

THE BIG LIE OR MANY SMALLER LIES? THE CAREER AND IMPACT OF COMMUNIST PROPAGANDIST WILLI MÜNZENBERG

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Willi Münzenberg

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Creating False History

Here is an interesting question for readers. Who burnt down the Reichstag in 1933? Can you recall the name of Marinus van der Lubbe, the somewhat crazed Dutchman, who actually set it on fire? And even if you can, do you not think that there was somebody behind it all? After all, it could not be just a lone lunatic, could it?

It would be interesting to know how many of those who read the above paragraph nodded and said, "Of course, Hitler ordered and manipulated van der Lubbe (assuming you can recall the name) and then used the fire to get rid of the opposition and to blame the Communists."

I am willing to bet that nobody said, "Oh yes, it was the Communists and they managed to get away with it because Dimitrov's trial (assuming you can recall that name) was unsuccessful. Hitler merely took advantage of the event."

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the difference between good and bad propaganda.

The truth is that van der Lubbe did act on his own. This has been investigated and proved by a number of historians. No evidence has been found of anybody else's involvement. Further, Hitler did take advantage of the fire to do what he had always planned to do and destroy the remnants of German democratic parliament and ban the Communist Party of which the Nazis were

oddly afraid. All of that is true.

Now we come to the battle of the propagandists. Everyone, but everyone, quotes Dr Göbbels's comment about the big lie and compares every would-be spin doctor with him. But who actually believed Göbbels? A large proportion of the German people for a time and some supporters in other countries who wanted to believe him.

As opposed to that, millions of people across the world repeat certain "truths" for which there is "full agreement" without once realizing that it is propaganda first started by that genius of spin doctoring and promoter of the Comintern, Willi Münzenberg, without even knowing his name or comparing any tuppenny-ha'penny press officer to him. Now that is propaganda. Sheer genius. Achieved by a long list of small and medium-sized lies.

Back to the Reichstag fire. It occurred on the night of the 27th February 1933 and the perpetrator was not hard to identify. Van der Lubbe, a supposed Communist and an unemployed bricklayer, clearly mentally disturbed (though the assumption that he was actually mentally defective comes from his obviously drugged state during the trial and a great deal of Communist propaganda), was found inside the building.

The following day the recently elected Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, went to see the President, Hindenburg, who signed an order that closed down all non-Nazi parties and

banned the Communist one.

A few days later the Gestapo arrested four Communists, intending to try them with Van der Lubbe. Ernst Toggler was a senior member of the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschland, German Communist Party), one of those who had not managed to escape. An arrest warrant was issued for him immediately and he surrendered himself to the police, something the KPD would later hold against him.

The other three were Bulgarians: Georgi Dimitrov, Vasil Tanev and Blagoi Popov, members of the Comintern.

What the Gestapo had not realized was that Dimitrov was the head of the West European section of the Comintern and, thus, a close adviser of Stalin's, one of the few people the latter would make an effort for. Normally Communist parties and their members would be sacrificed without a blink of an eyelid.

In addition, the man who had been charged to promote the cause of the Soviet Union and the Communist International through apparently innocuous publications, Willi Münzenberg, was reasonably anxious to become involved.

Willi Münzenberg

Münzenberg was a German Communist, one of the few from a working class background. He was a deputy in the Reichstag and the owner of two newspapers and a publishing firm. He was also the most skilled propagandist the Soviet Union and its cause ever had.

He did not write propaganda, he organized it, setting up hundreds of committees, using front organizations to run other front or-

ganizations, inspiring intellectuals to become fellow travellers and to manipulate other, innocent and ignorant intellectuals. In other words, he was the man who created the atmosphere in which it is considered to be normal to be on the left of the spectrum and intensely moral to support some of the worst tyrants in the world, as long as they seem to be a left-wing cause.

As Stephen Koch, author of *Double Lives* wrote in the *New Criterion*:

“He wanted to instil the feeling, like a truth of nature, that seriously to criticize or challenge Soviet policy was the unfailing mark of a bad, bigoted, and probably stupid person, while support was equally infallible proof of a forward-looking mind committed to all that was best for humanity and marked by an uplifting refinement of sensibility.”

Before 1933 he had been enormously successful in his organizational activity with his biggest achievement being the Sacco-Vanzetti case or, rather, the political activity around it. He took the case of two obscure Italian anarchists who had been accused of robbery and murder (of which Sacco was almost certainly guilty and Vanzetti possibly innocent)¹ and turned it into a left-wing cause célèbre, achieving two things.

The campaign pulled together disparate left-wing and well-meaning individuals and organizations under covert Communist control, in the process destroying the anarchist movement in the United States.

Secondly, it countered the potent myth of the Open Door and the American Dream for immigrants, a rival myth to that of the Soviet utopia, by creating an image of

America of a murderous, xenophobic society that destroys innocent immigrants if they happen to have the wrong political view.

We can date the irrational anti-Americanism so prevalent in Britain, Europe and the American left from that campaign. Münzenberg's work lives on.

In the months leading up to Hitler taking power the entire KPD behaved with exemplary foolishness, underestimating the Nazis and concentrating on internal dissent, purges and the fight with the Social-Democrats. Münzenberg was part of that mess.

Immediately after the Hindenburg decree he fled to Paris where he began to organize a counter-offensive.

The Brown Book

Its first aspect was *The Brown Book*, followed later on by *The Second Brown Book*. Münzenberg mobilized many of the West's intellectuals whom he had already enmeshed in his network or the Münzenberg Trust as it was known, to support this endeavour. Names of others, such as Albert Einstein, who protested, were simply added.

The Brown Book was probably written largely by Willi's henchman and probable NKVD agent, the Czech Communist Otto Katz, who may well have been involved later on in Masaryk's "defenestration". Subsequently, the grateful Communist government of Czechoslovakia put him on trial together with Rudolf Slánský in the great show trial of 1952. (Incidentally, the trials of the tortured and pressurized accused were filmed and shown. Their self-abasement was made public at the time and later.)

Katz, the ruthless manipulator and brilliant propaganda writer, was accused of Zionism and espionage, confessed to all his "crimes" and begged to be executed as he had no right to live. His masters obliged and he was hanged.

As Stephen Koch, author of *Double Lives* and Sean McMeekin, author of *The Red Millionaire*, Münzenberg's biography, have noted, *The Brown Book* so highly praised at the time and so valued by various historians, was largely a pack of lies. In fact, the lies were not really substantiated and only self-imposed hypnosis could have made all those writers and reviewers swoon with praise at the time.

There were three parts to the book. The first one told inaccurately of the Nazi rise to power, blaming largely the Social-Democrats and, naturally enough, being rather reticent about the war the KPD waged on the Social-Democrats and the Weimar democracy in general.

The second part dealt with Nazi oppression in general and was, as Sean McMeekin puts it, "intuitively correct", though short on facts. *The Brown Book* emphasised oppression as it affected left-wing parties and individuals, not those dreadful people, capitalists, under which rubric came anyone who did not support the KPD.

Nor was there anything about the growing persecution of Jews. Instead of giving examples, the book and its supposed author merely quoted Lenin's attack on rich and powerful Zionists, adding quite dishonestly that rich German Jews had not felt any discomfort under the Nazis. In fact, there was a great deal of indignation that the Nazis accused various non-Jewish left-wing and, above all, Communist activists of being that.

How ironic that the real author of this document should have ended his life as a “Zionist spy”. Communist history is full of ironies of this kind.

The third part dealt with the Reichstag fire and produced the accusations that it was organized by the Nazis, specifically by Göring. To prove this there were fraudulent charts and “photographs” produced that showed a network of subterranean passages through which the Nazis could have entered while Van der Lubbe was torching the place, to give him a hand.

To top the accusations, there were clear innuendos that van der Lubbe was the SA Chief Ernst Röhm’s catamite, possibly a sexual toy boy to the SA in general.

Even at the time this was thin and has since been disproved quite categorically by, among others, Fritz Tobias in his 1964 book, *The Reichstag Fire*. No other writer has produced any evidence to back the half-baked assertions of *The Brown Book* and *The Second Brown Book*. They have, nevertheless, penetrated into popular psyche to quite an astonishing degree.

The London Counter-Trial

Münzenberg’s other ploy was the London counter-trial, the template for many other subsequent “trials”. It was timed to open the day the Leipzig trial of Van der Lubbe, Dimitrov and the others was to start, the 21st September 1933.

The counter-trial was chaired by D.N. Pritt KC, barrister and member of the Labour Party, who was also one of the leading fellow travellers. In subsequent years he would use his standing as a barrister and a “silk” to explain why the Soviet show trials were legally entirely correct and how the

guilt of the accused had been proved beyond any reasonable doubt.

The other “judges” were Maître Pierre Vermeulen of Belgium, George Branting of Sweden, Maître Vincent de Moro-Giafferi and Maître Gaston Bergery of France, Betsy Bakker-Nort of the Netherlands, Vald Hvidt of Denmark and Arthur Garfield Hays of the United States.

The lawyers, except for Pritt, complained about the atmosphere in the “court room”, the pressure under which they were put by Münzenberg, the lack of evidence and the laughable testimony produced by friends of Willi wearing SA uniforms and masks.

For all of that, the counter-trial was a huge success. After a week’s deliberation it came to the conclusion it started with, that the fire had been initiated by Göring and carried out by SA officers, with Van der Lubbe, probably a homosexual lover of one or more of them, lined up as the fall guy. This was, astonishingly enough, accepted by all the *bien pensants* and many other well-meaning people.

Meanwhile, the real trial, in Leipzig was also a success for the Comintern. Dimitrov, a superb speaker, dispensed with his defence lawyer and used the four month long trial to proclaim repeatedly his and his comrades’ innocence and the Nazis’ guilt as well as the guilt of all those who did not support the Communist line.

Van der Lubbe, by now probably heavily drugged, drooling and giggling, continued to insist (in so far as he could insist anything) that he did it all by himself to call attention to the problems of the German workers.

On the 21st December 1933 the trial came to an end. Van der Lubbe was found guilty

and subsequently executed. The charges against the others were dismissed for lack of evidence, something that would not have happened under Stalin and did not happen at the counter-trial.

Ernst Toggler was kept in “protective custody” until 1935, then released. He was purged from the KPD because of his surrender to the police, went abroad and worked in Belgium, returning later to work, according to him under duress, for the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda. He survived until the early sixties.

Dimitrov, Tanev and Popov returned to the Soviet Union in February 1934, almost exactly a year after the fire to a hero’s welcome.

Why were the charges dismissed? One theory is that the German courts were still sufficiently independent not to bow to pressure from the Nazi hierarchy. This is not impossible.

Another aspect of the story is the arrest of seven German airmen who were undergoing training secretly in the Soviet Union. They were released after the Bulgarians had been acquitted and sent back to the USSR. It is hard to dismiss the notion of some agreement there. Stephen Koch thinks that the agreement went deeper and the whole Leipzig trial was a put-up job, with both Hitler and Stalin seizing the opportunity they were presented with.

Back in the USSR Dimitrov became head of the Comintern and a fervent Stalinist, though Robert Conquest mentions in *The Great Terror* that he, unusually, tried to save some of his Bulgarian comrades during the purge and may, even, have succeeded with one.

Whether he tried to save his co-defendants is unclear but, in any case, he did not succeed. Both Popov and Tanev disappeared into the Gulag, with only the first of them emerging after many years.

Dimitrov eventually became the Prime Minister of Communist Bulgaria and died in 1949 while on holiday in the Soviet Union. Rumours of him having been poisoned or irradiated have persisted ever since. It is true that Stalin had been displeased with his secret negotiations with Tito.

The “End” of Münzenberg

And what of Münzenberg, the evil genius, the man who created the modern intellectual atmosphere, who unknown to most and working in the shadows, consolidated Western opinion about at least two crucial events?

Alas, he did not live long enough to see the network he had set up of front organizations, fellow travellers and agents of various kind achieving their biggest success of demonizing Senator Joseph McCarthy and all who were associated with him and turning the Communist agents he had tried to uncover into martyrs. That opinion, too, persists to this day, as witnessed by the completely untruthful *Good Night and Good Luck* made by George Clooney and despite the research of such people as Ronald and Allis Radosh, authors of *Red Star Over Hollywood* and the Yale University series of published documents about American Communist activity. Another triumph for the real propaganda.

Willi, however, had no more triumphs after 1933 though he continued to weave his spider’s web for a while. From 1935 on he watched his various friends and comrades disappear into Stalin’s prisons to reappear in

show trials. He was purged from the KPD and in 1938 he broke with Stalin.

He then spent two years talking to British and French agents, explaining to them the truth or as much of the truth as he was prepared to divulge about the Soviet Union and the Comintern. He also started making plans for another propaganda campaign some time in the future, a left-wing anti-Soviet one. Many of his ideas were taken up after the war by the organizations and publications that came out under the auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom but Willi did not live to see that either.

He did carry out one coup against Stalin. Soon after the Nazi-Soviet Pact he published the names of 40 German Communists who had been murdered in Soviet prisons.

In early 1940 he was interned in France with all other German citizens. He had been advised to submit to that rather than try to escape by a couple of British agents he had been in touch with. Unfortunately, apart from the fact that Willi must have been watched by the NKVD, this was the period when the various British security services played unwilling host to a number of Soviet agents.

As the French surrender drew closer those in internment camps were either released or allowed to escape. Münzenberg headed off with a group southwards but reaching Montalou separated from the main group with three others, promising to return later. None was seen again. One, Hartig, a supposed left-wing social-democrat, turned up later in Paris and worked with the Nazis. Two other young men, who had made enormous efforts to befriend Willi, vanished.

This was the 21st June 1940, the day of France's surrender. In October of that year,

a body was found in the woods nearby of a man who had been hanged but as the rope had snapped, he had fallen under the tree. The body was in a very bad state of decomposition but papers in his pocket showed that this was, indeed, the former propaganda chief of the Comintern.

Some people think of it as a suicide but most assume that the two young men were working for the NKVD who wanted Willi dead and who accomplished the crime, possibly with the help of the Gestapo.

In any case, what matters is the evil that he did, which lives on. Few people know the name of Willi Münzenberg or that of his henchman Otto Katz. Yet over several decades millions across the world have repeated "truths" and opinions that had been created for them by these two. Not many people believed Dr Göbbels's "big lie" but too many still believe the medium lies that were piled up by the Comintern.

Successful Propaganda versus Mere Spin

We can see this with the successful propaganda coups of today. I am not, as it happens, talking about NuLab's or Blair's spin machine of recent years, as unsuccessful an operation as anyone has ever seen. Every single spin is known immediately to the media and those who follow politics. What use is that to anyone?

It is a big mistake to suppose that it was the spin machine that ensured Blair's three elections. It was actually the Conservative Party whose own attempts at spin or propaganda are too pathetic even to discuss.

No, I am talking of the saga we have followed on *EU Referendum* blog (www.eureferendum.blogspot.com) as did others, such as Charles Johnson on *Little*

Green Footballs (www.littlegreenfootballs.com) and Michelle Malkin on her blog (www.michellemalkin.com), the carefully staged pictures and videos in Jenin, Gaza and Lebanon by terrorist organizations whose leaders had been trained in the Soviet Union, as it happens.

Soviet training would have included the use of propaganda as a battle tool and, on the whole, it is a pity that the Israelis have not undergone the same process. Between them Hamas (until they started fighting Fatah) and Hezbollah have shown themselves to be past masters at the game, helped, of course, by that public sphere of opinion created in the first place by Willi Münzenberg.

The question that needs to be asked is the degree of involvement on the part of the media and other agents of influence who are using the staged pictures and videos to promote the cause of the supposed victims of Israeli aggression (which, of course, is backed by the Americans).

When Münzenberg spun his web he distinguished for his own purposes between those who were witting and those who were unwitting accomplices. The latter he called “innocents” and referred to with great contempt. But he knew for certain that his words would not become the truth for so many if those unwitting accomplices were not active.

Was the media a witting or unwitting accomplice then and is it now? Some journalists knew exactly what they were doing, as did some lawyers, academics, writers and political activists. They may have pretended to be merely men and women of the left, often of the moderate left, but were, in actual fact, Communist agents of different kinds.

Let us recall that none of those accused by Senator McCarthy or the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) were innocent, even if they lied when confronted. Interestingly, none used the defence that would have shown them to be genuinely well-meaning, that of freedom of speech. Many Hollywood supporters of the infamous ten were disgusted by the fact that, instead of admitting to their political views and pleading the First rather than the Fifth Amendment, they lied, continuing to play the Communist Party’s games.

Surely, nobody can possibly look at the pictures from Qana and see the media as unwitting accomplices. How could they watch those carefully staged shots and not know that they were being manipulated into purveyors of propaganda?

Then again, few of them can believe in the cause that they are promoting, in the way Willi did to the end of his life. One wonders what Willi would have said of them. Somehow, I suspect it would have been seriously rude.

Editor’s Note

(1) The guilt or innocence of the Italian-born anarchists Nicola Sacco (born 1891) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (born 1888), who were accused and convicted of a robbery and double murder that took place in April 1920 and who were eventually executed in August 1927, remains controversial. Supporters have claimed that they were the victims of anti-anarchist and anti-immigrant prejudice and that one way and another they never received a fair trial. As Dr Szmauely suggests, later (1940s onwards) *disputed* testimony has suggested that Sacco at least might have been guilty.