INTRODUCTION

Transnational and Global Perspectives on International Communist Solidarity Organisations

Bernhard Bayerlein, Kasper Braskén and Holger Weiss

We want to build a holy alliance, we, the white, yellow, black and other oppressed people of different colours. The decisive question is not the colour of ones skin but the fact that one is an oppressed, a poor fellow [...].1

This book provides an analysis of the articulation and organisation of radical international solidarity by so-called “Non-Party Mass Organisations” and “Sympathising Organisations for Special Purposes” that were either connected to or had been established by the Third or Communist International (Comintern), such as the International Red Aid, the International Workers’ Relief, the League Against Imperialism, the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers.2 The guiding light of these organisations was a radical interpretation of international solidarity, usually in combination with concepts and visions of gender, race and class as well as anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and anti-fascism. All of these new transnational networks form a controversial part of the contemporary history of international organisations. In most cases, these organisations have been completely excluded from more recent research

---


and have, thus, remained a hidden history of 20th century internationalism.³ Like the Comintern these international organisations had an ambiguous character that does not fit nicely into the traditional typologies of international organisations as they were neither international governmental organisations nor international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).⁴ They constituted a radical continuation of the pre-First World War Left and exemplified an attempt to implement the ideas and movements of a new type of radical international solidarity not only in Europe, but on a global scale.

Despite the profound ambiguity of the organisations for radical left-wing international solidarity it is argued in this book that they were in many respects significant predecessors to several post-1945 transnational solidarity organisations and NGOs. As claimed in Chapters 4 and 6 in the present volume, radical left-wing organisations that had been established by the German Communist Willi Münzenberg, such as the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe or the League Against Imperialism, developed and articulated a profound transnational perspective “from below”, i.e., not orchestrated by or in control of the Communist Parties, when it for example comes to the organisation of international solidarity campaigns, the uses of mass media, their global outlook and networking, and the staging of public spectacles for the mobilisation of support for the victims of oppression and injustices or for political prisoners. Previous attempts to analyse and categorise the radical left-wing international solidarity organisations have often limited themselves to the history of Soviet foreign policy, instead of analysing them as a part of a transnational world of the Left that was strongly embedded in the various national contexts and at the same time strongly entangled with the cultures of the international socialist and communist movement.⁵ Modern NGOs have often been described as the “conscience of the world”, constituting an important critical mass, exposing injustices, providing assistance to the poor of the world, and highlighting

³ These kind of organisations are not for example mentioned in Bob Reinalda, Routledge History of International Organisations. From 1815 to the Present Day (London: Routledge, 2009).