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“Vom Hakenkreuz zum Sowjetstern”: een kritische analyse van Bodo Uhses weg naar het communisme

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Citation

Borsten, G. (2021, February 17). *“Vom Hakenkreuz zum Sowjetstern”: een kritische analyse van Bodo Uhses weg naar het communisme*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3142386>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2021-02-17

Bijlage I: Summary (in English)

The East-German journalist, writer and politician Bodo Uhse (1904 – 1963) would have completely disappeared in the mist of history, had not his one decision - to leave Hitler's NSDAP and to join the KPD, the German communist party, a step he took somewhere in the early spring of 1931 – saved him from oblivion. And not just that: his determined and apparently spectacular step, highlighted by every biographer in the GDR (as well as by Uhse himself) describing his life, did provide him, from the very moment he returned from his exile in Mexico to East Germany in 1948, with a prosperous career and a reputation – according to his 'official' biography - of being one of the more heroic antifascists in the country. Reality, however, tells us a different story.

From what he has shared with us on his life and times in his autobiographical novel, *Söldner und Soldat* ("Mercenary and Soldier"), the book he published in Paris, shortly before his admission as a member by the KPD in 1935, we understand that he must have left us – mainly because of his work as a journalist - a myriad of "Biography Generators" (Alois Hahn). And indeed, in various archives in present day Germany, hundreds of articles of his hand he contributed to newspapers and periodicals in the years before turning communist were recovered, documents that were greatly unknown or inaccessible – assuming they wanted to know about them in the first place because of Uhse's solid reputation as an exemplary 'anti-fascist' - to his 'old' biographers.

The information buried in these articles, completed with a number of documents written by friends and colleagues that were mainly published after the *Wende* – autobiographies, diaries, memoirs and accounts of relevant historical research - has been systematically analyzed for Uhse's political viewpoints and his assessment of the harsh daily reality – both socially and economically – of life during the Weimar Republic, in order to retrieve what made Uhse decide to redirect his political stance from the ultranationalist right to a party that aimed at a Soviet inspired classless society. Those documents have proved of immense value for this project.

The outcome of the research shows a clear picture. Uhse's switching from right to left – painted by himself and his East-German biographers as a spectacular move from Nazi brutality to heroic antifascism – wasn't a decision he took in a moment of sudden opposition towards the Nazis. It wasn't spectacular, either. It took him a number of years to develop a clear resistance towards Hitler's gradual submission to capitalism, up to the point that his ties with the large industries became incompatible to Uhse's belief that a new Germany only could arise with, or with the help of the working class.

Uhse's switch, we may conclude, hasn't been very spectacular, and it wasn't from the extreme right to the extreme left. In fact, he hardly ever moved, ideologically speaking. The

main features of his beliefs - his anti-capitalism, his nationalist stance, and his anti-liberalism - shaping a strong basis for his antipathy for the Weimar Republic – never changed much. It was Hitler's choice, incorporating the German working class in the ethnic "Volk", denying them their social class and their unions, that proved indigestible for Uhse and made him decide to move on.

Taking his origins in consideration, we clearly see the roots of his anti-liberal beliefs. Uhse's family were *Kleinbürger*, nationalist, monarchist, lower middle class, disdainfully looking down on the traditionally social-democrat and communist working classes. His father's career as an officer in the Kaiser's army safeguarded a more or less stable existence during the war, but suddenly fell through the moment peace broke out. The emerging poverty made him decide to leave home, at the age of seventeen. His aversion to capitalism grew in later years, as a result of the way the Western - capitalist - powers treated Germany after the war.

Young Bodo Uhse emerged from the war years like many others from his generation, having no idea what the future would bring them. He joined *Wandervogel*, the youth organization that, organizing all kinds of outdoor activities, tried to establish a new bond with nature, in the process opposing teachers, parents and everybody else bringing them the lost war. From *Wandervogel* he moved on to the *Bund Oberland*, a paramilitary group of nationalist youngsters, longing for a strong and unified Germany, and being prepared to fight for it. The most important difference between them and the old conservative movement was, they didn't want history to repeat: the Kaiser and the civic society that had vanished during the war were gone and they didn't want it back. They wanted to reshape Germany into a state where everybody of German tongue could live, work and prosper under a strong leader.

During the Stresemann years (1925 – 1929), Uhse living as a reporter in the Bavarian *Kleinstadt* Bamberg, international relations and the economy flourished, foreign monies flowing into the county, cranking up foreign trade and job numbers. For Uhse the *Bund Oberland* gradually lost its appeal. He decided, in 1927, to join the NSDAP, because, in his words, they were the only party that considered the working class as an indispensable factor in establishing the new Germany. His membership may have been inspired by a number of *deutsche Tage* he took part in, large gatherings of mainly nationalist militant groups, collectively aiming at the destruction of democracy and the Republic.

His membership of the Nazi party brought new friends, and fresh ideas. The Strasser brothers, Otto and Gregor, foremen of the northern branch of the NSDAP, told him, contrary to Hitler's more capitalist approach, their purpose was the founding of a cooperative state accommodating the entire German-speaking Volk, on an ethnic (*völkisch*) and anti-capitalist basis. For them, *Socialism* was the essential factor in National Socialism.

Uhse's first opportunity to exercise his political views was in a new job, starting in May 1927, as an editor of the *Donaubote*, a völkisch-nationalist newspaper published in the Bavarian town of Ingolstadt. There, for the first time in his writings, we notice an amount of compassion with the working class, the 'servile masses', based upon his observations in the local slums. His career, however, ended quickly. The owner of the newspaper, Dr. Ludwig Liebl, appeared to be a very rigid supporter of Hitler's National Socialism, incompatible with Uhse's Strasser-inspired view, and Uhse was forced to leave.

Within months after the Ingolstadt project had failed, Gregor Strasser advised him to get in touch with the NSDAP party leadership in Itzehoe, a town about fifty kilometers north of Hamburg, where a party newspaper was to be established aiming at Schleswig-Holstein and beyond, the second Nazi newspaper in Germany after the Munich-based *Völkische Beobachter*. Within weeks Uhse was appointed editor-in-chief of the new newspaper, the *Schleswig-Holsteinische Tageszeitung*. The first edition of the paper was published on January 3, 1929.

Being a regional party official, Uhse's work wasn't limited to his editorial activities. As a Nazi propagandist he was supposed to speak at party rallies and party meetings in public houses all over Schleswig-Holstein. As NSDAP-*Ortsgruppenführer* he structured and subsequently was in charge of the Itzehoe SA, and, after the communal elections of November 1929, he got a mandate as a NSDAP-representative in the Itzehoe city council.

Uhse, in the articles he wrote for the *SHTz*, regularly utilized a very crude anti-Semitism, much more explicit than in his previous job for Dr. Liebl. Whether he used it as an instrument to clarify the newspaper's national socialist points of view or just to secure his job, flattering the Munich party headquarters, is unclear: in the articles he simultaneously wrote for the Strassers' magazines, we never find a trace of the racially and politically inspired hatred he expressed in the paper. It didn't help him much, though. Hitler, studiously reading it, detected the many inconsistencies with NSDAP party policies in his writings, especially concerning his adherence to the Strassers: "Socialism! That's an adverse word in the first place. Why do you write so much about it! It'll lead to misunderstandings!".

Uhse didn't seem very keen on obeying the Fuehrer's orders to discard socialism altogether, and remained on a more "leftist" course, until, somewhere during the late summer of 1930, he was sacked. He lost his job and his party membership, and remained unemployed until Ernst Putz, a KPD foreman, invited him to join the KPD (without being granted membership though) and help spread the word among the small farmers in the Rhön area, in South-Western Thuringia, a task he performed until after the Nazis came to power in January 1933. With the SS and the Gestapo constantly on his tail he realized he wasn't safe in Germany any more, and in April 1933 he moved to Paris.

As stated before, Uhse's decision to leave the NSDAP and join the KPD has so far been presented as a spectacular move. However, looking at the principles governing the Strasser wing of the NSDAP, we already observed a strong belief in a classless society, in which private ownership of capital goods and land was abolished. The *NS-Linke*, as they called themselves, like the KPD, was ideologically focused on the young state in the East, the Soviet Union. But, notwithstanding the similarities between the two 'beliefs', their ideological basis, being German 'völkisch' nationalists, appeared incompatible with the internationalist views of the Soviets.

Simultaneously, the Hitler wing of the NSDAP moved away from the NS-Linke, and developed an agenda clearly favoring the middle classes and up, including the capitalist captains of industry. His new program highlighted issues such as a refusal to establish a dispossession program for the nobility, and issuing a ban on trade unions. Because of this clearly capitalist stance, the party lost its appeal for voters aiming at a cooperative, more egalitarian society, finding a more left wing alternative in one of the smaller leftist groups that had sprung up during the later twenties, combining both a nationalist and worker friendly stance, like Beppo Römer's National-Bolshevik movement.

In the meantime, the KPD, realizing that in Germany their internationalist attitude raised suspicion in the eyes of the working class, and seeing Hitler's popularity grow rapidly because of his nationalist beliefs, decided to add a nationalist chapter to their agenda: the *Volksfrontideologie*, a revolutionary nationalism that not just aimed at the decomposition of capitalism, but, at the same time, spoke of the *Vaterland* and of true patriotism, which made her acceptable for people like Uhse as a working class friendly revolutionary and nationalist movement.

The fact that the party had lost many of her socialist features, and, with her nationalist agenda, ideologically moving towards the NS-Linke (who no longer existed at the time), and, at the same time, the NSDAP under Hitler became subordinate to Germany's captains of industry and nobility, explains the ease of Uhse's transfer to the KPD.

In Paris, after being accepted as a member of the KPD and after his first book was published – the autobiographic novel *Söldner und Soldat* – Uhse's life and work were entirely dedicated to party. He was commissioned to Spain to join the International Brigades in 1936, and in May 1939 he was sent to New York, to address the International Writers Congress, organized by the *American League of Writers*. From there, being overrun by the start of the Second World War in September 1939, he traveled to California and onwards to Mexico in 1940, where he co-founded the *Heinrich-Heine-Klub* and the German cultural magazine *Freies Deutschland*. He married Alma Neumann, whom he had met in Cuernavaca, in 1945. Apart from the editorial activities he was almost continuously 'running visa', to enable his colleagues in Europe to escape to Mexico, and, after the war had ended, back to Europe. As one

of the last exiled Germans, he travelled back to Germany, on a Soviet freighter, arriving in Berlin in September 1948, in the then Soviet Occupied Zone (SBZ).

After his return Uhse was appointed – among a number of other positions in the Party - as an editor in chief of the magazine *Aufbau*, official publication of the *Kulturbund*, the Federation for the Cultural Renewal of Germany. He kept his job there till the magazine was discontinued in 1958. His belief in the righteousness of communism was severely damaged – he started suffering from severe depressions that led to alcohol abuse and his divorce from Alma – the moment Stalins atrocities became known to the world in 1956, without, for fear of retaliation, having the guts to leave the SED, the KPD's lawful heir, or even the country.

Uhse died in July, 1963, after having returned from a trip to Cuba where he had fallen ill, of a stroke. He was buried at the *Dorotheenstädtischer Friedhof* in Berlin.