German seafarers, anti-fascism and the anti-Stalinist left: the 'Antwerp Group' and Edo Fimmen's International Transport Workers' Federation, 1933–40

JONATHAN HYSLOP

Colgate University and the University of Pretoria, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York, 13346, USA
jhyslop@colgate.edu

Abstract *Between the mid-1930s and 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 Transport Workers' Federation, to wage a campaign against the Nazi government among 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 was a breakaway from the Comintern-aligned International of Seafarers and Harbour Workers (ISH). The Antwerp men were reacting against the ineffectiveness of the response of the German communist leadership to Hitler's takeover of power, and against the growing subordination of the ISH to Soviet interests. By highlighting the role of anti-Stalinist militants in the anti-fascism of the 1930s, the article contributes to the recent scholarship on anti-fascism – a scholarship that has tended to emphasize the transnationalism and ideological diversity of anti-fascism, rather than seeing it in national terms, or as a monolithic entity controlled by Moscow.*

Keywords ANTI-FASCISM, ANTI-STALINISM, ANTWERP GROUP, EDO FIMMEN, INTERNATIONAL OF SEAFARERS AND HARBOUR WORKERS (ISH), INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKER'S FEDERATION, MARITIME NETWORKS

> The National Socialist German state wants war, so 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 Shirts. To help this collapse is your task! Prepare yourself to fulfil this task.
>
> (Antwerp Group of German Seamen 1937)[1]

In the spring of 1937, the SS *Thalia*, which belonged to the *Neptun* shipping company in Bremen, sailed from Antwerp for the Spanish port of Pasaia (then known as Pasajes). It carried a cargo of 1500 tons of phosphate, produced by IG Farben for the Hitler regime, and now destined to assist Franco's side in the civil war. One of the crewmen on board belonged to a clandestine group of anti-Nazi German seamen operating from Antwerp and linked to Edo Fimmen, the Amsterdam-based general secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). On returning to Antwerp, the sailor wrote a report to the 'Antwerp Group', which the ITF then forwarded to the Spanish Republican government. In the document, the sailor stated that, on arrival in Pasaia, he saw several other *Neptun* ships in the harbour, including a German U27 submarine and the *Wollin*, a floating military base used to supply Nazi forces deployed in the conflict. The seaman noted that the Basque dockworkers unloading the *Thalia* were unusually slow – it took them ten days to complete the task – and he thought that this must have been deliberate because they openly showed signs of supporting revolutionary ideas. He encountered many German military formations in the port – airmen, anti-aircraft specialists and drivers, all wearing Spanish uniforms. Several soldiers who boarded the ship complained to the sailor that they had not volunteered for Spain but had been ordered to go there. The men were discontented; they cursed their officers and said that they had 'had it up to here' and were 'standing in shit up to their necks'. In trying to explain their presence in Spain, one German airman said that 'our officers are always emphasizing how they have had theoretical training and exercises back home! We are only here to get practical experience!' (Antwerp Group 1937).

German historian Dieter Nelles (2001a) has written a superb social history of the Antwerp Group and other related ITF anti-Nazi operations in which he meticulously chronicled how German transport workers, under Fimmen's leadership and with support from comrades in other countries, resisted the Nazis in the 1930s. Besides the seamen's group, a network of railway workers, led by Hans Jahn, played a remarkable role. After 1939, some survivors took their struggle into exile and worked with the Allied forces. In this article, I in no way intend to replace Nelles's definitive study. However, I do want to bring that work, which is of great intrinsic interest, to the attention of Anglophone readers, and to consider the history of ITF–Antwerp Group activists in relation to current scholarship on anti-fascism and internationalism. In addition, I discuss the distinct nature of the Antwerp Group as a maritime network.

The unique character of ports as cities and of ships as social spaces made it possible, through collaboration between the Antwerp Group and the ITF, to construct 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). Another significant strand of contemporary scholarship has shown the need to consider ships as spaces that differ sharply from terrestrial forms of social organization in their relationship to the state authority, in their internal socio-spatial structure and, consequently, in the politics 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 also 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. In this article, I shall seek to show that the social worlds of international trade unionism and left-wing politics – portside pubs, boarding houses, the crew quarters aboard ship, all somewhat shielded from the direct exercise of state authority – provided a particularly generative environment for the development and defence of resistance politics.

Until recently, there has been a strong tendency in the historiography of the inter-war years to represent anti-fascism as deceptive democratic cover for the 'totalitarian' aspirations of Stalinism. Anti-fascism was 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. 2016). 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 account of neither the plurality of the anti-fascist 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 among 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 anti-fascism studies has been towards viewing it as a global, networked phenomenon rather than a series of comparable movements in separate states. Hugo Garcia (2016) believes that this trend will overcome 'methodological nationalism' and create a movement towards treating anti-fascism in transnational terms. Recent archival work (Weber et al. 2013) highlights the complexity of the relationship between German communism and the Soviet Union and its interface with anti-fascism. In the interwar years there was a triangular relationship between national communist parties, the Comintern and Soviet communist parties. In the early phase of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet government invested great hopes in the triumph of a revolution in Germany, but once this faded there was 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 the media over which Willi Münzenberg presided, which operated from its headquarters in Berlin in the late Weimar period, was an essential element of the Comintern apparatus, but also partly escaped its direct control. As Bayerlein (2017) contends, in the 1920s and early 1930s, this constellation of organizations, 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. Moscow came to regard these groupings 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. Stalin and his henchmen then actively demobilized and repressed the transnational organizations. Bayerlein's work suggests

that, in practice, Soviet leaders were far more willing to accommodate to Nazi Germany permanently than either their rhetoric or their diplomatic approaches to Western democracies have led historians to assume.

This perspective is crucial for understanding the context of the emergence of the collaboration between the Antwerp Group and the ITF. The ineffective response of the German Communist Party (KPD) to the Nazi seizure of power alienated some KDP militants. Their anger was compounded by the subsequent cynical calculation of the Soviet leadership in relation to Hitler, and the brutal purging of KPD exiles in the USSR. The Antwerp Group was 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 its outlook was based on a conscious rejection of Stalinist politics. Several key leaders of the Antwerp Group were rooted in a radical syndicalist political tradition that had never been comfortable with main-line communism. Under Fimmen's leadership, the ITF 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 the work not only of communists but also of non-party trade unionists, social democrats, syndicalists, Trotskyists, anarchists and others (Coppi and Heinz 2012; Graf 2001). Fimmen distanced himself from the Comintern primarily 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 ill-fitted the Comintern outlook. On the other hand, the ultra-militancy of the communists in the early 1930s attracted the ISH militants who joined the Antwerp Group. 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. Fimmen and the Antwerpers found common ground in their emphasis on labour unity and autonomy. Their joint activities combined a broad appeal to anti-fascism with a suspicion of the way communist leaders subordinated 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 preferred to affiliate themselves to anarcho-syndicalist forces on 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 greater weight to more specifically labour interests than the Comintern main line would have done.

Although recent work on the radical sailors of the interwar years has tended to focus on the ones affiliated to the Communist International (Adi 2013), the Antwerp Group's trajectory suggests that this is not the full picture. The Antwerp Group–ITF ideology is striking for its syndicalist leanings and (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 1918–19 revolution in Germany. These seamen initiated the upheaval that broke the imperial regime and were at the forefront of the insurgency that sought to shape a new political order, before it was crushed by the alliance of the army and the social

democrats. Even although the development of the group then passed through the highly centralized world of the communist movement, it retained a quasi-syndicalist autonomist element that re-emerged in the mid-1930s. On the other hand, Fimmen and his leadership group in the ITF felt equally suspicious of the constraints the political parties were imposing on the 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, which was highly unusual during this period in the world of western European trade unionism. The Antwerp Group was receptive to this anti-imperialist politics, which was notable in that, in the second half of the 1930s, the Comintern 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 and, by the mid-1920s, the Comintern was placing a considerable amount of emphasis on organizing maritime workers. In 1921, it decided to set up a network of international seamen's clubs. Seamen in this era faced extreme difficulties during their port sojourns, for exploitative boarding house keepers would often ensnare them into relations of virtual debt slavery and criminal bar and brothel owners constantly preyed on them. By providing a safe environment for recreation, cheap food and political discussion, these 'interklubs' were able to draw the seamen in. (In a sense they were replicating the strategy that Christian churches had long employed to reach seafarers through 'seamen's missions' and the like.) These clubs had several functions. On one level they enabled the building of support for communist politics and the communist-aligned labour movements that the 'Profintern' labour coordination centre in Moscow supervised. In addition, given the Soviet sense of encirclement, the potential this web of connections 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 1927–28 these expanded to some major European ports and, by the mid-1930s, there was an international network of clubs, of which 13 were in the USA. (According to Margain (2015: 135–6) there were about fifty, but Weiss (2017) is more sceptical about that.) 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 a wish to establish new, revolutionary unions: the creation of the new organization was directed against the ITF and its affiliates, despite the ITF being relatively far to the left on 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 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 organization's real animator. The ISH developed a methodology of seeking organizers among seamen, on which the Antwerp Group would later build. Although there were serious efforts to recruit sailors from Asia and Africa led by Liao Chengzhi among 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 insufficient attention to organizing seafarers from colonized countries (*Negro Worker* 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 (2017) asked whether the ISH was 'a radical global labour union' or 'a subversive world-wide web', an arm of the Soviet security apparatus. The latter view prevailed for many years, mainly on the strength of the fascinating but fictionalized and only partially reliable memoir of the repentant ISH activist Richard Krebs (Valtin 2004). In fact, it was a bit 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 several 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, in the 1920s, the communist parties struggled to 'Bolshevize' recruits from a syndicalist background. This was because their revolutionary trade unionism, which tended to emphasize spontaneous worker revolt, did not easily fit 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 the current scholarship shows, 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 on 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 best-selling novel of maritime life, *Das Totenschiff* (*The death ship*), published in German in 1926 and English in 1934 (Wyatt 1980; see also Traven 1991). 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 to a dissident position like that of the Antwerp Group, which, as we shall see, had a strong syndicalist element. The Comintern's move to a 'popular-front' position in the mid-1930s, 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 extraordinarily confident and charismatic 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 an unusual depth of insight into a world that 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 as 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 that led to the toppling of the *Kaiserreich* in November 1918. During the uprising Knüfken was released from prison by the insurgent sailors. As Nelles (2001a: 159–61) points out, this was his formative experience and it shaped Knüfken's subsequent view of politics: small groups of sailors had forged their own organization and brought down an apparently overwhelmingly powerful opponent. Such self-organization of mariners along syndicalist lines was to become the basis of the Antwerp Group's political approach. Knüfken continued to think of seamen as the legendary 'Red Sailors' of 1918. He was very active in subsequent revolutionary events and participated in the street fighting in Berlin in early 1919. In the aftermath of the defeat of the revolution, he became an important communist and seamen's union leader, although in the complicated politics of the German communist movement, he favoured the leftist faction of the 'Communist Workers Party' (KAPD), 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 of the hijacking and 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. Nevertheless, in supporting a Swedish sailors' strike against Comintern orders in 1925, and then taking part in a demonstration against Stalin in 1927, he displayed a dangerous degree of independence. In 1929, he was arrested, formally on charges of embezzling trade union funds but really 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, have

two children. In 1932, Knüfken returned to Hamburg to work for the ISH, with responsibility for the Scandinavian section of the interklubs. With his rough command of Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, English and Russian, he was peculiarly well equipped for this work. When the Nazis came to power, Knüfken fled to Copenhagen. The attention of the Danish police drove him first to Rotterdam and then, after further police pursuit, he moved to Belgium.

There, he consolidated a small circle of German seamen around him 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. Its headquarters 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: 300–4). 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 again moving headquarters to Paris and experimenting with various tactical expedients, including unsuccessful approaches to the ITF, by mid-1935 the ISH was in chaos (Weiss 2017: 308–9) – and it was not just a matter a matter of disorganization. Through access to newly available archival data, Bayerlein has convincingly argued that the Soviet leadership was far more willing to accommodate the Nazi state than previously realized. The Soviet Union 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 being a case in point.

The group's leading figures included the amiable Kurt Lehmann, Knüfken's chief lieutenant and the communist party seamen's leader from Hamburg; Kurt's brother, Werner Lehmann; Franz Pieterzak, who organized seamen for the ISH on the American East Coast; and Otto Häringer, who reputedly fled from Germany after killing an SS man. A source of their discontent was the ISH's insistence on trying to build a normal trade-union structure underground, so failing to adapt appropriately to the extreme repression under the Nazis and thus causing widespread arrests (Nelles 2001a: 161–7).

In early January 1936, Edo Fimmen received a letter from Antwerp saying that '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: 324–7). They were now based in exile and '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 the ISH, but about nine months earlier, the group had 'mutinied' against the 'incomprehensible' politics of the ISH. The sailors complained in the letter about the 'deification of leadership' in the communist movement. They claimed that they had a network of individuals and groups on no fewer than 190 German ships. They asserted that there were enormous opportunities for revolutionary work and, surely somewhat hyperbolically,

claimed that between 85 and 90 per cent 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 among the seagoing workers.

The secretary general of the ITF was not an obvious match for the rough diamond Knüfken. Born in Amsterdam in 1881, Edo Fimmen had been a religious and deeply serious young man. A member of the Salvation Army for a time, he went on to produce a peculiar newspaper that combined 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 turned into a radical outsider among 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, harbour and maritime unions in western Europe. The war threatened its existence and Fimmen played a key role in its survival, becoming general secretary in 1919, a position he was to occupy for the rest of his life. He evolved a complex politics that fitted uneasily into conventional political categories, comprising elements of revolutionary Marxism, pacifism and religious moralism. The 1914–18 catastrophe drove a deep internationalism and anti-war sentiment that characterized the ITF under his leadership. Fimmen insisted on the postwar 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 (Koch-Baumgarten 1997; Oldenbroek 1942; Reinalda 1997a). Perhaps his most remarkable innovation came with the launching, at the start of his ITF leadership, of a campaign to support the Hungarian left after Admiral Horthy repressed the revolution in Budapest in 1919. The transport boycott that Fimmen initiated against Hungary in 1920 became a template for his later campaigns against Mussolini and Hitler (Molnar 1997). It is important to note that it also became a prototype of later solidarity campaigns and that the Münzenberg–Comintern apparatus was not the only one to develop these types of movements. In 1923, Fimmen engaged in discussions with the Comintern about a joint anti-fascist campaign, but hostility from the IFTU forced him to back away (Braskén 2016: 584).

In 1933, Fimmen decided to focus the ITF's work as much as possible on resisting

fascism – a strategy that involved 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 managed to bring 31 delegates representing them to a conference in Denmark. Fimmen's close collaborator, the railway organizer Hans Jahn, travelled through Germany to work with his trade union contacts under cover of being a salesman for a Dutch wine merchant. Jahn built up an extensive underground network of oppositional groups among railwaymen, until the Nazis largely (but not entirely) rolled it up in 1937 (Nelles 2001a: 273–431, 2001b). The ITF developed a distinctive approach to underground work, namely making no attempt to build formal trade union structures, which were far too vulnerable to the police. Clandestine workplace groups would be formed to choose workplace representatives. The term used for these was *Vertrauensmann* (plural *Vertrauensleute*). The federation also brought out 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* 1933–45).

When Knüfken and Fimmen met, they immediately formed a warm personal bond. They quickly agreed to cooperate, with the seamen willingly accepting Fimmen's condition that they conduct the underground work on a strictly non-party basis. This was meant 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. For the Antwerp Group it was more than that, for many of its statements suggest that it 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 Schiffahrt* 1936: 3). The idea was for activists to build groups on board each ship, which would then select a *Vertrauensmann* (or perhaps 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, they would not 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's (2001a: 175–6) 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's 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, in most months the seamen were visiting 30 or more ships in Antwerp. The group's presence became particularly well established in ships that 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 that operated a Hamburg–Antwerp service (Nelles 2001a: 177).

An important feature of the group's work was planning to sabotage the German

fleet in the event of the outbreak of war. Seamen were issued with mercury, which causes engine overheating, and with this technique they conducted at least one experiment, which destroyed 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 they 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 it fell apart when the British pulled out (Nelles 2001a: 203–6).

Herbert Frahm, a young refugee from Hamburg who was based in Norway, was in Fimmen's network. Frahm had already adopted the *nom de guerre* by which he would become known to the world, Willy Brandt. Coorodinating with Fimmen, Brandt contacted German seamen in Norwegian ports and used Fimmen's connections to link them up with trade union groups in Germany. Brandt is an interesting example of the complexity of the political world of the left in the 1930s. A left-wing social democrat by background, he abandoned the party over the ineffectiveness of its response to the rise of Nazism and joined the revolutionary Marxist SAPD, to which he adhered while working with Fimmen. However, during 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: 65–6).

A useful tool for the Antwerp Group's activities was a stencil-machine-produced paper, *Die Schiffahrt* (Seafaring),[2] first published in 1935, which the group's activists circulated clandestinely to maritime workers. On the masthead of each edition was a sketch of a lighthouse, liner and trawler, along with the time-honoured invocation – 'PROLETARIANS OF ALL LANDS, UNITE YOURSELVES!' In the fourth edition, in February 1936, Fimmen announced the group's merger with the ITF. As well as sophisticated analyses of the political situation, the paper carried sailors' lively accounts of their experiences on the ships. Obviously, the paper was a propaganda organ and should thus be read sceptically, but the considerable detail in these stories gives many of them a ring of authenticity. Experientially based writing was relatively rare at the time in the maritime unions and in political journalism, which suggests that the Antwerp Group really was keen to give a real voice to its members.

A striking feature *Die Schiffahrt* is the optimism it conveys, despite the adverse circumstances in which the men were working. There was often a sense on the part of its contributors that anti-Nazi sentiments were widespread among sailors and that the ITF had found an effective way of working among them underground. For example, in early 1937, a sailor reported a voyage out of Hamburg 'among 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. The third and fourth mates on the deck were 'opportunistic' Nazis, but the crew refused to return their Hitler salutes or join in singing 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 they bought local newspapers in foreign harbours 'so that we could use the five months to discuss all questions, including our defeat in German. All colleagues on board agrees with "Schiffahrt" and the ITF Group' (*Die Schiffahrt* 1937: 3). Another

sailor wrote of how, after a dreadful voyage with a pro-Nazi crew, he remained on the ship and was joined a much more congenial company: 'the new crew came and they showed themselves to be real colleagues (*Kollegen*). … You cannot 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* 1936: 3). 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* 1937: 7).

The group also emphasized the connections it was making through the ITF's extensive international reach. In late 1937, the paper mentioned that the shop stewards' work with ITF contacts in different ports was 'exceptionally close and comradely' (*Die Schiffahrt* 1937: 12). The paper particularly hammered the theme of high food prices, an understandable preoccupation in a society in which lack of adequate nutrition had been widespread in 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 *Die Schiffahrt*. One story, for example, recounted a voyage to Australia on a coal burner, on which stokers and trimmers purportedly lost eight to ten pounds of body weight on each journey through excessive work and poor nutrition (*Die Schiffahrt* 1938: 1). One of the paper's favourite jokes was to make a point of always referring to the swastika as the 'hunger hook'.

Die Schiffahrt was constantly scathing about the Nazi ideal of national community and harped on about how the Nazis had promised all sorts of improvements before coming to power but had failed to deliver them because they were tied to capitalist interests. It emphasized that the repressive nature of Nazi rule made any real representation of worker interests impossible. As a sailor leaving Hamburg on the SS *Indra* wrote, 'woe if a "*Volk* Comrade" wants to make a justified complaint, then right away he's threatened with the concentration camp' (*Die Schiffahrt* 1936: 11). Frequently, to stress the crucial importance of the right to organize, the paper would carry detailed accounts of improvements in wages and conditions won by workers in democratic countries. *Die Schiffahrt* (1937: 7) opined 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 is important to note, however, that although the group stood against Nazi anti-Semitism, some of its rhetoric made only the feeblest of challenges to the populist roots of the regime's discourse. For example, when the Nazis were appropriating the Bernstein shipping company from its Hamburg owners, the best *Die Schiffahrt* could come up with was 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 shipowners' (*Die Schiffahrt* 1937: 5–6).

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

An interesting element of the ITF-influenced workers was the ambivalence they felt towards the Nazi labour organization that had replaced the trade unions, the *Deutsche Arbeiter Front* (DAF). While *Die Schiffahrt* tended to treat the DAF and its 'pompous officials' (*Bonzen*) with contempt, the sailors did occasionally see it as a force to play off against other Nazi elements. For example, when men boarding a ship failed to get their filthy, bug-ridden quarters fumigated, they confronted the captain and the DAF representative and successfully demanded the return of their documents. Again, when on the SS *Lüneberg*, sailing to the East Indies from Hamburg in 1937, first 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* 1937: 2). This tendency to view the DAF as slightly different from other Nazi organizations was later reflected in a debate among German exiles about whether a de-Nazified DAF might be the basis for a new labour organization.

Anti-colonialism

The anti-colonial dimension of *Die Schiffahrt*'s internationalism was striking. In 1935, the Comintern started to show a strong tendency to downplay the anti-colonial themes that had until then been a major feature of its anti-fascist activities (Buchanan 2016). This arose in large part from a desire to appeal to nationalist sentiments and middle-class opinion in Britain and France, the main colonial powers. Yet, the Antwerpers were strongly anti-colonialist. In its third edition, the paper took a strong stand against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia: '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* 1935: 3).

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 standing after his failure to raise wages and improve welfare. The Italian workers and peasants opposed it 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 (*Die Schiffahrt* 1937: 9):

> 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 Japan and the Third Reich, the Nazis have already begun the delivery of war materials to Japan. … Because we as German water-workers have nothing in common with the 'Third Reich', we call on all seafarers and barge workers to report all war transports.

Yet, like their counterparts in democratic countries, German seamen had a complicated relationship with the Asian workers on their ships. Internationally, in the early twentieth century many unions adopted an outright racist, white-labour protectionist stance towards Asian seamen. Fimmen was a striking exception to this trend (Reinalda 1997b); he stood out against the 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 among seamen. By 1937, the ITF had affiliates in Palestine, Canton and Trinidad. The most significant link though, was to India, where in the same year four Indian unions were affiliated, the most important of which was the 15,000 strong Seamen's Union, Bombay, and the 20,000 strong Seamen's Union, Calcutta (ITF Seamen's Section 1937). Yet, to some extent, Fimmen was forced to compromise with the dominant view in the western seamen's unions. This was reflected in the report of a committee that the ITF and International Mercantile Marine Officers Association set up to investigate the question of non-European crews at a meeting in Geneva in 1928, of which Fimmen was one of the authors (ITF 1928). The document reveals a compromise between the 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 were interested in organizing Asian and African seamen. It 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.' It then goes on to assert that such a view would be incompatible with the ITF's 'ideals of international cooperation'. However, it also stipulates 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 the ITF proposed was that Chinese and Lascar seamen should be engaged individually 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 that basis – all hiring should be based on national conditions with no exceptions. This formula was acceptable to both exclusionists and inclusionists in the European unions. *Die Schiffahrt* displayed the

same ambiguity and was hostile to the idea of employing Chinese crews under the prevailing conditions. Nevertheless, it emphasized the common interests of the Nazis and the shipping companies and tried to direct hostility away from Chinese maritime workers and towards the state and companies. The paper called for class struggle, not race struggle – '*Klassenkampf! nicht Rassenkampf!*' Thus, while the racial dynamic of German seamen's politics was real, *Die 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 attempted coup in July 1936, Fimmen sent a circular to all ITF affiliates calling on them to support 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 being sent to the loyalists. This was soon to become a critical issue because the British government's policy of non-intervention choked off most arms supplies sent from liberal countries to the legitimate government, while effectively leaving the fascist powers free to supply the rightists (Howson 1998). Sailors working with the Antwerp Group were able to deliver high-quality intelligence on arms shipments. One sailor who worked on 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. He also provided details about the activities of the Hamburg shipping broker, Matthias Rohde, who was arranging the arms shipments, and produced a sketch of the port of Pasaia identifying the ships lying at anchor (Antwerp Group 1937). The Antwerp Group used *Die Schiffahrt* to inform its sailor readers about arms shipments and to ask them to report any additional information they could glean.

Fimmen was often frustrated in his interactions with the Republicans, as in the case of the Norwegian ship SS *Rona.* In this instance, through lack of accurate information from the Spanish government, the Norwegian and Danish crew assumed that the ship was destined for the Francoists and had taken industrial action. In fact, the ship had cargo for the Republicans, and the attention drawn to it 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 select group of maritime unionists in several countries. Fimmen asked to be personally informed by telegraph of any information about arms shipments, having 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 it could to stop the ships sailing. Fimmen also acted for the Republicans by asking his contacts to find ships that the Madrid authorities could charter or buy. He specified that they should be between 1500 and 2000 tons, capable of 12 knots and have politically reliable crew (Fimmen, 17 December 1936, in Fimmen 1936–37a). Some success was

achieved in this and, 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 1936–37a).

The ITF representative in Cardiff, the vastly experienced trade unionist Jim Henson, was especially valuable. With a high concentration of tramp steamers owned by relatively small companies in South Wales ports, which were conveniently located geographically in relation to a 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 to replace a pro-fascist crew with '"left" officers and men' and liaised with French contacts to help the ship on its onward journey once it arrived in Bordeaux. Gomez and Henson prevented ships with suspected rebel loyalties from getting papers to sail (Henson, 22 December 1936, in Fimmen 1936–37b). When an incompetent Republican official replaced Gomez in March, 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 1936–37b).

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 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. He saw the owners of the *Sarastone* as 'good and decent people'. However, there was more than a tinge of anti-Semitism in his remarks about the Jewish owners of the *Marie Lewellyn*, who were 'prepared to do anything for money payment'. The captains were, Henson advised, the right men for the job. 'From information from my ship-owning friends this morning, any of these captains with a little encouragement from the Spanish government will go for [Bilbao] "Hell for Leather".' The determination of Captain David 'Potato' Jones of the *Marie Lewellyn* was striking. He was '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 1936–37b). Henson and Fimmen also coordinated – although apparently not without some interpersonal difficulties – with Fenner Brockway of the Independent Labour Party, who had a project to bring food to the Basque country (Brockway, 17 April 1937, Fimmen 19 April 1937, in Fimmen 1936–37b). This work had some success. 'Potato' Jones became internationally renowned for his attempt to ship weapons to the republic, which was only frustrated by the deployment of a Royal Navy flotilla. Several 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* 1937).

Six members of the Antwerp Group, including Kurt Lehmann and Häringer, travelled to Spain to fight in the conflict. In Barcelona, they joined an international militia linked to the UGT (General Workers' Union), but Hans Beimler, the group's KPD leader, expelled them over political differences. They subsequently joined the anarchist

Durruti Column, in which there were a number of other German sailors. The men fought on the Aragon front where several of them were wounded. The enthusiasm for the Spanish struggle seems to have been so considerable that *Die Schiffarht* (1937: 5–6) felt it necessary to carry an article explaining that readers might make a better contribution by staying at their posts to block arms shipments than volunteering to fight in Spain.

Sustaining the struggle

The unique character of maritime space gave the Antwerp Group the means through which to navigate the lethal forces it faced. The existence of an international seamen's network, in the form of the ISH, enabled it to recruit maverick individuals who were disgruntled with the Comintern line. The global nature of the ITF as a transport workers' organization gave the Antwerpers a way of escaping from the ISH orbit yet replaced it with another international network from which they could draw support. Visits to foreign ports produced opportunities to tap into the ITF's worldwide connections and this, combined with their vast experience of international mobility, enabled the activists to stay ahead of the retributive hand of the Stalinist enforcers and of the Gestapo. As a technological artefact, that was also a relatively closed social entity, and mobile across the world, ships proved surprisingly immune to the direct control of Nazi officials. The seamen's culture of anarchic self-assertiveness, rooted in their relative independence of single places, enabled them to face down 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 much more favourable political opportunities than were open to terrestrial-based workers.

Sustaining the commitment of the shipboard activists in the face of great danger was of course, difficult. One problem that the group encountered was that, given the unbearable conditions in Germany, there were widespread desertions in foreign ports. 'In Sydney, 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 the 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* 1937: 5–6).

In retrospect, the Antwerpers appear hopelessly over-optimistic. They genuinely believed in the possibility of a popular insurgency overthrowing the Nazis, or of their rapid collapse in a military confrontation. For example, enthusiastically reporting on the struggle in Spain, the paper declared, 'today Spain, tomorrow Germany! That will remain our slogan and urge us on in struggle against Brown [Shirt] oppression in Germany. Down with fascism!' (*Die Schiffahrt* 1937: 2). Always present in the background, however, was the image of the Red Sailors of November 1918, whom Knüfken had so readily supported.

Yet, again and again, *Die Schiffahrt* articles provided specific grounds for faith in the revolutionary potential of German seamen, which now looks so misguided. 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 stated in a more 'camouflaged' way when suspected Nazi agents were around. Instructions to give the Nazi salute were largely ignored. The crew, which was sympathetic to the Spanish Republicans and outraged by economic conditions at home, hoped for the military defeat of Germany (*Die Schiffahrt* 1938: 8). During the 1938 Munich crisis, two reports from ships jubilantly noted the men's apparent lack of enthusiasm for the war and the seamen's militancy. A correspondent on one ship in a foreign port reported that the Nazi crew members were downcast, had ceased giving the Nazi salute and had apologized to other crew members for 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* 1938: 9–10). A crew member on a ship undergoing repairs in Kiel, similarly reported that the two Nazis on board were despondent, whereas the rest of the ship's company felt elated at the prospect of the outbreak of war leading to the regime's fall (*Die Schiffahrt* 1938: 9–10). This may sound like wishful thinking, but it corresponds with Nicholas Stargardt's (2015) recent findings on the German experience of Hitler's war in which he posits that there was much less popular enthusiasm for war than previously thought. In the lead up to the outbreak of the conflict before the popular mood was restored by German military successes in September 1939 and Spring 1940, there was widespread initial panic about the consequences of a war for the country.

If the evidence from *Die Schiffahrt*'s ship reports can be trusted, it has interesting implications for debates on conformity and resistance in Nazi Germany. In the 1970s, some prominent historians of Nazism placed considerable emphasis on the failure of the Nazis to hegemonize the working class. For example, 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, a broad workers' front engaged in acts of informal resistance. The subsequent *Alltagsgeschichte* of scholars like Alf Lüdtke and Lutz Niethammer placed greater emphasis on the penetration of Nazi ideology into the working class. Later, the more conservative works of authors such as Michael Burleigh, Robert Gellately and Eric Johnson, who emphasized the overwhelming power of the Nazi racial discourse and its success in achieving political conformity, negated what recognition there still was of working-class opposition to Nazism (Eley 2013). This development in the debate left a strong and 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, especially, its accounts of life below deck on German ships, should make us consider at least the possibility that the pendulum has swung too far. While some of the earlier work certainly underplayed the centrality and pervasiveness of the Nazi ideology and was perhaps too reluctant to recognize the extent to which workers were

attracted to the Nazis, present-day historiographical wisdom tends to ignore the reality of activism and labour dissent. Not only was the Antwerp Group a remarkable example of an almost exclusively working-class core of opponents to Nazism, but its documents also provide convincing evidence of a widespread informal working-class resistance of the kind described by Mason. And, as dissidents from the communist movement and supporters of the independent socialism of the ITF, it would be equally wrong to dismiss the group as a bunch of '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's headquarters from Amsterdam to England, where the organization established offices in Bedford. Fimmen was, however, in poor health and after some time in the UK, he was sent to Mexico to recover, while his deputy, J. H. Oldenbroek, took over running the ITF. Fimmen died in Cuernavaca in December 1942.

The members of the group suffered a range of harsh fates. After being deported from Belgium during the group's activities there, Kurt and Werner Lehmann underwent a Kafkaesque series of expulsions from one country to another, before landing in the hands of the Vichy French and being handed over to the Nazis. Werner died in prison: Kurt survived Dachau and went on to a chequered postwar career (Nelles 2001a: 347–8). 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 over to the French, he was taken to France where he was interned, escaped, 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 years of imprisonment to become a coal merchant in Hamburg. His comrade Hans Weitkowitz died in Brandenberg-Görden Prison (Weihe 1997).

The unstoppable Knüfken came to England with the ITF, but then went on an underground mission to organize action against the Nazis in Norway. The local police arrested and imprisoned him for travelling on forged documents. When the Nazis occupied Norway the next year, they looked for Knüfken, but he survived because sympathetic members of the Norwegian administration failed to hand him over. They in fact hid him 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 became active in the trade union movement. In 1950 he returned to England, where the Foreign Office employed him. There are suggestions that he worked in intelligence, analysing Russian submarine communications. The old revolutionary ended up taking sides in the cold war. After suffering a stroke in 1965, he retired and died in Brighton in 1976 (Nelles 2015).

By disrupting normal patterns of global trade, the outbreak of war in September 1939 brought the work in which 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 several meetings with their intelligence agents. 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 the ITF's membership and could claim some credit for persistent acts of sabotage. In Sweden, which remained unoccupied and to which Willy Brandt had fled during the Nazi occupation of Norway, Brandt and his comrade August Enderle, resumed contact with the ITF. There was regular seaborne traffic between Sweden and Germany and Enderle managed to do some political work among the German crews, but little was left of the network of the Amsterdam group. After the war, both Brandt and 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 the Second World War it was surely understandably (Merseburger 2013; Nelles 2001a, 2001b).

Conclusion

Recent scholarship has made important connections between studies of communism, global networks, 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; we are also gaining a better understanding of how an increasingly brutal, self-interested and nationalist Soviet apparatus first restrained and then crushed this development. The ISH played a key part 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 reassessment. It helps to show that, although the Comintern was an enormous force, it was not the sole source of the innovative internationalisms of the 1920s or of the anti-fascism of the 1930s. Radical global networks come in many forms. The sailor's split from the ISH was part of a broader pattern in which genuinely innovative global organizations generated by the Comintern in the late 1920s and early 1930s were destroyed by a retreat from internationalist positions, fragmenting in multiple directions.

Fimmen's pacifist, humanist and anarchist-inflected socialism found common ground with the seafarers' revolutionary syndicalism. What held them together was their extraordinary 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.

Note

1. All translations from German are by the author.
2. The word is conventionally spelled with three 'f's – 'Schifffahrt', but the Antwerpers used a spelling with two 'f's.

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