

The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity

Kasper Braskin

Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany



Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements

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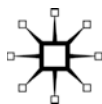
The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity

Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany

Kasper Braskén

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Series Editors' Preface

Around the world, social movements have become legitimate, yet contested, actors in local, national and global politics and civil society, yet we still know relatively little about their longer histories and the trajectories of their development. Our series reacts to what can be described as a recent boom in the history of social movements. We can observe a development from the crisis of labour history in the 1980s to the boom in research on social movements in the 2000s. The rise of historical interests in the development of civil society and the role of strong civil societies as well as non-governmental organisations in stabilising democratically constituted polities have strengthened the interest in social movements as a constituent element of civil societies.

In different parts of the world, social movements continue to have a strong influence on contemporary politics. In Latin America, trade unions, labour parties and various left-of-centre civil society organisations have succeeded in supporting left-of-centre governments. In Europe, peace movements, ecological movements and alliances intent on campaigning against poverty and racial discrimination and discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation have been able to set important political agendas for decades. In other parts of the world, including Africa, India and South East Asia, social movements have played a significant role in various forms of community building and community politics. The contemporary political relevance of social movements has undoubtedly contributed to a growing historical interest in the topic.

Contemporary historians are not only beginning to historicise these relatively recent political developments; they are also trying to relate them to a longer history of social movements, including traditional labour organisations, such as working-class parties and trade unions. In the longue durée, we recognise that social movements are by no means a recent phenomena and are not even an exclusively modern phenomena, although we realise that the onset of modernity emanating from Europe and North America across the wider world from the eighteenth century onwards marks an important departure point for the development of civil societies and social movements.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the dominance of national history over all other forms of history writing led to a thorough nationalisation of the historical sciences. Hence social movements have been

examined traditionally within the framework of the nation state. Only during the past two decades have historians begun to question the validity of such methodological nationalism and to explore the development of social movements in comparative, connective and transnational perspective taking into account processes of transfer, reception and adaptation. Whilst our book series does not preclude work that is still being carried out within national frameworks (for, clearly, there is a place for such studies, given the historical importance of the nation state in history), it hopes to encourage comparative and transnational histories on social movements.

At the same time as historians have begun to research the history of those movements, a number of social theorists, from Jürgen Habermas to Pierre Bourdieu and from Slavoj Žižek to Alain Badiou as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to Miguel Abensour, to name but a few, have attempted to provide philosophical-cum-theoretical frameworks in which to place and contextualise the development of social movements. History has arguably been the most empirical of all the social and human sciences, but it will be necessary for historians to explore further to what extent these social theories can be helpful in guiding and framing the empirical work of the historian in making sense of the historical development of social movements. Hence the current series is also hoping to make a contribution to the ongoing dialogue between social theory and the history of social movements.

This series seeks to promote innovative historical research on the history of social movements in the modern period since around 1750. We bring together conceptually informed studies that analyse labour movements, new social movements and other forms of protest from early modernity to the present. With this series, we seek to revive, within the context of historiographical developments since the 1970s, a conversation between historians on the one hand and sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists on the other.

Unlike most of the concepts and theories developed by social scientists, we do not see social movements as directly linked, a priori, to processes of social and cultural change and therefore do not adhere to a view that distinguishes between old (labour) and new (middle-class) social movements. Instead, we want to establish the concept 'social movement' as a heuristic device that allows historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to investigate social and political protests in novel settings. Our aim is to historicise notions of social and political activism in order to highlight different notions of political and social protest on both left and right.

Hence, we conceive of 'social movements' in the broadest possible sense, encompassing social formations that lie between formal organisations and mere protest events. But we also include processes of social and cultural change more generally in our understanding of social movements: this goes back to nineteenth-century understandings of 'social movement' as processes of social and cultural change more generally. We also offer a home for studies that systematically explore the political, social, economic and cultural conditions in which social movements can emerge. We are especially interested in transnational and global perspectives on the history of social movements, and in studies that engage critically and creatively with political, social and sociological theories in order to make historically grounded arguments about social movements. In short, this series seeks to offer innovative historical work on social movements, while also helping to historicise the concept of 'social movement'. It also hopes to revitalise the conversation between historians and historical sociologists in analysing what Charles Tilly has called the 'dynamics of contention'.

The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity is the first comprehensive study of the Communist front organisation *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (International Workers' Relief, IAH) from 1921 to 1933. Its brand of international solidarity is firmly set within the world of transnational international Communism, although the organisation has a strong German tinge to it, being founded and run in Germany by one of the most fascinating figures of international Communism of the interwar period, Willi Münzenberg. There is currently, in Germany at least, a renaissance of scholarship on Münzenberg, as he was a central player in international communism who was neither recognised by the Social Democratic nor by the Communist historiography post-1945, for he was suspect to Social Democrats as a Communist but he was also persona non grata among Communists because of his late break with Stalin and the Stalinist Soviet Union. This study puts Münzenberg back centre-stage in a wider history of Communist internationalism in the interwar period.

The concept of 'solidarity' is key to this study, and the various chapters of this book explore the manifold dimensions of solidarity and its relationship to other terms and concepts, including humanitarianism, charity, brotherhood and others more. Practical relief work was the most important strategy pursued by the IAH during its various campaigns that are all analysed in detail in the subsequent pages. However, such practical welfare work was always tinged with symbolism, for it was not just the practical relief that was foregrounded but also visions of a different and

more just society. Hence Brasken's study on the IAH is right in paying due attention to the emotive language of the organisation. It was visible from the outset, as the IAH came into being as a desperate attempt to help the young Soviet Union to fend off hunger and starvation that threatened the very survival of the communist state. And later, when the practical help turned to Germany itself, in the midst of economic depression and hyperinflation the emotive language of solidarity, social justice and the diverse notions of a better life and world yet to come (and symbolised by the motherland of the revolution, the Soviet Union) were always foregrounded by the IAH.

The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity also draws attention to the broadening and radicalisation of the IAH's work, both in geographical terms where it moved from the Soviet Union and Germany to the Far East and politically, as it began to engage directly in the support of strike activities to further workers' rights. From the mid-1920s onwards, it began to put its activities firmly in the context of the anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle, always emphasising the commonalities of class and downplaying the differences of race. It also became involved in the struggle against war, linking its analysis of capitalism to theories about war being an outcome of the greed and expansionary nature of capitalist regimes. Towards the end of the Weimar Republic it also engaged heavily in the struggle against National Socialism seeking to build on its networks of international solidarity to draw attention to the dangers of National Socialism and to battle it more effectively.

One of the proliferating turns of recent years in the history of historical writing has been the visual turn and it is gratifying to see that Brasken also pays due attention to the rich visual material produced by the IAH in an attempt to develop its own visual culture in the pursuit of international solidarity. It included visions of the new woman, as women were often portrayed as fighting and working women, equal to men in the overall desire to bring about the new society of the future. Children and youth were also often addressed pictorially, and once again it is the aspect of struggle and active involvement rather than passive endurance of violence and want that is emphasised by the IAH's imaginary.

Finally, this volume also pays due attention to the organisational world of the IAH, its organisation through both individual and collective membership, its organisation of festivals, street demonstrations and solidarity campaigns. Its congresses are analysed and its cultural productions in the form of films and theatre plays are highlighted. It draws the reader into the lost world of interwar Communist internationalism and shows

him or her how fascinating this transnational and potentially global world could be, for the vision of a more just and better world inspired a diversity of campaigns all based on notions of international solidarity.

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Without all of the generous support and friendly advice of these individuals and institutions, this book would certainly have remained unwritten. Needless to say, the remaining faults in the text are entirely my own.

List of Abbreviations

ADGB	Allgemeiner deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (the General Federation of German Trade Unions)
AIZ	<i>Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung</i> (The Workers' Pictorial Newspaper)
Antifa	Anti-Fascist Action
ARA	American Relief Administration
<i>Arbeiterhilfe</i>	Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (also: Auslandskomitee für Rußlandhilfe der Kommunistischen Internationale; Auslandskomitee zur Organisierung der Arbeiterhilfe für die Hungernden in Russland; Industrie- und Handelsaktiengesellschaft Internationale Arbeiterhilfe für Sowjetrußland; Bund der Freunde der Internationalen Arbeiterhilfe) (In English: the International Workers' Relief)
ARSO	Arbeitsgemeinschaft sozialpolitischer Organisationen
BArch	Bundesarchiv (the Federal Archives of Germany)
BArch R	Bundesarchiv, Reichsarchiv (Department German Reich (Department R))
BStU	Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (The Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records)
CC	Central Committee
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Comintern	Communist (Third) International
CP	Communist Party
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei (the German Democratic Party)
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik (GDR, the German Democratic Republic)
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei (the German National People's Party: Nationalist)
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei (the German People's Party)
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
GARF	Russian Federation State Archives

GDR	German Democratic Republic (DDR)
GStA PK	Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Secret State Archives Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation)
IAH	<i>see</i> Arbeiterhilfe
ICC	International Control Commission
Ifa	Interessengemeinschaft für Arbeiterkultur
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions (the 'Amsterdam International')
IISH	International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam
IML	Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der SED
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IRA	<i>see</i> IRH
IRH	Internationale Rote Hilfe (IRA, International Red Aid)
KAPD	Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (Communist Workers' Party of Germany)
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security), foreign intelligence and domestic security agency of the Soviet Union
KJVD	Kommunistischer Jugendverband Deutschlands (Young Communist League of Germany)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party) (NB! called the Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, VKPD, 1921–1922)
Krestintern	Red Peasant International
LAB	Landesarchiv Berlin
LAI	League Against Imperialism
LSI	Labour and Socialist International (i.e. Second International)
MdR	Member of the Reichstag
Mezhrabpom	Russian acronym of the <i>Arbeiterhilfe</i>
MOPR	Russian acronym of the IRH
Narkomindel	People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NKVD	People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (the National Socialist German Workers' Party; National Socialist; Nazis)

OBI	United Information Bureau
OMS	Department of International Communication
Orgbüro	Organisational Bureau (of the KPD or the Comintern)
PCF	Parti Communiste Français (the French Communist Party)
Politbüro	Political Bureau (of the KPD or the Comintern)
Profintern	Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale (RGI); Red International of Labour Unions (RILU)
RCP (B)	Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
RdI	Reichsministerium des Innern (Reich Ministry of the Interior)
RF	Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag)
RFB	Rote Frontkämpferbund (Red Front Fighters' League)
RGASPI	Russian State Archives of Social and Political History
RGI	<i>see</i> Profintern
RGO	Rote Gewerkschafts Opposition (the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition)
RGVA	Russian State Military Archives
RHD	Rote Hilfe Deutschlands (The German Red Aid)
RILU	<i>see</i> Profintern
RÜöO	Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung (State Councillor for the Supervision of Public Order)
SA	Sturm Abteilung (Nazi storm troopers)
SAPMO	Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR in the Federal Archives)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (the Socialist Unity Party)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (the Social Democratic Party; Social Democrats)
Sportintern	Red Sport International
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (the Independent Social Democratic Party)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union)
VKPD	<i>see</i> KPD
VOKS	All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad
WaA	<i>Die Welt Am Abend</i> (The World This Evening)
WEB	West European Bureau
WES	West European Secretariat
ZK	Zentralkomitee (Central Committee, e.g. of Communist Party) <i>Series Editors' Preface</i> <i>Series Editors' Preface</i>

1

Introduction

As dusk was falling over Berlin on a midsummer's evening in 1931, a trumpet fanfare was heard filling the night air. Tens of thousands of people had gathered to celebrate the annual International Solidarity Day organised by the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*, and the grand finale was about to begin. Suddenly a great fireworks display commenced, and a massive symbol of the *Arbeiterhilfe* was illuminated. A thundering cannonade then echoed through the grounds, and the enthusiasm of the crowd allegedly knew no limits: a spontaneous joint singing of the *Internationale* broke out, and simultaneously a great blaze of red light started to illuminate the Berlin night sky, symbolising the bright future of the working class.¹

It was one of the numerous dazzling spectacles of transnational solidarity that were arranged by the legendary German communist, anti-militarist and propagandist Wilhelm "Willi" Münzenberg (1889–1940), who was the principal leader of the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (International Workers' Relief, hereafter referred to as the *Arbeiterhilfe*).² He had, from the *Arbeiterhilfe*'s inception in 1921 until its destruction in Germany in 1933, allegedly had "everything in his hands"³ when it came to issues pertaining to the organisation. Although this is not a biographical study of Münzenberg, one of its central aims is to reveal Münzenberg's often forgotten, but influential role in the shaping of transnational solidarity movements during the interwar era. One could argue that Münzenberg's political biography as the *Arbeiterhilfe*'s leader follows, in a significant way, the historical development of transnational solidarity during the interwar period. Already during the early 1930s, both Münzenberg and others even claimed that the *Arbeiterhilfe* was the "embodiment" or "the organisational expression of international solidarity" which had

shouldered the gigantic task of spreading the idea of international solidarity after the First World War. It was subsequently argued that its creation and history represented a revival of international solidarity as it had never previously been conceived in history. The main issue of this study is thus to investigate how the *Arbeiterhilfe* under Münzenberg's leadership actually envisaged, organised and brought to life cultures, movements and celebrations of transnational solidarities in Weimar Germany.

The *Arbeiterhilfe* had its international headquarters in Berlin which functioned as the base, one could argue, for some of the period's most spectacular solidarity campaigns. The *Arbeiterhilfe* initiated a broad spectrum of solidarity ventures including famine and hunger relief; strike support; a social political programme for workers' children and women; and launched campaigns against war, imperialism and fascism. As a part of its cultural work the *Arbeiterhilfe* produced proletarian films both in Moscow and Berlin and brought Soviet films such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1926) to Germany and the world. The *Arbeiterhilfe* also created an impressive red media empire that published amongst others Kurt Tucholsky's *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* (1929) and the main illustrated newspaper of the Left in Germany, the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ) featuring John Heartfield's photomontages; and it built an extensive international organisation which was supported at different times by artists such as Käthe Kollwitz, Georg Grosz and Heinrich Zille; intellectuals and socialists such as Albert Einstein, Bernhard Shaw, Anatole France, Heinrich Mann, Arthur Koestler, Jon Dos Passos, Romain Rolland, Clara Zetkin, Maxim Gorky and Henri Barbusse; as well as by tens of thousands of German communist and non-communist workers. Characteristically, the *Arbeiterhilfe's* activities were built upon the concept of international solidarity which was never restricted to a European solidarity. Instead it specifically promoted the idea of an international solidarity which extended from West to East and from North to South. The *Arbeiterhilfe's* various ventures were linked by an overarching theme consisting of the idea and practice of international solidarity, and it is this specific aspect of the organisation that is at the heart of this study.

Through *Arbeiterhilfe's* international solidarity campaigns, it encouraged workers to 'think globally' and to make them realise that, just as major strikes in neighbouring countries were inextricably linked with their own future prospects, so too were the far-off struggles in the colonies. The *Arbeiterhilfe's* history was also integrally connected with the rise of the first global anti-imperialist movement, the *League Against*

Imperialism (LAI) which under the leadership of Münzenberg secured the support of some of the future leaders in the Third World, including Jawaharlal Nehru (India) and Achmed Sukarno (Indonesia).⁴

The *Arbeiterhilfe's* network connected all parts of the world as *Arbeiterhilfe* bureaus were established on all six continents in countries such as China, Japan, Australia, South Africa, Argentina, Mexico, the USA, Canada; and most European nations including Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and Austria. The German section of the *Arbeiterhilfe* was, however, the strongest of them all and one of the few areas where the *Arbeiterhilfe* was successful in forming the organisation into a so-called above-party mass organisation. The establishment and history of the *Arbeiterhilfe's* global network forms in this study a significant role, although the main empirical results are placed in the context of Weimar Germany.

Throughout the book, the changing and complex character of international solidarity that in modern terminology is better conceptualised as a form of transnational solidarity, will be analysed. How was the concept of workers' international solidarity provided with meaning through the creation of a vivid language, visualisation and the practices of solidarity? How were the *Arbeiterhilfe's* articulations of solidarity created and changed in relation to the Communist International (Comintern) and the Soviet Union's policies? As will be demonstrated, most prior studies on solidarity have focused on the sociological and philosophical aspects of this idea, whereas very few have investigated the contextual expressions, representations and articulations of international solidarity. Furthermore, studies on international communism have not focused on the issue of international solidarity from such a perspective.

Through the analysis of a number of the *Arbeiterhilfe's* major solidarity campaigns, this study will not only present a new history of the *Arbeiterhilfe* and Münzenberg but also contribute to a new history of international solidarity in interwar Europe. The subsequent narrative and analysis of the *Arbeiterhilfe's* history is both chronologically and thematically structured. All of the chapters thematically share the same basic questions concerning the formation of a transnational solidarity community; for example, the questions of inclusion and exclusion; the construction of 'the other'; and the relationship between international solidarity and concepts such as charity, philanthropy, humanitarianism, brotherhood, sisterhood and internationalism.

The history of the *Arbeiterhilfe* is consequently perceived as being integrally connected to the historical understanding of the experiences, mentalities and outlooks of the 'morbid' interwar period. In essence,

it forms a study of how transnational unity and imaginaries can be constructed beyond borders and national frameworks. But likewise it is a study of the vast number of contentions and difficulties that any such endeavour might entail.

Resurrecting a 'hidden history'

The history of the interwar period has until recently been largely characterised by methodological nationalism as most studies on the period have either focused on individual states or the international relations between governments. As Laqua (2011) has argued, the vitality of interwar internationalism has frequently been underestimated. There has indeed been a historical tradition in which international institutions have been written out of the study of the twentieth century.⁵

The current study highlights the significance of international organisations being the focal point of any study of the transnational history of the twentieth century. In the words of Iriye (2013) if international history deals with relations amongst nations as sovereign entities, then transnational history focuses instead on cross-national connections and on non-state actors such as international organisations.⁶ Transnational history has stressed the significance of abandoning methodological nationalism in favour of studying the "entanglements of people, ideas, technologies and economies with cultural, political and social movements". As this study also shows, the focus on the transnational does not imply that state borders or nations would fall outside the scope of any such analysis. On the contrary, the transnational history presented here is written within the specific context of Weimar Germany. In this case, Germany provides a necessary limitation as the historical context would be lost if additional countries were included. The nation provides, therefore, the context in which the transnational can be studied in depth.⁷

The transnational focus on non-state actors or international organisations is problematic when studying the era before 1945. The actual term for "non-governmental organisations" did not exist before the adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945, and the general use of the term NGO was not established until the 1980s. However, as amongst others Reinalda (2009) has shown, international organisations have a long history, which is often traced back to 1815 and the Congress of Vienna. The organisations established there were not non-governmental organisations, but most often so-called IGOs or intergovernmental organisations. There were of course much older 'transnational citizens networks' formed across Europe and America into private associations and societies

against issues such as slavery or poverty. It seems, therefore, that international organisations such as the *Arbeiterhilfe* represented in essence something completely new. In a sense, it resembled organisationally the *International Red Cross* and several other humanitarian organisations created mainly during or immediately after the First World War, as the *Arbeiterhilfe* was created as an international *relief* organisation. In stark contrast to humanitarian initiatives, however, the *Arbeiterhilfe* was a strong opponent to charity and philanthropy, and advocated instead a class-based international solidarity. In this spirit the *Arbeiterhilfe* was even described as the “Red Cross of the international working class” in 1924. As Willetts (2011) shows, the definition of what should be accepted as “non-governmental” organisations is in reality far from clear. As the term NGO is so strongly connected to the UN system, one could describe the pre-1945 *non-governmental* international organisations simply as transnational actors or transnational civil society organisations.⁸

What was the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*?

A number of labels and typologies have been applied to classify organisations such as the *Arbeiterhilfe*. During the interwar period, it was defined by German government agencies both as a subsidiary organisation of the communist movement (*Nebenorganisation/Unterorganisation*) and as a communist aid organisation (*Hilfsorganisation*). The national socialist ‘research’ on the communist movement classified the *Arbeiterhilfe* as both a united front organisation (*Einheitsfront-organisation*) and a subsidiary international (*Nebeninternationale*).⁹ Again in 1926, the Comintern classified the *Arbeiterhilfe* as part of the system of communist organisations which functioned as “sympathising mass organisation for special purposes”. The special purpose of the *Arbeiterhilfe* was to function as an international solidarity organisation on a global scale. In its own publications, the *Arbeiterhilfe* itself used a number of different labels, including “relief organisation of the working class”, “world organisation of proletarian solidarity”, or “above-party mass organisation”.¹⁰

However, previous research has primarily classified the *Arbeiterhilfe* as a front organisation due to its origins in and close connections to the Comintern. The concept of a front organisation has been an integral part of the totalitarian perspective developed by Hannah Arendt (1951) who highlights that the most striking new organisational device of totalitarian movements before their coming to power was the front organisation which represented a new form of “totalitarian organisation”.¹¹ Looking back, it was first during and after the Second World War that US scholars and state institutions began to utilise the concept of communist front

organisations. Fronts were defined as organisations delivering communism in disguise so that “well-meaning people who normally would not participate in openly communist-led activities can be drawn into them”.¹² Here, it was assumed that normal people would only support communism if lured by others. The fear of ideological ‘contagion’ was especially obvious in Cold War America, where for example the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, dedicated a whole chapter to communist front organisations in his book on American communism in 1958.¹³

Curiously, advocates of the front organisation perspective have since 1945 utilised the *Arbeiterhilfe* as a prime example of a front organisation. The only problem is that the very fundament of a front organisation is that it should not have any outward connection with Moscow or with communism. This is, without any doubt, inaccurate and largely anachronistic in relation to the *Arbeiterhilfe*.¹⁴ One only has to be reminded of the facts that Münzenberg, as the *Arbeiterhilfe*'s General Secretary, was a renown communist and Member of the *Reichstag* in Germany (1924–1933); the *Arbeiterhilfe* proudly proclaimed that the organisation had been founded on the initiative of Lenin himself; and finally, that it throughout the period openly supported both the Soviet Union and the Communist Parties (CPs). As Mally (2007) notes in an attempt to introduce a post-Cold War analysis of an interwar front organisation (albeit still calling it a front!) one did not have to be a genius to identify the organisations' open support of communism and the Soviet Union.¹⁵ It seems therefore more likely that organisations such as the *Arbeiterhilfe* made it possible for people already sympathising with radical ideas such as transnational solidarity to find a cultural expression for their beliefs, without forcing them to become actual members of the CP. There is a clear analytical difference between ‘luring (innocent) people to communism’, and providing already sympathising people the opportunity to engage themselves for the cause in cultural events, celebrations and protest campaigns.

During the Cold War, the interest in the West for the history and usage of “psycho-political warfare” generated an interest in the ‘origins’ of the communist front organisations. In these early studies, Münzenberg was in fact highlighted as the prime “architect of the front organisations”. In James D. Atkinson's *The Politics of Struggle* (1966) the *Arbeiterhilfe* is defined as “the prototype for all the hundreds and hundreds of front organisations that have been set in motion by the Soviet Union, Communist China, Castro's Cuba and other Communist nations” from 1921 to the 1960s. In a report to the US Senate on the techniques of Soviet propa-

ganda (1965), the “famous German Communist” Münzenberg is also described as “one of the geniuses of political warfare”.¹⁶

In these presentations, Münzenberg is best known as the “godfather” of the communist fronts and it has been claimed that Münzenberg scornfully labelled them as “Innocents’ Clubs” which were irresistible to progressive intellectuals, who were also sarcastically referred to as “fellow travellers”.¹⁷ Münzenberg was also later described by his life partner Babette Gross as the “patron saint” of fellow travellers, and he is revered in a recent history of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) as being the “great virtuoso of Soviet front organisations”. Wilford (2008) clearly endorses the Cold War definition of Münzenberg’s organisations as being devoted to an “undeniably benign cause, [...] whose real purpose was to defend and to spread the Bolshevik Revolution”.¹⁸ Again, it is assumed that radicalism is something external delivered to the politically innocent, whereas the social context as a distinct force for radicalisation is overlooked.

Furthermore, without any hint of criticism of the front organisation perspective, McMeekin (2003) vigorously claims in his controversial Münzenberg biography that the *Arbeiterhilfe* was a significant front organisation which by the beginning of the 1930s had turned into an “unabashed” servant of Stalin’s foreign policy needs. The *Arbeiterhilfe* is, in this version, a fabulous propaganda machinery only explained and understood from the perspective of the Kremlin and a world revolutionary offensive. McMeekin’s concern with worker solidarity is thus limited to the use of solidarity as a weapon for “spreading moral blindness”.¹⁹

It is perhaps an easy task to extend the perspectives of the Cold War era to our days, not least as the *Arbeiterhilfe* was irrefutably in close connection with both the communist movement and the Comintern. However, if one also seeks to analyse the *Arbeiterhilfe*’s cultural, political and social activities as being part of the German interwar context, it is argued here that the organisation cannot only be perceived from a totalitarian viewpoint as a puppet of Moscow providing propaganda for the Soviet Union’s conspiratorial aims.²⁰ If it is maintained, as the front organisation perspective irrefutably does, that the radical Left solely defined international solidarity as an instrument of Soviet politics, then it seems that the national contexts beyond the Soviet Union are irretrievably lost. As Hermann Weber has recently highlighted, it must not be forgotten that the German radical Left of the 1920s still stood firmly in the traditions of socialist thought based on the struggle for social

justice and international solidarity which had been accentuated by the devastating experiences of the First World War.²¹

Furthermore, as one of the most prominent Russian scholars on the history of the Comintern, Alexander Vatlin, has recently stated, it would be a great over-simplification to reduce the history of the German, or of any national communist movement, to only consisting of orders, emissaries and gold from Moscow.²² Equally, any research that disregards the increasing Bolshevik control and the *Bolshevisation* or *Stalinisation* of the CPs and organisations during the interwar period must, unquestionably, be distorted.²³

It seems beyond doubt that the Cold War era front organisation perspective represents a one-sided analytical category that is not open to interpretation but which contains a pre-conceived understanding 'from above', or if you like, 'from Moscow' that states that the *Arbeiterhilfe's* message of solidarity was merely a weapon skilfully utilised by the Soviet Union. From this viewpoint, the *Arbeiterhilfe's* expressions of solidarity were only pure political propaganda, void of any 'real' solidarity. A black and white dichotomy is constructed between the innocent, but ultimately false, message of solidarity and the actual 'menacing' communist propaganda hidden behind it.²⁴

If the *Arbeiterhilfe* is to be defined simply as a communist front organisation, it would represent and *recreate* a black and white dichotomy of the past, and purely in the context of Soviet foreign policy. The idea of this study is instead to open up a whole spectrum of past meanings and understandings that enables a deeper analysis of the various uses and articulations of international solidarity. The main question of my study will thus investigate how solidarity has been expressed and articulated through the *Arbeiterhilfe* – starting with the communist leaders in both Moscow and Berlin as well as the leaders and functionaries of the *Arbeiterhilfe*, and including the ordinary people who came out onto the streets of Weimar Germany in support of the *Arbeiterhilfe's* message of solidarity. International solidarity can then not only be perceived as a weapon and as a means to an end, but also as a cultural value, emotion, identity, a sense of belonging, and even an aim in of itself.

The front organisation perspective is hence 'laid to rest', and instead a spectrum arises: a spectrum of solidarity representing a multitude of parallel and multidimensional meanings that otherwise would be omitted in the black and white interpretations. Just as a degree of conspiracy and secrecy was a part of this history, so were actual stories of people engaging themselves for solidarity. There must be a difference

between what it did in practice and what the leaders of the Comintern perceived its mission to be.

It is here argued that the *Arbeiterhilfe* instead should be included in the history of early international *non*-governmental civil society organisations which had unparalleled prospects to develop new transnational identifications and social ties for global (albeit not universal) solidarity. It could consequently be suggested that the *Arbeiterhilfe* in several ways could be perceived as a predecessor to several post-1945 NGOs.²⁵ Modern NGOs have often been described as the ‘conscience of the world’; constituting an important critical mass, exposing injustices, providing assistance to the world’s poor and highlighting the fates of political prisoners. The somewhat heroic aura surrounding the NGOs must be viewed critically as they have always functioned in close collaboration with various state institutions.²⁶ The *Arbeiterhilfe* was likewise integrally connected to the Soviet Union through the Comintern and was thus strongly influenced by the shifting sands within the international communist movement and Soviet foreign politics. In this story the dependence of both the *Arbeiterhilfe* and Münzenberg on Soviet Russia/the Soviet Union is necessarily of supreme importance but, as I will suggest, a new history of the *Arbeiterhilfe* and its message of international solidarity can only be achieved if it is linked ‘from below’ to the traditions of worker solidarity in the historical context of Weimar Germany. International solidarity was not, after all, invented in Moscow.

The post-war crisis of the interwar period

The First World War gave rise to an array of international institutions and movements which tried to provide an international and transnational answer to the failures of the world order which had caused total war. In 1919, international cooperation was not only imagined in Woodrow Wilson’s *League of Nations*, but also from the perspective of class-based internationalism and international solidarity in the Comintern. During the final years prior to the First World War, international solidarity had been elevated to the principal concept and idea of the labour movement. The primary transnational labour organisation of the period, the Second International, called repeatedly for international labour solidarity against war but, as it was unable to gain sufficient support in the midst of the patriotic fervour, it stood powerless as the European armies quickly mobilised in the summer of 1914. The prevailing idea was not one of international solidarity, but one of patriotism and the defence of the Fatherland.²⁷

The years of war and social turmoil that followed were no less than ruinous for the unity of the international labour movement. The Third, or communist, International was founded in 1919 on the belief that a new International had to follow the Second International as it had beyond redemption 'betrayed' the idea of international solidarity. The Comintern was, however, devised as an International solely accessible to the 'conscious' part of the working class, and did not attempt to include all the parties of the Left. It was an organisation with a very restricted membership and it can, therefore, not be argued that its establishment represented a significant return to the idea of international solidarity in Europe.²⁸ The deplorable state of international working-class solidarity was emphasised by the fact that not even the previous flagship of international solidarity, the Second International, embraced the concept of solidarity when it was re-established in 1920. Sensationally, the institution which had originally been perceived as the primary forum for the workers of the world even failed to mention solidarity in its new statutes.²⁹ However, as this study will demonstrate, when the *Arbeiterhilfe* was established in 1921, it specifically articulated international solidarity as its guiding principle which was defined as being all-inclusive for the working class, labour parties, Internationals and for the sympathisers of the working class. However, this was never an unproblematic or uncontested undertaking, as the issue of international solidarity produced a significant number of political, practical and ideological controversies which continued to cause bitter conflicts, especially between the social democrats and communists.

The *Arbeiterhilfe* was brought to life in the summer of 1921 when Soviet Russia had been hit by a disastrous famine crisis which proved to be the most devastating tragedy to hit Europe after the First World War. It was a relief organisation created in the hour of an extraordinary crisis, one of many crises which became the hallmarks of the so-called morbid interwar age, typically characterised as an era defined by general anxiety, doubt and fear. Several scholars have attempted to break through the perceived 'pessimistic orthodoxy', but as Overy (2010) concludes, the prevailing discourses of the interwar period remain infused with pessimism, increasing uncertainty and insecurity.³⁰ Typically, the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), which is the essential backdrop to this study, has been merely perceived as a period explaining the rise of the Third Reich and the coming of the Second World War.

The prevailing 'vanishing points' in German history have been the years 1933 and 1945, and Winkler (2006) has even suggested that the question of how Hitler was able to come to power is the most important

question of modern, if not of all, German history.³¹ Contrary to this perspective, this current study will not primarily analyse the Weimar Republic as part of an interwar period or a period merely explaining the rise of the Third Reich, but as a *post-war* period whose defining experiences were the First World War, the 1917 Bolshevik October Revolution, the failed 1918 German November Revolution and the subsequent social turmoil and civil war. The First World War had undoubtedly engendered a severe apprehension regarding the future of Western civilisation and made it possible for a number of utopian aspirations to be successfully developed on both the political Right and Left producing bold new promises of a re-shaped world order.³²

Introducing Willi Münzenberg

The then young socialist Münzenberg belonged to the generation which had experienced the collapse of international solidarity in 1914 and was confronted with the madness of total war. Münzenberg, born in Erfurt, Germany in 1889, carried out his political work mainly from Switzerland, where he moved in the summer of 1909 at 20 years old. He soon became a leading figure within the socialist youth movement and in 1915 he was elected the International Secretary of a bureau for international socialist youth organisations, later to become the Youth International.³³ In September 1915, Münzenberg resolved to join the Zimmerwald Left which had formed around Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In the Youth International's official publication, entitled the *Jugend-Internationale*, articles by leading communists such as Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin and Radek were published. Already before the renown anti-militarist Zimmerwald Conference was held on 5–8 September 1915, Lenin and Münzenberg had frequented a discussion club in Zürich which marked the beginning of their long-lasting cooperation. When Lenin moved to Zürich in February 1916, they continued to meet frequently either at Lenin and Krupskaya's apartment or at Münzenberg's residence.³⁴

However, when Lenin and the other Bolsheviks left Zürich on 9 April 1917 by train heading first to Berlin and then continuing on via Saßnitz and Trelleborg to Petrograd, Münzenberg was unable to accompany his comrades due to his German citizenship. It is assumed that Münzenberg was not willing to risk entering Germany as he could have been either forced into conscription or arrested by the German authorities. Münzenberg was left behind on the platform at Zürich railway station, perhaps reflecting on the last words uttered by Karl Radek expressing the fateful conditions of their journey: "in six months they would either be ministers, or hanged".³⁵

In Zürich, Münzenberg continued to carry out the work of the Youth International, but the Swiss authorities regarded him as an increasingly dangerous anti-militarist agitator. He was consequently imprisoned on 19 November 1917 and, although he was released on bail in April 1918, he was interned anew in May. Finally, on 10 November 1918, Münzenberg was expelled from Switzerland and escorted to the German border.³⁶ When Münzenberg entered Germany, the country was in a state of complete upheaval, if not revolution. In early November 1918, the sailors and soldiers of Kiel had mutinied, signalling the beginning of the German "November Revolution", which reached Berlin on 9 November. It was a process that would soon lead to the fall of the *Second German Reich* (Empire) and pave the way for the first German parliamentary democracy, the Weimar Republic. In Germany, Münzenberg joined the *Spartacus Union* which, along with other radical groups, was transformed into the German Communist Party (KPD) on 30 December 1918. In Stuttgart, he joined the circle of the eminent German radical Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), who would later also become deeply involved in the *Arbeiterhilfe's* affairs. The critical situation in Germany led to continued radicalism, culminating in the Left-wing uprising in January 1919. This rising was, however, poorly organised and was quickly put down by government forces. As a result, all Left-wing radicals were brutally suppressed by Right-wing forces in Germany which, amongst other things, led to the execution of the KPD's two most prominent front figures, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Münzenberg was also arrested in Stuttgart as a result of his involvement in this uprising. Due to his imprisonment, Münzenberg was absent from the Comintern's inauguration congress although he had been one of the few Germans specifically invited to Moscow.³⁷

After his release five months later, Münzenberg settled in Berlin where he resumed his work for the Youth International which, on 20–26 November 1919, was transformed into the Communist Youth International (*Kommunistischesii Internatsional Molodezhi*, KIM).³⁸ Up until the summer of 1921, the KIM had been based in Berlin where, under Münzenberg's leadership, it enjoyed a fairly high degree of political independence and functioned as the main platform for the active international revolutionary youth. The KIM convened its own congress in Moscow on 14 July 1921, at the same time as the Comintern's Third World Congress. However, in reality, the major issues of the youth movement had already been settled by the leaders of the Comintern, and the KIM's congress was, ultimately, a mere postscript. The radical youth movement, as it had been built up by Münzenberg, was coming to an end. At the congress, the KIM just like the Comintern overall, was persuaded