In Control of Solidarity? Willi Münzenberg, the Workers’ International Relief and League against Imperialism, 1921-1935

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“The Workers’ International Relief have, bearing in mind the fact, tried to make an effort to unite with the powerful and strong force of international solidarity”.

(Willi Münzenberg, 1931)

Willi Münzenberg (1889-1940), German communist and architect of various propaganda operations in Europe during the interwar era, contemplated in 1931 on the ideological strength and practical use of solidarity. The theme of solidarity was frequently used as a thematic thread in Münzenberg’s organisational and political work. Considered as the grand master of establishing different propaganda campaigns, relief actions, and most important, as author and friend of Münzenberg, Arthur Koestler once put it: “[Münzenberg was] the original inventor of a new type of Communist organisation, the camouflaged ‘front’; and the discoverer of a new type of ally: the liberal sympathiser, the progressive fellow-traveller”.

The decomposing body of Münzenberg was found, leaning against a tree with a noose around his neck in the outskirts of Lyon in France, in the fall of 1940. The verdict from French authorities was suicide, paying no further attention to the deceased male. Afterwards, in biographical accounts by individuals engaged in the communist cause and movement during the interwar era, academic research, and publications of a more or less sensationalist

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2 Willi Münzenberg, Solidarität. Zehn Jahre Internationale Arbeiterhilfe 1921-1931, Neuer Deutscher Verlag, Berlin, 1931, 33. The Workers’ International Relief German name is Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH), and in Russian, Mezhdunarodnaia rabochiia pomoshch (acronym: Mezhrabpom).

3 Arthur Koestler, The Invisible Writing, London, 1954, 208. Koestler regarded Münzenberg as the equivalent of Gœbels, main operator and architect of Nazi propaganda. His own attitude on being engaged in the left-wing and communist movement was that “I wanted to live for the Party, not off the Party; I wanted to be an amateur Communist, not a professional” (212). See also David Caute’s informative study The Fellow-Travellers. Intellectual Friends of Communism (Yale University Press, New Haven, revised edition 1988) on the concept of fellow travellers, in which Caute goes into great detail of the “remote control radicalism” developed among intellectuals during the interwar era.

character, discussions on the “true” nature and causes of Münzenberg’s death has developed into a debate causing controversy. The fundamental question was, and still is, did he commit suicide, or was it the German SS, or Soviet NKVD agents who had murdered him? Still today, no satisfying answer can be given. And it will not, I must claim, unless new empirical material surface.

The nerve centre for Münzenberg’s activities sprung out from the Workers’ International Relief (hereon: WIR), an organization founded on Lenin’s initiative in 1921 after a discussion with Münzenberg in Moscow. The majormotif for Lenin was to find a capable individual who could conjure up, and mastermind the organisational task of establishing a relief campaign outside of Soviet Russia’s borders to gather financial aid and moral support to the famine stricken people, and deteriorated state of the Russian society, a socio-political effect brought about as a consequence of the War Communism in Russia 1918-1921. However, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Soviet Russia, the original idea of the WIR ceased to exist. Thus, Münzenberg transformed the entire organization into a vast “Konzeri” (as it was called by its opponents, the social democrats for example), with an intertwined network reaching into philanthropic areas such as strike support, handing out of food, organiser of different “loose” committees and front organizations focusing on anti-colonialism/imperialism, friendship societies, expressions and petitions of solidarity in support of persecuted individuals or groups (if one may be so bold, the WIR can be seen as a forerunner of Amnesty International in this particular context). But, the WIR and Münzenberg were also tied to the organisational structure and apparatus of the Communist International (more known as the Comintern, or the Third International), founded in March 2-6, 1919 at the First International Comintern Congress in Moscow. The goals of the Comintern were of a grandeur character. On the one hand, the promotion of world revolution, and, on the other hand, of a more modest nature, to assist in the establishment of national

5 See for example Tania Schlie/Simone Roche (Hrsg.), Willi Münzenberg: ein deutscher Kommunist im Spannungsfeld zwischen Stalinismus und Antifaschismus (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), or the rather misgiving interpretation of Münzenberg in 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).


7 Several have bought into the idea that Soviet agents were responsible for Münzenberg’s death, drawing inspiration from Georgi Dimitrov’s, Chairman of the Comintern (1935-1943), diary in which the following quote, based on a discussion between Dimitrov and Stalin on November 11, 1937, during the climax of the Great Terror, where Stalin supposedly told that: “Münzenberg is a Trotskyite. If he comes here [Moscow], we’ll certainly arrest him. Try and lure him here” (Ivo Banac [ed.], The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933-1949, Yale University Press, 2003, 69).

sections of the Comintern, that is, communist parties outside of Soviet Russia. Becoming a ‘section of the Comintern’, it was expected for the section to remain true to the political and spiritual vow once taken to participate and obey all of the decisions taken by the central Comintern “party” apparatus in Moscow, guided by the principle of ‘democratic centralism’. After several organisational and ideological transformations inside of the Comintern apparatus, the ‘world Party’ was abolished during the crashing inferno of World War II in 1943.9

Parts of the activities sprung out, being remote controlled from Comintern headquarters in Moscow at a distance were conducted by the mass organizations. The main operative centre for the mass organizations, of which several were administered through the hands of Münzenberg during the interwar era, was located in Berlin, in the zenith of the Weimar Republic, until Hitler and the National Socialists seized power in January 1933. Berlin had turned into a suitable scene where the activity of different mass organizations found fertile individual soil and political sustenance. Friedrichstrasse in Berlin, where the anti-imperialist organization the *League against Imperialism and for National Independence* (more known as LAI, organised and controlled by Münzenberg) had its International Secretariat, was during the 1920s and 1930s a place filled with decadence. In accordance with the spirit introduced during the Weimar era, characterised by its liberalism, modernism and the hunt for pleasurable entertainment of all sorts, Friedrichstrasse represented a microcosm of this social and political culture. The neon lit pavement of Friedrichstrasse hosted a diversity of pornographic treats such as prostitution and burlesque clubs offering fetishism and perversion of all sorts.10 This scenery also offered a milieu for political activism, organizations, and individuals seeking an arena to proceed in their political work. Here, and in the surrounding streets of Friedrichstrasse lived some 5,000 political refugees and students from the Imperial and colonial countries. Many individuals in this group also showed communist and radical tendencies, something German authorities acknowledged and monitored. Another general issue was the failure of Germany in the ‘Great War’, the following harsh treatment caused by Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919 and the dictates imposed on Germany by the League of Nations.11 A decisive act, causing discontent and anger in the

German society that later was used in the propaganda of the mass organizations both on the left and right.

The definite end for the communists and the organisational basis of Comintern activities in Berlin came when the Reichstag was set on fire on the night of February 27, 1933, thus leaving no other option for the communists to flee Germany and of relocating to Paris, or other major European cities.

*The Archival Option and New Empirical Possibilities*

The final collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist system, lasting for 74 years in Russia (1917-1991), not only gave re-birth to the Russian state as a Phoenix rising up from the ashes, but new research possibilities emerged as the archives became accessible for scholars, making no distinction between origin, political conviction or academic speciality. Six years before the Soviet system crashed, historians Branko Lazitch and Milorad M. Drachkovitch, concluded sadly on the archival situation and on the secrecy surrounding the Comintern Archive that “such a frozen situation cannot last and should change to the benefit of open historical research both East and West.”\(^ {12} \) The Comintern Archive belonged to the collections stored at was formerly known as the Central Party Archives during the Soviet period, nowadays it goes under the name of Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-polititcheskoii istorii (in English: Russian State Archive for Social and Political History, acronym: RGASPI).

Where do we stand today? Russian historian Apollon Davidson declared that if we decide to see ‘communism’ as an ideology, as a political, economic and social system, and as a factor in world politics, then, the Soviet version has to be recognised as one of the most “important phenomena of the twentieth century”. And belonging to these phenomena is the Comintern, or as Davidson put it, the Comintern was “without doubt one of the most important global organizations ever to have existed.”\(^ {13} \) With access to source material directly connected to the history of the Comintern in Moscow, a deeper understanding into the

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functions of the organization are now available, thus, one of the goals of deploying this specific empirical material is to facilitate a comprehensive interpretation on the phenomenon.

Other archives utilised by the author in the gathering a ‘genuine picture’ on the dynamics and functions of the system and ideas behind Comintern per se controlled mass organizations, and individuals connected to this organisational scheme, has been the Bundesarchiv SAPMO in Lichterfelde, Berlin, the National Archive in London, Kew (TNA, formerly the Public Records Office), and surprisingly, the Security Police Archive in Stockholm, Sweden, which is deposited at the National Archive in Stockholm.

The aim of the following paper is to present, discuss, and explain the basic idea and function of communist front organizations active in a limited field of solidarity during the interwar era, such as the Comintern used them, but also, to depict the failure and downfall of two specific organizations, the WIR and League against Imperialism and for National Independence (LAI). These two organizations were from the start instigated and controlled by Münzenberg’s own set of organisational structure and networks in Berlin, a condition which over time more and more became relentlessly limited due to several factors. Another motive is to discuss the historiographical picture and perception of the mass organizations, active in the field of limited solidarities, and how these left-wing movements have been considered as failures, and to present plausible factors which have contributed to this understanding. The main working hypothesis is that the mass organizations, here represented by the WIR and LAI, acted as hubs and centres for various activities (political, organisational, and individual) connected to solidarity, relief action, philanthropic initiatives, and by doing so, the organizations attempted to become nerve centres for different networks of both an individual and institutional character.

The paper may not, and does not either intend to, cover all aspects and facts concerning the WIR and LAI; however, that is not the point. Instead, it is of greatest concern to discuss why organizations as the above mentioned have so far received only marginal attention, even though the interwar era was filled with activities of non-party organizations, especially left-wing and radical mass movements, propagating sometimes utopian concepts and aspirations. The interwar era was wide open to new, unforeseen opportunities for action and inspiration, but also bitter critique. Much of it had found inspiration after the ‘Great War’, which indicated a change in the global community that was not by any means clear or visible.
The Unfinished Picture – The Insight into Communist Mass Organizations

“The world at large, … usually gets its first glimpse of a totalitarian movement through its front organizations”.

Hannah Arendt’s classic study of totalitarianism, published and based on experiences drawn after World War II, does not fail to comment on the idea of the communist front organization and the practical use of them. But, Arendt focused only on the power of propaganda and the latent threat of totalitarian regimes in their deployment of various mass organizations, instead of focusing on the inner dynamics of such organizations. Research into the functions and purpose of the mass organizations created by the Comintern has so far only accumulated a meagre, and in fact, a rather superficial picture. That is about to change, as mentioned above, due to the fact that empirical material has become available for analytical research and critical analysis. This archival possibility therefore makes it essential to move away from, as Eric D. Weitz remarked, only with the “great outpouring of rich empirical studies,” together with few new questions or approaches to the history of communism. Of utmost relevance I must argue, while studying and analysing the functions of the mass organizations, is to move away from the picture of uniformity and failure, instead, one has to take into account the ‘inside’ perspective of the mass organizations, that is, the experiences of different strategies and policies and how the individuals engaged in the political and organisational work coped with their situation.

The academic community has in general considered mass organizations as the WIR merely as curious items, concluding that such organizations only acted as pawns or instruments for either the national sections/communist parties, or for Bolshevik foreign policy interests. These two assumptions are of course not untrue, however, and which the academic community often has missed out on, the mass organizations often had their own set of agendas and networks, reaching further outside than the ones constructed and maintained in the practical (political and organisational) relation between the mass organization and, as in

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14 Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990. From Popular Protests to Socialist State*, Princeton University Press, 1997, 12. What Weitz has in mind was the first wave of published research results immediately after the archives in Russia and Germany were opened.

this case, Comintern headquarters in Moscow. Further, the relations between the mass organizations and Moscow were from time to time rather insecure, tense, and being on the verge of conflict. On the contrary, the relation between the national sections and Moscow were rather static. The networks of the mass organizations have so far been concealed and hidden, considered as unknown. Adding argumentation to this analytical and theoretical approach, political scientist Gregory J. Kasza claims that the practice of treating administered mass organizations as weak interest groups or abortive political parties “obscures their true character.”

If communist governed mass organizations are neglected in the process of filling in of the ‘blank spots’ of conventional communist history, the risk is of having a somewhat warped and unfinished picture. With the enrichment of new research possibilities, and methodological pluralism drawing inspiration from social history, social anthropology, social movements’ theory, the study of communist mentalities, and a variety of models derived from political science the ultimate goal is to create a “genuine historicisation” of the Comintern and its intertwined subjects (political – organisation – individuals). It is from this interpretative platform the following analysis, and character of this paper, concerning the WIR and other mass organizations administered via the hands of Münzenberg and the use of limited solidarity as a concept stands on.

The Concept and Context of Solidarity in Communist Mass Organizations

To join a communist party or organization during the Comintern era was an individual decision recollects historian Eric J. Hobsbawm on his engagement in the communist movement in the 1930s in his autobiography *Interesting Times*, and further, it was renowned as life-changing. Hobsbawm also categorised that the interwar era (1919-1939) as belonging to the “era of catastrophe,” a fitting metaphor and limitation in time for an era, but also for a society characterised by confusion, intolerance, and general socio-political unrest. In this societal mix, there was space for organizations which either were devoted to the idea of solidarity, or utilised the idea of solidarity within limited borders.

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More precise, humanitarian and solidarity movements found fertile soil in the social and political milieu of the interwar era. The ending of World War I in 1918, the formation of the League of Nations and the results of the Versailles Peace Treaty signed June 28, 1919, and in particular its treatment of Germany, the Russian revolution and the Bolsheviks seizing power in November 1917, together with a sense of general unrest and uncertainty (unemployment, the fragile state of the parliamentary system in several countries, revolutionary attempts in Germany, Hungary, etc.) in the European countries left room for organizations seeking to establish links and networks of solidarity. In detail, the aftermath of World War I motivated a remarkable expansion in the number of international organizations, some of which had nothing in common with the League of Nations.20 The left-wing solidarity movement of this time drew its energy in the possible dichotomy which could be described as ‘what should be done, and what could be done’, in the utopian aspiration of creating a ‘new’ society. However, actors as the WIR limited itself to certain arenas of solidarity, focusing on relief actions, or arranging political rallies in support of subjected regions undergoing conflict (for example China and Syria in 1925). Grey emissary of the Comintern, Finnish communist Otto W. Kuusinen, explained in Moscow in May, 1926, the key intention of creating and supporting mass organizations was that “various forms of mass organizations must be applied for special purposes … the WIR [has] developed as independent non-Party organization, and which today embrace broad masses.”21 The communist utopianism of the 1920s and 1930s, which assisted in shaping the idea and use of solidarity in a mass organization as the WIR, can, if we utilise Hobsbawm’s distinction, be distinguished as three elements: Marxism, internationalism, and tragedy.22 Connected to the last element, one can add failure.

Who is Willi Münzenberg? – A Short Biographical Outline

Willi Münzenberg was born in 1889 in the German town Erfurt. Quite early, Münzenberg associated himself with socialism and the labour movement after becoming a worker at a shoe factory in 1904, living and identifying himself on the living standards as outlined by the scanty life of a proletarian youth. Over the course of the years leading up to World War I in 1914, and with its ending in 1918, Münzenberg had travelled from being a militant socialist

youth to becoming a master of organisation, and pacifist by character (a crucial ideological decision regarding the shape of his future political career), developed ties of friendship with Lenin and other Russian émigrés while living in Zurich in Switzerland (1910-1918). Swiss authorities deported Münzenberg back to Germany with the ending of World War I, in November 1918, under the argument that he was a “dangerous foreign agitator”. Arriving in Germany, with close connections to Lenin and the Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia, Münzenberg was not considered as a mere disciple, on the contrary, the former Russian émigrés constellation respected him due to his organisational skills and ability as a leader. Acting as founder and leader of the Communist Youth International (KIM) in November 1919, Münzenberg travelled for the first time to Moscow in 1920 to attend the Second International Congress of the Comintern. The journeys to Moscow would be frequent up until his last journey in October 1936. The WIR was founded in August 1921, and on February 1922 the Executive Committee of the Comintern received the first report on international activity of the WIR. Berlin was Münzenberg’s main operative centre, where several of the activities instigated and managed through his hands functioned as a geographical hub for a variety of movements either officially or unofficially connected to the WIR (League against Imperialism, the Friends of Soviet Union, publishing, movie distribution etc.). In 1924, he became M.d.R. (deputy of the German Reichstag) for the Communist Party of Germany, more known as KPD, a position Münzenberg would hold until 1933. After the Reichstag Fire in 1933, Münzenberg escaped to Paris and continued his vein of profession, mainly organising relief and protest committees (Relief Committee for the Victims of Fascism, Committee for the Aid of the Spanish People, etc.). Münzenberg was also active in the work of the Central Committee of the KPD (CC KPD), the nerve centre for communist activity in Germany, in which fractional work often was conjured up, something Münzenberg tried to avoid as long as possible. Being in Paris however, the fractional work finally led to that Münzenberg was in a precarious position, and in 1937 relations with both the CC KPD and Comintern headquarters had reached a dead end. So, in 1938 he was expelled from the émigré CC KPD (residing in Prague), and later, the Comintern. No longer an actor inside of the Comintern, Münzenberg however continued political activity and published in 1939 what would be his last political adventure, the weekly newspaper *Die Zukunft* (in English: *The Future*). With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, German communists and other foreign elements residing in France were interned, and as Germany invaded France in June 1940, the internment camps were
dissolved. Later in the fall same year, the decomposing body of Münzenberg was found, leaning against a tree with a noose around his neck.23

Two Limited Solidarity Movements – The WIR and LAI

Münzenberg expressed, filled with enthusiasm, on February 21, 1927, that time was ripe to establish a large organization, and for the organization to “remain in our hands”. The organization Münzenberg was referring to was the LAI, and the enthusiastic message was intended for the Comintern Secretariat in Moscow.24 I shall turn my attention to the LAI later on in this section, but, it is valuable already here to pay attention to the message of control which Münzenberg uttered back to Moscow. Speaking of solidarity, the founding congress of the LAI in February 10-15, 1927, in Brussels, Belgium at Palais Egmont, Sen Katayama, Comintern agent and Japanese communist attending the congress, concluded in a report that the event “are great steps toward the international solidarity between the oppressed and oppressing nationalities.”25 However, returning to the original intention with these two movements; under what purpose did they function? Contributed the limited field of operation and activity to their downfall, or can other factors be distinguished?

“The International Solidarity of the Revolutionary Proletariat”26 – The WIR, 1921-1935

In the fall of 1926, WIR had existed for five years. The occasion needed to be celebrated, therefore was among many things a book published, Fünf Jahre Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, in which positive results were collected and presented. Filled with statistics on total number of members, money collected for various campaigns and relief actions, statute of the WIR, lists of WIR publications, and greetings from different individuals such as authors Ernst Toller and Henri Barbusse, Professor Albert Einstein, labour unionist Edo Fimmen, Lenin, and Left-wing figurehead Clara Zetkin to name a few, it gives the impression of a unified mass organization


24 Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (hereon after RGASPI) 542/1/7, pp.120-123, Letter from Willi Münzenberg in Berlin to the Comintern Secretariat in Moscow, 21/2-1927.

25 RGASPI 542/1/7, 131-132, Confidential letter from Sen Katayama to Comrade Petrof/Petrov [F. Raskolnikov] in Moscow 24/2-1927.

26 Willi Münzenberg, Fünf Jahre Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, Berlin, 1926, 5. Quote by Lenin, unknown date, but used as introduction in Münzenberg’s book which celebrated the 5th anniversary of WIR’s existence as international relief and solidarity movement.
which was active in several socio-political fields. Moving ahead, in September 1935, the WIR was abolished after a decision taken in Moscow at the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI), with many of the WIR’s functions transferred into other organisational bodies of the Comintern, such as the International Red Aid (IRA, Russian acronym: MOPR). The decision to abolish the WIR was considered as a righteous decision inside of the Comintern, where Münzenberg and his pet organization had several opponents, especially German communists, for example Walter Ulbricht, Wilhelm Pieck and others engaged in the IRA.

As mentioned earlier, the organisational structure and political activities of the WIR has scarcely been treated and thoroughly investigated by scholars so far. Instead, focus has been set on the relations between the national sections of the Comintern, that is, the communist parties, and with Comintern headquarters in Moscow. Thus, a centre – periphery interpretative model and consensus in the Comintern research paradigm has emerged as a fairly dominating feature.

Turning back attention to a general presentation of the life and decline of the WIR, it rather quick establishes the fact that any analysis on the WIR creates the character of conducting pioneer work, almost like conducting a method of cut and paste. Yet, what changes and ambitions can be traced in the activities of the WIR during its duration as a forerunner of solidarity movements? Since no previous scholarly attempts has been made to put a chronological description on any clear phases of the WIR, we have to rely on Münzenberg’s own description in his book Solidarität (Berlin, 1931), and sources extracted from the archives in Moscow and Berlin. This tentative periodization aims at a general illustration on both the time span and processes of transformation of the WIR:

1921-1924: Official establishment in Berlin, August 12, 1921. Consisting of ‘loose’ committees, organizer of support and relief actions mainly for the starving people in Soviet Russia and victims of the earthquake in Japan, receivers of aid were workers and peasants’.

1924-1929: Provider of financial and material (food and clothes) support to the mass strike movements in China, England (the Great Mine Strike 1926), Germany (soup kitchens in Berlin and other German cities), USA, and on. Construction of a sophisticated propaganda apparat/organization, and acting out from a philanthropic platform in its activities. Performing

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27 Münzenberg 1926.
29 Documents extracted from personal files of for example Pieck and Gyptner stored at the BArch SAPMO archive in Berlin verified the picture of animosity between Münzenberg and the above mentioned individuals.
as go-between, or instigator, of several committees and front organizations in the role of being “silent partner”; for example the committees *Hands Off China, Against the Cruelties in Syria*, and the anti-imperialist organization LAI, thus becoming a connective hub/central for individuals and organizations with left-wing leanings or aspirations, but also, being a builder of several solidarity networks of its own.

**1929-1933:** Main task; to support struggling workers’ with financial and material means, with the ambition to become an authentic social political mass organization with a large international following. The Reichstag Fire in Berlin on February 27, 1933 put a sudden halt to the activities in Berlin and at IAH headquarters; however, the organization relocated its headquarters to Paris.

**1933-1935:** *The Paris years*’ focused on being active in different fields of solidarity, that is, mainly within the socio-political field (providing aid to children in the form of summer colonies, distribution of food, health assistance, supplying medicine). During these tentative phases there was a latent tension in the relation with Comintern headquarters in Moscow, a situation which increased over time until the dissolution in 1935. For example, the WIR was instructed in 1927 by the Agitprop [Agitation and Propaganda] Department of the Comintern that the agitation of the mass organizations should go through the appropriate Party organ, and more essential, Moscow regarded that there was a lack of internal control concerning the work of the WIR. An explanation for this problem, according to Moscow, was that the WIR and the *International Red Aid* acted as rivals on the same arena of solidarity directed towards the labour movement. A few years later, in 1931, the Agitprop Department were still not satisfied with the development of the WIR. On June 17, based on a report by Münzenberg himself, Agitprop concluded that WIR now had to become a “real” mass organization through the means of increased agitation and organization, and to find “new bases for solidarity activities” by organising and educating proletarian wives, the youth and children. However, in the eyes of Comintern and with the stifling milieu in the Soviet society, speaking in terms of both political and social conditions (Stalinization, Five-Year Plan Economy, forced collectivization, industrialization), the WIR all the more turned into a difficult subject to master completely, mainly because it was in the hands of Münzenberg in Berlin. However, this would change after the Reichstag Fire in Berlin February 27. September 11 same year, the ECCI Secretariat in Moscow brought forward a confidential resolution on

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30 RGASPI 495/30/320, 36-39, Notizen zum Bericht über die Agitproparbeit in Deutschland, year: 1927.
31 RGASPI 495/30/715, 7-10, "Resolution zum Bericht des Genossen Muenzenberg ueber die Arbeit der IAH in der Beratung der Agitprop des EKKI", 17/6-1931.
the “immediate tasks of the WIR”, in which it became obvious that the WIR now had no other choice than to adjust and act within the limits set by the decisions adopted by the Political Commission of the Comintern, and for the work to be controlled by the national sections/communist parties.  

The final blow to the WIR was delivered in September 1935. Georgi Dimitrov, Bulgarian communist and Chairman of the Comintern, had a meeting at the ECCI Secretariat where the future of the WIR was discussed. It was agreed upon that the functions of the WIR should be infused into “practical mass solidarity work”, and adjusted after the new general line of the Comintern, the “Peoples’ Front against Fascism” (more known as the “Popular Front”), and for the organisational structure to be abolished. The decision was never officially published. Thus, the first step leading into obscurity concerning the WIR’s organisational and historical heritage was taken.

“We are no Visionaries or Utopian Dreamers” – The League against Imperialism, 1927-1933

The LAI was founded at the First International Congress in Support of the Oppressed Colonial Peoples in Brussels, February 10-15, 1927. Total numbers of participators were 174 delegates, representing 104 organizations in Europe and the colonies. The purpose of creating the LAI was from the beginning two-folded. The official line was to create an “permanent fighting” non-party organization, consisting of intellectuals, pacifists, left-wing radicals and organizations, all in support of the oppressed peoples in the colonies, demanding the liberation of the colonial world under the principles of national self determination, a formula designed by the President of the USA, Woodrow Wilson, and established at the Peace Treaty negotiations of the League of Nations in Versailles, France in 1919. The other side of the coin was the doctrine dictated at Comintern headquarters in May 1926, in which the agenda makers argued that the LAI ought to “act as a neutral intermediary between the Communist International and nationalist movements in the colonies.” The LAI was although not the first organization or committee established under the auspices of Münzenberg and the WIR,

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32 RGASPI 495/4/258, 223-227, Confidential resolution on IAH’s future tasks by ECCI Secretariat (English version), 11/9-1933.
33 BArch SAPMO, NY 4080, Bestand: Richard Gыйptner, 174-188, Typewritten manuscript by Richard Gыйptner, March 1964.
34 RGASPI 542/1/69, 45a, Manuscript of Willi Münzenberg’s speech at the Brussels Congress, 15/2-1927. The quote shall also be included by the author in the title of the dissertation on the network of the League against Imperialism: “We are no Visionaries or Utopian Dreamers” – The Network of the Axis League against Imperialism, Comintern and the Anti-imperialist Struggle, 1924-1933.
35 RGASPI 542/1/3, 10-11, Confidential letter from ECCI Secretariat in Moscow to Münzenberg, 29/5-1926.
reaching out a hand of solidarity to the people in the colonies. On the contrary, Münzenberg had since the beginning of 1925 started to shift focus for the WIR, turning his attention to the philanthropic arena. This shift was also registered by the German authorities who concluded that something was underway as Münzenberg at one stage had transferred money to the Communist Party in France (CPF) to be utilised exclusively for colonial propaganda.  

Leading up to the foundation of the LAI in February 1927, other committees and organizations such as *Hands Off China* (1925), *Against the Cruelties in Syria* (1925), *Action Committee against the Imperialist Colonial Policy* (1926), *League against Colonial Oppression* (1926), acted as forerunners of establishing a world wide covering network of anti-imperialist activists. Immediately after the Brussels congress, Münzenberg and other individuals (for example Indian nationalist V. Chattophadyaya, executed in Moscow September 1937, and Hungarian Comintern agent Louis Gibarti) at the International Secretariat of the LAI in Berlin began organisational and political activity, seeking to set up secure links of communication on an international scale. In addition, the LAI was cut off from the WIR’s organisational structure, which was of utmost relevance.  

During the first period of the LAI, individuals such as Jawaharlal Nehru (later India’s first Prime minister), Indonesian nationalist Mohammad Hatta, Mexican painter Diego Rivera, author Upton Sinclair, and Professor Albert Einstein (acting as Honorary President), to name a few, were active in the League. With the advent of the Sixth International Comintern Congress in the summer of 1928, Kuusinen delivered the theses on the national question and the colonies, marking a shift in Comintern policy towards the colonial and national liberation struggle, which now put in favour the rejection of collaboration with national reformist groups, and instead, a class against class policy was encouraged. The effects of Kuusinen’s theses on the LAI would, only a year after, at the Second International Congress of the LAI in Frankfurt am Main in Germany on June 20-31, 1929, manifest themselves in practice. Chiefly, with Kuusinen’s theses, the whole organisational and political structure of the LAI was set in motion as it on the one hand questioned the LAI’s role as a non-party interest group, acting in the interest of its members. On the other hand, the LAI was somehow forced to listen to the message sent out from Moscow. Thus, a seed of conflict was sown in the  

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36. TNA, PRO GFM Berlin 30.3.25, Secret report to German General Consulate in Antwerp from the German Foreign Office, Berlin, 30/3-1925.  
37. Examination of the sources in the Comintern Archive supports this hypothesis based on two assumptions. First, the LAI has their own catalogue (fond 542), which by analysing the documents stored there, mainly start with the Brussels congress in 1927. Secondly, the WIR catalogue (fond 538) contains a lot of material dealing with organising, establishment of the “colonial project”, and planning of the Brussels congress. Any material dealing explicitly with the LAI after February 1927 does not specifically occur in the WIR files.
relation between Berlin and Moscow. The Frankfurt Congress turned into a scene for arguments and aggressive slander, mainly conducted by the Russian delegation of the *Red Trade Union International* (RILU, or Profintern),\(^{38}\) against socialists, national reformist groups, and intellectuals participating at the congress. The main argument pursued by the Russian delegation was the weak and passive activity conducted so far by all of the above mentioned groups in the “active struggle” for national liberation. In short, the Frankfurt Congress was a failure of a grandeur character, shaking the whole anti-imperialist foundation and network of the LAI, and ultimately destroying several of the networks. But it was not the end, as Sean McMeekin wrongly has claimed in his biography on Münzenberg.\(^{39}\) On the contrary, a process of transformation of the LAI awaited, in which Comintern headquarters partly questioned the degree of efficiency at the LAI Secretariat in Berlin, and partly, intended to seize total and final control of the LAI’s political agenda, and most relevant, the organizational work of the organization.\(^{40}\) The ranks of the LAI, for example the Executive Committee, were purged of unwanted elements, or simply, several of them chose to leave the LAI on their own premises. Indonesian nationalist and member of the Executive Committee, Mohammad Hatta, frankly stated in an article later in 1929 that the LAI seemed to be undergoing a “purification process”, which meant the elimination of all “white, non-communist elements” in the LAI.\(^{41}\) Hatta’s article on the other hand served as an excuse for him to be expelled from the LAI. 1930 was filled with organisational turmoil, general unrest and confusion inside of the LAI, facing the unavoidable fact that a major re-organisation was at hand in order to keep the LAI alive. On September 1 same year, a hearing was conducted by Czechoslovakian communist and Comintern functionary, Bohumir Smeral in Moscow at Hotel Lux (a hotel which hosted foreign communists either visiting or living in Moscow). Smeral reported on September 13 on the future prospects of the LAI, thus suggesting two areas of activity for the organization: first, to become a genuine Comintern cover

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\(^{38}\) The purpose with RILU/Profintern (Russian acronym) was to “organize the working masses of the world for the overthrow of capitalism” (Lazitch 1986, xxx). See also Reiner Tosstorff’s *Profintern. Die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale 1920-1937* (Paderborn, 2004).

\(^{39}\) McMeekin 2003, 208, 348. The only reason given by McMeekin in explaining the dissolution of the LAI in 1929 was that the journal, *The Anti-Imperialist Review* (organ of the LAI), ceased to exist same year. McMeekin has by the way, “borrowed” the title for his book on Münzenberg, *The Red Millionarie*, from Gross biography on his husband where the subtitle “Der Rote Millionär” (Gross 1967, 210) is featured.

\(^{40}\) RGASPI, 495/20/722, 100-105, Confidential, DRAFT RESOLUTIONS ON RESULTS OF THE II WORLD CONGRESS OF THE LAI AND ITS DIRECT IMMEDIATE TASKS, Passed by the Eastern Secretariat on 27/8-1929; RGASPI 495/3/120, 1, Protokoll Nr.51 von der Sitzung des Politsekretariats des EKKI, 2/9-1929.

\(^{41}\) Mohammad Hatta, “A retrospective account of the Second Congress of the League against Imperialism and for National Independence held in Frankfurt”, in: *Portrait of a Patriot*, The Hague, 1972, 200-204. The article was originally published in *Indonesia Merdeka* (1929).
Concretely, from Comintern’s point of view, the LAI was from now on to act as a hub for the anti-imperialist struggle and for individuals engaged in this movement, thus, becoming a pure network actor which should re-direct any interested individual in the “right direction” and facilitate the proper connections. And while at it, try to act and pose as a neutral non-party organization. This implied that the LAI in fact did not have to pursue any “concrete” political work; on the contrary, major focus was to act as an instigator of different anti-imperialist networks.

In short, the LAI maintained its activity in Berlin up until February 1933. With the Reichstag Fire on February 27, the anti-imperialist network and the organisational structure was instantly shredded to pieces, much due to the fact that the communists had to flee Germany. Attempts were made to re-construct the work of the LAI in Paris, but as Münzenberg himself put it in a letter to Edwin Magyar, Hungarian and Comintern functionary, on June 8: “The energy is gone, time is up.”

In Moscow it was decided a week later on June 15 that all authority and activity of the LAI and its International Secretariat was to be transferred to the Secretary of the British Section of the LAI, English socialist Reginald Bridgeman and long time companion to Münzenberg, in London. The move to London indicated that the Comintern no longer was in total control of the organization. Was the LAI a failure then, and was it the limited arena of engagement that causing it to collapse?

Failure: Its Implications on the Perception and Writing of History

The victorious side always get to write the history. This is not an astonishing fact, but, should the historiography as decided by the victor be considered as the most accurate and fair depiction of certain events? However, can a winner be distinguished in this story, and was the WIR and LAI road to failure unavoidable? If we focus on how mass organizations, and in fact, the entire historical heritage of the Comintern was perceived after its demise, using the prism of ‘failure’, the picture was rather single-minded, depicting the Comintern as an highly

42 RGASPI 495/4/52, 12-42, Smeral’s report on the LAI (with corrections in the report) to the Political Commission 13/9-1930.
43 Fredrik Petersson, “The League against Imperialism: The Most Valuable Organizational Tool for Bolshevik Propaganda in the “Imperialist” and Colonial World during the Interwar Era?, in The International Newsletter of Communist Studies, No.20, Cologne, 2007. See also forthcoming study by Professor Holger Weiss on African nationalists and their affiliation with the Comintern for a further discussion on the intertwined networks. As the analysing of the empirical material, and writing of the thesis manuscript gradually progress, a more “sophisticated” interpretation on this angle is going to be made by the author.
44 RGASPI 542/1/59, 45, Letter from Münzenberg in Paris to Ludwig Magyar in Moscow, 8/6-1933.
45 RGASPI 495/4/250, 15-16, Protokoll (B) Nr.318 der Sitzung der Politkommission des Pol.Sekr.EKKI, 15/6-1933.
centralized organization consisting of an “inhuman character” of educated communists perceived as a “secret army of intelligent and courageous robots”, unable to reach the ultimate goal; world revolution. The mass organizations only amounted to “nostalgic recollections of intellectuals and others”. These views are rather representative of the Cold War School interpretation on the Comintern and its intertwined apparatus.

In the 1960s other interpretations on the failure of the Comintern was put forward. Historian Jane Degras, in the three volume narrative and documentary work *The Communist International 1919-1943, Documents (Volume I-III)*, posed the question: What, after all, did the Comintern amount to? Degras argued that “this is … an irrelevant question”, instead, one should take into account factors such as the foundation of the Comintern was a misreading of conditions, it sudden demise was embarrassing. But looking from a larger perspective, the Russian revolution was an “epochal event”, and the history of the Comintern is “inseparable from Soviet history,” or as it should be understood today, from Russian history. Drachkovitch extended Degras view, arguing that the Comintern:

Had a life of its own, and was to a large extent conditioned by the historical and socio-political environment in which it was born … [Comintern] was established as complete departure from the Second International … But before the [Comintern] could become what it became, the cataclysm of World War I had to shatter every foundation of the pre-1914 European order, … Lenin’s creation was one of the typical consequences of the totally new postwar world … Still, if Lenin execrated the Second International for its failures … his own International did not fare much better.  

Political scientist Stefan T. Possony further elaborated on the issue of what the Comintern *de facto* amounted to, concluding that the Comintern “served” the world revolution well. How come? Possony’s argued that never before had the world “experienced strategy so astute and complex,” together with operational concepts “executed with greater skill and more cynicism”.  

One major factor previously mentioned, which has resolutely changed how the mass organizations can be interpreted and analysed, active in the field of limited solidarities, and

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considered afterwards by the scholarly world as failures, was the opening up of the Comintern Archive (RGASPI) in Moscow in 1991. Another factor is the methodological approach, which in a second step unavoidably leads to new analytical frameworks. Comintern historian Kevin McDermott although claim from an archival perspective that:

The Comintern Archive is thus an indispensable source, but in the final analysis it is one among many. It must be supplemented by other sources, including the voluminous secondary literature, must of which does not rely on Russian archival material.\(^{50}\)

Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe discussed the new research possibilities of understanding the inner dynamics (political, organisational, and individual) of the Comintern, claiming that it is necessary to break from “stereotypes and fixed models to broaden and deepen our understanding of the nature of the Comintern.”\(^{51}\) Adding to Rees and Thorpe’s argument, the opportunity has come to analyse how Comintern approached and politically used themes such as anti-colonialism, cultural activities, gender, sport, relief support, and finally, the concept of solidarity. To illustrate the \textit{a priori} established view on organizations as the WIR and LAI, it is proper to use acknowledged historian E. H. Carr’s perception of mass/front organizations in \textit{The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935}, where Carr simply concluded that the:

Fronts of the nineteen-twenties fell short of their purpose because no aim propounded by them was powerful enough in the long run to overcome the contradictions inherent in the original conception; they were unmasked sooner or later as no more than agencies to promote the cause of communist revolution.\(^{52}\)

Does Carr’s conclusion consequently put an end to the discussion on how to evaluate and understand mass organizations, active in the field of limited solidarities, and considered as failures? No, I must argue. Already in 1960 sociologist Philip Selznick argued that ‘peripheral’ organizations are useful in mobilizing many persons for different causes. Further, once a network has been established, new ones can be created ‘with ease’. Thus, such a \textit{modus operandi} facilitated, as Selznick put it, a “disciplined non-party organizational network.”\(^{53}\)


The basis for the WIR was to create a system of various networks, each separated officially, but unofficially intertwined with each other. So to speak, to develop itself into an umbrella organization and hub for solidarity movements, something which the WIR actually at one stage in fact represented during the interwar era.

**The East German Example**

Factors aiding in putting movements of solidarities in the corner of failure could either be feelings of discomfort, controversy, or just by forcing the agenda makers to ‘forget’ the true nature of organizations as WIR and LAI. In East Germany, as time was ripe for the ‘old guard’, that is, German communists once active in the KPD in the 1920s and 1930s, to write down their Party history the whole process developed itself into a difficult procedure. Historian Catherine Epstein pondered on the issue of ‘politics of biography’, and how it was used in East Germany by party authorities to distort biographical facts enclosed in personnel or other files in order to slander certain groups of veteran communists, or for that matter, mass organizations. As experienced by the author himself during a week of work at the Bundesarchiv SAPMO in Berlin, summer 2006, several examples of ‘distortion’ of facts became evident. For example, various manuscripts contained a lot of descriptions on Münzenberg, the WIR, and its position in the Comintern. Former functionary and agent in the Comintern, German Richard Gyptner, wrote in March 1964 a draft for an article on the WIR (whether or not published has not been verified), where in great detail the role of WIR and Münzenberg was interpreted and described. However, in May, 1964, another author by the name Kurt Finker published the article “Aus dem Kampf der Internationalen Arbeiterhilfe in Deutschland” in Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, theoretical party organ for the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), and part of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. The article contained no reference to Münzenberg whatsoever, or any of the information which quite obviously was discussed and put on paper in the inner circles of the SED concerning how to treat the sensitive issue of the WIR. This variant of distortion has contributed in establishing a general perception of failure concerning the WIR.

**What are the Lessons of Limited, or for that matter, Failed Solidarities?**

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The historical heritage of the WIR and LAI is hard to distinguish. Whether or not a failure in itself, that is, the fact that the organizations simply did not make it should act as the deciding factor is irrelevant. For example, the Afro-Asian Conference of Bandung in Indonesia, April 18-24, 1955, which was the first gathering of nations still questioning the yoke of colonialism after World War II, highlighted the historical event when the LAI was founded in Brussels 1927, referring to it as the ‘First Bandung’.\(^{55}\) Another actor, active in the LAI, the Indonesian Mohammad Hatta, wondered in August 1945 as the turmoil of the World War II started to wind down what had happened with all of his ‘old comrades’, active both in the LAI and in the field of solidarity.\(^{56}\) German editor and historian Til Schulz argued in 1972 that the WIR in fact could be regarded as a ‘model’ for any labour movement, attempting to gather support in the vein of solidarity. Practical methods of expressing solidarity, organised by the WIR, was realised for example through the arranging of congresses, petitions of all sorts (political rallies, distribution of flyers and pamphlets), thus, expressions of solidarity were primarily of a verbal character aiming to influence both groups and individuals.\(^{57}\)

Generally speaking, mass organizations as the WIR and LAI without a doubt left some form of heritage, and in a longer perspective, provided with knowledge which actors could draw experience and learn from. On several levels, the ‘failure’ of the WIR and LAI surely passed on administrative skills to previous engaged members; it gave individuals experience in, as Gregory J. Kasza once concluded on the legacy of mass organizations, “scheduling activities, making out budgets, holding meetings, and applying rules,” which in the long run may be long-lasting enough to cover their entire lives. Nonetheless, and as Kasza reflect upon, there do not exist a specific system or general theory which can evaluate the long-term impact of mass organizations, instead, their legacy depends on the particular agenda they promoted. Further, the extent and manner of dissolution brought about on any organization cast a long lasting shadow on its memory.\(^{58}\) Both the WIR and LAI had for sure no ‘happy ending’.

Apart from Kasza’s conclusions, the legacy and lessons of the WIR and LAI can be summarized in two specific issues. First, the foundation on which the two organizations acted out from was to create various networks, reaching both institutions and individuals. This method of organising political activity and individual links of communication into a

\(^{58}\) Kasza 1995, 183-188.
sophisticated intertwined network was fine tuned and mastered by Münzenberg. Outside and inside factors such as internal conflict, ambitions for power within the Comintern apparatus, hostility and suspicion from authorities (which is no surprise since Münzenberg’s activities were considered as ‘subversive’ by German authorities at the time) and political opponents, the shift of power as the Nazis seized ultimate power, expulsion and internal isolation, and limited finances were some of the factors which assisted in bringing down the creations of Münzenberg, but the strength of some his networks managed to live on by themselves. Secondly, the socio-political work of the WIR and LAI could also be regarded as acting as forerunners of the modern NGO (Amnesty International and other interest groups), and especially in how different fields of solidarity were covered in their organisational and political work.

The lesson of the failed solidarity movements/mass organizations as described and discussed in this text is hard to come to grips with I must argue. Why? If we are seeking quantitative results, measuring the degree of success by registering number of members, political success, geographical spread and long-lasting continuity, the answer is rather poor. Instead, it is from a qualitative approach any form of lessons can be drawn, for example the degree of success (if that is necessary). The lesson drawn from the WIR and LAI is that the two of them were prime examples of their era, the interwar era, in which the two of them found a scene to attract individuals willing to participate and support their idea of solidarity, and with the construction of networks. This group of left-wing sympathisers, pacifists, radicals and intellectuals found a haven during this period of societal unrest in the non-party character of the WIR and LAI. After World War II, the international scene for promoting and pursuing acts of solidarity had again been altered.

In conclusion, then, literary critic and author Michael Scammell argues that the “very diversity of opinion” of Münzenberg, hints that “we have not heard the last of this complex and fascinating figure.” While examining the sources extracted from different archives, the picture becomes more and more complex and fascinating concerning both Münzenberg as a character, but also the intertwined structure and purpose of the mass organizations. Scammell indirectly pose the question “who was Münzenberg?” The question still haunts oneself while trying to draw out the complex nature of Münzenberg and the mass organizations out from the shadows of history.

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