

## Reflections about 100 years of transnational volunteering,

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### Born out of Pacifism

World War I dramatically changed the social, political but also economic landscape of Europe in almost every understanding. The War ended with a “new security” architecture of Europe, produced during the one-year-long Peace Conference in Versailles, France. But the war ended also with a strong impetus for different pacifistic movements, built on high expectations towards a world without wars. And, at least for some people, practical action was needed to stress the need for “more solidarity and better understanding” among people and nations as a solid tool to prevent future wars.

This was the idea behind the first international “workcamp” in Verdun, ground of one the bloodiest battles of WW I., which is today usually referred to as the “beginning of transnational voluntarism”. Swiss engineer Pierre Cérésole, of course not alone but with similarly minded colleagues from other European countries, organised this first »work camp«. A small group of people of mostly younger generations from several nations took part in cleaning the rubbish and rebuilding the village of Esnes-en-Argonne. The fact that the group included some French and German volunteers gave this camp a symbolic dimension of reconciliation.

The experience of Verdun was the basis for the beginning of what is today known as Service Civil International or, in English speaking countries, International Voluntary Service, originally even known as International Voluntary Service for Peace. This today world-wide international organisation started really as a bottom-up project, more like a movement, with local groups and quite often loose ties at national levels. The international structure of SCI was set up only after WW II in 1948.

A similar organisation, also born out of a strive for “no more wars”, was the Christian Movement for Peace, today known as the Youth Action for Peace. It started as an initiative by the mayor of the German town Datteln and one of the officers of the French Army which controlled the Ruhr region in the early Twenties, aiming to set up an instrument of trust building between the French and the Germans.

In the years to follow, SCI would move from reconciliation work to emergency aid and all the way to social commitment. The area of emergency aid was introduced already by the second SCI work camp in Les Ormonts (Switzerland), which helped to clear rubble after an avalanche. The second such effort gathered over 700 people from 28 countries and was dedicated to the removal of damages caused by the flooding of the river Rhine. The development aid line of volunteering through SCI was maybe most obvious in the workcamps that were organised in Bihar, India, between 1934 and 1936.

Following its strong pacifistic ideas, SCI remained committed to promoting voluntary involvement in such projects also as a replacement for military service for those who refused it for moral reasons (conscientious objectors).

At the beginning of the 1930s, the big economic recession after the crisis in 1929 made national governments play with the idea of big youth service programmes as a remedy for (youth)

unemployment. One of them was the Freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst (Voluntary Work Service) in Germany. Introduced in 1931, the programme allowed young unemployed people under 25 to do voluntary service for up to 20 weeks. When the National Socialist Party came into power, they introduced the compulsory Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Work Service) for all young people. The nature of the work often changed according to the specific needs resulting from the war.

## **Rebirth after World War II**

The volume of destructions visible at the end of WW II was much bigger than after WW I. In opposition to WW I, when war destructions had been in most cases limited to the areas around the front lines, WW II was a so called “total war”, far away from limiting military operations to direct battle grounds and nearby neighbourhoods.

Efforts to mobilise masses of people to voluntarily join the cleaning of ruins were quite spread, often promoted by local authorities but also various civil society organisations. And these efforts were definitely more than just cleaning of ruins and preparing grounds for new constructions sites.

Devastated Europe was also faced with all kinds of challenges that had never been seen before. Huge numbers of refugees, displaced persons, and returnees from concentration camps were on the move. Helping and supporting those people was also greatly covered by voluntary work, not only by Europeans but also by volunteers coming from abroad. One such organisation bringing US volunteers to Western Europe was the American Field Service. Today, one organisation coming out of the spread of AFS in Europe is known by the name European Federation for Intercultural Learning.

An exercise similar to the SCI work camp in Verdun was repeated after WW II during the rebuilding of Coventry, where a group of young Germans from parts of Germany controlled by Great Britain also took part alongside some British young people. Only that their arrival to Coventry was not anymore a “civil society initiative” but organised by the British occupational authority as a part of the “denazification programme” in Germany.

At the global level, the large numbers and wide range of volunteering initiatives and “exchanges” of volunteers across state borders created the need for a common space for different national voluntary work organisations as well as schemes to discuss and agree, if not on anything else, on technical aspects related to the mobility of volunteers. And this can be seen as a growing need to recognize volunteering as an important and beneficial aspect of social life, benefiting individuals and communities as well as the volunteers themselves.

In the second half of the 1940s, discussions started within UNESCO about ways to coordinate and encourage the different volunteering efforts. In April 1948 the International Workcamp Organisations Conference took place and the Coordinating Committee for International Camps was set up under the patronage of UNESCO, but as an “independent body” governed by its own general Assembly, and today known as CCIVS. It should also be mentioned that CCIVS was created mostly by “Western” organisations. First contacts across the Iron Curtain would become significant only in the Sixties, but then CCIVS provided valuable neutral space for contacts and dialogue between organisations from a divided world.

## **Split along the Iron Curtain**

The immediate years after WW II brought along a split between the “philosophies” of what would become “West” and what would become “East”. In the countries where socialism was about to become a state and social framework, voluntary work of young people was seen from other perspectives than just “rebuilding” the country or reconciliation.

In most of the countries east of the Iron Curtain, efforts to rebuild the country from the ruins of the war were replaced by efforts to support the development of socialist economies. An important feature was linked to ideological education, (e.g. birth of a new, socialist, mankind) and, when related to transnational activities, the important feature of “socialist solidarity and unity”.

In the territories of Former Yugoslavia, the history of Youth Work Brigades can be divided into several periods, and at least the first one between 1946 and the early 50’s would not always represent just voluntary participation of the young generation. From those who were there one can hear that any refusal to participate would entail serious consequences, ranging from denial to enrol into studies for the next year to being an opponent to the new “people’s democracy” and becoming suspect of inciting “counter-revolution”.

At the end, in last period of the Eighties, interest to participate in Youth Work Brigades went down rapidly, especially among students. And the “popularity” of participation was stimulated by measures of extra paid leave for employed young people.

The exchange of groups of young people through “voluntary” Youth Work Brigades was a part of life between socialist countries not only in Europe but worldwide. For example, brigades organised by the FDJ (Free German Youth) in the German Democratic Republic, the former East-German state, were involved in solidarity work in Cuba. In the case of Yugoslavia these types of exchanges with socialist countries were intensive between 1946 and 1948, but due to the break up with Stalin they stopped for many years.

This collective approach in forms of brigades instead of an individual approach was one of the main characteristic differences between East and West.

Participation in such activities outside one’s own country therefore existed, but taking into account the huge overall numbers of participants in such brigades, it remained a relatively small window of opportunity for a few people. Nevertheless, it represented a possibility to travel and to see other places and even to be able to get into contact with people from other countries. This possibility for contacts should not be ignored in the context of relatively closed borders and restricted possibilities of movement of people even within the socialist bloc. Therefore, one could even speak of “volunteering tourism”.

## **East-West Relations**

The Cold War, lasting basically from the end of WW II onwards, froze many relations across the Iron Curtain. However, there were a few places of contacts, one of them being World Youth and Students Festivals. The WYSF organised in 1955 in Warsaw opened the door for SCI to get in direct contact with regime-sponsored youth movements. The participation of SCI volunteers from the West in work camps in Poland (1995) as a part of the organisation of WYSF was the first example. It was followed

by work camps with the participation of SCI volunteers in the German Democratic Republic (1956) and the Soviet Union (1958). In 1972, SCI set up an East-West commission in order to facilitate volunteer exchanges and improve cooperation with partner organisations in socialist countries.

A huge step forward in terms of East-West relations was achieved with the Helsinki Accord in 1975. The Helsinki Accord explicitly dealt with co-operation in the field of youth. East-West cooperation in the field of volunteer exchanges now became much more than just efforts of very committed individuals. And such exchanges across the Iron Curtain received quite some attention. On the one side, those still limited exchanges provided opportunities to visit and be in contact with “locals” from other countries, but on the other side, these contacts were closely monitored.

### **Boom of Short-term Volunteering in the Seventies**

In the Seventies, especially in their second half, one could witness a boom of short-term volunteering e.g. participation in work camps in the West. In fact, this development could be linked with the beginning of mass tourism in the West at the end of Sixties, when an increasing number of people travelled abroad for holidays. Moreover, it fit into “cults” of the “flower power generation”, e.g. living and working together in communes.

Participation in various work camps became not only a possibility of volunteering in another country but also a way to discover and explore cultures far away from home. There can be no doubt that the new feature of geographical mobility, the introduction of the Interrail card in 1972, helped a lot and provided an effective means for mobility on the railway tracks throughout Western Europe and parts beyond the “Iron Curtain”.

### **More and More Cooperation**

For many years, the space for transnational volunteering was dominated by big international organisations, like SCI or MCP (Mouvement Chrétien pour la Paix) that were able to ensure sustainable co-operation among their national branches. However, the boom of the Seventies also produced or strengthened many national volunteering organisations that organised exchanges among themselves without being a part of a common structure with a shared ideology and philosophy.

In 1982, the Alliance of Western European Voluntary Service Organisations (AVSO) was founded by organisations<sup>1</sup> in Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

### **A New Impetus by Conscientious Objectors**

The recognition of the right to reject military service on the ground of personal conscience and to serve the country without arms represents a new impetus for transnational volunteering in the Eighties and Nineties.

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<sup>1</sup> MS Denmark, Concordia France, IJGD Germany, SIW Netherlands, SVI Spain, QISP United Kingdom, UNA Exchange United Kingdom

The recognition of this particular right led to the need for state administrations to create adequate possibilities for young men to serve their country without arms. This was the reason for the birth and establishment of schemes allowing civil service instead of a military service.

With the end of conscription, these schemes were not abolished. At the end of the day, many public institutions and services, especially in the fields of social care, health, or elderly people care, simply could not afford to lose the contributions from “volunteers” to their daily operations.

This new development did not find its way into the world of “volunteering” immediately, due to understandable differences with the more classical volunteering traditions in terms of overall concepts but also reasons of individuals to join such schemes. Their recognition as a voluntary work has come only with the abolishment of general conscription.

And it did not come without strong discussions: In fact, many people see the “volunteering opportunities” within such state schemes also as a way to replace paid work with voluntary work.

Today, many of those schemes do not only support volunteering within one’s own country but also opportunities of “serving” abroad. Having said this, opportunities for transnational volunteering within those schemes is usually not so much the result of cooperation between different schemes but more of the effort of an individual person. Furthermore, cooperation and exchanges between schemes existing in different countries are still today regarded as an uncharted territory of future expansion of transnational volunteering.

One initiative to stimulate this within EU programmes in the field of youth was the initiative AMICUS in 2008. AMICUS was originally planned as a financial support for the objective to bring those schemes from different countries together, to establish co-operation and agree on standards for the purpose of reciprocity between them.

As such schemes are set up and implemented in accordance with national legislation, at least a minimal level of joint standards would have to be ensured in order to enable any systematic exchange of volunteers between them. For instance, such a standard would need to include some agreement on how to deal with the social security of volunteers.

In the end, the idea was not supported by member states because such schemes existed only in a few member states, most notably Italy, France and Germany.

### **European Voluntary Service (EVS)**

In 1996 the decision was taken to establish EVS, which started as independent three-year pilot programme in 1997 as a parallel programme to the already existing Youth for Europe programme. In 2000, EVS was merged with Youth for Europe in the YOUTH programme.

Just a few words about Youth for Europe: Beginning in 1989, it was a pilot programme for two years. But it was also a programme aiming to support the political process towards the Maastricht Treaty and to win support among young Europeans for deeper European integration. Youth for Europe was mainly about short-term mobility of young people, mainly through youth exchanges. EVS introduced a new option for long-term mobility.

The introduction of EVS brought into existence several new dimensions. First of all, it was the first supranational scheme of multilateral cross-border volunteering. And it represents the first legal framework where all member states agreed upon several issues and standards in order to create one framework for all member states of EU.

### **Important Development in the Council of Europe**

In March 2000 the Council of Europe passed the European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People, stating minimum quality standards in the field. This Convention could be used as an instrument to reach necessary agreements about “common standards” also for different civic services and through this, also increase the exchangeability among national schemes.

### **European Year of Volunteering**

The European Year of Volunteering 2011 was carried out by EYV Alliance, the ad hoc alliance of a very broad range of voluntary but also civil service organisations. It led to huge political recognition of volunteering but it also created new dimensions in understanding volunteering in society.

One of them certainly affected the link between young people and volunteering. Before the EYV, and at least within the European institutions, volunteering was very much linked with young people, youth work and youth policies. After the EYV, volunteering is seen to affect much more than just the youth field.

The EYV also recognized that there are different concepts of volunteering. A strong emphasis on the educational role and opportunities of volunteering, as it is promoted in EVS, is one of them.

### **New Horizons**

In September 2016, President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker proposed “to set up a European solidarity corps. Young people across the EU should be able to volunteer to help where it is needed most, to respond to crisis situations like the refugee crisis or the recent earthquake in Italy. These young people will be able to develop their skills and get not only work but also gain an invaluable human experience.”