Up until the late summer of 1923, the Arbeiterhilfe had articulated an international solidarity which incorporated Soviet Russia as one the most central focal points and recipients of the expressed international solidarity in Europe and the world. The Arbeiterhilfe’s change in direction in 1923 saw in effect a return to a form of classic working-class solidarity, as the aim of international solidarity was no longer the saving or building of a socialist republic but the supporting of the German workers who had been thrown into an even deeper social despair due to Weimar Germany’s imminent economic, political and social collapse. This was the beginning of a vast international solidarity campaign organised to combat “Hunger in Germany.”

It was time for the Russian ‘brothers’ to show their solidarity in return to the German workers. In this sense, the German crisis provided the opportunity to elevate the honour of international solidarity and its principle of reciprocity. This chapter will therefore challenge the previous research that has explicitly stated that the international solidarity of the radical Left had already during the early 1920s turned into a Soviet-centred loyalty. The events of 1923 strongly refute this established ‘linear’ progression from international solidarity to loyalty towards the Soviet Union.

The Arbeiterhilfe’s campaign for Germany involved two stages: firstly, it concerned the transportation of ‘red grain’ to the Ruhr, Saxony and Thuringia, areas which were both crucial for and heavily involved in the planned German October Revolution of 1923; the second stage was connected to a general hunger relief campaign in Germany, launched in late October 1923. The history of the Arbeiterhilfe’s activities during the second half of 1923 has not been properly included in the previous
research on the German social disorder of 1923, nor the research on the German Communist Party’s (KPD) final attempt to organise revolution in Germany.

Save the starving of Germany!

Solidarity justified? Defining the German misery

“Hunger, hunger everywhere”, Käthe Kollwitz noted in her diary in November 1923. Indeed, citing Gerald D. Feldman’s standard work on German inflation, the period of hyperinflation experienced in 1922–1923 was “the most spectacular of its kind ever to hit an advanced industrial society with a market economy”. In addition to the hyperinflation, the cities of the Weimar Republic experienced constant shortages of affordable food, fuel and housing. The lack of food was not, however, due to a harvest failure in Germany. The German Minister of Agriculture and Food, Hans Luther, concluded for example that the 1923 German harvest was satisfactory. The fact that Germany experienced a good harvest in summer 1923 has recently been used to assert that the Arbeiterhilfe’s “German campaign was not, in fact, about famine relief at all”, implying the purely propagandist character of the campaign. However, as I will show, almost no one, and least of all Münzenberg, claimed that the German hunger crisis was caused by a failed harvest.

Rhetorically, Münzenberg asked in December 1923 at the Arbeiterhilfe’s “Hunger in Germany” congress in Berlin whether there had been a crop failure in Germany, when a substantial portion of the population was starving? According to Münzenberg, this was definitely not the case. Münzenberg could do nothing but concur with the blunt statement by the German Conservative Party (DNVP) member of the Reichstag, Graf von Westarp, who had recently declared in the German Reichstag that “the Germans were starving in front of full warehouses” (Die Deutschen verhungern vor gefüllten Scheunen).

The social chaos and escalating hunger crisis in Germany undoubtedly justified relief work to the starving. According to Feldman’s recent assessment, the seriousness of the food shortage in Germany was, “recognised by anyone with a sense of reality on the Right or the Left”. At the end of July, German authorities had even been in contact with the American Relief Administration (ARA) regarding possible assistance to Germany as it was estimated that there was a risk of a severe hunger crisis in the Ruhr area if foreign aid was not provided. However, according to Hoover there was plenty of food in Germany, and the only problem was that the