

## **The International Transport Workers' Federation and Working Class Resistance to the Nazis**

The leadership of the trade unions and of the social democratic parties of Europe generally did not play a role in the resistance to fascism in the 1930s and 40s. But *the* exception to this was the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), based in Amsterdam, led by Edo Fimmen. The ITF, under Fimmen's leadership, organised illegal trade-union and transnational underground resistance networks amongst German, Dutch, Belgium- and French- transport workers, such as seafarers, dockers and railway workers. Unlike the Communists, especially in the early 1930s, they emphasised working with workers from a range of left positions. They also brought aid and solidarity to the republican forces during the Spanish civil war. The ITF was remarkably effective in smuggling its antifascist and highly illegal publications into Nazi Germany and occupied Europe, an achievement which is virtually unknown.

Edo Fimmen, who was the leader of the ITF, *combined* antifascist activities with support for any struggle over working and living conditions and an emphasis on providing *information* to help members. For example, ITF combined campaigning amongst German merchant seamen against the Nazi government with a discussion of conditions. . They boarded the German ships in the Antwerp docks, a crucial organising hub, to discuss working conditions, food and the relationship with superiors at the same time as they would attempt to win over the crews to an anti-Nazi position, such as stopping the ships from carrying resources to the Franco side in Spain. It is also worth noting that many members of the ITF had broken with the Comintern aligned International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, in part because the KPD was not seen as having effectively combated Nazism.

ITF tried to counter Nazi propaganda among German sailors and dockworkers was crucial. The tiny groups of ITF militants distributed anti-fascist leaflets and newsletters as a way of building up the anti-fascist resistance. They distributed literature on boats docked in Antwerp and elsewhere and visited port taverns frequented by German seafarers. Two shop stewards from each ship were invited to ITF committee meetings. Papers and bulletins were secreted onto ships, then had to be unloaded and hidden on the docks of German port cities, where they could be collected by local activists, who somehow had received information on where the hidden material was.

From 1933 till 1945, the ITF published the fortnightly *Hakenkreuz über Deutschland* (Swastika over Germany), later renamed *Faschismus*. To give an idea of

its reach, almost 2000 copies were distributed in May 1935, and nearly 3000 in October 1935. At least 60% of the designated illegal literature appears to have reached Germany. Almost all Rhine river ports and most seaports were supplied directly or indirectly. Dutch inland waterway skippers and crews, part of the ITF's extensive clandestine network, also smuggled publications into Germany.<sup>1</sup>

In February 1936, 18 ships took illegal publications to Germany; the next month, ships carried "literature in small packages or many single copies to Bremen, Hamburg, Stettin, Danzig, Lübeck, Bremerhaven and some Rhine inland ports". In 1937, 1,300 copies of 3 issues were published and distributed.<sup>2</sup>

In the ITF bulletin of March 1936, an article written by some German seamen in collaboration with the ITF Antwerp group argued that only '*the unions of the free trades, i.e. seamen, boat workers and sailors, as well as all workers in the transport industry, can combat worker-attacking fascism and fight for the liberation of the labour force and trade-unions using the ITF as a global organisation.*' It ends: '*One for All. All for One. Down with the brown dictatorship.*'

The Antwerp Group of German Seamen also produced a stencil-machined bulletin, *Die Schiffahrt* (Shipping) from 1935-1938 which specifically targeted German sailors. Its masthead was 'Proletarians of all lands, unite.' It, critically, gave a voice to the sailors themselves who were encouraged to contribute. For example, in early 1937, a sailor reassured its readers that, on a voyage out of Hamburg, "*among about 40 deck and engine-room crew, from the first day a completely anti-fascist spirit prevailed*". *Although there were 3 or 4 Nazis on board, the crew refused to give the Nazi salute.*<sup>3</sup>

From June 1937, *Die Schiffahrt* put out a militant anti-Nazi statement: '*The Nazi German state wants war: therefore prepare for it. Germany wants dominance in the world. Germany wants colonies and raw materials... The coming war of Nazi Germany must lead to the collapse of the Brown [SA] system. To help this collapse is your task! Prepare yourself to fulfil it.*'<sup>4</sup>

The tone is one of exhortation, rather than agitation. In 1938, a sailor, writing in *Die Schiffahrt* first reassures that members of the SA or the Nazi Party have little influence on board, then calls for resistance:

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, Harold, *The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) 1945-1965: an Organizational and Political Anatomy*, PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp.12 & 186.

<sup>3</sup> Hyslop, German Seafarers, Anti-Fascism and the Anti-Stalinist Left, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Hyslop, p.1.

*We have just one duty to those who have been murdered, beheaded by hatchets and tortured in the Gestapo hell-holes: Fight fascism until it collapses! For peace, justice and freedom! Down with war! Against Hitler and his murder system! For a genuinely free and socialist Germany!*<sup>5</sup> (The fourth edition, in February 1936, announced its unification with the ITF.)

But distributing such literature was deadly dangerous and it is not surprising that that there were few if any strikes on German ships.<sup>6</sup>

But the ITF's clandestine work became increasingly dangerous. There was at least one Gestapo man in their midst which led to many arrests, and by the end of 1938, the distribution of leaflets in the harbour was scaled back and, by 1939, it had stopped altogether.<sup>7</sup>

The ITF also organised amongst Inland waterway workers, in particular the Rhine boat men. From 1938, they smuggled and distributed illegal literature, for example into Hamburg, where the ITF group had links with a resistance group of boatmen, dockworkers and shipyard workers. But the Gestapo made many arrests.

I have to mention the amazing railway workers network. ITF organised amongst Railway workers and in the Union of Railway Workers in Germany. The extraordinarily, Hans Jahn, the secretary of the railway union, was the key figure in organising the underground anti-Nazi struggle, even from exile. The railways, lest we forget, were, key to the Nazis' war machine polices and heavily supervised.

The illegal work of the railway union began as early as 1933. Jahn made contact with the leadership of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) in Amsterdam and started to establish a network of contacts, he knew many of the union's district officials personally and was soon to develop contacts with SoPaDe, the exile organisation of the SPD. The railway workers' secret network became key in establishing contacts with reliable German comrades, the gathering of information and carrying illegal anti-fascist leaflets and newsletters into the Reich. Jahn salvaged 17,000 index cards with members' addresses before the Nazis managed to seize them and set up a number of resistance groups, probably around 100, for example in Hamburg and Stettin, some miniscule, others larger.

Rail workers were crucial in the distribution of the leaflet and pamphlets of the ITF and of the International Socialist Combat League, the ISK, a very small but

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<sup>5</sup> *Die Schifffahrt* 178/9.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, *Jan Valtin Again*.

<sup>7</sup> Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, pp., 172, 186, 192.

committed group of mainly ex-members of the SPD, active against the Nazis. The ITF railway workers concealed the smuggled literature in the sleeping cars of the express trains or behind window shutters as the trains steamed into Germany.<sup>8</sup> Sympathisers, in particular attached to the ISK, would receive some sort of code where to look and could then smuggle the material out, for example in a briefcase with a secret compartment.<sup>9</sup>

The pamphlets were mostly four-pages and printed on thin paper; the comrades were instructed to swallow them in an emergency: "You can swallow leaflets even if you haven't much practice!" There were complaints if the leaves could not be swallowed!<sup>10</sup>

In 1935, the Gestapo uncovered and arrested many of Jahn's network, including Jahn for the third time, though, after much international pressure, he was released and fled. But, at least in the Cologne/Wuppertal area, pamphlets continued to be distributed up till 1936.. After that, the level of organisation declined, though the ITF newspaper *Fahrt-Frei* was still published.<sup>11</sup> But there were Gestapo agents everywhere. In 1937, on the German border, illegal material had been discovered in a car and 19 people were arrested. some were sent to the camps, others killed.

But, as late as September 1943, the ITF issued an extraordinary appeal to the German railway workers, which called upon them to 'actively participate in the destruction of the German war machine' and, while recognising the terrible risks, called for sabotage of the Nazis' railway system.

While there is no time to go into this, in the last years of the war, SOE, the Special Operations Executive, which had been set up in 1940 by Churchill, worked alongside Jahn and the ITF in attempting to sabotage the German war effort. SOE's role was, most unusually, to work from 'beneath': to promote sabotage and subversion in enemy occupied territory and to work with local resistance groups. Fimmen and Jahn both took a 'pragmatic' view about working with SOE>There were probably about ten episodes of derailments or sabotaging of engines, which were in part coordinated by SOE in Germany and which also occurred in France. According to a recently published study, the SOE file on Jahn includes reference to how 'explosives were attached directly behind the axle casing of a railroad car... and set with a timing

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<sup>8</sup> "Hans Jahn". *German Resistance Memorial Centre*.

"Obituary: Hans Jahn". *Report of the World Congress of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, 1962*.

<sup>9</sup> Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*.

<sup>10</sup> International Youth Federation (IJB) / ISK, file group: ISK, correspondence B (1933 – 1946), 4, March 30, 1934, Hans Jahn to Eichler.

<sup>11</sup> Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p.275-6.

device'<sup>12</sup>. The explosives were placed so the train fell to the left, blocking the train lines!

Once exiled in London, which made organising railworkers far more difficult, Jahn continued to campaign especially over support for refugees from Spain and Germany, working to gain their admittance to the UK.

Unfortunately, there is little time to talk about the ITF's remarkable role in Spain, eg their attempts to delay or stop the transport of weapons, ammunition or any other war material from Antwerp to the Francoists, and asking seamen to look out for German ships supplying the Francoists, The newspaper *Die Schiffahrt* became a key tool, informing sailors about almost all the "special steamers" that carried weapons and troops.<sup>13</sup> For example, in December 1936, *Die Schiffahrt* reported that, according to "absolutely reliable reports from German ports and ships", 26 German steamers had recently carried "war material of all kinds and troops ...from Stettin, Lübeck, Emden, Hamburg and Königsberg to Cadiz and Seville'. As late as 1938, *Die Schiffahrt* demanded:

*German Seafarers! Report all weapons shipments that are leaving German ports bound for the Spanish fascists! Stop these transports by any means! Down with fascism! Long live the victory of the Spanish workers and peasants! ..*<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the ITF's attempted, not always successfully, to protect anti-Nazi Germans who had fled Spain to Belgium after the defeat of the Republic, whom the Belgium authorities threatened with deportation to Germany. Fimmen also intervened to get his members released who had been taken prisoner by the Communists after the clashes with anarchists and the POUM in Barcelona in early May 1937.

In November 1939, Fimmen wrote: "*The ITF takes part in the war, not behind France and England, but against Hitler and his open and secret allies*". It was, he continued, "*a fight to the death against the Nazi and Fascist regimes which had crushed the free labour movements... persecuted, imprisoned and murdered so many of its [the ITF's] friends, and which aimed to enslave the workers of the world*".<sup>15</sup>

There are different reasons why the ITF has been largely ignored in the historiography of the Second World War. Even at the time, the ITF had to struggle to

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<sup>12</sup> Pfister: Eva and Otto

<sup>13</sup> Nelles, Dieter, "Das abenteuerliche Leben des Hermann Knüfken. Ein demokratischer Revolutionär", in: *ÖTV-Report Seefahrt* Nr. 3/1996.

<sup>14</sup> Presentation by Hamburger Friends of the XI International Brigade, Duckdalben International Seamen's Club, Hamburg during the Anti-fascist Harbour Days, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Nelles *The Repressed Resistance*.

get its anti-fascism position heard officially. For example, Theodor Liepart, the General Secretary of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (ADGB, *General German Trades Union Federation*) rejected the ITF's call for an international boycott of Germany. Liepart even called for participation in the Nazis' 'May Day' demonstration in 1933 (nelles), claiming "*We...recognise that the victory of National Socialism... is our victory as well*".

Much historiography since the end of the Second World War was born out of the Cold War and it is only in the last decades that there has been a sustained interest in resistance from below. Moreover, many, though not all, German historians have emphasised the draw of Nazism to the working class. While most analysis of the second world war have been dominated by assumptions of patriotism and class collaboration, my analysis has aimed to raise a discussion of class in the historiography of the Second World War and how an anti-fascist movement, rooted in working-class organisation, contributed to the collapse of fascism.

Let it never be said that working class people did not risk and lay down their lives to defeat Nazism.