

Münzenberg Review 190204, Words: 2,283

An Infant Terrible of Communist Internationalism

Peter Waterman
waterman@antenna.nl

Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West*. Yale University Press, New Haven. 2003. Pp. 397.

What, in this globalised and informatised capitalist world order, are we to make of Willi Münzenberg, who lived and died fighting in and against a national and industrial capitalist world order?

Sean McMeekin, 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). Well-a-well. One would have thought his title and subtitle sufficient to have Münzenberg hung, drawn and displayed - as a frightener - to the rest of 'us'.

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 of them 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 involved in international 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 there.

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 individuals - into a conjoined bureaucratic apparatus responding only to the latest twitch of its master’s moustache.

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 NKVD 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 chronology of 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 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. 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.

This brings me to my 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 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 propagandists or spies); and the Communicators (creating/instrumentalising/empowering mass action by providing relevant publics with information, ideas, *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 can be abandoned in the face of forceful criticism, or even 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 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 is fortunately compensated for by the pioneering two-volume work of Mattelart and Siegelau (1979, 1983), *Communication and Class Struggle*. These volumes come 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: Bertold Brecht on radio; and Hanns Eisler on the worker music movement. Brecht, with brilliant if premature and 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 at <http://eislermusic.com/>); 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 the mind of the beholder. Münzenberg's own contribution is suggestive – though we must discount the achievements claimed - but predictable.

The point here is that in the *Sturm und Drang* of Weimar Germany – and around the world at that time – there was an explosion of left cultural activity, linked, for better or worse, with Soviet and international Communism. When Hitler came to power (due in large part to Communism treating Social Democracy as the greater threat), and as international Communism was reduced to Soviet Communism, 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 movement. This has to do with Münzenberg's *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (IAH, International Worker Relief). This was set up ostensibly to aid victims of the Soviet famine of the early 1920s – a famine for which Soviet policies were largely if not solely 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 (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 can 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. The contemporary international trade union movement is active within this aid effort, but is also largely incorporated within both the institutional/financial practices and the ideological discourse of the liberal middle class.

The Communist project of Münzenberg destroyed itself by its financial and political shenanigans, and by his 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’, then there is clearly a need to reconsider this whole complex and disastrous experience, and then to reinvent international labour aid and solidarity activities on a more principled and independent basis.

Maybe we should see Münzenberg as the left equivalent of a robber-baron 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, 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 apocalyptic 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 albatros – the insurrectionary-apocalyptic zeal.

Neither of these 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 industrial period, as well as the instrumentalisation of culture, the primarily didactic disposition, and almost all of the *parteilichkeit* (partymindedness). It has a much more sophisticated understanding of international solidarity (commonly today pluralised). It no longer, with exceptions, considers that the proletariat needs grafted on to it (by any Herr Professor Doktor) a proletarian eye. It even has some ethical notions beyond that of the revolutionary end justifying the manipulative means. But I would 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. We all know the one about those who ignore history...

We should therefore be grateful to McMeekin. Because if capitalism was partially responsible for creating Gravedigger Münzenberg, then there must be a Little Willi in 'us' (of the newest international left), ready to cut corners, to misuse funds, to conceal, to manipulate, to preach - and all in the name of a world or a word miraculously superior to those by which we are surrounded. What Münzenberg would never have understood, but we can, is that the means determine the ends. 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 both the brutal attentions of any contemporary NKVD and the tender mercies of any future Sean McMeekin.

Peter Waterman (London 1936) worked in Prague for two Communist-front organisations, as an editor for the International Union of Students in the 1950s, and as a labour educator for the World Federation of Trade Unions in the 1960s. Most recently he has co-edited World Social Forum: Challenging Empires, Viveka Foundation, New Delhi, 2004, 402 pp. This is also on line, in Uruguayan cyberspace, at http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html.

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