

Comintern spin doctor

Willi Münzenberg, artiste en révolution (1889-1940) (Paris: Editions Fayard, 2008, pp.13-633. 26 euros)

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Willi Münzenberg is a pivotal figure for any historian or cultural historian of the 1930s concerned with the USSR, Germany or France. Born in Erfurt, Germany in 1889, Münzenberg was the *doyen* of Comintern operations in interwar Europe and on a worldwide scale; he was the inventor of modern mass communications. In June 1940, in a forest in the Isère in the Rhône-Alpes region, a decayed corpse was found with a rope around its neck, disguised as a suicide. Münzenberg's death has added mystery to the epic of his rise to a position of real political power. This biography presented by award-winning French novelist and world traveller, Alain Dugrand and the Monaco-based investigative journalist Frédéric Laurent - an exciting and vivid read - will not easily facilitate that understanding. Several issues are at stake here, involving the Münzenberg historiography, the opening of Eastern European and Soviet archives, the institutional affiliations and *parti pris* of previous scholars and genres of historical and biographical writing.

Münzenberg learned much from early mentors and as early as 1912 at the extraordinary congress of the Second International, in Basel, he represented the Swiss socialist youth movement, frequenting illuminaries such as Clara Zetkin, Jean Jaurès, Mussolini and Trotsky. Already a professional as regards propaganda tactics, he had printed and distributed tracts and posters by the thousand for the preparatory Zurich meeting. By 1915, he was head of the Communist Youth International, a movement with 38,000 members; his journal, *Jugend Internationale*, had a massive circulation. Münzenberg's Zurich base facilitated meetings with Lenin in the Spielgasse - home of the avant-garde Cabaret Voltaire and Dada movement. Like the Dadaists, his extreme political repugnance at the carnage and ideological confusion of the first world war drove him to action. It was the Soviet Revolution and Communist Party that seemed to offer an alternative vision. By autumn 1920, with forty nine affiliated associations, the Communist Youth International's membership numbers had risen to 800,000.

Following the first world war and revolution, the USSR faced drought, unprecedented famine and epidemics - created in part through the military's brutal war-time accessioning of peasant resources. Münzenberg became head of the world-wide mobilisation programme for international aid, publishing 'Bread and machines for Soviet Russia' in 1920 (following the publication of his early poetry in 1913, and wartime Youth International propaganda). The relationship with capitalist America and its aid programme was particularly telling at this time. Within a few months the international network became global. The Comintern subsequently looked out from Europe towards recruitment from its colonies. Münzenberg launched the League against imperialism (1926-9), coinciding with Soviet interest in supporting the Chinese Revolution. He declared his entire allegiance to Stalin in the USSR at the 12th German Communist Party (KPD) congress in 1929 and became a key figure in its ranks. In 1931 he published a resumé of ten years of activity in Berlin, *Solidarität: 10 Jahre internationale Arbeitshilfe*, and his autobiography, *Die Dritte Front*. By this time he had developed a huge propaganda enterprise and the vast range of publications. Following *Die Jugend Internationale* (Zurich, 1915-1918) came the Berlin-based trilingual *Sowjetrussland im Bild* (1921-3), *Sichel und Hammer* and *Chronik der Fascismus* (both 1923-4), and in

particular *A I Z- Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* together with the mass circulation newspapers *Welt im Abend* and *Berlin am Morgen*. These became role models for publications outside of Germany: in France, *Nos Regards, Illustré Mondial du Travail*, was published on the AIZ model on May 1st, 1928 and became an illustrated weekly supplement to the French Communist daily *L'Humanité* after 1933. As Münzenberg said of AIZ in *Soldarität*, 'It is devoted wholly to the life and fight of the workers and of all working sections of the population. It brings pictures of factories, strikes, of unemployment cards being stamped, of demonstrations, meetings, famine...'
Münzenberg's importance for Soviet film production is a revelation: Narkompros's section for revolutionary cinema was constituted in 1918; Münzenberg's **Meshrabprom Russ** - **half-financed** by American capital - produced 160 fiction films and 240 documentaries from 1937; they were distributed in ciné-clubs all over Europe, beginning with **the** sci-fi *Aelita* and including Eisenstein's internationally-acclaimed *Battleship Potemkin*. Münzenberg himself coproduced six major films ending with *Metall*, in collaboration with the German artist Hans Richter in 1933. Beyond Münzenberg's personal trajectory, the cultural density of his world - the world of Comintern penetration - was astonishing. Lenin apparently **labelled 'useful cretins'** the men such as George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht, Albert Einstein, the French writer and militant pacifist Henri Barbusse and the hosts of intellectuals - Communists or fellow travellers - who participated in dozens of congresses and signed innumerable manifestos Posterity has not retained the names of the armies of less-disitnguished journalists, photographers, translators, designers, printers - and the reading, spectating public - all of whom should be considered, nonetheless, as active participators in the 'Münzenberg Konzern'. (Communist historian Annie Kriegel's enumeration of the essential role of the radio technicians, accountants, bodyguards and cooks who propped up the Comintern enterprise is a useful comparison).

In 1932, Münzenberg founded the Movement against war and fascism, coming into conflict with his rival and co-worker Henri Barbusse. With the Reichstag fire, of February, 1933 - the **deliberately-engendered** pretext for Hitler's crackdown on the German Communist Party (KPD) - operations moved to Paris. Münzenberg joined the huge influx of German refugees including intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin - but quickly established his niche in the French political and journalistic elite. Lucien Vogel (formerly editor of the fashionable *Le Gazette du bon ton* and *Le Jardin des Modes*) was a key figure: he had launched **Vu on the AIZ model in 1928**; his daughter Marie-Claude would later marry Paul Vaillant-Couturier (a founding member of the French Communist Party). Münzenberg was able to legalise his position and take over the Editions du Carrefour; his priority was to publish the *Brown book of the Reichstag fire* (in German then French) - a major bestseller which internationally mobilised anti-fascist protest. A stream of antifascist publications followed including Brecht in French or Aragon or Malraux in German. After the death of Henri Barbusse he was ordered to direct the World Committee against War and Fascism in the context of the Front Populaire and Spanish Civil War. This period, however, was beset by doubt, clouded by the first Soviet show **trials and** the beginning of the assassination of his colleagues.

Münzenberg was replaced as Comintern leader in Paris December 1936, at a time of splits in the **KPD**, and menace to its membership in Germany; his overtures to the German social democrat leader in exile, Rudolf Breitscheid, started at this time. He wrote *Propaganda als Waffe* in convalescence in Paris in 1937, and became a director of the ill-fated German Union of Free Socialists. He launched *Die Zukunft, Ein Neues Deutschland, ein Neues Europa* in late 1938 in a situation of increasing disfavour and danger. He resigned from the KPD in early 1939 - prior to his published denunciation of Stalin after the nazi-Soviet non-agression pact. This act of suicidal courage marked the tragic end to the political idealism which had

spurred Münzenberg's earlier career (if he had survived, there is much speculation as to what his political role and influence in Europe might have been after 1945).

According to Alain Dugrand, Münzenberg as an operator of mythic status, has fascinated the French left since the 1930s – with a post-1945 hiatus. After the second world war, the French Communist Party attempted to erase his memory; there was evidently little interest in this Communist story in West Germany, while in the East he was considered the vilest of traitors. In 1967, his widow, Babette Gross published her memoirs of Münzenberg. A more confessional autobiographical fragment, *Lebenslauf*, appeared **posthumously** in facsimile in 1972. The Marxist 1960s and 1970s in both Germany and France bore witness to the first historical studies of the Comintern and a spate of primary and secondary texts from Soviet Russia reedited and translated. Dugrand and Laurent (who were on the inaugural team of France's *Libération* newspaper) were themselves formed intellectually in the post-'68 scene in Paris, where Trotskyists, Maoists and a proliferation of neo-marxist groupings challenged the incompletely de-Stalinised French Communist Party. The authors have a particular bugbear against what they see as the *corporatisme* of ex- or reformed Stalinists, and their grip on French university history faculties.... The Münzenberg historiography impacts directly upon the status of this account, which cannot be assessed without reference to its immediate precursors.

Dugrand was appointed honorary president of the conference 'Willi Münzenberg, un homme contre' held in Aix-en-Provence, accompanied by an exhibition which I caught at the Archives Nationales, Paris in 1992. (At Aix, Münzenberg's doomed personal plea to Stalin in a letter of July 1937 was revealed). The conference papers formed a special issue of the review *Communisme*, no 38-9 in 1994, a series directed by Stéphane Courtois and produced under the aegis of Annie Kriegel, the formidable Stalinist turned anti-Communist *doyenne* of university driven post-perestroika research. Coincidentally, Stephen Koch's *Double Lives: Spies and Writers in the Secret Soviet War of Ideas Against the West*, (New York, 1994) appeared. With a significant change of title, *La fin d'innocence. Les Intellectuels d'Occident et la tentation Stalinienne: trente ans de guerre secrète*, was welcomed in France the following year by Bernard-Henri Lévy and the *nouvelles philosophes*. Koch's book, Dugrand recalls, was regarded as yet another nail in the Marxist coffin. Koch (whose *Hyperstar* on Warhol was also translated into French) had had access, via specialist help, to Soviet archives and a week of conversations with Babette Gross in 1989. He did not write as a Soviet scholar however, and his work contains unsubstantiated material, inaccuracies, over-picturesque descriptions.... Sean McMeekin's *The Red Millionaire: A political biography of Willi Munzenberg, Moscow's secret Propaganda Tzar in the West* followed, published by Yale (2003): a University of California dissertation, honed by a post-doctoral year in New York with Tony Judt. McMeekin's account - scrupulously referenced and with much Soviet archive material - treats Münzenberg's crucial Paris years as a mere postscript, with scant attention to or sympathy for his renunciation of Stalinism. His conclusion with its deliberate post 9/11 slippages is an astonishing rant: Münzenberg is 'the perpetrator of some of the most colossal lies of the modern age'; he used 'Bolchevik blood money to whitewash Communist tyranny in Western public opinion'; as 'senior bolchevik "confidence man" in the West' with 'easy access to Moscow gold'.... He 'helped unleash a plague of moral blindness upon the world from which we have still not recovered.... The kinds of fronts Münzenberg invented, redundant, self-replicating cultural committees, innocuous-sounding political newspapers financed by distant paymasters, and above all, phony charities – are now exploited by the world's most formidable terrorist organisations.'

With an altogether more profound understanding of the menace of fascism and the European left of the 1930s, *Willi Münzenberg, artiste en révolution* could have been a definitive study. Yet the authors wrote the study like a thriller (always in the French historic present tense), while flouting editorial norms in a way unusual for a major publishing house: footnotes are basic, incomplete, always unpaginated; all publications in the select bibliography are undated; previous accounts by Münzenberg and Babette Gross or articles from the Aix conference may be perceived in palimpsest. The quasi-cinematographic narrative structure is based on fast-forwards and flashbacks. We begin with a dramatic account of the Reichstag fire: dozens of pages are required to get back to Willi's birth and youth, humiliating family circumstances and first degrading jobs, prior to working up again to 1933. Location as well as time-slots constantly change and almost every secondary character merits a mini-biography (so often ending tragically with the concentration camp, the gulag, murder, suicide or delayed suicide). The prose is punctuated with these *telescopes*, exclamations and astonishing statistics – for truth was indeed, in those times, stranger than fiction. Koch and McMeekin are rightly derided for their anti-communist polemics and demonisations – and an 'American,' capitalist attitude to money – but previous scholarship is hardly acknowledged. In conversation with Dugrand the potential for a different genre and treatment became apparent. Both writers read English, and between them combed archives in Germany and Amsterdam and in Paris, the Prefecture de la Police, the Archives Nationales and in particular the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, rich with the donations of major anti-Communist figures such as Boris Souvarine or David Rousset. In Mexico, the late Vlady Serge (son of Trotskyist dissident Victor Serge) had an apparently magnificent archive; in Moscow, acquaintances had special access via a privileged relationship with Putin's apparatchiks to secret police archives, archives in inaccessible provinces, etc. Nearer home, in Grenoble, the son of a former colleague of Münzenberg has collected material for thirty years. None of this is clearly evident in this tantalising but frustrating book. Significantly the work is dedicated to the Weimar expert Jean-Michel Palmier (an epigone of the exile-studies historian Gilbert Badia), whose very interdisciplinarity and writing on art and aesthetics disqualified him, Dugrand claims, from due consideration by historian colleagues obsessed with the archive and the *scientifique*...

Herein lies my major critique of all the **Münzenberg** literature: the biographical-political focus of these historians inadequately situates his controlling position within a certain cultural world of the late 1920s and 1930s. Evidently the tissue of European intellectual, architectural and artistic exchanges with the USSR involving figures such as Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus architects, El Lissitzky or John Heartfield are crucial – though not offered as context by **Münzenberg** scholars; moreover every study omits mention of the Soviet Pavilion at the Paris World Fair of 1937 – the greatest Soviet propaganda *Gesamtkunstwerk* outside the USSR – and its relationship to Paris operations. These Franco-German – Russian exchanges generated a visual world which offered the first opportunity for *self-representation* by the 'new masses', in photography, photomontage and film. The very notion of democracy was challenged and at stake – via the propaganda which signalled the rapid construction of a world superpower, whose economic operations, investments, speculation and currency dealings or 'treasures into tractors' policies indicate far more complex transactions with its capitalist partners than is suggested by the propaganda façade managed by Münzenberg through international charitable or voluntary organisations.

To deconstruct and reassemble *Willi Munzenberg, artiste en révolution*, asks too much of any reader, even a French one. What is needed is an exhibition that could demonstrate the power and impact of the films and illustrated publications that he financed, the interrelationships

between European capitals, the networks of artists and writers that were orchestrated globally via conferences and in his publications and, through a chronological progression, the ineluctable approach of disillusion and tragedy. The tragedy was both personal and tragedy on a world scale: another world war whose millions of deaths so dramatically eclipsed in number *la der' des der'* (the 'last of the last') which had triggered the politics, the peace movements and the art worlds of the interwar period - and whose structures and mindsets persist today. In **the** current conflict-ridden, globalised context where Russia and France's unresolved Stalinist and post-Stalinist histories and America's manichaeian post-Cold War attitudes still prevail, a dispassionate, more interdisciplinary reassessment is needed. One should indeed not idealise Münzenberg. The best epitaph was surely Arthur Koestler's in his 1967 preface to Babette Gross's biography of her husband: for him Münzenberg was 'no saint - or cynic' but 'a political realist in a time of hateful realities'.