

Argument – Conceptualising Transnationalism through Life Histories

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Abstract: The term transnationalism has developed into a concept with a broad meaning, defining anything having to do with transgressing the national boundaries. There are limits to it: it has more to do with non-statal actors, it relates to trans-border cultural, political and economic spaces, and it follows identity-defining experiences of individuals who have lived a complex, international life. The current issue of *History of Communism in Europe* is entitled *Transnational Biographies. Destinies at the Crossroads before and after the Cold War* and deals especially with the latter situation. The volume comprises a rich diversity of articles that explore adventurous biographies, enriching the studies of transnationalism.

Keywords: transnationalism, Enlightenment, biographies

Ravaged by two World Wars, consumed by totalitarian ideologies and regimes, and frozen for almost fifty years within a geopolitical tension between two worldwide military blocks, the XX century was the scene of fluctuating borders and volatile existences. Forged on the ruins of the former empires, nations were subsequently dismantled by wars, and (eventually) built again. Individuals were born in one country, lived their lives in another, and died in yet another one, sometimes even without ever leaving their hometown. Far more impressive is the phenomenon of cross border migration generated by all these hazards and misfortunes of the previous century. Individuals flew to

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escape political repression, ethnic resentment, race hatred, and/or confession antagonisms. Others sought adventure, the illusions of a better society and a non-discriminatory world and were driven by the idea of a decisive and inevitable revolution. Existences became thus intricate and intertwined with the different political, cultural, and social milieus they interacted with. Moreover, the various cross-border and transnational contexts in which the biographies evolved, altered and influenced existences, while also being subject to permanent (re)constructions and manipulation. All these evolutions transformed the individual's identity and moulded their inner self towards *internationalisation*, adjusting their existence to a life that transcended citizenship, race, ethnicity, confession, and borders.

But where does all this interest in internationalisation come from? Political thought has been accommodating and theorising internationalism since the Enlightenment. In the pursuit of a better man in a better world, a suitable answer was found in the transcendence of the state, its borders and limitations.

Two important meanings of the word "internationalisation" developed: the understanding of the human being as a universal citizen, with equal rights and opportunities, and the actions that can lead to the fulfilment of this ideal; or one of the main characteristics of the socialist revolutionary movement, theorised as global and with a consistent impact on the nature of property relations and production.

Today, internationalisation has taken a shift of interest from universality and revolution to the formation of diaspora and the free movement of people and capital. The term transnationalism has become interchangeable with that of internationalisation. Because of its broad meaning, "transnationalism" can be found both in the literature pertaining to the Soviet Union and the socialist regimes in the Eastern bloc, and the one explaining contemporary transborder experiences, such as migration, diasporas or multinational corporations.

18th-19th Century Internationalism – In Search of "the Perpetual Peace"

Political thinkers of the Enlightenment are preoccupied with humanity's ways towards peace and progress. Among the political theorists to firstly construct the idea of achieving peace by transcending the borders of states is Immanuel Kant. In multiple essays he conveys the thought of *cosmopolitanism* and/or the necessity of the creation of a federation of free states. In *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1795), Kant proves to be a harsh critique of the colonial behaviour of western European states and takes it as a counterexample of what *cosmopolitanism* should be: the right of any stranger not to be treated

with hostility when arriving on a foreign land, “by virtue of the common possession of the surface of earth” and the endless vicinities its spherical shape causes. Due to the prevailing idea of community of all people on earth, “the violation of right at any one place on the earth is felt in all places”, and therefore the “cosmopolitan right” is not “fantastic” or “exaggerated” (Kant 2006: 82-85).

Condorcet imagines a future peaceful world as well, in which better educated human beings in better health, living a longer and happier life, sharing a universal language that is both literary and scientific, live in permanent confederations. Through these confederations, people would secure their safety, instead of seeking power, and would achieve common ethical ground, thus safeguarding peace (Condorcet 2004, 65-82). Jeremy Bentham, too, coining the word *international* as a concept to replace *the law of nations*, argues that good international laws would ensure a peaceful world (Kenny 2015), but within the limits of the nations. Saint-Simon pleads as well for a project of the European community, within which all countries of Europe are to be represented by a common parliament and a King, a formula which would ensure peace and prosperity for the European peoples (Saint-Simon 1814: 28-55).

Revolutionary Transnationalism

A counter-discourse to that arguing for peace in a borderless world took substance in the 19th century and was promoted by revolutionary movements that challenged the capitalist order. These movements grew in importance after the first world war and even more so after the 1917 Revolution in Russia. International organisations, such as the First and Second Internationals were created to fight for workers’ rights at the end of the 19th century.

The Third International, the Comintern, was created by the Soviet Union in the interwar to support the activity of communist parties around the world and to help spread the ferment of revolution. The rationale behind such an organisation was the Trotskyist perception of the Soviet situation as a zero-sum game in which either the Russian revolution prevailed in Europe, or Europe would end it (Halliday 1999: 104).

Therefore, “the export of the revolution”, i.e., revolutionary governments advocating for revolution in other countries, was realised (despite contradicting Marxism) for two reasons: to show solidarity to other revolutionary movements and to protect against hostilities from non-revolutionary states (Halliday 1999: 94). Material gestures of solidarity were financing, assistance for publishing, transport, logistics, military - training and advising the revolutionary forces. International Relations specialist Fred Halliday points out that

it was through Comintern that the allied communist parties received arms and training for their military factions and it was Comintern that in 1928 produced a handbook on how to create armed insurrections (Halliday 1999: 98, 104). Nevertheless, it was only after the dissolution of Comintern (1943) that the effects of its activity were visible: communist parties came to power in 18 countries by 1982. And only in a short while after that, Gorbachev renounced the decades long support the Soviet Union offered to foreign communist movements. The politics of intervention and internationalism proved unsustainable, and the Soviet Union stopped backing up militarily the countries of the Warsaw Pact and Afghanistan in 1987-1988 (Halliday 1999: 108).

21st Century Transnationalism

In the meanwhile, the capitalist world suffered itself an ideological transformation that favoured universal suffrage and liberal democracy over nationalism, nurturing a specific type of internationalism, as a reaction to the communist world (Anderson 2002: 17). Starting with Bretton-Woods and continuing with the European Economic Community, this type of internationalism refined even more, once the multinational corporations developed across continents and eluded former nation-state control methods and regulations (Anderson 2002: 13-18). British historian Perry Anderson suggests calling *transnationalism* the kind of internationalism that comprises financial markets and gigantic “circuits of intercontinental investment and speculation”, to differentiate it from the revolutionary sort (Anderson 2002: 19).

Definitions & Current Approaches

The term “transnationalism” has suffered many transformations and acquired different meanings along with the development of relations that surpassed states and borders, be these relations referring to money, people, states, business or politics. It is not the purpose of this special issue or this introductory text to produce a disambiguation of the concept, but rather to contribute to the study of the phenomenon in its multifaceted forms and meanings.

Still, a short overview of the transformation of this concept might be helpful to understand the efforts of scholars to grasp its meanings and to further develop it. One definition that appears to be present in most of the scholarly work pertaining to transnationalism is that of Nye & Keohane: contracts, coalitions and interactions across state boundaries, when at least one of the participants is not a statal actor (cited in Clavin 2005: 422). Hence

“transnationalism” has grown into a concept focusing more on people and their practices and less on forms of organisation. Patricia Clavin’s review of the uses of the term indicates a shift from expressing inter-state relations during the 1950s to suggesting the efforts of social scientists to overpass the national boundaries in their perspective, in the 1970s. Nowadays, Clavin considers that it has become a catch-all concept and that the boundaries between the three words indicating transcendence of state borders - “transnational”, “international” and “multinational” are “blurred” (Clavin 2005: 433-436). Still, “transnationalism” has much to offer when highlighting diaspora communities and circulation of ideas (Drachewych 2019), the world of the Comintern (Drachewych 2019, Studer 2015), immigrant groups and their relation to their kin countries (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt 1999), the transnational public sphere and its emergence at the beginning of the 20th century (Kortti 2020) or structure-focused approaches that analyse the impact organisations and individuals have on one-another (van Apeldoorn 2004).

The articles in our special issue of *History of Communism in Europe* favour a focus on individuals as actors trying to overcome the national boundaries to which modern history usually confines people. The trans-border experiences pertaining to identity and language, related to political activism, travelling, or migration, that are presented in these contributions are extra-arguments for the necessity of further exploring and enriching the concept of “transnationalism”.

The first section of the journal comprises five articles that discuss transnational biographies of individuals and groups which explain their becoming and their life trajectories as influenced by organisations, networks, and hubs of transnational activism. These biographies explain how the different transnational contexts had a major impact on individuals and their life choices and decisions, as well as on their biographical turning-points. Moreover, the articles also explain how the existences of these activists were constructed and shaped as a consequence of their involvement within the communist parties’ transnational networks and hubs.

Arturo Zoffman Rodriguez’s article, “From Mexico to Moscow via Madrid: the Borodin Mission and the Origins of Communism in Mexico and Spain, 1919-1920” retraces the personal history of Mikhail Borodin, a representative of the Third Communist International (Comintern), who’s mission in Mexico and Spain was to establish and endorse the communist movement. Borodin assisted the creation of the Communist Parties both in Mexico and in Spain, exploiting pre-existing networks of transnational activism, while also recruiting young and committed cadres. Although the Borodin mission was not a complete success, its story remains significant, as it is an important chapter in

the history of the Comintern, and its continuous efforts in using transnational activism to establish an international communist movement.

Sandra Neugärtner's article analyses two biographies blatantly shaped by the political history of the 20th century, especially Stalinism, totalitarianism and the Cold War. The life stories of Hannes Meyer, German architect and socialist activist, and his wife, Lena Meyer-Bergner, textile designer, are representatives for the turbulent decades of the international communist movement. Exiled in the Soviet Union once the rise to power of Nazism in Germany, the Meyer husbands sought once again refuge in Spain, Switzerland and finally in Mexico, during a time when the Stalinist purges ravaged the Soviet Union. Their commitment to socialism and anti-imperialism shaped their existence in exile, as their activism soon was to be channelled towards distinctive activities, such as propaganda media print and the implementation of a sign language that would enable communication transnationally: the International System of Typographic Picture Education (Isotype).

The biography of the preeminent Italian communist Teresa Noce, detailed in Anna Tonelli's article: "Teresa Noce: an Italian Professional Revolutionary Woman", is an excellent case-study of how the lives of the communist activists transcend the common boundaries of national history. Born in Italy and member of the Italian Communist Party, Teresa Noce directed partisan movements in France and fought in different voluntary groups against the Franco's regime during the Spanish Civil War. Her biography illustrates the characteristic destiny of international communist activists during interwar, entangled within an intricate transnational network of organisations and activists.

The way these transnational networks of activists managed to evolve and redefine themselves in post-war years is the subject of Ștefan Bosomitu's article: "The Permanent Suspicion: The Romanian Communist Party and Its International Cadres". The article explores how the relations between the two unfolded in a context of a paradigm shift: the legalisation of the RCP and its ascension to power. The complicated relationship between the two soon ended in a dispute, as the party leadership that did not have a flawless legitimacy constantly sought to control and subordinate this political corpus of "internationals". Within and because of these tangled interactions, complex relationships emerged and developed between individuals and groups who disputed an informal primacy, and whose claimed legitimacy had distinct origins and evolutions.

Cristian Vasile's article: "Mihail Ralea between the Ministry of Arts and the Romanian Communist Cultural Diplomacy" retraces the life and the activity of one of the prominent representatives of the Romanian interwar literary intelligentsia. Born in Romania and educated in France, Mihail Ralea was not

only a university professor who taught psychology, sociology, and aesthetics, but also director of significant literary magazines, and a politician. The latest role facilitated him positions of power – Minister of Labor during Charles II royal dictatorship, and Minister of Arts under the first pro-communist government in postwar, but also the survival in the high ranks of cultural bureaucracy during Stalinism. During the late 1950s and early 1960, Ralea opted for cultural diplomacy, gaining positions of international cultural representation with the Romanian branch of the UNESCO, and the Romanian Institute for the Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (IRRCS). Vasile's article also discusses Ralea's survival in the high cultural bureaucracy, reviewing the price he had to pay – the collaboration with the Stalinist regime.

The second section of this issue comprises two articles which approach transnationalism and transnational biographies from an entirely different perspective, as influenced by ideology, language, discourse, and migration. Within this section, transnationalism does not refer strictly to physical borders and nationalities, but goes beyond, explaining how a transnational identity can emerge within multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic communities.

Valeska Bopp-Filimonov's article theorises an innovative approach on transnational biographies, by analysing a life trajectory not in relation with physical borders, but as influenced by ideologies, language, and discourse. The author discusses the "linguistic biography" of an individual born in a multi-ethnic region and argues that although he lived most of his life within the borders of only one modern state, his multilingualism allowed him to forge for himself a transcendent, transnational double identity, a status that granted him the opportunity to continually adapt, reassess, and reinvent himself, despite the hazards of living within a dictatorship, and despite the continuous ideological shifts.

A somewhat similar approach is undertaken by Lucie Lamy in her article: "Defining <Baltic Germanness> in Post-Soviet Latvia and Estonia: Ethnic Germans' Life Stories between East and West". Based on interviews conducted in 2019 with Latvian and Estonian citizens ethnically defining themselves as "Baltic Germans", the article discusses the manner in which the Soviet and post-Soviet experience, while also the ideological rupture between the East and the West shaped the process of self-identification of those individuals. The author analyses not only the individuals' transnational multiple identity – shared between Germany, Latvia/Estonia, Russia, and USSR, but also how these identities influenced their migratory experiences and their discourses on other ethnic groups.

The third section of the journal comprises three case-studies which discuss transnationalism, furthermore, represented as identities constructed through-out and/or around literature, dance, and travel.

Enis Sulstarova's article: "An Albanian Hemingway> Petro Marko's Recollection of the Spanish Civil War" depicts the life trajectory of an Albanian journalist, writer and communist activist, volunteer in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish experience will decisively influence Marko's subsequent existence. Despite all the misfortunes he had to endure – he was arrested and imprisoned by the Italian occupiers during World War Two; he was imprisoned by his communist comrades in late 1940s and subsequently permanently surveilled by the authorities, Marko remained faithful to his communist beliefs, which were characterised by internationalism and anti-Fascism. Sulstarova analyses the way this transnational identity was reflected through the two major works of Marko – the novel on the International Brigades that he wrote (*Hasta la Vista*), and his posthumously published autobiography.

The last two articles of this issue discuss biography as influenced and shaped by cross-national/transnational experiences through dance - Ana Teodorescu's article "Theodor Vasilescu - the Dancer who Took the Romanian Folklore all over the World", respectively travel and photography - Ana-Cristina Irian and Valentin Maier article "Picturing the West: A Slideshow of a Private Production in Communist Romania". Ana Teodorescu retraces the biography of a preeminent Romanian dancer whose life was impacted by his professional career, which allowed him to extensively travel all around the world. The article also discusses the manner in which the Communist regime endorsed traditional dance as an art with a political substratum, while also an efficient instrumentality of propaganda, and Theodor Vasilescu's intricate relationship with the Communist regime's secret police. Irian and Maier's article discuss the case of a Romanian tourist who had the privilege to extensively travel abroad during the 1970s and 1980s. His travel experiences were formative not for his existence, but also shaped and influenced the perception of the „abroad” for many others, as his subjective view on his encounters became material for private and public audiences, during semi-private shows. During times when travelling was controlled by the state authorities, his biography and his initiatives shaped the image of „the West” in counterbalance of the official propaganda.

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