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## **Hamburg, Rothesoodstrasse 8 – From a Global Space to a Non-place (post-print version)**

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### **Introduction**

Rothesoodstrasse is a small street situated in the Venusberg area, one of Hamburg's former notorious working class and harbour districts, only a few steps from St. Pauli Piers. Today, the street is lined with residential buildings, some built in the historicist style of the late nineteenth century, others were erected after the Second World War. If you would stop in front of house number 8, you would see a typical façade of a 4-storey post-war building. The anonymity of the site is telling: the historical past is absent and for anyone who does not live in the house, the site is a non-place, a spot with no memory nor meaning. Nevertheless, before the Bomb War and destruction of Hamburg in 1943, a late nineteenth-century building stood at the premises. In 1924, the building had been bought by a certain Albert Walter. This person was one of the leading persons in the Communist agitation and propaganda work among seamen and harbour worker. The address 8, Rothesoodstrasse were the premises for his world-wide communication network. Officially, it housed the Hamburg Port Bureau and International Seamen's Club or Interclub. From 1930, the headquarters of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers as well as those of the International Trade Union of Negro Workers, two radical umbrella organizations that had been established by the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU, also known as Profintern) were located in the same building.

The objective of this chapter is to use the site (8, Rothesoodstrasse) as a lens for a spatial analysis of radical transnational solidarity during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Focus will be on activities planned and orchestrated in the building as well as on the possibilities and constraints that affected the operations in Hamburg. A similar approach was used by Constance Margain in her 'multi scalar' analysis of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH). Magain identified three operational levels. At the local level, there were the Interclubs which were connected at a national level to national trade union sections or communist parties while at a global level, the Interclubs were linked to the RILU and the Comintern in Moscow.<sup>1</sup> However, the organizational structure of the ISH was much more complicated as it was not only multi scalar but also of a multidimensional character. Established as an umbrella

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<sup>1</sup> Constance Margain, "The International Union of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH) 1930–1937: Interclubs and transnational aspects", *Twentieth Century Communism* 8 (2015) 8, pp. 133–144.

organisation for radical, i.e., Communist-controlled or dominated labour unions, it was the ambition of the ISH to have national sections in all countries in the world. In theory, a national union of maritime workers would cut its ties with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and vote for joining the ISH. In praxis, however, apart from the Danish stokers' union, this was unrealistic as the Communists never constituted a majority in the various national unions and the leadership of the unions was usually firmly in the hands of the Reformist, Socialist and/or Syndicalist majority. Also, the Interclubs were not projected to be part of the national unions but under operational surveillance of the ISH International Secretariat in Hamburg. Thus, the operations of the Communists among seamen and harbour workers applied a dual structure. The national sections were to establish themselves as counterparts to the Reformist/Socialist/Syndicalist-dominated unions in each country. Their central unit for agitation and propaganda were the Communist-led cells on board the ships and in the harbours. On the other hand, the Interclubs, as will be outlined in the first part of the chapter, were to focus on work among foreign seamen.<sup>2</sup>

A multi scalar analysis of the activities that evolved from 8, Rothesoodstrasse does not necessarily include the national level. This is due to the headquarters of the German national section, the Einheitsverband der Seefahrer, Hafenarbeiter und Binnenschiffer, not being located at 8, Rothesoodstrasse but at 19/20, Kohlhöfen in the Gängeviertel quarters, close to the Hamburg headquarters of the German Communist Party. The Einheitsverband, in turn, was the maritime unit of the German Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition (Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition, RGO). Consequently, the RGO and, by extension, the German Communist Party tried as much as possible to monitor and supervise the activities of the Einheitsverband, especially via the so-called Communist fraction within the union. However, influencing and steering trade union activities among seamen and harbour workers through the Party was never an easy task, especially due to the usually earlier syndicalist background of seamen. Consequently, the leadership of the Einheitsverband, especially its leader Ernst Wollweber, highlighted their independence from the Party and the RGO by consolidating a political space of their own.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as will be discussed in the second part of the paper, the

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<sup>2</sup> Holger Weiss, "The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers – A Radical Global Labour Union of the Waterfront or a Subversive World-Wide Web?", in: Holger Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity. Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017, pp. 256–317.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Eiber, *Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Hansestadt Hamburg in den Jahren 1929 bis 1939. Werftarbeiter, Hafenarbeiter und Seeleute: Konformität, Opposition, Widerstand*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000, pp. 186–188.

leadership at the ISH International Secretariat, especially ISH President George Hardy and ISH Secretary Albert Walter, had few means at their disposal to interfere in the activities of the national sections including the German one.

Nevertheless, as will be discussed in the third part of the paper, 8, Rothesoodstrasse emerged as a global space not least through the activities of the ISH Secretariat and the International Trade Union of Negro Workers. In theory, the two units operated independently of each other. In praxis, their activities overlapped which was to cause friction between the leading figures of the two units. Both organizations operated within two circuits, the first one being that in control of the RILU and Comintern Apparatus based in Moscow and Berlin, the second one being the global communication network which each of the organisation was capable to establish and tried to monitor and direct from its headquarters in Hamburg. Two parallel organisational hierarchies existed; in the first circuit, the ISH and the ITUCNW were at the bottom-end of the of the RILU/Comintern Apparatus whereas in the second circuit, the secretariats of both organizations were in the centre of their respective global network.

The theoretical perspective for analysing 8, Rothesoodstrasse as a site of ‘the global in the local-cum-local in the global’ is inspired by a modified TPSN framework.<sup>4</sup> The activities in the building targeted and operated at *places* and *scales*. The Interclub focused on foreign seamen visiting Hamburg, thus the activists of the Club had to visit the ships in the harbour and tried to invite crew members to come to the Club. The ISH sought to coordinate international campaigns in support of national strikes whereas the ITUCNW envisioned itself as the spearhead of a radical, anticolonial and anti-imperialist movement for ‘Black toilers’ in the African Atlantic. Both the ISH and the ITUCNW operated as a *network* between individuals rather than groups or organizations. Last, but not least, *territory* was a constrain but also a possibility. Communist and anticolonial activities were closely monitored if not prohibited by national governments. In the Hamburg area, para-military units of the Communists battered with those of the Social Democrats or the National Socialists and the police, usually resulting in bloody clashes, among others the ‘Battle at the Round Mountain’ (Schlacht am Runden

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<sup>4</sup> See further B. Jessop, N. Brenner and M.R. Jones, “Theorizing socio-spatial relations”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008) 3, pp. 389–401. Equally inspiring are the discussion about ‘moderate relationalism’ and ‘phase space’ in Martin Jones, “Phase space: geography, relational thinking, and beyond”, *Progress in Human Geography* 33 (2009) 4, pp. 487–506.

Berge) in Geesthacht in 1927 or the ‘Bloody Sunday’ in Altona in 1932.<sup>5</sup> In some of the working-class areas of Hamburg, such as the Gängeviertel of Hamburg Neustadt, Barmbek or Schiffbek, the Communists controlled the local political space and were able to create ‘free-zones’ dominated by the Party and its organizations.<sup>6</sup> Depicted as ‘Little Moscows’ and known for their ‘small-place communism and counter-communities’, they existed on several places in inter-war Western Europe.<sup>7</sup>

### **Background: The ‘Third Period’ and the ‘Class-Against-Class’ Tactic**

The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH) was a short-lived transnational radical umbrella organisation for Communist-dominated/controlled trade unions of maritime transport workers established in 1930 during the ‘Third Period’ of the Communist International (Comintern). Officially presented as a radical and 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, originally established as the International Propaganda Committee of Transport Workers in 1922 and reorganized and renamed in 1928), and was financed through subsidies from Moscow. Starting with the Fourth World Congress of the RILU in July 1928, the Comintern shifted to the ‘Class-Against-Class’ tactic which was officially proclaimed at the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in August 1928. The Comintern’s reading of the current situation was that the class struggle was reaching a new phase and a new wave of revolutionary activity was expected. 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.<sup>8</sup>

The change in strategy of the RILU signalled the break with the Communists’ previous attempts to co-operate with reformist elements within the trade unions. The ISH’s aim was to challenge

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf-Rüdiger Busch (Hrsg.), *„Klein-Moskau“ – Geesthacht 1919–1933*, Münster: Lit Verlag, 1999; Joachim C. Häberlein, “Scope for Agency and Political Options. The German Working-Class Movement and the Rise of Nazism”, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14 (2013) 3, pp. 377–394.

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Pape and Leonie Barghorn, “Klein Moskau wurde die Gegend genannt” – Nachbarschaft und Politik im Hamburger Gängeviertel, available at [asg-hh.de/download.html?&filename=g\\_ngeviertel...pdf](http://asg-hh.de/download.html?&filename=g_ngeviertel...pdf) (checked 20.8.2017).

<sup>7</sup> Ad Knotter, ““Little Moscows” in Western Europe: The Ecology of Small-Place Communism”, *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011) 3, pp. 475–510; Kevin Morgan, “Bastions, black spots and other variations in and beyond the specificities of the Little Moscow”, *Twentieth Century Communism* 5 (2013) 5, pp. 193–209.

<sup>8</sup> See further Rainer Tosstorff, *Profintern. Die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale 1920–1937*, Paderborn: Schoenigh, 2004; J. Manley, “Moscow Rules? ‘Red’ Unionism and ‘Class Against Class’ in Britain, Canada and the United States, 1928 – 1935”, *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (2005), p. 23.

the hegemony of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) as well as the various national waterfront labour unions. 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 main idea was to transform existing opposition groups into independent radical unions and to establish independent radical platforms for these organisations. This new strategy focused instead on the establishment of revolutionary trade unions and would take an extremely hostile stand towards reformist unions and the Social Democratic parties, branding them as 'social fascists'.<sup>9</sup>

However, as Dieter Nelles has outlined in his study on the ITF, 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 organised 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 work force.<sup>10</sup> Also, as Peter Cole and David Featherstone have underlined, apart from the Marine Transport Workers' Industrial Union, the official maritime trade unions in the USA, Britain and elsewhere were preeminently exclusionary and segregationist.<sup>11</sup> Similar calls for multiracial spaces and organisations by ISH activists faced similar problems in the early 1930s.<sup>12</sup>

## **Part I. Local Nodes in a Global Network: The International Seamen's Clubs**

The first International Seamen's Club had been established in Leningrad in 1922. It was located at 15, Prospect Ogorodnikova had solely directed its activities towards foreign seamen that had arrived in the port. The Interclub was located in an old palace of the Russian nobility surrounded

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<sup>9</sup> Tosstorff, *Profintern*, pp. 657–661.

<sup>10</sup> Dieter Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität. Die Internationale Transportarbeiter-Föderation (ITF) im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2001. On the ITF, see further Bob Reinalda (ed.), *The International Transport-Workers Federation 1914–1945. The Edo Fimmen Years*, Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> See further Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007, and David Featherstone, *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: The Making of Counter-Global Networks*, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, pp. 124–125.

<sup>12</sup> See also David Featherstone, "Maritime Labour and Subaltern Geographies of Internationalism: Black Internationalist Seafarers' Organising in the Interwar Period", *Political Geography* 49 (2015), pp. 7–16. For a critical discussion on local reactions of the instructions from Moscow, see Joachim C. Häberlein, "Between global aspirations and local realities: the global dimensions of interwar communism", *Journal of Global History* 7 (2012) 3, pp. 415–437.

by a large garden. Although the interior of the palace witnessed of its former grandeur, it had been transformed into a political space by the Bolsheviks by placing a large Bronze statue of Lenin in the vestibule. Large signposts on the doors oriented a visiting seamen to a specific section, such as the German, French, Anglo-American, Scandinavian or Colonial, which were in charge of work among various national seamen. Other rooms contained a library, a gym and a large dining hall.<sup>13</sup> One year later, a similar club was established in Vladivostok followed by others in most all major Soviet ports.

However, as direct connections with Soviet Russia were limited during the early part of the 1920s and the Soviet Interclubs had been branded by Western shipowners and government authorities as sources of the Bolshevik pest, the International Propaganda Committee of Transport Workers decided to move its center of activity among seamen and harbour workers to Hamburg and other ports where Communist activities were legal and to establish so-called Port Bureaus which were to serve as centres for communication and information.<sup>14</sup> The plan was to establish centres in the most important ports of the world, i.e., in New York, San Francisco, Sydney, Liverpool, Hamburg, Buenos Aires and Marseilles.<sup>15</sup> The person in charge of this operation was Albert Walter (1885–1980), an ex-seaman who was one of the leaders of the German maritime union, the Deutscher Schiffahrtsbund, which had joined the RILU in 1922.<sup>16</sup> Walter was thereafter commissioned by RILU President Alexander Losovsky to develop the IPC Transport into a global platform.<sup>17</sup> 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 Hamburg's waterfront, which became the headquarters of the Hamburg Port Bureau. Officially, Port Bureau activities were camouflaged under the cover of visiting locales for harbour workers and visiting seamen, the Interclub. From here, he developed his global communication network.<sup>18</sup> According an advertisement in the Danish journal *Laternen*, there existed six Interclubs outside the Soviet Union in 1927, namely in Hamburg,

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<sup>13</sup> Eröffnung des Internationalen Seemannsklubs in Leningrad, Deutsche Botschaft. Deutsches Generalkonsulat Leningrad, 8.6.1932, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (German Federal Archives) BArchB R1501/20224, fol. 126.

<sup>14</sup> The Most Urgent Task of the International Committee of Propaganda of the Transport Workers, no date [ca 1921], Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), Moscow, 534/5/149, fol. 61–63.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Barker, Proposition for Marine Transport Bureaus, no date [ca 1921], RGASPI 534/5/149, fol. 96–97.

<sup>16</sup> „Walter, Albert Paul“, in: Hermann Weber/Andreas Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten. Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945*, überarbeitete und stark erweiterte Auflage, Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 2008, p. 988.

<sup>17</sup> Hermann Knüfken, *Von Kiel bis Leningrad. Erinnerungen eines revolutionären Matrosen von 1917 bis 1930*, Berlin: BasisDruck, 2008, pp. 210–211.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Valtin, *Out of the Night*, New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1941, pp. 38–39, 103–104.

Bordeaux, Marseilles, Copenhagen, Rotterdam and New York.<sup>19</sup> In early 1930, there existed already 23 Interclubs in various ports outside the Soviet Union,<sup>20</sup> followed by eleven new clubs established in the USA during the second half of the year.<sup>21</sup>

The rationale of an Interclub was its legal and official status. An Interclub could only be established in a location if Communist activity had not been banned and declared illegal by the national authorities. Consequently, a premises that was constantly raided by the police or closed by the local authorities was of little value. Of similar importance was the possibility for Communist activity in the maritime labour unions. Therefore, the objective of the International Propaganda Committee of Transport Workers was to establish so-called International Port Bureaus which together with the Interclubs were to serve as centres for Communist agitation and propaganda among seamen and harbour workers. In addition, their task was to combat the ‘false’ message of the Christian Seamen’s homes and missions and Reformist leadership of the maritime unions as well as to support the maritime workers in their struggle for better working conditions and salaries.<sup>22</sup> Objectives were publicized in magazines and leaflets and were thus known for both the target groups as well as the authorities. For example, the Interclub in Copenhagen published an advertisement in its magazine, *Laternen*, calling class-conscious seamen to visit the Interclub instead of the Christian Seamen’s Missions.<sup>23</sup> The New York Interclub was strategically located close to the Seamen’s Church Institute.<sup>24</sup> Leaflets distributed in the latter premises invited the seamen to visit the Interclub: ”DONT [sic] EAT IN DIRTY STEW POT JOINTS / THE GRUB IS BAD ENOUGH ABOARD SHIP / TRY THE CLEANIEST PLACE ON SOUTH ST. INTERNATIONAL SEAMEN’S CLUB RESTAURANT.”<sup>25</sup>

The Western authorities, the Reformist, Syndicalist and Catholic labour unions as well as the shipowners and Christian Seamen Missions regarded the Interclubs as dangerous ‘counter spaces’ that radicalized seamen and lured them to adopt the Communist credo. Press cuttings

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<sup>19</sup> See list of Interclubs in *Laternen* 2 (1927).

<sup>20</sup> Abschrift. Internationaler Seemannsklub in/Adressen der Internationalen Seemannsklubs, no date [ca. 1930], BArchB R1501/20224, fol. 7

<sup>21</sup> Vernon L. Pedersen, “George Mink, the Marine Workers Industrial Union, and the Comintern in America”, *Labor History* 41 (2000) 3, p. 312.

<sup>22</sup> ”Hampurin merimiesklubi 10-vuotias”, *Majakka* 6 (1932), p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Laternen* 2:6 (1927).

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailors’ Union of the Pacific, 1885–1985*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Seamen’s Church Institute, “Hospital Flyer,” *SCI Digital Archives*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://seamenschurch-archives.org/sci/items/show/1828>.

collected by the German police witness about the fear of these radical establishments or ‘free spaces’ which neither the authorities, the union leadership or the Christian mission were able to control. The Catholic newspaper *Germania* warned its readers that the Interclubs were perilous sites where seamen were radicalized and revolutionized.<sup>26</sup> The IWW magazine *Marine Worker* branded the Interclubs as ‘scratch-a-way-Inn’ which were used by the Communists to ‘lure penniless seamen, especially in the winter months, to come in and partake of watery stew and political propaganda’.<sup>27</sup> The Australian government authorities as well as the national seamen’s union viewed the Interclubs with suspicion and regarded them to be nothing else as the clandestine agitation centres of the RILU: “The Club in Sydney was full of Communist literature and prominence is given to a photograph of Lenin.”<sup>28</sup> In the USA, the syndicalist *Seamen’s Journal* warned its readership that the only task of the Interclubs was “to make use of the world’s seamen as the shock troops for Communism.”<sup>29</sup>

Each Interclub was to contain a library with communist and radical newspapers and journals on display as well as a restaurant or bar where cheap food was served. During the evening, the Interclub staged theatre or film shows or organised other cultural events.<sup>30</sup> More important was its function as a rallying point for radical seamen and communist agitators. According to a report sent to the Swedish Secret Service, the Port Bureaus and Interclubs 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.<sup>31</sup>

The establishment of the ISH in October 1930 resulted in a reorganisation of the activities of the Interclubs and Port Bureaus. The former agitation and propaganda centres of the IPAC Transport were to be transformed and developed into the ‘political-organisational centres’ of seamen and harbour workers. Their main task was mass agitation for the political campaign to strengthen the global outreach of the ISH.<sup>32</sup> The Interclubs were to be monitored and directed by the ISH Secretariat as a means to further effectuate and coordinate their work.<sup>33</sup> In addition,

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<sup>26</sup> “Sowjetpropaganda auf dem Seewege“, *Germania* Nr 5, 7.1.1931.

<sup>27</sup> *Marine Worker*, 15.10.1928, quoted in Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> *Canberra Times*, 3.5.1928.

<sup>29</sup> *Seamen’s Journal*, September 1928, quoted in Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront. Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1990 [1988], p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> Knüfken, *Von Kiel bis Leningrad*, pp. 211–212.

<sup>31</sup> Internationella hamnbyråer, 1.11.1928, UD:s arkiv 1920 års dossiersystem, HP 1459 32D, Den bolsjevikiska rörelsen: Sverige och utlandet, 1927–1928, Swedish National Archives (SNA), Stockholm.

<sup>32</sup> Draft Decision: Basic Principles [of work of the ISH], no date [ca. 1930], RGASPI 534/5/219, 81–84.

<sup>33</sup> (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

a special committee (“bureau”) at the secretariat in Hamburg was put in charge to produce information and propaganda material for the Interclubs, such as the ISH-bulletin which was published in several languages and directed to the functionaries of the Interclubs.<sup>34</sup> Every Interclub was to be divided into national sections, each of them to concentrate on work among seamen from their home countries or language group.<sup>35</sup> In praxis, however, only the larger Interclubs listed several sections.

### **The Hamburg Interclub – place, network and territory**

Albert Walter was successful in the establishment of a global communication network by making use of the Hamburg Interclub. His strategy had been to establish small cells onboard ships that could take care of the illegal transportation of printed agitation and propaganda material, the illegal transfer of cash subsidies to parties and unions as well as the hiding of stowaways, 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 Interclub functionaries and harbour activists boarded a ship in order to distribute leaflets and pamphlets among the crew. In addition, the crew members were invited to come to the club and participate in its evening programmes. Most importantly, a report was written after every visit, listing reliable contacts and identifying potential partners for future co-operation. The names of individuals, cells and ships were thereafter collected in a catalogue. This database, which already by the late 1920s included hundreds of individual seamen and ships, was the core of Albert Walter’s communication network.<sup>36</sup> However, as Peter Huber and Niels Erik Rosenfeldt have emphasised, the core unit directing the Comintern’s clandestine communication networks was its International Communications Office (OMS), including the operations of the courier service and the transfer of money to parties.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, Walter’s ships units were but cogs in a

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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.

<sup>34</sup> Rotes Gewerkschafts-Bulletin (R.G.B.), Sondernummer, Nr. 68, 18. Oktober 1930: Seeleute und Hafendarbeiter hissen die rote Fahne!, BArchB R1501/20224 Reichsministerium des Inneren. Internationale Hafendbüros und Seemannklubs, Jan. 1930 – Nov. 1933, fol. 19

<sup>35</sup> ”Internationale Seemannsklubs”, *Internationale Gewerkschafts-Pressekorrespondenz* Nr 76, 8.10.1931, 7; ”Hampurini Merimiesklubi 10-vuotias”, *Majakka* 6 (1932), p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Eiber, *Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung*, p. 186.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Huber, “The Cadre Department, the OMS and the ’Dimitrov’ and ’Manuil’sky’ Secretariats during the Phase of Terror”, in: Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn (eds.), *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in Light of New Documents*, Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1996, p. 129; Niels

larger apparatus over which he and his bureau in Hamburg had no influence. Instead, the nodal point was the OMS office in Berlin.

The Hamburg Interclub was a contested territory. On the one hand, its premises were controlled by the functionaries of the club who, in turn, had to deliver monthly reports about their activities to Walter. Apart from organizing the evening programme at the club and running the restaurant, the person in charge of the club was also responsible for the financial balance of the activities. Nevertheless, the main objective was to create an 'open space' for foreign seamen and local visitors, one that was not controlled by 'bourgeois' and 'Capitalist' authorities. On the other hand, as the Communists in Germany were at loggerheads not only with the local state and police authorities but also Social Democratic and National Socialist organizations, the Interclub became a contested territory. A rather common feature were fistfights in the restaurant if Nazi finks tried to interup a meeting at the club which usually resulted in the arrival of a police commando to calm down the situation. In general, however, police raids were politically sanctioned and occurred either for internal or external reasons. Seamens and dockers strikes were accompanied with police raids against Rothesoodstrasse as both the shipowners and the bourgeoisie politicians (rightly) claimed that they were organized by the Interclub. Occasionally, foreign authorities put pressure on German authorities for their 'lax' attitude towards Communist agitation and propaganda orchestrated by international Communist agencies based in Germany, notably the Port Bureau and Interclub in Hamburg. However, as long as Communist activities were legal in Germany, a police raid and closure of the Interclub was seldom a protracted affair.<sup>38</sup>

One who was not impressed with the work in Hamburg was ISH President George Hardy. Despite some early successes in the reorganisation of the Interclub, Hardy rapidly became dissatisfied with the conditions in Hamburg. Although being one of the largest ports in the world, Hamburg had, according to Hardy, several severe disadvantages. The first one was that very few colonial seamen called at Hamburg and none of them had the port as his place of residence. The second hindrance was tied to the first: few British, Dutch and American ships called at Hamburg and, among the Scandinavians, the Norwegian merchant fleet – which itself

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Erik Rosenfeldt, *The "Special" World. Stalin's Power Apparatus and the Soviet System's Secret Structures of Communication, I-II*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> For vivid descriptions about police raids against the Interclub, see Valtin, *Out of the Night*. Police raids were often reported in the internal reports, for example the raid on 1 February 1930, in Internationales Hafengebäude für Seeleute, Hamburg, Bericht Februar 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 14–15.

was one of the largest in the world during the early 1930s – called in to British rather than to German ports. Hamburg, reasoned Hardy therefore, was not the ideal hub for the ISH and the therefore proposed that ISH headquarters be moved to London.<sup>39</sup> However, neither the leadership of the ISH nor the RILU supported his plan. The main reason for the negative decision was strategic: the Interclub in London was not functioning very well and the national section of the ISH in the United Kingdom, the Seafarer's Minority Movement, was in constant disarray and chronic lack of funding.<sup>40</sup>

### **Transnational work of the Hamburg Interclub**

Starting in 1924, the Hamburg Interclub focussed on agitation and propaganda work among domestic as well as foreign seamen. One of its prime target groups were seamen onboard Scandinavian freighters. The reason for this were obvious: Communist activities were legal in the Scandinavian countries but the trade fleet of the Scandinavian countries, especially the Norwegian one, seldom called at their home ports. Thus, work among Scandinavian seamen had to be conducted outside Scandinavia and Hamburg was one of the major ports for Scandinavian shipping. The ultimate task of the Scandinavian section of the Hamburg Interclub was to establish a transnational link between the Scandinavian seamen and their maritime labour unions at home.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, members of the section were usually functionaries who had been sent to Hamburg from the Communist fraction of a Danish, Norwegian or Swedish maritime union.

The first person in charge of the Scandinavian section was the Norwegian Arthur Samsing whose main task was to organize a local unit of the Communist fraction of Norsk Matros- og Fyrbøterunionen, the Norwegian seamen's union, at the Interclub. This was of strategic importance as the Norwegian trade fleet was the fourth largest in the world during the 1920s and Norwegian ships sailed all over the world. Saming's activities ended abruptly after a police raid on the Interclub in 1929, resulting in his expulsion from Germany.<sup>42</sup> He was replaced by two Norwegians, Fred Nilssen and Leif O. Forss. Much to the dismay of the functionaries, work

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<sup>39</sup> Hardy to Lozovsky, Hamburg 30.3.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 139–142.

<sup>40</sup> 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.

<sup>41</sup> Interrogation Report, Richard Krebs, 1950, CIC (Army Counter Intelligence Corps) FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, National Archives, Washington DC, fol. 6, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Autobiography, dated Leningrad 10.2.1935, Arthur samsing personal file, RGASPI 495/247/540, fol. 50–51.

among Norwegian seamen was challenging and little rewarding – many of them were unemployed and stranded in Hamburg and were most of the time drunk.<sup>43</sup> Another drawback was Hamburg's peripheral position as a stop-over of Norwegian freighters; not the German harbour but those in the British isles were the central places for agitation and propaganda among Norwegian seamen.<sup>44</sup> This was also highlighted by George Hardy in his critique of work among foreign seamen in Hamburg and his proposal to move the centre of activities to London.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, after the reorganization of the Hamburg Interclub in 1931, the Scandinavian section broadened its activities and focused on work among seamen from all Scandinavian countries.<sup>46</sup>

The reorganisation of work at the Interclub in 1931 resulted also in the establishment of two new sections, a Finnish and a Baltic one. Little is known about their activities apart from each publishing a monthly journal, *Majakka* in Finnish and *Majakas* in Estonian. Agitation and propaganda work among seamen from Finland and the Baltic countries was complicated as Communist activities were illegal in these countries. Communist activities were underground and clandestine operations or were conducted under cover of legal organizations. The journals produced at the Interclub therefore served as the main agitation and propaganda vehicles; visiting seamen were enlisted as liaison persons and couriers who tried to disseminate the journals in their home countries.<sup>47</sup>

Work among so-called colonial seamen was of equal strategic importance. Initially, the main focus was on Chinese and Japanese seamen.<sup>48</sup> The key person was Comrade Leo or Liao Chengzhi who was in charge of work among Chinese seamen from 1928 to 1932. His main task was to produce Communist leaflets in Chinese and to develop an international Communist network between China and European port cities.<sup>49</sup> At first, he was quite successful and Albert Walter boasted in his communication to Moscow that numerous new cells had been established

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<sup>43</sup> Internationales Hafengebäude für Seeleute, Hamburg, Bericht August-September 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 67–69.

<sup>44</sup> Internationales Hafengebäude für Seeleute, Hamburg, Bericht März 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 17–18.

<sup>45</sup> Hardy to Lozovsky, Hamburg 30.3.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 139–142.

<sup>46</sup> Resolution über die Tätigkeit des Hamburger Internationalen Klubs, no date [ca. 1931], RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 159.

<sup>47</sup> Johannes Mikhelsen, "Sjöfolket i Estland", *Merimies – Sjömannen* 4 (1935), pp. 12–13.

<sup>48</sup> Internationales Hafengebäude für Seeleute, Hamburg, Jahresbericht 1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, 77–87.

<sup>49</sup> Lars Amenda, "Between Southern China and the North Sea: Maritime Labour and Chinese Migration in Continental Europe, 1890–1950", in: Sylvia Hahn and Stan Nadel (eds.), *Asian Migrants in Europe: Transcultural Connections*, Göttingen: R&R unipress, 2014, p. 69.

and direct communications had been secured with China.<sup>50</sup> However, the impact was superficial and fragile and the Communist impact on Chinese seamen remained limited, and the majority stuck to a mixture of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments.<sup>51</sup> In January 1931, Liao started to co-operate with the African American trade union functionary James W. Ford. He had been sent from Moscow to establish the secretariat of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (see below, Part III). He was ordered to cooperate with Albert Walter, the ISH and the Interclub and was immediately assigned by Walter to work among African and Caribbean seamen. Ford was rather successful and half a year later he had already been able to establish cells on more than a dozen ships. However, Ford was critical about the workload; instead of concentrating on his work as ITUCNW Secretary, he spend most of his time assisting the Interclub in its agitation and propaganda work. Ford's poignant criticism reached Moscow and resulted in a reorganization of work in the Colonial Section in September 1931. Thereafter, the Interclub, together with the Einheitsverein, was to focus on the Indian and Chinese seamen whereas the organisation of African and Caribbean seamen were to be the joint responsibility of the Interclub and the ITUCNW.<sup>52</sup>

## **Part 2. Aspiring to Become a Global Actor: The ISH Secretariat**

Established in late 1930, the ISH Secretariat had its office in rooms adjoining the Interclub at Rothesoodstrasse and initially consisted of three members. George Hardy, chair, was editor of the *ISH Information Bulletin* as well as in charge of the contacts with the Anglophone countries, India and the Far East. Albert Walter, secretary, was in charge of the technical apparatus as well as work in the Nordic, Baltic and German-speaking countries. The third member Auguste Dumay was in charge of connections with France, the Iberian and Mediterranean countries as well as work in French colonies in Africa and mandated territories the Near East and in Latin America.<sup>53</sup> A reorganisation of work at the headquarters in Hamburg followed sometime during the first half of 1931. Hardy was transferred to the United Kingdom and Dumay to France while Walter took over the secretariat in Hamburg. In addition, a new parallel unit was established,

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<sup>50</sup> Bericht über die Arbeit unter den chinesischen Seeleuten, 1–31.3.1930 & 3–28.4.1930, RGASPI 534/5/216, fol. 36, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Amenda, "Between Southern China", p. 69

<sup>52</sup> ISH, 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. 197–198.

<sup>53</sup> Duties and Tasks of Secretariat Members, filed 17.3.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 128–129.

the so-called Illegal Secretariat, which was manned by Comrade Adolf.<sup>54</sup> The person was Alfred Bem alias Adolf Shelley, sent by Moscow to monitor the activities of the ISH (legal) Secretariat of Albert Walter. Strategically, Shelley's secret office was located in an (unknown) location in Hamburg.<sup>55</sup>

In accordance with the hierarchical rules of the Comintern Apparatus, the various national units and its activities were to be co-ordinated, 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 to ISH headquarters. 'Travelling instructors' were sent to the national sections when they were to be reorganised, or in order to co-ordinate actions during a national strike. For example, Comrade Henry (Luigi Polano) was sent on a mission to Norway and Sweden in May 1931 with a mandate to co-manage the strike of the dockworkers in Oslo.<sup>56</sup>

One of the ISH's main structural problems was its dual position as both an independent and a Communist-controlled union. Its links to the party apparatus were generally weak; this was the case not only in Hamburg but also characterised 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 were syndicalists rather than Communists. At times, in Hamburg, the ISH was even at loggerheads with other Communist organisations, such as the Red Marine or even the local branch of the KPD. On the other hand, the independent position of the organisation 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 from the national parties or red union leadership. Nevertheless, the weak relationship between the ISH and both its sections and the party was time and again considered to be a handicap, especially when the ISH Secretariat tried to direct affairs in the sections: if Hamburg failed to influence the affairs of one section, ISH Secretary Walter tried to ask the party leadership to interfere – sometimes successfully but more often not – the only avenue left was to ask the RILU and Comintern Apparatus to intervene and settle the case.

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<sup>54</sup> See further the correspondence between 'Henry' [Luigi Polano] and Adolf Shelley, RGASPI 534/5/221, fol. 162–174.

<sup>55</sup> CIC FO 10501 Report R-G44-50, fol. 2; Richard Jensen, *En omtumlet tilværelse*, København: Fremad, 1957, 103.

<sup>56</sup> Arbeitsbericht des Sekretariats der I.S.H., Hamburg 16.6.1931, RGASPI 534/5/221, fol. 186.

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, or about 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 he urged Moscow to find a solution to it and declared: “we should not be a German-English International!”<sup>57</sup>

### **A global moment: The 1932 ISH World Congress**

The visible manifestation of any organization aspiring to be a global player is to organize a world congress. Already the terminology used – world congress – distinguishes the event from a local, regional or national affair. Calling for a world congress is to make a territorial claim and statement: representatives from all over the world are summoned in a particular location for a common, unifying goal. This was also the case for the ISH. Although it had been established as an outcome of an international summit at the Hamburg Interclub in October 1930, it was to be a provisional organisation to be officially established at a future world congress. The first plan was to arrange the congress in Copenhagen but due to the negative attitude of the Danish authorities, a new place had to be found for the venue. The Hamburg Interclub was out of question: its meeting hall was too small for the congress. In addition, the police authorities vetoed against a Communist summit to be organized in the city. Eventually, the organizers managed to convince the local authorities in Altona, one of Hamburg’s suburbs, but administratively part of Prussia, to give their backing to the new congress venue.<sup>58</sup> Despite police harassment and all sorts of difficulties, some 173 delegates from 30 nations finally made it to Altona where the congress was convened from the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1932.<sup>59</sup>

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

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<sup>57</sup> Letter from Adolf [Shelley] to 'Werte Genossen', Hamburg 24.11.1931, RGASPI 534/5/223, fol. 88.

<sup>58</sup> Leo Braun, Über den Kongress der Seeleute, 2.6.1932, RGASPI 534/4/405, fol. 241–242.

<sup>59</sup> Kongress der ISH, RGASPI 534/5/232, fol. 75–76.

techniques and under what circumstances one was to pursue a certain tactic. A third general theme was what positions the seamen were to take in a future conflict or even war; a fourth theme was the potential of the radicals to gain more influence in unions that were controlled by the Social Democrats.<sup>60</sup> In public, the congress downplayed the revolutionary aim of the ISH and the organisers were strictly ordered to make sure that the vocabulary of the proclamations and presentations did not arouse the suspicion of the police.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, far away from the public, meetings and conferences of various commissions were held behind the scenes in which only the inner circle of the Communists and trusted activists participated.<sup>62</sup>

### **Part III. Between Two Circuits: The ITUCNW**

The third unit operating at 8, Rothesoodstrasse was the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW, also known as the Hamburg Committee). The ITUCNW was the brain child of the combined efforts of the Comintern, the RILU and a handful of African Caribbean/American activists. Initially established as the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the RILU in July 1928, the organization had been officially inaugurated at the First World Negro Workers Congress in July 1930. The original plan was to organize the congress in London.<sup>63</sup> However, due to the rather cryptic response from the British government, i.e. not an outright rejection but neither an acceptance, the Interclub in Hamburg was chosen as the new venue for the congress. The congress itself was hailed by the organizers as a success: Approximately 19 participants from the USA, the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa had gathered in Hamburg and laid the foundation of a new radical network in the African Atlantic.<sup>64</sup>

As other RILU Trade Union Committees, the ITUCNW was more of a co-ordinating Secretariat than a membership organization and it was never projected to become a radical trade union platform for the Black toilers in the African Atlantic.<sup>65</sup> The ‘Class-Against-Class’ policy laid

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<sup>60</sup> Eiber, *Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung*, pp. 183–184.

<sup>61</sup> §14, Instruktionen für die Kommission zur Leitung des Internationalen Kongresses der ISH, 11.5.1932, RGASPI 534/5/232, fol. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Erik Nørgaard, *Revolutionen der udeblev. Kominterns vikrsomhed med Ernst Wollweber og Richard Jensen i forgrunden*, København: Fremad, 1975, pp. 94–95.

<sup>63</sup> “An Appeal to Negro Workers of the World”, *The Negro Worker* 3 (1930) 1, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Report of Proceedings and Decisions of the First International Conference of Negro Workers*, Hamburg: International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 1930, p. 1. See also Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism. The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919–1939*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> See further Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic. African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014.

out the guidelines of both the ITUCNW and of its predecessor: it was never to link up with political Pan-Africanism or even to emerge as a 'Black International'. Instead, the agenda and objectives of the organization had an exclusive class-basis rather than an inclusive race-based character: it was to be an organization only for the Black toilers, not for the Black bourgeois. Its task was to develop class-conscious (proletarian) international solidarity among the Black toilers in their struggle against colonial and imperial exploitation.<sup>66</sup>

The RILU never planned that the ITUCNW or Hamburg Committee as it was referred to in the internal communications of the RILU and Comintern would emerge as an independent actor. Instead, the Hamburg Committee was to discuss and outline work with the European Bureau of the RILU in accordance with instructions that were prepared by the RILU Secretariat, the RILU Negro Bureau or the Executive Committee of the Comintern. In addition, the Hamburg Committee was to co-operate with the Secretariat of the ISH, the Hamburg Bureaus of both the German Communist Party and of the RGO as well as with the Party Headquarters in Berlin.<sup>67</sup>

The intimate structural connections between the ISH and the Hamburg Committee were part and parcel of the grand strategy designed in Moscow. As noted in Part I, the ISH Secretariat and the local Interclub were to be assisted by the Hamburg Committee in their 'special work' among African and Caribbean seamen. In terms of planning for activities concerning the African Atlantic, the ISH, the Hamburg Committee and the RILU Negro Bureau were to co-operate.<sup>68</sup> Both organizations received funding from Moscow via the same relay station in Berlin, namely the European Bureau of the RILU. Monthly payments were transferred from the Comintern via Berlin to the ISH account in Hamburg; the activities and the salaries of the personnel of the Hamburg Committee were paid from the ISH account. The transfer of funds from Moscow to Germany neatly reveals the positions of the various organizations in the solar system of the Comintern: on top the Comintern centre in Moscow, next the RILU Secretariat, then the European Bureau of the Profintern, then the ISH and the Hamburg Committee.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> "What is the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers?", *The Negro Worker* 1 (1931) 10-11, p. 45. Also [Max Barek, ed.,] *What is the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers? A Trade Union Programme of Action*, Hamburg: Graphische Industrie Hamburg GmbH, n.d. [ca. 1931].

<sup>67</sup> Plan of Work and Immediate Tasks of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers at Hamburg, no date [ca. 1931], RGASPI 534/3/668, fol. 6-7.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Padmore to Walter, 21.7.1931, RGASPI 534/3/668, fol. 96.

<sup>69</sup> Ausgaben der ISH für das ITUCNW, April 1931 – Mai 1932, RGASPI 534/4/407, fol. 145–146. For a detailed discussion, see Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, Chapter 7.2.2.6.

In practice, however, the realization and fulfilment of the planned co-operation proved to be far more difficult. During Ford's period as Secretary of the Hamburg Committee, the leadership of the ISH regarded the Hamburg Committee merely as a branch of the ISH rather than an independent organisation. For example, the readers of the ITUCNW mouthpiece *The Negro Worker* were notified about the planned demonstration on the International Day of Struggle Against Imperialist War on August First. Therefore, Ford highlighted that the campaign "must be utilized with a view of organizationally strengthening the I.S.H. among the colonial seamen, the recruiting of new members from among the colonial seamen must be in the forefront of our work of mobilizing these seamen against war preparations and for the fight to better their living conditions and for the defense of the Soviet Union."<sup>70</sup>

Ford's turn as secretary ended in September 1931 when he was recalled to Moscow. A few months later George Padmore, born in Trinidad and member of the CPUSA, took over the operations of the Hamburg Committee. At first, the relationship between these two organisations became more balanced, although the Hamburg Committee was still expected to assist the ISH in its agitation and propaganda work among seamen. Soon, however, the relationship again reached its nadir as Padmore regarded work among Black seamen in European ports to be done in the name of the Hamburg Committee, an idea that was opposed by Albert Walter, the Secretary of the ISH who (rightly) claimed that work among seamen was aimed to strengthen the national sections of the ISH, not to establish sub-committees of the ITUCNW. Padmore even presented the ITUCNW as the spearhead of Black seamen in the October-November 1931 issue of *The Negro Worker*. It is likely that the ISH Secretariat must have dismissed such a claim as dissident. Be as it may, five months later, the April 1932 issue of the journal held as its front cover a photomontage highlighting a class-conscious message to the reader: A White, a Black and a Yellow worker (i.e., seaman) pointed united towards the catchword "Strike!", standing in front of a red flag carrying the badge of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers. An "Appeal to the Negro Seamen and Dockers" by the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers further urged the Black seamen "to join ship and dock committees of the International Seamen and Harbour Workers Union which are fighting for the [...] demands of the Negro seamen and the sailors of other races and colours."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "August First and Negro Workers", *The Negro Worker* 1 (1931) 7, pp. 4–6. See further Holger Weiss, "Between Moscow and the African Atlantic: The Comintern Networks of Negro Workers", *monde(s) histoire, espaces, relations* 10 (2016), pp. 89–108.

<sup>71</sup> "Appeal to the Negro Seamen and Dockers", *The Negro Worker* 2 (1932) 4, p. 24.

Despite the frictions between the Hamburg Committee and the ISH Secretariat, the former was dependent upon the latter in its ambition to establish a radical network in the African Atlantic. *The Negro Worker*, as well as the pamphlets and booklets published by the ITUCNW, were disseminated in two ways in the African Atlantic. It was sent by postal services to countries where Communist activities had not been banned by the authorities, such as the USA or the United Kingdom. In the Caribbean and African colonies, however, the colonial authorities had banned subversive and anti-colonial activities, including Communist agitation and propaganda. Therefore, the journal was smuggled into these countries by making use of the courier system of the ISH, namely its covert network through the ship cells that had been established on German, British and other vessels which were docking at ports in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans.<sup>72</sup>

### **Visible and nonvisible radical Black activists in Hamburg**

The premises at 8, Rothesoodstrasse became at the turn of the 1930s a hotspot for political activists in the African Atlantic. Some of them attended the Interclub and the ITUCNW headquarters as visible guests, others participated in meetings behind closed doors. Among the former were the African and Caribbean delegates who participated at the World Congress of Negro Workers in July 1930. Garan Kouyaté, a radical political activist from the French Soudan and leader of the Ligue de Defence de la Race Nègré in France, had been cooperating with Ford already in 1929 but the French police authorities had prevented him to attend the 1930 Hamburg conference. However, he managed to visit Hamburg in June 1931 when he had a ‘conference’ with Ford and the ISH Secretariat where he delivered a report on work among colonial seamen in France. The outcome of the meeting was that Kouyaté was to be sent to Marseilles to jointly work among seamen for the ISH and the ITUCNW as well as to establish a sub-committee of the ITUCNW.<sup>73</sup> One year later he attended the ISH World Congress as one of the keynote speakers and presented a report on the organization of the colonial maritime transport workers’ fight for economic justice.<sup>74</sup> Shortly after the Congress, Padmore and Kouyaté held a four-day meeting about the practical organization of the ITUCNW, probably at the bureau of the

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<sup>72</sup> See further Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, Chapter 8.5.

<sup>73</sup> NN [Adolf Shelley] to Pechmann [head of the RILU Bureau in Berlin], 13.6.1931, 534/5/221, fol. 155–161.

<sup>74</sup> [ISH], *De internationale Søtransportarbejderes Verdens-Enhedskongres og dens Beslutninger!*, Copenhagen, no date [1932], p. 4.

Hamburg Committee. Not surprisingly, both propagated for a more independent position of the ITUCNW vis-à-vis the ISH; among others, they called for an own budget for the organisation.<sup>75</sup>

Another African visitor at Rothesoodstrasse was the Sierra Leonean seaman E.F. Foster Jones. He had called at Hamburg several times in 1931 and 1932. Ford, and later Padmore, had given him the task to turn the Kroomen Seamen's Club in Freetown, Sierra Leone, into an Interclub. Foster Jones was enlisted both by the ISH and the Hamburg Committee as a courier and for special, i.e., clandestine, tasks in West Africa.<sup>76</sup> Most of his meetings at Rothesoodstrasse must have been held behind closed doors. However, at least on one occasion, he was used by the ISH as a speaker at one of their rallies in Hamburg.<sup>77</sup>

#### **IV. Postscript: 1933 and after or turning 8, Rothesoodstrasse into a non-place**

Communist agitation and propaganda activities at 8, Rothesoodstrasse ended abruptly in early March 1933. Political tension gained momentum when the Nazis came into power in Germany in January 1933. Anticipating a prolonged period of political turmoil and increased police attacks, the leadership of the Hamburg Interclub moved its printing press to a secret locality in the harbour area already in late 1932.<sup>78</sup> In early February, the police arrested George Padmore during a raid on his apartment in Altona and held him in detention for two weeks. The ISH together with the local branch of the German Red Aid tried in vain to arrange for his release. Instead, the local police authorities decided to deport him to England on 21 February.<sup>79</sup> A few days later, the German Reichstag Building stood in flames, followed by the emergency decree and the mass arrest of German communists, among others Albert Walter, on 28 March. On 5 March 1933, the SA stormed the facilities of the Interclub and on 16 March, the local police closed the Interclub and the ISH office.<sup>80</sup>

However, the activities of the ISH and the Interclub were at first not paralysed by the assault. Anticipating an imminent period of illegality, the ISH archives and Albert Walter's catalogue

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<sup>75</sup> Practical Decisions on the Discussions of the Int. Tr. Un. Comm., 23–26.5.32, RGASPI 534/3/753, fol. 111.

<sup>76</sup> Weiss, *Framing a Radical African*, pp. 386–388.

<sup>77</sup> Weiss, 'Between Moscow and the African Atlantic', p. 90.

<sup>78</sup> Eiber, *Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung*, p. 186.

<sup>79</sup> Bill, Über die Verhaftung und Ausweisung des Gen[osse] Padmore, no date [ca. February 1932], RGASPI 534/4/461, fol. 123–125. On the deportation of Padmore, see Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, pp. 578–582.

<sup>80</sup> Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, p. 575.

of ship cells and contact persons had been transferred to a secure hiding place already on 27 February. After the crackdown on the communists in Hamburg, operations were moved underground and Ernst Wollweber tried to reorganize work on an illegal basis. After the SA-raid on Rothesoodstrasse, it was decided to relocate the ISH headquarters including its archive to Copenhagen. Here, Albert Shelley's illegal secretariat continued its operations in the office building Vesterport at Vesterbrogade, under cover of being the office of the engineering company A. Selvo & Co.<sup>81</sup> Officially and in public, the ISH headquarters were claimed to be at Toldbodgade 16 – the address of the Copenhagen Interclub.<sup>82</sup> Neither were the activities of the ITUCNW badly shaken. Padmore moved to Paris in early March 1933 where he continued to publish *The Negro Worker* – albeit informing his readers that the post box of the journal was at Toldbodgade 16 in Copenhagen!<sup>83</sup>

The Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933 marked the end of communist and anticolonial activities at 8, Rothesoodstrasse. The building was stripped off its radical political significance and turned into a non-political space, housing a Christian dormitory of young females from 1934. Nevertheless, the Nazi whitewashing of former radical and red spaces was initially not totally successful. The Hamburg Interclub had been a 'free space' for radical-minded seamen and was portrayed by them as a positive place of memory. One of the few public reactions was by Franz Tretowitz who publicly protested when the former Interclub was turned into a dormitory. "We paid the house with our own money", he shouted outside the building one evening and accused the authorities for having illegally grabbed it. "I will seek revenge when I am abroad; the SA men are all rags," he continued. Not surprisingly, Tretowitz was immediately mannaed by some bystanders and handed over to the police who put him in jail. One year later he was condemned for public mockery of the SA and sentenced to six month imprisonment.<sup>84</sup> If Tretowitz' public shouting marked the beginning transformation of a former radical global space into a political non-place, the destruction of the building at 8, Rothesoodstrasse during the bombing of Hamburg in 1943 marked the end of the process.

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<sup>81</sup> Cross-reference: Jensen, Richard, 19.4.1933, Richard Jensen personal file, KV 2/2158, The National Archives, Kew; Niels Erik Rosenfelt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstad. Komintern og det hemmelige apparat*, Copenhagen: Gads forlag, 2011, pp. 203 – 204.

<sup>82</sup> Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, p. 577 footnote 8.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 588.

<sup>84</sup> Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – Strafsachen Franz Tretowitz, 213-11\_00142/36, Staatsarchiv Hamburg.