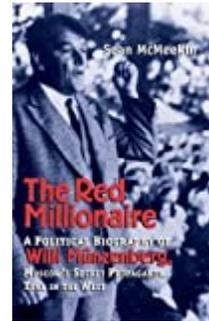




**Sean McMeekin.** *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. viii + 398 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09847-1.



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## Comintern Con-Man

Sean McMeekin has performed an important service in providing a scholarly treatment of the life of one of European socialism's most important early-twentieth-century figures. McMeekin has utilized extensive archival resources to correct some of the ideas perpetuated by previous treatments of the life of Willi Münzenberg, primarily memoirs and sensationalized accounts for mass audiences.[1] The previous image of Münzenberg as diabolical mastermind and brilliant media businessman is dissected and replaced with a picture of an often bumbling *apparatchik*, whose survival and success depended primarily upon his ability to toe the correct political line and to maintain politically expedient friendships, and whose business ventures were money-losers dependent upon constant infusions of capital from the Comintern.

In discussing his development from youthful idealist to Communist functionary, part 1 of the book, "A Call to Arms," seems to be the most appropriate for an undergraduate or general audience. Münzenberg's life and political milieu are conjured clearly and compellingly. Münzenberg's radicalism began during his early teens,

as a sort of game he convinced his circle of young factory workers to participate in for thrills. Although none of them had any grounding in Marxist theory, they were accepted by some of the older local Socialists as promising "new blood" for the aging worker's movement and taken in hand. It was not long before Münzenberg, out of work and in trouble with local authorities, relocated to Switzerland, the traditional home of radical expatriates, linking up with Lenin's Zimmerwald Left, while making a name for himself as a Socialist Youth organizer. By now, more sophisticated on both a theoretical and practical level, Münzenberg remained uncompromisingly activist, and those who succumbed to his considerable charm often found themselves in hot water. Münzenberg himself spent time in jail, but always seemed able to squirm out of culpability for serious legal charges. After the war, he returned to Germany, and continued to lead the Socialist Youth sections he had established throughout Europe, at the same time promoting the Revolution along Bolshevik lines at home. Part 1 ends with his trip to Moscow for the Second Convention of the Communist International, where his old Zimmerwald friends stripped him of his authority over the

international youth movement.

Part 2, *The Red Millionaire*, about MÃ¼nzenberg's years as a prominent propagandist and "media tycoon," is a much less intimate portrait, and would seem more appropriate to a specialist audience. The narrative shifts from the story of an individual and the people he interacted with to one of organizations and businesses. Countering previous ideas about MÃ¼nzenberg as a fiendishly clever businessman working against capitalism, McMeekin utilizes archival records and correspondence to demonstrate the financial failure of nearly every endeavor initiated by MÃ¼nzenberg, and the unreceptiveness of European workers to his message. MÃ¼nzenberg's mass propaganda work began with the formation of IAH (Internationale Arbeiterhilfe—the International Worker's Relief fund), to relieve the famine in the Soviet Union—or, as McMeekin demonstrates, to *appear* to be relieving the famine in the Soviet Union while badmouthing the work of "imperialist" relief efforts like Hoover's ARA. IAH sent little food to starving peasants, but did spend gobs of Comintern cash on spreading the message of the "worker's paradise" in the East, besieged by capitalism and forced to beg for relief money from its proletarian allies in Europe. MÃ¼nzenberg also invested IAH funds in various Soviet schemes for modernization, which invariably lost large amounts of money ostensibly earmarked for famine relief.

MÃ¼nzenberg is probably best remembered as the man who brought *Battleship Potemkin* to the West, and as a "media mogul," whose empire included a successful film studio, numerous magazines and newspapers, a glossy color photo-journal in the vein of "Life," books, book clubs, and numerous conferences and petitions with prominent participants like Albert Einstein and Heinrich Mann. McMeekin delves deep into the archives to show that this is largely a reputation based on smoke and mirrors. Most of the films he brought to western Europe through the Soviet film collective M-Russ (Mezhrabpom-Russ) were commercial flops with little artistic merit, propaganda boilerplates for Soviet aficionados and little more. Even *Potemkin*, undeniably a classic, came into his hands through the patronage of Lenin, not through his own efforts, and failed to make a profit for IAH, in spite of its considerable popularity. McMeekin describes many of MÃ¼nzenberg's other enterprises as "Potemkin Initiatives" (p. 201) after the false-front villages the original *Potemkin* built to confuse opponents. Although many magazines, clubs and organizations were funded by the Comintern, many of them produced little, if anything in the way of propaganda, had virtually no distribution and

were entirely unprofitable. "Successful" ventures, like the glossy magazine *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, invariably lost more than the *Potemkins*, but they were at least seen by more working-class eyes as well.

The final section of the book, "Flight," is a relatively brief recounting of MÃ¼nzenberg's covert departure from Nazi Germany, his fall from the graces of the Stalinist government, his attempts to make a deal with the West, and his mysterious demise in Occupied France. McMeekin uses the humiliating story of MÃ¼nzenberg's fall as a morality tale; he blames MÃ¼nzenberg for toeing the Party Line of "class against class," attacking the SPD as "social fascists," and thereby distracting the working classes of Germany from the enemy of real fascism and Hitler. Such charges seem unfair for two reasons: first, the rest of the book demonstrates the minute audience that actually existed for MÃ¼nzenberg's propaganda, so that his influence on working-class politics can be questioned, and second, MÃ¼nzenberg did not decide the line to be taken in his propaganda organs, and would have had them taken away from him had he deviated from Comintern policy. There can be no doubt, however, that MÃ¼nzenberg had chosen a dangerous game in working for Stalin in the 1930s, and it may well be that Soviet agents, not the Gestapo, caught up with him in France and ended his life, although McMeekin wisely allows that the evidence for this conclusion is no more than circumstantial.

Overall, I found the first part of the book to be the most enjoyable, the second the most useful and the third the most unsatisfying. Occasionally, McMeekin allows his prejudices to cloud his narrative, as in his dismissive attitude towards anarchism and Soviet films, including *Aelita*, *Queen of Mars*.<sup>[2]</sup> These are mostly confined to the endnotes, but there is an underlying attitude towards leftist radicalism that, at times, comes off as superiority on the author's part. He characterizes the Bolshevik operation of confiscating money and religious icons from churches as an act of "brutality," but passes over the murder of Spartacist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, by right-wing Freikorps, without a parallel moral judgment. He later accuses historians of making "darlings" of the slain communist leaders for "risking their necks in a reckless bid for power" (p. 83, see also p. 322 n. 20).

Other criticisms of the book include its lack of economic context for IAH investments and other MÃ¼nzenberg projects. It is clear from McMeekin's text that IAH was an unprofitable enterprise, but how did

it rate next to comparable “capitalist” ventures of Germany’s economically turbulent interwar period? How did UFA compare to M-Russ?[3] In the United States, at the time, enormous market demand for film content made it difficult to lose money as a distributor, no matter how bad (or illegal) one’s business practices, but was this also true for Europe?[4] It would be easier to assess MÄ½nzenberg’s success (or failure) as a media mogul with more information on comparable ventures. One final point is the disappointingly poor reproduction quality of the photographs included in the book. It is difficult to assess McMeekin’s assertions regarding the “fiery confidence [and] unmistakable belief in himself” (p. 12) visible in the young MÄ½nzenberg’s eyes from a picture wherein those eyes appear as black gulfs.

Ultimately, however, these criticisms are minor when taking into account the considerable value of this work. Previous treatments of MÄ½nzenberg, such as those of Babette Gross and Stephen Koch, are anecdotal and at times limited in their scholarship, while McMeekin’s is a carefully researched, excellently documented text. It is heartily recommended to those interested in Weimar Germany, Soviet history, the history of propaganda and the media, or radical labor movements.

#### Notes

[1]. McMeekin is especially at pains to correct Stephen Koch, *Double Lives: Spies and Writers in the Secret Soviet War of Ideas against the West* (New York: Free Press, 1994), which McMeekin characterizes as “a careless polemic” (p. 310), an assessment with which I concur. Koch’s main source was MÄ½nzenberg’s widow, Babette Gross, both in interviews and through her memoir, *Willi MÄ½nzenberg: Eine Politische Biographie* (Stuttgart: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 1967), which Koch consis-

tently accepts at face value. McMeekin also uses this source, though much more critically, to support some of his arguments. See also Harald Wessel, *MÄ½nzenberg’s Ende* (Berlin: Dietz, 1991) and Tania Schlie and Simon Roche, eds., *Willi MÄ½nzenberg (1889-1940): Ein deutscher Kommunist im Spannungsfeld zwischen Stalinismus und Antifaschismus* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1995).

[2]. His assertion (pp. 21, 312) regarding Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* is specifically refuted by eminent biologist Stephen Jay Gould in “Kropotkin Was No Crackpot,” *Natural History* (July 1997): pp. 12-17. His perspective on the Haymarket affair is decidedly anti-anarchist, certainly not in line with that given by Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). Anyone interested in more of the “legacy” of Johann Most, which McMeekin derides (p. 312), should see Most’s *Kapital und Arbeit: “Das Kapital” in einer handlichen Zusammenfassung Von Marx und Engels selbst revidiert und Ä½berarbeitet* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).

[3]. For UFA versus the U.S. film industry, see Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood’s High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 31-32.

[4]. As depicted in Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company that Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 40-85; and Benjamin Hampton, *A History of the Movies* (1933; reprint, New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1970), pp. 83-100. For a rather different picture, see Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London and New York: The Wallflower Press, 1988), pp. 36-51.

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