"Hauptgefahr jetzt nicht Trotzkismus, sondern Münzenberg" – East German Uses of Remembrance and the Contentious Case of Willi Münzenberg

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Introduction

On 17 October 1940 the remains of an adult male were found in the forest of Le Caugnet in the vicinity of the small French village of Montagne about 200 km north of Marseille. Apparently the carcass was the decomposing remains of the communist, pacifist and propagandist Wilhelm "Willi" Münzenberg (1889–1940), who nearly four months earlier under mysterious circumstances had passed away. In a sense, the callous image of Münzenberg’s festered body represented the inglorious end of the ‘classical era’ of working class internationalism, as in conjunction with the remains of Münzenberg two decades of his ceaseless struggle for international solidarity, communism and anti-fascism was deteriorating.

Münzenberg had been active for the international communist movement since the First World War and had been deeply engaged in the activities of the international and German radical left. However, during the second half of the 1930s Münzenberg had slowly diverted from the totalitarian rule of the Soviet Union and was subsequently excluded between 1937 and 1938 from the German Communist Party (KPD) and the Communist International (Comintern). Münzenberg was officially condemned a traitor, a deviator untrue to the dogma of Marxism-Leninism. In bitter resistance, Münzenberg acrimoniously declared that he was not willing to accept his expulsion from the communist movement without a struggle, and in

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1 The working paper was presented in a slightly amended form at the research seminar Kommunismus und Gesellschaft at the Institut-Zentrum für Zeitgeschichtliche Forschung on 7th December 2010 in Potsdam, Germany. It is based on my forthcoming doctoral dissertation: The Revival of International Solidarity. The Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, Willi Münzenberg and the Comintern in Weimar Germany, 1921–1933 (Åbo Akademi University, Finland). Contact: kasper.brasken@abo.fi.

2 According to the report by the Gendarmerie National that was based in St. Marcellin, Münzenberg’s body was found about one kilometer north of Montagne (Isère) at the edge of a forest road. The report is reproduced in a German translation in Harald Wessel, Münzenbergs Ende. Ein deutscher Kommunist im Widerstand gegen Hitler und Stalin. Die Jahren 1933 bis 1940 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1991), 399–405.

3 Münzenberg’s death has been a question of great controversy and speculation. See further: Wessel, Münzenbergs Ende. Ein deutscher Kommunist im Widerstand gegen Hitler und Stalin. Die Jahren 1933 bis 1940, 218–245; and Sean McMeekin, The red millionaire. A political biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s secret propaganda tsar in the west (London: Yale University Press, 2003). McMeekin erroneously states that Münzenberg’s corpse was found on 22 October 1940. McMeekin, The red millionaire, 304.

4 The years 1830–1940 have been described as the classical era of working-class internationalism in Frits van Holthoon & Marcel van der Linden, "Introduction," in Internationalism in the labour movement 1830–1940, ed. Frits van Holthoon & Marcel van der Linden (Leiden: Brill, 1988), VII.
late 1938 the chairman and one of the KPD’s prime leaders, and the future president of the East German Republic, Wilhelm Pieck (1876–1960), anxiously concluded during one of the KPD’s leadership sessions: “Hauptgefahr jetzt nicht Trotzkismus, sondern Münzenberg”. Remarkably, even though the struggle against Trotskyism had since March 1937 been elevated into one of the chief missions of the international communist movement, Münzenberg represented in fact the main threat behind closed doors.

Münzenberg had become a menacing independent force, who was not afraid of publicly criticising his former comrades, the KPD and the Comintern. In the shockwaves of the Soviet–German non-aggression pact of August 1939 Münzenberg made his dissent against the Soviet Union definite and dramatically proclaimed: ”der Verräter, Stalin, bist du!” After Münzenberg’s official brake with the Soviet Union, the Comintern and the KPD, there was no turning back. The name of Münzenberg had become anathema in the surviving Soviet world of international communism and later in the post war order in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Münzenberg became one of the many white spots in the history of the German radical left, but it was not only the name of Münzenberg that was left to insignificance, but also his primary organisation of the interwar era called the Internacional Arbeiterhilfe (for short Arbeiterhilfe).

The aim of the article is, firstly, to investigate the background of Münzenberg’s brake with the communist movement with special focus on the conflict between Münzenberg and the future prime leader of the GDR, Walter Ulbricht (1893–1973), and, secondly, to analyse the consequences of the fallout for the uses of remembrance in the GDR in both published ‘grand narratives’ and in the secret investigations into the contentious case of Münzenberg. The article will thus analyse one of the fundamental turning points in the history of the German radical left when Münzenberg was ousted from the communist movement, and elaborate on how the break affected the writing of the history of the German radical left. The

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7 Münzenberg’s famous outcry has lately been highlighted in Bernhard H. Bayerlein, “Der Verräter, Stalin, bist Du!”. Vom Ende der linken Solidarität. Komintern und kommunistische Parteien im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939–1941 (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2008).

approach is chronological as I first will elaborate on the events of the late 1930s, moving to the era of the GDR and the production of a grand narrative, and finally elaborating on the contentious case of Münzenberg based on the latest empirical findings. The article is based on empirical material from the Bundesarchiv, the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), and the Bundesauftragne für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BStU).

**Traitor, Renegade, Bitter Adversary: The Nemesis of Münzenberg**

The focus of the following section will not be on the political events or the discussions on political tactics or lines, but much more on the rhetorics between Münzenberg and his opponents within the communist movement during the years 1936–1939. How was Münzenberg in effect made into an adversary of communism during these years, and how did Münzenberg fight to maintain his position within the communist movement and to prevail his place in the history of the German radical left? Significantly, the discussions that are elaborated on here illustrate also how Münzenberg looked back at his work within the communist movement since the First World War, and show what motivated him to turn his back to the Soviet Union in the late 1930s.

Although the German communists refused to officially admit it at the time, the year of 1933 was a colossal disaster for the KPD and the Comintern. The ‘third period’ of the Comintern had since 1928–1929 installed the KPD towards an ‘ultra-leftist’ line, which had infamously defined the social democrats as their main enemy, as ‘social-fascists’. Despite the installation of the national socialist dictatorship in Germany, the KPD and the Comintern maintained their aggressive rhetoric against the social democrats. Officially, the leading members of the KPD upheld vehemently their belief in the class-against-class policy, whereas at least Münzenberg seemed to regard the line as a serious mistake that in his words had lead the Party to nearly total isolation. To openly challenge the official line was tactically...

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9 The correct English title of the BStU is *The Office of the Federal Commissioner*. The BStU preserves the records of the Ministry for State Security of the GDR. For further information: <http://www.bstu.bund.de/cln_012/mn_715182/DE/Home/homepage_node_html_nnn=true>.


impossible, but Münzenberg organised instead broad anti-fascist campaigns, such as the
Braunbuch campaign on the burning of the German Reichstag, that were not specifically
targeted to a communist audience, spread e.g. through his illustrated journals such as the
Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (AIZ) and the Gegen Angriff. Münzenberg was after all one of
the prime communist leaders who had ever since 1921 managed to join intellectuals and
artists such as Heinrich Mann, Albert Einstein, Käthe Kollwitz, Romain Rolland, Lion
Feuchtwanger, Arthur Koestler and Henri Barbusse with socialist organisations and politically
unorganised workers through especially the Arbeiterhilfe.13

The door to create broad anti-fascist alliances was lastly officially opened during the
Seventh and last World Congress of the Comintern that assembled in Moscow from 25 July to
21 August 1935 under the leadership of the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov. The turn
did not however legitimate any criticism towards the policies of the ‘third period’, as they
vehemently had been instigated by Stalin. As such the Popular Front policies of the
Comintern had significant inborn contradictions.14 One of these paradoxes was that its start
also signalled the beginning of Stalin’s fierce attacks against the Comintern. The international
anti-fascist struggle was thus accompanied by the Great Terror which hit the Soviet Union
hardest between 1936 and 1938 with disastrous consequences for the international communist
movement.15

As another apparent paradox of 1935 the Arbeiterhilfe was dissolved or ‘reorganised’ by
the Comintern leadership which in practice meant the dissolution of the organisation that for
the last fourteen years had been the nucleus of Münzenberg’s United Front activities.16 The
base of the Arbeiterhilfe had until 27 February 1933 been located on Wilhlemstraße 48 in
central Berlin. However, as all other communist and socialist organisations, the Arbeiterhilfe

13 Kasper Braskén, "Mot hunger, krig och fascism! Internationella arbetarhjälpen, Willi Münzenberg och kampen
197. The AIZ moved in 1933 from Berlin to Prague, where it continued to be published until 1938. From 1935 it
was published under the name of Volks-Illustrierte. See further Charlotte Morton, "The Arbeiter Illustrierte
Zeitung in Weimar Germany," Media Culture Society 7(1985); Heinz Willmann, Geschichte der Arbeiter-
Illustrierten-Zeitung 1921–1938 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974).
14 McDermott & Agnew, The Comintern, 130–131, 136, 142–145. See also: Edward Hallett Carr, The twilight of
(Berlin: Aufbau Verlagsgruppe, 2007).
16 The United Front policy had strived between 1921 and 1928 to building broad alliances between communist
and non-communist workers, and hence bring the workers closer to the communist movement and alienate them
from the social democratic organisations. See further a definition of the united front in Jane Degras, "United
and Daniel Fairchild Calhoun, The United Front! The TUC and the Russians, 1923–1928, Soviet and East
was banned in Germany, and Münzenberg was wanted for immediate imprisonment by the Gestapo. Münzenberg had then managed to flee to Paris, where he based the new centre of the Arbeiterhilfe and from where he organised various anti-fascist campaigns. Among his successful initiatives in Paris were the show-trial for Dimitrov organised in London, the publication of the *Braunbuch* and the organising of committees against fascism and war. Without elaborating further on these campaigns it can be concluded that Münzenberg was mostly engaged in ‘independent’ work in various committees and campaigns such as the Arbeiterhilfe, the *Free-Thälmann-committee* and the Saar plebiscite, that all were supported and monitored by the Comintern. Münzenberg also headed in Paris the KPD’s efforts to form a Popular Front in Germany. During the preparatory work and the initial formation of the German Popular Front – or as it was called in German the *Volksfront* – a serious dispute emerged within the KPD that would have far reaching consequences for the communist movement, and as I will argue, for the entire grand narrative of the history of the German working class. It was a conflict epitomised by a personal and political struggle between Münzenberg and Walter Ulbricht.

The Comintern apparatus could no longer approve of independent forces within the Arbeiterhilfe and the dissolution of the organisation in 1935 had been one of the first steps to set Münzenberg under strict control. In February 1936 a full blown conflict between Münzenberg and Ulbricht had commenced regarding the future direction of the German *Volksfront*, and in March the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) sided for Ulbricht in the dispute. Soon a number of rumours on the Comintern’s and Stalin’s politics against the *Volksfront* had started to circulate in Western Europe. It was claimed that Ulbricht had been sent to Paris in February 1936 in order to instigate a new ‘stalinist line’ and to dismiss Münzenberg from his duties. Apparently even Kurt Hiller, who since 1924 had worked at the *Weltbühne* (after 1934 in the *Neue Weltbühne*) had asked in an open postcard: "Ist es richtig, dass Münzenberg vollkommen erledigt und auf der Flucht nach Mexiko ist?"

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20 Letter from Münzenberg to the Comintern, 17.5.1936. SAPMO-BArch, RY 5/I 6/10/68, 130.
These rumours turned out to be the beginning of Münzenberg’s long departure from the communist movement. In letters to Dimitrov, Münzenberg tried to highlight that Ulbricht’s policies were not in conjunction with the decisions of the Comintern’s Seventh World Congress or the KPD’s Brussels Congress. Again in April 1937 Münzenberg warned the Comintern that Ulbricht’s actions would lead to the total isolation of the Party, such as it had been in 1931–1932, that in effect meant the burning of all bridges to all ”Bundesgenossen”, meaning all non-communist socialist organisations and intellectuals. Münzenberg could then in October 1937 with regret conclude that ”[m]eine Befuerchtungen sind leider nur allzu rasch allzu wahr geworden. Man hat gewuetet wie ein Elefant in einem Porzellanladen.” In effect, the manoeuvrings of Ulbricht and his supporters had by late 1937 brought the German Volksfront to its final end.

According to Münzenberg, Ulbricht’s politics – ”die unsinnige Politik des Kampfes gegen alle und alles” – had led to the KPD’s dissociation from the powerful bourgeoise and church circles, and to a strengthening of the social democratic leadership that was against the Volksfront. Münzenberg emphasised that the situation in the fall of 1937 should have been ideal for the formation of a strong unified opposition against Hitler and he concluded ”Man hat den Kampf gegen Hitler, […] nicht nur nicht gefordert, sondern auf das schlimmste gehemmt und erschwert”. Instead of standing united against Hitler, the communists were engaged in a bitter internal fight, and Ulbricht had according to Münzenberg initiated a ”niedrigen wie nichtswuerdigen Kampf” against Münzenberg and the politics of the Volksfront. Münzenberg could not however fathom why the Comintern did not intervene in the devastating situation in Paris. For the Comintern 1937 was a devastating year as the international anti-Trotsky campaigns and the Great Terror, partially lead to failed Popular Front formation in Europe. At the same time Stalin made his increasing suspicions against the Comintern apparatus clear as he in early 1937 had according to Dimitrov stated that ”All of you there in the Comintern are working in the hands of the enemy.”

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22 Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937. SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 56.
23 The so called Brussels Congress of the KPD was in reality held outside of Moscow, 3.–15.10.1935. Sigfried Bahne, *Die KPD und das Ende von Weimar. Das scheitern einer Politik 1932–1935* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1976), 66.
24 Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937. SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 57.
26 Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937. SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 57.
27 Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937. SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 57.
Münzenberg had namely had the impression that the Comintern was very pleased with his achievements and that it was not a question of slowing down Münzenberg’s work, but to increase it. As a sharp contrast to Münzenberg’s response from Moscow, Ulbricht had arrived in Paris and immediately commenced to spread the rumour both inside and outside of the Party that Münzenberg was politically terminated, and that Münzenberg had been called to Moscow only to be ousted from the Party. Münzenberg concluded with regret that if Ulbricht actually had had the mission to create a situation in Paris when it simply was impossible for Münzenberg to continue as a member of the Party, then Ulbricht had indeed succeeded with his mission.29

Conflicts between Münzenberg and Ulbricht as such were old news. Ulbricht had apparently already during the years in Berlin circulated his cynical convictions regarding Münzenberg’s United Front politics and solidarity campaigns in the Arbeiterhilfe and stated: ”Warte nur, einmal kommt die Pleite”. However, much to the dismay of Ulbricht Münzenberg managed to avoid major pratfalls and the successes of the Arbeiterhilfe grew year after year in significance and influence. Münzenberg highlighted that his campaigns had been so successful that Göbbels had in poor fashion attempted to replicate Münzenberg’s propaganda methods.30

Münzenberg did not however wish to depart from the communist movement and in an effort to sort out the conflict Münzenberg sent a long private letter to Ulbricht in late May 1937 that has been preserved in the RGASPI. It was a letter that was in Münzenberg’s words written from ”Mensch zu Mensch, von Mann zu Mann, von Genosse zu Genosse” where Münzenberg explained that he sincerely felt that the current problems within the Volksfront were caused by Ulbricht alone.31 In Münzenberg’s mind their relation was in essence a long history of conflicts:

Ich habe mich spaeter wiederholt gefragt, aus welchen persoenlichen Motiven oder antipathien Du Dich an die Spitze derjenigen stelltest, die innerhalb der KPD bei den verschiedensten Anlaessen gegen mich auftraten und innerhalb der KPD jenen Verleumdungsfeldzug fuehrtest, den Bela Kun mit den groessten Eifer innerhalb der KI [Comintern] betrieb, bis ihm der Genosse Dimitroff das Handwerk legte; Du erinnerst Dich an diese Zeiten, in deren es mitunter schien, dass nicht Hitler sondern Münzenberg als Hauptfeind innerhalb der KPD und der Komintern behandelt wurde”32

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30 Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937. SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1/6/10/68, 58.
31 Letter from Münzenberg to Ulbricht, 25.5.1937. RGASPI, 495/205/7000 II, 18.
32 Letter from Münzenberg to Ulbricht, 25.5.1937. RGASPI, 495/205/7000 II, 18.
Münzenberg and Ulbricht had apparently met in Hotel Lux in Moscow during the Comintern’s Seventh World Congress in 1935 to discuss the German Volksfront. Münzenberg had then explained to him that it was a true danger for the KPD when Ulbricht was more driven by personal than by factual issues. Münzenberg had e.g. been in favour of open discussion and debate with the social democrats, whereas Ulbricht had supported a line that wanted to create a separate body, that then later was to attract the social democrats. Münzenberg was convinced that Ulbricht’s opposition against his line had not been based on any political consideration, but only on a personal such. Ulbricht would not however listen to Münzenberg’s reasoning, and only ”heard what he wanted to hear”.

As the conflict developed Dimitrov had invited Münzenberg to Moscow in October 1936 to shoulder a new Comintern-mission. What Münzenberg could not fathom was the apparent conflict between Dimitrov’s invitation to Moscow that had promised to him new important missions abroad on the one hand, and Ulbricht’s agitation against him as a politician, communist, as a socialist revolutionary, and as a human being on the other. When Dimitrov made his offer to Münzenberg, one of Ulbricht’s closest coworkers had allegedly exclaimed in a Party cell: ”Wenn Münzenberg gefahren waere, waere er schon erschossen.”

In October 1936 Dimitrov had suggested to Münzenberg that he was to be made the head of the Comintern’s propaganda and agitprop department. Münzenberg had been honoured of this possibility, but in the end refused the offer. Münzenberg was instead interested of establishing an anti-fascist propaganda bureau. He maintained however that such an institution could not function from Moscow, but had to be based in the West in order to rapidly answer to the daily turns of the fascist propaganda and to constantly feel the pulse of the fascist rivals through the hundreds of informants who were located in Western Europe. However, one of the main reasons for Münzenberg’s refusal to accept the new mission in Moscow was accordingly because he had never during his years in the communist movement worked in an Apparat. During all the years he had always had the possibility to work with a certain degree of independence, Münzenberg explained to Dimitrov. Münzenberg acknowledged the risks of his way of working, but emphasised that this was the only way for him. This freedom had made it possible to advance Münzenberg’s own initiatives, and he

33 Letter from Münzenberg to Ulbricht, 25.5.1937. RGASPI, 495/205/7000 II, 19.
34 SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/I 6/10/68, 60–61. The source does not identify who ”Ulbricht’s closest coworker” was.
dared to claim to Dimitrov that these campaigns would never have been achieved in the right
time by the Comintern’s Apparat. If he was to accept the new assignment, he certainly would
not be allowed such freedom, Münzenberg remarked.\textsuperscript{36} If Münzenberg had then accepted the
offer to head the Comintern’s Agitprop department in Moscow the ‘problem of Münzenberg’
had probably been solved as a part of the Great Terror, but as Münzenberg remained in Paris,
the conflict within the Party deepened. Münzenberg’s destiny was however already set by
then in Moscow, as Dimitrov had noted in his diary of a private conversation with Stalin in
1937 regarding Münzenberg. Accordingly, Stalin had exclaimed that "Münzenberg ist ein
Trotzkist. Wenn er herkommt, werden wir ihn verhaften. – Geben Sie sich Mühe, ihn hierher
to locken."\textsuperscript{37}

Pieck, who later in 1938 would render Münzenberg as the main threat of the KPD,
regretted strongly the long wait to solve the problem of Münzenberg, who during the time had
commenced to powerfully challenge the accusations against him. Münzenberg had apparently
mobilised social democrats and members of the bourgeois against the KPD and the
Comintern. Pieck even levelled accusations on Münzenberg’s collaboration with trotzkists
and Trotsky himself. The contentious case of Münzenberg had to be solved quickly, Pieck
emphasised, and eventually to set the Party free from Münzenberg, who through his resistance
demeaned the authority of the entire Party.\textsuperscript{38} As Ulbricht and Pieck had managed with the
support of Dimitrov and Stalin to become the unchallenged leaders of the KPD, the rift
between Ulbricht and Münzenberg likewise became a rift between the KPD and Münzenberg.
Equally one might assume that as Ulbricht and Pieck represented the line advocated in
Moscow, the rift was essentially a consequence of a breach between Münzenberg and Stalin.

In Paris Münzenberg had apparently asked representatives of the Russian Mensheviks,
if it was wise for Münzenberg to travel to Moscow. The Mensheviks had accordingly advised
Münzenberg that he should travel, as he was internationally renown, and nothing thus could
happen to him.\textsuperscript{39} Münzenberg did not however follow the advise, as non of the old Bolsheviks
in the Soviet Union seemed to be safe as rumours from Moscow stated that both Piatnitsky,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{36} Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, [no date, November–December 1937] SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 64–65.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Bernhard H. Bayerlein, ed. Georgi Dimitroff, Tagebücher 1933–1943 (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag,2000), 165.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Letter from H/70, reference number 221-98-87, signed by "Br.", 30.6.1937 (28.6.1937). SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 44.
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Knorin, Kun, Remmele, Sauerland, Neumann, Flieg and many others who had been close coworkers with Münzenberg had been arrested.⁴⁰

Ulbricht desperately wanted Münzenberg to travel to Moscow, and accused Münzenberg of a failing party discipline as he refused to head to Russia. In response Münzenberg reminded Ulbricht of all the instances when he had preserved his iron discipline. Münzenberg explained to Ulbricht that although he often had strongly disagreed with the tactics and politics of the Party and the Comintern he had always preserved his discipline:


Münzenberg explained thus to Ulbricht that the question of personality and human trust was a significant factor when it came to diplomacy and politics, and when the two of them were compared as leaders of the German Volksfront several circumstances were in Münzenberg’s favour. As Münzenberg presented it: He was on the one hand renown among socialists and intellectuals due to his work in the Arbeiterhilfe and other United Front organisations in the Weimar Republic. Ulbricht on the other hand was not know within these circles as a person endorsing broad unity, but instead through his work in the KPD’s sectarian union struggle, as the district leader of the KPD in Berlin, and as the leader of hostile communist strikes.⁴²

Münzenberg was convinced that the Volksfront politics that had been pursued by him had been in full accordance with the decisions of the Comintern’s Seventh World Congress, that had been confirmed by Dimitrov and Stalin. Hence, Münzenberg could not believe the rumours that claimed that Ulbricht represented the ‘stalinist line’. Münzenberg proudly concluded to Ulbricht that, “…nicht nur meine Arbeit […] sondern ebenso die zuegellose Wut der Faschisten und aller Gegner der Sowjetunion gegen meine Person mehr als genügende Beweise dafür sind, wer stalinistische Politik vertritt und betreibt.”⁴³ Münzenberg and Ulbricht clearly had diverging perspectives what it meant to pursue a ‘stalinist line’, which explains Münzenberg’s numerous outbursts before his brake, when Münzenberg had

⁴⁰ Transcript of telegram from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 14.8.1937. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 91.
⁴² Letter from Münzenberg to Ulbricht, 25.5.1937. RGASPI, 495/205/7000 II, 23–24.
⁴³ Letter from Münzenberg to Ulbricht, 25.5.1937. RGASPI, 495/205/7000 II, 27.
exclaimed that it was he who was the true stalinist, and not such apparatchiks as Ulbricht. Clearly, the definition of what it in effect meant to pursue a stalinist line had not been settled, and Münzenberg’s declaration seems in retrospect rather intriguing, but also illustrates the important change that was occurring at the time. With the eventual departure of Münzenberg, the ‘stalinist line’ had been provided with a historical meaning and understanding far from that of Münzenberg’s *Volksfront* and antifascist politics.

The extensive internal party struggle landed into the non communist press on 24 July 1937 as an article in the *Neue Tagebuch* openly speculated that Münzenberg had been replaced with Ulbricht. It was assessed that Münzenberg undoubtedly was a part of the general ‘cleansing’ of the KPD that was occurring, and that Münzenberg was one of those who had grown ”too big” in front of Stalin. Ulbricht was regarded as a typical replacement as he even before had given proof of the required political ”elasticity”. Accordingly it was highlighted that the new leader of the German anti-fascist *Volksfront* policy, had only three months before Hitler’s seizure of power agitated for a collaboration with the nazis. Göbbels and Ulbricht had then fought side by side, and ironically it was asked, what would guarantee that Ulbricht would not honour this old alliance again?44 For the secretariat of the KPD it was very troubling to notice the ongoing debate in the socialist and bourgeois press that had noticed a rising ‘stalinist line’ in the KPD and actively attempted to distinguish within the KPD between ‘loyal communist’ on the one hand and ‘stalinists’ on the other.45

On 13 August 1937 a comrade from the KPD’s leadership was sent to have a private talk with Münzenberg. Münzenberg had explained to him that the conflict between him and Ulbricht on the *Volksfront* policy was growing ever deeper and could only be resolved by the retirement of Ulbricht or himself. Münzenberg had been requested to travel to Moscow to sort out the conflict but according to Münzenberg he would not travel to Moscow until he was certain of the fact that he quickly could return back, as he refused to work in Moscow.46 Münzenberg had accordingly explained:

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46 ’Bericht von Schorr (Raul) über eine Besprechung mit M.’. Date of meeting 13.8.1937. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 90.
Vielleicht bin ich grössenwahnsinnig, aber ich kann nicht arbeiten, wenn ich in jeder Fragen und Entscheidungen warten muss, wenn ich Tage warten muss, bis man mit mir spricht usw. Und ich sage es offen, ich lebe hier [Paris] lieber als dort [Moscow], wo man kontrolliert wird, mit wen man spricht und was man tut.47

Münzenberg had then claimed that the Comintern was by no means the highest authority for him: "Für mich gibt es höhere Instanzen […]. Mit der KI [Comintern] diskutiere ich nicht mehr".48 Münzenberg differentiated in his reasoning between the communist organisations and the Soviet Union, and thus Münzenberg had no problem with preparing a meeting to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet Union in 1937. Münzenberg explained further that he had informed the KPD that this was not a problem for him despite the ongoing conflict as Münzenberg was able to distinguish on the one hand between the Soviet Union, which he supported, and the Comintern and the KPD on the other, which he did not.49 Münzenberg’s official high regard for Stalin’s Soviet Union would soon, however, be brought to its end.

In Paris Ulbricht continued to spread rumours on Münzenberg, and apparently he had declared to the former Prussian Minister of Finance, Klepper, that "Wir schicken ihn [Münzenberg] nur nach Moskau, damit er erledigt wird".50 Apparently, Ulbricht’s closest coworker and political spokesman, Bruno von Salomon, had in private conversations with other communist assured that the Russian secret police had a long arm that Münzenberg surely would not escape.51

During a meeting with the leading communists Wilhelm Pieck, Philipp Dengel (1888–1948), and Wilhelm Florin (1894–1944) it was finally decided that if Münzenberg was not present in Moscow before 15 August 1937 they would recommend to the Secretariat of the ECCI that Münzenberg be expelled from the KPD and its central committee. Pieck was at the time the chairman of the KPD; Dengel had since 1929 worked in the apparat of the Comintern, and Florin functioned as a member of the KPD’s central committee and the Polbüro, worked as the secretary of the ECCI, and functioned as the chairman of the

48 ‘Bericht von Schorr (Raul) über eine Besprechung mit M.’. Date of meeting 13.8.1937. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 90–91. Münzenberg had apparently contacted Stalin or Jechow, but was still awaiting their answer.
49 Letter from Walter [Ulbricht] to unknown receiver, 24–30.10.1937. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 104
50 Letter from Münzenberg to das Sekretariat der Komintern, Dimitrov, 15.12.1937, SAPMO-BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 75.
51 Letter from Münzenberg to das Sekretariat der Komintern, Dimitrov, 15.12.1937, SAPMO-BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 75–76. Citation, 75.
International Control Commission (ICC).\textsuperscript{52} Pieck reported to Dimitrov that the situation in the West was devastating as the press was constantly reporting on the conflict and on Münzenberg’s refusal to travel to Moscow. Münzenberg’s defensive stance had reached a level that could not be tolerated by the Comintern’s international standard of discipline, Pieck declared to Dimitrov.\textsuperscript{53}

Münzenberg refused however to travel and the situation grew even more unbearable for Münzenberg, and he looked on as his thirty years of work for the labour movement was being reduced to nothing. In response Münzenberg threatened Dimitrov that he was ready to reveal every side of his long work for the public of the world in order to show that he indeed was falsely accused.\textsuperscript{54} Münzenberg declared in late October 1937 to Dimitrov: "In meinem Kreis gab es keine Trotzkisten, in meiner Umgebung nicht einen einzigen Gestapoagenten, trotzdem ich ueber 15 Jahre gerade in der Peripheriearbeit tätig war, weder mein Sekretär noch meine Mitarbeiter, die Mann um Mann trotz hervorragenden Leistungen und Fähigkeiten entfernt, sind mit dem Revolver herumgelaufen, um den Genossen Stalin zu ermorden".\textsuperscript{55}

Later Münzenberg emphatically explained to Paul Merker (1894–1969), who at the time was a member of the central committee and Polbüro of the KPD\textsuperscript{56}, that he had already in the Weimar Republic had several tactical differences with the Party, but never such that had emerged in 1937. Accordingly, the first time Münzenberg had refused to submit to the political line of the Party was in 1937, as he regarded the politics as a severe blow to the emerging Volksfront.\textsuperscript{57} Münzenberg explained to Merker: "Es wusste jeder Genosse, dass ich niemals als bürokratischer Angestellter und Beamter in einem Apparat arbeiten konnte und werde und alle Genossen, Lenin, Stalin, Dimitrov und die Leitung der Komintern haben diesem Arbeitswunsch Rechnung getragen. […] Ich kann nicht verstehen, dass das, was 20 Jahre lang anerkannt wurde und so gute Resultate hatte, heute ein Verbrechen sein soll."\textsuperscript{58}

Finally, on 14 November 1937 in a top secret memorandum the KPD’s allegations against Münzenberg were formulated\textsuperscript{59}, and on 26 November 1937 a letter was sent to the secretariat of the ECCI and the ICC that recommended that a process against Münzenberg

\textsuperscript{53} Letter from Wilhelm Pieck to Dimitrov, 2.8.1937. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 81.
\textsuperscript{54} Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937, SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 61.
\textsuperscript{55} Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937, SAPMO–BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 61.
\textsuperscript{56} Weber, \textit{Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus}, 220.
\textsuperscript{57} Letter from Münzenberg to [Paul] Merker, 5.4.1938. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 169.
\textsuperscript{58} Letter from Münzenberg to [Paul] Merker, 5.4.1938. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 170.
\textsuperscript{59} Beschuldigung gegen Münzenberg, 14.11.1937 Streng vertraulich! SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 131
was to be commenced due to his continued breaches against party discipline and due to his "Verrat der Partei".\(^{60}\)

As the campaign against Münzenberg reached momentum he was severely criticised because he had allegedly not openly sympathised with the Soviet Union’s actions against the "fascist-trotzkist" spies and traitors. The KPD stated that this would have been crucial as rumours had circulated among socialists that Münzenberg was not sympathetic with the trials in Moscow. It was according to the allegations no coincidence that Münzenberg had been very formal in his involvement in the anti-Trotzky campaigns in France among the emigration community.\(^{61}\) The consequences of Münzenberg’s lack of engagement was integrally connected to the problem of Münzenberg, and the party explained: "Wie sollen die sozialdemokratischen Genossen und die Sympathisierenden zum Kampf gegen den Trotzkismus gewonnen werden, wenn sie selbst erfahren, dass M. [Münzenberg] mit dem Urteil im Moskauer Prozess nicht einverstanden ist"\(^{62}\) It was hence alleged that Münzenberg was heading a "prinziplösen, hinterhältigen" struggle against the politics of the Party and had systematically obstructed the collaboration between the KPD and the social democrats. He had accordingly even influenced important intellectuals such as Heinrich Mann against the politics of the Party and Münzenberg had apparently also in an outrageous manner informed the two other prime leaders of the Volksfront, the social democrats Georg Bernhard (1875–1944) and Rudolf Breitscheid (1874–1944), that the Volksfront should be continued without the KPD.\(^{63}\)

Most severely, Münzenberg had according to the allegations that were sent to the ICC in late November 1937 engaged in creating a new radical Party that was to serve as a new platform for the Volksfront.\(^{64}\) Further, Münzenberg was accused of a breaching party discipline as he after his last visit to Moscow in October 1936 had refused to travel to Russia, and instead produced the outrageous idea to form an überparteiliche arbitral court in Paris, like the one that had been formed for Dimitrov in London, to deal with Münzenberg’s case.

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\(^{60}\) The ICC had been established in the early 1920s in order to solve personnel problems within the Comintern. During the 1930s the ICC was however to an increasing extent controlled by Stalin, and in 1935 his close confidant Matvei Shiriatov became the leader of the ICC. Kevin McDermott, "Stalinist terror in the Comintern. New perspectives," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30(1995): 119.


\(^{62}\) Letter from Sekretariat des ZK der KPD to Pieck, 7.6.1937. RGASPI, 495/205/7000 II, 15.


\(^{64}\) ‘An das Sekretariat des EKKI und die IKK’, 26.11.1937. SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 144.
This demand alone, it was highlighted, illustrated to the KPD that Münzenberg in his mind already had breached with the Party.65

Even worse, Münzenberg had according to the allegations never been self-critical regarding his political errors in the past. Münzenberg had accordingly always utilised his international mandates, tried to realise his own personal goals through manoeuvring between the KPD and the Comintern. The very reason to the conflict was accordingly Münzenberg’s detachedness from the Party and Münzenberg’s attempts to do political work independently from the Party. Münzenberg apparently hence thought that there was a possibility to be a communist, but not to act according to the decisions of the Party. It was further claimed that Münzenberg was attempting to distinguish between the politics of the Party on the one hand and the politics of certain ‘loyal communists’ on the other. This line of thought had accordingly driven Münzenberg even further from the Party. The secretariat of the KPD suggested thus that if the ICC did not within a short time span manage to persuade Münzenberg to officially admit his errors, set himself under the discipline of the Party and to defend the Party against all aggressors, he would be banned from the KPD.66

Münzenberg had in response to all the accusations exclaimed to Dimitrov that he was ready to take all measures possible in order to save the honour of his name. Münzenberg had apparently even sent letters to Stalin demanding that the matter be solved in Paris, and not in Moscow. If a proper investigation of the accusations against him was not conducted, Münzenberg had repeated his threat that he was indeed prepared to take up his struggle in front of the public of the world.67 Finally, on 18 February 1938 Münzenberg declared bitterly in a letter to Ulbricht:

Ich habe bis heute geschwiegen, bis heute alles hingenommen, aber jetzt, wo man in solch unerhörter Weise Tatsachen und die Rolle einzelner Personen in ihr Gegenteil umzufälschen versucht, kann ich nicht mehr schweigen. Zur Verteidigung meines Namens als Initiator und Organisator der grossen und grössten Einheitsbewegung der Arbeiterbewegung und der ersten verheissungsvollen Zusammenfassung der antihitlerischen Kräfte in der Emigration, besonders aber im Interesse unserer Partei bin ich entschlossen, zu sprechen.68

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68 Letter from Münzenberg to “Friedrich” [aka Walter Ulbricht], 18.2.1938. SAPMO-BArch, RY 5/I 6/10/68, 86.
The time of silence was no more. Münzenberg declared that he was prepared to struggle with all his powers against Ulbricht, who aspired to erase his name as a revolutionary antifascist.\(^69\)

Münzenberg was not retiring without a fight: "Ich habe Walter [Ulbricht], als er diese nichtswürdige Kampagne begann, erklärt, dass ich mich dagegen mit Klauen und Zähnen wehren und nicht dulden würde, dass man so Parteigeschichte und Parteileben fauscht."\(^70\)

On 22 May 1938 the decision to officially expel Münzenberg from the KPD’s central committee was published in the *Deutsche Volkszeitung*.\(^71\)

Finally on 26 February 1939, after years of animosity, the KPD summarised the main faults of Münzenberg, that had motivated the KPD’s measures against him. Among the allegations were death sins such as: "Münzenberg vertritt einen liquidatorischen Standpunkt"; "Münzenberg führt mit Hilfe trotzkistischer, menschewistischer und einige sozialdemokratischer Kräfte eine Verleumdungskampagne gegen die Politik der Partei"; "Münzenberg weigert sich, sich der Parteidisziplin unterzuordnen"; "Münzenbergs Individualismus und sein streben nach Unabhängigkeit von der Partei führte dazu, dass er von der gegnerischen Spionage ausgenutzt wurde"; and "Seine politische Position bedeutet das Überlaufen zu sozialdemokratischen Gruppierungen".\(^72\)

The final nail to Münzenberg’s coffin was stricken on 6 March 1939 when the ICC finished its investigation. Lastly, Münzenberg was expelled from the KPD due to his "prinzipienlosen und doppelzünglerischen Verhaltens, wegen seines Kampfes gegen die Einheitsfront". Ironically, one of the main architects of the interwar United Front policy and the initiator of the German *Volksfront* was expelled from the Party due to his alleged attempts to ‘sabotage’ it.\(^73\)

All of Münzenberg’s crimes, errors, failures and personal problems were finally settled in public on 5 June 1939 in the Comintern journal *Die Internationale*. The several years long break was finally official and accordingly it was claimed that Münzenberg had by then totally lost his belief in the working class, and had left Münzenberg in a state of total political demoralisation.\(^74\) The article summarised all the reasons that motivated why the name of Münzenberg could no longer be highly regarded. It was stated that "Die KPD und die

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\(^69\) Letter from Münzenberg, 29.8.1938, SAPMO-BArch, NY 4036/515, 183.

\(^70\) Letter from Münzenberg to Dimitrov, 29.10.1937. SAPMO-BArch, RY 5/1 6/10/68, 58.


Kommunistische Internationale haben immer die spezifisch Münzenbergschen dummen Bluffmethoden abgelehnt, mit denen nichts für die Sache des Volkes erreicht werden kann.” Further Münzenberg’s affiliation to Heinz Neumann was brought up as a final proof of Münzenberg’s long lasting problems with the politics of the Party.  

Without a trace of doubt it was proclaimed: ”Unter fester Wille, die Einheit unter den Antifaschistischen herzustellen, unser Gefühl der Verantwortlichkeit vor dem deutschen Volk macht es uns daher zur Pflicht, vor Münzenberg zu warnen. Er ist ein Feind!”

Piece by piece the history of Münzenberg was dismantled in order to illustrate his alleged minor role in the history of the German working class. Even Münzenberg’s so often emphasised long friendship with Lenin that had begun during the First World War in Switzerland, was now declared a ”legend” that Münzenberg had created himself. The alleged cooperation and understanding between Münzenberg and Lenin was criticised and it was polemically asked that if Lenin and Münzenberg in fact had been so close, why had Münzenberg tried to hinder the establishment of the Youth International in Moscow. Why, when the revolutionary masses were directing their hopes towards ‘the light from the east’, had Münzenberg as the secretary of the Youth International not wished to move it closer to Lenin and the Bolsheviks? This problematic stance had accordingly lead to Münzenberg’s slow dissociation from the communist movement, that eventually had brought Münzenberg into the camp of the Anti-Bolsheviks.

In the final verdict, it was emphasised that in reality Münzenberg had never been a character of any significance. In effect, the article in Die Internationale that proclaimed Münzenberg as an enemy of the communist movement formulated the future destiny of Münzenberg in the GDR’s grand narrative of the German working class. A grand narrative, that Münzenberg was never going to be a part of.

In an last attempt to save his name, Münzenberg proclaimed his retreat from the Party and desperately tried to maintain his place in the history of the movement that he had been an integral part of: ”Ich trenne mich schwer von einer Organisation, die ich mitgegründet und mitgeschafft habe.” Münzenberg did not however hold back his critique: The communists had not been able to hinder the fascist dictatorship, and even worse, the communist leadership had

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denied to call the establishment of the Third Reich as a failure until two years after the takeover in 1933:78

Ich habe geglaubt, die Anerkennung dieser politischen Prinzipien innerhalb der Kommunistischen Partei, wenigstens eine freie und öffentliche Diskussion in ihrem Rahmen erreichen zu können. Ich habe mich geirrt. Nach einem Konflikt von über zwei Jahren habe ich eingesehen, dass dies Unmöglich ist. Es wird verhindert durch eine Organisationsform, die mit der der ursprünglichen Partei wenig gemeinsam hat, durch das Ueberwicht eines bürokratischen Apparates, der das Parteileben beherrscht und durch eine Leitung, die sich trotz aller Niederlagen seit 1933 unfehlbar und unersetzbar denkt.”79

Münzenberg forcefully concluded that his ambition was to continue his work as a communist, and to thus continue to effect the course of history. Münzenberg emphasised that he after all was a central part of the history of the radical struggle of the interwar era and in his view he stood shoulder to shoulder with the revolutionary heroes of the movement:

Ich werde fortfahren, wie bisher, mit allen mir zur Verfügung stehenden Kräften für die Schaffung einer grossen, umfassenden Einheitspartei und für die Entfachung einer breiten mächtigen Volksbewegung zu arbeiten, die stark genug ist, das Hitlersystem zu stürzen und ein neues Deutschland zu schaffen. Und so behalte ich den Platz, den ich seit 1906 neben Karl Liebknecht, später neben Rosa Luxemburg, Klara Zetkin und 1915 neben Lenin gewählt haben, den Platz in den Kampfereihen des revolutionären Sozialismus.80

As it turned out, the honoured names of Liebknecht, Luxembourg, Zetkin and Lenin were the last ones who were to be combined with Münzenberg’s name in the future GDR. In the East German historical narratives the lineage of heroic revolutionaries included instead the future leaders of the GDR, Walter Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck, who both had been the bitter adversaries of Münzenberg. As I will illustrate, the consequences of Münzenberg’s break with the communist movement had a profound effect on how the history of the interwar German radical left was written when it concerns the inclusion and exclusion of events and characters within the narrative. In effect a significant slice of history had to be removed from the narrative as the history of Münzenberg and his many successful campaigns and United Front organisations had to be silenced.

Decoding East German Uses of Remembrance

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The primary leaders of the GDR returned after the war from exile in the Soviet Union and were in the process provided with the opportunity to construct a novel grand narrative of the history of the German radical left. The aim of the East German historical scholarship was hence to legitimate the GDR as the true government of the divided Germany after the devastating experiences of the Third Reich. The establishment of the new workers’ and peasants’ state was thus presented as the finale of a long and glorious history of the German radical workers’ movement. The uses of remembrance in the GDR could be expanded to various public manifestations, statues, memorials, and the naming of streets and public buildings that all carried the names of important characters from the historical grand narrative. Of course, none of these carried the name of Münzenberg and I will hence limit myself to the production of the narrative that was written for the East German people. The works analysed here were not strict academic works meant for a scholarly public, but were provided for the people in order to show the historical roots of the GDR’s state power. As such they can also be analysed as effective means to form and mould what was remembered among the people and who had been the most significant characters in the history of the GDR.

In this process Münzenberg became naturally an anomaly of the past and was ignored by his former comrades, who were then the ones writing and overseeing the official history of the German working class. Beginning from the early 1950s research on the history of the German workers’ movement was controlled and coordinated by the Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der SED (or for short IML)\textsuperscript{81}. The IML had in effect monopoly on all novel publications on all leading characters from the history of the German workers’ movement and all publications were put under the strict censorship of the IML.\textsuperscript{82}

The eight volume magnum opus \textit{Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung} (GdA) published in 1966 constituted the standard work of the East German scholarship that produced a holy grand narrative. Most importantly, it was rigorously ‘corrected’ and steered by Walter Ulbricht\textsuperscript{83}. All manuscripts on the history of the German working class were long after 1966 evaluated solely on the basis of how well they strengthened the positions of the GdA, that remained the last published version of the grand narrative of the history of the German

\textsuperscript{81} The IML was originally named the Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin-Institut beim Zentralkomitee der SED but was later renamed to the Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der SED.


\textsuperscript{83} Manfred Wilke, ed. \textit{Die Anatomie der Parteizentrale. Die KPD/SED auf dem Weg zur Macht} (Berlin: Akademie Verlag,1998), 40–43.
workers’ movement.\textsuperscript{84} In the three volumes of the GdA depicting the years 1917–1945, the name of Münzenberg is mentioned once in volume three, eight times in volume four and twice in volume six. In most cases Münzenberg’s name is simply listed among other names without further elaboration. Münzenberg was hence only worth eleven short remarks in the two thousand pages long grand narrative on the history of the German communist movement between and during the two World Wars.\textsuperscript{85} This usage of remembrance in the GDR can now clearly be elaborated on when the bitter fight especially between Ulbricht and Münzenberg is brought into attention.

When decoding the grand narrative presented in the GdA, but also in other East German publications, several central elements or ‘turning points’ are distinguished. A central aspect of the East German grand narrative is the importance of the ‘years of struggle’ in the Weimar Republic. The main characters of the grand narrative are presented as the communist heroes of the Weimar years, who allegedly had headed the underground struggle in Hitler’s Germany, and lastly became the leading figures of the GDR, who – finally – achieved the revolution they had emphatically prophesied during the past decades. In the narrative, the struggle of the main characters, such as Ulbricht, Pieck and the martyr Ernst Thälmann (1886–1944), had begun in their youth, and was then gloriously attained with the assistance of the Soviet Union. The chronology in these personal stories of Ulbricht and Pieck is clear: first the history of their youth and their political awakening is narrated, secondly their role as founders of German communism is emphasised, thirdly their heroic struggle against fascism is narrated, fourthly a turning point in the narrative is achieved as the long awaited empowerment in the GDR is materialised, and lastly the narrative ends with the successful construction of socialism in Germany. The life stories of Ulbricht and Pieck represented the very model of


any ‘progressive’ historical narrative.\textsuperscript{86} The history of the \textit{Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands} (SED) that from the East German perspective ranged all the way from ‘the radical workers’ of the 16th century until the 1970s is for example powerfully demonstrated in the monumental \textit{Seht, welche Kraft! Die SED. Tradition, Gegenwart, Zukunft} published in 1971.\textsuperscript{87}

The very history of the GDR was strongly interwoven with the life stories of Pieck and Ulbricht. Also in a collection of Pieck’s writings on the \textit{Volksfront} that were assembled 1955 in \textit{Im Kampf um die Arbeitereinheit und die deutsche Volksfront 1936–1938} the notorious absence of Münzenberg is confirmed. In the preface provided by Ulbricht he highlights that it was Pieck who was the central force that had had the authority to bring together ”all democratic and peace-loving Germans”.\textsuperscript{88} The writings by Pieck, who in 1955 was the president of the GDR, were accordingly published in order to illustrate how Pieck had been an integral part of the historic struggle of the KPD, for the liberation of the German people and thus enabled the establishment of the GDR.\textsuperscript{89} Obviously Münzenberg did not fit into this narrative, but was not even mentioned as a dangerous renegade that had been ousted from the movement. The historical grand narrative in the GDR centred hence around ‘progressive stories’ and naturally exclude unwanted stories from the history of the German radical left. The ”topography of the censorship” was of course divided into hot and cold areas, where the hot ones were incorporated into the ”organised forgetting”, that marked who had the power over the politics of today and its history.\textsuperscript{90}

One might think that after the era of Pieck and Ulbricht, the history of Münzenberg or his primary organisation of the years 1921–1935, the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, would have

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\item \textsuperscript{87} \textit{Seht, welche Kraft! Die SED. Tradition, Gegenwart, Zukunft} (Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1971).
\item \textsuperscript{89} Ulbricht, ”Vorwort,” 12–13.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Lokatis, ”Die Zensur historischer Literatur in der DDR unter Ulbricht,” 292–293; Dorpalen, \textit{German history in Marxist perspective. The East German approach} 48.
\end{itemize}
been revived in the GDR, but this was not the case. The SED-historians were conservative to the very end, and as Russian researches such as Firsow began to criticise Stalin and his responsibility for the collapse of the Comintern, the East German historians remained to the old uncritical line. During the Stalin era, the SED was not concerned with the history of the Comintern, and if they were, the Comintern was most often described in positive terms. The first East German publication on the history of the Comintern Die Kommunistische Internationale. Kurzer historischer Abriss was originally published in 1969, that maintained its position as a standard work during the 1970s and 1980s. As a part of the glorification of the achievements of the Comintern, the monumental illustrated book Die Kommunistische Internationale 1919–1943. Ihr weltweites Wirken für Frieden, Demokratie, nationale Befreiung und Sozialismus in Bildern und Dokumenten was published in 1984. Here, substantial illustrations and images from the Arbeiterhilfe’s history was interwoven with the history of the Comintern, but the name of Münzenberg remained still in oblivion. A more scholarly perspective was gaining ground in the Soviet Union during the era of glasnost and perestroika, but the perspective of the East German historians on the Comintern remained that of a "Rechtfertigungsideologi", which encompassed an ideologically based historical scholarship that uncritically strived to justify the Comintern’s actions and part in the history of German communism.91

The troubled relationship between the history of the Arbeiterhilfe and the history of Münzenberg was a difficult one to solve, as Münzenberg represented the heart and soul of the organisation. There were some minor articles published on the GDR, manifestly ignoring the role of Münzenberg, but the logical solution for the East German scholars became not to publish neither on the history of the Arbeiterhilfe nor on the history of Münzenberg.92 As with the history of the Comintern, the Soviet scholars seemed more open minded on the issue and one of the only monographs on the Arbeiterhilfe was published 1971 in Russian.93 Typically, this work was never translated or elaborated on among the East German scholars. Thus the only East German publication on the Arbeiterhilfe that seems to have been supported by the IML was a bibliography on the Arbeiterhilfe’s publications from 1986. Characteristically the

93 Dobrin Michev, Mezhrabpom—Organizatsiia Proletarskoi Solidarnosti 1921–1935 (Moscow: Mysl’, 1971).
preface does not highlight Münzenberg’s central position for the organisation, but simply concludes that he was chosen as its secretary in 1921. Evidently still in 1986 the time had not come to write the history of the Arbeiterhilfe in the GDR, as Münzenberg could not be included in this alternative history of the German working class.\footnote{Heinz Sommer, *Im Zeichen der Solidarität. Bibliographie von Veröffentlichungen der Internationalen Arbeiterhilfe in Deutschland 1921–1933*, Bibliographische Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung (Berlin: Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, 1986), 2–30.}

Thus, a history of the Arbeiterhilfe was never published in the GDR, and to the very bitter end the name of Münzenberg remained a white spot in the East German historical narrative. Weber concludes rightly in 1989 that "Die SED versucht weiterhin, die Geschichtswissenschaft für die Politik der Partei zu instrumentalisieren". In this respect, the scholars of the IML were still writing on the grand narrative that combined the history of the interwar KPD with the history of the SED and hence legitimised the state power in the GDR,\footnote{Weber, "Die SED und die Geschichte der Komintern. Gegensätzliche Einschätzungen durch Historiker der DDR und der Sowjetunion," 901.} which by definition could not include the renegade, traitor and bitter adversary Münzenberg. Münzenberg’s ‘treacherous’ break with the Soviet Union and the KPD, had landed him into a historical no mans land which meant that neither he nor the Arbeiterhilfe could be included into the grand narrative or in any East German narrative of the history of the German working class for that matter.

**Behind the Curtains of the Grand Narrative**

Officially the name of Münzenberg had become anathema, but still he was a character that the leaders of East Germany could not ignore. Thus, behind the curtains of the evolving ‘grand narrative’ Ulbricht and Pieck were very concerned with the legacy of Münzenberg and of all persons who had had a closer connection to him. The notion of Münzenberg as a dangerous enemy epitomised by Pieck’s anxious remark of 1938 stating "Hauptgefahr jetzt nich Trotzkismus, sondern Münzenberg” haunted still the new leaders of East Germany. The following presentation of empirical findings concerning postwar secret investigations into the case of Münzenberg and his legacy is still at a tentative stage, but provides an outline of the process based on SED files and the files of the former *Ministry of State Security* (MfS) that will shred new light on the East German perceptions on Münzenberg.

Münzenberg had passed away in silence and represented as such no threat to the GDR, which explains why there e.g. is no personal file on Münzenberg in the BStU. However,
investigations into Münzenberg’s nearest circle that had survived the war were thoroughly
documented after the Second World War, that can today be found in the SED files in the
Bundesarchiv. Among the most notable survivors of the Münzenberg-group was his former
life partner Babett Gross. The SED’s department for Personalpolitik informed on 1 April 1947
to Pieck, who at the time was the chairman of the SED, Ulbricht, who was the primary leader
of the SED, and Franz Dahlem, who at the time was the leader of the KPD/SED’s cadres
department⁹⁶, that Gross had been observed in Paris, and that she had married the earlier
Prussian finance minister Otto Klepper. Worriedly, it was reported that Gross had the intention
to move to Frankfurt am Main and Dahlem had noted that Gross apparently had spread
rumours stating that Münzenberg had been murdered by the GPU.⁹⁷ Gross had since 1940
been in exile in Mexico and in April 1947 Paul Merker informed Dahlem on what was known
of her activities in Mexico. It was revealed that Klepper and Gross had lived in Mexico-City
until 1944, but then moved to the vicinity of Veracruz, that was almost totally separated from
all political events. The only reported contact that Gross upheld to the Münzenberg-group was
to Emil Berger, who earlier had functioned as Münzenberg’s chauffeur. Apparently Gross’
husband Klepper had stayed in contact with the comrades in East Germany and Merker noted
contented in 1947: ”[Klepper] gab jedoch über alles, was wir von ihm wissen wollten,
bereitwillig Auskunft”⁹⁸

Another informant reported in June 1947 to Paul Merker that Klepper indeed had
returned to France and was at the moment living in Paris as a guest of Münzenberg’s former
secretary Hans Schulz. Merker informed that ”Die Genossen aus Mexiko informierten mich,
daß Babett Gross ihnen im Gespräch mitteilte, daß ihre Schwester viele Jahre in Rußland
gefangen war, jetzt nach Deutschland zurückgekehrt sei, und daß Babett alles darn setzen
wird, um die ”grausigen Leiden ihrer Schwester in der SU” zu rächen. Während dieses
Gespräches unterstrich Babett auf das Schärfste ihre Parteifeindliche und antisowjetische
Haltung.” Further it was of concern if Gross had affected Klepper towards her anti-Soviet
stance.⁹⁹ On 8 August 1947 instructions were given to collect more information on Gross, on
what here activities had been in Paris during the years of exile, and on what her activities had

⁹⁷ [letter imprint: SED Hausmitteilung]: Letter from Abteilung Personalpolitik [two illegible signatures] to Pieck,
Ulbricht and Dahlem, 1.4.1947. Handwritten note signed by Dahlem, 14.4.1947, SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV
2/4/382, 164.
⁹⁸ [letter imprint: SED Hausmitteilung]: Letter from Paul Merker to Dahlem, 15.4.1947, SAPMO–BArch, DY
30/IV 2/4/382, 165.
⁹⁹ [letter imprint: SED Hausmitteilung]: Letter from Paul Merker (Zentralsekretariat) to Personalabteilung,
been in the French camp Gurs. On Gross it was further reported that she had been one of Münzenberg’s closest coworkers who had followed loyally Münzenberg’s political statements. With concern it was reported that Gross had also followed Münzenberg’s departure from the Party and agreed to his severe critic of the Soviet Union in 1939–1940. Allegedly, it had been through a trotskyist committee in Lisbon that had granted her the opportunity to flee to Mexico. Accordingly it was reported with concern that Gross had a great antipathy against the SED, and that there were no signs of a turn of heart.

Another informant had suddenly met Gross in August 1947 in a café in Paris. Gross had been dressed “typisch wie ein Potsdamer Offizierstochter” and revealed that she by then had moved to Frankfurt am Main where here sister Margarete Buber-Neumann also lived. Later it was reported with great concern that Gross’ sister Buber-Neumann intended to publish a critical book called Als Gefangene bei Hitler und Stalin. In late April 1948 rumours had reached the investigators in East Germany that affirmed that Gross and her sister Buber-Neumann, the widow of Heinz Neumann, had been observed in Frankfurt am Main. In order to gain information on Gross, the investigators had even interviewed the mother of Gross, who had simply informed them that Gross probably was not engaged in politics, and more interested of art dealership.

Following another trail, it was reported with concern on 28 January 1947 that there was a woman with the name of Münzenberg who lived in Berlin. On 21 March 1947 a representative from the SED Zentralsekretariat had requested information on this person with the A. Münzenberg from the SED-9. Kreis Wilmersdorf. Finally on 18 June the SED’s department for Personalpolitik was informed that A. Münzenberg had been a member of the

107 The full name of the person in question is not revealed due to regulations at the Bundesarchiv. The person seems unfortunately as an totally unknown person in the previous research.
KPD since 1928.\textsuperscript{109} With concern it had however been noted that Münzenberg had on 21 May 1947 renounced her party membership, which she had motivated with personal reasons.\textsuperscript{110}

Other persons of interest from the former Münzenberg-group were Otto Katz aka André Simon who had been a close coworker to Münzenberg in Paris.\textsuperscript{111} Ulbricht noted also to the \textit{Personalpolitik} department that Katz had stood close to Münzenberg, but noted that if there was no remarks on Katz’s activities after 1938, he could well be made a part of the antifascist mass propaganda.\textsuperscript{112}

Another person interviewed on the matter was Richard Gyptner. When it came to Gyptner the main interest of the investigators was not so much the stance or whereabouts of Münzenberg’s former associates, but much more on facts concerning Münzenberg’s activities during the 1930s. Gyptner had been engaged in the Comintern’s West European Bureau until 1933, and in August 1933 he had been appointed against Münzenberg’s will as the international secretary of the Arbeiterhilfe’s executive committee. Gyptner reported between the late 1940s and the 1960s thoroughly on all persons that had been within Münzenberg’s closest circle\textsuperscript{113}, including Münzenberg’s longtime coworker Paul Scholz. On Scholz Gyptner concluded that ”Scholz ist wahrscheinlich 1937 in Moskau in einem der Prozesse abgeurteilt worden”. As he revealed such facts Gyptner emphasised to the investigators that he indeed was very well informed as he after 1935 worked in Moscow as a ‘political coworker’ to Dimitrov.\textsuperscript{114} Gyptner reported further that ”1936 war Münzenberg mindestens zweimal in Moskau. Es gelang ihm noch von Moskau abzureisen, obwohl bereits Leo Flieg verhaftet war und selbst Befragungen durch die IKK hatte. Die Genossen im EKKI [ECCI] rechneten damals fest mit der Verhaftung Münzenbergs. Für sie war es eine Exkursion als sie hörten, daß Münzenberg wieder abgereist ist.” Gyptner assessed further that it had only been possible for Münzenberg to escape the Soviet Union through his friends at the Foreign Ministry.\textsuperscript{115}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[109] ‘Fragebogen: A. Münzenberg’, SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/382, 209; A. Münzenberg, ‘Lebenslauf’, written by A. Münzenberg 1.12.1945, SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/382, 210. See also the further clarification of A. Münzenberg, that claimed that she lacked a marxist stance, and was only a member of the Party because her friends were members. Letter from SED Kreis 14, Neukölln, to the Zentralssekretariat der SED, Personalpolitik, ‘Betrifft: A. Münzenberg’, 3.2.1947, SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/382, 214.
\item[110] Letter from SED, Berlin-Neukölln, to the Zentralsekretariat der SED, Abt. Personalpolitik, ‘Betrifft: A. Münzenberg’, 18.6.1947, SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/382, 203. At this point there is no other information on the role of A. Münzenberg and if further investigations were made regarding her possible connection to Willi Münzenberg.
\item[113] See especially SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0331.
\item[114] SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/382, 195.
\item[115] SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/382, 195–196. Citation, 195.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
secret information that Gypchner revealed was of course regarded top secret and was never provided to the public.

Another person of interest for the investigators was Münzenberg’s former secretary Hans Schulz, who had in April 1947 had been observed in München.\textsuperscript{116} Hans Holm reported in February 1948 on what he by accident had learned in Paris on Hans Schulz. Apparently Schulz managed over some sort of a bureau in Paris, and ”schwimmt im Geld”. Schulz’s bureau was seeking a worker so Holm had suggested that a trusted French comrade was installed there in order to observe the activities of Schulz. Holm was not though the most informed source of information when it came to Schulz, and referred to a Lene Rado, who was capable of reporting thoroughly on these matters.\textsuperscript{117}

The above examples from the SED files illustrate how the former Münzenberg-group was still after the Second World War of central interest to comrades as Ulbricht, Pieck and Franz Dahlem, who all were in the KPD’s central committee. Clearly as they were engaged in the constructing of a historical ‘grand narrative’ of the German radical left that legitimised their power, persons carrying witness to alternative stories were of great concern. However, despite the investigations into Münzenberg’s former associates during the late 1940s, it is difficult to distinguish from the few MfS files in the BStU any certain pattern of investigation on the case of Münzenberg. Apparently, the remaining members of the group were after all not regarded dangerous for the state security in the GDR. The SED controlled after all the bulk of the empirical material pertaining to Münzenberg or the Arbeiterhilfe, consisting of the KPD’s archives and the former archives of the German ministries and police forces. Further, the Central Party Archives in Moscow were securely locked away.

In the BStU there are however copies of publications from the west that had been collected, such as of Babett Gross’ biography of Münzenberg. Copies have further been preserved of western journals and magazines that e.g. celebrated the 100-anniversary of Münzenberg’s birth in 1989, such as Zitty Live Magazin and an extensive newspaper article by Harald Wessel.\textsuperscript{118} There were also e.g. copies from Branko Lazitch and Milorad M. Drachkovitch book Bibliographical dictionary of the Comintern (1973), that was preserved in the library of the IML as ”Sperrliteratur” that was only to be used within the MfS.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{116} [letter imprint:] SED Hausmitteilung; Letter from Zentralbüro der Arbeitsgemeinschaft SED-KPD, Huhrmann, to the Abteilung Personalpolitik, 17.4.1947, SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/4/382, 199.
\textsuperscript{118} BStU, MfS SV 19/82, Bd. 5, 156, 159; BStU, MfS SV 170/88, Bd. 4, 334–338
\textsuperscript{119} Hauptabteilung IX/11, Berlin, 18.9.1989, BStU, MfS SV 170/88, Bd. 4, 347.
One of the most revealing documents from the BStU illustrate that if Münzenberg had returned to the Soviet Union in 1937 or later, Münzenberg had by certainty been arrested and probably sentenced to death. A translation from an undated Russian court document states that on 22 November 1937 Erich Wilhelm Belfort-Birkenhauer, who had been a coworker at the Comintern, had been arrested in Moscow. On 21 July 1939 Birkenhauer had been sentenced to twelve years of imprisonment. According to the court document, Birkenhauer had allegedly functioned as a spy for the Gestapo and been a part of the “trotzkistischen Spaltergruppe Neumann-Remmele-Münzenberg”. As it is well known today, both Trotsky, Remmele and Neumann were all killed by agents of the Soviet Union. Even if the document does not prove anything of the contested death of Münzenberg, it does throw new light on Münzenberg’s total fall out in the Soviet Union, and furthers the speculation if Münzenberg indeed was killed on the orders of Stalin.

One of the most perplexing documents found in the BStU is a letter sent from the leader of the Haupabteilung I, Generalmajor Kleinjung, to Erich Mielke, who at the time was the Minister of State Security. Kleinjung informed him on 10 June 1969 that through Führungs-IM ”Achim” copies of documents regarding Münzenberg had been sent to Mielke. In the documents that had been found from the Deutschen Institut für Militärgeschichte in Potsdam, Kleinjung claimed that there was proof of that a secret agent of the Gestapo with the code name ”V 49” had infiltrated into Münzenberg’s group in 1939. Unfortunately it remains unclear how Mielke and the MfS analysed the documents. The documents are apparently not to be found in the BStU but I have managed to locate at least a part of the files in the Bundesarchiv. Unfortunately, the identity of agent V 49 and Führungs-IM ”Achim” remains unknown despite an inquiry to the BStU on their identity.

As a last example of the MfS’s interest in the contentious case of Münzenberg, various books to be published in the GDR were also closely examined. For example Gerhard Leo’s book Frühzug nach Toulouse (1988) was sent in for approval to the Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe, section 6. The leader of the section, Fischer, reported to the leader of the Hauptabteilung IX/11, that ”Der Abschnitt des Buches über Willi Münzenberg wurde dem
IML vollständig zur Stellungnahme übergeben und wurde von dort nicht beanstandet”. The example illustrates how the IML still during the late 1980’s was interested of Münzenberg. Leo’s book claimed to prove that Münzenberg indeed had committed suicide in 1940. Apparently, the IML had nothing to object against publications that challenged the rumours that Münzenberg had been killed on the orders of Moscow and instead maintained that Münzenberg ingloriously had taken his own life.  

Conclusions and Future Prospects

The contentious case of Münzenberg would remain a sour spot in the history of German communism as long as a the GDR existed. The history of Münzenberg and the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe could not be effectively included in the grand narrative without seriously damaging the authority of the East German leadership. The fact that Münzenberg in effect was the main threat to the German communists during the late 1930s has not yet been thoroughly investigated, just as the effects of the East German uses of remembrance that still can be felt. Still today, the contentious case of Münzenberg rises a number of controversial issues, but his history and the history of his many organisations, and especially the Arbeiterhilfe, have not been made an integral part of the history of the interwar radical left. Münzenberg has recently been eagerly debated in the woks of Stephen Koch and Sean McMeekin, but a new history of the Arbeiterhilfe still remains to be written.

The coast is still however not clear for uninhibited research as for example the personal file of Münzenberg in the RGASPI in Moscow is still strongly censored. The file contains according to the archive database nearly 1300 pages of documents but despite requests from our research team, these documents have not been released. A request for the files was made in 2009, but only 120 pages were provided. In March 2011 a new request for Münzenberg’s papers was put forward in the RGASPI, which resulted in about 100 pages of new unseen papers, accompanied by a renewed ‘classification’ of the documents that had been showed in 2009. The contentious question is of course why? Why is Münzenberg’s personal file in the Comintern archive still today, seventy years after Münzenberg’s death regarded top secret?

124 Gerhard Leo, Frühzug nach Toulouse (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1988).
Clearly, as Münzenberg became a strong critic of the Soviet Union and Stalin personally, it can be speculated whether these files in effect could provide new insight into the interwar history of the German working class and the rewriting of the history of the interwar radical left, and thus in the end affect the writing of the history of the 20th century. Arthur Koestler after all conspicuously concluded that when the biography of Willi Münzenberg will finally be written, it will be one of the most revealing documents of the interwar era.\footnote{Arthur Koestler, "Vorwort," in Willi Münzenberg. Eine politische Biographie (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1968), 7.}

My forthcoming dissertation *The Revival of International Solidarity. The Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, Willi Münzenberg and the Comintern in Weimar Germany, 1921–1933* will hopefully cast significantly more light on the contentious case of Willi Münzenberg and the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe and provide thus a new narrative of the German interwar radical left, analysing the Arbeiterhilfe’s message of international solidarity and its efforts to mobilise the German non communist workers for a radical message of international solidarity and antifascism during the interwar era.