Chronotopos
A Journal of Translation History

Jan Ceuppens

"Die Internationale": from Protest Song to Official Anthem and Back. Aspects of the German Reception of "L'Internationale" in the Early 1900s and After 1945.

1/2024
DOI: 10.70596/cts176

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au / Edited at: Institute of Applied Linguistics and Translatology (IALT), Leipzig University
ISSN: 2617-3441

Abstract

The fate of the German translations of "L'Internationale" reflects some of the fates of the German left. Several translations were produced around 1900, before the Emil Luckhardt version would become canonized shortly after the First World War. When compared to a more scholarly translation–of which the very first one, by Sigmar Mehring, is a good example–, Luckhardt's is much less faithful to the Pottier original, but still quite effective. It is also less ideologically radical, so that it was acceptable within many strands of the German left. After the establishment of two German states following the Second World War, and even after the German unification in 1990, the song became a point of dispute for the left, even if at the same it also lost much of its original message in popular culture. This article examines the possible reasons for the lasting success of Luckhardt's translation, its shifts in relation to the source text and some of the contexts in which it has been used.

Keywords: reception, ideology, political poetry, song translation

Zum Zitieren des Artikels / Pour citer l'article / To cite the article:
Ceuppens, Jan (2025): "Die Internationale": from Protest Song to Official Anthem and Back. Aspects of the German Reception of "L'Internationale" in the Early 1900s and After 1945, Chronotopos 6 (1), 102-118. DOI: 10.70596/cts176

Jan Ceuppens

"Die Internationale": from Protest Song to Official Anthem and Back

Aspects of the German Reception of "L'Internationale" in the Early 1900s and After 1945

The fate of the German translations of "L'Internationale" reflects some of the fates of the German left. Several translations were produced around 1900, before the Emil Luckhardt version would become canonized shortly after the First World War. When compared to a more scholarly translation–of which the very first one, by Sigmar Mehring, is a good example–, Luckhardt's is much less faithful to the Pottier original, but still quite effective. It is also less ideologically radical, so that it was acceptable within many strands of the German left. After the establishment of two German states following the Second World War, and even after the German unification in 1990, the song became a point of dispute for the left, even if at the same it also lost much of its original message in popular culture. This article examines the possible reasons for the lasting success of Luckhardt's translation, its shifts in relation to the source text and some of the contexts in which it has been used.

Irgendwo wurde die Internationale angestimmt und in vielen Sprachen erklang die alte völkerverbindende Hymne der internationalen Arbeiterklasse.

[Somewhere the Internationale was intoned, and the ancient anthem, uniting the international working class, resounded in many languages.]

Neues Deutschland, 07.10.1957

Beginnings, national and international

When "L'Internationale" is being used at socialist or social democrat party rallies, at formal occasions in communist countries, or by trade unions and political activists all over the world, sometimes in a grand orchestral version (on tape or performed live), most often sung in unison by the participants, it is thought to create a solemn but also combative atmosphere of solidarity. The purely musical merits of the song are seldom acknowledged on such occasions; but then, aesthetics is not really the point, as Vernon Lidtke states of such workers' anthems in general:

Es gab kaum je einen Anlaß, bei dem Massenlieder vor allem eine künstlerische Funktion erfüllten. Zweifellos fanden sie einige Mitglieder, vielleicht viele, schön und waren darum

auch ästhetisch befriedigt, wenn sie diese Lieder sangen oder hörten. Doch die Hauptfunktion lag anderswo. Arbeiterlieder wurden im Dienst der Arbeiterbewegung und der ihr angeschlossenen Organisationen geschaffen, nicht die Organisationen im Dienst der Lieder. (LIDTKE 1979: 55)

[There was hardly ever an occasion at which mass songs would primarily fulfill an artistic function. Doubtlessly some members, perhaps even many of them, would find these songs beautiful and found aesthetic pleasure whenever they sang or heard them. Their main function, however, lay elsewhere. Workers' songs were meant to serve the workers movements and their affiliated organizations, not the other way around].

Nevertheless, thanks to their unsophisticated but very effective construction, both the music and the words of "L'Internationale" exert an immediate appeal to all those present. The same is true for other versions of the anthem, whether in Belgium, China, North Korea, or the USSR – one might say that it has fulfilled its own promise as being a truly international medium for the working class as well as its official representatives. One might assume that with these universal aspirations comes a logical commitment to faithful translation:

The Internationale had to be translated into many languages, and since its message was universal, one may plausibly surmise that the translators of the anthem have been committed to replicating the French original as closely as they could, not only because of the underlying premises of felicitous translation in general, but also because the anthem flagged a message of unity and uniformity. Therefore, only technical constraints of prosody, meter, and rhyme in the target language could count as justified causes of deviation. (KUZAR 2002: 89)

As Kuzar concedes, this assumption is a little naïve, not only in view of the pitfalls of translation and cultural mediation in general, but also of the anthem's concrete trajectory since its first appearance. Even in socialist countries its lyrics were subject to compromise, evidencing the paradoxes inherent to its national and/or institutionalized, state-backed forms. Furthermore, it has had to compete with other workers' songs and with national anthems (although it was the official USSR anthem between 1922 and 1944, as discussed by Pieter Boulgone in his contribution to this focus issue). The various translations of "L'Internationale" and their subsequent use throughout the twentieth century testify not only to national specificities, but also to internal controversies within the left, and its trajectory in Germany is a telling example.

The present article has two aims: to retrace the early history of "Die Internationale" in Germany by contrasting the 'canonized' translation with a more faithful, scholarly one, and to show how that canonized translation was and is used in very different ways by different actors in postwar and present-day Germany. Straddling descriptive translation theory, translation history and reception theory, it hopes to show the complicated

relationship between the supposed universal message and the particularities of the various receiving contexts.

Eugène Pottier's original poem "L'Internationale" was written in the aftermath of the Paris Commune,[1] when the fault lines within the International Workingmen's Association had not yet led to an open conflict, the anarchist movement had not yet distanced themselves completely from Marxist orthodoxy, and differences between revolutionary socialism and social democracy had not yet split the movement. The song "L'Internationale" was enthusiastically received in Germany soon after it was adopted as the official anthem at the 1896 convention of the French Workers' Party in Lille. According to Inge Lammel, who has done extensive research on the origins of the French text and its reception history for the Berlin *Arbeiterliedarchiv*, the original text and sheet music were in all probability brought to Germany by social democrat leader Karl Liebknecht, who attended the Lille convention (LAMMEL 2002: 213). In the course of the following decades, it would spawn at least eleven different translations, not counting parodies and alternative versions. Of course, much of this success was due to the march music composed by Pierre De Geyter – despite, or perhaps because of its generic character –, which could explain some of the liberties taken by its German translators as attempts to match the music. At a closer look, however, translations did not always concern themselves with singability any more than they did with faithfulness to Pottier's source text. Rather, they sought to adapt it to the specific context in which it was to be used. In that sense, the song gained a life of its own, its ultimately canonized version becoming part of German collective memory. It is only fitting, then, that literary historian Hermann Kurzke considered "Die Internationale" a *German* anthem in a book published in the year of German unification (KURZKE 1990: 109). In his view, the canonized German translation by Emil Luckhardt constitutes a substantial mitigation of Pottier's radical tone. Among other things it suppresses the infamous fifth stanza (especially for the line "nos balles / Sont pour nos propres généraux" [our bullets are for our own generals]) and introduces more conciliatory, even romanticizing imagery. In a recent study on the German reception, Michael Fischer (2021) connects this softening of the original message with the evolution of socialist and social-democrat movements in Germany from the late 1800s onwards. The question is whether the semantic shifts in the translation brought about changes in the affective potential and/or the addressees of the song.

At any rate, the very first German version is certainly an exception to the 'toning down' evolution outlined by Kurzke. It is a well-informed, even scholarly translation that will serve here as a contrast to the Luckhardt translation that would eventually become the standard.[2] It was produced by the German-Jewish poet and translator Sigmar Mehring,

[1] The circumstances surrounding the creation of the French original are detailed by Lammel (2002: 211) in a somewhat romanticized version, and more realistically by Fischer (2021: 148–149).

[2] Mehring's version is given more attention here because of its faithfulness to Pottier's original and because Mehring takes an almost scholarly approach. The most literal translation, by Walter Mossmann and Peter Schleuning (MOSSMANN & SCHLEUNING 1980), is not considered here, as it is a mere tool for understanding the original.

probably around the turn of the century, when he was preparing a collection of translations of recent French poetry (MEHRING 1900). That volume was eventually published by Baumert und Ronge, a publishing house that was open to recent literature, both translated and originally German (among others, its catalogue included texts from naturalist authors like Emile Zola and Julius Hart), but not specifically left leaning. Mehring was an experienced translator, quite knowledgeable about French literature (see HEUER 2008: 409–413), and he accorded much space to revolutionary and worker's poetry in this volume. His aim, he states right away, was to create faithful translations ["Die Übertragungen sind sämtlich sinngetreu", MEHRING 1900: VII]. In a short introduction, Mehring characterizes Eugène Pottier as "the man of the sharpest tone. His poetry has shed even the last glimmer of joie de vivre, the faintest bit of soothing humor" ["der Mann der schärfsten Tonart. Aus seinen Dichtungen ist auch der letzte Schimmer zarter Lebensfreude, der leiseste Klang eines mildernden Humors verschwunden." MEHRING 1900: 196]. He then offers a translation of one poem by Pottier, viz. *Jean Misère*, which he presents as a biographic document. Interestingly, however, Mehring did not include his translation of "L'Internationale" in this volume, although it must have belonged to the same manuscript (see FISCHER 2021). This indicates that it did not yet have the urgency it would soon acquire.[3] Mehring's translation was only published in 1924, when his son Walter, himself by then a renowned writer, put together a collection of French revolutionary poetry (MEHRING 1924). In his *Internationale*, Sigmar Mehring's intention seems to have been to demonstrate his appraisal of Pottier and his 'schärfste Tonart'; its radicalism may have been a reason why he did not publish it himself.[4]

Debout ! les damnés de la terre !
Debout ! les forçats de la faim !
La raison tonne en son cratère :
C'est l'éruption de la fin.

Du passé faisons table rase,
Foule esclave, debout ! debout !
Le monde va changer de base :
Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout !

Auf! Auf! Ihr glückbetrog'nen Toren
Auf! Sklaven ihr der Hungerzunft!
Hört ihr's im Krater nicht rumoren?
Zum Durchbruch kommt die Weltvernunft
Räumt auf mit allem morschen Plunder!
Und vorwärts mit der Kraft des Stiers!
Die alte Welt zerfall' wie Zunder,
Wir waren nichts und jetzt sind wir's!

[3] It should be noted that even Pottier himself initially attached no greater importance to "L'Internationale" than to his other politically inspired poems. It seems that it only acquired its canonical status after De Geyter selected it for use in a song.

[4] In Germany's political climate around 1900, publication of such a radical text could have resulted in court cases, even if translators were usually not held responsible. Mehring would have been wary after he had been sentenced to three months of incarceration ('Festungshaft') for defamation of the Catholic Church in 1899; see Heuer (2008: 409).

Chorus

C'est la lutte finale :
Groupons-nous, et demain,
L'Internationale
Sera le genre humain

Il n'est pas de sauveurs suprêmes :
Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun,
Producteurs, sauvons-nous nous-mêmes !
Décrétons le salut commun !
Pour que le voleur rende gorge,
Pour tirer l'esprit du cachot,
Soufflons nous-mêmes notre forge,
Battons le fer quand il est chaud !

L'État comprime et la loi triche ;

L'Impôt saigne le malheureux ;
Nul devoir ne s'impose au riche ;
Le droit du pauvre est un mot creux.
C'est assez languir en tutelle,
L'Égalité veut d'autres lois ;
« Pas de droits sans devoirs, dit-elle
« Égaux, pas de devoirs sans droits ! »

Hideux dans leur apothéose,
Les rois de la mine et du rail
Ont-ils jamais fait autre chose
Que dévaliser le travail ?
Dans les coffres-forts de la bande
Ce qu'il a créé s'est fondu
En décrétant qu'on le lui rende
Le peuple ne veut que son dû.

Les Rois nous soûlaient de fumées,
Paix entre nous, guerre aux tyrans !
Appliquons la grève aux armées,
Crosse en l'air, et rompons les rangs !
S'ils s'obstinent, ces cannibales,
À faire de nous des héros,
Ils sauront bientôt que nos balles
Sont pour nos propres généraux.

Ouvriers, paysans, nous sommes
Le grand parti des travailleurs ;
La terre n'appartient qu'aux hommes,
L'oisif ira loger ailleurs.

Refrain

Nun kämpft zum letzten Male!
Stürmt an! Schon winkt uns dort
Die Internationale,
Der Menschheit Ziel und Hort!

Es kann uns kein Erlöser retten.
Nicht Gott, noch Caesar, kein Idol.
Erlöst Euch selbst aus Euren Ketten!
Schafft selbst der Allgemeinheit Wohl!
Der Räuber, allzulang umfriedet,
Gab endlich uns die Beute preis!
Blast nur das Feuer an und schmiedet
Das Eisen noch, solang es heiß!

Der Staat erdrückt, Gesetz ist Schwindel!
Die Steuern trägt der Arbeitsknecht.
Man kennt nur Reiche und Gesindel,
Und Phrase ist des Armen Recht.
Die Gleichheit soll den Bann vernichten!
Und für das kommende Geschlecht
Gilt: „Keine Rechte ohne Pflichten!"
Und: „Nichts von Pflicht mehr, wo kein Recht!"

Die Minenherrn und Schlotbarone
In ihrem Hochmut ekelhaft,
Was taten sie auf ihrem Throne,
Als auszusaugen uns're Kraft?
Was wir gefördert, schließt die Klicke
In ihren Panzergeldschrank ein,
Und glüh'n danach des Volkes Blicke
So fordert's nur zurück, was sein!

Die Herrschgewalt hat uns benebelt,
Krieg ihnen, Frieden uns allein!
In Streik sei die Armee geknebelt,
Den Kolben hoch! In ihre Reih'n!
Wenn uns zu Helden zwingen wollen
Die Kannibalen, wagt das Spiel!
Wir werden feuern! Und dann sollen
Sie selbst sein uns'rer Kugeln Ziel!

Arbeiter! Bauern! Eilt geschlossen
Zur Proletarierpartei!
Die Welt gehört den Werkgenossen,
Und mit den Drohnen ist's vorbei.

Combien de nos chairs se repaissent !	Wieviel wir auch verloren haben,
Mais, si les corbeaux, les vautours,	Es kommt der Morgen, der die Schar
Un de ces matins, disparaissent,	Der Eulen fortjagt und der Raben!
Le soleil brillera toujours !	Aufflammt die Sonne hell und klar!

As can be seen, Mehring largely managed to preserve the meaning and wording of Pottier's source text, despite some deviations necessitated by rhyme and meter (e.g., the translation "Ihr glückbetrog'nen Toren" [fools deprived of happiness] for "les damnés", or the curious replacement of "vautours", vultures, by "Eulen", owls, in the final stanza). The radicalism of the original, its clear-cut opposition between capitalists and workers, including the image of an army shooting its own leaders, are not mitigated here. Mehring's attention to rhyme and meter is not surprising, as he had written a handbook on the matter (Mehring 1891); still, some of his solutions seem somewhat contrived ("Und vorwärts mit der Kraft des Stiers!" [forward with bullish force] for "Foule esclave, debout" [stand up, enslaved masses]). Also, it is improbable that Mehring was considering – or, indeed, knew – De Geyter's melody or, more generally, paid attention to singability, which does not solely hinge on meter.[5] Thus, if the chorus was an important reason for the success of "L'Internationale", the first line of that chorus in Mehring's version is much less effective than the original (Fischer even calls it "etwas farblos" [somewhat bland]; FISCHER 2021: 57) or some of the later translations. The point, of course, is moot, since Mehring's "Die Internationale" was only published decades later, at a time when those other translations were already widely accepted.
One would expect singability to be the main concern of many of those later translations, as they were often commissioned by workers' choral societies with an explicit reference to the music of De Geyter (DOWE 1978; LIDTKE 1979). In 1902, the periodical *Lieder-Gemeinschaft der Arbeiter-Sängervereinigungen Deutschlands* published a "liberal translation" of the "Lied der französischen Sozialisten" produced by left-leaning author Rudolf Lavant (nom de plume for Richard Cramer). Although not wholly unpo-

[5] Peter Low (2013), taking his cue from skopos theory, lists a number of criteria which song translation should meet, 'singability' (which he also labels 'performability') being paramount. A practical example is the avoidance of "under-sized vowels" (LOW 2013: 93), which is certainly an important consideration when translating a revolutionary song with a somewhat wider tonal range like "L'Internationale". The wider tonal range is also emphasized by Cloud and Feyh (2015: 307), when they state of De Geyter's composition that "it features wide (therefore difficult) vocal intervals. The reach from pitches lower to higher, however, is integral to the feeling of the music: one starts as 'naught' but *rises* from prisoner-status to become 'all' in the final conflict. To strain for those high notes in the final stanzas enacts in microcosm the collective effort of building revolutionary consciousness and organization". Kurzke makes a similar observation where he contrasts 'combative' anthems (like "La Marseillaise" and "L'Internationale") with more 'solemn' ones (for which "God Saves the King" is the prototype). Mehring's otherwise admirable translation does not entirely live up to this standard.

etical, its meter makes it hard to sing, and it was probably intended as an aid for understanding the original rather than as lyrics in their own right, or even a new version intended for the German workers.

Lieder-Gemeinschaft

der Arbeiter-Sängervereinigungen Deutschlands.

Nummer 4 | Berlin, im Mai 1902. | Nummer 4

Der Beitritt zur Lieder-Gemeinschaft kann jederzeit erfolgen. Beitrag oder Einschreibegeld wird nicht erhoben. Beitrittserklärungen, sowie Einsendungen von Kompositionen sind an den Obmann des Ausschusses, **Otto Rasche,** Berlin SO., Mariannen-Platz 5, zu richten. An Orten, wo ein Bund vorhanden, welcher der Lieder-Gemeinschaft angehört, werden an Einzelvereine keine Noten versandt.

Die Internationale.

Von Eugen Pottier.

Frei übersetzt von Rudolf Lavant. Lied der französischen Sozialisten. Komponirt von Degeyter.

Empor, ihr Enterbten der Erde!
Ihr Sklaven des Hungers, empor!
Und der Ausbruch des Kraters, er werde
Vernichtend wie niemals zuvor!
Das Alte ist faul und verrottet —
Reißt das morsche Gerümpel denn ein!
Und wir, die man tritt und verspottet,
Wir werden die Herrschenden sein!
Auf zum letzten Kampfe
Schließet Eure Reih'n,
Die Internationale
Wird dann die Losung sein.

Keine Gottheit zerbricht uns're Ketten,
Kein Cäsar wird je, kein Tribun
Aus entnervendem Elend uns retten.
Wir müssen es selber thun!
Nur dann ist uns Wohlfahrt beschieden,
Nur dann lacht der Diebe der Fleiß,
Wenn wir selber das Eisen zu schmieden
Verstehen, so lange es heiß.
Auf zum letzten Kampfe
Schließet Eure Reih'n,
Die Internationale
Wird dann die Losung sein.

Der Staat, die Gesetze erbarmen
Der duldenden Massen sich nicht.
Wo giebt es ein Recht für den Armen?
Wo bindet den Reichen die Pflicht?
Man verdammt uns zum Loose der Knechte,
Doch die Gleichheit, die zürnende, spricht:
Hinfort keine Pflicht ohne Rechte,
Hinfort auch kein Recht ohne Pflicht!
Auf zum letzten Kampfe
Schließet Eure Reih'n,
Die Internationale
Wird dann die Losung sein.

Die Herren der Gruben und Schienen,
Sie werden von Schmeichlern geehrt —
Doch wo ist die Arbeit erschienen
Daneben nach Würde und Werth?
Sie füllte die Kisten und Kasten
Der Bande, die nie wir gerührt.
Wenn wir sie des Mammons entlasten,
So wird uns nur, was uns gebührt.
Auf zum letzten Kampfe
Schließet Eure Reih'n,
Die Internationale
Wird dann die Losung sein.

Die Erde gehört nur dem Schweiße,
Der von brennenden Sternen fiel.
Und wer da zu stolz ist zum Fleiße,
Der suche ein andres Asyl.
Wenn die Raben und Geier verschwinden,
Die vom Fleisch sich der Armuth genährt —
Die Fluren der Erde, wir finden
Sie sicher dann sonnig verklärt!
Auf zum letzten Kampfe
Schließet Eure Reih'n,
Die Internationale
Wird dann die Losung sein.

Figure 1: Rudolf Lavant's translation of "L'Internationale" as published in the periodical of the German workers' choir associations

The socialist poet and prose writer Franz Diederich produced two more liberal translations, one around 1901 and one in 1907. Both Lavant's translation and Diederich's second version tellingly omit Pottier's fifth stanza. In later decades, more renowned poets would try their hand at a translation, adapting Pottier's original to specific needs. Thus, the anarchist writer and journalist Erich Mühsam would write a version in the context of the short-lived Munich *Räterepublik*, translating the first three stanzas of Pottier's poem and adding a stanza that specifically addressed the new circumstances, although it was only written in 1920, after the demise of said republic. The poet Erich Weinert, a member of the German communist party since 1924 and later an important advocate of German-Soviet cooperation, produced a faithful translation of "L'Internationale" for the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War in 1937, but by that time, much to Weinert's dismay, another version had already acquired canonical status.

As stated before, it was not a translation by an established poet or translator that would ultimately prevail, but the 1906 version by Emil Luckhardt (1880–1914). Its author was not a scholar, nor was he a musician or songwriter: he was a beer brewer and trade unionist from Wuppertal, born in nearby Barmen, and a member of various workers' associations, such as the *Deutscher Arbeiter-Sängerbund*.[6] It was in this context that he was prompted by choir leader Adolph Uthmann to write a German version of Pottier's poem, fitting De Geyter's melody. Uthmann, who like Luckhardt was from Barmen, had already published several collections of militant workers' songs, including not only his own compositions to texts of contemporary proletarian poets, but also arrangements of existing German songs and translations, including "Die Internationale".[7] However, it was Luckhardt's translation that was eventually adopted by the choir association, which guaranteed its wider dissemination: workers' choirs started using it all over Germany around 1918 (Fischer 2021: 159). This version, consisting of only four stanzas, is quite liberal. Luckhardt omitted the third and fifth stanza from Pottier's text; his own third stanza (which is most often left out when the anthem is sung today) only has a faint resemblance to Pottier's fourth. More generally, as already mentioned, the Luckhardt translation is not nearly as radical as Pottier's poem.

Debout ! les damnés de la terre !	Wacht auf, Verdammte dieser Erde,
Debout ! les forçats de la faim !	die stets man noch zum Hungern zwingt!
La raison tonne en son cratère :	Das Recht wie Glut im Kraterherde
C'est l'éruption de la fin.	nun mit Macht zum Durchbruch dringt.
Du passé faisons table rase,	Reinen Tisch macht mit dem Bedränger!
Foule esclave, debout ! debout !	Heer der Sklaven, wache auf!
Le monde va changer de base :	Ein Nichts zu sein, tragt es nicht länger
Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout !	Alles zu werden, strömt zuhauf!
C'est la lutte finale :	Völker, hört die Signale!
Groupons-nous, et demain,	Auf zum letzten Gefecht!
L'Internationale	Die Internationale
Sera le genre humain (2 x)	erkämpft das Menschenrecht.
Il n'est pas de sauveurs suprêmes :	Es rettet uns kein höh'res Wesen,
Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun,	kein Gott, kein Kaiser noch Tribun
Producteurs, sauvons-nous nous-mêmes !	Uns aus dem Elend zu erlösen
Décrétons le salut commun !	können wir nur selber tun!
Pour que le voleur rende gorge,	Leeres Wort: des Armen Rechte,

[6] Before the Deutscher Arbeiter-Sängerbund was officially founded in 1908, a number of similar societies within the socialist and social-democrat movements had already been established and were important hubs for these ideologies (see DOWE 1978; VOIGT 2020).

[7] Unfortunately, very little information can be found on Uthmann's own translation, which may have been written around the same time as Luckhardt's (cf. FISCHER 2021: 159); a version (starting with the lines "Nun Mut, Verfemte dieser Erde, empor, du Volk von Joch und Not") can be found in the *Liederbuch* published by the Berlin section of the Arbeiter-Sängerbund in 1922.

Pour tirer l'esprit du cachot,
Soufflons nous-mêmes notre forge,
Battons le fer quand il est chaud !

L'État comprime et la loi triche ;
L'Impôt saigne le malheureux ;
Nul devoir ne s'impose au riche ;
Le droit du pauvre est un mot creux.
C'est assez languir en tutelle,
L'Égalité veut d'autres lois ;
« Pas de droits sans devoirs, dit-elle
« Égaux, pas de devoirs sans droits ! »

Hideux dans leur apothéose,
Les rois de la mine et du rail
Ont-ils jamais fait autre chose
Que dévaliser le travail ?
Dans les coffres-forts de la bande
Ce qu'il a créé s'est fondu
En décrétant qu'on le lui rende
Le peuple ne veut que son dû.

Les Rois nous soûlaient de fumées,
Paix entre nous, guerre aux tyrans !
Appliquons la grève aux armées,
Crosse en l'air, et rompons les rangs !
S'ils s'obstinent, ces cannibales,
À faire de nous des héros,
Ils sauront bientôt que nos balles
Sont pour nos propres généraux.

Ouvriers, paysans, nous sommes
Le grand parti des travailleurs ;
La terre n'appartient qu'aux hommes,
L'oisif ira loger ailleurs.
Combien de nos chairs se repaissent !
Mais, si les corbeaux, les vautours,
Un de ces matins, disparaissent,
Le soleil brillera toujours !

Leeres Wort: des Reichen Pflicht!
Unmündig nennt man uns und Knechte,
duldet die Schmach nun länger nicht!

Gewölbe stark und fest bewehret
die bergen, was man dir entzog,
dort liegt das Gut, das dir gehöret
und um das man dich betrog!
Ausgebeutet bist du worden
ausgesogen stets dein Mark!
Auf Erden rings, in Süd und Norden
das Recht ist schwach, die Willkür stark!

In Stadt und Land, ihr Arbeitsleute,
wir sind die stärkste der Partei'n
Die Müßiggänger schiebt beiseite!
Diese Welt muss unser sein;
Unser Blut sei nicht mehr der Raben,
Nicht der mächt'gen Geier Fraß!
Erst wenn wir sie vertrieben haben
dann scheint die Sonn' ohn' Unterlass!

As Hermann Kurzke (1990: 116) emphasizes in his analysis, Luckhardt's wording caters more to a general, democracy-minded, liberal audience than Pottier's original, by using much more general and/or romanticizing terms and culminating in a struggle for human rights rather than the working class' victory ("Verallgemeinerung, [...] Romantisierung, [...] Verbürgerlichung"). Furthermore, the class enemy, who is clearly

identified in Pottier's third, fourth and fifth stanzas, remains quite vague in the Luckhardt translation. In other words, the antagonism is much less straightforward, so that the addressee no longer seems to be the working class alone.[8] In an essay on Eugène Pottier and the German translations of his work, Erich Weinert levels a more general criticism against the Luckhardt version. He faults it for thwarting recognition for Pottier in Germany:

Nun ist der deutsche Text der INTERNATIONALE, den wir Deutschen allgemein singen, allerdings nicht angetan, das literarische Interesse für ihren Autor zu wecken; er ist undichterisch, hat wenig von der Kraft des Originals und entspricht auch inhaltlich nicht dem Urtext. (WEINERT 1937: 156)

[Now the German text of the INTERNATIONALE which we Germans usually sing will hardly awaken literary interest in its author; it is unpoetic, it lacks the power of the original, and it does not match its content.]

While it is clearly unfaithful in many respects, Luckhardt's translation does use a relatively modern and straightforward language, and it is quite easy to memorize and sing. Kurzke maintains that the vocabulary of the Luckhardt version no longer addresses the working class, but that is not necessarily how the working class itself perceived it. Its singability and its propagation through workers' choirs have probably been the key to its success and eventual canonization by most socialist movements after the First World War. Moreover, it mirrors the shifts within the various working-class movements, many of which were now, in their institutionalized form as trade unions or parties, somewhat less disposed to direct violent revolution. In that sense, "Die Internationale" does meet the criteria for what Cloud and Feyh (2015: 301) call 'fidelity': "Fidelity describes the emergent fit between a rhetorical hailing and the experiences of those hailed."[9] It soon replaced the workers' anthems that had been used until then, more particularly Jakob Audorf's "Arbeiter-Marseillaise", which was mainly a song of praise for Ferdinand Lasalle, an icon of social democracy in Germany at the time, or Max Kegel's "Sozialisten-Marsch", written for the 1892 social democrat party convention (cf. LIDTKE 1979); the only contender in terms of popularity was, and still is, Hermann Scherchen's "Brüder, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit" (see below). Luckhardt himself would never enjoy his song's success, as he died in a trench in Flanders in 1914 – during what might be considered the ultimate failure of the international call for solidarity evoked by Pottier's song, and its translations. On the other hand, it might be precisely this failure that made the song

[8] Interestingly, this tendency towards generalization and 'blurring' of class antagonisms can also be found in a much more recent English translation by Billy Bragg, as analyzed by Cloud and Feyh (2015) and Christophe Declercq in this focus issue.

[9] Admittedly, this concept remains hard to operationalize: Cloud and Feyh (2015) make a somewhat strenuous attempt to distinguish between genuine working-class anthems and populist ones, eventually even rejecting Billy Bragg's version as belonging to the latter.

appealing, not only for workers' movements, but for left-wing movements in general, as it would acquire its place in the canon.

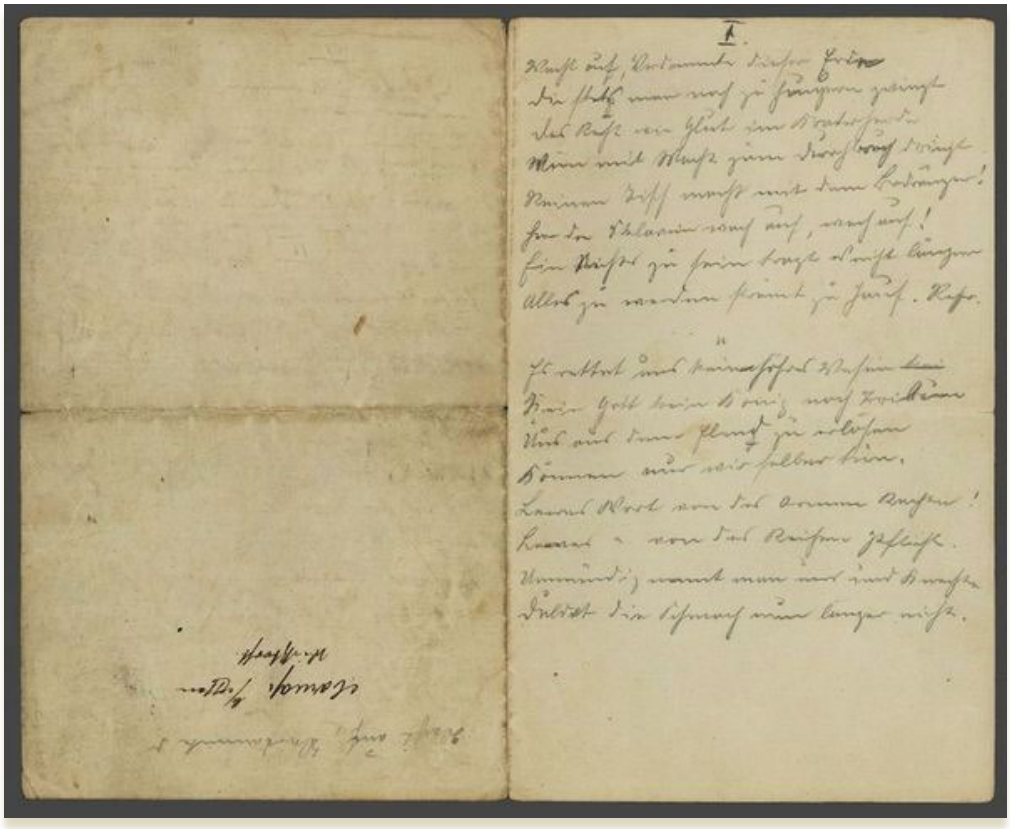

Figure 2: the manuscript of the Luckhardt translation, Museum Industriekultur Wuppertal

Party contexts: song competition

As mentioned above, the Luckhardt version of "Die Internationale" has become part of Germany's cultural heritage, at the very latest since the end of the Cold War. The question, then, is whether it is now completely devoid of any real political meaning, reduced to mere tradition or even part of the *Bildungsbürgertum*'s repertoire, or if it still retains a core of revolutionary potential. To answer that, it could be interesting to look at how it has been used in Germany since 1945.

It seems obvious that the anthem would be adopted by the newly founded German Democratic Republic; after all, the Russian version had been the national anthem of the Soviet Union until 1944, the German version had been sung at communist party rallies and at formal or informal occasions by workers ever since the First World War; neither the 'bourgeois' tendencies diagnosed by Kurzke nor the stylistic flaws criticized by Weinert seemed to matter. Indeed, if "Die Internationale" did not become the GDR's 'national' anthem, it would be sung at the very first conference of the unified socialist party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) in 1946 – three years before the new East German state was founded – to celebrate the (enforced) merger of

the social democrat SPD and the communist KPD. During all later SED party conferences, the almost compulsory closing event was the singing of "Die Internationale" by all those present. It was also sung on military parades by the *Nationale Volksarmee* as well as paramilitary 'Arbeiterkampfgruppen' [workers combat groups].[10]
However, this does not mean that it had a privileged position. On many other political occasions and from the very beginning of the GDR, the anthem was accompanied or at times replaced by other songs with a similarly long standing in workers' movements. An interesting instance of this ritualistic combination of workers' anthems is the symphonic "Festouvertüre 1948" by Ottmar Gerster. It was commissioned by the Thuringian section of the newly founded SED on the occasion of the centenary of Germany's 1848 revolutions. The overture is spun around quotes from various well-known songs. Instantly recognizable is the Marseillaise, which constituted a blueprint of sorts for many revolutionary anthems; indeed, the German version mentioned above, the so-called "Arbeiter-Marseillaise", written in 1864 by poet and activist Jacob Audorf, would have been the obvious association for most of the original audience in 1948. This melody is then combined with another staple from GDR party rallies, Hermann Scherchen's aforementioned "Brüder, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit" ("Brothers, Towards the Sun, Towards Freedom"), the German version of "Smelo, towarischtschi, w nogu" ("Brave, Comrades, In Step"). Finally, "Die Internationale" is also included in this short "Festouvertüre". Although it concerns an instrumental piece, knowledge of these songs' texts was considered a given; the overture sought to activate the emotional content associated with the popular music and consolidate a new collective within a new state, as Norbert Albrecht observes:

Das, worauf Ottmar Gerster vor allem abhebt, ist das Zitat, und zwar das Zitat von Liedern, deren Text allgemein geläufig gewesen ist. Für Gerster ist das Lied-Zitat nicht aus musikalischer Sicht wichtig gewesen (dazu waren sie künstlerisch zu anspruchslos), sondern wegen des Textes […] Auf neue Erfahrung, auf Erkenntnisgewinn zielte diese Musik nicht. Aber ihre Stereotypie besaß eine nicht geringe Symbolkraft und seit langem ein ästhetisches, sogar politisches Prestige. Gerster muß sich dessen bewußt gewesen sein: In der anhebenden Geschichte seines Landes seien Kampf und Sieg vergangener Zeiten aufgehoben oder doch auf eine höhere Stufe gehoben; der zeitgenössische Hörer war der Protagonist und seine individuelle Leistung als historische Leistung musikalisch bestätigt. (ALBRECHT 1999: 313–14)

[What Ottmar Gerster focuses on in particular is the quotation, and specifically the quotation of songs whose text would have been familiar to most. For Gerster, the quotation of songs was not important from a musical point of view (they were too artistically unassuming for that), but because of the text. This music did not aim at new experiences or the gaining of knowledge. Its stereotypicality, however, had considerable symbolic power,

[10] Evidence of this can be found in original footage freely available on internet sources. (See, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDNe6Ra4__M, retrieved 15.05.2025)

and for a long time, it had had an aesthetic, even political prestige. Gerster must have been aware of this: in the rising history of his country, the struggle and victory of past times had reached their apogee or had at least been elevated to a higher level; the contemporary listener was the protagonist, and his individual achievement was confirmed as a historical achievement through the music.]

The versatility of Pottier/Luckhardt's poem in De Geyter's musical setting was demonstrated again during the peaceful 1989 revolution, which would see the end of the GDR. While at the very last SED party conference in East Berlin on 7 October, "Die Internationale" was sung by all attendees – including Mikhail Gorbachev, who was on a state visit, and obviously joined in in Russian –, the protesters in the so-called Montagsdemonstrationen in Leipzig would recite the sentence "Wir sind das Volk", setting them apart from those in power, but also sing "Die Internationale", which in its German version invokes universal human rights, after all:

Auf der Leipziger Montagsdemonstration vom 9. Oktober 1989 mussten die Funktionäre erleben, dass Tausende die 'Internationale' anstimmten – das Lied der Weltrevolution, das an den Schulen eingeübt worden war, um den 'Klassenfeind' in Schach zu halten. Jetzt sprach der Ruf 'Völker, hört die Signale' unmittelbar diejenigen an, die noch ängstlich und zögernd hinter den Gardinen verharrten und unschlüssig hinunter auf die sich straßenbreit voranwälzende Menschenmenge blickten. Das unverfängliche Wort 'Menschenrecht' – es enthüllte mit ungeahnter Urgewalt seinen wahren, den Stasi-Staat unterminierenden Sinn. (GURATZSCH 2014)

[At the Monday demonstration in Leipzig on 9 October 1989, the functionaries had to experience that thousands sang the 'Internationale' – the song of the world revolution that had been practiced in schools to keep the 'class enemy' at bay. Now the call 'Völker, hört die Signale' spoke directly to those who remained fearful and hesitant behind the curtains, gazing indecisively down at the crowds of people advancing along the street. The innocuous word 'human rights' – it revealed its true meaning, undermining the Stasi state, with unexpected elemental force.]

Of course, protesters would later resort to another and more lasting rally cry: "Deutschland einig Vaterland" – a line from the original GDR anthem, composed by Hanns Eisler to lyrics by Johannes R. Becher.[11] Nevertheless, "Die Internationale" proved to be resilient enough to accompany another revolution, contradicting Kurzke's hypothesis that the song would not be able to express the feelings of the people of the GDR because of its association with state power (cf. KURZKE 1990: 119).
While the use of socialist anthems was institutionalized in the GDR and constituted a living tradition for its citizens that they could even turn against their leaders, things

[11] As the GDR consolidated into a state in its own right, that anthem was only played in an instrumental version from the late 1960s onwards.

were a bit more complicated in the west, and it would seem they remain so to this day. During the Cold War period and the period of reconstruction (often termed *Wirtschaftswunder* or, after the first chancelor, *Adenauerzeit*), conservative powers would prevail in the Federal Republic of Germany. The communist party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD) was banned in 1956.[12] The social democrat SPD would not be in government until 1966, after having renounced its Marxist foundations under the so-called Godesberger Programm in 1959, which the party hoped would make it acceptable for a wider group of voters (turning it into a *Volkspartei*). This may explain why "Die Internationale", although still in use on International Workers Day, would no longer be sung at the end of the yearly SPD party conventions. Other songs were chosen instead, one of them being the aforementioned "Brüder, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit", which has a more conciliatory, less combative text, and is also traditionally used at gatherings of Germany's biggest trade union federation, the Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB).

"Die Internationale", however, still holds its symbolic value for other left-wing movements. Outside parties and related organizations, "Die Internationale" was adopted by the student movement of the late 1960s and its heirs from the 1970s onwards. The singer-songwriter Hannes Wader in particular should be mentioned, as his performances of workers' songs during the 1970s also brought "Die Internationale" to younger audiences.[13] After 1990, the party *Die Linke*, historically the heir of the GDR state party SED, used the song at the end of its party conventions.[14] It seems logical that social democrats want to steer clear of this association, even if they have forged coalitions with *Die Linke* in a number of states (viz. Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, Berlin, and, most recently, Bremen). But interestingly, the SPD's youth organization, the *Jungsozialisten* or JuSos, did preserve "Die Internationale" at the closing of their national conventions, in a way defying the party's more conformist choices. This became apparent at a small uproar during the 2019 SPD party convention. As had been customary since 1966, when the convention ended on Sunday, the audience sang "Wann wir schreiten Seit' an Seit'", a song written in 1914 by Hermann Claudius and set to music by Michael Englert. It paints an almost idyllic scene of workers going to the countryside (and, as is almost compulsory for Germans, into the woods) after a hard week's work. The contrast to "Die Internationale" could hardly be greater. On the previous

[12] This concerns the traditional communist party which was founded in 1919; in 1968, the Deutsche Kommunistische Partei (DKP) assumed its legacy, but it would never play any role in German politics.

[13] Wader's 1977 live recording "Hannes Wader singt Arbeiterlieder" (Philips 6305 342) is somewhat of a classic. It sold very well despite negative reviews and a ban on most radio stations. Around the time of its release, Wader became a member of the DKP and would remain in the party until 1991 (see Wader's autobiography, Wader 2019, as well as Holler 2007).

[14] The importance the party still attaches to the song is demonstrated on its YouTube channel, where a singalong version was posted on the occasion of the song's 150 years celebration (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p41mETuQQ-E, retrieved 15.05.2025).

day of the convention, however, "Die Internationale" was sung, mainly at the instigation of JuSo representatives, prompting a number of conservative commentators to lament the radicalization of social democracy (which, in turn, was ironically commented by left-leaning newspaper *taz*; see BEUCKER 2019). In hindsight, this may have been a wise choice, as the author of "Wann wir schreiten Seit' an Seit'", although a social democrat at first, became a staunch national socialist in the 1930s and did not really distance himself from this ideology after the Second World War. Claudius' text was so unspecific that it lent itself to various political uses. It was even included in the SS songbook (SS-Liederbuch 1942). In 2021, the SPD decided to cancel the song, and are now looking for a new anthem. It remains to be seen whether "Die Internationale" is a contender. The reluctance against it may indicate that the song retains a revolutionary kernel even today, or that its association with the GDR or the Soviet Union is still too powerful. Prompted by the commotion surrounding the song at the 2019 SPD convention, German poet, songwriter and former GDR dissident Wolf Biermann wrote a short column in favor of Luckhardt's version, again emphasizing its more universal appeal:

In der altmodisch pathetischen Hymne leuchtet im Aschehaufen immer noch der humanistische Glutkern der Revolution – die Hoffnung auf Freiheit, auf Gerechtigkeit und Humanität. Es steckt in der Internationale die immer wieder auch zerstörbare Hoffnung auf die „Victoire de la condition humaine". Die Menschenrechte gehören seit 1948 zum Grundgesetz der Völkerfamilie: der UN Declaration of Human Rights. (BIERMANN 2019)

[In this unfashionably anthem, within the heap of ashes there still glows the humanist core of revolution – the hope of freedom, of justice and humanitarianism. Within Die Internationale lies this hope, ever prone to destruction, of the "Victoire de la condition humaine". Since 1948 human rights have been part of that constitution of the family of peoples: the UN Declaration of Human Rights.]

It might be said, of course, that the song (rather than the poem) "L'Internationale"/"Die Internationale" has lent itself to various contexts and purposes mainly because De Geyter's music, even if it was not particularly imaginative, has proved to be very effective. The question, then, is whether the translation needed to be all that true to Pottier's very radical source text, embedded in its specific political context as it was. As long as a number of key words were preserved, the message may always have been more in the performance than in the content. And perhaps the success of the Luckhardt version, besides being heavily promoted by workers' choral societies, was also due to its adaptability, which made it acceptable to moderate social democrats as well as far left activists. Yet even as it has become part of German collective memory and risks being reduced to a museum piece, recent events have shown that when controversy arises, the text of "Die Internationale" can still transport what Biermann calls the "humanist core of revolution".

References

ALBRECHT, Norbert (1999): "Musik zum Sprechen bringen. Aspekte der Narration in der frühen DDR-Musik." In: LÄMMERT, E. (ed.): *Die erzählerische Dimension. Eine Gemeinsamkeit der Künste*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 305–328.

BEUCKER, Pascal (2019): "Rechter Kontertenor. 'Internationale' beim SPD-Parteitag", *taz*, 9 December 2019.

BIERMANN, Wolf (2019): "Wacht auf, Verdammte. Darf die SPD die ‚Internationale' singen? Na klar! Doch am besten wäre: Mit Verstand", *Die Zeit*, 11.12.2019, https://www.zeit.de/2019/52/die-internationale-hymne-arbeiterbewegung-spd.

CLOUD, Dana L. & FEYH, Kathleen Eaton (2015): "Reason in Revolt: Emotional Fidelity and Working Class Standpoint in the 'Internationale'", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45 (4), 300–323.

DEUTSCHER ARBEITER-SÄNGERBUND (1922): *Liederbuch*. Berlin: Deutscher Arbeiter-Sängerbund, Gau Berlin und Umgebung.

DOERING, Kai (2021): "Parteitag: Warum die SPD 'Wann wir schreiten …' nicht mehr singt", *Vorwärts*, 10.12.2021.
https://vorwaerts.de/artikel/parteitag-spd-schreiten-mehr-singt

DOWE, Dieter (1978): "The Workingmens' Choral Movement in Germany before the First World War", *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (2). Special Issue: Workers' Culture (Apr., 1978), 269–296.

FISCHER, Michael (2021): "Vom revolutionären Geist der Utopie. 150 Jahre *Die Internationale* von Eugène Pottier", *Lied und populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 66, 147–192.

GURATZSCH, Dankwart (2014): "Aus DDR-Parolen wurden Worte des Widerstands", *Die Welt*, 9 November 2014.

HEUER, Renate (ed.) (2008): *Lexikon deutsch-jüdischer Autoren*. Bd. 16: Lewi-Mehr. München: Saur.

HOLLER, Eckard (2007): "The Folk and *Liedermacher* Scene in the Federal Republic in the 1970s and 1980s". In: ROBB, D. G. (ed.): *Protest Song in East and West Germany since the 1960s*. Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 133–167.

KURZKE, Hermann (1990): *Hymnen und Lieder der Deutschen*. Mainz: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung [= excerpta classica Bd. 5].

KUZAR, Ron (2002): "Translating the Internationale: Unity and Dissent in the Encoding of Proletarian Solidarity", *Journal of Pragmatics* 34, 87–109.

LAMMEL, Inge (2002): "Die Internationale". In: id.: *Arbeiterlied – Arbeitergesang. Hundert Jahre Arbeitermusikkultur in Deutschland. Aufsätze und Vorträge aus 40 Jahren*. Teetz: Hentrich & Hentrich.

LIDTKE, Vernon (1979): "Lieder der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, 1864-1914", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 5 (1) (*Arbeiterkultur im 19. Jahrhundert*), 54–82.

LOW, Peter (2003): "Singable Translations of Songs." *Perspectives* 11 (2), 87–103.

MEHRING, Sigmar (1900): *Die französische Lyrik im 19. Jahrhundert. Mit eigenen Übertragungen*. Großenhain/Leipzig: Baumert & Ronge.

MEHRING, Sigmar (1891): *Deutsche Verslehre*. Leipzig: Reclam.

MEHRING, Walter (1924): *Französische Revolutionslieder aus der Zeit der Pariser Commune. Clément und Pottier. Übertragen und eingeleitet von Walter Mehring*. Berlin: Malik.

SS-LIEDERBUCH (1942): SS-Liederbuch mit Bildern und Noten. 9th edition. Munich, Zentralverlag der NSDAP.
https://archive.org/details/SSLiederbuchMitBildernUndNoten244S.Fraktur

VOIGT, Boris (2020): "Arbeitergesang zwischen bildungsbürgerlichem Ideal, Gemeinschaftskonstitution und proletarischem Kampf. Die Liedersammlungen des deutschen Arbeiter-Sängerbundes in der Zeit der Weimarer Republik", *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 51 (1) (June 2020), 59–100.

WADER, Hannes (2019): *Trotz alledem. Mein Leben*. München: Penguin.

WEINERT, Erich (1937): "Eugène Pottier in deutscher Sprache", *Internationale Literatur. Deutsche Blätter* 7 (10), 156–157.

WETTIG, Klaus (2021): "150 Jahre 'Internationale': Ein Lied erobert die Welt", *Vorwärts*, 3 June 2021.
https://vorwaerts.de/artikel/150-jahre-internationale-lied-erobert-welt