them), as suggested by the very title of the official organ of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), *For a Lasting Peace, For a People's Democracy*. Even those who in Britain dredged its endless columns of turgid prose called it, disrespectfully, *For-For*. Left internationalist and cultural expression only revived with what I above called 1968. This was the era of the New Left, less Communist but retaining or reinventing its apocalyptical and creative edge. The most recent left wave is associated with the 'global justice and solidarity movement' – that wide gamut of protest and proposition provoked by 'our' globalised networked capitalism. Thanks to the thoroughly post-industrial internet, this is becoming the first primarily communicative internationalism (and the first post-nationalist one?), whilst simultaneously losing its dead albatrosses – the insurrectionary-apocalyptical zeal, the monopoly of truth, the revolutionary lie.

I suggested above that I was one of the - let us here say *less-inspired* if still enthusiastic - internationalist Communists/communicators. This was in Prague in the later 1950s. I was the English (and inevitably chief sub-) editor of the magazine of the International Union of Students, *World Student News* (Waterman 2014: ch. 2). This was what remained of the Münzenberg Galaxy after its charismatic genius had disappeared, his projects been re-sited inside a Communist-state-bloc and reshaped as pallid organs of a dozen or more international Communist-state-front organisations. The Zeal was tempered, the Truth remained, and the Revolutionary Lie had been converted, mostly, into the diplomatic phrase. Coming from a liberal-democratic Britain and with a diploma in journalism, I struggled within this turgid organisation with mixed success.

And I could also experience how the Czechoslovak state media (film occasionally, oddly, accepted) reproduced the monopoly of truth and the post-revolutionary lie, if not the apocalyptical zeal. Every Communist country had its international magazine, *The Soviet Union Reconstructs, Czechoslovak Life...* One item I contributed to a Czechoslovak weekly had been so heavily 'translated and improved' that I proposed the promised fee (moderate) be paid to the editor responsible. The Prague Spring and Soviet Summer of 1968, which I later experienced, saw the transformation of even Czech state TV (of which my former IUS boss Jiří Pelikán, was now director, later fleeing to Italy). And then, of

³ <http://www.interfacejournal.net/2014/12/interface-volume-6-issue-2-movement-internationalisms>

course, there was the outburst of popular fury and creativity when the Soviets invaded: 'Come Back Lenin, Brezhnev has Gone Crazy!'. But this was an overwhelmingly national effort, with no knowledge of Münzenberg, remarkably little inspiration from the Paris Spring, and whose hopes of international solidarity were reduced to attempts to inform a largely indifferent West and its divided and disoriented Left. After Soviet 'normalisation' had been reimposed the media returned to, well, the Communist norm. Even in 1989, with Communism in full crumble, *Czechoslovak Life* was publishing on 'Mushroom Picking in Czechoslovakia'⁴! International Communist propaganda had become national tourist publicity.

Neither of the earlier-mentioned New Lefts knows much about Münzenberg, though they certainly owe him something. It is my belief that the latest of these movements is surpassing the mechanical Marxism of that national-industrial period, as well as the instrumentalisation of culture, the hidden agendas, the primarily didactic disposition, and almost all of the *Parteilichkeit* (partymindedness). It has a rather more sophisticated understanding of international solidarity (which can and should today be pluralised). It no longer, with exceptions, considers that the proletariat needs grafted on to it (by any *Lider Maximo* or *Herr Professor Doktor*) a proletarian eye. It even has some ethical notions beyond that of the revolutionary end justifying the manipulative means. (The alternative is increasingly conceived, and practiced, as 'prefiguration'). But I would still say that it has much to learn from Münzenberg and his comrades. Mostly, of course, to do with avoiding his crimes and even his misdemeanours.

Here another parenthesis is in place, this having to do with... well... misdemeanours leading to crimes? Amongst the revolutionary comrades of Münzenberg in the 1930s would have been the Czechoslovak Communist Jew, Otto Katz/Andre Simone (Miles 2010) and the brilliant and witty, sometime Communist, journalist, Claude Cockburn (father of the now better-known Alex). In his autobiography (Cockburn 1958), Claude relates how he helped Katz fake up a detailed report of an uprising amongst Franco's North African troops in Spain. The purpose – apparently successful - was to get the French government of Blum to provide armed support to the beleaguered Spanish Republican regime. Claude is unapologetic about the revolutionary lies of Katz and himself. But what he fails, at least here, to relate is that Katz was later executed by the Czechoslovak Communist state that further such lies, propaganda and hidden agendas had helped bring into existence. There are evident parallels with the fate of Münzenberg.

We should be grateful to McMeekin. Because if capitalism was partially responsible for creating Gravedigger Münzenberg, then there may be a Little Willi in 'us' (here the 'us' of the new global solidarity and justice movements), ready to cut corners, to stay in 5-star hotels whilst holding encounters against neo-liberalism, to misuse funds, to conceal, to manipulate, to preach - and all in

⁴ <http://rainbow.chard.org/radio/radio-prague-czechoslovakia/018-4/>

the name of a world or a word assumed to be inevitably superior to those in existence - or to those conceivable by the mass, class or identity in whose name we might claim to speak. Our utopias are, Thank Goddess, not what they used to be. In so far as we work out what they might be, we may escape the brutal attentions of at least 'our own' assassins and the academic mercies of any future Sean McMeekin.

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Peter Waterman (London 1936) worked in Prague for two Communist-front organisations, as an editor for the International Union of Students in the mid-to late-1950s, and as a labour educator for the World Federation of Trade Unions in the later 1960s. Most recently he has published, online and free, his autobiography (http://www.intoebooks.com/book/from_coldwar_communism_to_the_global_emancipatory_movement/reviews/). This deals, in part, with Communist internationalism and its media, as well as the State-Communist experience, and attempts to create 'alternative international labour communication by computer'.