

## **German Seafarers, Anti-Fascism and the Anti-Stalinist Left: The 'Antwerp Group' and Edo Fimmen's International Transportworkers Federation, 1933-1940**

**Jonathan Hyslop (Colgate University and the University of Pretoria)**

**Abstract:** *In the period from the mid 1930s to the beginning of the Second World War, a group of German seamen based in Antwerp combined with Amsterdam-based Edo Fimmen, Secretary of the International Transportworkers Federation, to wage a campaign against the Nazi government amongst the sailors of the German merchant fleet. They organized cells of supporters on German ships, encouraged informal resistance, circulated propaganda and planned sabotage. The Antwerp Group were a breakaway from the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH), a Comintern-aligned organization. The Antwerp men reacted against the ineffectiveness of the German Communist leadership's response to Hitler's takeover of power, and against the growing subordination of the ISH to Soviet interests. The article highlights the role of anti-Stalinist militants in the Anti-Fascism of the 1930s. It contributes to the recent scholarship on Anti-Fascism, which has emphasized Anti-Fascism's transnationalism and ideological diversity, rather than seeing Anti-Fascism either in national terms, or as a monolithic entity controlled by Moscow.*

**Keywords:** Edo Fimmen; Hermann Knüfken, Anti-Fascism, internationalism, seafarers, International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, Comintern

*The National Socialist German state wants war: therefore prepare for it. Germany wants dominance in the world. Germany wants colonies and raw materials... Because National Socialism with its autarchy fails in peace, it will be incited into a war ... The coming war of National Socialist Germany must lead to the collapse of the Brown system. To help this collapse is your task! Prepare yourself to fulfill this task.*

– The Antwerp Group of German Seamen, 1937, *Die Schifffahrt* 5/6 1937

In the Spring of 1937, the *SS Thalia*, a ship of the *Neptun Reederei* of Bremen, sailed from Antwerp for the Spanish port of Pasajes. It carried a cargo of 1500 tons of phosphate produced by I.G. Farben corporation, and was part of the Hitler regime's programme of assistance to Franco's side in the Civil War. One of the crewmen on board was a member of a clandestine group of anti-Nazi German seamen operating from Antwerp. This network was linked with Edo Fimmen, the Amsterdam-based Secretary General of the International Federation of Transportworkers (ITF). On returning to Antwerp, the sailor would make a report to the 'Antwerp Group' for forwarding via the ITF to the Spanish Republican Government. The document recounted how on arrival in Pasajes, the sailor found a number of other *Neptun* ships in the harbour, as well as a German submarine, U27, and the ship *Wollin*, which was a floating military base supplying the Nazi forces deployed in the conflict. The seaman noted that the Basque dockworkers unloaded the *Thalia* extremely slowly, taking ten days to complete the task – he thought that this was deliberate,

for they openly showed signs of support for revolutionary ideas. He encountered many German military formations in the port - airmen, anti-aircraft specialists, and drivers, all wearing Spanish uniforms. Soldiers who came on to the ship complained to the sailor that they had not volunteered for Spain, but been ordered thence. The men were discontented, cursing their officers and saying that they had 'had it up to here' and were 'standing in shit up to their necks'. One German airman accurately summed up a major reason why the Germans were there: " Our officers always emphasize to us: They've had theoretical training and exercises back home! We are only here to get practical experience"(Antwerp Group 1937).

The Antwerp Group and other related anti-Nazi operations of the ITF have been the subject of a superb work of social history by the German historian Dieter Nelles (2001a). Nelles has meticulously chronicled how, under the supervision of Fimmen's leadership, groups of German transport workers, supported by their comrades in other countries, resisted the Nazis through the 1930s. Besides the seamen's group, a remarkable role was played by a network of railway workers, led by Hans Jahn. After 1939, some survivors took their struggle into exile and worked with the Allied forces. This article is in no way intended to substitute for Nelles' definitive study. However it aims not only to bring that work, which is of great intrinsic interest, to the attention of Anglophone readers. And it also to consider the history of the ITF-Antwerp Group activists in relation to current scholarship about Anti-Fascism and internationalism. In addition, it discusses the particular nature of the Antwerp Group as a maritime network.

In the Antwerp Group – ITF collaboration, the unique character of ports as cities, and of ships as social spaces, enabled the construction of maritime networks in apparently highly unfavourable circumstances. A considerable body of literature has in recent years shown how port cities, placed on the margins of stable social and political arrangements, can be difficult for established authorities to control (Hein 2011). And another significant strand of contemporary scholarship has shown the need to consider ships as spaces which sharply differ from terrestrial forms of social organization in their relation to state authority, in their internal socio-spatial structure, and consequently, in the politics which they then help to constitute (Hasty and Peters 2012). As we shall see, the partial escape from monolithic authority, which not only foreign ports, but even German ships, and to a lesser extent German harbour towns allowed, provided the necessary political and psychological space for the Antwerp / ITF attempts at anti-Fascist resistance. This article will seek to show that the social worlds of international trade unionism and left politics, portside pubs and boarding houses and ship's crew quarters, somewhat shielded from the direct exercise of state authority, were a particularly generative environment for the development and defence of resistance politics.

There has until recent years been a strong tendency in the historiography of the inter-war years for Anti-Fascism to be represented simply as deceptive democratic cover for the 'totalitarian' aspirations of Stalinism. Anti-Fascism is reduced to a front for Soviet Communism, which is itself seen as simply the mirror image of Fascism.

However new scholarship on the Comintern has questioned this highly ideological narrative (Garcia et. al. 2016a: 1-19). It has become increasingly clear that the notion of a broad anti-Fascist movement was not a monopoly of the forces directly controlled by the Stalinist regime. As Enzo Traverso (2016: 11) points out in his luminous reflection on the World Wars:

Though this verdict contains an element of truth, it is one-sided and reductive, taking no account neither the plurality of the antifascist phenomenon, in which various ideological sensibilities and orientations found common ground, nor its scope and embeddedness, both intellectual and social.

As Traverso shows, the idea of a broad Anti-Fascism originated in the 1920s, amongst a range of political actors, and long preceded the Soviet Union's adoption of the Popular Front strategy in the mid-1930s.

A related shift in the direction of studies of Anti-Fascism has been a move toward treating it as a global and networked phenomenon, rather than analyzing it as a series of comparable movements in separate states. Hugo Garcia (2016) has identified this trend as one of overcoming 'methodological nationalism' and movement toward treating Anti-Fascism in transnational terms. The archival work carried out in recent times by Bernhard Bayerlein and his colleagues (Weber et. al. 2013) has especially highlighted the complexity of the relationship between German Communism and the Soviet Union and how this interfaced with the question of Anti-Fascism. In the Interwar years there was a triangular relationship between the national communist parties, the Comintern and the Soviet Communist Parties. In the early phase of the Russian Revolution great hopes were invested by the Soviet government in the triumph of a revolution in Germany, but once this faded there was an increasing subordination of the overall Communist project to the national interests of the USSR. Nevertheless this triangular relationship had powerful internal tensions. The network of international Comintern front organizations and media enterprises presided over by Willi Münzenberg, operating largely out of Germany in the late Weimar period, was an important element of the Comintern apparatus, but also partly escaped its direct control. As Bayerlein (2017) contends, during the 1920s and into the beginning of the 1930s, this constellation of organizations, most notably the League Against Imperialism and the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* / International Workers Relief, combined cross-border political organization and cultural modernism to generate new forms of global social activism, which were to have a long-lasting socio-political impact. These groupings came to be regarded by Moscow with increasing suspicion, because of their relative independence. Bayerlein (2017: 67) accurately describes "a general de-internationalization process of the transnational networks" during the 1930s. The transnational organizations were then actively demobilized and repressed by Stalin and his henchmen. Bayerlein's work suggests that the Soviet leadership became, in practice, far more willing to live in a permanent accommodation with Nazi Germany

than either their rhetoric or their diplomatic approaches to the western democracies have led historians to assume.

This perspective is crucial to understanding the context of the emergence of the Antwerp Group / ITF collaboration. The ineffectiveness of the German Communist Party (KPD) response to the Nazi seizure of power alienated some of the German party's militants, and this was compounded by the cynical calculations of Soviet policy toward Hitler, and the eventual brutal purging of the KPD exiles in the Soviet Union. The Antwerp Group were a breakaway from one of the German-based but globally networked Comintern organizations of the early 1930s, the International of Seafarers and Harbour Workers (ISH) (Weiss 2017). And the Group's outlook was based on a conscious rejection of Stalinist politics. A number of the Antwerp Group's key leaders were rooted in a radical syndicalist political tradition that had never been comfortable with main-line Communism. The ITF was a movement which, under Fimmen's leadership, sought to articulate its own democratic socialist vision, independent of both Social Democracy and Stalinism. This history demonstrates the importance of recognizing that working class resistance to Fascism was not only the work of Communists but also of non-party trade unionists, Social Democrats, syndicalists, Trotskyists, anarchists and others (Graf 2001; Coppi and Heinz 2012). Fimmen primarily took his distance from the Comintern over its sectarianism. His emphasis on labour unity went against the grain of the Stalinist policy of the late 1920s and 1930s, which targeted Social Democrats as the main enemy. He also had a strong streak of pacifist ideology which only with difficulty fitted the Comintern outlook. On the other hand, the militants of the ISH who join the Antwerp Group seem to have been somewhat attracted by the ultra-militancy of the Communists in the early 1930s. What seems to have turned them away from the ISH was the Communist leaders' ineffectuality during the Nazi takeover and failure to adapt tactically to the new circumstances. Where the Fimmen leadership and the Antwerp Group were able to find common ground was in their emphasis on labour unity and autonomy. Their joint activities combined a broad appeal to Anti-Fascism with a suspicion of the Communist leaders' subordination of working class interests to Soviet Policy goals. The Anti-Fascism of the group was complex in its relationship to the Popular Front strategy. In Spain they supported the victory of the Popular Front government, but they preferred to affiliate themselves with the anarcho-syndicalist forces within the left. On the other hand the overall tone of the ITF's Anti-Fascism campaigns shared something of the broadly humanistic tone of Popular Front Anti-Fascism, while at the same time giving a greater weight to specifically labour interests than the Comintern main line would have done.

Recent work on the radical sailors of the interwar years has tended to give prime attention to those who were affiliated with the Communist International (Adi 2013); but Antwerp Group's trajectory shows that this is not the full picture. The ideology of the Antwerp Group - ITF is striking for both its syndicalist leanings and for its (albeit flawed) anti-colonial enthusiasm. The Antwerp Group had a direct lineage from the sailor militancy of the German naval fleet in the First World War, which produced the 'Red Sailors' who took the lead in initiating the revolution of 1918-19

in Germany. These seamen initiated the upheaval which broke the Imperial regime and were at the forefront of the insurgency which sought to shape a new political order, before it was crushed by the alliance of the army and the Social Democrats. Even though the development of the group then passed through the highly centralized world of the Communist movement, it retained a quasi-syndicalist, autonomist element which re-emerged in the mid 1930s. And on the other hand, Fimmen and his leadership group in the ITF had a complementary suspicion of the constraints imposed by political parties on trade unions. Fimmen and his circle also brought to the mixture a strong strand of anti-racism and support for labour organization in colonized countries, highly unusual at the time in the world of western European trade unionism. The Antwerp Group proved receptive to this anti-imperialist politics. This aspect is notable in that the Comintern, in the second half of the thirties, showed a strong tendency to back away from anti-colonial politics in the interests of unity with liberals in Britain and France (Buchanan 2016).

### **The Antwerp Group and its Origins**

The Comintern's maritime network was the matrix from which the Antwerp Group emerged. By the mid 1920s, the Comintern was placing a considerable amount of emphasis on the organization of maritime workers. In 1921, it took the decision to found an international network of international seamen's clubs. Seamen in this era faced extreme difficulties during their port sojourns. They were constantly preyed on by exploitative boarding house keepers – who often ensnared them into relations of virtual debt slavery - and criminal bar and brothel owners. By providing a safe environment for recreation, cheap food and political discussion these 'Interklubs' were able to draw seamen in. (In a sense they were replicating the strategy which Christian churches had long employed to reach seafarers through 'Seamen's Missions' and the like). These clubs had a number of functions. On one level they enabled the building of support for Communist politics and the Communist-aligned labour movements supervised by the 'Profintern' labour coordination centre in Moscow. And, given the Soviet sense of encirclement, the potential this gave for disrupting shipping in the event of war was a major attraction for the Soviet Union. Seamen's networks could also be used for clandestine connections between the Soviet Union and Communist Parties abroad. Members of the Interklub network smuggled money, political literature and Comintern operatives aboard their ships (Margain 2015; Weiss 2017). By the end of 1922 there were Interklubs in several Soviet cities. In 1927-8 these were expanded to a number of major European ports; and by the mid 1930s there was an international network of clubs, 13 of them in the USA ( According to Margain (2015: 135-6) there were about fifty, although Weiss (2017) is more sceptical as to the number). The ISH was formed around this Interklub network. The decision to launch this movement was taken at a meeting in Moscow in January 1930, which included the Comintern/ Profintern trade union chief Alexander Lozovsky, and a dynamic and capable German Communist seamen's leader, Albert Walter. The strategy was part of the Comintern's shift to a position of extreme hostility to the Social Democrats and mainstream unions. This included the goal of establishing new, revolutionary unions: the creation of the new organization

particular was directed against the ITF and its affiliates, despite the fact that the ITF was relatively far to the left within the existing western trade union spectrum. The ISH was launched on 3 October 1930 with a conference and demonstration in Hamburg. Its headquarters were located at the International Seamen's Club at number 8 Roothesoodstrasse in Hamburg's dockside St Pauli district (Weiss 2017). Subsequently, primary responsibility for activities among the sailors of Anglophone countries was allocated to the organization's British President, George Hardy, but Walter was the real animator of the organization. The ISH developed a methodology of seeking organizers among seamen, which would later be built on by the Antwerp group. Although there were serious efforts to recruit sailors from Asia and Africa led by Liao Chengzhi amongst the Chinese sailors (Amenda 2006: 93) and George Padmore in the Afro-Caribbean world, the ISH was primarily a movement of European and American sailors. Certainly, Padmore felt that the movement paid inadequate attention to organizing seafarers from the colonized countries (*The Negro Worker*: 6: 2 1932). The German section of ISH, the *Einheitsverband der Seeleute, Hafenarbeiter and Binnenschiffer* (Union of Seafarers, Harbour Workers and Barge Workers) was established in 1931, and soon came under the leadership of senior KPD official Ernst Wollweber (Weiss 2017: 280). (In the future German Democratic Republic, Wollweber would become head of the Stasi).

Holger Weiss (2016) has posed the question of whether the ISH was "a radical global labour union" or "a subversive world-wide web", in other words an arm of the Soviet security apparatus. The latter view was influential for many years, mainly on the strength of the fascinating but fictionalized and only partially reliable memoirs of the repentant ISH activist Richard Krebs (Valtin 2004). But it was in reality something of both. The ISH, as Weiss convincingly shows, to a significant extent escaped the supervision of the Comintern, to act independently as a militant union movement in a number of international contexts. Moreover, while ISH leaders were generally organized Communist Party members, in Weiss's view the rank and file were frequently inclined toward syndicalism (Weiss 2017: 279). This is important because through the 1920s, the Communist parties had struggled to 'Bolshevize' recruits from a syndicalist background, whose revolutionary trade unionism, tending to emphasize spontaneous worker revolt, did not easily fit in with Leninist ideas of centralized and ultra-disciplined organization. Weiss's characterization of the ISH members' political orientation is extremely plausible. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the internationally mobile male workforce which often moved between ships and manual labour ashore, had been particularly receptive to the appeal of syndicalist politics, especially through the global operations of the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW or 'Wobblies' as they were popularly known). As current scholarship is showing, the Wobblies were a transnational rather than a purely American phenomenon (Cole et. al. 2017). Given that many German sailors worked on the merchant fleets of other countries, this IWW influence probably interacted with the already strong indigenous strain of anarcho-syndicalism in the German left. For example, in the aftermath of the 1919 Revolution, Otto Feige, a German anarchist, (also known as 'Ret Marut') went to sea to escape political persecution. Feige was almost certainly the author, under the

pseudonym of 'B. Traven', of the bestselling novel of maritime life, *Das Totenschiff* (*The Death Ship*), published in German in 1926 and English in 1934 (Wyatt 1980). The book has an identifiably Wobbly / anarcho-syndicalist politics, and indeed, its leading character, George Gale, also appears in Traven's first book, which was published as *Der Wobbly*. This background of maritime syndicalism helps to explain the receptivity of some ISH supporters toward a dissident position like that of the Antwerp Group, which, as we shall see had a strong syndicalist element. The move, in the mid-thirties, to a 'Popular Front' position by the Comintern de-emphasized class struggle in favour of unity of 'progressive' forces, a view uncongenial to the syndicalist emphasis on industrial confrontation.

The origins of the Antwerp group are perhaps best approached through the remarkable life story of its charismatic and extraordinarily confident leader, Hermann Knüfken. The recent publication of his remarkable autobiography under the editorship of Andreas Hansen and Dieter Nelles, together with the outstanding editorial materials they supply, give a unusual depth of insight into a world which has left few literary traces (Knüfken 2015). Born in Düsseldorf in 1893, Knüfken went to sea at the age of 14, working on steam trawlers and later on a cable layer. In 1914 he was called up to the Imperial Navy. There he became active in an underground libertarian-leftist political group. In 1917 he deserted to Denmark, but returned under an amnesty. A second attempt at desertion led to his incarceration in Kiel Naval Prison. Kiel was the site of the famous naval mutiny which led to the toppling of the *Kaiserreich* in November 1918, and Knüfken was released from prison by the insurgent sailors. As Nelles (2001a, 159-161) points out, this was his formative experience and shaped Knüfken's subsequent view of politics: small groups of sailors had forged their own organization and brought down an apparently overwhelmingly powerful opponent. This focus on self-organization which was to be a theme of the later Antwerp Group partook of the syndicalism of the time. Knüfken continued to think of seamen as being in the mould of the legendary "Red Sailors" of 1918. Knüfken was very active in the subsequent revolutionary events, participating in the street fighting in Berlin in early 1919. In the aftermath of the defeat of the revolution, Knüfken became a leading Communist and seamen's union leader, although in the complicated politics of German Communist movement he favoured the "Communist Workers Party" (KAPD) leftist faction which was more in tune with his broadly syndicalist approach. He took a KAPD delegation to a conference in the Soviet Union by the simple expedient of hijacking the trawler on which he was working. During his visit he had meetings with Lenin, Zinoviev and Bukharin. On his return to Germany, Knüfken was convicted for the hijacking and was imprisoned in Hamburg. After a campaign by the local labour movement and several hunger strikes by Knüfken himself, he was released in May 1923.

Knüfken went to Leningrad, where he worked for the Comintern as a labour organizer and leader of the Interklub in that port. Knüfken nevertheless displayed a dangerous degree of independence, supporting a 1925 Swedish sailors' strike against Comintern orders, and in 1927 participating in a demonstration against

Stalin. In 1929 he was arrested, formally on charges of embezzling trade union funds, but in reality because of his anti-Stalinist politics, and spent months in prison, some of it in Moscow's feared Lubyanka. On his release, the next year, which was apparently precipitated by support from political contacts abroad and seamen in Leningrad, he married a Russian woman, Sonja Diniach. Unlike many Soviet citizens married to foreigners, Sonia was later able to leave the country with him, and they were to remain together, and, much later, to have two children. In 1932, Knüfken went to back to Hamburg to work for the ISH, with particular responsibility for the Scandinavian section of the Interklubs. He was peculiarly well equipped for this work, with a rough command of Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, English and Russian. When the Nazis came to power, Knüfken fled to Copenhagen. The attention of the Danish police drove him first to Rotterdam, and then further police pursuit made him move to Belgium.

There, he consolidated around him a small circle of German seamen who were becoming increasingly discontented with the Comintern's direction of the ISH. With the Nazi seizure of power, the ISH had gone into crisis. The headquarters had had to be transferred to Copenhagen, which was not a central port in world shipping networks, and its communications were disrupted; the ISH mishandled important shipping strikes in Sweden and Finland; and Albert Walter, now in captivity, was 'turned' by the Gestapo (Weiss 2017:300-304). Most importantly for the German sailors, the *Einheitsverband* seemed to lack a coherent strategy for adapting to the extreme demands of working clandestinely under Nazi rule. After moving headquarters again to Paris, and experimenting with various tactical expedients including unsuccessful approaches to the ITF, by mid-1935 the ISH was in chaos (Weiss 2017: 208-9). This was not just a matter a matter of disorganization. As Bayerlein convincingly argues on the basis of newly available archival material, the Soviet leadership was far more willing to accommodate the existence of the Nazi state than has previously been realized. It was becoming more and more bureaucratic and nationalist and therefore uncomfortable with semi-autonomous internationalist movements like the ISH. Its paranoia fed into the increasingly extreme violence of Soviet policy at home and abroad. This repelled many militants previously attracted to Soviet Communism. Bayerlein (2017: 66) points out that "this repressive transformation strengthened intermediate oppositionist and anti-Stalinist currents": the breakaway of the Antwerp Group certainly a case in point.

Leading figures in the group included Knüfken's chief lieutenant, the amiable Kurt Lehmann, a Communist Party seamen's leader from Hamburg; Kurt's brother Werner Lehmann; Franz Pieterzak who had organized seamen for the ISH on the American East Coast; and Otto Häringer, who was reputed to have fled Germany after killing an SS man. A particular source of their discontent was the ISH's insistence on trying to build, underground, a normal trade union structure, thus failing to adapt appropriately to the conditions of extreme repression under the Nazis, and leading to widespread arrests (Nelles 2001a: 161-167).



In early January 1936 Edo Fimmen received a letter from Antwerp: “We are a group of German seamen, who since Hitler’s taking power, have been working in a revolutionary way (*im revolutionäre Sinne*) with colleagues voyaging on German ships” (Knüfken 2015: 324-327). They were now based in exile: “it’s no fun continually to be deported from Holland to Belgium or the other way around’. The comrades were mainly from the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and ISH, but about nine months earlier, the group has ‘mutinied’ against the ‘incomprehensible’ politics of the ISH. The sailors complained in the letter of the ‘deification of leadership’ in the Communist movement. They claimed that they had a network of individuals and groups on no less than 190 German ships. They asserted that there were enormous opportunities for revolutionary work and, surely somewhat hyperbolically, claimed that 85-90% of German crews were Anti-Fascist oriented and sympathized with them. The letter proposed a future cooperation with the ITF. The network included not only ocean-going vessels, but also barge workers on the German canal and river transport system, although the group seems to have achieved greater success amongst sea-going workers.

The Secretary General of the ITF was not perhaps an obvious match for the rough diamond Knüfken. Born in Amsterdam in 1881, Edo Fimmen had been a deeply serious and religious young man – for a time a member of the Salvation Army, he went on to produce a peculiar newspaper which managed to combine sermons on the theme of sexual purity with elements of utopian anarchism. A commercial clerk by trade, Fimmen had become involved in his union, and his outstanding organizational talents, and linguistic skills (eloquently fluent in English, French and German) helped him to become first Secretary of his union, then Secretary of the International Federation of Commercial Employees. By his early thirties he was Secretary of the Dutch national trade union federation, and was propelled into the highest levels of international trade union politics. He was for a time secretary of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), but it proved too conservative for him. Fimmen found his true home in the transport workers federation, which he transformed into the radical outsider amongst the generally more conservative international trade union secretariats. The ITF had emerged as a powerful force in pre-First World War years, embracing most of the major rail, harbor and maritime unions in Western Europe. Its existence had been threatened by the war and Fimmen played a key role in its survival, becoming General Secretary in 1919, a position which he was to occupy for the rest of his life. He evolved a complex politics which did not fit easily into conventional political categories, comprising elements of revolutionary Marxism, pacifism and religious moralism. The experience of the 1914-18 catastrophe drove a deep internationalism and anti-war sentiment which characterized the ITF under his leadership. Fimmen insisted on the post-war reintegration of German and Austrian workers into the international labour movement, led strong campaigns for hunger relief in Austria and Russia, and called for a boycott of arms shipments to Poland during the 1920 Polish-Soviet War. Fimmen’s great personal charm bridged many boundaries. For example he was on close personal terms with the British Communist Party leader Harry Pollitt and the German Communist propaganda genius Willi Münzenberg, despite the Comintern’s

frequent denunciations of the ITF as a 'yellow' union movement. (Oldenbroek 1942; Reinalda 1997a; Koch-Baumgarten 1997). Perhaps the most remarkable innovation by Fimmen though, came with the launching, right at the beginning of his time in the ITF leadership, of a campaign to support the Hungarian left after the repression of the revolution in Budapest by Admiral Horthy in 1919. This transport boycott initiated against Hungary by Fimmen in 1920, became the template for his later campaigns against Mussolini and Hitler (Molnar 1997: 155-163). It is important to note that it can also be considered a prototype of later solidarity campaigns and that it was not only the Münzenberg-Comintern apparatus that developed these types of movements. In 1923, Fimmen did engage in discussions with the Comintern about joint Anti-Fascist campaign, although he was forced to back away because of hostility from the IFTU (Braskén 2016: 584)

In 1933, Fimmen decided to focus the work of the ITF as much as possible on resistance to Fascism. This strategy compromised both a vigorous propaganda campaign and clandestine activities. By early 1935 the ITF had a network of 100 underground transport workers groups in Germany and actually managed to bring 31 delegates representing them to a conference in Denmark. Fimmen's close collaborator, the railway organizer Hans Jahn, travelled through Germany under cover of being a salesman for a Dutch wine merchant, working his trade union contacts. Jahn built up an extensive underground network of oppositional groups amongst railwaymen, until it was largely (but not entirely) rolled up by the Nazis in 1937 (Nelles 2001a: 273-431; Nelles 2001b). The ITF developed a distinctive approach to underground work. There was to be no attempt to build formal trade union structures, which were far too vulnerable to the police. Clandestine workplace groups were to be formed and they were to choose workplace representatives. The term used for these was *Vertrauensmann*, (plural *Vertrauensleute*). The Federation also established a range of publications as part of its anti-Fascist campaign, one of which, *Fascism*, published in several languages and edited by Walter Auerbach, became a notable source for international political campaigners (Anonymous 1997: 199; *Faschismus* 1933-1945).

When Knüfken and Fimmen met, they immediately formed a warm personal bond. They quickly came to an agreement for cooperation, the seamen willingly accepting Fimmen's condition underground work be conducted on a strictly non-party basis. This was intended to allow the group to appeal to maritime workers of all political persuasions, and to keep the ITF out of the crossfire of Socialist – Communist rivalries. But for the Antwerp Group it was more than that, for a number of their statements suggest that they embraced a syndicalist vision in which labour organizations rather than parties would be the basis of a future society. Thus one activist wrote: "Away with the fatal confusion of the parties and forward with the building of our new movement, of which the unions will be the basis ..." (*Die Schifffahrt*, 3, 1936) The strategy was for activists to build on board groups in each ship. These groups would then select a *Vertrauensmann* (or several). These representatives would make regular contact with the group in Antwerp or other low country ports. At that point reports would be made, strategy discussions held and

propaganda material handed over for distribution. In line with ITF strategy, there was not an attempt to build large, formal union structures, which made the activity of the group easier to keep secure.

The Antwerp Group's work appears to have been remarkably successful. According to Nelles' (2001a: 175-176) meticulous analysis of the data the number of German ships with 'Vertrauensleute' (Shop Stewards) climbed rapidly from 78 in January 1936 to 221 a year later and 307 in January 1939. By the outbreak of war they had men on 322 ships. Nelles' figures for the number of ships suggest a somewhat declining level of activism over time, with the peak month being July 1936 when 90 ships were contacted in Antwerp. Nevertheless, in the second half of 1938 and the first half of 1939, the seamen were visiting 30 or more ships in Antwerp in most monthly periods. The group's presence became particularly well established in ships which regularly called at the port, such as liners of the Hamburg-based Bernstein-Red Star Line which had a regular service between Antwerp and New York, and two tour boats which operated a Hamburg-Antwerp service (Nelles 2001a, 177).

An important feature of the groups work was planning for the sabotage of the German fleet in the event of the outbreak of war. Seamen were issued with mercury, which could be used to cause engine overheating, and at least one experiment was conducted with this technique, with the destruction of one of the engines of a liner. The Antwerp Group and Fimmen took the pragmatic view that they needed to ally with Nazi Germany's military opponents, and opened contacts with the British and French intelligence services. A plan to sabotage German iron ore shipments to Sweden was discussed with the British in 1938, but fell apart when the British pulled out (Nelles 2001a 203-206)

Amongst Fimmen's network was a young refugee from Hamburg based in Norway, Herbert Frahm. Frahm had already adopted the *nom de guerre* by which he would become known to the world, Willy Brandt. Coordinating with Fimmen, Brandt made contact with German seamen in Norwegian ports, as well as using Fimmen's connections to link up with trade union groups in Germany itself. Brandt is himself an interesting example of the complexity of the political world of the left in the 1930s. A left Social Democrat by background, he had abandoned the party over the ineffectiveness of its response to the rise of Nazism, joining the revolutionary Marxist SAPD, to which he adhered during the time that he worked with Fimmen. However, in the course of his Norwegian exile, the future *Bundeskanzler* became increasingly influenced by the Norwegian social democrats, whose political model became decisive for his future politics (Merseburger 2013, especially 65-66).

An important tool of the Antwerp Group's activities was a stencil-machine produced bulletin, *Die Schifffahrt* (Shipping) which was clandestinely circulated to maritime workers by the group's activists. Each edition of the paper carried on its masthead sketch of a lighthouse, a liner and a trawler and the time-honored invocation "Proletarians of All Lands, unite yourselves!". The group had begun to publish it in 1935. The fourth edition, in February 1936 announced the unification with the ITF,

in a message from Fimmen. As well as sophisticated analyses of the political situation the paper was characterized by lively accounts by the sailors of their experiences on the ships. Obviously, the bulletin was a propaganda organ and thus should be read sceptically. Yet the high level of detail in these stories gives a ring of authenticity to many of them. Experientially based writing is relatively rare in the maritime union and political journalism of the time, and this suggests that the Antwerp Group really were keen to give a real voice to their members.

The optimism of *Schiffahrt*, despite the adverse circumstances in which the men were working is a striking feature. There was often a sense on the part of contributors to the bulletin that there were widespread anti-Nazi sentiments amongst the sailors and that the ITF group had found an effective strategy for working underground amongst them. For example, in early 1937, a sailor reported a voyage out of Hamburg: “amongst about 40 deck and machine crew, from the first day a completely anti-fascist spirit prevailed”. Especially in the engine room there were many members of the pre-Nazi union. On the deck the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> mates were ‘opportunistic’ Nazis, but the crew refused to return their Hitler salutes or join in the singing of the Horst Wessel Song. The Nazi officers set up a box for contributions to the campaign against waste, but the only things put in it were a swastika armband and a Nazi poster. In the mess, the crew discussed the Spanish Civil War and foreign harbours they bought local newspapers. “So we could use the 5 months to discuss all questions, including our defeat in German. All colleagues on board were in agreement with “Schiffahrt” and the I.T.F.-Group ...” (*Die Schiffahrt* 3, 1937). Another sailor wrote of how after a dreadful voyage with a pro-Nazi crew, he remained on the ship and was joined by a much more congenial company “ the new crew came and they showed themselves to be real colleagues (*Kollegen*) ... You can’t see a Führer-picture in the crew quarters any more. We read anti-Fascist literature and we have had two meetings of our free trade union. All of us on board see ourselves as members” (*Die Schiffahrt* 3, 1936). A seaman on another steamer assured his readers that “politically and trade union -wise, we haven’t been sleeping”. The activists had been working with the crew for their ship for six months and felt they had ‘made progress’. “We have received papers fairly regularly and discussed all questions, especially the building of free trade unions” (*Die Schiffahrt* 7, 1937).

The group also emphasized the international connections they were making, using the extensive international reach of the ITF. In late 1937 *Schiffahrt* mentioned that the *Vertrauensleute* were working ‘exceptionally close and comradely’ with ITF contacts in different ports (*Die Schiffahrt* 12, 1937).

The paper particularly hammered the theme of high food prices, an understandable preoccupation in a society in which lack of adequate nutrition had been a widespread experience in the from the First World War, through much of the Weimar period and into the Great Depression. Exhaustive discussions of the quantity and quality of food on board and of shortages at home filled the pages of *Schiffahrt*. A story for example recounted a journey on a coal burner to Australia, on which it was claimed that stokers and trimmers were losing 8 to 10 pounds of body

weight on each journey from excessive work demands and poor nutrition (*Die Schiffahrt* 1, 1938). One of *Schiffahrt's* favourite jokes was to make a point of always referring to the Swastika as the 'Hunger Hook'.

The paper was constantly scathing about the Nazi ideal of national community. *Schiffahrt* harped on the theme of how the Nazis had promised all sorts of improvements in conditions before coming to power but had failed to deliver on them, because they were tied to capitalist interests. It emphasized the point that the repressive nature of Nazi rule made any real representation of worker interests impossible. A sailor from of his experience on the *SS Indra* out of Hamburg: "Woe if a 'Volk Comrade' wants to make a justified complaint. Then right away he's threatened with the Concentration Camp ... "(*Die Schiffahrt* 11, 1936). Frequently, the bulletin carried detailed accounts of improvements in wages and conditions won by workers in the democratic countries in order to make the point that the right to organize was crucial. *Schiffahrt* (7, 1937) opined in 1937 that: "Supported by strong unions, the seafarers in the non-Fascist countries, in struggle against the profit-greed of shipping capital, can improve their wages and even as in France significantly shorten working hours. With us it's the other way around. Completely enslaved, without legal unions, we voyage on Hunger Hook ships for a wage that only just keeps us alive." It needs to be said though, that though the group stood against Nazi anti-Semitism, some of their rhetoric made only the feeblest of challenges to the populist roots of the regime's discourse. Thus when for example the Bernstein shipping company of Hamburg was in the process of being seized from its owners by the Nazis, the best that *Schiffahrt* could offer was the observation that: "The new "Aryan" management is the same as the previous Jewish one, Everyone on board has realized that there is no difference between Aryan and Jewish ship owners". (*Die Schiffahrt* 5/6 1937).

The ITF group clearly believed that there was a broad groundswell of anti-Nazi sentiment amongst ocean going sailors, and pointed to widespread symbolic resistance. For example, when the Swastika flag was introduced in the merchant fleet, ship management celebrated with flag parades. But *Schiffahrt* claimed that "in almost all the liners, the watches remained in the crew quarters. By doing that they expressed what they think about the hunger-hook". The paper also claimed that on most ships "a festive flag parade can't even be thought of because the hostility to the hunger-hook system is much stronger" (*Die Schiffahrt* 3, 1936).

An interesting element of the ITF influenced workers practice was an ambivalence to the Nazi labour organization which had replaced the trade unions, the *Deutsche Arbeiter Front* (DAF). On the one hand in *Schiffahrt* the DAF and its *Bonzen* (pompous officials) were referred to in contemptuous terms. But at times the DAF was also occasionally seen as a force that could be played off against other Nazi elements. Thus sometimes the sailors treated the DAF with defiance, as in a case reported in the *Schiffahrt* when men boarding a ship demanded that their filthy and bug-ridden quarters be fumigated. When they were refused this demand, they confronted the captain and the DAF representative and successfully demanded their

documents back. But in 1937, on the *SS Lüneberg* to the East Indies from Hamburg, when 1<sup>st</sup> Engineer Huwald ignored his men's serious medical complaints, worked them to exhaustion and brutally beat a Greek sailor, the whole crew wrote a letter to the DAF complaining about him (*Die Schiffahrt* 2, 1937). This tendency to view the DAF as a little different from other Nazi organizations was later reflected in a debate amongst German exiles about whether a De-Nazified DAF might be the basis for a new labour organization.

### **Anti-Colonialism**

The anti-colonial dimension of the internationalism of *Die Schiffahrt* is striking. A feature of Comintern Anti-Fascism from 1935 was a strong tendency to play down the anti-colonial themes which had been major feature of its activities before then. (Buchanan 2016). This arose in large part from a desire to appeal to nationalist sentiments and middle class opinion in Britain and France, the major colonial powers. Yet the Antwerpens were strongly anti-colonialist. In its third edition, it took a strong stand against the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini:

Mussolini's war in Italy has become a fact. Without a declaration of war the modern Mass murder machine with its Bomber planes, Tanks, poison gas, flamethrowers and everything that goes with it is set in motion against the until now independent Abyssinians (*Die Schiffahrt* 3, 1935).

The article declared that "Italian Fascism, the deadly enemy of Freedom" was conducting the war in the interests of fascist big business. It also attributed the war to Mussolini's attempt to restore his a standing after his failure to raise wages and improve welfare. The Italian workers and peasants opposed the war, but were too weak to do anything about it. If Mussolini lost the war, it would be the end of Fascism in Italy: "Therefore our slogan is "Hands off the independence of Abyssinia". Calling for support for League of Nations sanctions against Italy, the paper urged: ".. from now on every German seaman must take care that no German tonnage is used for direct or indirect war material transport. Such transports should be reported in foreign ports to the nearest workers organizations, so that that the shipping (of the goods) can be prevented".

In 1937, the paper also took the side of China in the face of Japanese invasion: "Our sympathy is self-evidently on the side of the Chinese who with admirable bravery are fighting to defend their country. As a consequence of the anti-communist pact between the Japan and the Third Reich, the Nazis have already begun the delivery of War Materials to Japan ... Because we as German waterworkers have nothing in common with the '3 Reich', we call on all seafarers and barge workers to report all war transports" (*Die Schiffahrt* 9, 1937).

Yet like seamen in the democratic countries, German seamen had a complicated relationship to the employment of Asian workers on their ships. Internationally, many unions had, during the early twentieth century, taken an outright racist, white

labour protectionist stance toward Asian seamen. Fimmen was a striking exception to this general trend (Reinalda 1997b :117-125). He stood out against the predominant racial chauvinism of the European trade unions, attempting to draw Asian unions into the ITF and achieving some success in this. Under Fimmen, the ITF expanded its international reach amongst seamen. By 1937, the ITF had affiliates in Palestine, Canton, and Trinidad. The most significant linkage though, was to India, where in the same year, four Indian unions were affiliated, the most important of which were the 15 000 strong Seamen's Union, Bombay, and the 20 000 strong Seamen's Union, Calcutta (ITF Seamen's Section 1937). Yet Fimmen was also forced to some extent to compromise with the dominant view in the western seamen's unions. This was reflected in the report of a committee set up to look into the question of non-European crews by the ITF and the International Mercantile Marine Officers Association at a meeting in Geneva in 1928, of which Fimmen was one of the authors (ITF Seamen's Section, 1928). It is possible to read into the document a compromise between those white labour trade unionists who wanted to use calls for reform and formal equality as a smokescreen for racial protectionist moves and those, like Fimmen, who actually were interested in organizing Asian and African seamen. The document starts off by asserting that there was no intention "to exclude non-Europeans from European ships. The shipping trade is an international one, and even for this reason alone, it is hardly possible to shut out any seaman merely on grounds of nationality". But it also goes on to assert that such a view would be incompatible with the ITF's "ideals of international cooperation". However it then states that the engagement of 'Asiatic' crews on 'European ships sailing from European ports' was – intentionally on the part of the shipowners- excluding 'European seamen working under better conditions' and thus hampering or defeating attempts to improve working conditions and introduce better labour legislation. The solution proposed by the ITF was that Chinese and Lascar seamen needed to be engaged individually and under the same conditions as seamen from European countries. Nobody should be excluded from the labour market on grounds of race or nationality and no laws should be made on this basis – but all hiring should be on the basis of national conditions with no exceptions. This formula was acceptable to both exclusionists and inclusionists in the European unions. The attitude of *Schiffahrt* can be read as displaying the same ambiguity. It is hostile to the employment of Chinese crews under the prevailing conditions. But it nevertheless emphasizes the identity of interests of the Nazis and the shipping companies and tries to direct hostility away from Chinese maritime workers and towards the state and the companies. *Schiffahrt* called for: "*Klassenkampf! nicht Rassenkampf!*" (Class struggle not race struggle). Thus while the racial dynamic of German seamen's politics was a real one, *Schiffahrt*, probably reflecting Fimmen's influence, made a creative challenge to it.

## Spain

The Spanish Civil War became a major focus of the ITF's energies. The day after the generals launched their coup attempt in July 1936, Fimmen sent a circular to all ITF affiliates calling for support for the Republican government, and from then on the

Federation worked with seamen's and dockers' unions to try to obstruct arms shipments to Franco, and to assist those to the loyalists. This was soon to become a very important issue because the British government-promoted policy of non-intervention choked off most arms supplies to the legitimate government from liberal polities, while effectively leaving the fascist powers free to supply the rightists (Howson, 1998). The sailors working with the Antwerp Group were able to deliver high-quality intelligence concerning the arms shipments to the republicans. One sailor who worked of the *SS Sostris* out of Hamburg, for example, was able to pass information about the Swedish-flagged *SS Allegro*, which was taking German troops and war materials to Spain, to provide details of the activities of the Hamburg shipping broker Matthias Rohde in arranging that arms shipments, and also produced a sketch map of the port of Pasajes identifying the ships lying at anchor (Antwerp Group 1937). *Schiffahrt* was used by the Antwerp Group to inform its sailor-readers about arms shipments and to ask them to report new information they gleaned.

Fimmen was often frustrated in his interactions with the republicans though, citing for example the case of the Norwegian ship *SS Rona*. In this instance Norwegian and Danish crew, for lack of accurate information from the Spanish government, had assumed the ship was destined for the Francoists and taken industrial action. In fact the ship had cargo for the republicans, and the attention drawn to the ship led to the seizure of the weapons by the nationalists and the arrest of an Antwerp group comrade who was handed over to the Nazis. In December 1936, Fimmen launched a new initiative, clandestinely coordinated with a selected group of maritime unionists in a number of countries. Fimmen asked to be personally informed by telegraph of any information about arms shipments. He had by now arranged with the republicans that they would let him know of their own arms shipments. Fimmen would act to ensure that there was no repetition of the *Rona* incident and that republican arms were loaded as rapidly as possible. In the case of nationalist arms shipments, the network should do everything that could to obstruct the ships from sailing. Fimmen also acted for the republicans by asking his contacts to find ships which the Madrid authorities could charter or buy. He specified that they should be of 1500 to 2000 tons, be capable of 12 knots and have a politically reliable (*'hartgrondig antifaschistisch'*) crew (Fimmen 17 December 1936 in Fimmen 1936-7a). Some success was achieved in this. Thus for example in February 1937 Fimmen asked a Belgian contact to find a crew for a Belgian flagged ship, the *SS Prina* (Fimmen 8 February 1937 in Fimmen 1936-7a).

Especially valuable was the ITF representative in Cardiff, the vastly experienced trade unionist Jim Henson. With a high concentration of tramp steamers owned by relatively small companies in the South Wales ports, convenient geographical location in relation to the Republican controlled pocket in the Basque country, and Henson's expert local knowledge, much could be done. Henson established a close relationship with the locally domiciled Republican consul, Ernesto Gomez Bellido, in facilitating ships supplying the Spanish government out of the port. In one case, Henson arranged for a pro-Fascist crew to be replaced with "left' officers and men",



and coordinated with French contacts who would help the ship in its onward journey once it arrived in Bordeaux. Gomez and Henson obstructed ships with suspected rebel loyalties from getting papers to sail (Henson 22 December 1936 in Fimmen 1936-7b). When in March Gomez was replaced by an incompetent republican official, Henson appears to have been able to use Fimmen's influence with the republicans to get Gomez reinstated (Henson, 29 April, 8 June 1937 in Fimmen 1936-7b) In April 1937, Henson responded to a request from Fimmen for urgent intelligence about the trustworthiness of three ships lying at anchor in the port of St Jean de Luz awaiting an opportunity to run to the Basque ports. These were identified as the *Sarastone*, the *Marie Lewellyn* and the *Hamsterley*. Henson's account evokes the relative lack of social distance between the small ship owners, captains and senior trade unionists in the port. The owners of the *Sarastone* he characterized as 'good and decent people'. (But there was more than a tinge of anti-Semitism in his remarks on the Jewish owners of the *Marie Lewellyn* - 'prepared to do anything for money payment'). The captains were, Henson advised, the right men for the job: "[F]rom information from my shipowning friends this morning, any of these Captains with a little encouragement from the Spanish government will go for [Bilbao] "Hell for Leather". Especially striking was the determination of Captain David 'Potato' Jones of the *Marie Lewellyn*, according to Henson "the old type of skipper who if he has a port to go to will go through fire and water for the fun of beating Franco, or anyone else who is up against him" (Henson, 19 April 1937 in Fimmen 1936-7b). Henson and Fimmen also coordinated - although apparently not without some inter-personal difficulties - with Fenner Brockway of the Independent Labour Party, who had a project of bringing food to the Basque country (Brockway 17 April 1937, Fimmen 19 April 1937 in Fimmen 1936-7b). This work had some success. 'Potato' Jones became internationally famous for his attempt to ship weapons to the Republic which was only frustrated by the deployment of a Royal Navy flotilla. A number of British ships including the *Hamsterley*, after receiving certificates that they were not carrying war materials, did manage to reach Bilbao, braving a bombardment from rebel ships as they entered the harbour (*Sydney Morning Herald* 24 April 1937).

Six members of the Antwerp Group, including Kurt Lehmann and Häringer travelled to Spain to fight in the conflict. In Barcelona, they joined a international militia linked to the UGT union federation. However they were expelled by the group's KPD leader, Hans Beimler, over political differences. They subsequently joined the Anarchist Durruti Column, where there were several other German sailors. The men fought on the Aragon front, where a number of them were wounded. The enthusiasm for the Spanish struggle seems to have been considerable, so that *Die Schifffahrt* (5/6, 1937) actually felt it necessary to carry an article explaining to readers that they might make a better contribution by staying at their posts and trying to block arms shipments and than by volunteering to fight in Spain.

## Sustaining the Struggle

The unique character of maritime space gave the Antwerp Group the means through which they could navigate the lethal forces that they faced. The existence of an international seamen's network, in the form of the ISH, enabled them to recruit maverick individuals who were disgruntled with the Comintern line. The global nature of the ITF as a transport workers' organization provided the Antwerpers with a way of escaping from the ISH orbit, yet also replaced it with another international network from which they could draw support. Visits to foreign ports provided opportunities to tap into the ITF's worldwide connections. This organizational resource, combined with activists' vast experience of international mobility, enabled them to stay ahead of the retributive hand of both the Stalinist enforcers and the Gestapo. The ship, as a technological artifact that was also a relatively closed social entity, and was mobile across the world, proved to be surprisingly immune to the direct control of Nazi officials. Seamen's culture of anarchic self-assertiveness, rooted in their relative independence of single places, enabled the facing-down of authority in remarkable ways. Even in fascist-controlled ports in Spain their work allowed the risky possibilities of subversive contacts. In this sense the maritime world provided political opportunities to resist which were much more favourable than those open to terrestrial-based workers.

Sustaining the commitment of the shipboard activists in the face of great danger was of course, hard. One difficulty that the Group encountered was that given the unbearable conditions in Germany, there were widespread desertions in foreign ports: "In S[y]dney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Buenos Aires, Cape Town and especially in the North American harbours, many German seafarers use the opportunity once and for all to shake off the blessings that National Socialism has brought to them". However for the sake of continuing the struggle against the Nazis, the Group urged, it was necessary for men to stay on board; "The German ships are our red trenches from which tomorrow with our comrades in the factories we will storm to the attack". (*Die Schiffahrt*, 5/6, 1937) And in retrospect, the Antwerpers appear hopelessly over-optimistic. They genuinely believed in the possibility of an overthrow of the Nazis by a popular insurgency, or its rapid collapse in a military confrontation. For example, enthusiastically reporting on struggle in Spain, *Schiffahrt* (2, 1937) declared: "Today Spain, tomorrow Germany! That will remain our slogan and urge us on in struggle against Brown Oppression in Germany. Down with Fascism!" (*Die Schiffahrt* 2, 1937). Always present in the background was the image of the Red Sailors of November 1918, to whom Knüfken gave the group a direct connection.

Yet again and again the *Schiffahrt* articles provide quite specific grounds for this faith, which now looks so misguided, in the revolutionary potential of German seamen. In 1938 a crewman on a liner reported that of the 200 men on board only 14 were Nazis. Most conversations on board were conducted in a 'decisively Nazi-hostile' spirit, sometimes expressing 'openly revolutionary' opinions, and expressed in a more 'camouflaged' way when suspected Nazi agents were around. Instructions

to give the Nazi salute were largely ignored. The crew were sympathetic to the Spanish republicans and outraged by economic conditions at home, and hoped for the military defeat of Germany (*Die Schiffahrt*, 8, 1938). During the 1938 Munich crisis, two reports from ships reflect jubilantly on the apparently complete lack of enthusiasm of the men for the war and the militancy of the seamen. On one ship, in a foreign port, the correspondent reported that that Nazi crew members were downcast, stopped given the Nazi salute and were apologetic toward other members of the crew about their previous conduct. The Antwerp-connected activists on board discussed a plan for a violent takeover of the ship in the event of being ordered to sail (*Die Schiffahrt*, 9/10, 1938). On a ship in Kiel for repairs, a member of the crew similarly reported that the two Nazis on board were despondent, whereas the rest of the ship's company were elated at the prospect that the outbreak of war would lead to the fall of the regime (*Die Schiffahrt*, 9/10, 1938). This may sound like the product of wishful thinking, but it corresponds with the findings of Nicholas Stargardt's (2015) recent work on German experience of Hitler's war. Stargardt suggests that there was much less popular enthusiasm for war than stereotypical interpretations may suggest. In the lead up to the outbreak of the world conflict, there was widespread initial panic about the consequences of the war for the country in September 1939, before the popular mood was restored by German successes.

If the evidence of *Schiffahrt's* ship reports can be trusted, they have some interesting implications for debates on conformity and resistance in Nazi Germany. In the 1970s, some of the foremost historians of Nazism placed considerable emphasis on the failure of the Nazis to hegemonize the working class. Thus Martin Broszat stressed the extent of non-cooperation with the regime, Detlev Peukert pointed to examples of non-conformity and Ian Kershaw suggested that workers were quiescent rather than accepting of the regime. Most notably, Tim Mason (1996) contended that beyond the formal opposition groups there was a broad workers' opposition engaging in acts of informal resistance. However subsequently the *Alltagsgeschichte* of scholars such as Alf Lüdtke and Lutz Niethammer placed a greater emphasis on the penetration of Nazi ideology into the working class. Later, in the much more conservative work of authors such as Michael Burleigh, Robert Gellately and Eric Johnson, a focus on the overwhelming power of Nazi racial discourse and its success in achieving political conformity left little space for any recognition of working class opposition to Nazism (Eley 2013). The consequence of this development in the debate has been a strong and still prevailing tendency to assume a Nazi consensus in German society, with resisters, if recognized at all, reduced to the roles of isolated heroic moral exemplars or deluded Stalinists. Yet the example of the Antwerp group and, even more, their accounts of life below decks on German ships, should at least make us consider the possibility that the pendulum has swung too far. While some of the earlier writing certainly underplayed the centrality and pervasiveness of Nazi ideology and was perhaps too reluctant to recognize the extent to which workers were attracted to the Nazis, the present prevailing historiographical wisdom tends to ignore the reality of activism and labour dissent. Not only was the Antwerp Group itself a remarkable example of an

almost exclusively working class core of opponents to Nazism, but their documents also provide strong evidence of a widespread informal resistance working class resistance of the kind described by Mason. And as dissidents from the Communist movement and sympathizers of the independent socialism of the ITF, the group equally cannot be dismissed as 'totalitarians'.

## War

Following the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Fimmen foresaw the likely course of military events and moved the ITF headquarters from Amsterdam to the England, where the organization established offices in Bedford. Fimmen was however in poor health and after some time in England, he was sent to Mexico to recover, while his deputy, J.H. Oldenbroek, took over the running of the ITF. Fimmen died in Cuernavaca in December 1942.

The members of the group suffered a range of mostly harsh fates. Kurt and Werner Lehmann, after being deported from Belgium during the groups activities there, underwent a Kafkaesque series of expulsions from one country to another, before landing in the hands of the Vichy French and being delivered of the Nazis. Werner died in prison: Kurt survived Dachau, and went on to a chequered post-war career. (Nelles 2001: 347-348) Seaman Helmut Bruns, who had fought in Spain with the ITF group, was captured by the Francoists while working on a boycott runner, and nearly executed. Handed to the French he was taken to France where he was interned, escaped, was interned again and then escaped to North Africa. After a further internment there by the Vichy authorities, he was handed over to the Nazis. Amazingly, he survived several year of imprisonment to become a coal merchant in Hamburg. His comrade Hans Weitkowitz died in Brandenburg-Görden Prison. (Weihe 209-214).

The unstoppable Knüfken came to England with the ITF, but then went on underground mission to organize action against the Nazis in Norway. Arrested by the local police he was imprisoned for travelling on forged documents. When the Nazis occupied Norway the next year they were looking for Knüfken, but he survived because sympathetic elements in the Norwegian administration did not hand him over. Knüfken was placed in a mental health facility in the prison, under a false name. In late 1944, with the Nazi grip starting to weaken, the authorities allowed him to slip away to England. From 1946 to 1949 Knüfken worked for the British authorities in Hamburg, in a de-nazification committee dealing with seamen, and becoming active in the trade union movement. In 1950 he returned to England, where he was employed at the Foreign Office. There are hints that in fact his work was in intelligence, analyzing Russian submarine communications. The old revolutionary ended taking sides in the Cold War. After suffering a stroke in 1965, he retired, dying in Brighton in 1976 (Nelles 2015).

The outbreak of war in September 1939, by disrupting normal patterns of global trade, necessarily brought the kind of work amongst German seamen were involved

to an end. Even before the war, Fimmen and Knüfken had taken an entirely pragmatic view of collaborating with western intelligence agencies against the Nazis and had a number of meetings with their intelligence agents. A plan to sabotage German ships carrying Swedish iron ore to Germany was discussed but misfired when the British pulled out. Hans Jahn however, after narrowly escaping to England, worked closely with the British Special Operations Executive. He was able to maintain some connections to German railwaymen through ITF adherents, and was able to claim some credit for persistent acts of sabotage, In Sweden – which remained unoccupied - Willy Brandt who had fled there during the Nazi occupation of Norway, and his comrade August Enderle, resumed contact with the ITF. There was regular seaborne traffic between Sweden and Germany, and Enderle was able to do some political work amongst German crews. But little was left of the network of the Amsterdam group. After the war not only Brandt, but also Hans Jahn played a major part in the construction of West German social democracy, with Jahn becoming an important trade union leader in the new German state. His work with intelligence agencies was long held against him by the German left, though in the context of World War it was surely a highly understandable one (Merseburger,2013; Nelles 2001a, 2001 b).

## **Conclusion**

Recent scholarship has connected the study of Communism in an important way with the study of global networks and of the development of forms of transnational organization and 'global society'. We can now see how the Comintern produced a remarkable synthesis of organizational innovations and modernist cultural forms. And we are gaining a better understanding of how an increasingly brutal, self-interested and nationalist Soviet apparatus first restrained and then crushed this development. The ISH appears as a key instance in this history, although marked by the peculiarities of the maritime world. We are also seeing a new scholarly interest in the field of Anti-Fascism. This work is challenging the reduction of Anti-Fascism to the project of the Comintern, or to a front for Soviet 'totalitarianism'. It is instead emphasizing that Anti-Fascism preceded the Popular Front, and that its forms were not confined to those approved by Moscow and national Communist parties.

The story of the Fimmen ITF - Antwerp Group connection speaks to this process of re-assessment. It helps to show that, enormous force though the Comintern was, it was neither the sole source of the innovative internationalisms of the 1920s, nor of the Anti-Fascism of the 1930s. Radical global networks came in many forms. And, as the sailor's split from the ISH demonstrates, in the time to the Comintern's tendency to retreat from radical and internationalist positions in the mid to late 1930s, the global networks which had been generated by the Comintern organizations of the period from 1921-1933 sometimes fragmented and moved in other directions. The pacifist, humanist and anarchist -inflected Socialism of Fimmen found common ground with the revolutionary syndicalism of the seafarers. What held them together was not the power of a cynical apparatus, but their extraordinary common commitment to fight against the dictatorships of Mussolini, Hitler and Franco,

without guarantees. What makes the lives of Edo Fimmen, Hermann Knüfken and their comrades so compelling is that they exemplify a politics that was in the deepest sense internationalist, and was simultaneously concerned with broad, humane values and the harsh realities of class oppression.

## References

Adi, H. (2003) *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora*, Trenton: Africa World Press.

Amenda, L. (2006) *Fremde-Hafen-Stadt: Chinesischen Migration und ihre Wahrnehmung in Hamburg 1897-1972*, Munich: Dölling und Galitz.

Anonymous (1997) 'Fascism – A Forgotten ITF Publication 1933-1945', in B. Reinalda (ed.) *The International Transportworkers Federation 1914-1945: The Edo Fimmen Era*, Amsterdam: IISH, 199.

Antwerp Group (1937) 'Meldungen über Rebellienhäfen' 4 May 1937, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS 1159/3/C/b/24.

Bayerlein, B. (2017) 'The "Cultural International" and the Comintern's Intermediate Empire: International Mass and Sympathizing Organizations Beyond Parties', in H. Weiss (ed.) *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919-1939*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 28-88.

Braskén, K. (2016) 'Making Anti-Fascism Transnational: The Origins of Communist and Socialist Articulations of Resistance in Europe, 1923-4', *Contemporary European History*, 25 (4), 573-596.

Buchanan, T. (2016) "'The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged": Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s', *Contemporary European History*, 25 (4), 645-665.

Cole, P., Struthers, D. and Zimmer, K. (eds.) (2017) *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW*, London: Pluto.

Coppi, H. and Heinz, S. (eds.) (2012) *Die vergessene Widerstand der Arbeiter: Gewerkschafter, Kommunisten, Sozialdemokraten, Trotzisten, Anarchisten und Zwangsarbeiter*, Berlin: Karl Dietz.

Eley, G. (2013) *Nazism as Fascism: Violence, Ideology, and the Ground of Consent in Germany 1930-1945*, London: Routledge.

*Faschismus, 1933-1945*

<https://www.fes.de/hfz/arbeiterbewegung/Members/schochr/faschismus>

Fimmen (1936-7a) Fimmen to various recipients , Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MRC MSS 159/3/c/b/15.

Fimmen (1936-7b) Correspondence between E. Fimmen, J. Henson and F. Brockway, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, MRC MSS 159/3/c/b/17.

*Die Schifffahrt*, 1935-1939

<http://library.fes.de/itf/schifffahrt.htm>

Garcia, H. (2016) 'Transnational History: A New Paradigm for Anti-Fascist Studies?' *Contemporary European History*, 25 (4), 563-572.

Garcia, H., Yusta, M., Tabet, X. and Climaco, C. (2016) 'Beyond Revisionism: Remaking Antifascism in the Twenty-First Century', in H. Garcia, M. Yusta, X. Tabet and C. Climaco (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics 1922 to the Present*, Oxford: Berghahn, 1-19.

Hasty, W. and Peters, K. (2012) 'The Ship in Geography and the Geographies of Ships', *Geography Compass*, 6 (11), 660-676.

Hein, C. (ed.) (2011) *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks*, London: Routledge.

Howson, G. (1998) *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War*, New York: St. Martin's.

ITF (1928) 'Report on the employment of non-European Labour on European Ships', Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MRC MSS 159/1/5/0/1.

ITF Seamen's Section (1937), Minutes of meeting of the ITF Seamen's section, Amsterdam, 17-19 November, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MRC MSS 159/1/5/2.

*Faschismus*

<https://www.fes.de/hfz/arbeiterbewegung/Members/schochr/faschismus;>

Knüfken, H. (2015) (A. Hansen and D. Nelles eds.) *Von Kiel bis Leningrad: Erinnerungen eines revolutionären Matrosen 1917 bis 1930*, Berlin: BasisDruck.

Koch-Baumgarten, S. (1997) 'Edo Fimmen- Iron Fist in a Silken Glove: A Biographical Sketch' in B. Reinalda (ed.) *The International Transportworkers Federation 1914-1945: The Edo Fimmen Era*, Amsterdam: IISH, 52-67.

Margain, C. (2015) 'The International Union of Seamen and Harbour Workers 1930-1937: interclubs and transnational aspects', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 8, 133-142.

Mason, T. (1996) (J. Caplan ed.) *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Merseburger, P. (2013) *Willy Brandt 1913-1992: Visionär und Realist*, Munich: Pantheon.

Molnar, M. (1997) 'The International Trade Union's Boycott against the "White Terror" of the Horthy Regime in Hungary, 20 June-8 August 1920 and the Contra-Boycott' in B. Reinalda (ed.) *The International Transportworkers Federation 1914-1945: The Edo Fimmen Era*, Amsterdam: IISH, 155-163.

Nelles, D. (2001a) *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität: Die Internationale Transportarbeiter-Föderation (ITF) im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, Klartext: Essen.

Nelles, D. (2001b) 'Die Widerstand der Internationalen Transportarbeiter-Föderation (ITF) gegen Nationalsozialismus und Faschismus in Deutschland und Spanien' in A.G. Graf (ed.) *Anarchisten gegen Hitler: Anarchisten, Anarcho-Syndikalisten, Rätekommunisten in Widerstand und Exil*, Berlin: Lukas.

Nelles (2015) "'Nicht betteln, nicht bitten": Die abenteuerliche Leben des Hermann Knüfken' in H. Knüfken (A. Hansen and D. Nelles eds.) *Von Kiel bis Leningrad, Erinnerungen eines revolutionären Matrosen 1917 bis 1930*, Berlin: BasisDruck, 396-422.

Oldenbroek, J.H. (1942), 'In Memoriam – Edo Fimmen' ITF Press Report, 17 December 1942, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MRC MSS 159/6/41.

Reinalda B. (ed.) (1997a), *The International Transportworkers Federation 1914-1945: The Edo Fimmen Era*, Amsterdam: IISH.

Reinalda, B. (1997b) 'The ITF and the Non-European World' in B. Reinalda (ed.), *The International Transportworkers Federation 1914-1945: The Edo Fimmen Era*, Amsterdam: IISH, 117-125.

Stargardt, N. (2015), *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945*, London: Bodley Head.

*The Negro Worker, 1931-1937.*

Traven, B. (1991) *The Death Ship*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press.



Traverso, E. (2016) *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War 1914-1945* (London, 2016).

Valtin, J. (2004) *Out of the Night*, Oakland: AK.

Wyatt, W. (1980) *The Secret of the Sierra Madre: The Man Who Was B. Traven*, London: Cape.

Weihe, R. (1997) 'Biographies of Seafarers Who Resisted The Nazi Regime' in B. Reinalda (ed.) *The International Transportworkers Federation 1914-1945: The Edo Fimmen Era*, Amsterdam: IISH.209-214.

Weber, H., Drabkin J., Bayerlein B. and Galkin A. (eds.) (2013) *Deutschland, Russland, Komintern: 1. Überblicke, Analysen, Diskussionen*, Berlin: De Gruyter.

Weiss, H. (2017) 'The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers – A Radical Global Labour Union of the Waterfront or a Subversive World-Wide Web?', in H. Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919-1939*, Leiden: Brill, 256-317.