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(review) Brigitte Studer, The Transnational World of the Cominternians

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Hoffrogge's research is a genuine service to both scholars and activists alike. It provides a meticulously detailed yet eminently readable account of a rich life of struggle that mirrored the fate of the German workers' movement itself: from its promising beginnings of huge trade-union organization and the mighty SPD through to the defeats and disorientation of the 1920s and that movement's ultimate destruction in 1933. It seems that Müller lived and breathed these setbacks with such intensity that he ultimately came to shun the movement to which he had devoted his life.

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STUDER, BRIGITTE. *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*. Transl. by Dafydd Rees Roberts. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke [etc.] 2015. ix, 227 pp. £41.73. doi: 10.1017/S0020859016000201

This book presents a concentrated and engaging collection of historian Brigitte Studer's research on international communism and its pivotal centre between the wars, the Communist International (Comintern; 1919–1943). Studer is one of the leading international experts on the Comintern as a global phenomenon in the history of the twentieth century. Her research over the past twenty years has greatly contributed to dismantling the historiographical myths that had been in circulation about this international organization after its dissolution and during the Cold War. As late as 1986, the historians Branko Lazitch and Milorad M. Drachkovitch feared that the Kremlin's concealment of and the lack of access to archives in Moscow would silence the history of the Comintern.¹ However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the opening of Russian archives, and the pioneering efforts of Studer and many others in the 1990s, it was possible to take great strides in reassessing the Comintern's history, not only adding new insights based on primary sources but also introducing new theoretical and methodological perspectives. The present book contributes to this body of literature by offering a spirited and stimulating study on interwar communism as a space of “experience” and “practice”. In this volume, Studer draws up a balance sheet on some of her substantial research on the Comintern. Comparable to historian Alexander Vatlin's survey *Die Komintern*,² Studer's book builds both on formerly published essays and on revised versions of contributions to other publications either in French or German. Given that this book is in English (skilfully translated by Dafydd Rees Roberts) it will surely help to bring her research to a wider circle of readers.

What does the title of the book imply? The detailed introductory chapter outlines Studer's firm belief in placing the experiences of individuals at the centre of her historical

1. Branko Lazitch and Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern* (Stanford, 1986), pp. viii–ix.

2. Alexander Vatlin, *Die Komintern. Gründung, Programmatik, Akteure* (Berlin, 2009).

analysis, a methodological framework inspired by Reinhart Koselleck's reflections on "experience" as a historical category. At the same time, she calls for attention to be paid to "space" and the (varying) spatial dimensions of the Comintern, linking her sensitivity to space to Michel Foucault's theoretical considerations about "other spaces", thus pointing to the ways in which Moscow and the Soviet Union functioned as a tangible place of utopia. Following this twofold focus – "experience" and "space" – Studer outlines first the global ambitions of the Comintern to promote attempts at revolutionary change, if not "world revolution", between the two World Wars, then zooms in on the transnational world of the Cominternians as it developed in Moscow itself. The Comintern was a complex and distinctly hierarchical organization with relations going in both vertical and horizontal directions. Studer appropriately goes beyond national and international frameworks in tracing the transnational world of the foreign communists connected to the Comintern who travelled to Moscow to contribute to the realization of its global ambitions. While the Comintern was successful in creating a world that moved from the local to the global in an almost fluid way, thus epitomizing a transnational space, in Moscow itself it was shaped by the Bolsheviks' rationalization of discipline, centralization, and bureaucratization. This experience of various cross-border circulations contrasting with the rigidities of politics in Moscow was strange and hard to adapt to for many foreign communists.

The lives of these foreign communists, who experienced the place and space they lived in as increasingly alien, hostile, and, in numerous cases, even life threatening, reveal a series of national, cultural, social, and gendered issues. By tracing individual and collective experiences, Studer carefully analyses the types of political commitment of foreign communists and how they thought they were part of something extraordinary – the "world party of the proletariat". The book is based on an in-depth study of the cadre files located in the Comintern archive, held at the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI). Being a documentary resource of particular intricacy, these files contain not only documentation on the actions and deeds of the individuals mentioned, but also, and more importantly, the voices of the subjects themselves (although created under particular circumstances and expectations). Rather than perceiving the accounts as some form of individual diarizing, Studer looks behind the production of these enthralling and informative narratives, analysing why and how they were written and for what they were used in the end. Studer's methodology offers a template for how to approach this complex type of primary source, which is essential for any researcher engaged in tracing the histories of individuals active either in the heart of or on the periphery of the Comintern. In this way, the book adds to a growing body of biographical prosopographical studies on the Comintern. Inspired by Foucault's conceptualizations of the relation between the self and society and how individuals use techniques of the self to situate and embed themselves within society, Studer approaches the empirical material with heuristic tools that further develop our understanding of how Stalinism swayed the lives of foreign communists.

Despite its compact length (227 pages including notes, bibliography, and index) the book offers detailed insights into the everyday lives of the Cominternians, as they unfolded inside the social and political maze of the Comintern. Aside from its conceptual introductory chapter, the book is divided into seven chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter sticks to the Koselleckian interpretative mode of tracing the experiences of foreign communists, discussing, for example, the Bolshevik model as a hybrid of political and organizational ideas, gender and the creation of the new woman, or how the Cominternians experienced living in Stalin's Moscow. Subsequently, Studer sets out to analyse the illusive and conflicted relation between the Party and the Private, and how the gradual transformation of Stalinist

Soviet Russia affected foreign communists, who were faced with the disillusion of the Great Terror in 1937 and their ensuing isolation, either as strangers or enemies.

Detailed and engaging, even if one is familiar with the subject, this account offers some seemingly unreal and bizarre episodes. Studer, however, is particularly eloquent in making comprehensible the rationale of choosing a life as a communist and Cominternian between the wars. The chapter “Becoming a ‘Real Bolshevik’”, for example, abounds in stories that show how foreign communist cadres were educating themselves as communists with an emphasis on self-cultivation and self-perfection. This implied not only gender or social issues; it could also involve physical culture (*fizkul'tura*), as in the case of “student Forster”, who, in his rejection of exercise and physical activity, according to the stenographic report on the purge of the International Lenin School in Moscow 1933, showed a lack of discipline and self-control, and was therefore not a real Bolshevik. Thus, Studer skilfully blends well-known and unknown individuals of this transnational space, emphasizing the importance of including the experiences of individuals in the study of international organizations. It is individuals and their beliefs in a particular cause (in this case, communism) that allow an assessment of how subjective and emotional dimensions shaped social and political movements.

Studer's conclusions include a reflection on the Comintern's dissolution, and how it implied the end of one of the most authoritative (and authoritarian) instruments for coordinating the communist movement outside the Soviet Union. However, from a historian's point of view, Studer leaves us with the captivating remark that the hopes and beliefs of the Cominternians produced a unique transnational cultural and political space, characterized by the complexity and multiplicity of these historical actors, a world that deserves further study. This book must surely be recommended to anyone interested in the Comintern, and will soon be seen as a standard reference work by both established scholars and future students of international communism and the Comintern. While criticism can be levelled at its Eurocentric and Western focus, eliding the experiences of individuals from the colonies who lived in Moscow between the wars, the book's concentrated conceptual outlook both explains and outweighs that limitation. Its contribution to historicizing the Comintern lies less in the completeness of its account than in the way it conceptualizes the organization as a social and political space. Similarly to Shelia Fitzpatrick's groundbreaking study of the 1930s Soviet Union, *Everyday Stalinism*,³ Studer's book deepens and recasts our understanding of the lives and experiences of foreign communists in a Stalinist society. This is not political history, which is often the case when it comes to writing the history of the Comintern as a global phenomenon; instead, Studer uses the Comintern's political history to shed light on other dimensions, including subjective and emotional ones. In doing so, she adds new depths to our understanding of this international organization as a constituent part of twentieth-century history.

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3. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York [etc.], 1999).