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Analysis

Students as Cold Warriors

The International Student Movement during the Cold War (1946-1969)



By Thomas Nilsson

Even if the International Student Confederation (CIE) came to a full stop with World War II ([see LINK 2/2004](#)), international student activism didn't. On November 17th 1939, nazi troops in German occupied Czechoslovakia entered the University of Prague, executed nine student leaders and closed the university down. Eventhough these events would eventually be overshadowed by much greater atrocities by the nazis, November 17th is still remembered throughout the international student movement as the international student day.

A new student international

Meanwhile during the war, European students who had fled nazi occupation met in London in 1941 and founded the International Council of Students in order to prepare a new international student organisation after the war. And right after the war, in November 1945, national student representatives met both in London and in Prague. In London, 150 student representatives from 38 countries met and made general decisions on how a new international student organisation should be built. One of the corner stones was that the new organisation should be build on one national student representative organisation from each country, thus keeping the same rules as the predecessor CIE. In Prague a week after, 600 students from 51 countries met to confirm and continue the decisions made in London. An International Preparatory Committee was set up in order to organise the next meeting and the statutes of the organisation.

The students met in the spirit of anti-fascism and cooperation between the peoples, but it was evident that there were major differences between national unions of students (NUSes) from the east and from the west. But still, so short after the war, the representatives made a real effort to emphasize unity and refrained from taking stands which would openly split the not yet fully formed organisation. Being elected in Prague, the preparatory committee had a communist dominance, and they set the tone for the basic organisational structure of the new organisation. The draft constitution emphasized political participation as well as service to affiliated NUSes, and it bound members to the decisions of the organisation's congress. Several NUSes from Scandinavia and Benelux opposed the political orientation and favoured a "student as such" model as the old CIE had. The NUSes from the USA, Britain and France could accept a politicised organisation, but only if the political involvement was voluntary rather than mandatory for the members.

On August 18th 1946 the First World Student Congress of the **International Union of Students (IUS)** met in Prague. Eventhough communists were in a majority amongst the 300 delegates from 38 countries, they did not press their numerical superiority when substational opposition was expressed for fear of splitting the organisation. Similary, western NUSes accepted a communist leadership within the organisation as a gesture of good will towards its allies in the war. This was soon to be changed.

By early 1947 IUS was firmly established as the international student

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organisation, representing most NUSes in the world. Only a few NUSes, such as the Dutch, refused to take part of the IUS because a refusal to be bound by its political decisions. It set up its headquarters in Prague had an Executive Committee of 17 members. It published a journal, the World Student News, and undertook various projects. Even though the IUS was supposed to be independent from national governments, only a handful of its members had the financial means to support it. And those who made up most of the USD 100 000 budget in 1947 were the NUSes from the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, which in their turn were financed by their governments.

The notion of "one NUS per country" soon made an impact within IUS. The power on who to accept as national student representatives lay in the hands of the Credential Committee, firmly in the hands of the communists. Thus the Netherlands, where the NUS refused to take part of the IUS, was represented by a very small communist student organisation, as was India and many other countries.

The student movement splits

The communist coup d'etat in Prague in 1948 had an enormous impact in Europe, both within and outside of IUS. After these events, the IUS became more and more openly communist and several of its western members left the organisation. In September 1949, the Yugoslav NUS was expelled from the IUS, in line with orders from Moscow, who broke all ties with Yugoslavia at that point. By then it became evident to all that the IUS had been turned into just another Cremlin ruled front organisation and in 1950 almost all western and non-communist NUSes had left it.

This was confirmed by the Second IUS World Student Congress in Prague in August 1950. Western NUSes sent observers to the congress to see if it was meaningful to re-enter the organisation. The international secretary of **SFS - The Swedish National Union of Students**, Olof Palme (later prime minister of Sweden) wrote in a report that "the first speaker was the delegate from North Korea. He entered wearing camouflage uniform and a bazooka on his back, and began a rant against the fascist west. This set the tone of the entire congress."

As a direct consequence of this congress, SFS together with the British **National Union of Students** and other Scandinavian NUSes called for a meeting in Stockholm in December 1950. There, on the "First International Student Conference", 21 western NUSes decided to found an alternative to IUS: the **International Student Conference (ISC)** was born. At the next meeting in January 1952 in Edinburgh, the organisation got its constitution and a "Coordinating Secretariat for National Unions of Students (COSEC) was set up Leiden in the Netherlands. In contrast to IUS, the secretariat only got administrative powers and the executive was rather weak.

So by the mid 1950-ies there were two opposing and hostile student internationals, aligned in a similar way as the rest of the world was at that time: one communist eastern and one democratic western. Whereas the IUS got smaller and political homogenous, the ISC grew in size but also in political diversity. In the beginning, the ISC only consisted of NUSes from western Europe, North America and Oceania. The Scandinavian NUSes opposed all "political activity" of the ISC, the Latin European NUSes favoured a more "activist" role and inbetween the "northerners" and "southerners" were the British and American NUSes, who favoured some political role for ISC.

What did the opposing student internationals do then? In some ways they were fairly similar in the way they provided assistance to their members. Both held regional and special events and trainings. The IUS focused more on political events, whereas the ISC held more special events, such as the International Student Press Seminar for technical assistance to student newspapers. Other services were international student travels and (limited) scholarships for students studying abroad. Both organisations issued glossy monthly student magazines and had a secretariat with many full time employees. In the 1960-ies COSEC was manned with a staff of over 50 people!

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the IUS opened up a bit and attracted NUSes from developing countries. In a similar manner the ISC gained new members in the third world and by the 1960-ies the NUSes from developing countries were in a majority in the ISC. This led to big changes within the ISC, as the new members favoured a more activist stance. At the beginning of the 1960 the ISC

abandoned its "student as such" principle and began having policies on various political topics. The reason for this is not hard to understand: if you are from a developing country, fighting for political freedom and survival, questions on student mobility within the OECD becomes less important. This did however lead to much political in-fighting within the ISC and in the end of the 1960-ies some NUSes left the ISC because of this. Although being thoroughly communist, the IUS didn't lack its share of political in-fighting, especially after the rift between the Soviet Union and communist China.

The death of ISC

An important question was of course how these organisations were funded. The IUS was more or less openly funded by the various eastern European governments through their member NUSes, although it officially always claimed to be financially independent. No doubt a huge amount of money flowed through the IUS in order to keep the staff and finance the magazine. The ISC always criticised the IUS for being government controlled and boasted their own financial independence. However, compared with the situation of international NUS cooperations today, such as ESIB, it is almost unbelievable how much funds that were obtained by the ISC. Not only had they the means to fund an office with a staff of 50, but also to publish a magazine in colour which costed around USD 10 000 a year. The answer to this riddle was funding from various foundations, mainly in the USA and the UK. These foundations funded either the American NUS (National Student Association, NSA) or the British NUS, who in its turn financed the ISC. But why were these foundations ready to finance student unions with 100 000 dollars every year, and where did they get the money from in the first place? In 1967, a reporter, Sol Stern, from the magazine *the Ramparts* asked himself that very question.

After months of investigations the reporter came up with one startling answer: the whole of the ISC and the international department of the NSA was financed with black money by the American intelligence service the CIA.

In subsequent findings from other news papers such as the *New York Times* it turned out that the CIA had backed many non-communist youth and student movements, such as the International Union of Socialist Youth and various labour unions. Generally, the CIA didn't have direct influence in the workings of the organisations, but they felt that it was enough that there were non-communist alternatives on the world scene, even though some of these organisations, such as the ISC, were against the Vietnam war. The *NY Times* calculated that the CIA had backed the ISC with as much as USD 400 000 every year.

The revelation struck the ISC as a bomb. Only an inner circle within the NSA and the ISC were aware that the funding they got came from the CIA. When the magazine hit the streets, it became a world news and the response was of course fury from the member NUSes. One by one, the NUSes left the ISC, and the money from the CIA-backed foundation stopped. In a very short period of time the Secretariat in Leiden closed down and the ISC ceased to function. NSA joined the IUS and several other west European NUSes followed suit. In the end the ISC was dissolved without any formalities - there wasn't any money to organise a final congress.

The sad demise of the ISC did however give rise to a new breed of international student organisations - the continental platforms. Already in 1966 did the Latin American NUSes created **OCLAE** (Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes) out of disagreements with both the ISC and IUS, and soon the Africans (**AASU** - All African Student Union) and Asians (**ASA** - Asian Student Association) followed suit. It would take more than a decade for the West Europeans to find a way to form a continental platform of their own in 1982, but more about that in the third and final part of the history of the international student movement.

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