**Counter Libraries: Exhibition of anti-fascist print at the Library of the Labour Movement, Helsinki**
**2.–31.10.2025**

Taking the antifascist collections of the Library of the Labour Movement as a starting point, the exhibition discusses the role of illegal and exile printing activities in the antifascist struggle. The exhibition's main source is an uncatalogued collection of publications classified under 'Fascism', which was relocated to the library from the People's Archives in 1987.

The exhibition addresses historical cases of antifascist libraries and publishing activities in the 1930s, as well as the burning of books, libraries and printing houses by fascists in Germany and elsewhere, including Finland; the role of oppositional publishing in educating people despite tightening censorship and illegality; the strategies used by writers and artists to resist rising fascism by using libraries as a platform for organising.

During the exhibition (24. October) we organised a discursive programme including a lecture by historian Kasper Braskén on German communist activist and publisher Willi Münzenberg, and a discussion with expert Päivi Penkkala on Finnish communist activist and writer Olavi Laiho, followed by the launch of a book of Laiho's antifascist prison writings from 1944.

Counter Libraries is organised by Sezgin Boynik and Minna Henriksson.
Poster design by Otso Peräsaari.

## Antifascist Exile Prints

Soon after the end of the War, Hanns Wilhelm Eppelsheimer had the idea of collecting the complete published works of the émigrés. This undertaking was particularly hard as these writers had sought refuge in all parts of the world, and their publications had been printed in short print runs, often with deliberately falsified publisher details so as to mislead Gestapo investigators. Author names and book titles were also disguised (*Tarnschriften*), while many publications had been lost or destroyed. Eppelsheimer thus sought first of all to compile an index. The idea was born in Zurich, with former emigres such as Ossip Kalenter, Walter Fabian and Otto Zimmermann. A collection was also attempted by W. Sternfeld, who had emigrated to London. The number of titles assembled grew from 100 in 1950 to 12,500 by 1968 (11 000 books and journals, 1500 letters and manuscripts). (Cited after Kurt Koster, Zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung Exilliteratur 1933-1945, Bad Godesberg 1968.) The Deutsche Bücherei at Leipzig also collected a large number of works proscribed under the Third Reich while their authors were in exile. This currently holds 3,294 monographs, 2,104 translations and original works in foreign languages, 78 microfilms and 14,923 issues of reviews and periodicals.

The form of exile literature was intuitively political. The clandestine nature of the texts made them oppositional, often overshadowing their content. As Manès Sperber wrote retrospectively: "illegality was of the very essence of propaganda material; the texts' intrinsic value meant less than the fact that they were circulated against the law. Each leaflet was proof that the dictatorship was not all powerful and the opposition powerless."

Much exile literature adopted an ahistorical view of Nazism, a perspective that in some cases persisted until 1939. For these émigré writers and intellectuals, as Jean-Michel Palmier writes, "Nazism struck Germany like a natural disaster. They liked to compare it to a "storm", a "hurricane", an "easthquake", or a "tidal wave", without trying to understand it further. The only solution was to await its disappearance, as one waits for the end of winter or for a flood to ebb."

"Many [émigré writers] see fascism as an anachronism, an intermezzo, a return to medieval barbarism. Others talk of a sickness of the German spirit, or an anomaly contradicting the 'normal' course of historical development. They curse the Nazis as a horde of losers who have brusquely descended on the country. We, on the contrary, do not see fascism as an accident, but as the organic product of moribund capitalism." Wieland Herzfelde, publisher and editor of Malik Verlag, in the essay 'Wir wollen deutsch reden' [We want to speak German] published in 1933.

Reference: Jean Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America*, Verso, 2006.


BROWN BOOK

Exhibition of anti-fascist print in the Library of the Labour Movement

Sörnäisten rantatie 25, Helsinki

Counter Libraries 2.–31.10.2025

Pikkilanlai

WILLI MÜNZENBERG

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Pikkilanlai

TARNSCHRIFTEN

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Pikkilanlai

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**Willi Münzenberg**

Willi Münzenberg (1889–1940) joined the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1919. From 1919 to 1921, he served as secretary of the Young Communist International. In 1921, he organised aid for those starving in Russia, becoming head of the International Workers' Relief Organisation until 1933. With the help of the Comintern, he established a far-reaching communist media enterprise. A member of the KPD Central Committee, he advocated an ultra-left policy until 1932. Following the Reichstag fire, he fled to France, where Henri Barbusse helped him gain political asylum.

- From 1915 to 1919, Münzenberg served as coordinator of the international anti-militarist youth movement during the First World War.
- In 1921, he became Lenin's representative for the Soviet Union's International Famine Relief, later serving as General Secretary of the International Workers' Aid.
- In 1926, he founded the League Against Imperialism and National Oppression.
- Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, he originated numerous global and regional initiatives against fascism, racism and the oppression of women.
- During the 1930s, he practised and theorised mass propaganda against war, oppression and fascism.
- The new media created by him, his partner Babette Gross and his collaborators, primarily in Berlin and, after 1933, in exile in Paris, are today considered to be pioneering historical, cultural and artistic reference models.
- Initially a supporter of Stalin, Münzenberg became one of his main enemies, distancing himself from Walter Ulbricht and the official line of KPD in 1937. Following the signing of the 'Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact' in 1939, he formed Franco-German networks within the entire anti-Hitler opposition in an attempt to prevent the impending war, whilst also issuing warnings about the "traitor Stalin".
- His unexpected death remains unsolved. Willi Münzenberg was found dead in 1940 while fleeing German troops in south-eastern France. According to Babette Gross, he was the victim of a political assassination carried out by Stalin's agents.
- His most innovative product was the AIZ (Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung, or The Workers' Pictorial Newspaper). By the time Hitler came to power, it had a circulation of half a million. What made the AIZ distinctive was its new aesthetics and visual language, featuring John Heartfield's photomontages and photoreportage, and the new genre of journalism. Münzenberg believed that images were the best way to reach non-Communist (and indeed Communist) readers.
- Described by the Swiss police as a "fanatic", Münzenberg was a dedicated, though not heartless, businessman: he did not hesitate to speculate on the stock market to finance his businesses, while often taking on comrades who had become unemployed.

In 1933, Paris became the new centre of antifascist campaigning, where Münzenberg with his activity on the cultural front, remained the great star of the Communist movement. He was among the few from the movement who could deal with the Nazis' accession to power – a defeat for which the language of the Comintern had no terms.

Münzenberg set a team to work on *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag*, founded the World Committee for the Relief of the Victims of German Fascism, and helped set up the Bibliothèque des Livres Brûlés/Deutsche Freiheitsbibliothek [Library of Burnt Books/German Freedom Library]. Soon coming to hold some 20,000 works banned, burnt, seized or censored in Germany, this last became an important intellectual centre for Germans in exile, thanks also to its later fusion with the International Anti-Fascist Archive, with its library of 200,000 newspaper cuttings on fascism and antifascism, material accumulated in the course of work on the Brown Book.

He pursued the Popular Front line before it became the Comintern's official policy at its 7th Congress in 1935. Ahead of his time, he was the éminence grise behind the World Committee Against War and Fascism, which was established at the World Congress Against Imperialist War in August 1932. During his time in Paris, he founded some of the most effective antifascist publishing houses: Éditions du Carrefour, Éditions Sebastian Brand and Éditions Prométhée.

In most of his initiatives, he ran a tried-and-tested model: 'No more than 20 per cent Communists', as many social democrats as possible, and the rest non-party aligned. This was the outward appearance of his operations, predating the Comintern sanctioned Popular Front policy. Communist influence was only clearly apparent at the core of the organisation and at the highest decision-making level.

The trajectory of Münzenberg's life and his tragic end provide an answer to the liberal revisionism advocated by academics such as François Furet, who claimed that "anti-fascist communism is the new face of Stalinism."

References:
Brigitte Studer, *Travellers of the World Revolution A Global History of the Communist International*, Verso, 2023.

Babette Gross, *Willi Münzenberg: A Political Biography*, Michigan State University Press, 1974.

Helmut Gruber, 'Willi Münzenberg: Propagandist for and against the Comintern', *International Review of Social History*, Volume 10 , Issue 2, August 1965, 188-210.

https://www.muenzenbergforum.de/


*Itä ja Länsi* [East and West] was a journal published in Finland from 1924, until in 1930 it was shut down under the so-called communist laws.

The communist laws came on force in 1930 when pressured by the fascist Lapua Movement, Finnish Prime Minister Kyösti Kallio presented a set of legislative proposals to the Finnish parliament to ban all public activities of left-wing radicals and their organisations. The Finnish government's bourgeois front accepted the legislation, which led to the banning of over 2,200 registered associations and a thousand unregistered ones.

Persecution of communists continued all through 1930s and until the end of the war. In the mid-1930s, Prime Minister T. M. Kivimäki ordered the State Security Police (EK) to investigate communist infiltration of cultural liberal organisations. The EK's list of the Popular Front movement identified "Akateeminen Sosialistiseura" and its magazine *Soihtu*, as well as *Tulenkantajat* and *Kirjallisuuslehti*, as the most dangerous. Over the next few years, EK kept records of individuals who worked for or subscribed to these magazines.

Reference: Erkki Sevänen, *Vapauden Rajat: Kirjallisuuden Tuotannon Ja Välityksen Yhteiskunnallinen Sääntely Suomessa Vuosina 1918-1939.* Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1994.

## Brown Book

One of the most sensational publications realized by Willi Münzenberg, through his Carrefour imprint, was *The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror* [Braunbuch über Reichstagsbrand und Hitlerterror], which was published in Paris in 1933. By 1935, 600,000 copies of *The Brown Book* had been published in twenty-four languages and fifty-five editions. 15,000 of these were smuggled into Germany under the innocuous covers of the Reclam edition of German classics. The Brown Book aimed to prove the innocence of Georgi Dimitrov and the other communists accused of the Reichstag fire, and to reveal that Göring and Goebbels had set the fire to create scapegoats and consolidate Nazi power. The book also delved into the psychological instability of Van der Lubbe, who was officially accused of setting the fire. *The Brown Book* challenged the technical evidence relating to the fire and exposed the Nazis' destruction of the trade unions, their attacks on German culture, their persecution of Jews and their torture of prisoners. The book's cover was designed by artist John Heartfield.

While the objectivity of *The Brown Book*'s montage technique was questioned, it is widely accepted that it was the first publication to provide a detailed account of Nazi terror, combining investigative journalism, communist tracts and the conventions of the political thriller.

*The Brown Book* had an immediate and profound effect on developments in Germany and beyond. Its follow-up, *Brown Book II: Dimitrov contra Göring,* published in 1934, provided a detailed account of the trial

of the accused and was also translated into a dozen languages (not in Finnish).

References:
Brigitte Studer, *Travellers of the World Revolution A Global History of the Communist International*, Verso, 2023.

Jean Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America*, Verso, 2006.

Anson Rabinbach, 'Staging antifascism: The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror' (2008), *Staging the Third Reich : essays in cultural and intellectual history*, Routledge, 2020.

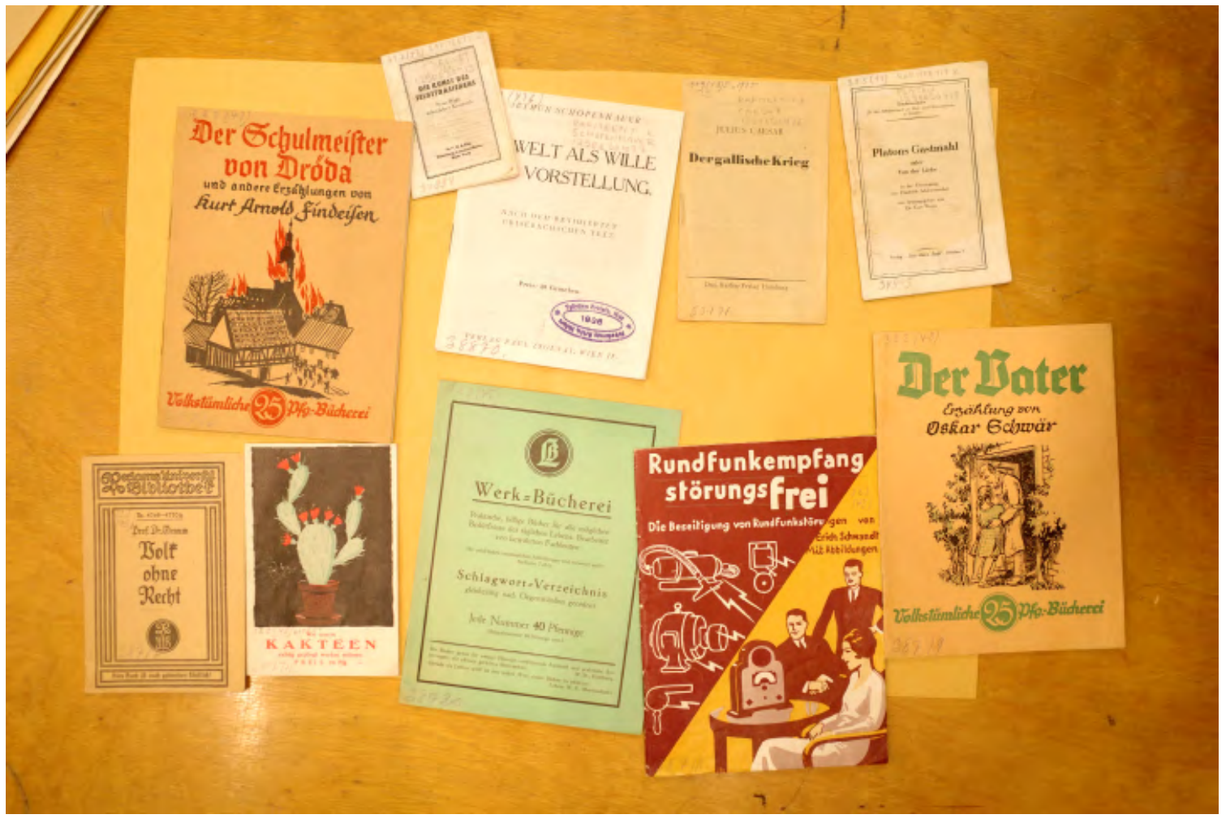

Following the Reichstag fire on 27 February 1933, the Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of the People and the State, also known as the Reichstag Fire Decree was issued which permitted the restriction of the right to assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press, among other rights, and it removed all restraints on police investigations. The decree allowed the regime to arrest and imprison political opponents without specific charges, dissolve political organisations and suppress publications. A wave of arrests and terror on an unprecedented scale was unleashed against all those opposing National Socialism. On 14 July 1933, all the printing and publishing houses belonging to the two workers' parties — the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) — as well as the trade unions, were confiscated and transferred to serve Nazi publishing activities.

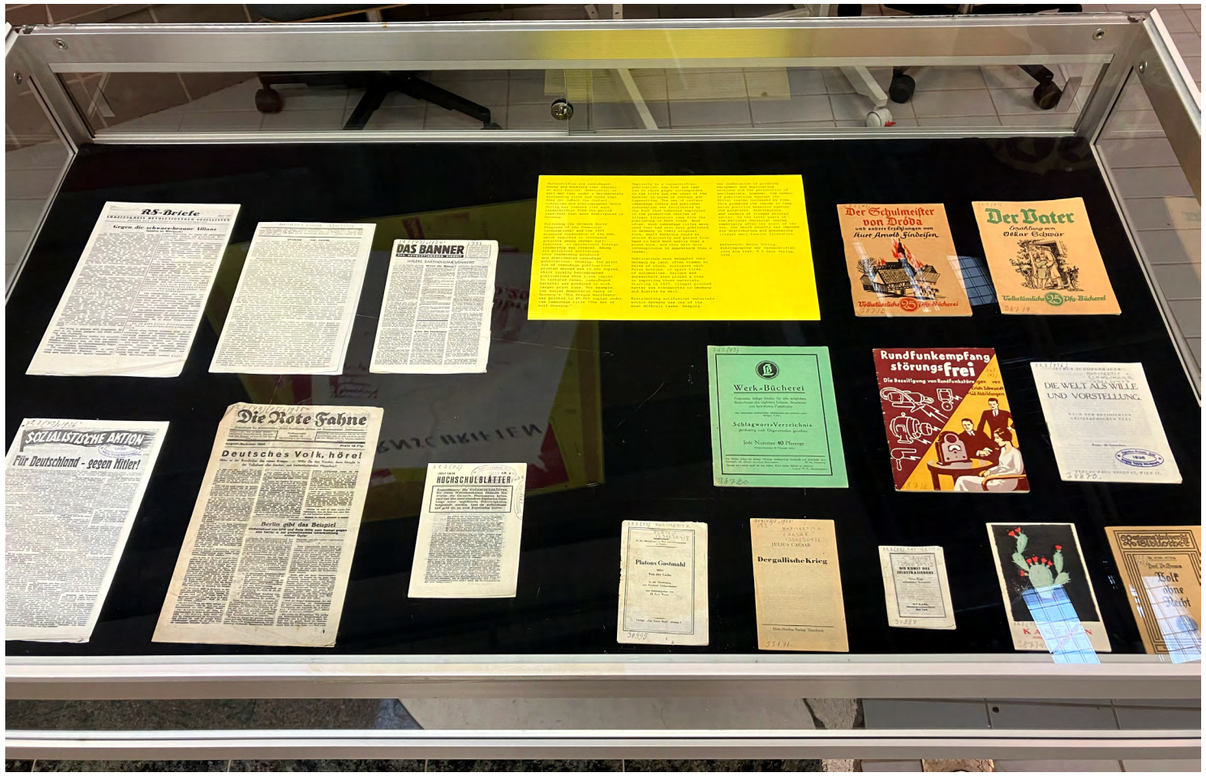
## Tarnschriften

*Tarnschriften* are camouflaged books and booklets that conceal an anti-fascist, democratic, or anti-war text under a deliberately misleading title and cover that does not reflect the content. Librarian and bibliographer Heinz Gittig has indexed 1024 such tarnschriften from the period 1933–1945 that were distributed in Germany.

Following the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International and the 1935 Brussels Conference of the KPD, which resulted in increased activity among German anti-fascists, an operational foreign leadership was created. Among its political activities, this leadership produced and distributed camouflage publications. Usually, the print run of camouflage publications printed abroad was 10,000 copies, while locally hectographed publications were 1,000 copies. In isolated cases, camouflaged material was produced in much larger print runs. For example, the Social Democratic Party of Germany's "The Prague Manifesto" was printed in 40,000 copies under the camouflage title "The Art of Self-Shaving."

Typically in a tarnschriften-publication, the first and last two to three pages corresponded to the title and the cover of the booklet in terms of content and typesetting. The use of certain camouflage covers and publisher information was facilitated by the fact that numerous employees in the production centres of illegal literature came from the publishing or book trade. Most often, such camouflage titles were used that had also been published in Germany in their original form. Small






booklets could be stored discreetly and passed from hand to hand more easily than a bound book, and they were more inconspicuous in appearance than a leaflet.

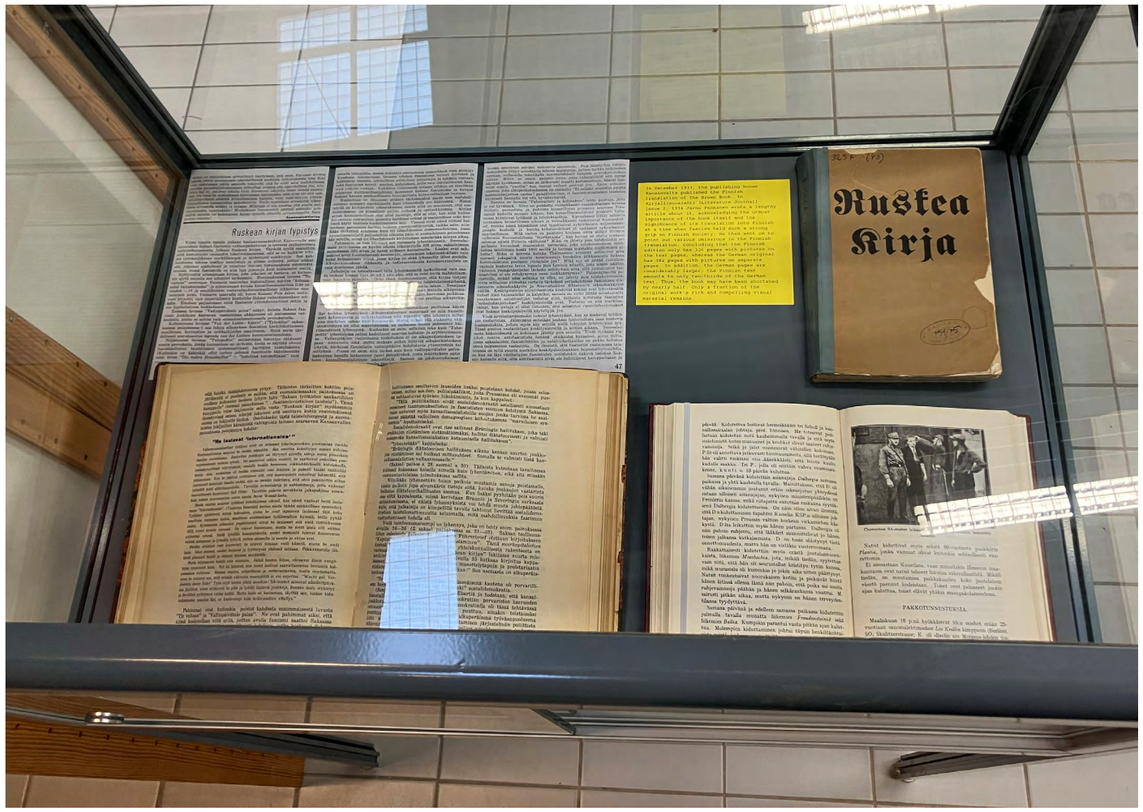
Publications were smuggled into Germany by land, often hidden in bales of cloth, suitcases with false bottoms, or spare tires of automobiles. Sailors and dockworkers also played a role in importing these materials. Starting in 1937, illegal printed matter was transported to Germany and Austria by mail.

Distributing antifascist materials within Germany was one of the most difficult tasks. Despite the confiscation of printing equipment and duplicating machines and the persecution of antifascists, however, the number of publications against the Hitler regime increased by time. This prompted the regime to take harsh punitive measures against the producers, distributors, and readers of illegal printed matter. In the later years of the National Socialist regime, especially after the start of the war, the death penalty was imposed for distributing and possessing illegal anti-fascist literature.

Reference: Heinz Gittig, *Bibliographie der Tarnschriften 1933 bis 1945*, K G Saur Verlag, 1996 1996.

## The Brown Book in Finnish

In December 1933, the publishing house Kansanvalta published the Finnish translation of The Brown Book. In *Kirjallisuuslehti* [Literature Journal] issue 2, 1934 Jarno Pennanen wrote a lengthy article about it, acknowledging the utmost importance of the book itself and the significance of its translation into Finnish at a time when fascism held such a strong grip on Finnish society. He then went on to point out various omissions in the Finnish translation, concluding that the Finnish edition only has 326 pages with pictures on the text pages, whereas the German original has 382 pages with pictures on separate pages. In addition, the German pages are considerably larger; the Finnish text amounts to only two-thirds of the German text. Thus, the book may have been shortened by nearly half. Only a fraction of the original work's rich and compelling visual material remains.



## Burning Libraries

At the beginning of the 20th century, two parallel library networks existed in Finland: the folk library system, which was maintained by the nobility, clergy and bourgeoisie; and the workers' library system, maintained by the labour movement. The folk libraries' purpose was to educate the masses, but they were not to house books offering critical views on religion or the present social order. To cover this lack, many workers' libraries were founded in the early 20th Century, increasingly after the 1905 General Strike and they housed literature on socialism and workers' culture.

After the Civil War of 1918 the White Terror reached the workers' houses and libraries: from 1017 libraries with 96 702 volumes in 1916 the amount of workers' libraries decreased to 395 in 1919 with 44 895 volumes. With the legitimation of the folk libraries as the public library system in 1920s the state imposed its ideological control mechanism to the libraries and ruled out, among others, that "immoral or otherwise inferior" literature was not allowed.

In 1930, communist laws were passed, leading to the closure of many workers' houses, either with the blessing of the authorities, who 'sealed' them, or by nailing the doors and windows shut, even by force. In addition to being nailed shut, workers' houses suffered vandalism, arson and explosions.

References:
*Kulttuurivihkot* 3 / 1975, 59-65.

Erkki Sevänen, *Vapauden Rajat: Kirjallisuuden Tuotannon Ja Välityksen Yhteiskunnallinen Sääntely Suomessa Vuosina 1918-1939*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1994.


The Pieksämäki Workers' Association building after the destruction wrought by the white terror. The restaurant furniture had been smashed to pieces and the library destroyed. A series of books entitled *A Century of Social Democracy* had been left on a table, riddled with bullet holes and defaced with excrement. The photos were published in the 1920 *Workers' Calendar*. It states that this happened to hundreds of workers' halls and libraries. Source: *Kulttuurivihkot* 3/1975.
Photo: The Labour Archives

28.3.1930 The fascist Lapua Movement destroyed a printing house in Vaasa where, among other publications, the communist newspapers Vapaa Sana and Työväen Lehti were printed. Commercial counsellor Rafael Haarla promised to fund any consequences that the Lapua activists might face. Photo: The People's Archives.

## Techniques

Among the Finnish Communist Party's files from its illegal period (1918–44) are several sheets of instructions on how to multiply text using easily available materials, such as sheets of glass or zinc; how to make a printing mold out of tissue and silk paper; and how to employ photography to shrink the copied text.

The SKP’s secret printing press was located at Köydenpunojankatu 3 from 1920 to 1928. In the 1920s, the premises housed August Kirvesniemi’s shoemaker’s workshop, which also had a secret ‘printing press’ for printing leaflets. His assistant was Armas Satamavuori. Oskar Lamminen recounts: “Satamavuori Armas worked for Antti Kirvesniemi. He needed to buy a ‘push printing press’ but couldn’t get one. They bought a ‘chain’ of printing ink, there had to be two, one pulled the paper and then they were dried. The lock was ‘closed’ from the outside, the windows were covered. A property was bought for Antti at Kremzinkatu 3, where Mäkelä and Antikainen lived from 1920 to 1928 and from where Adolf Taimi was arrested. There was a raid in 1928, and Antti and his wife also were charged.”

The People’s Archives, The archive of the Finnish Communist Party (1918-1944)


## Elvi Sinervo

Elvi Sinervo (1912–1986), writer, poet, and translator, was one of more than a thousand leftists imprisoned during the Continuation War, when Finland joined forces with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union.

Writing about prison conditions, criticising the authorities, or discussing the political situation or religion was strictly forbidden. So was writing poetry. In Hämeenlinna women’s prison Sinervo secretly wrote a poetry anthology *Pilvet* [Clouds] on toilet paper. A fellow prisoner bound it into a book and made the covers from striped prisoner uniforms. The book circulated among the prisoners, eventually making its way out of the prison wihtout being discovered. Tammi published the anthology after the war in 1944.

Recollections of Aino Kallio in:
Matti Hako ja Heimo Huhtanen. *Kotirintaman Kahdet Kasvot: Sota-ajan Muistelmia.* Tammi, Helsinki, 1985.

Sinervo’s short story ‘Lentolehtiset’ [Leaflets] tells of a distributor of illegal leaflets, which at the hands of the police officers fly off blown by the wind and reach the crowds.

Further reading: Ulla-Maija Peltonen, *Naisia Turvasäilössä*. Art House, Helsinki,1989.

Linocut illustration by Minna Henriksson / Kiila Feminist Archive 2019–25.

## The Left Book Club

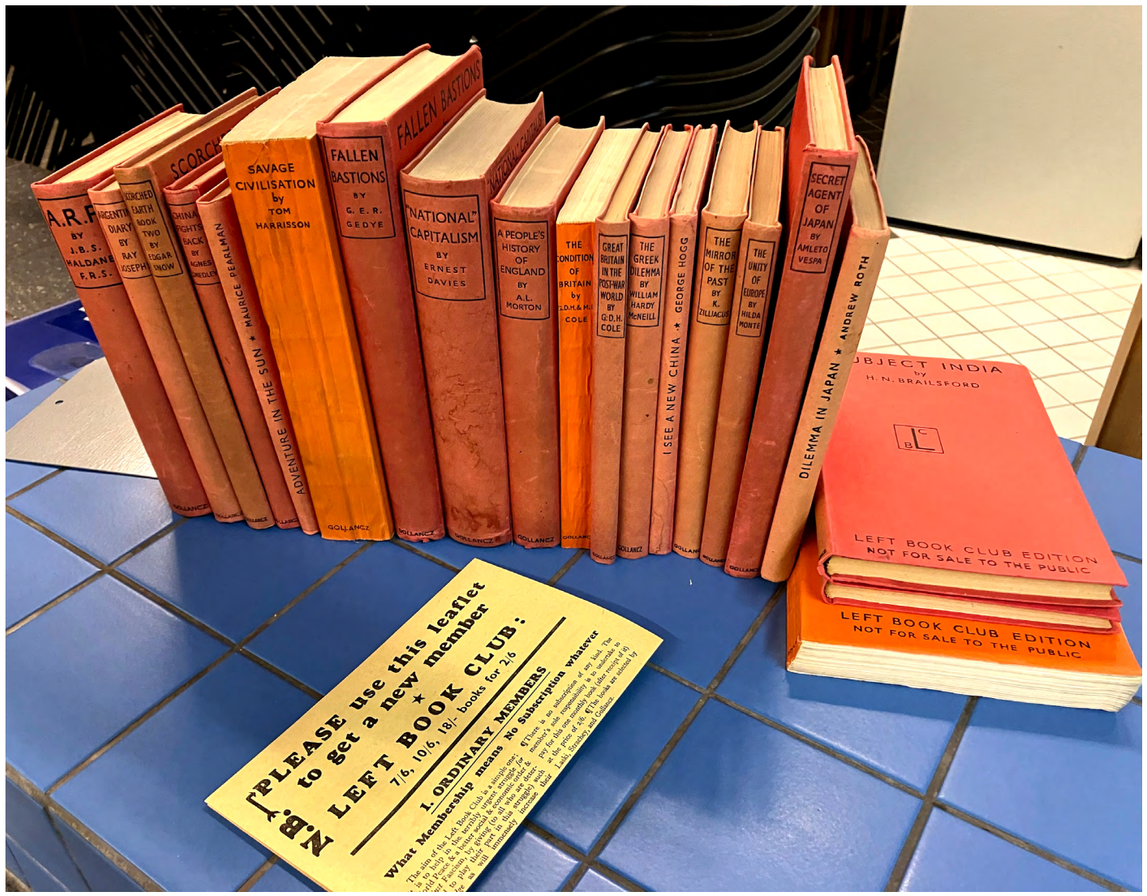
The Left Book Club was founded in 1936 to oppose war, inequality and fascism. It was launched by the publisher Victor Gollancz. The books were selected by him, John Strachey and Harold Laski, and published monthly at the lowest possible price. In line with the Popular Front, the publishing policy of the Left Book Club aimed to produce a broader left coalition against rising fascism and authoritarianism. The books were seen as a tool for 'political education', which the publisher, Gollancz, described as the urgent need for clear thinking, scientific economic political studies, and radical political analysis.

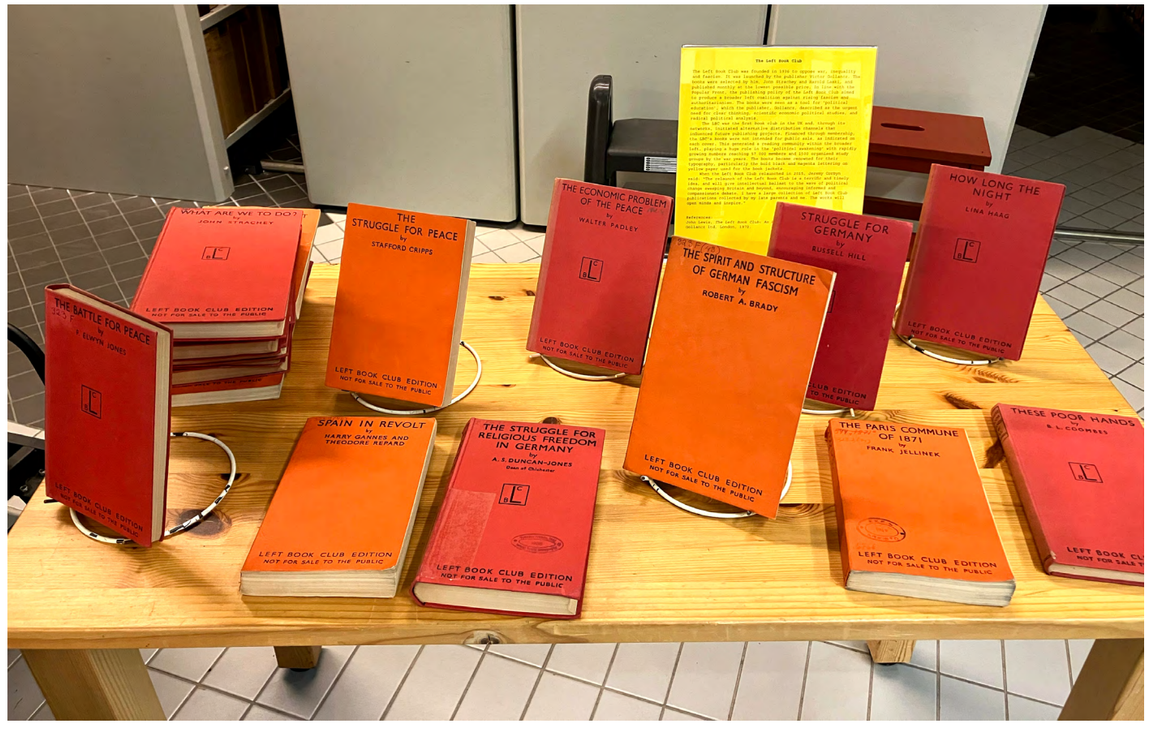
The LBC was the first book club in the UK and, through its networks, initiated alternative distribution channels that influenced future publishing projects. Financed through membership, the LBC's books were not intended for public sale, as indicated on each cover. This generated a reading community within the broader left, playing a huge role in the 'political awakening' with rapidly growing numbers reaching 57 000 members and 1500 organised study groups by the war years. The books became renowned for their typography, particularly the bold black and magenta lettering on yellow paper used for the book jackets.

When the Left Book Club relaunched in 2015, Jeremy Corbyn said: "The relaunch of the Left Book Club is a terrific and timely idea, and will give intellectual ballast to the wave of political change sweeping Britain and beyond, encouraging informed and compassionate debate. I have a large collection of Left Book Club publications collected by my late parents and me. The works will open minds and inspire."

References:
John Lewis, *The Left Book Club: An Historical Survey*, Victor Gollancz ltd, London, 1970.

https://leftbookclub.com/



## Neo-Fascism

The official state policy of the German Democratic Republic was based on antifascism. Throughout its existence, the GDR used antifascism to oppose capitalism and portray socialism as genuine opposition to National Socialist ideology. The GDR also used it to criticise the Federal Republic of Germany's failure to deal with denazification. The West, and particularly West Germany, was depicted as being dominated by new forms of fascism.

However, some critics have argued that what began as a rigorous effort to repudiate National Socialism and its contemporary manifestations turned into a legitimisation of the dictatorship of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany.

Despite its political bias, East Germany's state-sanctioned antifascism produced some interesting research and publications on militant anti-fascism during the interwar period, as well as on the failures of denazification within West German institutions.

Researchers intending to use these materials should heed Anson Rabinbach's epistemological warning that "despite the efforts of well-intentioned scholars and contemporaries to disentangle authentic antifascist memory from the official rituals of state policy after 1989, the two were so entwined that not even the most careful craftsmanship could untie them."

Reference: Anson Rabinbach, 'Antifascism' (2006) in *Staging the Third Reich : essays in cultural and intellectual history*, Routledge, 2020.

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