

Lessons from writing history including one's own role as author: The case of IOJ

Kaarle Nordenstreng, Professor Emeritus
Tampere University, Finland
<https://sites.tuni.fi/kaarle/>

Presentation in Colloquium [Prague's International
Organizations and the Global Cold War](#)
Charles University, Prague, 3 November 2023

*The Rise and Fall of the International
Organization of Journalists
Based in Prague 1946-2016*
Charles University Press Karolinum
Prague 2020

This presentation:

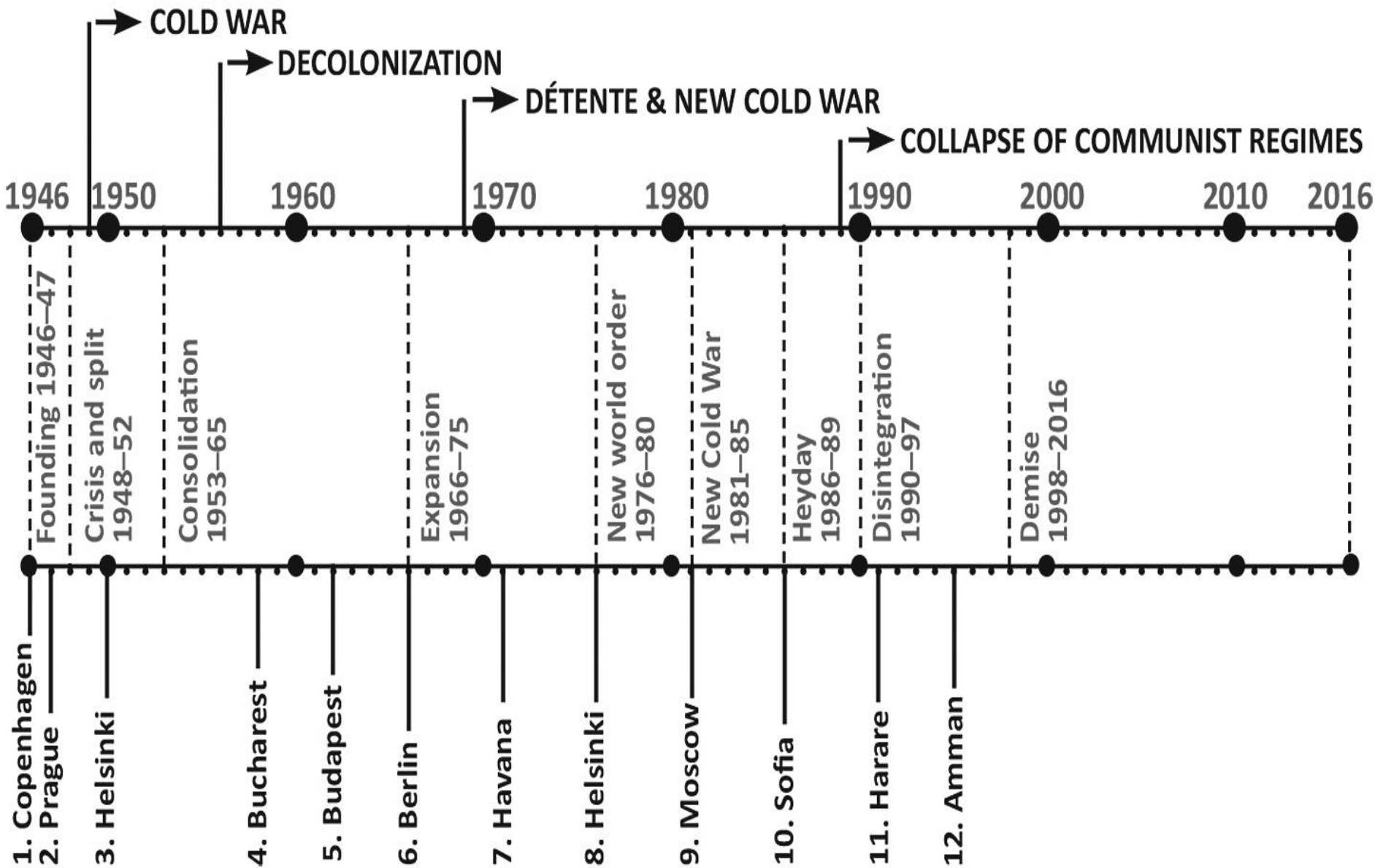
First, gives a sweeping summary of the IOJ's history with a panorama of selected pages from the book

Second, shares the lessons learned by the author who has been part of the Organization for 14+ years

Summary of IOJ history in stages

1. Prehistory 1894-1945
2. Founding 1946-47
3. Turmoil in the Cold War 1948-53
4. Consolidation 1954-66
5. Expansion 1966-75
6. Keeping pace with a new world order 1976-80
7. Persevering in a new Cold War 1981-85
8. Heyday 1986-89
9. Disintegration 1990-97
10. Demise 1998-2016

Overview of IOJ history in timeline



Markers in IOJ history on selected pages

- Founding in Copenhagen June 1946
- 2nd IOJ Congress in Prague 1947, J Masaryk speaking
- Split: Western unions leaving 1948-49
- Prague spring 1968, normalization with little damage
- 8th IOJ Congress in Helsinki 1976 with great hopes
- 40th anniversary in Prague 1986
- Activities and economy high 1988 with publishing house, interpretation service, journalism school, etc.
- Secretariat headquarters moved from Pařížská to renovated house in Celetná at Old Town Square 1989

- After Velvet Revolution in November 1989 Czechoslovak Union of Journalists dissolved itself; its successor Syndicate did not rejoin IOJ, leaving it with no member in the home country; acrimony between IOJ and the new political reality in CZ erupted in Lisbon Presidium in January 1990
- IOJ became target of smear campaign in CZ press
- In August 1990 the CZ government decided to expel IOJ, IUS and WFTU; in January 1991 the 11th IOJ Congress in Harare accommodated by approving new strategy and electing new leadership

- Congress outcome was “too little too late” for new political forces in CZ, leading to political and financial decline; Secretariat headquarters transferred to smaller premises in Mánesova Prague 2
- Brazilian President and French Secretary General quarreled over everything; in late 1993 the President stepped down and 12th Congress in Amman elected a new one from Jordan, while the Secretary General was dismissed for financial mismanagement and replaced by a reputable one from the Philippines
- New Secretary General led promising struggle for survival until 50th anniversary in Hanoi 1996

- Yet demise was inevitable, while enterprises were exhausted and all activities discontinued in 1997; only a small company *Mondiapress* survived in Londýnská
- Last move was visit by President, Vice-President and Treasurer to Beijing in 1998 suggesting that IOJ leadership be handed over to All-China Journalists' Association; the offer was politely declined
- Whatever remained from IOJ offices was saved in a leaking warehouse in Dolany in the late 1990s
- IOJ was declared defunct by a letter from last two Presidents at IFJ Congress in Angers in June 2016

Lessons from writing IOJ history: In general

“With experiences like these I can testify that the IOJ was an object rather than a subject in history.”
(Last sentence of Part One of the book, p. 231)

From Epilogue, pp. 227-228:

“While overall political structures determine the main course of history, considerable leeway remains for *subjective factors and pure chance* to influence the course of events and developments.”

“The socialist countries in central and eastern Europe constituted a political environment typically called totalitarian, but in fact this left considerable *room for manoeuvring* in maintaining international contacts, arranging events and issuing publications. An impressive example of pragmatic activities is the commercial enterprise system of the IOJ – an island of capitalism in the sea of socialism.”

“*Tactical attempts to influence political trends were unsuccessful in Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution.*”

“Discord among leaders creates confusion and loss of direction throughout any organization. A striking example of this is the conflict between President and Secretary General in 1991–93, preceded by a rift developing between the radical reformers with the Soviets and other east Europeans on the one side, and those adhering to the status quo with the Arabs and Latin Americans on the other.”

“Much value in leading international organizations is lost by neglecting the institutional memory while leaders are typically immersed in their present interests and not concerned with historical legacy.”

Lessons from writing IOJ history: Regarding my own role

“I am the main author – both as a media scholar and as a former President. One might wonder how it is possible to reconcile these different roles. My response to such doubts is, first, that writing any history is inevitably more or less subjective, and personal experience may even add valuable elements to the narrative. Second, in this case I have benefitted from a great deal of unique inside knowledge and documentation accumulated during the nearly 15 years of my Presidency...

...I consider it my moral obligation to tell the story of the IOJ honestly and openly for posterity. I do not claim to present the definitive account but rather history as I see it, with the advantage of personal involvement.”

(Preface, p. 11)

So no extraordinary conditions even if the author had been part of the story! The situation alerted me to beware of taking sides, but that should be normal in any serious history writing. Or am I naive and blind to my own limitations? Only critical assessment and scholarly debate will tell...

The Cold War paradigm still concerns me: Soviet vs. the other side. Siding with the Soviets makes one their apologist / useful fool. Siding with the others makes one a Western apologist / an agent of imperialism. In my case: bridgebuilder vs. cold warrior.

Can one really avoid taking sides; should one rather openly process both sides, aiming at a hybrid paradigm including both – a fairness doctrine in Cold War history? Not easy if one has a reputation for making history on one side, like me on the Soviet side. But it is possible, even stimulating in light of personal experience, with an uncompromisingly scholarly line.

Finally the main international 'democratic' organizations from the 1940s: Where are they now

IOJ Journalists 1946 (Copenhagen): finished in 2016

IUS Students 1946 (Prague): finished in 2006

WFTU Trade Unions 1945 (London): in Athens

WFDY Youth 1945 (London): in Budapest

WIDF Women 1945 (Paris): in cyberspace/Havana

WFSW Scientists 1946 (London): in Paris

IADL Lawyers 1946 (Paris): in cyberspace

WPC 1949-50 (Paris-Prague-Warsaw): in Athens

Thank you!

See also

[Steering the International Organization of Journalists
through Détente and Cold War](#)
in Symposium [Fellow Travellers and 'Useful Idiots'
from Lenin to Putin](#)

University of Helsinki, 14 June 2019