Research plan

**THE REVIVAL OF INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY – THE INTERNATIONALE ARBEITERHILFE, WILLI MÜNZENBERG AND THE COMINTERN IN WEWAR GERMANY, 1921–1933**

The aim of my research is to present a pivotal analysis of the transnational solidarity organisation Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH) and its expressions of international solidarity in Weimar Germany. During the interwar era the IAH developed under the auspices of the Third, or Communist International (Comintern), from a solidarity movement into a vast mass organisation with its nucleus in Weimar Germany. The IAH was officially non-committed in party politics and strove to unite the whole working class and its sympathisers under the ideal of international solidarity. A systematic analysis of the IAH, its solidarity undertakings, and its expanding global network has not yet been presented. My study will thus attempt a fundamental research of the IAH and present it as one of the most significant predecessors to contemporary Non Governmental Organisations and solidarity movements.¹

International solidarity as an ideological and political utopia has been a constant component within the modern world. The outbreak of the first world war brought, however, a virtual collapse to the internationalism that had been created during the 19th century.² Total war created immense social disapproval, revolts and ultimately, revolutions in Germany and Russia. The radical dreams of socialism did not materialise in Central Europe at this time, but the notion of a proletarian, international solidarity was intellectually revitalised through the creation of the Soviet Union and the Comintern.³ During these years, one specific organisation had the mission to strive for a revival of both the idea and practice of international solidarity in the Weimar Republic that emerged from the initiative of the radical left. This novel solidarity organisation was the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe – an organisation not exclusively meant for the radical left, but for the entire German and international working


class. The positive quality of international solidarity has though long been excluded from the history of communism in the 20th century while the common notion of the communist movement’s immense and historically continuous failure has been prevailing. Here I purpose that the historical understanding of interwar communism (1921–33) should be perceived from a completely different perspective.

During the Cold War the question was raised whether the IAH should be perceived as a propaganda organisation as a part of “the great conspiracy against the free and democratic West”, or alternatively as a humanitarian organisation for every leftist, struggling against the structural inequalities of war torn Europe, fighting against the fractions within the working class? The primary question was whether the IAH yet again was a failed communist experiment or if it was a relative success of its time, a true agency of international solidarity? These constructed dichotomies seem helplessly outdated, and a modern scientific analysis of the IAH must strive to critically analyse the IAH’s message of solidarity and its network to the Comintern in order to reach a contextually set historical understanding of the organisation and its mission in Weimar Germany.

The aim of my study is hence not to produce another research effort that only concentrates on highlighting details of a forgotten past, but to significantly criticise the efforts of the previous research on the grounds of perspective. The edge of this critic is centred around the concept and idea of solidarity, which also is the main analytical tool of my research. The research concerning the IAH is thus connected to the grand scientific disputes concerning the European and the international leftist radicalism and utopian dreams between the two world wars; and the hopefulness of the time era that was lost in the bitter fight against fascism and the totalitarian dictatorship in Stalin’s Russia.

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My dissertation is a part of the research project *InterSol* (International solidarity, utopian ideals and political consciousness: radical and left-wing networks during the interwar period in Europe and beyond) that is headed by prof. Holger Weiss at Abo Akademi University. Through the project I am part of an extensive international network of scholars and specialists on the interwar era. My research is based on extensive, difficultly attainable Russian and German archival material.

**The Context**

Ever since the IAH’s creation during the Comintern’s third world congress in 1921, the IAH has been affiliated to a broad spectrum of activities and goals. The IAH’s original purpose was to organise an international solidarity campaign for the victims of the 1921 famine in Soviet Russia. After the famine, the IAH grew into a significant organisation in Weimar Germany with highly diversified fields of activity: the IAH was engaged in various international and national solidarity campaigns, had a broad social political program, distributed Russian proletarian films to Germany, developed an impressive proletarian press, and built an extensive membership organisation ranging the entire country. Further, the IAH organised annual international solidarity days that were celebrated in the streets of major German and European cities. It also organised several international congresses in Germany and in 1931 the IAH celebrated prominently its ten-year anniversary around the country and especially in Weimar Berlin. The myriad of activities that the IAH was engaged in was combined by a thick red line consisting of the idea and practice of international solidarity, and it is this specific aspect of the organisation that is the focus of my research – the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* and its efforts to head a revival of international solidarity within the transnational labour movement during the interwar era.

The IAH’s headquarters were located in Berlin where it managed over national sections with a global reach. The web of IAH-organisations that were coordinated from the centre in Berlin ranged all the way from Japan, China and Australia, to South Africa, Latin America, the USA and a dozen European nations. However, the German IAH section was the most extensive and significant of them all, which motivates a delimitation to the German context.

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Among the IAH’s supporters were the very elite of the interwar intellectuals, who sarcastically have been referred to as *fellow travellers*, including such renown names as Albert Einstein, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Käthe Kollwitz, Anatole France, Arthur Koestler, Sperber Manés, and Henri Barbusse. These personalities contributed widely to the IAH’s popularity and public image as an intellectually and politically free leftist forum. Thereby, during the 1920s and early 1930s the IAH influenced through its language of solidarity millions of German leftists towards a positive image of the Soviet Union and socialism, and a critical view towards the bourgeoisie, the social democratic leadership and fascism.⁹

Even though the IAH’s concrete actions had various forms, the IAH’s *leitmotiv* was at all times the ideal of international solidarity. Thus, the IAH never expressed its workings as a form of charity or humanitarianism but instead as class aid. The IAH was related to a tradition of proletarian solidarity ranging from the communist manifesto (1848) and Karl Marx’s first international to the Communist International. The IAH made tremendous efforts to revitalise the traditions of the proletarian internationalism via a solidarity movement attempting to extend itself over the gaps between the radical and moderate left through an universal appeal of solidarity between all peoples. In the age of modernism, this utopian appeal was a veritable alternative to the rising tide of fascism, nationalism, and bourgeoisie cosmopolitanism.¹⁰

**Previous research**

Especially the IAH, but also its leading figure Willi Münzenberg have been obscured by the German and international research community. In East Germany Münzenberg fell into disgrace and ignorance due to his partition from the communist movement in 1937. Thus, during the Cold War era the IAH and Münzenberg were intentionally disregarded in the GDR as research objectives.¹¹ In the West, the IAH has remained almost entirely obscured and only been partially highlighted in studies focusing on the life of the “mysterious” Willi Münzenberg. The main currents of the IAH’s history have been narrated in a number of

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articles and minor studies, although non of the studies by the Wester scholars have concentrated on the IAH’s message of international solidarity.12

The first scholarly biography on Münzenberg was written by Sean McMeekin (2004). His empirical research is scholarly, although the questions that McMeekin raises to the material are clearly steered by pre set intentions; namely an agenda of disgrace. McMeekin transforms the “mysterious” Münzenberg into the worst kind of communist: fanatical, vulgar, cynical and dishonourable. Münzenberg and the IAH are compared to terrorists of today and defined as the very reason behind evil in this world. Meanwhile, McMeekin never bothers to consider the impact that Münzenberg and the IAH had on the interwar era.13 Solidarity is here only considered a slogan, void of any meaning or historical significance. Further, McMeekin’s monograph is a biography of Münzenberg (1889–1940) and not a study of the IAH. The depth of his analysis of the IAH’s message of solidarity remains thus surprisingly shallow.14

The IAH’s network with the leadership of the German Communist Party and the Comintern were evidently top secret and remained highly contested. This has left the IAH’s status open for various forms of speculation regarding the organisation’s message of solidarity. The Cold War scholars continually defined the IAH as a typical instrument of the Comintern and, ultimately, Joseph Stalin’s dictatorship. Thus, the IAH’s message of solidarity was primarily defined as political propaganda. McMeekin extends the dominating perspective of the Cold War era and presents the IAH as one of the Comintern’s front organisations, as an organisation that has the mission to reproduce the foreign policy of Soviet Russia. Accordingly, international solidarity is reduced to a form of loyalty to Soviet Russia.15

The fact that the IAH:s headquarters in Berlin were in a continuous relationship with the Comintern in Moscow has emphasised the categorisation of the IAH under the theory of


14 McMeekin concludes that: "...Willi Münzenberg helped unleash a plague of moral blindness upon the world from which we have still not recovered. His example should remind us that the great lies no less than the great crimes of history are conceived by flesh-and-blood men, who, in their bottomless contempt for the truth, enable evil to flourish in the front of our eyes." McMeekin, The red millionaire, 307.

bolshevisation, which implies the theoretical construction of a strict military hierarchy within the international communist movement. Accordingly, orders were given at the highest level and obediently executed by the agents of the revolution. However, there is a significant risk that the perspective obliterates the possibility of freethinking actors within the various national or local contexts. From a Soviet point of view the instrumental use of the concept of solidarity was a political necessity and the perspective fits perfectly with the front organisation narrative. Stalin concluded after all in 1927 that “[a]n internationalist is one who, unreservedly, without hesitation, without conditions, is ready to defend the Soviet Union”. But how does this instrumentalism correspond to the IAH’s message of solidarity in the Weimar Republic? If it is maintained that the radical left’s concept of solidarity was solely understood as an instrument of Soviet power, then it seems that the German context is irrecoverably lost. The IAH was irrefutably in close connection to the Comintern, but the IAH can not only be treated as a variable explaining the Comintern’s and the Soviet Union’s methods to spread communism. As one of the most prominent scholars on the history of the Comintern, Alexander Vatlin, has recently stated, it would be a great simplification to reduce the history of the German, or any national communist movement to only consisting of orders, emissaries and gold from Moscow. Just the same, any research effort that disregards the dominion of the bolsheviks and the bolshevisation of the communist parties and organisations during the interwar era is without question distorted.

Münzenberg was undoubtedly a significant person for the radical left between the two world wars, but his greatest creation, his most extensive organisation, the IAH still remains a

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white spot in the history of the German and international communist movement and the history of international solidarity in Europe. Most of the assumptions on the IAH have been drawn without a significant empirical material, or merely based on the IAH’s opponents’ judgements. An empirically based reassessment of the IAH in light of the archive material is thus urgently required. A new history of the IAH and its message of solidarity must however rest on the conclusion that if the IAH is only understood as a communist front organisation it recreates a black and white dichotomy of the past. However, if the IAH instead is understood as a solidarity organisation it opens a spectrum of past meanings and understandings that include both the influence from Moscow and the German national context.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, METHODS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The aim of my research is to narrate an empirically founded history of the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe. As much as it is a history of an organisation and its activities in Weimar Germany, it is a contextually set analysis of international solidarity expressed through the IAH in the Weimar Republic. The hypothesis of this study is that the IAH can not be understood without the analysis of its expressions of solidarity, and consequently that the interwar uses of solidarity can not be adequately understood without the analysis of one of the most prominent solidarity organisations of the time period. The main question of my study is thus: How was solidarity understood and defined, and how was this definition reinterpreted by the IAH during the interwar era?

The history of the organisation and the analysis of the idea and praxis of solidarity are thus perceived as two sides of the same coin: What could be said about the history of international solidarity in the Weimar Republic if a fundamental presentation of the IAH and the people actively employing the concept of solidarity was lacking? The history of the organisation is hence perceived as a contextually set history of the concept and praxis of solidarity in interwar Europe. Stjernø (2005) states in his distinguished study on the history of solidarity in Europe that the Comintern abandoned the language of solidarity, but simultaneously he fails even to mention the Comintern’s primary solidarity organisation of the

22 In the conceptual and historical studies on solidarity the IAH has been completely excluded. There is further no study that focuses on the concept of solidarity during the interwar era. See e.g. Steinar Stjernø, Solidarity in Europe. The history of an idea (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kurt Bayertz, ed. Solidarität. Begriff und Problem (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,1998); Rainer Zoll, Was ist Solidarität heute? (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000); Nathalie Karagiannis, ed. European solidarity (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Aafke E. Komter, Social solidarity and the gift (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sven-Eric Liedman, Att se sig själv i andra. Om solidaritet (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1999).
era, namely the IAH. It seems indisputable that the analysis of the labour movements expressions of international solidarity during the interwar era is in its current state severely distorted.\textsuperscript{23}

In order to analyse the IAH’s message of solidarity I rest on the theoretical discussions on solidarity presented by Stjernø, Komter, Zoll and Bayertz.\textsuperscript{24} These theoretical works provide an optimal foundation for the analysis of the IAH’s message of solidarity including mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, the spectrum of motives for solidarity behaviour, and the distinction between solidarity and synonymous concepts such as charity and philanthropy. All these aspects will be discussed when I analyse the IAH’s expressions of solidarity.

Previous conceptual studies on solidarity have mainly focused on the theoretical analysis of the concept, and not explicitly analysed the actual process when the concept was defined and redefined through an empirical material confined to a specific historical time and space. In this respect, my research will present a novel perspective on the historical study of international solidarity in Europe.

My method to analyse the IAH’s expressions of solidarity commences from the assumption that its message of solidarity was the result of internal negotiations, closely examined by the leadership of the IAH, the Comintern, and various committees within the organisations. All this was done in order to secure that the IAH’s message conveyed the correct language and symbols of solidarity. Often these expressions of solidarity were a compromise between different internal groupings. At the same time they reflected a compromise between the traditions of the labour movement and new adjustments in policy. As Stjernø highlights, ideological concepts or symbols are scarcely ever adopted to an organisation’s published texts, illustrations or resolutions by accident. Instead, they are most probably introduced after careful deliberation.\textsuperscript{25} The theoretical understanding of organisations and the networks between organisations is founded on Ahrne.\textsuperscript{26}

Evidently, the outcome of my research will not be a total history of the IAH, but instead I will set focus on the IAH’s more significant campaigns and activities. The structure of my dissertation is chronological and parts of the chapters will very much be limited to the axis

\textsuperscript{23} Stjernø, \textit{Solidarity in Europe}, 266–267.


\textsuperscript{25} Stjernø, \textit{Solidarity in Europe}, 15.

Berlin–Moscow, and investigate the discussions between Münzenberg and the bolshevik leaders on what kind of solidarity the IAH was supposed to express. Other sections will on the other hand contrast these discussions to the actual solidarity work of the IAH in Weimar Germany and focus on local activities, the actual solidarity campaigns and local expressions of the IAH’s message of solidarity. I am hence able to highlight various forums or arenas where the concept of solidarity was expressed, and to analyse the various connotations that were integrated to the IAH’s message of solidarity. The black and white dichotomy of the Cold War era is hence ”deconstructed”, and instead a spectrum arises: solidarity had various meanings and understanding that can not be reduced to solidarity versus propaganda. It is this conclusion, or hypothesis, that truly opens the IAH for a deeper analysis and enables a historical inquiry of the IAH and it’s expressions and praxis of solidarity.

My research is strongly influenced by the need to establishing basic, but yet fundamental facts, which will constitute the basis for new empirical knowledge concerning the IAH, its network with the Comintern and the IAH’s expressions and manifestations of international solidarity. Thus, my intention is not only to analyse and explain, but also simply to describe the organisation, its activities and its networks. To analyse the IAH in the light of Russian and German source material as a significant solidarity organisation between the two world wars is scientifically singularly motivated. A systematic research of the IAH as an organisation, of its structural and functional transformation, of its expanding network and of its most important leaders will shred crucial light on the interwar labour movements’ efforts to revive the idea of international solidarity before its ultimate collapse during the years preceding the second world war (1933–1939).

**SOURCE MATERIAL AND TIMETABLE**

The principal source material for my research is located in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow; the Bundesarchiv (SAPMO-BArch); and the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussicher Kululturbesitz (GStA PK) in Berlin; and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. I have further collected material from the Stasi-archive in Berlin (Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, BStU); the Landesarchiv Berlin; and the

Akademie der Künste in Berlin. The empirical material consists of IAH publications, unpublished protocols from IAH meetings in Moscow, Berlin and on the regional level, extensive correspondence between the IAH’s headquarters and the Comintern, newspaper- and journal clippings, and extensive police reports. Key documents have thus been scanned in both Moscow and Berlin regarding the IAH and its activities in Weimar Germany, but further visits must still be made in order to complete the research. Additional material has been acquired from the Labour Relations Institute in Stockholm (ARAB) and the Labour library and archive in Helsinki.

The financing of my research commenced on 1 January 2008. The immediate task of my research was to begin collecting the empirical material. In February 2008 I visited the Bundesarchiv and in March I made my first visit to the RGASPI in Moscow. From August until December 2008 I made extensive research in Berlin. During my research in Germany I established good contacts with the Institut–Zentrum für Zeitgeschichtliche Forschung (ZZF) in Potsdam, where I visited as a DAAD-scholar. In November 2009 I made my second visit to the RGASPI, which resulted in a significant breakthrough for my research. Between September 2010 and October 2011 I am subscribing to the Comintern Online Archive, which enables a thorough research into the Russian archival material. In order to investigate the significant portion of the source material that is not digitalised and difficultly attainable I will make my third and last visit to Moscow in March 2011. In 2011 I will conclude my research in Berlin.

During the years I have visited several seminars and published national and international articles and working papers on my dissertation. I have so far written four chapters of my dissertation and have received encouraging comments during seminars and sessions. I plan to finish my dissertation in May 2012.

Bibliography


