The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers – A Radical Labour Union of the Waterfront or a Subversive World Wide Web?

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Introduction

The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH) was a short-lived transnational radical umbrella organization for communist-dominated/controlled trade unions of maritime transport workers established during the ‘Third Period’ of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1930. Officially presented as an independent platform, the ISH was in reality a masked continuation of the Comintern’s Maritime Section, the International Propaganda and Action Committee of Transport Workers (IPAC-Transport), and was financed through subsidies from Moscow. The aim of the ISH was to challenge the hegemony of the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) as well as the various national labour unions of the waterfront. The rationale behind this policy was the belief in Moscow that the former policy of a ‘unity front from below’ where the Communists had formed so-called revolutionary opposition groups within labour unions dominated by the Social Democrats had to be replaced by a new approach. The key idea was to transform existing opposition groups into independent radical unions and to establish independent radical platforms for these organizations.

Maritime workers constituted during the interwar period a multifaceted group such as seamen and stokers of many nationalities hired on the various national merchant fleets as well as dockers and stevedores working in the harbours. Working conditions both on board and on land were tough and worsened due to the economic depression since the late 1920s. However, as Dieter Nelles has outlined in his study on the ITF, syndicalist work among the maritime transport workers was difficult not least due to regulations about when to strike and their long period at sea when they were cut off from organized labour unions. Another handicap was that both Social Democratic and Communist party and labour leaders regarded the waterfront
as a secondary field of work – in sheer numbers, the maritime workers constituted but a small portion of the working force.¹

On the other hand, capitalists as well as political and labour leaders from the Left to the extreme Right realized that the transport workers were of utmost importance for industry and commerce. They controlled the rail- and seaways that connected factories with consumers as well as the transportation of armament and war equipment. The waterfront evolved as a battleground during the 1920s and early 1930s where shipowners and national governments on the one hand tried to press wages and cut expenses as well as to block the radicalization of the maritime workers and the spread of revolutionary ideas. On the other hand, one fundamental guideline among the Bolsheviks in Moscow was their fear of an imminent attack on the Soviet Union by the ‘imperialists’ and their lackeys. From Moscow’s perspective, the maritime transport workers were crucial allies not only in preventing an attack on the Soviet Union but also as potential couriers as they criss-crossed the Seven Seas and called at ports that where the outside the reach of the Soviet Russian merchant fleet.

Agitation and propaganda of the Comintern among the maritime transport workers had two main objectives. The first one was to create cells and sections among the crew on board the ships and among the harbour workers who were to serve as the core action units in case of a strike or other legal activity. The second one was to establish a cadre of liaison persons, usually the leader of a cell, whose task was to maintain a secure communication infrastructure through which secret messages, publications and financial transactions as well as agents, instructors and emissaries of the Comintern Apparatus could bypass the surveillance of the police and military intelligence anywhere in the world. Starting in the 1920s through the establishments of a series of so-called Port Bureaus and International Seamen Clubs (Interclubs) through the IPAC Transport, the system was to be refined and reorganized on a global scale by the ISH and its national sections during the 1930s. Nevertheless, the basic structure of the system remained untouched despite the systemic changes in 1930. The operations of the ISH therefore rested on two pillars: the cells on board the ships and the Port Bureaus and Interclubs.²

² For an excellent introduction to the background of the establishment of the ISH, see Lars Borgersrud, Wollweber-organisasjonen i Norge, Doktoravhandling i historie ved Universitetet i Oslo 1994, Chapter 1.
While the global history of the ISH is yet to be written, the aim of this chapter is to present a tentative outline of the national, transnational and global dimensions of the ISH. Similar to the other associated organizations of the Comintern and its syndicalist wing, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU or Profintern), the global ambitions of the ISH to emerge as an international radical platform has hitherto received little attention in research on global syndicalism and transnational organizations. While the ISH even at its height in the early 1930s listed but a minor fraction of all labour unions of the waterfront, the mere existence of a radical and potentially subversive platform caused concern not only among the ITF and the national unions but also the police and state authorities. Further, as will be argued below, the ISH was in contrast to the ITF intrinsically directed towards building international solidarity not only in words but in deeds by actively highlighting an anti-colonial, anti-imperial and anti-racial agenda. Last, but not least, as will also be discussed below, although the strength of the ISH was its global outreach, its weakness was its ambivalent structure as on the one hand being a syndicalist organization with unclear ties to the various national Communist parties and, on the other hand, its role as an independent but in effect Moscow-controlled organization. However, in contrast to a one-sided presentation of the ISH as the vehicle and mouthpiece of Moscow, the study stresses the capacity of the agents of the organization to make independent choices. Therefore, organizations such as the ISH and its agents should be studied as responsive and pro-active subjects who tried to find room for manoeuvre during an era when space for such activities was rapidly diminishing.

The radical maritime workers in literature and research

Hitherto, only a few studies have discussed the history and activities of the ISH. Interestingly, two of its main activists, Richard Krebs and Richard Jensen, were engaged in a showdown on their experiences of working within the ISH during the 1930s. In 1941, the ‘autobiography’ Out of the Night was published in the USA. The book became a bestseller and at one time regarded as a ‘true story’ of the clandestine and subversive operations of the ISH and

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4 Jan Valtin, Out of the Night (New York 1941).
especially his escape from Copenhagen in 1937, hunted by both Nazis and Communists, and his disillusionment and break with Communism during the 1930s. It was soon realized that the author’s name, Jan Valtin, was a pseudonym, his real name being Richard Krebs who had been in charge of the Inter-Club in Bremen and Hamburg as well as served as a so-called Political Instructor of the ISH in 1932 and 1933.\(^5\) Until the 1980s, his book was used as the main source in the descriptions of the organization and activities of the ISH.\(^6\)

Krebs’ description of the poisonous atmosphere among the ISH leadership, especially the negative description of the leader of the German ISH section Ernst Wollweber, was challenged by the Danish Communist and ISH leader Richard Jensen in his refutations of Krebs’ ‘revelations’ 1946 and claimed that Krebs actually was a Gestapo agent.\(^7\) An intensive debate also arose in France after the publication of the French translation of Krebs’ book in 1948 as two high-ranking government officials, René Cance and Pierre Villon (alias Roger Walter Ginsburger), were claimed to have cooperated or even worked for the NKVD during the 1930s.\(^8\)

The controversy between Krebs’ and Jensens’ presentation of the activities of the ISH continued for the next decades. Richard Jensen continued to stick to his version about Krebs being a Nazi agent in the 1930s in his autobiography *En omtumlet tilværelse*.\(^9\) Among the first studies about the ISH and its operations were written by the Danish journalist Erik Nørgaard based on long conversations and interviews with Jensen who also had supplied him with material on the ISH.\(^10\)

Nørgaard’s publications were among the few that tried to shed some light on the history of the ISH. However, he was mainly using Danish archival material and, according to


\(^7\) Richard Jensen, *Frem i lyset. Jan Valtin Gestapo Agent Nr. 51* (København 1946).


Borgersrud, exaggerated the position of Copenhagen as the hub of the ISH after late 1933.\textsuperscript{11} Jensen himself cannot have owned much material as he claimed that he managed to destroy all documents on his activities a few hours before the German troops had reached Copenhagen in 1940.\textsuperscript{12}

Still, in spite of Jensen’s refutation of Krebs, \textit{Out of the Night} was generally regarded as an important eyewitness report on the inner operations of a Comintern organization and the amoral objectives that dominated its operations. Similar to other literature by former communists who had cut their ties with the Comintern, the information in Krebs ‘autobiography’ was seldom challenged and sets the framework for Michael Rohrwasser’s narrative on Krebs in his overview on renegade literature.\textsuperscript{13}

However, the ‘archival revolution’ in the 1990s has resulted in a critical re-evaluation of Krebs autobiography and its claim to be non-fictional. Based on German archival material, Dieter Nelles provided a critical assessment of Krebs’ activities after 1933, especially his relationship with the Gestapo, and argued that Krebs’ was an agent of the Gestapo in 1937 and 1938. In addition, he questioned the reliability and validity of the autobiography in toto and discharged it as fiction.\textsuperscript{14} Nelles’ negative account was subsequently challenged by Ernst von Waldenfels who was the first to use German, Russian, British and American archival material.\textsuperscript{15} Waldenfels attempt to neutralize Krebs’ activities after he was jailed by the Gestapo in 1933 has been criticized in Dieter Nelles for an uncritical interpretation of the German and Russian sources.\textsuperscript{16} Borgersrud’s doctoral thesis, too, supports Nelles’ argument and with a bulk of Norwegian, Swedish, German, Dutch, Belgian and Russian archival material is able to present a much more nuanced outline of the activities of the ISH and the so-called Wollweber-organisation. Among others, Ernst Wollweber comes out in a total different light in Borgersrud’s research that his description as the emotionless mastermind of

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  \item \textsuperscript{11} Borgersrud 1994, p. 13-14, 77, 86-90.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Jensen 1957, p. 168.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} See Rohrwasser 1991.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Ernst von Waldenfels, \textit{Der Spion der aus Deutschland kam. Das geheime Leben des Seemanns Richard Krebs} (Berlin 2002).
\end{itemize}
sabotage and subversive activities as he is described in Krebs’ book.\textsuperscript{17} Recently, Guillaume Bourgeois, who also consulted American and British security sources, confirms Borgersrud’s and Nelles’ claim that Krebs’ autobiography is heavily biased, subjective and unreliable if not sometimes even fictive.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless, as will be subsequently outlined below, at least part of Krebs’ account for his engagement in and account of the ISH before 1933 seems to be fairly correct although his presentation of the structures of the ISH has several flaws.\textsuperscript{19} Already in his reply when interrogated by the CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) in 1950, Krebs stressed that the book had been written as an adventure story and contained some deliberate distortions and inaccuracies,\textsuperscript{20} especially about the role of the key ISH leaders Albert Walter, Alfred Bem (a.k.a. Adolf Schelley or Shelley) and Ernst Wollweber.

The main problem with Krebs’ account on the ISH is the author’s position within the organization. Krebs did not belong to the inner circle of the ISH and although his book has been used as a source for reconstructing the structures and operations of the ISH it is only of secondary value. Waldenfels’ book provides some interesting insights on the ISH but does not exclusively focus on the organization itself. While Krebs and von Waldenfels are providing a rough sketch of the structural pattern of the ISH, their main focus is on the clandestine and illegal activities of its members. What so far has been missing is an outline that takes into account both aspects of the ISH, namely its attempt to establish a global platform for organized radical maritime workers and its function as the clandestine worldwide communication network of the Comintern.

A full reconstruction of the global outreach of the ISH would require archival research in all the five continents and must be the objective of a future collaborative research project. This study is mainly based on documentary sources of the ISH filed in the Archives of the Communist International, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow, British Police and Military Intelligence files on Albert Walter, Richard Jensen and

\textsuperscript{17} Borgersrud 1994. See also Erik Nørgaard, \textit{Krigen for krigen. Wollweber-organisationen og skibssabotagerne} (Lyng: Bogan 1986), and Erik Nørgaard, \textit{Krig og sluitspl. Gestapo og dansk politi mod Kominterns »bombefolk«} (Lyng: Bogan 1986b).


\textsuperscript{20} CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 2, RG 319 IRR, Personal File; Box 124 BB, National Archive (USA).
Richard Krebs of the 1920s and 1930s available at the British National Archives (BNA) in Kew, and the Interrogation Report of European Bureau of the CIC on Krebs and the ISH filed at the National Archives in Washington DC. The RGASPI-files constitute the core source material as they contain copies of the correspondence between the ISH headquarters in Hamburg and its various sections in addition to correspondence of the various ISH sections and Port Bureaus and the headquarters in Moscow. Unfortunately, the archives of the ISH headquarters in Hamburg seem to be lost (or have not yet been traced). It was not confiscated by the Nazis in 1933 as it had been shipped out to Copenhagen before the German police raided the premises of the ISH but what happened thereafter to the material is not known – apart from that it most likely was not sent to Moscow.

Some material concerning the operations in Hamburg, especially on the World Congress of the ISH in Altona in May 1932, is filed in the Landesarchiv in Schleswig and have been consulted. Additional documentary sources are believed to be traceable in all countries where the ISH tried to establish sections or in the archives of organizations, such as the ITF in Amsterdam, with whom the ISH tried to establish connections in the 1930s. Although I have not been able to check these archives, there are a few thorough studies about union activities of harbour and maritime workers and their engagement in the fight against Nazism and Nazi Germany, such as Ludwig Eiber’s study on workers movements on the waterfront in Hamburg during the 1930s, Dieter Nelles’ book on the activities of the ITF against Nazism, and Hermann Knüfken’s autobiography (including his correspondence with ITF General Secretary Edo Fimmen during the 1930s). Especially Knüfken’s autobiography and letters are valuable as he belonged to the ISH leadership and belonged to those who organized the transfer of the ISH Secretariat from Hamburg to Copenhagen in 1933 and was later in charge of operations in Rotterdam. In 1936, he and his cell broke with the Communists and joined the ITF.

There are a few studies outlining the national, regional and even meta/trans-regional aspects of the International of Harbour and Seamen. Apart from Eiber’s and Nelles’ works on the activities of the ISH in Germany and the activities of the German exile sections after

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21 I am grateful to Dieter Nelles for localizing me the report.
22 Eiber 2000.
25 On Knüfken’s rift with the ISH and his groups’ subsequent integration in the ITF, see further Eiber 2000, p. 672-674 and Knüfken 2008.
1933, the activities of George Hardy, the leader of the Seamen Minority Movement in the United Kingdom, and the futile attempt to establish a red seafarer’s union is critically assessed by J. Manley and Kevin Morgan.\textsuperscript{26} A critical presentation of George Mink’s activities as organizer of the IPAC Transport in the USA and his activities as head of the Marine Workers’ Industrial Union (MWIU), the ISH Section in the USA, is provided by Vernon L. Pedersen.\textsuperscript{27} In addition, there is Bruce Nelson’s ‘history from below’ of the Red waterfront in the USA and the 1934 longshoremen strike in San Francisco and the role of the MWIU.\textsuperscript{28} At least two studies outline the operations of the \textit{L’Internationale des marins et des dockers} (IMD), as the ISH was known in French, in France. Marie-Paule Dhaille-Hervieu’s monograph provides a general outline on the communist activities, including those of the IMD, in Le Havre from a local, national and international perspective as well as a sub-chapter on the local comments on Jan Valtins’ critical remarks on the French communist (and ISH Instructor) Pierre Villon.\textsuperscript{29} The other study is Constance Margain’s forthcoming PhD thesis on the IMD and ISH. Her ambition is to give the first full analysis of the objectives and activities of the organization as well as to provide a biography of about 500 activists.\textsuperscript{30} Josephine Fowler’s detailed assessment on the trans-Pacific activities of the ISH and its forerunner is singular in its global approach.\textsuperscript{31} Finally, there are a few studies on the so-called Wollweber League (or Wollweber-group) and their acts of sabotage against German, Italian and Japanese ships in 1936-1939. Although this group had no direct links to the ISH, there were several indirect ones as will be discussed further below.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} Bruce Nelson, \textit{Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s} (University of Illinois Press 1988)
\textsuperscript{32} See further Hans Dankaart and Rudi van Doorslaer, ‘De activiteiten van een communistische sabotagegroep in Antwerpen en Rotterdam: De organisatie Wollweber (1933-1939)’, VMT Cahier 1, Frans Maseereefonds vzw (1979), available at: \url{http://www.marxists.org/nederlands/thema/wereldoorlog2/1979sabotage.htm} (checked
Forerunners: The IPAC Transport and the Port Bureaus

The early 1920s was a turbulent period marked by various attempts by the Comintern to promote the export of a world revolution. All of them failed miserably. The lasting effect was an increasing division in the working class movement and resulted in the disastrous rift between the Communists and the Social Democrats, reformed Socialists and other groups who rejected the idea of a violent class struggle. The Bolshevik state, the Comintern and its affiliated Communist parties as well as the Profintern or the Red International Labour Union (RILU), the trade union section of the Comintern established in 1921, were branded by national governments in Europe and North America as subversive movements that had to be closely monitored if not be declared enemies of the state and the existing political and economic order.33

The dilemma of the Communists was their pariah position throughout Europe. The various national Communist parties had few members apart from the German Communist Party, the KPD. Even less impressive was the position and influence of the Communists in the various national and international labour unions and federations. Apart from the Czechoslovakian labour federation, which had affiliated with the RILU, most of the national horizontal trade union centres such as the British TUC, the German ADGB and the French CGT were dominated or controlled by Social Democrats or Reformists. The International Trade Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) or Amsterdam International rejected all invitations by the RILU to discuss a merger or a ‘United Front’-policy, branding the Communists and their organizations for pursuing a covert policy to destabilize society and to capture labour unions from within.34

The establishment of the RILU had been an attempt by the Comintern to build a radical horizontal counterpart to the IFTU. Another plan was to influence the International Trade Secretariats, i.e., ‘vertical federations’ based on a single craft or industry, by

33 On the RILU/Profintern, see further Rainer Tosstorff, Profintern. Die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale 1920 – 1937 (Paderborn 2004).
establishing special organizations, the so-called International Propaganda Committees (IPC). Although the ITS and the IFTU were formally separate bodies, in practise they were linked as members of the ITS were usually also members of their national trade union federations. The strategy of the RILU was thus to influence key craft and trade unions. Several of such branch committees were launched in the early 1920s, among others the IPC of Transport Workers (IPC-Transport) in 1922, renamed in 1928 as the International Propaganda and Action Committee (IPAC) of Transport Workers.\(^{35}\)

A key person of the IPC-Transport was Albert Walter (1885–1980), an ex-seaman who was one of the leaders of the German maritime union, the *Deutscher Schifffahrtsbund*, which had joined the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) in 1922.\(^{36}\) Walter was thereafter commissioned by RILU President Alexander Losovsky to develop the IPC-Transport into a global platform of the RILU.\(^{37}\) This was achieved through Walter’s second unit, the so-called International Port Bureaus. In 1924, he bought a house at 8, Rothesoodstrasse close to the waterfront of Hamburg. From here, he established his global communication network.\(^{38}\)

Officially, the activities of the Port Bureau were camouflaged as premises for harbour workers and visiting seamen, the Inter-Club. The first Inter-Club had been organized in Leningrad in 1922 by another German communist, Herrmann Knüfken (1893–1976); it was to serve as the model for that established by Walter in Hamburg. Another key club was established in Vladivostok in 1923, serving as the nodal point for activities in the Pacific.\(^{39}\) Each club was to contain a library with communist and radical newspapers and journals at display as well as a restaurant or bar where cheap food was served. During the evening, the Inter-Club staged theatre or film shows or organized other cultural events.\(^{40}\) More important was its function as a rally point for radical seamen and communist agitators. According to a report sent to the Swedish Secret Service, the Port Bureaus and Inter-Clubs had three main tasks: to agitate among seamen, to serve as gateways for illegal communist literature, and to provide a safe place for the meetings of the international propaganda committees. According

\(^{38}\) Valtin 1941, pp. 38-39, 103-104.
\(^{39}\) Fowler 2007, p. 105.
\(^{40}\) Knüfken 2008, pp. 211-212.
to the report, Inter-Clubs were known to exist outside the Soviet Union at least in Hamburg, Duisburg, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Copenhagen, Rotterdam, and New York by 1927.41

Walter was successful in the establishment of a global communication network. His strategy had been to establish small cells on board ships that could take care of the illegal transport of printed agitation and propaganda material, the illegal transfer of cash subsidies to parties and unions as well as the hiding of blind passengers including couriers and emissaries. This was achieved by the so-called Hamburg method. The core idea was to establish a personal contact between an agitator and a seaman when a new ship arrived in Hamburg. A small group of functionaries and harbour activists embarked a ship to distribute leaflets and pamphlets among the crew. After contacts had been established, a close interaction between the Inter-club headquarters and the crew was then projected to win at least some of the crew for the cause of radical agitation. Richard Krebs, who participated in these activities already during the 1920s, recalled that our immediate aim was to arouse discontent among the seamen, discontent against rations, wages and ship’s discipline. Wherever a crew was receptive to our agitation, we went on to form an action committee on the ship to prepare them for coming strikes, or to build up the Party unit among the men, or to pick particularly able individuals for courier service and other confidential work.42 Most importantly, a report was written after every visit, listing reliable contacts and identifying potential partners for future cooperation. The names of individuals, cells and ships were thereafter collected in a catalogue. This database, which already by the late 1920s included hundreds of persons and ships, was the core of Albert Walter’s communication network.43 However, as Peter Huber has underlined, the core unit directing the clandestine communication networks of the Comintern was its International Communications Office (OMS), including the operations of the courier service and the transfer of money to parties.44 Consequently, Walter’s ships units were but cogs in a larger apparatus of which he and his bureau in Hamburg had no influence. Instead, as Josephine Fowler claims, the nodal point

41 Internationella hamnbyråer, 1.11.1928. The report is a translation, the original report is not indicated but was presumably written by the German police in 1927. UD:s arkiv 1920 års dossiersystem, HP 1459 32D, Den bolsjevikiska rörelsen: Sverige och utlandet, 1927-1928, Swedish National Archives, Stockholm.
42 Valtin 1941, p. 39.
43 Eiber 2000, p. 186.
44 Peter Huber, 'The Cadre Department, the OMS and the 'Dimitrov' and 'Manuil’sky' Secretariats during the Phase of Terror’, in: Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in Light of New Documents, ed. Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History 1996), pp. 129.
was the OMS office in Berlin which was headed by “Uncle Max” or Solomon Vladimirovich Mikhelson-Manuilov alias Max Ziese. Ziese, who was also in charge of the RILU European Bureau in Berlin, handled transactions between Moscow and the Party functionaries and other Comintern agents and organizers working overseas from 1929 to 1932.45

The establishment of the ISH

The ‘United-Front-from-Below’-strategy of the Comintern and the RILU came to an end in 1928. Starting with the Fourth World Congress of the RILU in July 1928, the Comintern shifted to the ‘Class-Against-Class’-tactics that was officially proclaimed at the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in August 1928. This strategy declared the break with the previous attempts by the Communists to cooperate with reformist elements in the trade unions. The new strategy focused on the establishment of revolutionary trade unions and to take an extremely hostile stand towards reformist unions and the Social Democratic parties, branding them as ‘social fascists’.46 The Comintern’s reading of the sign of the hour was that the class struggle was reaching a new phase and anticipated a new wave of revolutionary activity. RILU General Secretary Alexander Lozovsky called for a rapid formation of red unions and to break with mainstream unions that were blocking the worker’s path to revolutionary consciousness.47 Directives were sent to all Communist parties to form new unions. In Germany, this resulted in the foundation of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition (revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition, RGO).48 In the USA, the CPUSA created several revolutionary craft unions as well as established the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) as a red union centre; in Canada, the Workers Unity League (WUL) was established in December 1929 whereas the National Minority Movement (NMM) was revived in the United Kingdom.49

Moscow’s idea was not only to reorganize trade union work. According to Richard Krebs, a small group of leading Communist trade union leaders, including Lozovsky, Walter and the leader of the Soviet Transport Workers Union Komissarenko, held a closed meeting

45 Fowler 2007, p. 88.
47 Manley 2005, p. 23.
49 Manley 2005, pp. 18-22.
in Moscow in January 1930 to discuss the need to also change the strategy for work in the waterfront and among seamen. The outcome of the meeting was the decision to launch yet another platform of the RILU, namely an international for marine and harbour workers that was to serve as the unifying body of all revolutionary seamen’s and dockers’ unions.\textsuperscript{50} Similar to other auxiliary units that had been established or were about to be established by the RILU, such as the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in Shanghai (1927), the Latin American Federation in Montevideo (1929) or the International Trade Union Committee for Negro Workers (projected to be launched in 1930), the planned organization was to be camouflaged as sovereign and self-governing by placing its headquarters in Hamburg.\textsuperscript{51}

Although Krebs did not participate in the meeting, his information is valid. On January 20, 1930, the plan to transform and reorganize the IPAC Transport into a “Berufsinternationale”, i.e., an international for seamen and harbour workers, was announced in a letter. A conference was to be called lager in the year and to be preceded by an international campaign for a call of revolutionary marine workers unions.\textsuperscript{52}

Albert Walter and the Port Bureau in Hamburg were responsible for the organization of the conference that was planned to convene in Hamburg in early August 1930. By July 1930, Walter informed Moscow that the international campaign to call for the conference was in progress.\textsuperscript{53} Meanwhile, he and his associates had also been in charge for the arrangements of the First World Congress of Negro Workers.\textsuperscript{54} However, in August it was realized that the Marine Conference had to be postponed to October; instead, Walter organized on the 9\textsuperscript{th} and 10\textsuperscript{th} of August a rally of seamen and dockers in Hamburg. On the first day, about 2,800 seamen and dockers walked through Hamburg in a protest march and about 10,000 of them participated in a subsequent mass rally. On the following day, accordingly some 1,600

\textsuperscript{50} Valtin 1941, 205; Nørgaard 1975, 75.
\textsuperscript{52} (Copy) Letter from NN to 'Lieber Freund', 20.1.1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 3. It is unclear if Albert Walter was the recipient or the author of the letter although the content could possibly indicate the latter.
\textsuperscript{54} IHBS MR July 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 64. On the Negro Workers’ Conference and Albert Walter’s part in its preparation and the establishment of the ITUCNW, see further Weiss 2014, Chapter 5.
participants attended a meeting that ended with the call for the foundation of a “Kampfinternationale aller Seetransportarbeiter,” i.e., an International of Maritime Workers.\(^{55}\)

The ‘International Conference of Seamen and Harbour Workers’ finally convened on the 3\(^{rd}\) of October 1930. 38 delegates from 26 countries met in the premises of the Port Bureau on 8, Rothesoodstrasse to discuss the future of marine work and the need to cut the ties with the reformist-controlled International Transport Workers Federation (ITF).\(^{56}\)

Following an interim report, most of the participants came from European and American countries, such as Italy, France, Greece, Norway, Sweden, England, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, although present were also representatives from China, “Arabia”, Peru, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the USA. A Presidium and an Executive Committee were elected; in the latter George Hardy was nominated as chair and Albert Walter as (first) secretary.\(^{57}\)

Officially, the meeting resulted in the establishment of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH; Internationale der Seefahrer und Hafenarbeiter or L’Internationale des marins et des dockers). Typically for Communist rhetoric, the list of participating in the official publication following the conference included ‘fictitious’ participants from Finland, Poland, Canada, “Algiers” (perhaps this was the representative from “Arabia”?), India, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Argentine, Chile and Brazil. On the other hand, the idea of the pamphlet was propagandistic: its objective was to tell its presumable reader that a new global organization had been established and aimed to rally seamen and dockers under its sections – existing or planned – in all the aforementioned countries. Most important, however, was the declaration of open hostility towards the ITF: “Die ITF in Amsterdam dient nicht der Sache der Arbeiterklasse, sondern der Kapitalisten und den Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion!”\(^{58}\) The announcement used the ‘class-against-class’ rhetoric, depicting the ITF as the traitor of the working class as well as and a lackey of the shipowners and the aggressors towards the Soviet Union.

The newly established platform was for several months an unwritten chapter for both its target groups and the secret police. According to lengthy report by a police informant on an international meeting of harbour workers and seamen held in Altona from the 10\(^{th}\) to the

\(^{55}\) IHBS MR August 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 67-69.

\(^{56}\) Handwritten report about the meeting of 3rd October 1930 (in German), RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 21.

\(^{57}\) Bericht über die internationale Konferenz der Seeleute und Hafenarbeiter am 3. Oktober 1930 in Hamburg, RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 2-5.

\(^{58}\) Appeal in German: Seeleute und Hafenarbeiter! Proletarier aus den Häfen und von den Schiffen!, RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 12-16.
11th of January 1931, the meeting of the first day had resulted in the establishment of the ISH.\(^{59}\) A critical evaluation of the situation soon corrected this assumption: the ISH had in fact already been established in October 1930.\(^{60}\) The January 1931 meeting rather concerned the establishment of a German section of the ISH.\(^{61}\) On the other hand, the local police authorities did not change their position: no international activities had been reported before January 1931 and thus they claimed that the ISH became effective only after the January meeting.\(^{62}\)

What was the ISH – a revolutionary trade union platform as it proclaimed itself or yet another subversive organization of the Bolsheviks? Richard Krebs claimed that the operations of the ISH comprised three distinctive fields: 1) revolutionary action, 2) communications between the Moscow-Berlin centres and the rest of the world, 3) marine espionage.\(^{63}\) Similarly, Erik Nørgaard argues that the main objective for launching the ISH in the strategic planning of the Comintern had been to unify the two already existing marine units – the IPAC Transport and the Port Bureaus – to better channel and organize the clandestine and preventive operations to advert the war preparations against the Soviet Union in close cooperation with the newly established Western European Bureau (WEB) in Berlin.\(^{64}\)

However, what Krebs and others have either downplayed or actively neglected was the outspoken will of the RILU to first and foremost establish a revolutionary trade union platform and global alternative to the ITF.\(^{65}\) The subversive and clandestine part certainly existed, and will be discussed further below, but it was rather the aggressive and uncompromising labour union tactics that met the concern not only among shipowners and national governments but also the national reformist unions. Yet, Albert Walter was fully aware of challenges to organize a worldwide network of sections of the ISH. In countries where the Communists more or less freely could operate, such as Germany and the Scandinavian countries, ISH sections were rather easy to be established. In other countries, especially in those were Communist activities were illegal, one would have to combine legal and illegal methods to organize the workers of the waterfront. It was also to be expected that


\(^{60}\) Letter from 'Preussische Minister des Inneren an den Oberpräsidenten in Kiel, dated Berlin 5.3.1931, LAS Abt. 301 Nr. 4532.


\(^{62}\) Report by the Preuss. Polizei-Präsident Altona-Wandsbek in Altona, 15.4.1931, LAS Abt. 301 Nr. 4532.

\(^{63}\) Valtin 1941, p. 307.

\(^{64}\) Nørgaard 1975, pp. 63-64.

the national governments would to their utmost to prevent the formation of a revolutionary trade union of seamen workers. Whatever the case, Walter assured Moscow that his communication system provided alternative contact avenues that enabled him to keep in touch with all ISH sections worldwide.\textsuperscript{66}

\textbf{The structure and organisation of the ISH (1930–1933)}

The headquarters of the new organization were located in Hamburg. A series of resolutions and instructions outlining its basic principles, operations and structures were issued in Moscow and Hamburg during the following months.\textsuperscript{67} The leading unit was the Executive Committee that constituted of the leading functionaries and secretaries in Hamburg as well as the leaders of the various national sections of the ISH.\textsuperscript{68} The centres of mass agitation were the International Seamen’s Clubs and their number was to be vastly expanded (see chapter below).\textsuperscript{69} The centre in Hamburg was to be strengthened by establishing new sections to coordinate work among different countries and regions: an Anglo-American\textsuperscript{70}, a Scandinavian\textsuperscript{71}, a Latin (including France, the Mediterranean and the Latin American countries), and a Colonial Section.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, there was a Baltic (Latvian) section but it was not located in the ISH building as well as a Finnish section, located in the premises of the Inter-Club in Kiel.\textsuperscript{73} The Colonial Section was to focus on work among Chinese, Indian and ‘Negro’ (i.e., Caribbean and African) seamen calling at Hamburg. Initially, it was headed by the Chinese Comrade Liao (Liao Chengzhi\textsuperscript{74}) and the African American James W. Ford, the

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\textsuperscript{67} Resolution on Work of the Seamen’s and Dockers’ International, 17.II.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 75-76; Duties and Tasks of Secretariat Members, no date, filed 17.III.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 128-129.
\textsuperscript{68} CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 5.
\textsuperscript{69} Draft Decisions: Basic principles [for work of the ISH], RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 81-84.
\textsuperscript{70} Interestingly, Krebs gives no information about this section in his interrogation report!
\textsuperscript{71} Krebs gives its name as the “special Scandinavian Bureau” but I have not found any references to such a name in the Comintern files.
\textsuperscript{72} Resolution über die Tätigkeit des Hamburger Internationalen Klubs, no date, filed 15.3.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 158-161.
\textsuperscript{73} CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 6, 14. Krebs information about the existence of a Finnish section in Kiel in vague – he himself had seemingly no first hand information about its existence and so far I have found no traces about its activities among the Comintern files.
\textsuperscript{74} Fowler 2007, p. 89.
Secretary of the ITUCNW whose bureau was located in a room behind the Inter-Club in the building of the Port Bureau/ISH at 8, Rothesoodstrasse.75

The Secretariat of the ISH was already reorganized in December 1930. George Hardy, chair, was in charge of the ISH Bulletin as well as work in the Anglophone countries and the Far East. Albert Walter, secretary, was in charge of the technical apparatus as well as work in Scandinavia, the Baltic Sea countries and the German speaking countries. Comrade Dumay, second secretary and resident in France, was to head the Latin Secretariat, i.e., this section was transferred to Paris, and responsible for work in the Mediterranean, Balkan and Black Sea countries as well as Latin America.76 According to Krebs interrogation report, Robert Thompson from the UK was at first treasurer and the Norwegian Leif Foss was a functionary in charge of work among Scandinavian seamen.77

Despite of some early successes in the organization of new sections and Inter-Clubs, George Hardy became rapidly dissatisfied with the conditions in Hamburg. Although being one of the largest ports in the world, Hamburg had according to Hardy some severe disadvantages. The first one was that very few colonial seamen called at Hamburg and none of them had the port at his place of residence. The second one was tied to the first problem: few British, Dutch and American ships called at Hamburg, and among the Scandinavians, the Norwegian merchant fleet – which itself was one of the largest in the world during the early 1930s – called rather in British than in German ports. Hamburg, reasoned Hardy therefore, was not the ideal hub for the ISH and the therefore proposed the headquarters to be moved to London.78 However, Hardy’s proposition was rejected and resulted in him being distanced (but not yet removed) from the ISH leadership.79 The result was a reshuffle of the ISH leadership: Hardy and Thompson were sent back to the UK, Foss to Norway.80 Instead, a new person emerged as the wirepuller in the ISH Secretariat: Comrade Adolf.81 The person was Alfred Bem or Comrade Adolf alias Adolf Schelley, Moscow’s representative and identified by Krebs as the Instructor of the ISH. He was in charge of the so-called Illegal Secretariat,

75 Plan of Work Outlined for the Seamen’s International Amongst Colonial Workers. Immediate tasks., no date, filed 28.II.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 77-82.
76 ISH MR December 1930, RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 71-75. On the Latin Section, see Dumay’s report from 15.1.1931 and 23.4.1931, RGASPI 534/5/228, fol. 16-23, 41-42.
78 Hardy to Lozovsky, Hamburg 30.3.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 139-142.
79 The Situation, the Work and the Tasks of the ISH – Resolution on the Report of Comrade Hardy and Walter, 12.VI.1931, RGASPI 534/5/221, fol. 114-123.
80 CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 5.
81 See further the correspondence between George Hardy and Comrade Adolf, RGASPI 534/5/162-174.
i.e., the monitoring unit of the ISH (Legal) Secretariat of Albert Walter, located in a secret office in another part of the town.\(^\text{82}\)

In accordance to the hierarchical rules of the Comintern Apparatus, the various national units and its activities were to be coordinated, monitored and controlled by the centre. This was to be achieved by sending written instructions by couriers, by receiving written monthly reports on activities and by visits of national functionaries at the ISH headquarters. ‘Travelling instructors’ were sent to the national sections when they were to be reorganized or to coordinate the actions during a national strike. By October 1931, the ISH engaged at least one instructor to oversee its affairs in France, and planned to employ an additional five instructors, one for the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, Belgium and the Netherlands, a second one for the Danube countries and Greece, a third one for the Far East, a fourth one for West Africa and a fifth one for Latin America.\(^\text{83}\) However, at least the West African mission never realized.\(^\text{84}\) One of the most notorious ISH Instructors was Richard Krebs, who operated in Britain in 1932 and in Scandinavia in early 1933. In addition, a monthly mimeographed periodical, *The ISH Information Bulletin*, edited by Adolf Schelley, was sent to the functionaries.\(^\text{85}\) This publication was not for publication; instead, the various national sections would publish their own periodicals and journals, such as *Der Sturm* in Germany, *Rød kurs* in Denmark, *Hamn- och sjöproletären* in Sweden or *The Marine Workers’ Voice* in the USA. Similar periodicals, such as the Finnish magazine *Majakka* or those in Chinese and Japanese, were published in Hamburg and spread via ISH contact persons or the Inter-Clubs.

According to Richard Krebs, the ISH operated in 22 countries and 19 ‘colonies’, managed 47 Inter-Clubs and published its bulletin in 13 languages. He further claimed that the total budget of the organization amounted to USD 52,000 of which USD 8,000 were used to pay for the cost of running the ISH headquarters in Hamburg and its field staff. The rest of the sum was sent abroad as subsidies.\(^\text{86}\) Krebs’ information is usually either taken as face value (Waldenfels) or discharged as being either an overstatement (Pedersen) or even bogus. In the light of both British Intelligence Sources and the Comintern files, Krebs’ information is

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\(^{84}\) Weiss 2014, 354-356.

\(^{85}\) CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 7.

\(^{86}\) Valtin 1941, 307.
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problematic. His figures for the total amount of Inter-Clubs are much to optimistic (Waldenfels even counts 48 Inter-Clubs!) and his figures for the transfer of subsidies dos not indicate whether it was on a monthly or an annual basis!

Material on the transfer of money from the RILU headquarters to Hamburg seems to indicate that Krebs overestimated the amount of Moscow’s support to the ISH Secretariat. Even more, the available documentation reveals that he seems not to have been aware of what kind of financial support was transferred from Hamburg to the various sections. According to Adolf Schelley, the ISH Executive Committee decided at its meeting in late 1931 to drastically change the financial structures of the organization. Previously, the operations of the sections had been financed through money transfers from Hamburg but this procedure was to be reversed and all sections were to finance their union activities themselves. Only the expenses of the Inter-Clubs and the local publications were to be covered by instalments from Hamburg. \(^{87}\) Unfortunately, the available data is both insufficient and difficult to interpret as to give a definite answer to how much was sent on a monthly or an annual basis. In the early parts of 1931, the ISH Secretariat received a monthly sum of USD 1,364 to cover its expenses, including the salaries of 2 Secretaries, 2 Instructors and 2 technical functionaries. In addition, the Secretariat received a token of USD 1,950 to be transferred as stipends to the various affiliated sections. \(^{88}\) Consequently, Walter would have received more than USD 3,300 per month or almost USD 40,000 per year. Perhaps this was even the case during the first half of 1931, as one document seems to indicate. \(^{89}\) However, figures of the financial transactions in the latter part of 1932 and early 1933 reveal that this was not necessarily the case. While the ISH was to receive from March to May USD 300 per month, the amount decreased to USD 100 in June and USD 75 in July. For the rest of the year, the allowances were dramatically increased: in August, October and December 1932 USD 2,200 per month and from January to March 1933 USD 1,828 per month. \(^{90}\) At least in 1932, therefore, the total sum sent to the ISH Secretariat was perhaps even less than USD 20,000. On the other hand, special campaigns, such as the organization of the ISH World Congress in 1932 were funded through extra instalments from Moscow (see below).

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\(^{88}\) Monthly budget of the ISH, no date (c:a 1931), RGASPI 534/8/156, fol. 131.

\(^{89}\) Budget Januar-Juni (1931), RGASPI 534/8/177, fol. 140.

Money was never transferred directly to Hamburg. Instead, the RILU established a secure communication network operating via Max Ziese in Berlin. Ziese would direct monthly instalments to Albert Walter for the operations of the ISH and the ITUCNW. Walter, in his turn, would send subsidies to the various ISH sections via his courier system. Occasionally, Richard Jensen served as courier between Moscow, Berlin and Hamburg.

One of the main structural problems of the ISH was its dual position as both independent and communist-controlled union. Its links to the party apparatus was generally weak; this was the case not only in Hamburg but also characterized the relationship between the party and the various national ISH sections throughout the world. While most, if not all, of the leading comrades were party members, the majority of the rank-and-file where rather syndicalists than communists. At times in Hamburg, the ISH was even at loggerheads with the communist organizations, such as the Red Marine or even the local branch of the KPD. On the other hand, the independent position of the organization was advantageous from a strategic and tactical perspective – it was not controlled by the local KPD or RGO apparatus in Hamburg neither were its sections taking any directives of the national parties or red union leadership. Nevertheless, the weak relationship between the ISH and its sections and the party was time and again considered time and again to be a handicap, especially when the ISH Secretariat tried to direct the affairs in the sections: if Hamburg failed to influence the affairs of one section, for example in the UK, ISH Secretary Walter tried to ask the party leadership to interfere – sometime successfully but more often not as in the UK case, see below – the only avenue left was to ask the RILU and Comintern Apparatus to intervene and settle the case.

Another challenge for communication (and control) was language. Only German and English were in use at the ISH Secretariat and the non-German and non-English-speaking sections continuously complained about not receiving material in Spanish, Portuguese or French nor having trouble in translating German and English directives. Similarly, the ISH headquarters was in trouble when receiving messages and reports from its sections – it took days if not weeks to have them translated into German and vice versa. For Adolf Schelley, this was a major problem and the urged Moscow to find a solution to it and declared: “we should not be a German-English International!”

91 A. Walter, 25.1.33/Cross-Reference, BNA KV 2/1799.
92 Valtin 1941, 367; Jensen 1957, 164.
The national sections of the ISH – an overview

A number of affiliated organizations constituted the sections of the ISH. According to Krebs, there were roughly 30–35 national sections affiliated with the ISH between 1931 and 1933, although many of them were not actually sections at all but rather “threads of communications”. Only a few of the national sections, including those in Germany, France and the Scandinavian counties, were financially self-sufficient. Other sections received ISH stipends for special purposes and individual actions, such as the US American section, while the British, Baltic, Chinese and other sections were completely dependent on ISH subsidies.

Although the Soviet Russian mariners union was a member of the ISH, its links to the platform were weak and even downplayed. In principle, the incomes of the ISH Secretariat constituted officially of monthly instalments from the various national sections, the sum being calculated as a certain portion of its total membership. Although the Soviet Russian section was the largest one, as was reflected in the large financial support sent from Moscow to Hamburg, there were only Russian representatives at the Presidium of the ISH and not a single Russian comrade at the ISH Secretariat. Officially, therefore, the ISH clung to its idea of being a radical but independent and democratic platform where each section was to be represented.

The largest and best organized section of the ISH outside Soviet Russia was the German one, the Einheitsverband der Seeleute, Hafenarbeiter und Binnenschiffer (EV). It had been established in 1931 and was the only national section to include separate units seamen, dockers, river sailors and fishermen. It was first headed by Hans Koschnik. After the failed 1931 October strike of German seamen, Ernst Wollweber (1898-1967) took over the leadership of the EV; from 1932, he belonged to the inner circle of the ISH. Progress seemed to be rapid. Its predecessor, the maritime section of the RGO counted 714 members at the end of 1930, while the Einheitsverband listed about 40 local units with about 10,300 members at the end of 1931. In accordance with the general instructions of the RILU, the

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94 CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 5, 10.
95 The relation between the Soviet Russian marine workers union and the ISH needs to be analyzed further and must include a different set of archival sources that the ISH files in the Comintern Archives.
96 IHBS Annual Report 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 77-82.
Einheitsverband had focussed on enlisting unemployed seamen and dockers and being quite successful hereby. However, although impressive on paper, the membership was substantially less than those of the reformed unions.\footnote{Eiber 2000, 186-188. See also Hartmut Rübner, ‘Arbeit, Milieu und Konfliktverhalten: Syndikalismus in der Schifffahrt bis in die 1930er Jahre’, Archiv für die Geschichte des Widerstandes und der Arbeit 16 (2001), 165-212.} On the other hand, the various cells that Walter had been able to establish on board German ships constituted the core units of his ‘communication system’ and consequently, the German section was regarded as one of the most important of the ISH.

Other important sections were the Scandinavian ones, first and foremost the Danish and Norwegian revolutionary opposition unions. Work at the Scandinavian section (Bureau) in the ISH headquarters was at first handled by the Norwegians Arthur Samsing and, after his arrest and expulsion from Germany in 1930, by Leif Foss who was replaced by Hermann Knüfken and the Norwegian Gustav Langfors in 1931. The notable presence of Norwegian functionaries, Krebs explained, was that the Norwegian merchant fleet was at that time about third or fourth largest in the world but that these ships rarely touched Scandinavia because of lack of cargo there. Thus a large portion of the fleet was based at Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg and, consequently, the national ISH in Scandinavia could not reach their potential audience. Instead, agitation and propaganda work had to be conducted by the Inter-Clubs and Scandinavian sections in the three harbours.\footnote{CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 6, 52.}

In Norway, the leading members of the ISH were Arthur Samsing, Martin Rasmussen Hjelmen and Dr. Arne Halvorsen as well as Leif Foss who was in charge of the Inter-Club in Oslo. Apart from getting a footing in the Norwegian merchant fleet, the ambition of the ISH was to control the two key harbours in northern Norway, Narvik and Tromsoe, the main outlet for Swedish iron ore.\footnote{On the activities of Norwegian section of the ISH, see further Borgersrud 1994.} In Denmark, on the other hand, the Danish Sailor’s Union and Stokers Union under the leadership of Richard Jensen and Georg Hegener, was a highly appreciated affiliated union.\footnote{Valtin 1941, 368; CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 11-12, 16, 42.} Jensen, acting sometimes as a courier between Moscow and Hamburg, belonged to the core leadership of the ISH. However, the Danish merchant fleet was never as important as the Norwegian one. By 1932, the campaign to establish cells on Danish and Norwegian ships had been fairly successful, for example, about half of the crew (15 persons) on the Marie-Maersk (DK), one-third (10) on the Emma Maersk (DK) and 8 out
of 36 on board the *Anna Knudsen* (No) and 5 of 32 of the *Finanger*’s (No) crew were members of a revolutionary trade union opposition.\(^\text{102}\) A special conference was organized in Copenhagen in January 1933 to further strengthen the work in Scandinavia.\(^\text{103}\) Eventually, the ISH listed 6 “Ortsabteilungen” (local units) in Norway existing at the end of 1933.\(^\text{104}\) In Sweden, too, a revolutionary trade union section had been established in the Swedish Seafarers union, the *Sjötransportarbetarnas röda fackliga opposition* (RFO), and was an affiliated section of the ISH and counted some 1,200 members in 1933.\(^\text{105}\)

Equally problematic was the situation in the Baltic Sea region. Communist activities were banned in Finland, and the Finnish Seafarers’ Union was closely controlled by the Reformists and Socialists and was a member of the ITF.\(^\text{106}\) A small revolutionary trade union group existed among the seamen although without little influence,\(^\text{107}\) and the ISH Secretariat had few if any direct links to it. Nevertheless, underground communist agitation was a known fact in Finland and at least part of the seamen were believed to either sympathize or back the calls of the ISH to demand for a replacement of the unions’ leadership until 1934.\(^\text{108}\) Work among Finnish seamen was concentrated to Kiel as the port was the main liaison point for traffic with Finland.\(^\text{109}\) Similar was the situation in Poland and the Baltic countries, although the ISH tried to agitate among Polish sailors via the Inter-Club in Danzig (Gdansk),\(^\text{110}\) and in 1933 the majority of the members of the seamen’s union as well as its leadership were affiliated to the ISH.\(^\text{111}\) Special emphasis was also directed towards gaining as footing in Estonian and Latvian merchant fleet.\(^\text{112}\) While the Estonian case proved difficult, the ISH was

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\(^{102}\) List of members of the Scandinavian Section of the Inter-Club in Batumi, 1932, RGASPI 534/5/233, fol. 20-21.


\(^{110}\) Plan of Immediate tasks, no date (c:a late fall 1930), RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 54-57. The headquarters of the Polish national section of the ISH was also placed in Danzig and served as communications unit for the underground CP Poland (CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 6, 15).


successful in infiltrating among Latvian ships. By the end of 1932, sections for Latvian seamen existed at the Inter-Clubs in Hamburg, Antwerp, Danzig, and Rotterdam whereas cells or at least members existed on 32 ships, the largest ones being on the Janis Faulbaums (10 persons). One year later, the ISH claimed to control the majority in the Latvian seamen’s union. The central person in charge of the Baltic countries was Ernst Lambert alias Michael Avatin (or Avotin), born in Riga 1902, who like Joop Schaab, Richard Jensen and Martin Hjelmen belonged to the core members of the Wollweber-group after 1936.

Together with the European Secretariat of the RILU, the ISH Secretariat was responsible for coordinating work among crew members on board river steamers on the Danube. The outcome of this work was the establishment of a national ISH section in Austria and an ISH Bureau, the ‘Donaukommittee’, in Vienna. This section was to closely cooperate with the Inter-Club in Bratislava. There existed no national Czechoslovakian ISH section but a strong working group under the direct direction of the ISH Secretariat in Hamburg.

In Western Europe, the ISH had sections and affiliated groups in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The Port Bureaus and Inter-Clubs in Antwerp and Rotterdam were among the most important ones of the ISH Apparatus although at least the Belgian ISH section was, according to Krebs, of little importance. France, on the other hand, was among the most important countries. Following Krebs, a peculiar situation existed as both the Seamen’s and harbour Workers’ Section of the CGTU as well as the anarchist-dominated local union in Le Havre, the socialist-dominated union in Dunkirk and the local union in Marseilles were affiliated members of the ISH, although it is likely that he misinterpreted the situation and the latter local unions have to be identified as local Inter-Clubs? Be as it may, the French ports, especially Marseilles and Le Havre, were crucial exit points for reaching Latin American countries as well as the Francophone world, including the

113 Stand der Mitgliedschaft der RGO-Wassertransport auf den lettischen Schiffen am 1.12.1932, RGASPI 534/5/234, fol. 53.
116 Vertrauliche Beschlüsse zur Resolution der I. Donaukonferenz der Schiffer- und Hafenarbeiter, no date (c:a 1932), RGASPI 534/5/231, fol. 85-90. The ’Donaukommittee’ was to direct activities along the Danube in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Rumania.
118 CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 11.
119 CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 11.
French colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia.\textsuperscript{120} However, the activities of the Inter-Clubs and French trade union opposition were often reported to be unsatisfactory and resulted in several attempts to revise and reorganize the local settings.\textsuperscript{121} In late 1931, the French headquarters were moved from Paris to Rouen where, in addition to Dunkirk and Marseilles, important Inter-Clubs existed.\textsuperscript{122} Still, the revolutionary union of seamen and fishers in France was among the largest sections of the ISH, counting some 4,500 members of which 1,800 paying (i.e., more than half of its members were unemployed).\textsuperscript{123}

Another task of the French Section was to monitor work in the Mediterranean. Effort was put into revitalizing the illegal Italian union (FILM) whose headquarters had been transferred to Marseilles.\textsuperscript{124} In 1931, activities in Greece looked at first promising but soon deteriorated due to police harassment and the arrest of two of its secretaries.\textsuperscript{125} A few years later it had collapsed,\textsuperscript{126} and its headquarters being transferred to Marseilles, similar to the headquarters of the (illegal) Yugoslav ISH section.\textsuperscript{127} Work in Spain and Portugal was difficult, too, although at least in Spain substantial progress was noted in 1933. Most promising was the situation in Seville where 1,800 seamen and a similar amount of dockers were said to have affiliated via their unions with the ISH.\textsuperscript{128} In addition, the Inter-Club in Marseilles was charged to organize an Inter-Club in Oran in Algeria in late 1931.\textsuperscript{129}

More problematic was the situation in the United Kingdom. Seamen Minority Movement (SMM), also called the rank and File Committee, was at first a caucus of the National Union of Seamen (NUS). The SMM was not under the direct guidelines of the CPGB or Moscow although many members were Communists or under Communist influence. In late 1930, the situation looked very promising when the SMM listed activities in

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\textsuperscript{120} Report on France incl. the Latin-American Secretariat of the ISH, 30.5.1931, RGASPI 534/5/228, fol. 108-121.  \\
\textsuperscript{121} Resolution sur la situation actuelle, et les taches les plus paroches du Club International des Marins a Marseille, no date [c:a 1931], RGASPI 534/5/228, fol. 122-125.  \\
\textsuperscript{122} Letter from Adolf [Schelley] to 'Werte Genossen', Hamburg 24.11.1931, RGASPI 534/5/223, fol. 95.  \\
\textsuperscript{123} Material über die ISH und über Arbeit unter den Seeleuten und Hafenarbeiter, 20.1.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 70-88.  \\
\textsuperscript{124} Material on the reorganization of the FILM, RGASPI 534/5/217; Report by Comrade Dumay on his work among Italian seamen, no date (c:a 1931), RGASPI 534/5/228, fol. 81-90.  \\
\textsuperscript{125} Appeal of the ISH to all Inter-Clubs re arrest of its two Greek secretaries, 7.4.1931, RGASPI 534/5/221, fol. 7.  \\
\textsuperscript{126} Material über die ISH und über Arbeit unter den Seeleuten und Hafenarbeiter, 20.1.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 70-88.  \\
\textsuperscript{127} CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 6.  \\
\textsuperscript{128} Material über die ISH und über Arbeit unter den Seeleuten und Hafenarbeiter, 20.1.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 70-88.  \\
\textsuperscript{129} Letter from Adolf [Schelley] to 'Werte Genossen', Hamburg 24.11.1931, RGASPI 534/5/223, fol. 96
\end{flushright}
The SMM, too, focussed mainly on mobilizing unemployed seamen. Initially, they had some success in South Shields when the SMM protested against the rota system and the system of registration in 1930. However, in 1931 and 1932 the SMM was paralyzed by a serious rift between the factions of George Hardy and Fred Thompson. Part of the critique against the SMM was its failure to engage in work among Black, Arab and Asian seamen; among the fiercest critics of were the Barbadian Communist and SMM member Chris Braithwaite (alias Chris Jones, 1885–1944) and Harry O’Connell from British Guyana. In July 1932, the ISH decided to interfere and to send Richard Krebs as instructor on a special mission to reorganize work in the British harbours in July 1932. Hardy was accused for the “total breakdown” of the SMM, and was forced to resign. O’Connell, at this time belonged to the Hardy factions, was criticized for blocking his followers to join the reorganized SMM section in Cardiff. Chris Jones was expelled from the SMM as Krebs accused him for working as a police informant or at least on commission for the NUS. By 1933, work in England was in crisis: the SMM was in a state of dissolution and a functioning committee existed only in Liverpool.

Organized revolutionary unions of seamen and dockers as well as sections of the ISH existed both in the USA and in Canada. In the USA, the call to form independent unions resulted in the establishment of the Marine Workers Progressive League in

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130 List of Port Secretaries of the SMM, no date (c:a late 1930), RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 89. Port Secretaries existed in the following ports: Barry, Newport, Liverpool, Glasgow, Swansea, Cardiff, Leith, North Shields, Blythe, Hull, Manchester, Middlesborough, Southampton, and London.


132 (No author,) Denkschrift über die politischen Differenzen zwischen den Genossen Hardy und Fred Thompson, 22.III.1932, RGASPI 534/5/230, fol. 71-75.


135 See further the various references in Richard Krebs’ personal file, including copies of intercepted letters and evaluation reports by the British police authorities, in BNA KV 2/1102.

136 (Copy, no author) Letter to Comrade Hardy, 23.7.1932, RGASPI 534/5/231, fol. 45.


138 Intercepted letter from Anderson [Krebs] to 'Dear Friend' [probably Albert Walter as the original letter was written in German], 23.8.1932, BNA KV 2/1102. According to British intelligence – and obvious from the documentation – Krebs used the alias James Anderson while working in the United Kingdom.

139 Intercepted letter from And[erson] to Albert Walter [English translation], 3.9.1932, BNA KV 2/1102.

1928, renamed in 1929 as the Marine Workers League (MWL). In April 1930, the MWL was reorganized and re-established as the Marine Workers International Union (MWIU). Its first leader was George Mink. Work concentrated on three main regions: the Atlantic and Pacific harbours as well as the ports of the Great Lakes. In his August 1930 report, Mink informed Walter that the MWIU operated already eleven Inter-Clubs and had some 6,000 members (although only 1,600 of them paid dues). One year later Mink was replaced by Comrade Hynes as part of a larger reorganization of the operations in the USA by the ISH. Activities were to be concentrated to four major ports, i.e., New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco, and Mink was sent to New Orleans to be in charge of the local Inter-Club.

In Canada, the ISH activities of the ISH were concentrated towards the Inter-Clubs in Vancouver and Montreal. However, the establishment of a revolutionary trade union proved more difficult. An attempt was made in 1934 at a conference in Vancouver although with no lasting effect.

While the Atlantic ports and the MWIU headquarters in New York were in direct contact with Albert Walter’s bureau in Hamburg, the Pacific ports constituted a different system and were monitored via the ISH Pan-Pacific Secretariat and the Port Bureau as well as Inter-Club in Vladivostok. The Hamburg Bureau, the Port Bureaus in Antwerp and Rotterdam and those on the US and Canadian Pacific coast were keen in enlisting Chinese and Japanese seamen. Via these networks, communications were established to the illegal Japanese revolutionary seamen’s union, the Sasinkai. The core unit for coordinating work in East Asia was the Secretariat in Vladivostok, in cooperation with the RILU Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in Shanghai and its American Bureau in San Francisco. Through its two bureaus, the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat tried to activate not only a Pacific

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141 Pedersen 2000, p. 312.
143 Albert Walter’s report (in German) on work in Canada, 14.6.1932, RGASPI 534/5/230, fol. 121.
147 See Simpson, Secretary of the Pan-Pacific Secretariat of the ISH to Albert Walter, 3.3.1932 and 14.4.1932, RGASPI 534/5/235, fol. 17-18, 31-32.
link and distribute its journal in Japan, Korea and China but also to organize Japanese and Chinese immigrants activists on the Californian waterfront. In France, especially in Marseilles, focus was put on enlisting seamen from Indo-China whereas especially the Port Bureau in Antwerp was active to establish cells among Laskars or Indian crew members working on British and German ships. In Rotterdam, Joseph (Jozef, Joop) Rimburtle Schaap (1898-1943), who belonged to the inner circle of the ISH and was in charge of the local Inter-Club, had been able to establish a very effective organization in the (Dutch) East Indies, particularly among Indonesians serving on Dutch warships. Through these various networks, communication could be established with local ISH sections in Singapore and in Java.

In addition to the above listed sections and groups affiliated to the ISH, the organization was present through a series of Inter-Clubs in several Latin American and African countries as well as in Australia. While the situation in the Latin American and Caribbean countries remained unclear from the perspective of the ISH headquarters in Hamburg, an ISH section had been established in Australia – the Militant Minority Movement in the Seamen’s Union of Australia and Walter was able to directly communicate with its leadership. Still, the situation in Australia, too, was “absolutely unsatisfactory” from Moscow’s perspective.

Least promising was the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although the ISH headquarters had been ordered by the RILU headquarters to closely cooperate with the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), and the ITUCNW Secretaries were to run the Colonial Section of the ISH and concentrate on work among ‘Negro’ seamen in Hamburg, little was achieved apart from establishing a series of cells on board British ships. In 1931, it looked as if a local union in Sierra Leone was affiliate itself with the ISH – and an Inter-Club was even listed in Freetown – but the plan was never

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150 CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 6, 77.
151 Adolf [Schelley], [Albert] Walter, [?] Stein (signed), Vorschläge zur Stärkung der organisatorischen Arbeit der ISH, 3.3.1932, RGASPI 534/5/230, fol. 52-55; Material über die ISH und über Arbeit unter den Seeleuten und Hafenarbeiter, 20.1.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 70-88. According to Krebs, there existed about seven to eight sections in Latin America, the most well organized being in Chile (CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, page 6)
realized. Eventually, the ISH was able to get a foothold only in South Africa in Cape Town and Durban.

**The reorganization of the Inter-Clubs**

The backbone of the ISH was the International Seamen’s Clubs (Inter-Clubs). A few of them had been established as Port Bureaus before 1930 as organs of the IPAC Transport but they were reorganized in 1931. Only a few of them existed throughout the history of the ISH and at no point did they amount to 47 (or 48) in operation at the same time. A list of the Inter-Clubs usually includes a varying number of ports in the Soviet Union, including Leningrad (established in 1922), Vladivostok (1923), Odessa, Batumi, and Murmansk, and the rest of the world, including Hamburg, Copenhagen, Oslo, Trondheim, Narvik, Gothenburg, Stockholm, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Rotterdam, Antwerp, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Shanghai. Some of the Inter-Clubs listed in a publication of 1932, such as the Inter-Club in Freetown, hardly existed in reality. Others had been planned but took long time to establish, such as the Inter-Clubs in several Latin American ports or those in London and in Vancouver, others were planned but never established such as the Inter-Clubs in Havana and Vera Cruz (Mexico). Especially the three central Inter-Clubs in Rotterdam, Antwerp and Marseilles were under constant reorganization while the situation in England and the USA oscillated between a list of several established Inter-Clubs in late 1930 and only few of them existing in 1933 (UK: only Liverpool; USA: only New York, San Francisco and New Orleans).

The Inter-Clubs were the nodes of the worldwide communication network of the ISH and were directly under the ISH Secretariat and not subordinated to the national sections. Their key function was to serve as centres of mass agitation. For example, the Inter-Club in Hamburg listed in April 1931 the following activities: 333 ships visited and 5,000 seamen

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156 See further Weiss CoWoPa.
157 (ISH instructions,) An alle Interclubs und sämtliche angeschlossene Organisationen, 4.4.1931, RGASPI 534/5/221, fol. 1-4; Resolution über die Tätigkeit des Hamburger Internationalen Klubs, no date, filed 15.IV.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 155-161; Decisions of the II. Plenary Session of the Executive Committee of the ISH on the Activity and Tasks of the International Seamen’s Clubs, September 1931, RGASPI 534/5/224, fol. 191-203.
158 Report on activities, no author, no date, filed 28.II.34, RGASPI 534/5/236, fol. 171-180. According to the report, IC:s should again be organized in London, Cardiff, North or South Shields as well as in Le Havre, Oran and Dunkirk.
159 Draft Decision: Basic Principles, no date (c:a 1930), RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 81-84.
visited the club. The club organized 15 large gatherings, 5 information evenings, 25 concerts, 18 sport events, 9 leisure evenings as well as one legal and one illegal demonstration. However, as noted above, the activities of the Inter-Clubs were constantly reorganized. In Hamburg, for example, 4-weeks special training courses for Anglophone, Scandinavian and ‘Negro’ seamen were introduced in 1932.

The clandestine network: The Ship Cells

If the International Seamen’s Clubs were the backbone of the ISH, then the ship cells were its core units. Albert Walter was claimed to have established a card index listing all ships with ISH cells but its whereabouts today are not known – the German police was never able to confiscate it but, seemingly, it was never transferred to Moscow either.

The most reliable cells included those on board German merchant ships although their activities became increasingly constrained since 1929 due to the increased activity of the Nazi seamen organization. Seamen who were known to be communists were side-stepped and not hired by the shipowners. Walter’s network on board the German merchant fleet was shrinking and he was urged to establish an international communications network that was capable to take actions in case of a crisis.

The loss of cells and contact persons on board German ships was counter-weighted by an increasing amount of cells on other nations ships. While the Norwegian, Danish and Dutch cells continued to be well-functioning during the early 1930s, the infiltration among the crew members on British ships was more difficult especially due to the weak performance of the SMM and the ISH in the United Kingdom. At first, a perfect basis for work on British ships, especially among the Lascars, was Hamburg and Antwerp. However, the German police

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160 ISH MR April 1931, RGASPI 534/5/221, fol. 57-63.
162 An account on the operations of a ship cell is provided by Hartmut Rübner, ‘Das Bordzellenbuch des Dampfers BOCKENHEIM’, Archiv für die Geschichte des Widerstandes und der Arbeit 17 (2003), pp. 131-150.
164 Valtin 1941, p. 214.
uncovered this clandestine channel of communication between Europe and India already in 1929.\textsuperscript{165} The reorganization of the Inter-Club in Hamburg in 1930 resulted in a vitalization and diversification of Albert Walter’s communications network. The key cornerstone in the new tactics was at first to focus on Chinese and Japanese crew members.\textsuperscript{166} Soon Walter boasted of having established numerous new cells and secured direct communications with China,\textsuperscript{167} and by the end of 1930 he informed Moscow that the establishment of a new network connecting the ISH Secretariat and the national sections and communications centres was making good progress.\textsuperscript{168} Work among ‘Negro’ seamen was added to the obligations of the Inter-Club in Hamburg after the establishment of the headquarters of the ITUCNW in the ISH-building in November 1930. With fairly good result: within a few months, Ford had established about a dozen cells on British ships.\textsuperscript{169}

However, Hamburg was never a major hub for work among ‘Negro’ seamen and had ceased by the end of 1931. A new change in tactics was planned in March 1932 but never fulfilled as George Padmore, the new secretary of the ITUCNW, was busy in establishing his own global network.\textsuperscript{170} The Chinese Comrade who worked for the colonial section, on the other hand, was making good progress and had expanded his sphere of influence to include activities in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Antwerp, London, the USA and the West Indies.\textsuperscript{171}

Nevertheless, communications between Hamburg and the Pacific rim remained problematic. Both the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in San Francisco and the Pan-Pacific Secretariat of the ISH in Vladivostok had failed to establish extensive links connecting the Pacific ports, and especially their work among Asian sailors had been weak.\textsuperscript{172} Consequently, communications between Hamburg and the sections in East and South-East

\textsuperscript{165} P.F. 41314, 18.3.29, BNA KV 2/1799 Albert Walter, personal file.
\textsuperscript{166} IHBS MR January 1930, IHBS MR March 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 10-12, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{167} Bericht über die Arbeit unter den chinesischen Seeleuten, 1-31.3.1930 & 3-28.4.1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 36, 37.
\textsuperscript{168} ISH MR November 1930, RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 45-47.
\textsuperscript{169} See further Weiss CoWoPa.
\textsuperscript{170} Adolf, Walter, Stein (signed), Vorschläge zur Stärkung der organisatorischen Arbeit der ISH, 3.3.1932, RGASPI 534/5/230, fol. 52-55. On Padmore’s activities, see Weiss CoWoPa.
\textsuperscript{171} Walter, Kurzer Bericht des chinesischen Mitarbeiters im Inter-Club Hamburg, 12.11.1932, RGASPI 534/5/231, fol. 72.
Asia were difficult to operate and Walter instructed the comrades in Vladivostok and San Francisco to do their utmost in establishing secure connections.\footnote{Instructions from Walter to the American Bureau of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in San Francisco, 9.11.1932; Instructions from Walter to the Secretary of the ISH Section in Vladivostok, 18.11.1932, RGASPI 534/5/235, fol. 107, 131-132.}

**Hamburg – Copenhagen: The ISH in the shadow of global politics**

Although Albert Walter and Adolf Schelley run the daily operations of the ISH, strategic and tactical planning had to be organized at sessions of the Executive Committee. While the first session of the Executive Committee in October 1930 mainly concentrated on launching the newly established platform,\footnote{Bericht über die Exekutive-Sitzung der ISH, 3.10.1930, RGASPI 534/5/219, fol. 6-9.} its second session in September 1931 included a lengthy discussion about the progress of work and closed with a call to organize an international congress of seamen and dockers.\footnote{Zweite Plenartagung der Exekutive der ISH, 10-12.9.1931, RGASPI 534/5/224, fol. 1-190.} The date for the congress was set to the latter half of May 1932 and it was to convene in Copenhagen.\footnote{Instruktionen für die Kommission zur Leitung des Internationalen Kongresses der ISH, Vertraulich, 11.5.1932, RGASPI 534/5/232, fol. 33-35.}

Back in Moscow the RILU Budget Commission prepared an outline for the congress. Funds were needed to cover for 250 delegates to be invited for 5 days, and an additional 100 participants for 8 days. In total about 20,000 USD were budgeted to cover for the expenses of a total of 296 delegates.\footnote{Kostenvorschlag zum 1. Weltkongress der ISH, RGASPI 534/8/157, fol. 192.} Nevertheless, the RILU Secretariat also calculated with the possibility of a negative reply from the Danish authorities and urged the organizers to prepare an alternative plan if Copenhagen turned out to be impossible. Most important, the Secretariat underlined, was the legality of the congress: an illegal event was under no circumstances to be preferred.\footnote{See §19, Instruktionen für die Kommission zur Leitung des Internationalen Kongresses der ISH, 11.5.1932, RGASPI 534/5/232, fol. 35.}

Not surprisingly, the Danish authorities rejected the application of the ISH. The organizers then had to find a replacement and in the end managed to convince the local authorities in Altona, one of Hamburg’s suburbs but administratively part of Prussia, to give their backing for the venue.\footnote{Kongress der ISH, RGASPI 534/5/232, fol. 75-76.} Despite police harassment and all sorts of difficulties, some
173 delegates from 30 nations finally made it to Altona where the Congress convened from the 21st to the 24th of May 1932.\textsuperscript{180} The Congress was a typical masquerade by the Comintern: although the overwhelming majority of the delegates were non-communist, the communists “fraction” or minority held a tight control over every meeting.\textsuperscript{181} In public, the congress downplayed the revolutionary aim of the ISH and the organizers were strictly ordered to make sure that the vocabulary of the proclamations and presentations did not arouse the suspicion of the police.\textsuperscript{182}

A central theme discussed at the plenary sessions concerned living conditions onboard and demands for seven-hour working days, unjust working conditions and demands for a just salary. Another theme was the right to form unions and the right to strike onboard on ships, their techniques and under what circumstances one was to pursue a certain tactic. A third general theme was what positions were the seamen to take in a future conflict or even war; a fourth theme was the potential of the radicals for gaining more influence in unions that were controlled by the Social Democrats. On the other hand, far away from the public, meetings and conferences of various commissions were held behind the scenes where only the inner circle of the communists and trusted activists participated.\textsuperscript{183} While Krebs in his over-critical autobiography presented the Congress as a big fake,\textsuperscript{184} Richard Jensen regarded it as the peak of the revolutionary waterfront.\textsuperscript{185} Nevertheless, an immediate internal report was highly critical about the outcome of the Congress, not least about the limited participation from the colonies.\textsuperscript{186}

If the year 1932 was marked by the public demonstration of the ISH at its World Congress and heralded the global fight for decent working conditions, 8-hour working days and against cuts in wages which shipowners in every country were attempting as well as unified actions against war preparations, the following years witnessed the weaknesses of the

\textsuperscript{180} (ISH), \textit{De internationale Søtransportarbejderes Verdens-Enhedskongres og dens Beslutninger!}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{181} Valtin 1941, pp. 313-314.
\textsuperscript{182} §14, Instruktionen für die Kommission zur Leitung des Internationalen Kongresses der ISH, 11.5.1932, RGASPI 534/5/232, fol. 35.
\textsuperscript{183} Nørregaard 1975, pp. 94-95; Eiber 2000, pp. 183-184.
\textsuperscript{184} Valtin 1941, pp. 314-316.
\textsuperscript{185} Jensen 1957; Nørregaard 1975, pp. 94-95.
\textsuperscript{186} Kongress der ISH, RGASPI 534/5/232, fol. 75-76. The American, English and Spanish delegations, in particular, were criticized for their weak performance at the Congress whereas the German organizers were blamed for the belated preparations of the venue.
organisation. The ISH failed both in terms of counteracting the Nazi onslaught in Germany as well as in being a global player in national strikes and a counter-force to the ITF.

The 1932 World Congress was conducted in the shadows of the political fragmentation and unrest in Germany and the intensification of the worldwide economic depression. For the Bolshevik analytics, the economic and political instability were clear signs of the breakdown of the capitalist system and that the ‘class-against-class’-tactics was to be fully implemented. Thus, neither the ISH nor its national sections saw the reformist organizations, the ITF and its reformist national unions, as its main enemies. Any loss in a national strike – such as the German 1931 October strike – was interpreted as a betrayal of the ‘Social Fascist’ unions and their leadership. Little time was spent in a critical reflection of the shortcomings of its own tactics and strategies. Instead, the early 1930s were marked by a restless jumping from one campaign to another.\(^{187}\)

Nevertheless, the ISH leadership was not blind and unable to read the signs of the hour in Germany. According to Jensen, the inner circle of the ISH discussed already at the World Congress at a closed meeting the need to prepare for underground existence and operations in Germany. In case of being declared illegal by the German authorities, the Secretariat was to be moved to Copenhagen.\(^{188}\) In December 1932, Albert Walter called for a session of the Extended Bureau of the Executive Committee to be held in Copenhagen in early January 1933.\(^{189}\) If the critical situation in Germany and the preparations for the transfer of the ISH Secretariat were discussed at the meeting Copenhagen is not known.

Nevertheless, Walter and the comrades in Hamburg had taken precautions for the worst case. When the Nazis and the German police started its crackdown on the communists in February, the ISH Secretariat had already started to distribute its documents and archive in safe places all over Hamburg. The ISH-building was empty when the police raided it on the 6\(^{\text{th}}\) of March 1933. Over the following weeks, the ISH material as well as the last transfer of money from Moscow were moved in small instalments to Copenhagen where Richard Jensen organized the new headquarters of the ISH in the office building Vesterport at Vesterbrogade, camouflaged as the office of the engineering company A. Selvo & Co.\(^{190}\)

\(^{187}\) Eiber 2000.
\(^{188}\) Nørgaard 1975, p. 95, 97.
\(^{189}\) Letter from Albert Walter to ‘Werte Genossen’, 2.12.2012, RGASPI 534/5/231, fol. 78-81
The Nazi takeover was a severe blow to the ISH as its largest and hitherto most efficient unit, the EV, had to operate outside Germany as all communist activities were declared illegal by early March 1933. The closure of the ISH Secretariat and Inter-Club in Hamburg meant that the Comintern’s global communication network was seriously damaged as all operations via Germany had come to a standstill. Leading members of the ISH, EV and other communist organizations as well as the KPD were arrested by the police and sent to concentration camps, among them Albert Walter and Edgar André. But were structures so seriously damaged that the network collapsed?

Activities in Copenhagen were quickly back to ‘normal’. Most of its inner circle, including Adolf Schelley, Gustav Langfors and Ernst Wollweber, had been able to escape to Denmark and together with Richard Jensen and Richard Last (or Rast) constituted thereafter the ISH Secretariat, whereas Hermann Knüfken was sent to Rotterdam to organize illegal activities in Germany. As in Hamburg, the ISH Secretariat received financial support from Moscow; according to Knüfken, the monthly subsidies amounted to 10,000 Reichsmark. Although the ISH Secretariat planned to continue its global operations, it soon had to realize that major structural changes were necessary as its economic resources were extremely low. As a consequence, the technical instructors were abolished and the subsidies to the national sections as well as the financial support to strikers and strike campaigns had to be cancelled.

The inability of the ISH to fully engage and monitor national strikes became evident during the seamen’s strikes in Sweden and Finland in 1933. In both cases, the ISH played a bizarre role. In Sweden, the ISH Secretariat was able to send an instructor to monitor the strike activities of the RFO, although with little success. In Finland, the ISH Secretariat was not even informed about the plans of the Finnish Seamen’s Union to start a strike and

Also in Copenhagen was the new headquarters of the WEB, the West European Bureau of the Comintern, the transfer of which from Berlin to Copenhagen had been organized by Wollweber. Three ISH-activists were linked to the WEB bureau: Richard Jensen, who was in charge of its financial section, Michel Avatin, who was in charge of its security apparat, and Wollweber, who was in charge of its organisation apparat. The fourth – political – section was claimed to be headed by the Finn Otto V. Kuusinen (Dankaart and van Doorslaer 1979). However, according to Nørgaard, there is no evidence that Kuusinen ever headed his unit in Copenhagen (Nørgaard 1975, p. 136).

Report by Adolf on the work of the ISH Secretariat in Copenhagen, 10.5.1933, RGASPI 534/5/236, fol. 53-54.
BNA KV2/2158, 26.7.33.
Jensen and Adolf, Umstellung des ISH-Budgets, no date, (c:a August 1933), RGASPI 534/5/236, fol. 81-85.
therefore upheld at first a negative stance towards the Finnish strike.\textsuperscript{196} Too late did the ISH change its position in the Finnish case and called for an intensified blockade of Finnish ships.\textsuperscript{197} Not surprisingly, therefore, neither the ISH nor the underground Finnish organizations or the Swedish RFO were in no position to challenge the position of the Reformists in the unions.\textsuperscript{198}

Even more problematic than the meagre performance of the ISH in the Nordic strikes was the fact that its global system was difficult to operate from Copenhagen. The town itself was not an international port and communications with the various national sections were more difficult to monitor than from Hamburg. As a consequence, those national sections that were still in operation and not dependent on ISH subsidies, such as the MWIU, started to sever its ties from the ISH centre – not least due to the fact that the comrades in Copenhagen had not sent any instructions for months.\textsuperscript{199} Thus, the ISH Secretariat received information about the 1934 harbour strike in San Francisco only through the RILU!\textsuperscript{200} In fact, even the connections to Moscow were not functioning well and Adolf Schelley complained in October 1933 not to have received any literature from Moscow to be distributed to the Inter-Clubs for the last three months.\textsuperscript{201}

Another disappointment was the disturbing news about the activities of Albert Walter who had been released by the police in July 1934. His disloyal behaviour was noted already while he was in concentration camp, and when he witnessed in a trial against communist comrades, it was proven that he had become a renegade.\textsuperscript{202} Consequently, he was excluded from the ISH.\textsuperscript{203}

The Executive Committee made two attempts to reorganize the operations of the ISH. As the Secretariat, at first, did not function legally in Copenhagen – and the Illegal Secretariat had still to be reactivated – the first secret meeting was organized in connection with the World Congress against War and Fascism in Paris in June 1933.\textsuperscript{204} The second secret

\textsuperscript{196} Soukola 2003, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{197} ISH Secretariat, Instructions regarding the Finnish Seamen’s strike, 4.5.1933, RGASPI 534/5/236, fol. 55.
\textsuperscript{199} (Copy) Letter from the MWIU to Richard Jensen, no date, filed 22.XI.1933, RGASPI 534/5/236, fol. 126.
\textsuperscript{200} (Copy) Letter from George [Mink?] to the RILU Secretariat, filed 7.VII.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 171-172.
\textsuperscript{201} Adolf and Schmidt (signed) to ’Liebe Freunde’, 14.10.1933, RGASPI 534/5/236, fol. 120.
\textsuperscript{202} Report regarding Albert Walter’s behaviour, 2.8.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 212-213.
\textsuperscript{203} Letter from Adolf Schelley, 14.7.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 207.
\textsuperscript{204} CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, p. 5.
gathering took place one year later in Antwerp.\textsuperscript{205} The outcome was that the ‘legal’ Secretariat of the ISH would be reorganized and to be moved to Paris while the ‘illegal’ Secretariat, headed by Adolf Schelley, was to be placed in R[otterdam].\textsuperscript{206}

The liquidation of the radical waterfront

An attempt to revitalize the operations of the ISH was outlined at the same time as the Comintern and the RILU had started to redefine the ‘Class-Against-Class’-tactics in 1934. The outcome of this process was an ill-defined attempt to introduce the return to the united front-strategies. While such tactics were implemented in France and Spain already in 1934, they received official backing first at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935.

The unclear general political strategy caused much confusion among the rank-and-file members in the various communist organisations, including the ISH. Already in late 1934, the ISH Secretariat had prepared statements calling for opening discussions with the ITF and for united actions of the national unions in Denmark and France.\textsuperscript{207} In November 1934, a confidential circular letter was sent to the leadership of the national sections, calling them to submit proposals for a united front with the ITF.\textsuperscript{208} In December, the decision was made in Moscow that the ISH Secretariat was to write an open letter to the ITF, to call for a world congress of the ISH and last, but not least, to move the Illegal Secretariat from Rotterdam to France.\textsuperscript{209}

The plans of Moscow and the comrades at the ISH Secretariat for a ‘world unified front’ together with the ITF never materialized. Already in mid-December 1934, the ITF responded negatively to the invitation of the ISH Secretariat.\textsuperscript{210} The ISH Secretariat – at this

\textsuperscript{205} S.I.S. report, 20.6.1934, BNA KV2/2158.
\textsuperscript{208} Confidential letter to the leading functionaries of the ISH sections, 8.11.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 271-274
\textsuperscript{209} Vorschläge der Kommission über die Arbeit der ISH, 2.12.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 293.
\textsuperscript{210} Letter to the RILU Executive Bureau, 12.12.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 300.
time referred to the Copenhagen Committee as it had not yet moved to Paris – tried in vain to call for a united front in letters and declarations in late 1934 and 1935.\(^{211}\)

The weak – if not non-existent – position of the ISH was finally revealed during the campaign against the Italian aggression and war against Ethiopia in 1935. While the ISH Secretariat was quick in responding to the call to organize a boycott against Italian ships and even tried to mobilize a world-wide anti-war and ‘Hands-off Abyssinia’ campaign, its attempt to enlist the ITF for unified actions failed miserably. At first, the ITF Secretariat did not even bother to respond to the calls of the ISH, and after several futile attempts, the ITF declined to cooperate with the ISH.\(^{212}\)

Even more depressing must have been the realization of the Illegal Secretariat of the ISH that there was no point to summarize a world congress in 1935.\(^{213}\) Instead, it was decided in Moscow that the Copenhagen Committee was to be reorganized as an opposition group within the ITF (“Oppositionsbewegung innerhalb der ITF”).\(^{214}\) However, such plans met stiff critique among the rank-and-file members of ISH.\(^{215}\) Nevertheless, an enlarged plenum of the ISH Executive Committee convened in Paris in May 1935 to discuss the reorganization of the ISH.\(^{216}\) It was to be the last organized gathering of the ISH leadership. Interestingly, although the plenum welcomed the idea of amalgamating the ISH with the ITF, the illegal structures of the ISH were not to be affected of the fusion.\(^{217}\) Instead, these structures were to be used by Ernst Wollweber to establish his own parallel organization, the so-called Anti-Fascist League.\(^{218}\)

The discussions with the ITF ended in a cul-de-sac. In the mind of the ITF, the ISH had by 1935 outplayed its role, if it ever had any. This was also the conclusion of an internal assessment report on the activities of the ISH in October 1935. By that time, there existed no

\(^{211}\) Deklaration der ISH zur Arbeitsbeschäftigungsaktionen der Seeleute und Hafenarbeiter, 23.12.1934; Circular letter [in German] on the need to establish a united front, no date [c:a December 1934], RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 327; (Draft) Letter to the Secretariat of the ITF, 19.2.1935, RGASPI 534/5/242, fol. 31-32.

\(^{212}\) Letter of Tillon to Comrade Jusofowitch, 11.10.1935 & 12.10.1935, and mimeographed pamphlet: For the Unity of the Transport Workers in the Struggle Against War – Correspondence between the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH) and the International Transport-Workers’ Federation (ITF) regarding Mussolini’s attack on Abyssinia, RGASPI 534/5/243, fol. 116-118, 173-177.

\(^{213}\) Letter from ‘Georges’ to the RILU, 26.3.1935, RGASPI 534/5/242, fol. 94.


\(^{215}\) Eiber 2000, p. 673, 690.


sections anymore in Germany, Canada and the USA. The Spanish and Danish unions were about to merge with the reformist unions. On the other hand, there was large space for activities outside Europe and North America and the ISH was urged to concentrate on establishing a truly global front by organizing regional conferences for the Pacific, Africa and Latin America. Yet, such concepts were but chimeras. Since 1933, the former global network was barely functioning. Most of the Inter-Clubs, apart from those in Marseilles, Rouen, Dunkirk, Rotterdam, New York, Copenhagen, Esbjerg and Stockholm, did not exist anymore due to the lack of financial support from the ISH Secretariat.

The final countdown of the ISH is not even documented. It seems that the ISH Secretariat ceased to be in operation by mid-1936. Adolf Schelley, who had supported the ‘popular front-tactics’, was called to Moscow where he was charged for being a ‘Trotskyist’ and a Polish spy and sentenced to death. Thereafter, the ISH existed only on paper and its fate was decided by the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, resulting in the liquidation of the organization on the 27th of May 1937.

Postscript: A radical trade union platform or an agglomeration of subversive cells?

So far, the outline has highlighted the syndicalist aspect of the short history of the ISH. While the in retrospect romantic description of an agglomeration of subversive cells connection radicals and communists all over the world does depict one aspect of the ISH, such activities were but a secondary objective of the organization. One finds few traces of Albert Walter’s clandestine worldwide communications network or any subversive operations in his or Adolf Schelleys correspondence with the RILU and Comintern headquarters in Moscow. Although this fact certainly does not refute any claims of clandestine activities, its seems that such operations were either not planned in and directed from Hamburg or were discussed in letters that were not addressed to the RILU headquarters but that of the OMS and the GPU/NKVD.

Although the ISH failed in establishing itself as a radical syndicalist platform, the main blame for its disintegration was the unclear agenda of the Comintern. Established in

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220 Bericht über die Internationalen Seeleute-Klubs und einige Vorschläge zu ihrer weiteren Tätigkeit, 31.3.1936, RGASPI 534/5/245, fol. 107-117.
221 Nørgaard 1975, p. 137.
222 Protokoll (A) Nr 155 zusammengestellt auf Grund fliegender Abstimmung unter Mitgliedern des Sekretariats des EKKI am 27.6.1937, RGASPI 495/18/1206.
opposition to the ITF, the change to the ‘Popular Front’-policy of the Comintern in 1935 and
the idea of merging the RILU with the Amsterdam International was in effect the deathblow of any of the organizations established during the Third Period.

However, from the perspective of the ISH having established a worldwide communications network, the overall assessment of the ISH is somewhat different. At its heydays during the early 1930s, especially from 1931 to 1933, the ISH was capable to support strikes and radical syndicalist activities on a global scale. Although none of these activities were successful in terms of winning a strike or influencing the majority of the marine workers, the ISH and its sections rather than the ITF and the reformed syndicalist unions raised the call of anticolonial and anti-imperial actions, not least their largely forgotten attempts to call for global boycotts and actions against the Japanese invasion of Manchuria 1931 and the Italian aggression against Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935. However, many of these actions are little known and further research is needed to establish a detailed account of the global outreach of the ISH during these years.

Although the ISH did not exist anymore by 1936, some of its ship-cells were still functioning and were used for the transfer of illegal literature, agents and funds. Also, it was by operating via the remnants of the ISH network that Ernst Wollweber was to establish his sabotage organization in 1935, termed ‘Organization against fascism and in support of the USSR’ but usually referred to as the Wollweber League or Wollweber-group. All of the key members of his group were former ISH functionaries. The headquarters of the organization was in Oslo from where it operated in several European bases, including the still existing Inter-Clubs and other cells in Scandinavia, the Baltic countries, Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands. After its first act of sabotage in 1936, the group attracted the attention of the Gestapo. In 1937, the Gestapo believed that Wollweber’s group was part of the ISH, perhaps due to Richard Krebs’ reports…

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223 See further Borgersrud 1994.